1860s Civilian Shirts For the Soldier

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Throughout the Civil War, soldiers on both sides were provided with shirts as their basic undergarment by national or state supply sources. The appearance and use of the most common flannel shirt issued by the United States government has been well documented. Other shirts provided by the federal government have been less well identified though their existence and use is a matter of record even if they no longer physically exist.[1]

The manufacture and issue of shirts by the Confederate States government and individual states has been less well documented though it is clear that this was done in some quantity. The appearance of these garments is largely a matter of conjecture.[2]

That individual soldiers, especially officers, provided themselves with ready-made and home-made shirts is also well documented with numerous examples extant. The purpose of this brief article is to describe forms, construction features and materials used in civilian shirts of the Civil War era.

From at least the early 17th century until the middle 1840s, the basic shirt form remained fairly constant. Essentially it consisted of a single piece body which ran over the shoulders. Earlier shirts utilized the full width of the goods, leaving the selvages to be used in the side seams. Length was generally 72 inches hem to hem. The head opening was constructed by cutting a 'T' shaped slit at the center. The vertical opening had the edge simply turned under and hemmed. Usually the weak area at the base of the opening was reinforced in some manner. The corners of the neckline were reinforced with triangular gussets and the neckline gauged to fit the length of the rectangular collar. The sleeves were also simple rectangles gauged to the side of the body. Ease under the arm was provided by a diamond shaped gusset. Cuffs, or wristbands as they were commonly known, were also rectangles with the sleeves gauged down to fit. Long vents at the side seams provided ease for the thighs. These shirts generally used three buttons: one at the base of the collar and one at the base of each wristband. Generally speaking, early shirts had more generous dimensions in the body and sleeves. The reason for the gradual reduction in size may have been due to the close-fitting coat sleeves popular in the early 19th century.

Several construction details common in early shirts are worth noting. The first is the use of reinforcing gussets at the upper corner of the side vents. Because shirt tails were so long, these vents provided ease. The gusset, usually in the form of a triangle or horizontal rectangle, prevented this area of considerable stress from ripping out. Not all artifact shirts exhibit this feature but all seen by this author that do not, have a stress tear at this point. Another detail is shoulder reinforcements. These were narrow horizontal strips of cloth called "shoulder strips" or "shoulder straps" which ran from the collar to the sleeve seam. "Binders" were internal patches which covered the sleeve seam and often extended all the way around the seam from the lowest corner of the gusset and in toward the neck vent several inches.

This then was the "traditional shirt," made of squares and rectangles, cut without a pattern and efficiently employing approximately three yards of material. Civilian shirts were still being made and worn during the war which followed the traditional pattern but employed some new features described below. The most common U.S. government issue shirt was a holdover of this form.

Sometime in the middle 1840s this traditional shirt form began to be changed. The major improvement was in the fit at the neck and shoulders. Because the traditional shirt was fitted only at the neck, the shoulder tended to rotate forward when the collar was buttoned. Since the shirt was principally supported on the neck, this was an uncomfortable reality. The new form had the body cut in two pieces with a seam along the top of the shoulder. The seam formed a downward slope toward the sleeve. The neckline was also cut with a contoured curve that formed along the base of the neck. Like modern shirts, this curve was approximately ½ inch below center back and 1 inch below center front. These new features resulted in a lower neckline and more support across the shoulders. In this era the plaquet front closure began to appear. A plaquet facing was sewn to the right or to both sides of the front slit and included three or four buttonholes . As before, the opening extended to about the sternum. Shirts with full length front openings did not exist in this period. Perhaps because of the shoulder seam, binders enlarged to cover most of the front and gradually formed a separate single piece extending across

the entire back of the body.

Perhaps in response to increasing tailoring sophistication, shirt cut changed radically by 1860. The traditional sleeve joined square with the body was abandoned in favor of a "set in" sleeve, which employed a contoured armscye and corresponding curve cut at the sleeve head. This is the manner in which shirt sleeves are attached to this day. The sleeve became more tapered toward the wristband and was fitted with either plaits or gathers. To eliminate the body bulk in the sides, the side seams were cut with a pronounced concave curve. Perhaps due to the increased acceptance of drawers for everyday wear among the fashion conscious, shirt tails became shorter and often had rounded corners.

