

# Weekend Time Machines

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From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 32: 1 (fall 1992). Images may differ from those in the original article.

How would you like to travel back into the past . . . to “be there” during the Revolutionary War . . . to smell the gun smoke and taste the **firecake** . . . to experience the sights and sounds and excitement of a period that others only read about in history books?

Of course, time travel is an impossibility, at least for the present. But if the idea appeals to you, you can have a whole range of similar experiences at a Revolutionary War reenactment. The term *reenactment* means a re-created battle where the participants, called reenactors, dress as soldiers and act out the conflict for spectators who come to share their experience.

The term reenactment also includes other types of activities, such as re-created encampments and nonmilitary activities that portray the people of two hundred years ago. Men, women, and children act out historical daily activities—cooking, eating, dancing, and playing.

With the noise, smoke, and excitement, a reenacted battle is a real attraction. Large scale reenactments can draw an audience of thousands of people who come to see in person what they have only read about before.

Many families come to see the battle reenactment and then stay and talk with the reenactors. Reenactors have studied the history of the time period, and they can talk about the soldiers and their families, the way they lived, and the way they felt about the war and what they were fighting for. Spectators at reenacted battles are often surprised to learn that the American forces, contrary to what they had heard, did not “hide behind rocks and trees.” Revolutionary soldiers used exactly the same tactics as the British forces—standing in lines facing the enemy and firing all their muskets at the same time. In fact, the American armies were losing most of the battles until they learned to fight like the British!

Why did they use these **tactics** that look so strange to us today? Why were they successful tactics? Any reenactor will tell you that the muskets of two hundred years ago were so inaccurate that it was only

through the use of **massed firepower** that the guns were effective at all. And, while the American rifle was extremely accurate, it was very slow to load.

Another surprise for visitors at a reenactment is the number of women and children in camp. Revolutionary War families sometimes followed their soldier-husbands and fathers into the army camps. They knew they could not manage by themselves on their small farms without help. The women acted as nurses, did laundry, cooked, and provided other domestic services so that they could stay with the troops. There was no place in a military camp for those who did not work.

While visiting a reenactment, you may be impressed with all the reproduction weapons, clothing, tents, and equipment. Reenactors try to make everything look just as it did back then. Some of the items you see are available on order from sutlers, an old term for suppliers who specialize in providing articles to reenactors. Sutlers sell many items—from muskets, shoes, and tents to toothbrushes.

However, most reenactors prefer to make as much of their equipment and clothing as they can. Handmade items are much more **authentic** in appearance. The reenactment groups' officers and staffs can provide the patterns and instructions for making many of the items.

Just finding the right materials can be time-consuming. Back then, most clothing was made from linen or wool. These materials are available today but are expensive. In fact, a typical "soldier" reenactor may spend over one thousand dollars for his reproduction uniform and the other items necessary to complete his portrayal. Clothing and equipment for women and children is less expensive because they do not have to buy the reproduction muskets.

Reenactors spend many weekends during the year traveling to reenactments and historic sites all over the United States. My group, the Sixth North Carolina Regiment, spends about twenty weekends a year doing reenactments. During 1992, we traveled as far north as the Great Lakes and as far south as Florida. In 1987 our group went to England for a reenactment.

You may ask who these reenactors are and why they go to such lengths to re-create the past. For reenactors, participating in reenactments is our hobby. Many of us will tell you that we participate for the exciting personal experiences and the satisfaction of knowing that we are helping to educate the public about our history. Most would also mention the fun of traveling with friends with the same interests and feeling a part of the historic sites and places we visit.

Many older Revolutionary War reenactors learned about the excitement of the personal experience in the 1960s when they were reenacting the Civil War. They participated in re-creations of those huge battles, surrounded by the swirls of gun smoke, the crash of musketry, the sound of **fife** and drum, and the hundreds of troops moving about them.

They also felt the discomfort of itchy woolen uniforms and the heavy packs of equipment. The muskets were cumbersome and the black powder smoke stank. But for a few hours, it seemed to be the 1860s and they knew the excitement and fears of being a Civil War soldier. No history book could ever duplicate the experience.

Personal experiences like that—the ones that cause you to feel that you are there—are a reenactor’s reward for his efforts. They give a reenactor a unique and personal understanding of history.

