

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR U.S. ISSUE BLANKET

John M. Sutton

The original intent of this article was to review federal issue reproduction blankets now available through various vendors. Samples from several vendors were ordered in August, 1994 for review; however, in all cases, the vendor was out of stock. As a result, the samples were not available for comparison. [Some samples were received later, see below -- Ed.] Examination of surviving examples and descriptions of surviving examples resulted in a conclusion that, with the exception of one case, such comparison would be difficult. A range of blanket dimensions, color, and end stripe variations can be found among the 26 surviving blankets reviewed.

Instead, this article will attempt to address what to look for when shopping for a new blanket and ways to improve the appearance of your existing federal-issue blanket, plus sample sources for blankets.

Historical Background

The specification for blankets can be found in the U. S. Army Regulations of 1861:

1599. BLANKET—woolen, gray, with letters U.S. in black, four inches long, in the centre; to be seven feet long, and five and a half feet wide, and to weigh five pounds.

Woolen blankets were to be issued to the soldier as part of his clothing allowance in the first and third years of enlistment. Additionally, federal issue blankets had a black stripe woven into the material a few inches from the end. Typically, blankets had a twill weave and were of a grey-brown color. The ends of the blanket were unfinished when issued. The "US" was applied by hand to the center of the blanket.

The color "gray" used in the regulations referred to undyed wool or unbleached wool, rather than wool redyed grey color. With a combination of "natural" colors, the result would be brown-grey mixture. In the wool industry, darker colored fleece traditionally is reserved for dyeing into darker colors while, near-white wool is reserved for dyeing into light colors.

Many of the surviving blankets are "tan" colored blankets with darker tan or brown stripes. Research has indicated they were mixed with cotton and re-used wool fibers which resulted in a tan color, and not necessarily fading of dyes. Such was an attempt to economize during the war effort by contractors. As with a number of other contractors of "shoddy" woven goods, the government cracked down on the suppliers

and quality generally improved as the turmoil of supplying the troops in the early part of the war gave way to more quality standardization. In addition, large quantities of regulation blankets were manufactured in Europe and imported by the federal government.

Two unissued "grey" blankets are located in the Danish Royal Museum. These examples date to 1858 and were used as a pattern for a blanket recently reproduced by County Cloth on a limited basis. (These are currently sold out). In the late 1970s, the blanket was produced in limited numbers by the National Historical Services of Jessup, Maryland. County Cloth has indicated they may remake the regulation blanket should there be sufficient interest.

What To Look For When Shopping For A Federal Issue Blanket

Review of the description of 26 Civil War federal-issue blankets led to the composite dimensions, listed below. In shopping for a new blanket compare the composite dimensions. Look for the twill weave (two "warp" or long threads are crossed by two short or cross threads—the "woof"). A twill weave was more tear-resistant. The tighter the weave the warmer and more water repellent the blanket will be. Feel for weight (consider taking a fish scale with you to sutler's row and see the vendor's reaction!). A heavier blanket will keep you warmer than a lighter one. The blanket should be 100% virgin wool or a dominant wool blend (blends of 85% wool, 15% nylon are common in today's market). Blankets with high synthetic content or reprocessed wool should be avoided. A blanket with a quality hand-stitching of one of the styles identified below would be more desirable than one without.

It is suggested the color should be grey-brown with end stripes grey-black to represent an issued regulation item. Light colored tan blankets with medium-brown stripes should be avoided, unless you are looking for a "shoddy impression" of 1862.

Composite Blanket Dimensions

Width: 66 to 68 inches
Length: 78 to 82 inches
Width of stripe: 2.75 inches to 3.25 inches
Distance of stripe from end: 4 to 6 inches
Color: Grey-brown
Color of stripe: grey-black

Improving Your Existing Blanket

- **Stitch "US" in the center of the blanket.** If your blanket does not have the "US" stitched in the center, you may consider this improvement. Generally speaking, the yarn should be of the same color as the end stripe. Several styles of styles of stitching have been noted in the review with style "A" being the most common:

stitch over the last loop to hold it in place. Fasten it inconspicuously on the wrong side. (refer to sketch)

- **Remove end stitching.** Blankets ends were left raw when cut off the loom. Many reproduction blankets have stitching covering the ends of the blankets. This should be removed. Poorer quality blankets may unravel, but having some fraying on the end would be likely. A few surviving examples show whip-stitching or "button-hole" stitching added by the owner along the raw edge.

