

A Word About Longhunters

Longhunters were professional hide hunters. They lived in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, or Virginia during the mid-1700s, but hunted in present-day central and eastern Kentucky. Called Longhunters because they went on “long hunts” for months at a time, they lived off the land and hunted mainly white-tailed deer for their hides.

The Life of a Longhunter

Usually the hunting season began in April and ended in late fall. Longhunters came to hunt in Kentucky in two ways. Some traveled by foot or on horseback, following the overland trails that crossed the mountains at Cumberland Gap in southeastern Kentucky. Others traveled on flatboats, keelboats, bateaux, or dugout canoes down the Ohio River, then up the Kentucky River to their hunting areas.



For protection, Longhunters traveled in large groups and set up base camps. These groups split up into smaller groups to hunt deer. The life of a Longhunter was dangerous. He faced bad weather, rabid wolves, poisonous snakes, mosquitoes, ticks, disease, starvation, and frostbite.

Once a Longhunter killed a deer and removed its hide, he might butcher it and eat the meat. But more often, he left the carcasses to rot. Back in camp, the men scraped the hair, meat, and fat off the hides. Then they staked and stretched them to dry.

Squire Boone, a Kentucky Longhunter.
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The prepared deer hides were now ready. The men tied them up in bundles of 50, and packed them out on horseback. Then they shipped them out on boats to market and traded them to American and European hide dealers. Longhunters took thousands of deer annually during the hide harvest. In 1767, the commissary at Fort Pitt took in over 200,000 deer hides. Businesses bought the hides and made them into clothing, shoes, book bindings, saddles, gloves, and horse harnesses.

During the years the Longhunters worked in Kentucky, the French and British were competing with each other for control of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Due to this conflict, many Longhunters lost their entire season of hides to the French or their native allies, who helped themselves to the hides.

Native peoples also hunted deer, and they resented the Longhunters. These men came into Indian territories and killed the game native groups depended on for food, clothing, and many other things. There was fierce competition between the Longhunters and native groups: in hunting the deer and in trading the skins at the various trading posts, such as Fort Pitt. Native peoples also considered the Longhunters the advance guard of colonial settlement. If the Longhunters were in an area, the settlers could not be far behind.



How He Dressed

A Longhunter often dressed much like a Native American hunter. He wore breechclouts, deerskin leggings, a knee-length cotton or woolen shirt, and leather moccasins (there was no underwear then). Shirts doubled as a night shirt at bedtime.

He tied the leggings below his knee with hand-woven leg ties, or piece of leather thong to tighten them against his leg. The bottom of his leggings were generally tucked inside his moccasins. To keep insects, burrs, and brambles out of his shoes, he kept the cuff at the top of his moccasins rolled up and tied-off.

Over his shirt, he often wore a waistcoat or vest of wool or linen that reached mid-thigh. A fringed hunting shirt or frock made of deerskin or *linsey-woolsey*, a coarse fabric made from a combination of wool and linen, completed his outfit. He tied it all off with a colorful sash or a leather belt. His clothing was a brown or beige hue, since it was dyed with natural ingredients, such as butternut, black walnut hulls, and oak bark.

Hairstyle was a personal preference, but many Longhunters wore their hair long, tied in a ponytail in the back. Headgear consisted of felt hats with wide brims, tri-corner hats, or hats made from animal fur. Often a hunter tied a large handkerchief “pirate style” around his head.

A Longhunter was never without his flintlock rifle-gun or musket. A rifle had spiral grooves cut inside the barrel. These grooves caused the lead ball, when shot, to spin out of the end of the gun, creating greater accuracy. A musket had a smooth bore. This allowed the hunter to load his gun more quickly and easily, but the weapon wasn't as accurate. A Longhunter also carried a long-bladed knife and tomahawk. Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton are famous Kentucky Longhunters.



Longhunter Vocabulary

Firelock or **Flintlock** – a muzzle-loading weapon with a firing mechanism ignited with flint and steel. The gunflint strikes the metal, causing a spark, igniting the powder in the barrel. This caused an explosion that shot the ammunition out of the gun. Flintlocks were used from the early sixteenth century to around 1840.

Flash Pan – is located directly underneath the *frizzen*. It consists of a shallow depression near the *touch hole* of the barrel. Very fine gunpowder (which ignites quickly) is placed in the flash pan. Once the pan is filled with powder, the *frizzen* is pushed over the pan to cover the powder.

Frizzen – another essential component of the flintlock firing mechanism. The *hammer* holding the *gunflint* strikes the frizzen, causing a spark, which ignites the gunpowder. The *gunflint* actually shaves off molten pieces of steel from the frizzen.

Gunflint – a piece of flint held in the jaws of the *hammer*. The gunflint strikes the steel *frizzen*, which produces a spark, which ignites the gunpowder. Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, gunflints were typically made in England or France. English gunflints were a distinctive black flint, while French gunflints were a distinctive “honey”-colored flint. Gunflints came in various sizes, depending on whether they were used in muskets, rifles, or pistols. When neither English nor French gunflints were available, Native American hunters often made gunflints from local flint or *chert*.

Hammer – one of main components of the flintlock firing mechanism. It held the *gunflint*.

Musket – a type of muzzle loader with a smooth *bore* (or barrel). Muskets were easier to load but were less accurate than rifles. Experts could load a musket in 15 seconds.

Muzzle Loader – an early weapon that hunters loaded from the *muzzle* (top of the gun barrel) rather than at the *breech* (bottom of the barrel) as modern weapons are. All muzzle loaders used black powder, a very corrosive, smoky, and explosive kind of gunpowder.

Powder Horn – the hollow horn of a cow or buffalo used as a container to hold the gunpowder. Powder horns came in different sizes and were often elaborately decorated.

Rammer – a slender piece of wood or steel used to push and shove the lead ball (used as ammunition) down the gun barrel.

Rifle – a type of muzzle loader with a “rifled” barrel. The gun barrel had spiral grooves cut into it, which caused the ammunition to spin. This created greater velocity and accuracy than the musket was capable of. The rifle took longer to load than the musket.

Touch Hole – a very small hole in the gun barrel near the *flash pan*. Once the gunpowder is ignited in the *flash pan*, the spark causes the gun powder in the gun barrel to ignite.

We use these terms in our language today, holdovers from when people commonly used flintlocks.

“A Flash in the Pan” – If the gunpowder in the *flash pan* ignited (causing a spark and smoke), but didn’t ignite the main powder charge in the gun barrel, it was considered to be “a flash in the pan” and had no significant affect for firing the gun. When we use this phrase today, such as, “His career was just a flash in the pan,” it means it happened quickly and was not important.

Half Cock – the position to which the hammer is pulled back before it reaches the full cock position. A muzzle loader cannot be fired in the half cock position and acts as a safety measure. The term “Don’t go off half-cocked” means to act hastily or quickly without giving any thought to your actions.

Lock, Stock, and Barrel – the main components of a flintlock gun. All components are necessary for the gun to fire. If one of the components is missing, then you can’t use the gun. Today, the term is used to mean complete or that everything is included.

For further reading, we recommend *The Hunters of Kentucky: A Narrative History of America’s First War West, 1750-1792*, by Ted Franklin Belue, published in 2003 by Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA.