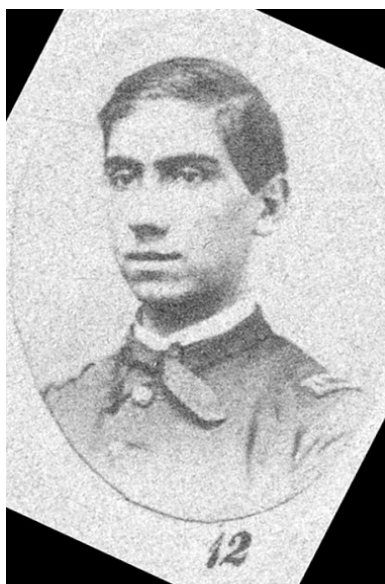


The Benjamin Marshall Mills Blanket



Between 1861 and 1865, millions of blankets were furnished by hundreds of contractors to the War Department for issue to Federal troops. Of this number, perhaps 100 are known to survive today in private or public collections. (source: Fred Gaede) Accordingly, the surfacing of *any* issue blanket, much less one with a documented provenance, is significant. This writer made such a find recently in the special collections of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

The blanket in question has been securely identified to 1st Lieutenant Benjamin Marshall Mills, Company F, 49th United States Colored Infantry. B. M. Mills (1846-1869), the only son of noted Indiana educator and abolitionist Caleb Mills (1806-1879) who survived childhood. Benjamin Mills entered into studies at Wabash College, a small, but highly regarded, men's "independent and nonsectarian" liberal arts institution in September 1863. However, at the still-tender age of 17, and with his father's encouragement, Mills withdrew from his studies in April 1864, along with a classmate, and secured a lieutenant's commission with the 49th USCI which had initially organized the previous year as the 11th Louisiana Infantry (African Descent). (<http://www.wabash.edu/aboutwabash/history.shtm>)



1st Lieutenant Benjamin Marshall Mills

Company F, 49th U.S.C.I.

ca. May 1864

Previously unpublished.

Wabash College Archives, Crawfordsville IN.

When the Civil War finally arrived, Hoosier Presbyterians and Congregationalists willingly filled the ranks of enlisted men as well as officers. By 1864, 307 graduates and students of Wabash College had joined the fight as soldiers in the Union Army. The college was almost devoid of 3rd and 4th year students because so many had gone to war. The sentiment was so strong on campus that Professor Caleb Mills encouraged his son, Benjamin Marshall Mills to enlist. Young Mills joined the war as an officer in an African American regiment, knowing he faced immediate execution if ever captured by Confederate forces. (Wabash College: 117-128)

(<http://www.connerprairie.org/historyonline/presby.html>)

Gronert, T. G, and Osborne, James I. *Wabash College, the first hundred years*. Crawfordsville: R.A. Banta, 1932.

For the next fifteen months, Lieutenant Mills and his regiment primarily performed "Post and garrison duty at Vicksburg, Miss., and at various points in the Dept. of Mississippi [for its] entire term" Mills' terms of service was occasionally eventful: one of Mills' unpublished diary entries indicates he had to pull his pistol on a less-than-cooperative man in his unit in order to make him comply with an order. Mills subsequently resigned his commission effective 7 July 1865 and the the 49th USCI subsequently mustered out on 27 March 1866." (*Dyer's Compendium*)

(Note: <http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/cwbattle.htm> Lists of battles--apparently the 49th USCI did participate in at least two actions in 1863-1864, including Milliken's Bend LA on 7 June 1863)

B. M. Mills subsequently resumed his studies at Wabash College, in September 1865, and graduated in June 1868 with a baccalaureate degree in science despite suffering recurrent bouts of poor health, likely due in part to his wartime service. Mills soon thereafter entered into medical studies, but died from "pneumonitis and galloping consumption" on 9 January 1869, aged only 22.

Several items identified to Mills' military service are currently held in the Wabash College Archive holdings including his officer kepi-style cap, marked wallet, three-volume set of *Casey's Tactics* (dated "Vicksburg April 20th [1864]"), uniform buttons, and even his Pattern of 1858 "smoothside" canteen, which remains in remarkably good condition.

