

GETTING INTO LEATHER -- PART I:

NOTES ON FEDERAL INFANTRY ACCOUTERMENTS

Mark Hubbs

Reenacting is a hobby which has evolved tremendously in the last five years. One aspect of general accuracy that has not improved appreciably is the quality and accuracy of leather accouterments. The purpose of this article is to bring to light problems that continue to be encountered in this area. We will discuss the standard manufacturing traits and characteristics of original Federal accouterments. Part 2 will analyze some current reproductions. This will assist the reader in choosing the best reproduction for his impression.

Federal infantry accouterments were made by several government-owned arsenals and by many private contractors during the war years. Although the contractor-made sets of accouterments far out-numbered the government-made sets, they are all essentially the same. Pattern pieces were provided to the contractors for duplication and the finished products were inspected to insure that they were faithful to the specifications were set forth. In other words, very little variation existed between various contractor- and government-made products. In our examination of these items, we will discuss general observations about stitching, leather, and finishing; and then specific details about the cartridge box, cap box, bayonet scabbard, waist belt and cartridge box belt (sling).

Stitching on original pieces was all by hand. I have not yet found any period reference to the use of a sewing machine that can duplicate the complex leather joints on cartridge boxes. (If someone has such a reference, please share it with me!) The stitching on all U.S. products was straight and even with constantly spaced stitches. The 3 cord linen thread should be black and fairly small in diameter. I have encountered three types of stitching on original boxes: harness stitch, back stitch and running stitch. A harness stitch was done with a long single strand of thread with a needle at each end. Both needles are passed back and forth through each hole. It should have the same appearance on both sides of the seam. The back stitch is a single thread with one needle. The single needle is passed through each hole two times in opposite directions. It will have the same appearance on one side as the harness stitch, but on the reverse the stitches will be double in length and overlap one another. The running stitch is done with a single needle passed back and forth through each hole only one time. When finished it looks as though it has missed every other stitch.

Original pieces are generally made from quality vegetable tanned leather. The outer surface is smooth and free from

scars or brands. The inner surface of the leather is skived smooth and does not have a fibrous appearance. The leather on most items appears to have been dyed before the individual pieces were cut out. The finished items were coated with a black leather varnish after they were completed.

The standard components of infantry accouterment sets remained unchanged from before the war until 1863 and each complete set consisted of cartridge box, cartridge box belt, waist belt, cap box, bayonet scabbard and musket sling. In 1863 changes were introduced to bayonet scabbards to make them more durable, by the addition of five copper rivets on the frog. Early in 1864 cartridge boxes were reinforced with rivets on the closing tab and buckles, and later in that year the flaps of cartridge boxes were embossed with an oval "US" and the box plate was omitted. These late war models did not see the extensive service rendered by earlier models, so they will not be discussed in detail in this article.

Some leather accouterments manufactured early in the war were not marked with a contractor's name or individually inspected by government representatives. This caused problems among army procurement officers when they tried to determine the origin of faulty merchandise. As a result, by the middle of the war all contractor products had to be marked with the name and address of the manufacturer and each had to be inspected and marked by a government agent. Government arsenals, who had always marked each piece, generally marked cartridge and cap box on the inside flap. Contractors tended to do the same. Government inspection marks were usually placed on the bottom of the flap, or on the inside flap. Another mark that is encountered on many cartridge boxes is an imprint in the leather that looks like a large asterisk (*). I have found no conclusive documentation as to the purpose of these marks. Some folks have suggested that these marks were left by a device that gripped the leather and held it in place while it was being sewn. However, most of these marks have tack holes underneath them. Tacks are used to hold the box on a wooden last while it is being sewn. I think the marks are stamped over the holes to help close the tack hole up and make the box more water tight. (If someone can provide a period source which can shed some light on this subject please share it!)

The Cartridge Box - Most reenactors carry .58 caliber weapons, so we will concentrate on cartridge boxes designed for that caliber weapon. The standard .58 caliber box of the war was first developed to accompany the Model 1855 Rifle Musket, so for lack of an official title we will call it the "Model

1855" cartridge box. The cartridge box is a complicated and detailed object so we will describe each of its characteristics in detail.

- **Body** - The body is composed of the sections which actually enclose the six sides of the box. A rectangular piece of leather creates the front, bottom and part of the back. It is joined to the flap, which creates a seam across the back of the box. The box is held together with a stout harness stitch with 8 stitches per inch. The stitching passes through the body into the side panels at an angle which allows the leather pieces to rest together at right angles. The seams are then dressed and smoothed. The scalloped end of the flap extends below the front of the box.

The side panels are actually two pieces of leather glued together, rough side to rough side, so that a smooth surface is on the inside and outside of the box. They are also stitched together at their top at 8 stitches per inch.

- **Belt & Sling Loops** - These loops on the rear of the box are 1 1/32 inches wide and the edges have a line embossing. The horizontal loops pass through four holes in the body and are stitched down along the edge of each hole. The vertical belt loop has its top end stitched and riveted under the sling loops. The other end extends to within 3/4 inch of the bottom of the box and is stitched around its rounded end. It is riveted inside the stitching.

- **Inner Flap** - The inside flap is attached to the body by the same stitching that holds on the sling loops. The edges of the inner flap also extend down the inside back of the box and are secured by the stitching on the side panels. The flap is long enough to cover the top portion of the appendage pocket.

