

TOPPING OFF YOUR IMPRESSION

CONFEDERATE HATS CAME IN A WIDE VARIETY OF COLORS AND STYLES, AND CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, THEY WERE GENERALLY IN PRETTY GOOD SHAPE

By Frederick R. Adolphus

Considerable progress has been made by reenactors in creating authentic Confederate impressions, with improvements in uniforms, equipment, accouterments and hats. But there is always more that can be done to improve our impressions, so here is some information gleaned from period drawings and photographs on styles of hats worn by Confederate soldiers and how common the various styles were.

Most hats at this period were made of treated woolen cloth, although some were made of felt, either expensive fur or cheap wool felt. Together with straw hats made of woven straw or some other splittable grass, these accounted for the vast majority of hats worn in the South.

These hats were further distinguished by the size and shape of the brim and the crown. Brims are either wide, medium or narrow. A medium brim from the period was about three inches wide. Crowns are classified as either low, medium or high. The medium crown was about five inches tall.

Most brims—at least when new—flared up very slightly at the edges, but some were flat and many were given or acquired distinctive shapes with use. Some were pinned up on the side or front. Some would sag all the way around, and others slouched

down slightly in the front and rear. Sometimes, when a brim began to acquire an unwanted slouch due to wear, the owner would roll it up on the sides toward the front, somewhat like a modern cowboy hat.

There were a variety of styles of crowns, as well. There were flat, round and telescoped variants. Some were straight, some flared out toward the top and some tapered in toward the top.



The hat shown above was worn by Col. John G. Walker, Provost Marshal at Orange and Nebbetts Bluff, Texas, 1864-1865. Walker's drab colored hat sports a CSA badge with wreath mounted on cloth. He telescoped the crown and added a Union officer's band and tassel cord. The brim slouches down in a manner not often seen in Confederate hats. (Private collection)

One of the most widespread flat styles of crown was the cylindrical straight pillbox. Pillbox hats were medium in height. Similar in shape to the pillbox was the pork pie. This, too was a flat cylinder of medium height, but the top was slightly concave, resembling an English pork pie. Some of the flat crowns tapered toward the top, like a Hardee hat. Others belled out towards the top, and are known as bell crowns. There were also older styles such as the high, straight stovepipe; and newer, but less widespread, styles with low flat tops.

Round crown hats usually had either an evenly-rounded dome or a flat top with abruptly rounded sides, resembling a pillbox with rounded edges. This latter crown is often called a sugarloaf style. The evenly rounded crowns differed little from one another except for height.

Many, however, were misshapen or had the tops pushed in to reduce the height. Another variant of the round crown was the beehive or beegum crown. This style had somewhat the form of a beehive as it came to a point at the top. The beehive appears to be a misshapen sugarloaf hat. On all styles of crown, many wearers pinched the front together, giving a "V" shape viewed from the top.

Black was perhaps the most common color used for hats, but they

were available in shades ranging from drab white to black, with brown also much in evidence.

The pillbox hat was probably the most widely-used style in the South during the War, (see figure 1). The wide-brimmed variant was the favorite, and black was the most common color. Straw hats were almost invariably pillbox-shaped, (see figure 2).

Pillboxes also came with medium and narrow brims, although the narrow-brim style was not all that common during the war and the medium brim was also less common than the wide brim, (see figure 3).



Figure 2. Frank B. Chilton's hat, Hood's Texas Brigade. This straw hat is typical of most, having a wide brim and a pillbox shaped crown. The style was common to all areas of the South, but despite its coolness, it was never as popular as the wool hat. (Confederate Museum of Richmond)

