

Men's Hats of the 1860s

In the 1860s all men wore hats — for every occasion and occupation, every event and celebration. Although the hat was the accessory most visible, in the case of men's hats, it is the accessory least collected. To solve the query of what men wore in the 1860s or any other pre-20th century era, one must go beyond the physical evidence and look at the photographs, study the manufacture, review illustrated papers and listen to the stories told by the hat makers themselves. For it is the cross-referencing of clues that leads to clarification.

The most telling source is the hats themselves. But sadly, relatively few remain before the Victorian era because, unlike ladies' *chapeau's* that might be treasured for their beauty and finery, men's hats were often worn out, given to servants, or discarded. What we have left as indicators is limited to the more formal, upper-class top hat, middle class derby, a few straws, a few fur and cloth caps and those styles worn by religious group such as Amish, Shakers or Mennonites. Only three of the more than two thousand hats I have found in major museums or local history societies across the United States, England, Italy and France have had a dated provenance. Several others were known to have been worn at a specific wedding or official function on a specific date. Because dating is such a problem, we must turn to other sources.

Photographic evidence illustrates the breadth of variety in men's hat styles. When you look at the slightly blurred photograph of Lincoln at Gettysburg, or the crowd at Lincoln's second inauguration [1], you can see what were the popular styles for men of all rank, ranging from silk top hats to oddly mashed felts. The most formal dignitaries, including Lincoln, wore the top hat, seven inches tall, constructed from silk plush. The general public wore either softer felts reminiscent of broad-brimmed western styles, round crowned felts soon to evolve into the stiff everyday middle-class bowler or derby [2], or a style often forgotten because of its rarity in museum collections the short-crowned top hat (a style made famous in Clint Eastwood's westerns). [3] The crown is almost half the height of the top hat, in the four to five inch range; the brims are three to four inches wide and vary from flat to slightly curved. Some appear darker in the photograph, while others appear to be lighter shades of gray and beige. These two photographs provide reliable documentation of the variety in 1860 fashion.

Fashion illustrations are another valuable resource because of the influence as guides to a society striving for sartorial acceptance. The United States followed Europe's lead in matters of fashion; England dictated what was acceptable for a gentleman's wardrobe. Illustration 1 is a perfect example of what was published for the fashionable buying public. This "spring fashion" page is from the 1854 *Godey's Lady's Magazine* that periodically included men's wear. Illustration 2 is from the September 1860 *Journal des Marchands Tailleurs*. Just as today's fashion magazines point the style conscious in one direction or another, these journals promoted the haphazard swings of fickle fashion. In order to interpret what people actually wore, one must compare artifacts and photographs on the one hand with illustrations on the other —

a balancing act between promotion and adoption.

The top hat as pictured in the fashion magazines was standard for the dignified gentleman in the 1860s. As these illustrations show, the height of the hat is approximately seven inches, (Illustration 2) the sides taper in slightly and the brim curls up at the sides and slopes down in front and back. The 1850s fashion preferred the eight-inch hat with straighter sides, called a stovepipe, to the lower and more curved line of the 1860s. Crowns rose again in the 1870s and lowered in the 1890s. Crown heights were as fickle as the length of women's skirts.

The majority of top hats manufactured after 1840 were made from a woven silk fabric called silk plush. This was cut and sewn to fit over a stiffened calico or cardboard base. These were still called "beavers" after their predecessors, a fur felt hat containing a varying amount of the most costly fur. Beaver could be mixed with hare, rabbit or any number of furs, or even felted into the surface of a wool or fur-felt body. Both the surface sheen and the stitching between the crown top and sides identify the hat as silk plush and not fur felt. The top hats worn in Illustration 2 are more likely made of silk plush because of their portrayed sheen. If you have a top hat in hand, look for a tiny stitch line between the oval crown top and the crown sides — this is a silk plush topper. If the entire hat has a dull finish or has visible longer hairs, it's fur felt.

From fashion sources, we can assume that a core of basic styles and materials was popular in the 1860s. How these styles differed from their predecessors or their followers derived not only from the manufacturer who controlled crown height, brim width, fabric, color and fiber content, but also from the manipulation of the wearer or his hatter.

In the 1860s United States photographic evidence disputes English fashion illustrations that show the bowler as the style of casual choice. Photographic evidence picture the lower flat-topped hat and the soft felt as the popular choices. When the derby or bowler did become popular, it was adopted worldwide by the majority as the formal hat for the "up and coming" middle class. This was a hard felt hat, made from wool or animal fur, stiffened with shellac, with oval rounded crown and a curled brim. The inauguration photograph indicates the prototype in many roundish shaped hats with flaring brims. [4]

Before the stiffened derby stormed America, the soft felt was the staple of the working and middle classes. Higher in crown and broader in brim, it could be worn by anyone. Originally called the Kossuth (after Lajos Kossuth, leader of the Hungarian Independence movement, following his visit to America and England in 1851) today we call it a fedora. The soft hat was more flexible than the stiff topper. It created so much of a sensation that it was adopted by Civil War soldiers in both armies, assimilated with the Mexican sombrero into the cowboy hat, and worn by a variety of hardy explorers. It was seen on Dr. Livingston in the *Illustrated Times* of January 3, 1857, as part of his traveling costume (Illustration 3). These hats were fabricated from steam-blocked wool or fur felt, only slightly stiffened, thereby enabling each individual to hand-shape his own brim and crown into his own personal style.

From this flexibility of material comes that variety of styling seen in pictorial representation — the same basic hat made unique by its owner.

The 1860s gentleman, soldier, laborer and slave all sported some variety of one of many of the styles previously described. Straws were woven in shapes similar to the felts, while cloth caps have always been worn as a convenient, inexpensive head covering. These basic styles were present at the beginning of the 19th century and would last, with differing heights, widths, curling and colorings, into the 20th century. Some styles overtook others as fashion and function dictated, but amidst the change, men have always been able to maintain their individuality through choice, tilt and hand shaping.

A man's hat has been and continues to be his crowning glory.

Debbie Henderson

NOTES:

[1] I picked these two group photographs because most folks are familiar with them or have easy access to them. They can be found in *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*, Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns, & Ken Burns, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1990, pages 263 & 361. Both images are available in the collections of the Library of Congress.

[2] The hat was called a bowler because the prototype was made for Locke & Co. of London by felt makers named Bowler for their client William Coke in the 1840s. He wanted a stiff hat that would protect his gamekeepers' heads. *Mr. Locke of St. James's Street*, F. Whitbourn, William Heinemann, Ltd., London, 1971. The same hat was called a derby in America because the Earl of Derby wore it at the Derby horse race.

[3] Eastwood wore this shape in Sergio Leone's "spaghetti westerns" filmed in Spain. He continued wearing them in *The Outlaw Josie Wales*, *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, *Pale Rider*, *High Plains Drifter* and *Unforgiven*.

[4] In the 1870s a crease down the center transformed this stiffened felt into the Homburg.

Debbie Henderson is the author of *Cowboys & Hatters: Sagebrush & the Silver Screen* (Wild Goose Press, Yellow Springs, Ohio, 1996, \$19.95). The book is a result of her work on her Ph.D. at the Union Institute, Cincinnati, Ohio and the Kent State University Museum Exhibition by the same name March – October 1996. She is a member of the Costume Society of America and graciously agreed to write this overview for *The Watchdog*.

The DOG says that even though the exhibit is over Ms. Henderson's book contains some wonderful information on hat terminology, manufacturing and retailing. It has an excellent bibliography. For those of you that do post-CW cowboy impressions there is a chapter on the Stetson hat.

Future *Watchdog* articles on men's hats will focus on the examination of originals and reviews of reproductions currently offered for sale. The editors appreciate any source information on access to one hat or a collection for inspection of original men's civilian hats and caps.