- **Identify your blanket.** Stencil your first initial and last name on the lower edge of the blanket. Use 1 inch Roman letters and black stencil ink with a brush, not spray paint, to apply the letters. Examples exist of adding the company and regiment to the stencil, such as: "CO A 29 WV (Wisconsin Volunteers)."

Other Common Stitching Styles

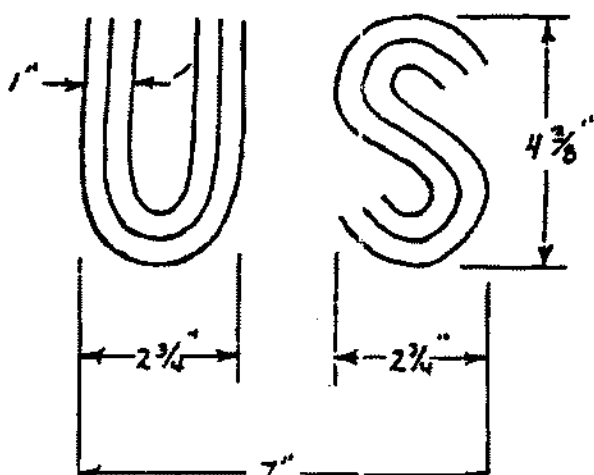


Figure 1.

Style "A" - Chain stitched, 3-line, open end "U S." From the Danish Royal Museum. Another example is pictured in *Echoes of Glory*, p. 215.

To chain stitch you will need black woolen yarn and a yarn needle available at a local knitting store. Lay out the blanket and measure the center. Using a piece of chalk, draw the lines of the "US" to serve as a guide for stitching. The chain stitch, (see figure 2), is worked down toward you. Each loop or link of the chain is closed at the tip and comes out through the loop of the previous stitch. Bring the thread out at the top of the line. Hold it under your thumb a little to the left of the line. Put the needle back in the same hole and bring it out 1/8 inch below, on the line, to that the needle passed over the thread held down. Draw the thread up to form a loop but not too tight. Each finished chain link should be about 3/8 inch. Continue to the end. Make one short

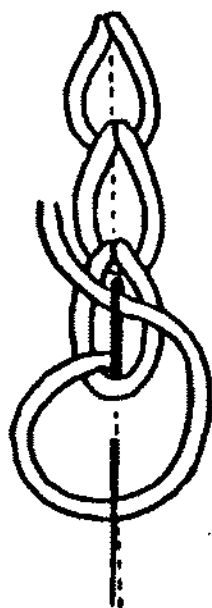


Figure 2.
Chain Stitch.

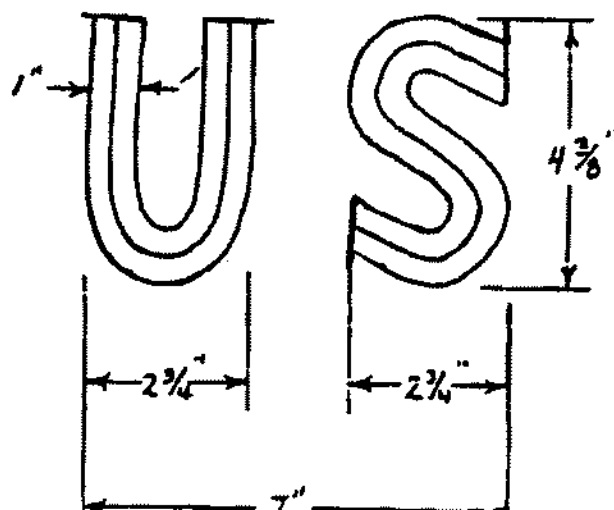


Figure 2.