However the "crown jewel" of the Mills Collection is decidedly his issue blanket which this writer examined and photographed on 10 January and 6 May 2003. Catalogued by Wabash College as "**ARMY BLANKET (A92-48),**" **this item was reportedly donated by Helen Mills Condit)?**

Contractor Source

Contractor information for this item is unknown. However, given that Lieutenant Mills apparently took receipt of his new blanket sometime after his arrival for duty at Vicksburg, on 14 April 1864, one can reasonably speculate that it was produced under Quartermaster Department contract in the fall of 1863 or winter of 1863-1864.

Dimensions

Dimensions are, based on an initial measurement, 68" wide x 83" long (compare with official Quartermaster Department specifications of "7 feet by 5.5 feet" - 66" x 84").

Fabric

Appears to be standard 2/2 woolen twill with relatively low shoddy content.

Color

Color can best be described as a gray-green-brown wool which, though apparently faded somewhat, still remains surprisingly "vibrant" due to the fact that the blanket appears to have largely been kept in storage and away from exposure to the elements and direct sunlight. What is most interesting is that traces of the original "nap" apparently remain, no doubt due to the fact that it was not subjected to the stresses and rigors of hard campaigning as the 49th USCI did not see any significant action (other than picket duty) during Mills' term of service with the regiment.

Markings

"Standard" three-line "US," but in a relatively unusual chain-stitch, in center of blanket in 5 ¼" black letters. The actual width of the stitched lettering, regrettably, was not measured during inspection, but is probably similar to that used on the "Abe Thomas Blanket." Stenciled name, rank, unit toward bottom edge of blanket in approx. 1 ¼", somewhat irregular, letters applied with black ink reading as follows:

B M Mills
C^o F
49th USCI

The spacing between each line varies from approximately 1", between the first and second lines, to 1 ¼" between the second and third lines. This suggests that more than one, possibly locally devised, stencil was used for marking since a commercially-devised stencil would presumably have been more consistent in its lettering and spacing. Research by Fred Gaede indicates that visible, unique markings on surviving Federal blankets are relatively rare—about 15 percent of the available sample—despite circumstantial evidence suggesting the practice of marking personal items, more or less according to regulations, was fairly widespread. On 20 January 1865, B. M. Mills noted in a letter to his father that:

In the morning I commenced marking the men's haversacks canteens and knapsacks and rubber blankets, so that if they should be stolen we could easily identify them and [we] worked hard until dark and then was not quite done, [so we] finished in the evening.

To this, Mills' father queried in a subsequent letter:

How did you mark the new knapsacks, canteens &c., for, unless it was something like marking flour barrels? I do not see how you could do it so speedily.

Young Mills replied in turn:

You asked how we marked the men's knapsacks we put Co F then the number of the man whatever that might be, then the canteens on one side [with] the number and [the] Co on the other. In this way all through the Co. So if anyone should lose his canteen it could easily be indentified [sic]. It was done with stencils [and this] was the reason of accomplishing it so quickly.

NOTE: A detailed description of a similar U.S. issue blanket can be found at the following website:

<http://members.aol.com/qmwoolens/blanket/blanket.htm> (link broken as of 15 January 2009)

The assistance of Fred Gaede, Esq., Lutherville MD and Johanna Herring, Wabash College Special Collections, is gratefully acknowledged.

**Wabash College Special Collections, Crawfordsville IN
(Johanna Herring, Archivist)**

Benjamin Marshall Mills Collection

(B. M. Mills' father was Caleb Mills, a prominent figure in 19th century Indiana education)

Mills served as 1st Lieutenant, Company F, 49th USCI.

49th Regiment United States Colored Infantry

Organized March 11, 1864, from 11th Louisiana Infantry (African Descent). Attached to 1st Colored Brigade, District of Vicksburg, Miss., to April, 1864. 1st Brigade, 1st Division, United States Colored Troops, District of Vicksburg, Miss., April, 1864. 2nd Brigade, 1st Division, United States Colored Troops, District of Vicksburg, Miss., to October, 1864. 1st Brigade, 4th Division, 16th Corps, to November, 1864. 1st Brigade, 1st Division, United States Colored Troops, District of Vicksburg, Miss., to June, 1865. Dept. of Mississippi to March, 1866.

