

Lore of the Corps

The True Story of a Colonel's Pigtail and a Court-Martial

Fred L. Borch III
Regimental Historian & Archivist

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In July 1805, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Thomas Butler, Jr. was court-martialed for refusing an order to crop his hair short and for "mutinous conduct" in appearing publicly in command of troops with his hair in a pig-tail or "queue" as it was called. He was found guilty of both charges and sentenced to a year's suspension from command and of pay. What follows is the true story of how Butler—a senior officer who had fought in the Revolutionary War and had spent nearly thirty years in uniform—was prosecuted for refusing to cut off his pigtail.

Hairstyles in the Army have usually reflected the civilian fashion of the period. In the late 1960s, for example, most young men had long hair (whites had hair over their ears; African-Americans wore the popular "Afro"). Moustaches and beards were popular, too. More than a few Soldiers—many of whom were draftees—who wanted to look like their civilian counterparts faced the wrath of their First Sergeant, who usually sported a crew-cut. Those who did not listen to "Top" and get their hair cut shorter always had the option to appear before their company commander for an Article 15.

The Army of the Revolutionary War era was no different. Soldiers in General George Washington's Continental Army wore their hair in accordance with the longish styles of the day. This explains why Continental Army General Orders published by Washington's headquarters required Soldiers "to wear their hair short or plaited (braided) up." But a Soldier also had the option to wear his long hair "powdered and tied."¹

Continental Army personnel who did powder and tie their hair did so with a mixture of flour and tallow, a hard animal fat. Powdered hair was usually tied in a pigtail or queue. According to Randy Steffen in *The Horse Soldier 1776-1943*, cavalymen preferred a "clubbed" hairstyle in which hair, gathered at the back of the neck, was tied in a firm bundle, folded to the side, and then tied again in a club. Mounted Soldiers liked the club because it "was likely to stay in place during the excitement and violent action of a mounted fight."²

The practice of wearing long hair—tied in a club or simple queue—continued in the Army after the Revolutionary War. By the early 1800s, shorter hairstyles had become fashionable in civilian America, but Soldiers continued to prefer to wear their hair in a pigtail. According to an article published in *Infantry Journal* in 1940, this fashion was considered by some Soldiers "almost as a prerogative—a badge of their caste."³

Imagine their horror and dismay when, on 30 April 1801, the Army's Commanding General, Major General (MG) James Wilkinson, announced in General Orders that all hair would be "cropped, without exceptions of persons." The practice of wearing a queue, club, or pigtail had been abolished.

At least one historian has speculated that Wilkinson's decision to end the wearing of long hair in powdered queues, clubs, and other types of pigtails was motivated by a desire to curry favor with then-President Thomas Jefferson, who wore his own hair short and not powdered.⁴ However, this is merely speculation, and it is just as likely that Wilkinson simply believed 18th century aristocratic hair styles were ill-suited to the new United States, where every male citizen was asked to reject old European (and aristocratic) fashions and adopt a true republican lifestyle—and shorter hair.

Regardless of Wilkinson's motivation in directing U.S. Soldiers to cut their hair short, his order provoked considerable resistance. Some Soldiers were outraged because they considered the hair order to be nothing short of required self-mutilation. Others did not want to serve in an Army that infringed on their natural rights. For example, Captain Daniel Bissell wrote his brother, "I was determined not to cut my hair . . . I wrote my Resignation & showed it, but . . . the Col. was not empowered [sic] to accept, nor was the pay Master here."⁵ It seems that Bissell could only resign his commission if he traveled 1800 miles (Bissell was located on a remote frontier post in Wilkinsonville, Georgia) to Washington, D.C., and submitted his resignation papers personally. Being unable to make such a journey, Bissell

¹ RANDY STEFFEN, 1 THE HORSE SOLDIER 1776–1943, at 35 (1977).

² *Id.*

³ Frederick P. Todd, *The Ins and Outs of Military Hair*, INFANTRY J. 166 (Mar.–Apr. 1940).

⁴ Frederick B. Wiener, *The Colonel's Queue*, ARMY 39 (Feb. 1973).

⁵ *Id.*

“was obliged to submit to the act that [he] despised” and cut his hair short.⁶

While the rank-and-file and officers like Bissell eventually acquiesced and cut their queues, there was a lone hold-out: LTC Thomas Butler. He adamantly refused to cut off his pigtail. Initially, at his own request and “in consideration of his infirm health,”⁷ Butler obtained an exemption from the cropping order, but the reprieve, which Butler had obtained from Wilkinson personally, was short-lived. The Secretary of War, Dr. William Eustis, rescinded the exemption.

Butler, his feelings hurt and his honor insulted, refused to comply with the Secretary’s order. As a result, Butler appeared before a general court-martial in Fredericktown (now Frederick), Maryland, in November 1803. He was found guilty of disobeying the April 1801 hair order and was sentenced to be reprimanded.

In authoring the reprimand MG Wilkinson wrote that “rank & responsibility go hand in hand. . . . [T]hey are inseparable.” While the actions of a younger officer might be excused, “gray hairs” should know better, and while such “gray hairs, wounds, scars & a broken constitution present strong claims to our compassion . . . they illy [sic] apply to the vindications of military trespasses.”⁸

Butler, however, continued to resist. After he repeatedly refused to cut off his queue, he was court-martialed a second time in July 1805. This time, a general court-martial sitting in New Orleans, Louisiana, convicted him of two charges: disobedience of a lawful order (to cut his hair) and “mutinous conduct by appearing publicly in

command of troops with his hair cued.”⁹ Knowing that the reprimand imposed by the first court-martial had not corrected Butler’s conduct, the second court-martial sentenced him to be suspended from command and of pay for twelve months. This was a severe punishment, given Butler’s seniority and three decades of service. Major General Wilkinson, then on duty in St. Louis, Missouri, approved this sentence on September 20, 1805.

Unknown to Wilkinson, however, Butler had died thirteen days earlier in New Orleans, probably of yellow fever. He was unrepentant to the end, having refused to crop his hair. In fact, when Butler was near death, he asked his friends to “bore a hole through the bottom of my coffin right under my head, and let my queue hang through it, that the damned old rascal (Wilkinson) may see that, even when dead, I refused to obey his orders.”¹⁰ As a result, Butler was in fact buried in a coffin with a hole that allowed his queue to protrude through it—for all to see and to report to MG Wilkinson.

So ends the true story of a colonel’s pigtail and a court-martial. Twice defeated in life, LTC Butler was seemingly victorious in death.

More historical information can be found at

The Judge Advocate General’s Corps
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<https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/8525736A005BE1BE>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Dorothy van Woerkom, *Colonel Butler’s Queue*, AM. HIST. ILLUSTRATED 25 (Feb. 1973).

¹⁰ *Id.*