

The Red Heart



In depictions of the American Revolutionary War, you may occasionally notice a curious detail on the coattails of some Continental Army uniforms: a small red heart. Though striking, this emblem was not an official, standardized insignia worn by all soldiers. Instead, it was a design element that appeared on certain late-18th century coats—particularly those influenced by French military fashion—and it served a blend of decorative, practical, and symbolic purposes.

A Functional Feature with a Decorative Twist

Eighteenth-century military coats were designed with long tails that extended behind the wearer. In the field, however, these tails could easily become cumbersome, especially during marching, drilling, or maneuvering through muddy terrain. To solve this problem, soldiers often pinned or buttoned the tails upward, folding them back against the coat.

When the tails were secured in this way, the inner lining became visible. On some “French-pattern” coats used by the Continental Army, tailors sewed red fabric shapes—often cut in the form of hearts—onto the lining. Once the tails were pinned up, these bright shapes appeared on the outside of the coat. What began as a hidden lining detail suddenly became a distinctive visual accent, adding flair to an otherwise utilitarian uniform.

French Influence on Revolutionary Uniforms

The appearance of the heart motif reflects the broader influence of French military style on American uniforms during the Revolutionary era. After the alliance between the United States and France in 1778, French equipment, fabrics, and uniform patterns increasingly

shaped Continental Army clothing. The decorative heart on the coattail lining mirrors embellishments seen in some French regimental coats of the period, where interior linings were occasionally cut into stylized shapes that showed when the tails were turned back.

Possible Symbolic Meaning

Some historians and interpreters have suggested that the heart design may carry symbolic meaning. One interpretation links it to the legacy of King Richard I of England—“Richard the Lionheart.” In this view, the heart motif evokes the ideals of courage, loyalty, and martial honor associated with the medieval king’s legendary reputation. While this connection is not universally accepted among historians, it remains a compelling tradition within historical interpretation and reenactment circles.

A Subtle Point of Distinction

The red heart may also have offered a subtle visual distinction on the battlefield. Although the Continental Army is often remembered for its blue coats, supply shortages meant that uniforms varied widely in color, cut, and quality. Decorative details such as the red heart lining could help give otherwise plain blue coats a recognizable flourish.

This small detail also created an interesting contrast with the uniforms of British troops, widely known as “Redcoats.” Rather than the British Army’s solid red outer coat, the Continental soldier’s uniform might reveal only a flash of red—a heart-shaped accent visible when the tails were turned up.

A Small Detail with a Big Story

While never a universal badge or regulation emblem, the red heart found on certain Continental Army coattails illustrates how practicality, artistry, and symbolism often intertwined in 18th-century military dress. What began as a simple lining detail became a distinctive mark of style—one that continues to capture the attention of historians, reenactors, and anyone fascinated by the visual culture of the Revolutionary War.