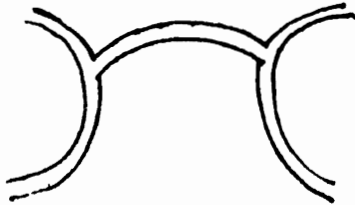


A Closer Look

Nicky Hughes

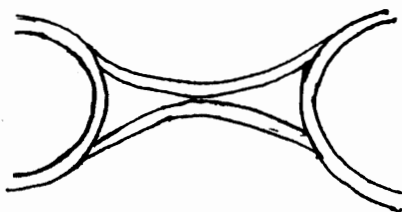
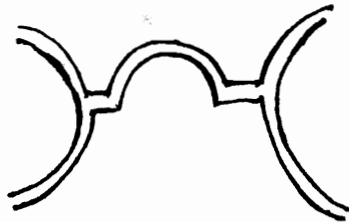
Mr. Robert Stone has done Civil War reenactors a service by making an extensive survey of antique eye wear and historical paintings and photographs that show eyeglasses. Working from dateable examples and images, he has established a chronology of eyeglasses styles and features as used between 1760 and 1920. Using his data and terminology it is easy to identify eye wear likely to have been worn in the early 1860s. The information in this article is derived from a presentation by Mr. Stone at the 1995 meeting of the Association for Living History Farms and Agricultural Museums, and from his handouts distributed at that session and used with his permission.

Following are the main types of spectacle bridges identified by Stone, along with their dates of use:



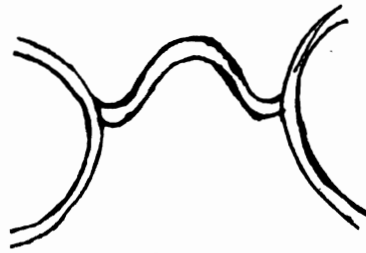
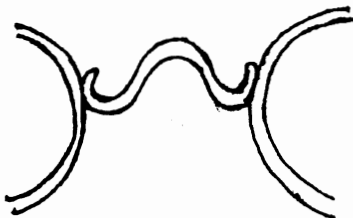
Arch - Consistently seen from before 1760 to the mid-1840s; occasional use into the early 1860s.

Crank - Common from 1800 to 1880; occasional use to the mid-1880s.



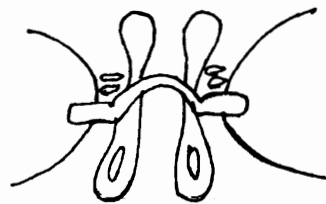
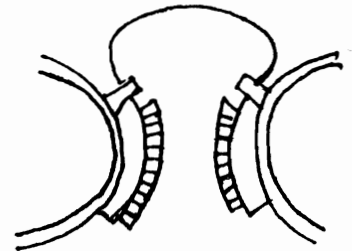
X - Occasional use in the 1790s; popular continually from 1800 to about 1895.

Scroll - Occasional use in the 1860s; regular use from about 1870 to about 1915.



W - Popular from about 1895 to beyond 1920.

Spring Pad - Occasional use in the 1840s; continually popular until about 1915.



Coil Springs - Popular from the early 1900s onward.

Following are the lens shapes identified by Stone along with their dates of use:



Round - Before 1760 to the mid-1820s; seen on occasion until about 1910 when again commonly popular.



Oval - Occasional use in the 1770s; regularly popular from the early 1780s through about 1915.



Rectangular - Popular from about 1795 through 1890.



Reading - Popular from the mid-1830s to beyond 1920.



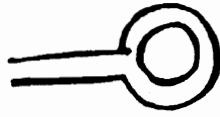
Long Octagonal - Occasionally seen in the 1820s and 1830s; continuously popular from 1840 into the 1890s.



Asymmetrical - Occasional use from 1910; regularly popular from 1920 onward.

Following are the types of temple piece finials (tips) identified by Stone along with their dates of use:

Large round open rings - Before 1760 to 1790: occasional use to about 1805.



