

Reenacting / Living History How-Tos

OBSERVATIONS OF ORIGINAL CIVIL WAR SHELL JACKETS

by Jay White

The Civil War Collectors Show in Mansfield, Ohio provides an excellent opportunity for some "hands on" museum viewing. By this, I mean the chance to go beyond the glass case to get real close and possibly even touch surviving relics of a bygone era.

At Mansfield 2000 [*the Mansfield relic show is one of the largest in the country - Ed.*], I was fortunate enough to view several shell jackets. In addition, three artillery jackets and four cavalry jackets were available for viewing (and purchase!) The basic design fit the "regulation" description of a twelve button front, trimmed in branch of service color, and with a standing collar. All jackets had tape trim and all were lined in various materials.

Per the 1861 *United States Army Regulations*, the common jacket is described as follows:

"COAT, ENLISTED. All enlisted men of the cavalry and light artillery shall wear a uniform jacket of dark blue cloth, with one row of 12 small buttons on the breast placed at equal distances; stand-up collar to rise no higher than to permit the chin to turn freely over it, to hook in front at the bottom, and to slope the same as at the coat collar; on the collar, on each side, two blind button holes of lace, 3/8 inch wide, one small button on the button hole, lower button hole extending back 4 inches, upper button hole 3 1/2 inches; top button and front ends of collar bound with lace 3/8 inches wide, and a strip of the same extending down the front and around the lower edge of the jacket; the back seam laced with the same, and on the cuff a point of the same shape as that on the coat, but formed of the lace; jacket to extend to the waist, and to be lined with white flannel; two small buttons at the under seam of the cuff, as on the coat cuff; one hook and eye at the bottom of the collar; color of lace (worsted), yellow for cavalry and scarlet for light artillery." [*United States Army Regulations of 1861*, reprinted in Francis Lord's *Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia, Vol. 1*, pp. 295, Blue & Grey Press, 1995]

Observations

Buttons: The jackets I viewed all followed the same basic design in body, shape, and button placement. The jackets were of the ten- to twelve-button front with 3/8-inch general service buttons. There were two functional cuff buttons and two false buttons on the collar. The majority of buttonholes were hand sewn, although the button holes that may have been machine done were done via the key-hole method. Refer to the article on Historical Clothier's web page, www.HistCloth.com, for more detail on machine-sewn buttonholes. As previously mentioned, all seven jackets had a pair of buttons sewn on either side of the collar.

Trim: All seven jackets were fully trimmed, however, the method of attaching the trim differed. The trim on all seven was a wool twill tape. Two of the artillery jackets exhibited machine sewn trim. The thread was a brownish color, presumably a logwood dyed thread oxidized to brown over the years.

There were several jackets that had the trim applied by machine. The machine stitching was sloppy and ran about 6 to 10 stitches per inch. The stitching was not straight in some instances. The collar trim was applied in double rows with somewhat even spacing between the pairs except for one jacket whose trim tape was either wider than normal or the collar was shorter, or a combination of both. The rows ran together with little to no spacing in between. The trim on all jackets was not perfectly applied and some sloppy construction was evident.

Lining: Now we come to the interesting part. All seven of the jackets viewed were lined. Per the regulations quoted above, the lining was to be of a "white flannel." Two of the linings were made from an off-white, coarse material that was almost like linen, but may have been a domet flannel. One jacket was lined with a blue wool flannel, very similar to blouse flannel, and one had a brown and off-white checked lining. The material on the checked lining was a cotton-like woven material. The remaining three had a brownish jeanwool material (brown wool on white cotton) lining. A similar type of lining can be seen on the cavalry jacket shown at John Wedeward's excellent website, at http://www2.inxpress.net/jwedeward/original_shell_jackets.htm.

One interesting interior detail observed on two of the jackets was a strip of cloth that ran along the bottom of the interior of the jacket, or a facing piece. The cloth was the same material as the rest of the jacket and was whip stitched into place with the edges left raw.

Other: Due to the limited nature of the viewing and handling (unless you're a serious buyer of one of these jackets, which usually cost from \$2,500 to \$3,500 each, dealers generally do not want you to handle them!) some interior details like sleeve lining attachments and inspectors' marks and size marks were not viewable, except for one jacket. Likewise, the backs were not examined, which excluded the pillows from examination. Furthermore, evidence of the front being padded was indeterminable.

One jacket was an exception with respect to the interior markings. The cavalry jacket with the brown checked lining was laying open on the table to show the interior marking. Centered between the sleeves were the letters "SA" over the number "3" or "5" stenciled or stamped in white paint. The "SA" is indicative of the jacket having been made or contracted by the Schuykill Arsenal. The jacket did have some machine and hand stitching evident. The sleeves were not viewable, and no markings on the interior were observed. It was assumed that the markings for arsenal and size were "painted" on the back of the interior of the jacket only.

A final observation relates to the wide variation in the "standards" of the garments. There was no "cookie cutter" version of these coats, although the main features were the same. Construction methods and finishing techniques were varied.

Conclusions

I have not compiled numbers on the use of the jackets by the different branches of service, but photographic evidence indicates that the jackets were in use in good numbers by artillery and cavalry units. Also, there is photographic evidence of infantrymen using these jackets as well. Wilder's Lightning Brigade purchased or were issued jackets in place of frock coats and it is documented that the men, in order not to be confused as cavalry, removed the trim on the jackets. There is also a photograph of Private John Riddle, a teamster and ambulance driver from Company D, 18th Ohio Volunteer Infantry wearing a jacket without trim [refer to pp. 232 of *Echoes of Battle: The Struggle for Chattanooga*, Blue Acorn Press, 1996]. The collar is folded down and the hook and eye are in plain view.

For either an artillery or cavalry impression, a good jacket is not out of place. Photographic evidence shows that jackets were in use in about equal numbers in both Eastern and Western theaters of the war. Not taking into account the privately purchased jacket or ones that have been altered by the company tailor, the "Arsenal Issued" jacket has its proper place in either of these two branches. The missing feature is the *quality* and *correctness* of the jacket. Finally, it is in this author's opinion that some jackets did make their way (in small numbers) to infantry units in the field, particularly in the western armies, such as the Army of the Cumberland. The vast majority of infantrymen were attired in fatigue blouses, frock coats, and various other types of jackets, whether state issue, private purchase, or modifications of other uniform coats.

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