

“If everyone lit just one little candle...”

Lighting for Civil War Reenactors

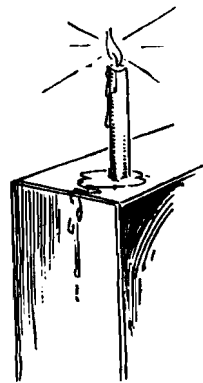
Nicky Hughes



of petroleum-based lighting products. Kerosene was on the verge of replacing whale oil as the fuel of choice in lamps. We are better off just forgetting about most oil lamps. Changes were being made so rapidly to lamps in the early 1860s that it is difficult to know what was really available at any given time. Nearly every “railroad lantern,” “Gone With The Wind” globe lamp, and similar device used today by reenactors

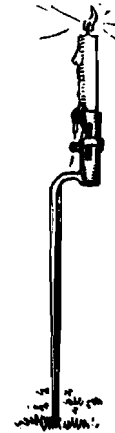
has features not likely to have been in use in the early 1860s. In any event there were, and are, practical problems in using oil lamps in the field. Finding reliable supplies of oil would have been difficult, as would have been transporting the heavy, volatile fluids. Obviously, our

sources for whale oil have been pretty well shut off, and we would not recommend a source to you if we knew one. (We can, however, recommend a dandy source of reproduction whale-oil lamps, if you just must take this



route; contact Pewter Reproduction Works, 5950 Park Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45243; (513) 831-2815.)

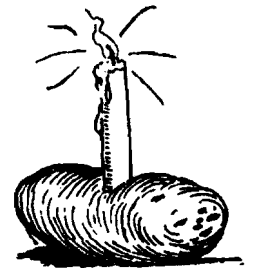
Reenactors could make more use of lamps that burn animal fat or grease - a practice relatively common among our



Civil War forebears. Several tinsmiths offer convincing betty lamps and small conical or pedestal lamps (check with Pat Cunningham, 402 E. Main Street, Madison, IN 47250; ph. (812) 273-4193). But even these are probably better restricted to “officers’ row,” hospitals, refugee camps, settled-in garrisons, and the like. Enlisted men might

want to experiment with making “slush lamps” from grease, rags, and improvised receptacles like sardine tins (the latter offered in 1860s style by Maki Boxes and Mercantile, 9128 Walnut, Kansas City, MO 64114). All devices of this type rely upon oil (commonly grease poured off the skillet or, less accurately, bottled lamp oils) in a tin receptacle from which projects a simple wick (normally a bit of rag).

The appropriate source of light for most soldiers then and now is the candle. The armies issued candles to the men in camp right along with food, soap, and other commodities. Broadly speaking, candles were made of three main components during the middle years of the 19th



Providing lighting around the reenactment camp at night is something very simple that has gotten very complicated. Many camps sprout a plethora of oil lamps and candle lanterns around sunset, creating a far better lit scene than would have been typical of original Civil War encampments. Citizens of the middle of the 19th century were not by any means accustomed to the high levels of light in the evening we find normal today - it was literally a darker time. Lighting devices were used sparingly, one individual recalling that “when evening came we used to set a candle on the candle stand and pull the stand to the centre of the room so that four people could sit around it and see to work.” If peacetime homes were kept dark, it is fair to assume that military camps were dim places indeed.

Perhaps unfortunately for reenactors, the Civil War era was a time of transition in lighting technology - the changes being brought about by the introduction

century - tallow, beeswax, and sperm oil. Unfortunately, period publications (see *Notes on Preparing Stores for the United States Army and on the Care of the Same, etc.* by C.L. Kilburn, Cincinnati, 1863) indicate a strong preference on the part of the military for the whale-based items, which are of course no longer available. Tallow candles, made from household animal fat - an extremely common source of light on the home front - were deemed by the military to be satisfactory only "for cold climates" - and they are hard to come by today too (anybody know a good source?). Beeswax candles are available now, but this writer finds no evidence of their regular issue by the armies. New, "high tech" candles of our era of interest were made of paraffin - one of those revolutionary, new petroleum products - as are the great majority of candles manufactured today. The availability of paraffin candles to Civil War soldiers and associated civilians is uncertain, however, but may have been very limited.

