When you think of a pirate, what image automatically comes to mind? Maybe you picture a swarthy looking fellow with an eye-patch, a peg-leg, a hook and a scar. He's probably wearing a striped shirt and a bandana tied around his head. He might be sporting earrings or a wide leather belt and bucket top boots with huge buckles. And let's not forget one of the most important items; the oversized black hat adorned with feathers and a skull and cross bones emblazoned across the front. With no apologies to Johnny Depp a.k.a. "Jack Sparrow" it's pure Hollywood.

So what did the pirates of Laffite's day actually wear? Was it as colorful (or as laughable) as popular fiction, cartoons and motion pictures depict? The answer can be found with a bit of historical detective work, plus a careful study of period paintings, documented sources and museum pieces. Thirty years as a re-enactor and as an historical artist have also come in handy when preparing this article.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the majority of the organized navies of the world did not have a regulation "uniform". But certain items of clothing became accepted as practical wear for the seaman. Most ships carried a supply of ready-made clothing for the men in need. The cost of these items was taken out of the sailor's pay. In addition theft, graft, kick-backs and corruption was rampant and debt became a heavy burden for the common deck hand.

This ready made clothing consisted of the basics and included shirts, jackets, pants or breeches, socks, headwear and shoes. Most of it was made on the cheap, often out of old worn out linen canvas sail cloth. The workmanship and fit tended to be on the sloppy side thus sailors would dub these togs as "slops" with good reason! If you were reduced to rags, this was one of the few alternatives.

For the Baratarians it was a different story. While Laffite maintained stores of supplies, most men in need of a new wardrobe tended to grab whatever clothing chance tossed their way. If the pirates captured a ship with a stock of clothing, then life became so much easier. If none were to be had, then prisoners or battle casualties were robbed of their finery. Baring even that, clothing was made up from whatever bits and pieces that were available. The variety of backgrounds and ethnicities of Laffite's men produced a hodge-podge of styles.

It's highly likely that deserters from the Royal Navy as well as veterans of other military conflicts could be seen wearing parts of their issue clothing. A Frenchman who had served under Napoleon probably still wore his "bonnet du police" or fatigue cap. Likewise, fishermen, boatmen, laborers and vagabonds clung to the clothing of their previous employment and added to it as opportunity allowed. Some pirates dressed as outlandishly and mawkishly as possible to intimidate their victims as well as to impress the ladies. Most didn't give a damn about fashion.

The sketch shown here is an example of typical early 19th century clothing and weapons as used by the "rogue of the seas". He discarded any fripperies that could get in the way. To survive, pirates had to be walking arsenals and know their weapons better than a father knew his own son.

Starting at the top, we see a knitted wool stocking cap. These were similar to the "toques" worn by French/Canadian trappers as well as European whalers. Cheap and easy to
make, the knit cap was warm and comfortable. A few men chose a wide brimmed hat, but a strong gust of wind could send it flying. Worse than that, a blow during a fight might knock a hat into the wearer's eyes temporarily blinding him. The man shown has tucked the edge of his knit cap up, but this could also be folded down over the ears in colder weather. Colors ranged from bright reds, shades of blue or green to browns and greys. In the American War as well as the French Revolution, these knitted caps often had slogans or images embroidered across the front. "Liberty or Death" and a skull and crossed bones were popular. (Chalk one up for Hollywood!)

The bandana was another item worn by seamen on both sides of the law. Many tied a bandana around their heads to confine long hair and keep sweat out of the eyes. Another bandana was often tied around the wearer's neck to protect from sunburn. In bad weather, the neck bandana could be pulled over the face and nose for warmth and protection. Bandanas did double duty as a bandage for gunshot and stab wounds and as a sling for sprained limbs. Materials ranged from coarse linen, cotton or similar fabrics. Judging from numerous period paintings and written descriptions, polka-dot patterns were popular, especially with British seamen.