SERVICE.--Post and garrison duty at Vicksburg, Miss., and at various points in the Dept. of Mississippi entire term. Mustered out March 27, 1866.

(Dyer's Compendium, 1908.)

The following items were examined on 10 January 2003:

CANTEEN (A93-31)

Consistent with a U.S. Pattern of 1858 "smoothside" variant. Medium blue cover (possibly kersey cloth); strap/cover in excellent condition with only minor wear around the keepers and minor staining on the strap; jack chain; no discernible contractor/inspector markings on spout or keeper; interior of canteen appears to be in excellent condition with "shiny" finish.

WALLET (A93-remainder of catalog number not known)

Slim, light-brown leather wallet; 4" x 11.75"; inscriptions on interior:

In main section:

B. Marshall Mills
 1st Lieut Co F 49th U.S.C. Infantry
 Vicksburg
 Mississippi

B. Marshall Mills
 Crawfordsville
 Ind.
 (Note: This is flipped
 90 degrees to the left and written
 on the interior of the right-hand flap)

Residence
 Crawfordsville
 Indiana

Stamped on the right interior of the wallet (and flipped 90 degrees to the right) is:

MADE BY. COBB & JOHNSON
 LANCASTER MASS.

OFFICER & ENLISTED BUTTONS (A93-35)

Large officer - EXTRA QUALITY

Enlisted "I" - Scoville Mfg. Co.
 Waterbury

Small officer - No markings on back

OFFICER PRIVATE PURCHASE "KEPI" (A93-30)

Small black label with gold character and stripe - 1/2" high by approx. 3/8" wide

Manufacturer ID stamped in gold lettering on interior fabric forming inside crown:

Col. Ⓞ. Lippincott.
 Government Goods Depot.
 79 & 81 RANDOLPH ST.
 CHICAGO.

Diameter of round top to kepi - 5 ½"

Chin strap ½"

Glazing on brim is applied to both sides and in good condition

Width of brim at center, 1 ½" (approx. 2" including cloth binding)

Fabric of exterior consists of a high-quality medium-dark blue wool fabric

Fabric of interior lining is dark brown (possibly originally black but faded) with a texture and sheen similar to "polished cotton."

ARMY BLANKET (A92-48) (Blanket Donated by Helen Mills Condit)

Dimensions are, based on first measurement, 68" wide x 83" long (compare with official Quartermaster Department specifications of "7 feet by 5.5 feet" - 66" x 84")

Color: Gray-Green-Brown wool (probably faded somewhat due to exposure to the elements and sunlight)

"Standard" three-line chain-stitch US in center of blanket in 5 ¼" black letters

Stenciled name, rank, unit toward bottom edge of blanket in approx. 1 ¼" letters applied with black ink: Appears to read as follows

B M Mills
C^o F
49th USCI

NOTE: A detailed description of a similar U.S. issue blanket can be found at the following website:

<http://members.aol.com/qmwoolens/blanket/blanket.htm> (link broken as of 15 January 2009)

ADDITIONAL ITEMS (Catalog numbers not known):

Image of B. M. Mills in citizen dress. Appearance of pasteboard backing to image suggests a post-1865 date. Photograph may have been taken in conjunction with Mills' graduation from Wabash in Spring 1868.

Unpublished group "collage" of individual 49th USCI officer images, including one of Mills. Approximate date made: March 1864 - March 1866.

Inscribed, three-volume set of *Casey's Tactics* in good condition. The most detailed written inscription appears in the front page of Vol. II:

B. Marshall
Mills Esq.,

Crawfordsville
Ind.,

Vicksburg April 20th
49 U.S. I. Colored

B. Marshall. Mills
Crawfordsville
Indiana

Vicksburg Miss
April 20th 1864