Hallmarks of an 18th Century Cane or Walking Stick for the Historical Reenactor

“By the Way, one never carries a cane, one wears one.” (Canes Through the Ages)

Let us begin with the understanding, that canes or sticks as they were often called, were extremely popular in our period. Gentlemen and ladies both utilized them as a fashion statement and a practical instrument to assist in steadying themselves on cobble stone and muddy streets, climbing into and out of carriages or as a weapon for self-defense. Canes were so popular that they were sold on the streets of London and Paris as newspapers are hawked today. (Canes Through the Ages). Probate inventories often listed multiple canes owned by gentlemen, they were a fashion accessory after all.

I’m going to discuss the cane elements that were commonly seen, the elements that as a reenactor, we should strive to emulate. Never say never, there will always be that rare or uncommon example that will pop up occasionally. What I am wanting to share are the common elements that a reenactor should be looking for when they are seeking a historically accurate 18th century cane to add to their kit.

Let us begin by looking at who carried canes or walking sticks. Virtually every gentleman or lady would have owned and used several. Socially, they were considered a necessity and were used to demonstrate their wealth, personality or heritage (think Blackthorn canes, these might deviate from the norm but they were very popular too). The middle and lower classes often emulated the upper classes, so a stick that would fit into their budget would be selected. Instead of gold or silver a handle could be made from brass or silver-plated brass. Instead of ivory bone could be selected, etc.

Starting from the ground up, by the 17th and 18th centuries canes were tipped with a steel rod. This protects the end of the cane from damage and extends their life.

Next, we will find a tampered ferrule. This was most commonly made from brass but occasionally we find silver. Later in the period we might even see horn but by far the most common material was brass. Even on canes topped with gold or silver handles. It is believed that brass was used because the ferrule would eventually wear out and need to be replaced, brass is an inexpensive material to do this with.

In the 18th century, these ferrules were long, occasionally upwards of 6-7” but commonly closer to 3-4”. The ferrules that are about 1” or less appear in the 19Th and 20th centuries.

The cane shaft itself could be of an extreme range of common or uncommon materials. Exotic hardwoods and Malacca were extremely common. Remember, raw materials from around the world were shipped to England and France, where a finished product was produced and then sold within those countries or shipped back to their colonies where the product was sold.

Malacca was so commonly used. It is the base end of the ratan vine and inhabits the East Indies. Bamboo and Calcutta canes were also very popular. It seems that Malacca was king though and for a very good reason. It is light weight, tough and has some flex. All excellent attributes of a walking stick.

A side note, Blackthorn was culturally popular and appears to have been popular in the British Iles.

The shape of the common cane was almost always round and tapered from the handle to the steel tip. Very rarely a cane shaft that was carved or jewel encrusted in encountered.

Canes in an octagonal shape and taper did not appear until the 19th century and even then, round was more popular or common.

Octagonal canes seem to be a “reenactorism” today. If you purchase an octagonal cane blank from one of the many vendors who sell them, work the angled corners down with a plane until you have a round cane shaft. (yes, I know of an octagonal cane associated with Thomas Jefferson, but it is from the early 19th century and is only one, so, not common. Remember we are discussing 18th century.)

The next element that really should be on a cane, is the eyelet or lanyard hole. These more often than not appear on canes of the 18th century (Walis). They were in the cane shaft, below the handle. They could have been just a simple drilled, unlined hole or the hole could have been lined with brass, gold, silver or ivory.

The collar or joint between the shaft and handle. If a cane was topped with a handle constructed of some metal, there wasn’t a separate collar, since the collar was incorporated into the handle or knob. If a handle was made from a material such as ivory, burl, bone or horn then a metal collar was commonly employed to cover the joint. Collars could be plain or quite decorative.

The handle or knob. This is where commonality seems to run off the tracks. A unique variety of materials could be found in use. Brass, gold, silver and ivory are by far the most commonly seen but the shapes and sizes vary greatly.

In the 17th century, Ivory handles intricately decorated with silver dots, know as pique’ work, were very popular. These were often on the longer side and the eyelet hole was drilled through above the collar. These canes were highly fashionable and valued, they were passed from father to son or grandson.

It was not uncommon for an out of fashion cane to be reworked to fit updated styles. For instance, the handle from a 17th century pique’ decorated ivory handle would be refitted to a cane shaft that more comfortably fits the new owner. An eyelet was put in this cane below the collar and the original eyelet hole in the ivory handle was filled with an ebony dowel.

The brass ferrule was also shortened as styles changed. This is often why we find 17th century pique’ worked ivory handles on canes that have other elements from the 19th century, such as a 1” brass or horn tapered ferrule.

I will leave you with this quote: They say a man with a cane was truly a gentleman, “who toils not, neither does he spin”

Sources:

Canes Through the Ages, by Frances H. Monek

YouTube Video: Neal Hurst, Taylor; 18th Century Walking Sticks with Mark Wallis

Scribid: !8th Century Material Culture; English Walking Sticks; French Walking Sticks