In cooler weather, sailors and pirates often slipped on a hip length jacket. Many were made of coarse wool but the majority were made of old sail cloth which at this time was a linen canvas. Jackets were either single or double breasted, depending on the man's size and girth. Sailor's jackets usually had one or two small pockets. Buttons were made of horn, pewter, brass or similar material. In some cases, old worn out coins were drilled with a couple of holes and sewn in place for a button. If a man deserted from the navy his buttons might sport a variation of the "fouled anchor" design that was so common. Paint and pine tar were two of the most commonly used waterproofing agents to keep out the salty spray, so the seaman's clothing got a generous coating. The smell must have been overpowering to say the least! This is the probable origin of the nickname "Jack Tar" for sailors.

A leather waist belt not only kept the wearer's trousers in place but also secured weapons. Most were between 2 and 2 1/2 inches wide. Buckles were made of brass or iron with the iron versions kept painted to prevent rust. The buckle was often placed at the wearer's back to avoid snagging on weapons and for comfort. Shoulder belts were often worn to hold the cutlass and scabbard with the waist belt being worn to hold a brace or two of pistols and a dagger or knife.

The sketch shows our pirate wearing what were called "petticoat breeches. (The similarity to a woman's petticoats is unmistakable.) These were knee length and loose fitting to allow freedom of movement when working or fighting. In Laffite's day most men's shirts were pull-over type with the puffy sleeves and square collars. Sailor's shirts would be made of wool flannel, coarse linen, cheap cotton, pillow ticking or even old sailcloth. 19th century paintings and written records indicate that checked patterns were common. Buttons ranged from wood to horn and bone. A pirate who lifted a fine silk shirt from a rich man could sport some swank with its laced cuffs, collar and trim!

In the navy hair was to be kept trimmed and neat, but it's doubtful if Laffite's lads followed this practice. Many sailors braided their long hair into pig-tails and tied it off with ribbons. For long serving old salts, this long pig-tail was a status symbol. Period accounts describe how sailors put a coat of pine tar on these pig-tails to keep rats from chewing on them! Beards were not common at this time although Laffite himself is often described with a "moustache". On the other hand, "chin-whiskers" and "side-boards" were all the rage at this time and were seen on most male faces that were able to grow them!

Sailor's shirts had not changed much from previous centuries. Loose fitting to allow freedom of movement and knee length with the long shirt tail seeing double service as underwear. Most
breeches and pants were "drop fall" or "fall front" closure; a wide flap with several buttons. A few men wore breeches with a fly front with a vertical row of buttons. The waist could be adjusted with a leather or cloth thong for a "one size fits all". Zippers and belt loops didn't exist at this time. Sailor's breeches were generally made of old sail canvas or pillow ticking and were coated with pine tar for waterproofing. Early records and paintings indicate that red was a popular color for sailors breeches. Long trousers were also common and were made of similar materials.

Wool stockings or socks were probably a rare item except in cold weather. 18th and early 19th century paintings frequently show striped patterns on seamen. A gentleman might wear stocking garters, a narrow belt worn around the knee to keep the socks from "drooping" but it's doubtful if pirates or common sailors used them.

The sketch shows our buccaneer wearing sandals. (No, not "flip-flops") These were made of leather or braided from rope. (they were called "ropa" sandals) Sandals were practical in that they were easy to make and comfortable in hot climates. Leather shoes or boots would have offered more protection, but tended to be slippery on a wet deck. Many sailors preferred to go barefoot for better grip especially when climbing into the ship's rigging. Medical records from the time indicate that sailor's feet were quite flat and their soles hard as a board. No doubt there was also a generous layer of pine tar under their toenails!

When it comes to weaponry this man has considerable firepower with several flintlock pistols tucked into his belt and two more hanging on a strap around his neck. Our man's blades include a cutlass and a razor sharp dagger, dirk or belt knife. In future issues, we'll take a closer look at the weaponry used by the Baratarians.