Illustration 1 — Godey's Lady's Magazine, 1854



Illustration 2 — *Journal des Marchands Tailleurs*, September 1860

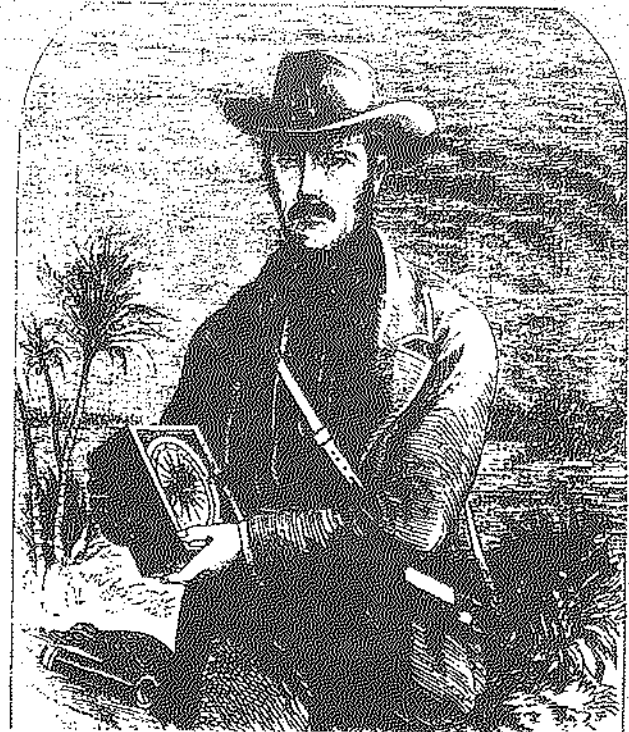


The enlargement of the photograph of President Lincoln at Gettysburg in the collections of the Library of Congress referred to in the article (the complete image can also be found on page 263 of *The Civil War* by Geoffrey C. Ward among other sources). We note that many men are bareheaded...had a prayer or benediction just been completed or a gesture of respect for the speaker? orator?



The enlargement from a photograph of President Lincoln's second inauguration in the collections of the Library of Congress referred to in the article (the complete image can also be found on page 361 of *The Civil War* by Geoffrey C. Ward among other sources). Note the bareheaded men around the speaker's stand...perhaps a gesture of respect for the

ILLUSTRATED TIMES.



DR. LIVINGSTON, THE AFRICAN EXPLORED, IN ONE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

Illustration 3 — Dr. Livingston

Men's Hats of the 1860s — Part Two

In modern life the very thought of wearing a hat makes me uncomfortable. I don't wear a hat when I play golf or mow the lawn, and certainly won't wear one for more formal occasions. Except for the ubiquitous baseball cap, men rarely wear hats. I won't wear a modern hat—period, but I will wear a period hat. For reasons unknown, my attitude changes dramatically when I have the opportunity to dress in “our” period style. My hat collection serves as conclusive evidence that I have borderline obsessive/compulsive behavioral traits when it comes to mid 19th century hats. To paraphrase a popular country western song “I like ‘em, I love ‘em, I want some more of ‘em.” Perhaps this is why Mr. Christen, the esteemed publisher of this periodical, asked me to write an article on reproductions of men's civilian hats. I have many of them. Some of them are good and some...well, not so good.

By way of explanation and apology, I must tell you I am not a hat expert. I am a novice researcher who gratefully accepts information from others far more experienced than I and unashamedly uses it to make more informed purchases. I may get to be a hat expert some day, but I'm not there yet. So, with that out of the way I would like to tell you about my first field trip to research the subject matter.

The objective was to compare reproduction hats made by the Clearwater Hat Company [1] to original hats. In search of originals, my wife Kathy and I visited the Valentine Museum [2] in Richmond, Virginia in mid July. We called about a week in advance to make sure they had the artifacts in which we were interested and to make an appointment. Sure enough, they had examples of period hats; however, all of them were top hats. The dearth of less formal hats seems to support the assertion in a previous Watchdog article [3] that many less formal hats met a more inglorious end.

Colleen Callahan, the museum's Curator of Costumes and Textiles, greeted us. She escorted us to the third floor storage area and produced a ladder for our use. We resisted the temptation to investigate the vast clothing collection all around us and went straight to the hat storage shelves. We found four hats, of or about the period, and brought them down for examination with white gloves, measuring tape and camera.

Bob and Kay Burton, proprietors of Clearwater Hat Company, volunteered several types of reproduction hats for evaluation. Although a tophat was not among their submissions, we used my Clearwater fur felt top hat as the test subject. As other original civilian hats are found we plan to submit future evaluation articles to the DOG.

The data we have collected is presented here without interpretation. Such a small sample size does not invite conclusive interpretation. A comparison of the originals to Clearwater Hat Company's sample to what we found at the Valentine would be like comparing oranges to tangerines. The hats at the Valentine were labeled “beaver” or “clipped beaver.” The Valentine did not have a silk or fur felt hat. However, if they had I would have included this data in the matrix—not for comparison with the fur felt Clearwater hat, but merely because they would be

examples of a period top hat. Only when this matrix grows large enough with examples of period fur felt hats can we make a valid comparison. We did include examples of originals from previous decades to compare and contrast with each other and with original hats of our period.

What, then, can we say about Clearwater's top hat? We found similar construction details to those hats in the Valentine collection and very nice touches in Clearwater's reproduction. Mr. Burton stated that the hat blocks for 98 per cent of their hats are originals, some dating back to the 1840s. He further stated that it is very rare to find a top hat block so they have had to make some using the old design—a five-piece block. Clearwater hat designs are based on thorough observation of thousands of photographs, owning many period hat blocks, and originals in their collection.