Small round open rings - Regularly seen between the late 1790s and the early 1820s; occasional use about ten years on either side of that period.

Large open teardrops - Occasional use from 1765; regularly seen from 1780 to the mid-1820s; occasional use into the early 1830s.



Medium open teardrops - Occasional use in the 1780s; constantly popular from about 1790 to about 1840; occasionally into the early 1850s.

Small open teardrops - Occasionally seen from about 1815 to 1825; regularly popular from then until the mid-1890s; occasional use to about 1905.

Flat solid beavertails - Constantly in use between 1770 and 1915 and for a few years on either side of that period.



Small droplets - Popular from about 1890 onward to beyond 1920.

Further, Mr. Stone identified several types of spectacle temples as being in use during the early 1860s, including plain straight ones, and several varieties with sliding length adjustments. Eyeglasses with temples hinged at the center date from before our period of interest. Temple pieces that curve around the ear became popular in the 1880s and were in constant use from about 1890 onwards.

Using these illustrations, it should be easy to select eyeglasses — either old ones in an antique shop or reproductions. A typical pair of Civil War era eyeglasses might have “crank” frames with oval, rectangular, or long octagonal lenses, and straight or adjustable temples with small open teardrop or flat solid beavertail finials. Lenses were, of course, small by modern standards, typical ones being somewhat over an inch wide. Frames might be found of brass, silver, or other metals. Styles do not seem to vary by the gender of the wearer.

We are aware of three sources that advertise Civil War “reenactor eyewear” in living history publications. Inspector

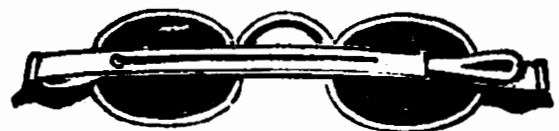
General’s did not respond to our request for review samples. The Grand Spectacle (528 W. Water St., Elmira, NY 14905) provided two samples. Sturdily made and apparently converted from old eyeglasses, these frames can be had with impact-resistant lenses -- perhaps a prudent idea for reenactors. Details of construction -- most notably the temples that curve over the ears -- would date the prototypes of these eyeglasses to the postwar era, however. Grand Spectacle eyeglasses might be better for North-South Skirmish Association shooters for whom safety is a greater concern than historical accuracy.

We examined a pair of the “19th C.” frames offered by James Townsend & Son (GL-795: P.O. Box 415, Pierceton, IN 46562) purchased by a nearby historic site for one of its interpreters. These glasses would seem appropriate for the late decades of the nineteenth century, not the Civil War era. They have scroll bridges, over-the-ear curving temples, and small droplet finials.

As best we can determine, accuracy-minded living history practitioners will have to use original frames. Prices for original eyeglasses can vary considerably, depending upon condition, the metal used in their fabrication, your region of the country, and the whim of the antique dealer. Prices in the \$65.00 range are not unusual.

Now that we know what kind of spectacles to wear, Civil War reenactors must face another question - whether to wear eyeglasses at all. While there are numerous images of mid-19th century civilians in spectacles, and a great many pairs of eyeglasses from that era still exist, images showing Civil War soldiers in specs are *extremely* scarce. Many explanations for this phenomenon have been offered. There is evidence that some officers may have been downright hostile to the wear of glasses by soldiers. We do not have a good explanation for the dearth of eye wear depictions, but the ultimate point seems valid nevertheless. Soldier reenactors who need corrective lenses should consider wearing contact lenses — if your ophthalmologist thinks this appropriate for you. A smattering of eyeglasses among civilians would seem appropriate, however. Under no circumstances whatsoever are modern eyeglasses acceptable on the face of anyone attempting to re-create the appearance of a citizen of the 1860s!

Thanks to Mr. Robert Stone of Liberty, Missouri, for the information used in preparation of this article.



This mid-19th century trade cut shows a pair of eyeglasses with oval frames, teardrop finials, sliding adjustable temple pieces, and arch bridge, all appropriate to a Civil War or slightly earlier impression.