

# EVALUATING REPRODUCTION FEDERAL ENLISTED MEN'S FROCK COATS

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At the start of 1861, the manufacture of Federal uniform items was supervised by the Army Clothing Establishment at Schuykill Arsenal, PA., which developed patterns, cut the cloth, packed it into bundles for local women to hand sew, and inspected the finished goods. At that time, the U.S. Army consisted of less than seventeen thousand men in 10 regiments of Infantry, 5 regiments of Cavalry, and 4 regiments of Artillery. As the army expanded following Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers, arrangements were made for private contractors to supply the needs of the volunteer forces.

Contemporary Federal reenactors are in a position similar to the Federal government in late 1861. There is a substantial need for quality uniforms, but little standardization in wool quality or color, or the details of the construction and sewing. Poor quality is often rationalized with the explanation that variation existed in original specimens, so a uniform that bears only a superficial resemblance to what Civil War soldiers were issued should be accepted with prompt payment and with no complaint (or so it is argued).

Unlike reenactors, the Federal Government of 1861 was not tolerant of the shoddy materials and workmanship supplied by the less reputable contractors. The Federal government expanded its uniform inspection system to include depots in New York, Cincinnati, Steubenville and St. Louis. General Order #91, July 29, 1862, specified that uniform items were to be marked with the contractor's name and with Federal inspector marks in the lining. Late in 1864, the contract date was added to the contractor's stamp.

The uniform inspection system was not designed to produce the same level of standardization and interchangeability as that instituted for contract arms. Nonetheless, the inspection system put a substantial amount of uniformity in Federal enlisted men's uniforms. I have examined more than two dozen Civil War enlisted men's frock coats, and it is my observation that original specimens are much more similar to one another than are current reproductions.

The enlisted man's frock coat of the Civil War was authorized in 1851, and reflected male fashion trends of that decade. Fashion called for a padded chest, tight waist, high collar and tight cuffs. During the Civil War, men's fashion also emphasized ballooning sleeves, with a circumference as much as 20 inches at the elbows. Officers' uniforms followed these fashions but the enlisted man's frock was conservative and had only 14 inch circumference elbows.

The frock is often assumed to be a dress item, but 46% of the Army of the Potomac chose to wear frock coats into the

field. Gardiner's photographs of the Federal dead at the Rose Farm at Gettysburg, for example, show them wearing frock coats. The *Quartermaster General's Report of 1865* indicates that 218,288 frock coats were issued in 1864.

The frock coat was issued in four sizes. Size 1 had a 36 inch chest, size 2 was 38 inches, size 3 was 40 inches, and size 4 was 42 inches. Early war coats were marked with one to four dots to indicate size, but later war coats were marked with arabic numerals. The frock coat was expected to last 7.5 months; 8 were issued over a 5 year enlistment. The frock coat cost the government \$4.08 in 1861 and \$14.67 in 1865. The materials used in the construction of the frock coat are reported in the *Quartermaster's Manual of 1865*:

**1. Body:** The body of a medium (size 2) frock coat was made in six pieces out of "1 3/4 yards of 6/4 (1.5 yards wide) dark blue woolen cloth, weighing 21 ounces per yard, 56 threads of fillings (woof) each square inch, 60 threads in chain (warp) each square inch." The skirt was made in four pieces, with pleats and pockets in the tail. The length of the body was 18 1/4 inches and the length of the skirt was 16 3/4 inches.

**2. Body lining:** The chests were padded with cotton batting, but the back of the coat and the skirts were not lined. The layer behind the body of the coat was: "3/4 yard of 24 inch canvas; the padding was: "1 sheet of black cotton wadding;" the inner lining, next to soldier was made of: "5/8 yard of black alpaca 80 inches wide."

**3. Sleeve lining:** "7/8 yard of unbleached muslin or cambric."

**4. Collar:** The collar was 1 1/4 to 2 inches high, and lined with "1/8 yard of buckram." Branch of service color was piped on the neck and cuffs with a twisted cord, or welt, or a piece of thin cloth folded over within the seam of "1 inch of sky blue facing." Soldiers often lowered the neck height, and did not put back the top welt. The neck of frocks also contained a hook on the left side, and an eye on the right which often was removed.

**5. Cuffs:** The cuffs were covered with an extra thickness of material which carried the branch collar piping. The piece is in the shape of an inverted "V," 4 inches tall at the point in front and 2 1/2 inches tall in the rear. The cuffs closed with two functional cuff buttons.

**6. Rear pockets:** Inset into the tail of skirts were one pocket on either side of the vent, made of: "3/8 yard of black muslin." The edge of the pocket opening adjacent to the soldier was covered with a strip of wool one to two inches wide.

## **ERRORS COMMONLY FOUND IN REPRODUCTION FROCK COATS:**

1. On reproduction coats, the wool is not as tightly woven as in originals, making it feel too soft and thin. Consequently, the raw edge on the bottom of the skirt often unravels.
2. On reproduction coats, the color is aniline dyed with a blue-black tone, rather than pure indigo blue, with a slightly greenish sheen.
3. On reproduction coats, the chest padding is not at least 1/4 inch thick, and does not extend to the side seams. The chest lining is not black or dark brown.
4. Original frock coats contain hooks and eyes in the facing edge and the vent, 4 to 8 inches from the bottom edge. These allowed the skirts to be turned back, similar to the Continental uniform. Reproduction coats usually lack that detail.
5. On reproduction coats, the facing color on the neck and cuffs is baby blue, rather than the correct Saxony blue. The color should be the same as the color of infantry Hardee hat cord.
6. On reproduction coats, the colored welt is too wide. On originals, only about 1/16" of color is visible.
7. On reproduction coats, the two buttons on the cuffs are not functional.
8. On reproduction coats, the nine button holes are machine stitched rather than hand sewn.
9. Originals had a vertical row of stitching behind the line of buttons, not found on many reproductions.
10. Originals have the seam joining the body of the coat with the skirt covered with an extra 1 1/2 inch wide piece of cloth.
11. On some reproduction coats, the sewing thread is brown rather than blue. The thread color on originals turns brown over time, but did not start that way.

The mathematics for converting Civil War dollars to 1994 dollars is under debate, but one recommended correction factor is 15. Based on that value the cost of a frock coat in modern money would be \$220.05. The government was willing to pay that for a quality frock during the war; reenactors might find it necessary to pay that high to get a comparable example.

**Mike Cunningham is a serious collector of Civil War uniforms and has had several articles published in *North-South Trader's Civil War and Military Images*. Dr. Cunningham has recently joined the staff of *The Watchdog* as an associate editor.**