Regardless of materials, candles were made in two ways - either by pouring the fluids into molds or by repeatedly dipping the wicks into containers full of molten fluid. Candles could be made in prodigious numbers by either process, but surviving mid-19th century candles known to have been commercially produced (those aboard the sunken steamboat *Arabia* and one illustrated on page 135 of *The Fighting Men of the Civil War* by William C. Davis [New York: Gallery Books, 1989]) show the smooth sides and sharply conical tips typical of candles made in molds.

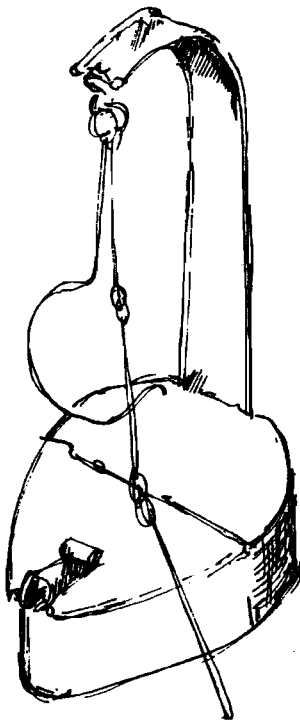
So, in the absence of candles made of the proper materials - what to do? We can use candles that approximate as best possible the appearance of those issued by the armies. They should be of a pure, dull white color - always avoid the many "decorator colors" commonly available. Use candles made in molds rather than made by dipping - this will provide the desired smooth surfaces and pointed tips (a feature of little significance moments after the wick begins to burn). To simulate candles obtained from civilian sources, off-white yellowish candles that look like tallow ones might be appropriate. Molded beeswax candles can be found in some antique and craft shops, and these might be useful for civilian impressions.

Candles can be used in a variety of ways. Unless you portray an officer, someone with access to the company wagon, or a well-off civilian, you can do without a candle lantern. Use a bayonet or some other improvised candle holder (see chapter five of *Hardtack and Coffee* by John D. Billings for ideas).

Collapsible two-piece brass candle-holders like that on page 137 of *The Fighting Men of the Civil War* are available from many sources. Brass candle sticks can be had from gift shops, department stores, and elsewhere, and might be appropriate for civilians, especially those portraying refugees who have brought along some household goods. One of the types of

candle holders most often seen in Civil War photographs is the so-called "hog scraper" style stand in tin (an example is shown held by the man in the large illustration on the facing page) - a couple of them even show up in the famous photograph of Abraham Lincoln sitting in General George McClellan's tent. If you just must have a candle lantern, use a well-made tin reproduction instead of a wooden one - the latter too often deviate from period designs, materials, and finishes and are very hard to document in a Civil War context. For both "hog scraper" candle stands and excellent candle lanterns of a documented style (see page 152 of *Images of War* volume I, *Shadows of the Storm*) contact Pat Cunningham (address and phone above).

When using any kind of Civil War lighting device -- **BE CAREFUL!!!** You are playing with fire!



Selected references:

- Darbee, Herbert C., *A Glossary of Old Lamps*, Technical Leaflet 30; American Association for State and Local History, Nashville 1965.
- Garrett, Elisabeth Donaghy, *At Home, the American Family 1750-1870*; Harry N. Abrams Publishers, New York 1994.
- Nylander, Jane C., *Our Own Snug Fireside, Images of the New England Home 1760-1860*; Yale University Press, New Haven 1994.
- Seale, William, *Recreating the Historic House Interior*; American Association for State and Local History, Nashville 1979.
- Brown, William L. III, *The Army Called It Home, Military Interiors of the 19th Century*; Thomas Publications, Gettysburg 1992.
- Moss, Roger, *Lighting for Historic Buildings*; Preservation Press, Washington 1988.

Illustration of "betty" lamp provided by Larrie S. Curry.