- **Appendage Pocket** - The appendage pocket is sewn to the front of the body with a widely spaced running stitch. The flap of the pocket is held in place by a leather tab 7/8 inch wide. Total size of the pocket is 3 3/4 by 6 inches.

- **Hardware** - Finials were soft brass and were ball shaped. The tear drop shaped final did not appear until the design improvements of 1864. The japanned iron roller buckles were 7/8 inch square (inside measurement). The buckles were sewn on with two lines of parallel stitches, 8 per inch.

- **Tins** - Ammunition inside the box was protected by two tin liners or "tins." The tins were identical in size: 3 3/8 inches wide, 5 inches tall and 1 1/2 inches thick. The right and left tin differed by the position of the divider in the upper compartment. This divider isolated about 1/3 of the space in the upper compartment. This divider was on opposite sides for the right and left tin.

The Cartridge Box Belt - The cartridge box sling, as it is commonly called, was designed to support the weight of the fully loaded cartridge box on the shoulder. The sling was just long enough to keep the box at waist level. Original slings for .58 caliber cartridge boxes came in only one length, 55 inches

(slings for .69 caliber boxes were 2 inches longer.) The sling had a "billet," a narrow integral strap 5 1/2 nches long, at each end that buckled to the box. This made the total length of the sling with the billets 66 inches with a width of 2 1/4 inches. The majority of reproduction slings are much too long, some as long as 76 inches, supposedly to accommodate taller people. The excessive length allows the box to flop around when one is on the march. The box sling should be short enough so that the waist belt nestles just on top of the cartridge box when the accouterments are worn properly. Indeed, some troops even wore the waist belt through the loops on the back of the box with the sling worn simultaneously. (I'm 6'4" and have no trouble wearing the period length 55 inch sling.) Original slings were made of black bridle leather (smooth side out), and black buff leather (smooth side stripped away leaving both sides rough). The black bridle version was the most plentiful. Buff versions grew less common as the war progressed. Most slings were generally marked half way down the length of the sling, which would have resulted in the markings resting above the wearer's shoulder.

The Cap Box - This description is of the most common U.S. cap box, the Model 1850, which was made by the Federal Government and its contractors. This model had an outer flap which was cut with an integral latch tab. (Many Northern states issued cap boxes which had a shield shaped flap with a separate, sewn on, latch tab.) The body of the cap box was shaped, when wet, on a wooden form. It was trimmed and sewn with a harness stitch, ten stitches per inch to a single piece of leather that formed the back, outer flap and latch tab of the cap box. When fully extended, this single piece was about 9 1/2 inches long. The two belt loops on the rear of the box were 5/8 inches wide and had a line embossed edge. The rounded end of the loops were sewn to the back at 10 stitches per inch and were reinforced with a small copper rivet. Under the inner flap, sewn to the back of the box is a strip of sheep's skin with its wool intact. This wool was intended to keep the caps from bouncing out when the flap was unbuttoned. The inner flap should cover about two thirds of the body when the flap is closed. A small loop of thin leather was sewn into the right side seam on the inside to hold a cone pick.

Period cap boxes were made of thinner leather than the cartridge box, had very well executed, small stitches and generally were very well made. Manufacturers normally stamped their names on the inner flap, and inspectors usually stamped the center of the outer flap.

The Waist Belt - Original waist belts were 1 15/16 inches wide and came in only one length, 38 1/2 inches. This is the only accouterment item that may require larger sizes than the original. One end of the belt had two tear drop shaped holes to accommodate the hooks on the belt buckle. The other end had a brass "keeper" which kept the loose end of the belt from dangling. Four adjustment holes, 1 1/4 inches apart were punched on the keeper end. As with the sling, bridle leather,

and buff leather versions were made, with the bridle being the most common. A "waxed leather" (smooth side in, rough side out with a wax coating) finish was also manufactured in quantities similar to buff.

The Bayonet Scabbard -The bayonet scabbard was modified twice during the war years. The scabbard in use before the war and for the first two years of the war was 18 ½ inches long. It had a sheet brass tip with a acorn shaped final soldered in the bottom. The tip was riveted with either two or four tiny copper wire rivets to the scabbard tube. The frog was constructed of two pieces. One was a throat which was wrapped around the scabbard tube. The other piece formed the belt loop and was sandwiched between the two ends of the throat. A triangle shaped pattern of harness stitching, 8 stitches per inch, held the belt loop to the throat. It was reinforced by two copper rivets. A line of stitching also joined the top of the collar with the scabbard tube. In 1863, the triangular line of stitching was replaced with four copper rivets on the belt loop. One additional rivet was added on the joint between the belt loop and throat. This is known to collectors as the "seven rivet" model. In 1864 an additional rivet was added at the joint between the throat and tube. This "eight rivet" model was only used in the last stages of the war.

REFERENCES

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Personal communication between the author and LTC Paul Johnson, USAF (Ret.) in 1992, 1993, and 1994.

Original Infantry accouterments in the collection of the author.

Mark Hubbs began reenacting in 1972. He is a Historic Preservation Analyst in Huntsville, Alabama, and has been collecting and reproducing Civil War clothing and leather items for over 15 years.