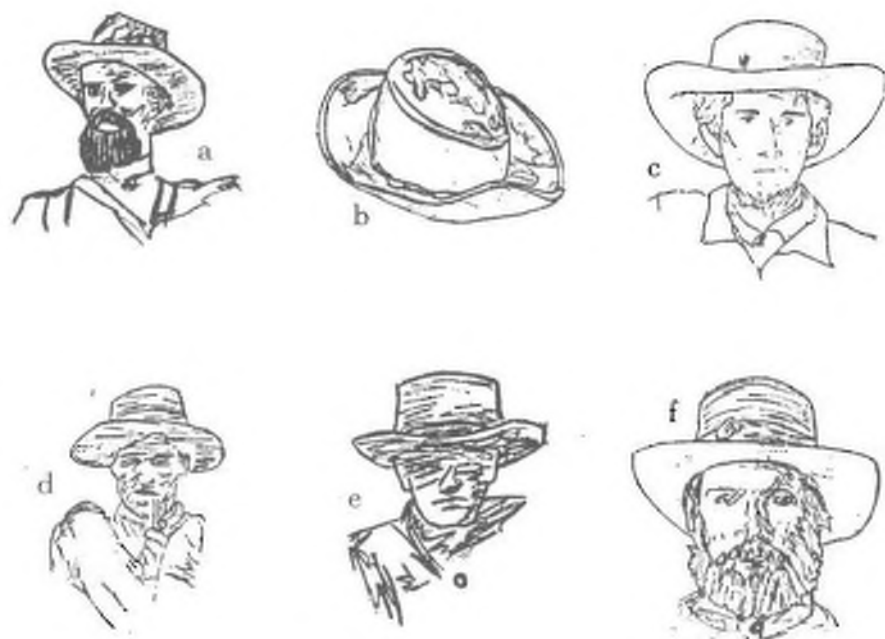


Figure 1. These drawings all show the wide-brim pillbox hat in fairly good condition. Two of the hats shown are from the Eastern Theater, two are from the West and two are from the Trans-Mississippi. All are black, except for one from the Trans-Mississippi. These hats also show hat bands, and the brims on all but one flair up slightly. The exception has a brim that is flat at the edges and slopes down slightly in the front and rear.

- a) Virginia Army prisoner at Gettysburg (Jensen, pg. 68, 69).
- b) Found beside a fallen Tarheel at Spotsylvania (Jensen, pg. 72).
- c and d) Western Confederate prisoners in Chicago, 1864 (*Military Images*, pg. 16, 17).
- e) Pvt. Edwin L. Patton, Co. F, 5th Texas Mounted Vol., 1861 (*Military Images*, pg. 10).
- f) Unidentified soldier from Anderson County, Texas, 1861 (Calendar, cover 1992).



Figure 3. Two hats with medium brims and one with a narrow brim are shown here. All the brims flair up slightly at the edges, one shows evidence of a band and edging around the brim. All of these hats were worn by troops in the Western theater. The narrow-brimmed example is black, the other two are of a medium shade, but the exact color is unknown.

- a) Robert B. Hunt, Jr., 55th Tennessee Inf. (Jensen, pg. 33).
- b) Ulysses Hairgrove, Co. E, 3rd Texas Cav (Calendar, Dec. 1997).
- c) Seaton Cullen, Forrest's Cavalry (Calendar, April 1991).

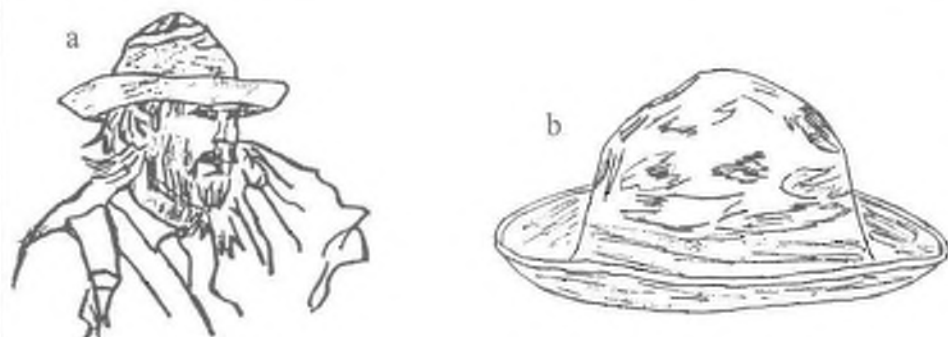


Figure 4. Both of these hats are misshapen, wide-brim pillboxes from the Army of Northern Virginia. The one worn by the soldier is dark in color. The one from the Museum of the Confederacy's collection is now gray, but was originally black and was imported from England.

a) Prisoner taken at Gettysburg (Jensen pg. 68, 69).

b) Cpl. T.V. Brooke's hat, 3rd Co., Richmond Howitzers (*Echoes*, pg. 157).