Chain Stitched, 3 Line, Closed end. Example pictured on page 137 of *The Fighting Men of the Civil War*.

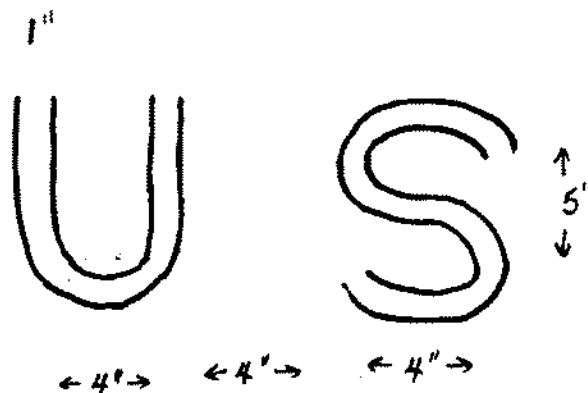


Figure 3.

Chain Stitched, 2 Line, Open end. Example pictured in *Echoes of Glory*, p. 214.

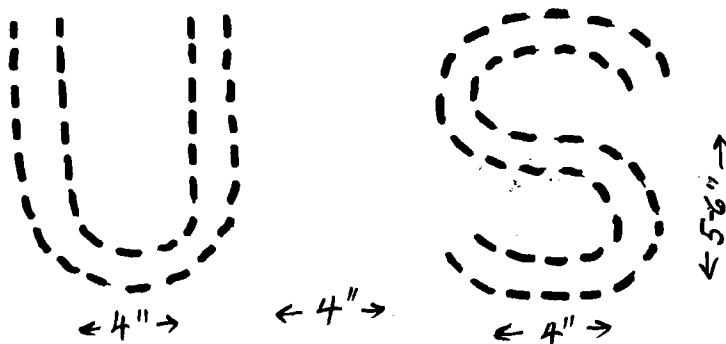


Figure 4.

Quilt stitched, 2 Line, Open end. From a photograph of General George Crook in Kedren, *With Crook in the Black Hills* (Pruit Publishing Co., 1985), p. 7.

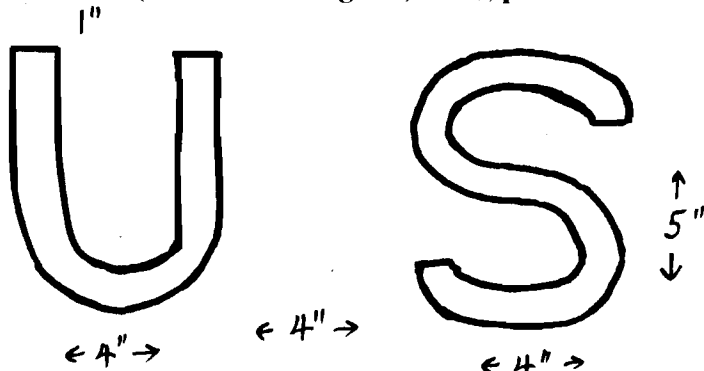


Figure 6.

Chain Stitched, 2 line, Closed end. Example from the Earl Coates collection, pictured in Coates, *et. al.*, "Collector's Corner," *The Skirmish Line*, 1972.

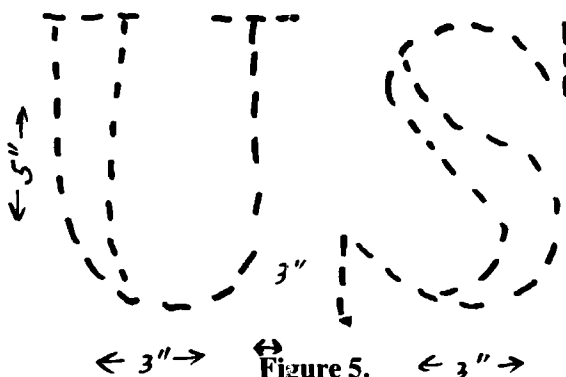


Figure 5.