It did not take long for reenacting to become more than re-creations of battles alone. Groups competed with each other in trying to provide the best re-creations of civilian and camp life. Each group tried to be more authentic than the others. That meant more research and more and better reproduction items.

As soon as reenactments became more than just battles, there were opportunities for wives and children of all ages to join in. They portrayed people from all walks of life. The re-created camps became as attractive to the visiting public as the reenacted battles.

The public’s questions and a fondness for sharing a love of history led reenactors to begin to interpret history. Historic interpretation is the process of explaining the past to others by relating it to things the modern audience understands through its own experience. For example, it is easier to feel the crowded conditions of a Revolutionary War camp when you see a small tent and are told that six men shared the tent than to be told, “The tents were crowded.” Many reenactors find their rewards in explaining the nation’s history to the public.

Everyone expected the end of the Civil War **centennial** to bring an end to reenactments. But we reenactors were having too much fun. We would not give it up. Reenacting struggled for a while but then found new strength, new directions, and fresh followers from the **bicentennial** of the American Revolution from 1975 through 1984.

Today there are perhaps 25,000 reenactors in the United States, about 2,000 in North Carolina alone. Of these North Carolinians, about 500 reenact the Revolutionary War era. There are over a dozen

Revolutionary War reenactment groups in the state today. They range in size from small units of about a dozen to large groups of over one hundred members. The average size is about fifty members.

Some, like my unit, portray the American regular troops called Continentals. Some reenact the soldiers of the Patriot militia, which were something like our National Guard today. They served when called upon by their state for local emergencies or for a specific campaign. Other units portray the king's regular troops or the Loyalist militia.

You may wonder why someone would want to portray the king's troops. If you were to ask one of the "British" reenactors, they would tell you that to understand history you must learn the whole story and not just one side. During the American Revolution, there were many people who did not want to lose the security of the British king's government. There were those who took a neutral position and did not want to be involved at all. All of them were fighting for what they believed in and all of them believed they were right.

Reenactors and reenactments remind us that the Revolutionary War was a long and hard struggle that meant tremendous sacrifices on the part of everyone, winners and losers alike.

If you would like to see a reenactment or an encampment, the most likely places are historic sites and parks. However, some are held in places where no actual battle occurred. Reenactors call these tactical engagements because they re-create the marches and movements of an army but not an actual battle. North Carolina has a number of Revolutionary battle sites, but few of them have reenactments. Most are parks that have rules preventing reenactments.

One of the few places in North Carolina where you can see a re-created Revolutionary War battle at the original site is at the House in the Horseshoe State Historic Site near Carthage. Other battle reenactments held near the original sites are "Guilford Courthouse" held in a city park in Greensboro, "Cowan's Ford" held in a county park north of Charlotte, and "The Battle at Colson's" held near Norwood.

Military encampments can be found at Historic Bethabara and Old Salem (both within the present-day city limits of Winston-Salem), Moore's Creek National Military Park near Wilmington, Historic Halifax State Historic Site, Historic Salisbury, and Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens at New Bern.

Once you see a reenactment, you might even decide that you want to become involved in reenacting yourself. Most groups require that a member be at least sixteen years of age to participate as a soldier or

to participate without a parent or guardian. Many young people join with their families and find that reenacting provides fun for all who want the experience of “trying on the shoes” of our ancestors.

*\*At the time of this article’s publication, Jim Daniel was “commander” of the Sixth North Carolina Regiment, Continental Line. He had begun reenacting the Civil War in 1960, leading to his interest in reenacting the American Revolution. He served as reenactor coordinator for Colonial Williamsburg’s Public Times program and helped with the production of several educational Revolutionary War films and videos. When he was not reenacting, Daniel was a computer systems consultant.*

### Definitions

A **firecake** is a cake made by mixing wheat flour or cornmeal with water and cooking it in the ashes of the campfire.

**Tactics** are the movements and uses of troops and weapons.

**Massed firepower** is shooting a large number of weapons at the same time to increase effectiveness. This tactic was useful during the Revolutionary War because of the inaccuracy of weapons and the time required to reload them.

**Authentic** means real or genuine.

A **fi**fe is a small musical instrument, like a pipe, used with drums to make marching music.

**Centennial** is a one hundredth-anniversary.

**Bicentennial** is a two hundredth-anniversary.