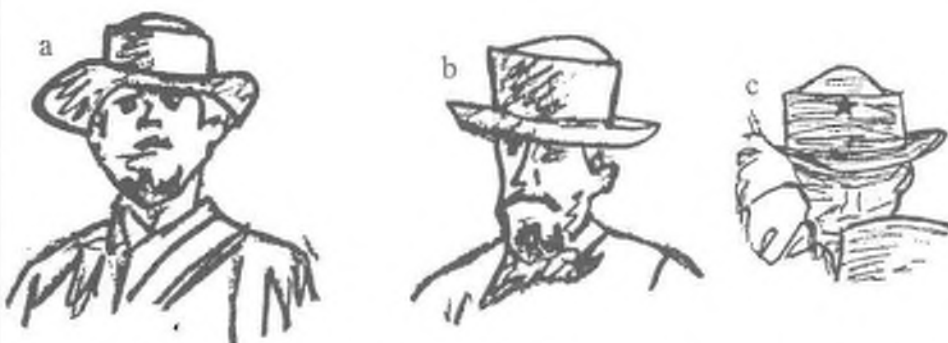


Figure 5. All of these pork pie hats are from the Western theater. Two are straight and one is bell crowned. Two clearly have bands and one has edging around the brim. All are in good shape, with the brims flaring slightly up at the sides. The one with the Texas Lone Star is black, one is of a medium color and one is light.

a and b) Soldiers of the 9th Mississippi Inf., Pensacola, Fla., 1861 (Jensen, pg. 24).

c) Western Confederate prisoner in Chicago, 1864 (*Military Images*, pg. 16, 17).



Figure 6. Three examples of the stovepipe hat. All are in good condition and all are black, which seems to be typical for this style. Two of the wearers are from Western commands and one is from the Trans-Mississippi. Eastern theater usage was limited.

a) Pvt. George Washington Beatty, Co. F, 4th Miss. Cav (Calendar, Aug. 1994).

b) Col. Julius A. Andrews, 32nd Texas Cav (Calendar, April 1995).

c) Unidentified private of the 1st Miss. Cav. Btm. (Calendar, Jan. 1987).

As the pillbox lost its original shape, the flat top often got pushed up and the brim sagged near the crown and curled upwards at the edges. Figure 4 shows this effect.

The commonly-used pork pie hat was similar to the pill box, but the edge of the crown was indented on top, which caused the center of the top to pooch up after some wear. This style also came with straight and bell crowns, and came in a wide array of colors. The overwhelming majority had wide or medium brims, (see figure 5).

Other flat crown hats, less common than the pillbox and pork pie, include the stovepipe, Hardee and bell crown. The stovepipe, with its high straight crown, was already going out of style by the time of the Civil War. Still, it had quite a number of adherents in the conservative southland and seems to have been especially popular in the Trans-Mississippi. Hat expert Bill Wickham says that the Trans-Mississippi region and the West in general tended to lag behind in the fashion trends, which may explain why the stovepipe was so prominent in this area. In character with this fashion's namesake, it was almost always found in black, (see figure 6).

The bell crown and Hardee style hats were not used extensively throughout the South, but were not uncommon. As with the stovepipe, the bell crown was going out of fashion by the time of the war and was more prominent in the West than the East. The Hardee style, with its high tapering crown, also seems to have found more wearers in the West than elsewhere. Black was also the predominant color of these hats, (see figure 7).