The dimensions of the various features were similar to the features of the originals. The exception being the crown height. Clearwater's sample had the shortest crown height of the four originals being 1 1/4 to two inches shorter than the 1860s samples. They have recently added a tall top hat with a 7 1/2 inch crown. All other dimensions are similar to the original hats.

Clearwater's hats are high on my arbitrary comfort scale. The interior of the sample hat is finished with a hand-sewn hatband of very soft leather that makes just wearing the hat a pleasure in itself. The sides are of a brown cotton check sewn to a cotton/linen tippet. The tippet is stamped with the name and town of an actual hatmaker of the period (not necessarily with the hatmaker's logo however). You can select from a variety of hatmakers if you have an affinity for a particular region.

The exterior is of fur felt that does a superb job of repelling water. I wore an evaluation sample of one version of Clearwater's slouch hat at the Grant vs. Lee reenactment and it came through a drenching rain with only a slight leak at the hatband. The shape did suffer a bit, but following Clearwater's advice to hang and dry it properly should restore its shape.

If you are looking for a reproduction top hat made faithful to the shape, construction, and look of a period top hat you can't go wrong with Clearwater Hat Company's version.

Joe and Kathy Scherer

(See page 19 for a matrix documenting their measurements and observations.)

NOTES (4-7 pertain to the matrix):

[1] Roasting Ear Creek Rd., HC 73, Box 646, Newnata, Arkansas 72680 and (870) 746-4324, (870) 746-4294 fax and <http://www.clearwaterhats.com>

[2] 1015 E. Clay St., Richmond, VA 23219 and (804) 649-0711, (804) 643-3510 fax and <http://www.valentinemuseum.com>

[3] Debbie Henderson, “Men's Hats of the 1860s,” *The Watchdog*, Vol. 7 No. 1, Winter 1999

[4] Classified by the Valentine Museum as a stovepipe hat

[5] We're almost sure this is not the same company sponsoring *Tool Time* with Tim “the Tool Man” Taylor

[6] Two inch black faille ribbon sewn onto underbrim extends 1/8 inch around the brim top

[7] Black silk sewn onto underbrim

Men's Hats of the 1860s - Top Hat Matrix (continued from page 5)

	Hat #1	Hat #2	Hat #3	Hat #4	Reproduction hat
Object ID	49.41.1	91.111.1	67.119.1	67.119.2	
Hat Type	Top [4]	Top	Top	Top	Top
Date	c. 1860	c. 1860	c. 1833	c. 1825	Modern
Maker & Markings	Unidentified Norfolk, VA	Binford [5] No. 82 Main St. Richmond, VA	John Dooley Richmond, Va.	Dunlap & Co. Copyrighted Hampton Roads Hat Co.	Clearwater Hat Co. Reproduction hat maker's stamp: Cyrus Douglas Beaver Hats St. Louis
Hat material	Clipped beaver	Beaver	Beaver	Beaver	Fur Felt
Crown height	7½	6¾	7	6¼	5½
Crown shape	Straight sides Flat oval top	Slight bell	Slight bell Flat oval top	Bell Flat oval top Screen vent on top center ¼ in. diameter	Tapering sides Tapering front and back Flat round top
Brim shape	Slightly rolled sides	Rolled sides	Slightly rolled sides	Rolled sides	Rolled sides
Brim width	2⅞	2	2¼	2	2½
Brim edging width	¼	⅞ [6]	½	1 [7]	1
Brim edging material	Grosgrain ribbon	Faille ribbon	Grosgrain ribbon	Grosgrain ribbon	Grosgrain ribbon
Hatband width	½	½	⅞	1¾	1⅞
Hatband material	Grosgrain ribbon Ribbon bow	Grosgrain ribbon Metal buckle	Grosgrain ribbon Metal buckle	Wool cloth - black No bow	Grosgrain ribbon Ribbon bow
Sweatband width	2¾	2½	2½	2⅞	2⅞
Sweatband material	Leather	Paper	Leather	Leather - brown	Leather - brown
Lining	None	Paper - brown plaid	Paper - blue	Silk - white	White cotton/linen top Small brown check cotton sides
Remarks		Grosgrain ribbon has a rib on each edge similar to wired ribbon of today	Grosgrain ribbon has a rib on each edge and one in the middle similar to wired ribbon of today		