

The Lottery Coat

During the harsh middle years of the American Revolutionary War, the soldiers of the Continental Army often fought with little more than determination—and whatever clothing they could find. By 1777-1778, shortages of uniforms had become severe. Many troops marched in worn civilian garments or mismatched military coats, a situation that threatened both morale and discipline.

Relief arrived in 1778 thanks to America's new ally, the France. As part of its growing support for the revolutionaries, France shipped thousands of ready-made wool uniform coats across the Atlantic. These garments, manufactured by French contractors, were sturdier and better constructed than many of the makeshift uniforms previously worn by American troops. They featured white metal buttons and a distinctive style: typically blue or brown wool with red collars, cuffs, and lapels—colors that echoed European military fashion of the era.

Why They Were Called "Lottery Coats"

The unusual nickname came from the way the uniforms were distributed. Because the coats arrived in several different color combinations rather than one standardized style, army officials needed a fair way to allocate them among the states supplying regiments to the army. The solution was simple: they drew lots.

Each state's representatives essentially "won" a particular coat color for their regiments—much like drawing numbers in a lottery. From that moment on, soldiers and historians alike referred to the garments as "lottery coats."

A Welcome Upgrade

Beyond their distinctive origin story, these coats represented a significant improvement for American soldiers. The French-made garments were more durable and more consistent in construction than many earlier uniforms. At a time when the young army struggled with supply shortages, the arrival of thousands of well-made coats boosted both comfort and morale in the ranks.

A Legacy in Living History

Today, the lottery coat remains a recognizable piece of Revolutionary War material culture. Reenactors portraying Continental soldiers frequently wear reproductions to represent the diverse uniforms seen during the war.

More than just clothing, the lottery coat tells a story—of international alliance, logistical improvisation, and the everyday realities faced by the soldiers who fought for American independence.



A soldier of the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment wearing imported French clothing, December 1778