

Civil War Glasses - Or, How Not To Make a Spectacle Of Yourself

By Thomas McEvoy

Over the past couple of years I have been making spectacle lenses for members in my unit and members of Thomas' Mudsills. The biggest problem that I have encountered is in people's misconception as to what is and what isn't a period frame. I thought that a description of the different styles might help those considering getting a period pair of spectacles.

Spectacles came into common use in England around 1750. These contained the regulation front section held in position by temples or bows. The long temples or bows were called "telescope sides or turnpins", according to the mechanisms by which they varied the length to fit the wearer. It was not until this time that what we now know to be the prototype for today's spectacles became popular. Frames were fabricated from such materials as wood, horn, bone, paper mache, and, during the early 18th and 19th centuries, metals, which were followed by real tortoise shell at the beginning of the 20th century.

Until 1826, very nearly all American spectacles were imported from Europe, a practice which continued until the Civil War. In 1830, only 25 to 30 men were known to be engaged in making spectacle frames in this country. Most of these frames were made from gold and silver with a few being made from steel. These men would manufacture the frames and insert lenses which they had imported from Europe. It was not until towards the end of the war and after that the Americans were finally able to produce a spectacle lens comparable to the quality of those imported from Europe.

Spectacles can be easily identified by specific changes in construction, mechanisms, and appearance. The following categories are related to historical periods and will help assist you in dating and choosing spectacles that will better fit your impression.

The frames that I suggest people get are those of the Pre-Civil War period. These will have either the straight, stud-slit, or sliding temple with looped ends. The frame will have the straight bridge extension and the gauge of the eyewire will be somewhat thick. This type of frame is still easily found at most flea markets or antique shows. When choosing a frame, one should make sure that it contains all parts and that the hinge which closes the eyewires is held closed by a screw. Frames which have a press-fit hinge are too hard to insert lenses into and are usually the type of frame that was mass-produced for shooting glasses around 1897. Frames of the Post Civil War period are very popular in that they are easy to find and, because the eyewire sizes are larger, they afford the wearer a better field of vision. Cosmetically, they do have the Civil War style except for the comfort cable

temples.

At this point, I think a few words about spectacle lenses might also be helpful. At the time of the Civil War, prescriptions for near-sightedness were almost non-existent with glasses being mainly used for reading. When deciding on whether to use a glass or plastic lens you should consider a couple of things. Cosmetically, both glass and plastic look the same. Glass has the advantage of not scratching as easily, but plastic, while scratching easier, is much lighter in weight. For those of you who have strong prescriptions, plastic is probably your best bet. The difference in weight of the lenses will be quite noticeable and, since the frame rests directly on the nose, plastic will be a definite advantage. For those of you considering a tinted lens, the most popular shades were light green, blue, and smoke grey. While there are examples today of tinted lenses, most frames would have had clear lenses. Most Ophthalmologists, Optometrists, or Opticians should be able to have your prescription put into the frame you have found but will probably do it under the understanding that if the frame breaks, they cannot be held responsible. Most of the frames are very individual and parts are not readily available for them.

I hope that this has cleared up some misconceptions and has given you a better understanding in choosing a spectacle frame better suited for your impression.

References:

Ophthalmic Dispensing: Russell L. Stimpson, Sec. edition, Charles C. Thomas

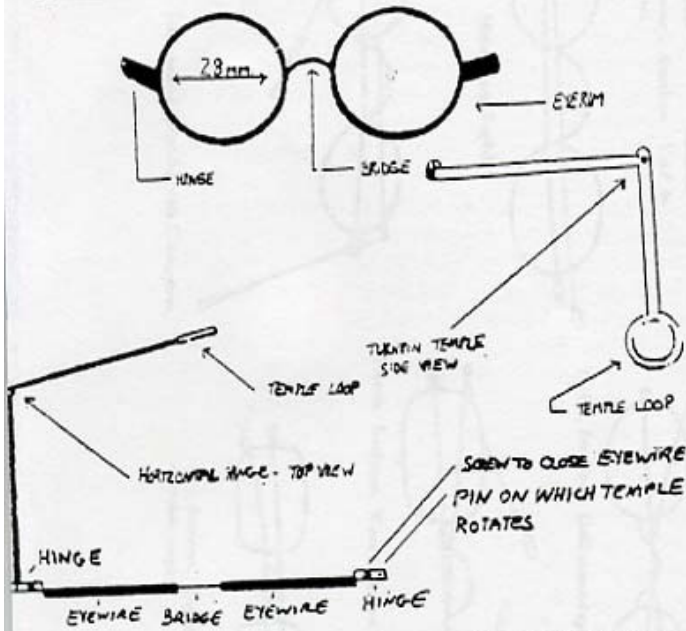
Early American Specs: Dr. L. D. Bronson, Occidental Publishing Co., Glendale, Ca.

Tom is a former member of The Mudsills and has researched period eyewear over a number of years. He has the correct frames for sale and, in addition, will grind lenses for them. For more information you may contact Tom at (708) 668-5281.

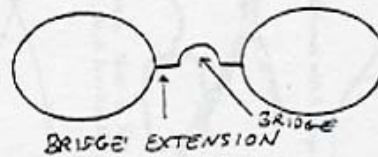
This article was originally published in Vol. 4 No. 2 (April 1984) of the *Company Front*.

This article is continued by Tom's descriptions and drawings of the different spectacles from Pre-Revolutionary War through Post-Civil War.