Quilt Stitched, Shadow Line. Original in the collection of the Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania National Military Park (Catalog no. 130).



Figure 7.

Quilt Stitched, Contoured. Example from the collection of the Milwaukee Public Museum, pictured in Coates, *et. al.*, "Collector's Corner," *The Skirmish Line*, 1972.

All illustrations by John M. Sutton

Solid lines indicate "chain" stitches." Dashed lines indicate "in and out" or quilt stitches.

Blanket Vendors

The following vendors received orders/inquiries for review blankets:

County Cloth
13797-C Georgetown Street, NE
Paris, OH 44669
(216) 862-3307

Regulation blanket sold out. Currently in production is a medium- brown, blanket with dark brown stripes, stitched "US" with an estimated cost of \$130.00. Available in late December, 1994.

Baron Woolen Mills
P. O. Box 340
Brigham City, Utah 84302

Cost is \$70.00 plus shipping for a high quality blanket. Fabric is a blend (85% wool, 15% nylon) for durability. Color is steel grey. This blanket will require "US" stitching and removal of end stitching. Size: 66 inches by 84 inches. Weight

is 4 lbs, 7.25 oz. Stripe is 3.5 inches wide and is 5 inches from the end of the blanket.

Fall Creek Suttler
P. O. Box 92
Whitestown, IN 46075
(377) 769 5355

Vendor telephoned reviewer quickly to report that "Regulation" Blanket was currently sold out. Sent a sample advertised as an "emergency issue" blanket for review: 60.25 inches by 70.5 inches, camel-tan color with 3 inches chocolate brown stripe 5.25 inches from end. Cut from roll, end left unfinished. Weight: 3 lb, 5 oz. Cost: \$39.50 No "US".

The Regimental Quartermaster
P. O. Box 553
Hatboro, PA 19040
(275) 672-9020
Cost: \$42.95 plus \$3.95 shipping

Vendor telephoned reviewer to inform of delay in receiving supply from mill. The reviewer received a sample blanket in

mid-December with the following features: 63 inches by 85 inches, dark steel grey color with 4 inch darker grey-black stripe 6 inches from the end. There is not much contrast between the colors of the blanket and the stripe. The blanket has a thick felt-like finish which makes the weave pattern difficult to determine. Ends are finished with a double row of binding with a "Woolrich-Pearce Woolen Mills" manufacturer's tag attached. A chain-stitched, 3-line, open end "U S" in center in black yarn. Letters are 4 inches tall and about 3.5 inches wide with about .75 inch space between. Weight: 3 lb. 12.5 oz.

An untested source which has recently been brought to the reviewer's attention is:

Thistle Hill Weavers
6 Railroad Avenue
P. O. Box 102
Cherry Valley, New York 13320

"Regulation" Blankets were ordered from the following vendors, but not received:

C&D Jarnagin
Box 1860
Corinth, MS 38834
(601) 287-4977
Cost: \$79.95 plus \$8.00 shipping

Vendor returned check and declined to have the product reviewed in *The Watchdog*.

Winchester Sutler
270C Shadow Brook Lane
Winchester, VA 22603
Cost: \$67.50 plus \$9.50 shipping

Vendor telephoned reviewer to inform out of stock and returned refund check.

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- Gettysburg NMP collections, Catalog no. 26876 and 28258.
- Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NB collections, Catalog no. 130 and 3384.
- Petersburg NB, "The Civil War Blanket" Data Sheet.
- Robert Willey Collection, blanket identified to Pvt. Levi Gilpin, Co. E, 51st Ohio Infantry.
- Tafel, Anthony L., "The Army Blanket, 1861 Issue," *North South*

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Erwin, Mabel D., and Kinchen, Lila A. *Clothing for Moderns*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974, 491.

John M. Sutton is a founding member of the General Miles Marching and Chowder Society, an Indian Wars living history group founded some 13 years ago. He is an 18-year employee of the National Park Service, currently serving at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Park.