Trailing behind flat crown hats in popularity, but still fairly common, were the round crown hats. The simple evenly rounded crown was common to all theaters of the war. Medium height crowns with broad or medium brims were undoubtedly the most widespread of this general type, (see figure 8).

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Figure 7. Two Texans wore these black bell crowns to Virginia in 1861. The wide brims have been pinned up on the side. Another Texan displays a black Hardee-style hat with a flat brim that slopes down slightly in the front and rear.

a) Privts. Emzy and C.M. Taylor, Co. E, 4th Texas Inf (Calendar, March 1992).

b) Capt. Samuel Richardson, 3rd Texas Cav., 1861 (Josephy, pg. 134).



Figure 8. These medium and wide-brim round crowns are all a medium shade and are worn by soldiers from all theaters. They retain their original shape and the brims curve upward. This style of headgear was fairly common.

a) Pvt. A.F. Aucoin, Co. A, 9th Louis. Inf. Bttn. (Calendar, Oct. 1992).

b) Member of the 9th Miss. Inf., Pensacola, Fla., 1861 (Jensen, pg. 24).

c) Unidentified Arkansas soldier (Josephy, pg. 135).

d) Western Confederate prisoner in Chicago, 1864 (Military Images, pg. 16, 17).

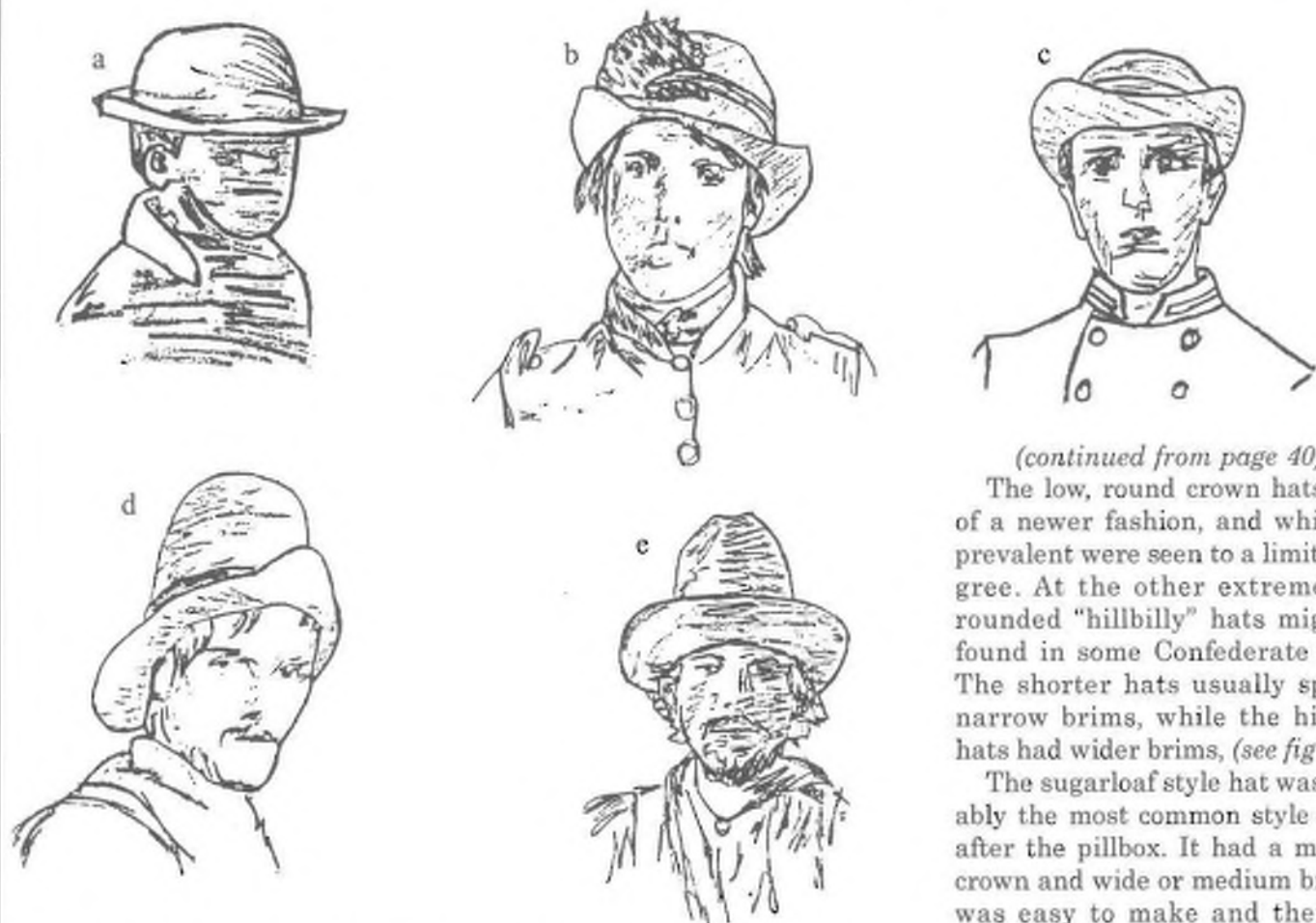