Pre-Revolutionary (1620-1738) This period encompassed the most insignificant alterations to the frame. The distinguishing feature, however, consisted of temple lengths of approximately four inches which folded vertically on a turn-pin arrangement ending in a large loop. The eyerim diameter is 28mm and round in shape. Toward the end of this period, the temples were changed to fold horizontally on a hinge type construction with the temple loops being somewhat reduced.



Pre-Civil War - Frame construction was considerably lighter in weight and gauge of material with temple loops such smaller. The large loops of the Pre-Revolutionary period and the stud-slit temple mechanisms were found to be less functional and were eliminated. A change in construction, allowing for alterations in the bridge, was added. This addition was a straight extension placed on both sides of the bridge between the bridge and the eyewire. Frames could be found in the shapes of ovals, rectangles, hexagons, and octagons. These were manufactured from gold, silver, brass, plated brass and steel.



Civil War - Temples were solid with no loops. The purely round frames were non-existent at the time. All shapes are the same as Pre Civil War, with frame construction being much more refined and with the gauge of material used being thinner.



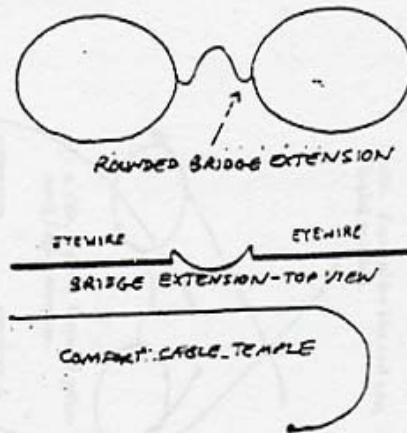
Revolutionary Era - The temples were changed to a sliding type. The method was that of a stud on one part of the temple which moved into a slit on the other part of the temple. The ring loops at the end of the temples were slightly reduced in size. Eyerims are more oval than round and the construction of the frame is less crude and thinner in gauge of material than those of the Pre-Revolutionary period.



War of 1812 (1812-1820) The temples were changed to a new sliding method with elongated loops affording much easier manipulation with the wig. The frames were still somewhat heavy and bulky. The most common shapes were oval and rectangular.



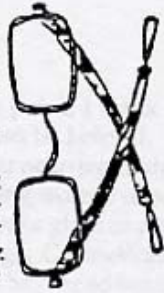
Post Civil War (1866-1900) These frames are thinner in the gauge of metal used for eyewires. The eyewire sizes are larger with the most common shape being oval. The frame construction is very refined with the bridge extension being more rounded and, in some cases, being placed behind the eyewires. The temples are either straight or the curved "comfort cable".



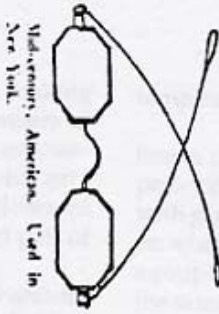
Examples of Period Spectacles



1871, Swedish. Gold frames with K-shaped nosepiece.



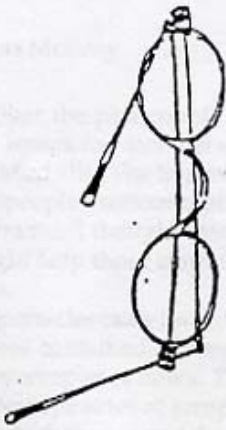
c. 1867, American. Made in New York by W. V. Brads between 1851 and 1847.



Mid-century, American. Tied in New York.



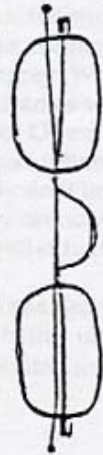
Mid-century, English.



1844, American. Steel-rimmed spectacles with C-nosepieces.



c. 1850, American. Silver frames with plain vitidian green glass.



Probably made not later than 1851, French. Steel rims.



c. 1850-60, American. Possibly brass.



c. 1851, American. Gold-rimmed spectacles with English nosepieces.



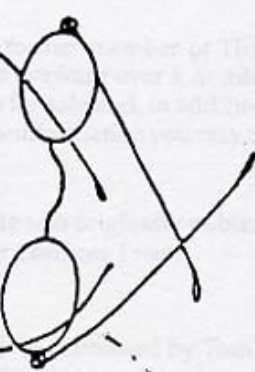
French. Steel rims. Worn by Anders Erik Alnäs (1777-1850)



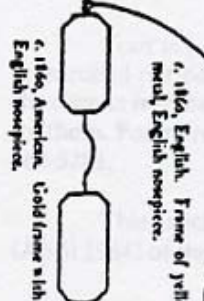
1813, American. English nosepiece, extension temples.



1850, English. Frame of low blue steel wire, English nosepiece.



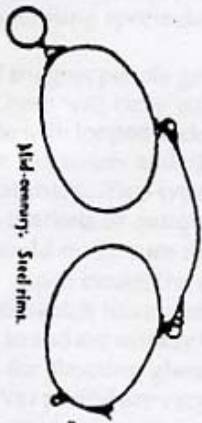
c. 1850, English. Frame of yellow metal, English nosepiece.



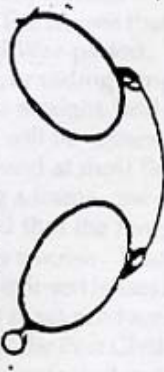
c. 1850, American. Gold rims with English nosepiece.



Mid-century, American. Pinc-naz with adjustable steel bar spring.



Mid-century, Steel rims.



1850, American. Collapsible frame, removable steel ring. Manufactured by Bausch and Lomb.

