

Eyeglasses for Reenactors.

by Lewis Newbury

If there is one surefire way to ruin an otherwise outstanding impression, it is wearing modern glasses. For those who *must* wear them, and who cannot or will not wear contact lenses or get some sort of corrective surgery, the only option is to get some 1860s period eyeglasses.

There are very few period photographs of or references to eyeglasses in the Federal Army. This could be due to several reasons:

1. In general, our ancestor's eyes were better than ours are today.
2. Most men who had poor vision stayed home.
3. Soldiers who *did* wear eyeglasses did not mention them in letters home and always took them off before being photographed.
4. Soldiers with poor vision did without glasses, either because they never had any, or because they had been broken or lost.

We can dismiss the first reason by remembering that compared with the workplaces of our ancestors, our lives are very well lit. People of the time had to work and read in relatively poor light, and this added eyestrain probably contributed to more vision problems than we have today.

Reason number two has more merit. Although a man with extremely bad vision may have been able to pass the cursory medical examination given to most recruits, many myopic citizens may have known better than to attempt a campaign with their bad eyes, corrected by spectacles or not. A young man in Cleveland wrote to his brother serving in an Ohio regiment,

I shant join the army, you know the reason as well as I do . . . I could not see a rebble if he was in the same tent with me . . . my spectacles are of no account... on a cold day they frost over so that I can see better without them . . .

Whether this man was truly concerned about his campaign-worthiness, or merely grasping at a reason to avoid military service, we shall never know.

Reason number three is almost certainly true to some extent. Although images do exist of civilians in glasses, at least one photo was examined that showed a lady holding her specs in her lap. Perhaps eyeglasses were considered “unfashionable”—patriotic men may not have considered their normal bespectacled visage warlike enough. Perhaps bad vision was considered a “defect” and therefore unworthy of representation in a photograph. Maybe there were concerns about whether the sitter's eyes would be visible enough through the lenses.

Common sense tells us that reason number four was also true. Men who had sufficient vision to recognize their comrades and superiors, and to see shapes moving through a picket line would probably have served without much censure.

All things considered, eyeglasses were probably a very rare item in military camps of the period. Spectacles of the mid-nineteenth century were relatively fragile and would not withstand the rigors of campaigning well.

For those who must wear glasses, here are a few guidelines to help you choose a pair that looks the part.

Lens Shapes.

There were three basic shapes that were in general use during the war years: rectangular, oval and long octagonal (FIG 1).

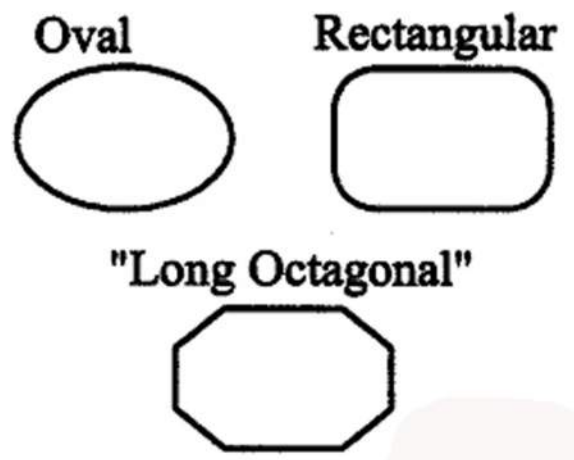


FIG 1. Eyeglass lens shapes.

The most common of these frame types was probably the oval variety. The rectangular shape was in fashion during the decade or two before the war, and due to the large numbers of them made, they were probably ran a close second to the ovals in numbers. The long octagons were a more recent innovation, and were probably the least common of the three styles.

Other shapes have been identified in antique lenses, but all of them were either long out of fashion, unpopular or not yet invented. The most obvious single example of all of these was the perfectly round lens, which went out of fashion a generation before the war and did not become popular again until after 1900.

Lenses were quite small. The versions shown in the illustration were just over an inch wide. The small size was less inconvenient than might be supposed, since the lenses themselves were worn quite close to the eye.

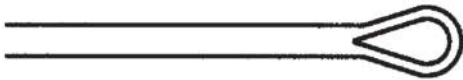
Frame Materials.

The most common frame materials included blued steel, silver, and gold. A few examples have been examined that had brass frames, but these must have been originally plated, probably with gold, since uncoated brass will leave green marks where it contacts the skin.

Bow Finials.

Spectacle bows were long, straight and spindly looking and ended over the ear in one of two common shapes. The “teardrop-eye” shape featured a hole for the attachment of a string or ribbon that could be used to secure the glasses to the wearer’s head or left loose to prevent loss, like the modern “Chums.” The other common shape (labeled “teardrop” in FIG 2) had the same profile, but did not have the hole.

Teardrop-Eye Bow



Teardrop Bow

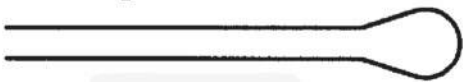


FIG 2. Eyeglass bow shapes.

Some bows had sliding extensions, but this type saw common use long before the war, and was probably becoming uncommon by 1860. The “spring” type earpieces that curve around the ear like a “C” postdate the war by at least a decade, so they are incorrect for a wartime impression as well.

Bow Attachment.

Bows were attached to the frames with a hinge formed by the frame and a screw. Rivets were not used as “original equipment.”

Nosepiece.

The most common nosepiece shape was the “yoke” variety shown in FIG 3. According to research done by two other authors (John A. Braden and Robert Stone), there were others in use, but reenactors are advised to utilize them with caution. In my opinion, both of these styles, the “W” and the “X,” have insufficient documentation of their use in the United States to be rated as “common.” At least a few images, however, have been noted of the “X” style, so an illustration of them is included here. No similar evidence

“Yoke” Type Nosepiece



“X” Type Nosepiece



FIG 3. Nosepiece shapes.

There are two other types of more complex nosepieces, both of which are more complicated than the two illustrated. One type had pads attached to the lens frames for the side of the nose, and the nosepiece “bow” was actually a spring that forced the two lenses and the pads against the nose. This version is undoubtedly too fragile to have lasted long in the field and was probably too expensive for the majority of lens wearers.

Another version was not a nineteenth-century style at all. It featured a rigid connection between the two lens frames and two nose pads held against the nose with coil springs or a small metal arm. This improvement did not become widely available until the early twentieth century.

Modern Sources.

Unfortunately, there are not any good reproductions being made of eyeglasses. The cheapest alternative, if you can wear them, are contact lenses. Affordable varieties of disposable contacts are very comfortable, can be worn for up to a week and then thrown away.

If glasses are your only alternative, the best option is to buy a pair of originals. A simple set of frames will cost between \$25 and \$200, depending on condition and quality. Have a local optometrist put in your prescription. You may have to visit a few places before you find one that will be able to custom-fit lenses to the outdated frame. Be persistent.

NOTES AND SOURCES:

The illustrations are courtesy of John E. Tobey.

Nicky Hughes, “A Closer Look,” *The Watchdog*, vol. 3, no. 4 (fall 1995), 6,7.

Margaret Richards, “Collecting Antique Spectacles,” *The Pack Rat*, spring 1988, 16–8.

The collections of the Millville Farmers’ Museum, Joan Willet and Paul Wright.