Figure 9. The brims on these low-crown hats flare slightly upward. One is black, the other two are a medium shade. Two apparently have silk bands. All are believed to have been worn by soldiers in the Eastern theater. The tall hillbilly hats are from both Eastern and Western theaters. The brims are turned up and a hatband is visible on the Western theater hat. One is light, the other dark in color.

- a) Prisoner taken in the Wilderness or Spotsylvania (Jensen, pg. 76).
- b and c) Unidentified soldiers (Jensen, pg. 44, and Calendar, Cover 1991).
- d) Unidentified Western soldier (Jensen, pg. 66).
- e) Soldier of the 21st Va. Inf., June 1864 (Jensen, pg. 77).

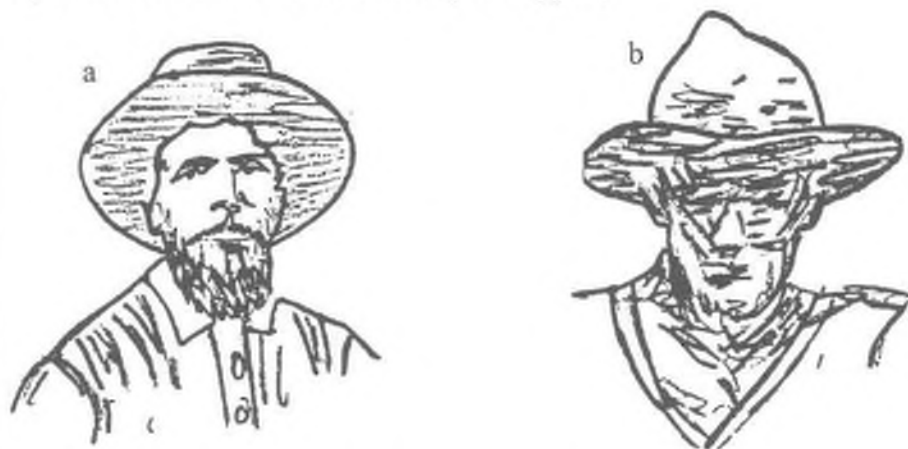


Figure 10. The first drawing is of a Trans-Mississippi soldier with a sugarloaf hat in its original state. The second drawing shows a Western Confederate with the same style hat in a "beehive" state, when the crown has lost its shape.

- a) Sgt. John Samuel Bryan, Co. B, 16th Texas Dismounted Cav (Indiana Historical Society).
- b) Western Confederate prisoner in Chicago, 1864 (*Military Images*, pg. 16, 17).

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The low, round crown hats were of a newer fashion, and while not prevalent were seen to a limited degree. At the other extreme, tall rounded "hillbilly" hats might be found in some Confederate units. The shorter hats usually sported narrow brims, while the hillbilly hats had wider brims, (see figure 9).

