

Royal and Sky Blue Enlisted Men's Trousers in the Army of Northern Virginia

Fact or Fiction?

By David Burt

In the film "Gettysburg" virtually every Confederate soldier seems to wear sky blue trousers. This film is hardly the most authentic as far as uniforms are concerned, but apart from a few incidents of Confederate Soldiers capturing Federal pants, just how likely would it be for soldiers in Lee's army to wear sky blue or royal blue trousers? Confederate Infantry Regulations published on June 6th 1861 called for sky blue trousers for enlisted men. Prior to 1862 the Richmond Clothing manufactory made a large percentage of the trousers in Sky Blue and Grey Kersey. However more and more of this quality Kersey was sold to officers and it became increasingly rare in enlisted men's clothing.

From early 1862 most of the cloth used for making trousers was jeans and cassimere, but some woollen kersey was manufactured domestically. Made by such firms as the Danville Manufacturing co, and the Crenshaw Woollen mill, both of whom were located in Virginia. It was probable blue woollen trousers were still being produced through this period. But by October 1863 large amounts of Sky Blue, Medium Blue, and Royal Blue, woollen Kersey began to arrive at the Richmond Depot from England.

Upon becoming the first foreign agent for the Quartermasters Dept in December 1862. Major James B Ferguson's first order, the following April, was to purchase one million yards of woollen cloth, with half in sky blue for trousers.

Two receipt ledgers for the last quarter of 1863, and the whole of 1864 shows this cloth from England coming into the Richmond Depot. Cloth listed as "English Blue Cloth" "Pilot Cloth" "Blue Trowsering" "English Blue-Privates" In fact these Blue Cloths were the second largest quantity of cloths imported from England behind the blue/grey kersey.

There are also references from the ledger to "sky blue" cloth in smaller but still substantial quantities, probably similar to Federal blue and probably used for trousers.

Surviving examples of blue trousers made by the Richmond Depot include a pair worn by Private Henry Redwood who served in the 3rd Virginia local Defence Troops. They are sky blue woollen kersey cloth, with inner facings and pockets of light brown cotton Osnaburg with Japanned tin buttons.

Another pair belonged to Corporal T.V. Brooke of the Richmond Howitzers issued to him in 1864. Again sky blue wool kersey, inner facings and pockets of off white cotton, again with japanned tin buttons. Both these pairs of trousers are virtually identical.

Yet another surviving pair belonged to Private Alfred May of the 61st NC INF the 61st NC only served briefly with the ANV from Oct-Dec 1864. This must have been when May received the trousers, as they have striking similarities to Richmond Depot issue. Royal blue in colour they are crudely made woollen pants; they have a back belt associated with the Richmond Depot Japanned tin buttons and off white inner facings and pockets, again virtually the same as the previous two pairs.



Trousers of Private Alfred May, 61st NC Inf.

Now, evidence has come to light on British Import ready made trousers reaching the Confederacy much earlier, in 1862.

A pair of Royal blue (Bright Blue) wool Kersey trousers worn by General William Dorsey Pender were ready made and were imported to the Confederacy by the English firm S Isaac Campbell and Co. These trousers were for the use of enlisted men with pockets and inner facings of light brown cotton drill. Black japanned tin buttons, narrow waistband with reinforcements behind trouser buttons, and with a label marked "Campbell and Co". The Pender trousers have no WD (War Department) or C&M (Certificate & Medal) marks on them. Which is evidence they were produced solely for the Confederate market by contractors working for S Isaac Campbell & Co.

Gen Pender was wearing these trousers intended for the use of Confederate enlisted men when he was mortally wounded at Gettysburg in July 1863.

In a letter entitled *Abstract of summary statement showing quantity and value of army supplies purchased and shipped by Major C Huse on account Confederate States Government* Dated Feb 3rd 1863, Col J Gorgas Chief of Ordnance stated:

"8,250 pairs of Trousers" had been accounted for, and "13,750 Pairs were in London awaiting shipment".

Major Caleb Huse – or Captain, as he was in 1861-, had been sent to England in May 1861 to purchase much needed Quartermaster and Ordnance goods.

He quickly linked up to the firm of S Isaac Campbell & Co of Jermyn (Pronounced German) St London. S Isaac Campbell were able to offer Huse bulk purchases on all kinds of military stores, including cloth, and ready made trousers. Huse carried on buying QM goods until replaced by the QM Dept's own agent Major JB Ferguson in the spring of 1863.

Since Major Caleb Huse exclusively used the Firm of S Isaac Campbell & Co for his purchases. Plus General Pender's trousers are marked "Campbell & Co", added to the fact he was wearing them in the summer of 1863. All this strongly suggests that these could be a pair of the trousers mentioned in Gorgas's letter above.

Although the letter does not specify the colours of the trousers provided. Judging from the colour of General Pender's trousers (Royal Blue) it must be very likely that most, if not all, would have been the regulation colour of Blue.

Descriptions of Longstreet's Corps upon their arrival and during the battle of Chickamauga Sept 19th – 20th 1863. A member of Bragg's artillery took note of the appearance of Longstreet's men.

He noted "our first impression was partly caused by the color of their uniform (dark blue gray jackets, light blue pants"). And a member of Kershaw's Brigade of Longstreet's Corps remembered his uniform as a "Dark Blue round jacket, closely fitting with light blue trousers".

So given the evidence of Longstreet's own men, it seems likely they were uniformed probably in English imported trousers sent through the blockade.

As previously stated 8,250 pairs had arrived, with some 13,750 awaiting shipment. So all told we could be looking at a total of some 22,000 pairs.

And yet there were more descriptions of soldiers in the A.N.V. wearing blue trousers.

An Illinois Infantryman who talked to some pickets of a South Carolina Regiment in 1863 described them as "better dressed than we are, their uniforms being apparently new". The Carolinians uniform is bluish grey with sky blue pants and according to D. Augustus Dickert Co H 3rd S.C. their uniforms consisted of a "dark blue jackets closely fitting, with light blue trousers".

However, it was however becoming increasingly dangerous to wear these light blue pants with a blue grey jacket. On September 21st 1864 a letter written by A R Lawton Chief Quartermaster to J B Ferguson Chief Purchasing Agent in Britain, who had taken over purchasing Quartermaster goods from Major Huse stated. "You need not contract for blue cloth for pants, as the grey makes up to more advantage". So unofficially the making of blue trousers was at an end but how many blue trousers were still made from remaining blue, or royal blue cloth is unknown.

Summary and Conclusions

Confederate regulations published in June 1861 specified sky blue trousers for enlisted men. This policy was not dropped until at least September 1864. Judging from extant pairs and written evidence it is obvious many Confederate trousers were made from sky blue kersey, or one of several shades of medium to "dark royal", blue kersey or "blue trowsering". These trousers, made with imported or domestically produced cloth, were Richmond Depot issue made in the RD pattern. Which copied the popular civilian trousers of the day, including a belt and buckle for adjustment.

These, added to the S Isaac Campbell & Co imported ready made trousers that started to arrive in 1862, probably meant they were around in substantial numbers. Fact or fiction? - Definitely a fact.

Sources:

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