The sugarloaf style hat was probably the most common style of hat after the pillbox. It had a medium crown and wide or medium brim. It was easy to make and therefore popular with hatters of the day. When misshapen, its crown pooched up and its apex protruded, giving it the appearance of a beegum or beehive. It had been thought that this was a distinct style until hatters, reproducing the sugarloaf, discovered that the beehive hat was, in fact, a misshapen sugarloaf pattern, (see figure 10).

Once the soldier got his hat, he sometimes embellished it by adding a badge or fancy cord. Not every Southerner did this, but it was popular when the embellishments were available. Typical badges included brass company letters, regimental numbers, state devices and other similar articles. Texas troops were especially fond of adorning their hats with Lone Star badges, as relic hunters have found. Cords with tassels, plumes and buttons were also used on hats, although the proportion of hats embellished this way was small. Some examples of these hats can be seen in many of the illustrations.

In addition to adding badges, some Southerners pinned the brim up on one side of their hat or in the front. The practice of pinning brims up to one side was common at the outbreak of the war, and had its origin in the style of the U.S. Army or Hardee hat. Wearers probably felt the pinned up side gave them a martial appearance. There was little practical need for side pinning, and it mostly ceased after the first part of the war, judging from battlefield photos. As for pinning the front of the brim up, evidence of this can be found throughout the war, but it was not a widespread practice. When it was done, it probably was for practical reasons, to keep a drooping brim out of the face, (see figure 11).

There is a perception that many troops wore old, dilapidated and misshapen hats, and I believed when I began my research that this would be the most typical Confederate hat. But one of the first things I noticed when looking at battlefield photos was the relative absence of worn out hats with the brims slouching down. Of the hundreds of hats I studied that were associated with Confederates in the field, only a handful could really be described as dilapidated. Most soldiers wore hats that were in good or at least fair condition. Likewise, the incidence of slouching brims was also low. Even those hats which appeared to be somewhat worn had their brims flared, curled or shoved upward. Wearing a brim that flopped down does not appear to have been common in Confederate ranks. However, there are illustrations of soldiers with such headgear, (see figure 12).

It is difficult to say what hat you should don for a Confederate impression. Black pillboxes were probably the single most popular style in the Confederate Army, but every hat mentioned here, and many that I neglected to mention, would be perfectly authentic on a Reb. The best advice probably is that units should maintain a good balance of different types of headgear that would have been typical for the region and cir-



Figure 11. The soldiers with their brims pinned up on the side are both 1861 volunteers. The two others have brims pinned up in the front. Such practices were not widespread.

- a) Unidentified Texas infantryman, 1861 (Calendar, Dec. 1987).
- b) Unidentified infantryman, 1861 (Calendar, Nov. 1992).
- c) G.W. Hastings, regiment unknown (*Military Images*, pg. 13).
- d) Unidentified Confederate, possibly a Texan (Calendar).



Figure 12. These Cold Harbor prisoners display hats that are very worn. The crowns are dented or misshapen and the brims are slouching down. Such hats were the exception, however. The other fifty-some prisoners in the same photo had headgear in fairly decent shape.

cumstances portrayed. A limit on the number of broken-brimmed, slouching hats would enhance a group's image. More flat crowns as opposed to round crowns would help, too. Little things, such as not pinning up brims on the side and keeping brims flared up, would help overall group authenticity.

Finally, some research into the region that the unit is supposed to come from might help, too. For instance, black stovepipe hats worn in a Trans-Mississippi command would help give that group the proper look.

I hope this will at least encourage readers to research the topic of hats on their own. Many thanks to Bill Wickham for his patient and generous sharing of knowledge on hats of the Civil War era.

Picture Credits:

Jensen, Leslie D., *Johnny Reb, The Uniform of the Confederate Army, 1861-1865*; Greenhill Books, London, Stackpole Books, Pennsylvania, 1996.

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