Nearly every part of the shirt was "improved." Collars became increasingly detachable, especially on dress shirts, and were cut back from the chin so as to leave a gap in front. Often collars were constructed with the band and fall cut in separate pieces and sewn together. Wristbands were more often called cuffs and increasingly had rounded corners, requiring them to be cut in two pieces. As in the case of more complex dress patterns, shirt pattern sophistication may have been the result of increased use of the sewing machine.

While ready-made handsewn shirts had been available since at least the 1820s as far west as St. Louis, they became more readily available in the 1850s and 60s.[3] Machine-sewn "bosoms" and collars could be purchased in stores and incorporated in hand-sewn shirts. Even when shirts were machine-sewn, buttonholes and buttons were still executed by hand.

Fabrics

Throughout the 19th century, white cotton was by far the most common shirt material. Coarse working shirts were made from blue and white checked cotton or linen and a durable twill-woven cotton with narrow horizontal blue stripes called "hickory." Printed cottons were not used to any meaningful extent until the 1850s, except in the Indian trade Printed cottons used in shirts in the 1850s and 1860s tended to have white backgrounds with small geometric designs arranged in stripes in one or two colors. There was also a trend toward checked or printed bodies and sleeves with white collars, cuffs and plaited bosoms for informal shirts. Dress shirts throughout the era were white. The best shirts were entirely of fine linen. From the 1840s, dress shirts with linen bosom, cuffs and collar on a cotton body and sleeves became common as did those entirely of cotton. These were considered to be of lesser quality.

Buttons

Sometime in the early part of the century, carved shell buttons came into use on dress shirts. These were small, about 1/4 to 3/8 inch in diameter. Common features were regular designs carved around the rim or the four attachment holes. About 1840 white glass buttons appeared. These often had a wide flat rim which sloped down from the center or displayed a narrow ridge radiating outward. Plain shell buttons also came into use about this time on work shirts. Metal buttons appear to have been mainly used on overshirts. Studs were also used to close plaquets and collars. Gold or mother-of-pearl studs would generally be seen only on best dress shirts with plaited bosoms.

Overshirts

Another very common type of shirt was the overshirt. These were made of coarse woolen flannel and worn over cotton or linen shirts for warmth without the weight and bulk of a coat or jacket. During the winter they were worn in multiples. Most seem to have been made on the traditional pattern. Miners, lumbermen, hunters, sportsmen, boatmen, and farmers all wore overshirts. Numerous daguerreotypes and the paintings of Charles Nahl attest to their popularity in the California gold fields. George Caleb Bingham depicted them on many of his Missouri and Mississippi River boatmen and farmers. Many Currier and Ives engravings show them on hunters and farmers. One of the first uses of the overshirt as an inexpensive and comfortable uniform was by Jefferson Davis' Mississippi Rifles during the war with Mexico. Early in the Civil War many units adopted overshirts as rudimentary uniforms. While the 1st and 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, for example, wore what is referred to as the "Rhode Island Blouse," it was nothing more than a somewhat elaborate overshirt. Photographs of Confederate soldiers in overshirts, often with contrasting plaquet, collar, cuffs and pockets are relatively common, though the modern term "battle shirt" does not appear to have been used contemporarily.

The principle means of identifying overshirts in photographs and paintings is by tone or color. Overshirts

were generally grey, blue or red. Cotton and linen shirts were virtually never solid in color. Red appears to have been the most favorite color, probably for the variety it provided. Checked and plaid woolen overshirts are seen in Confederate photographs and exist in some number in the *Bertrand* collection.[4] Favorite additional decoration appeared in the form of contrasting piping around the plaquet and embroidered cuffs, plaquet, shoulder strips and collar. The latter appears to have enjoyed some popularity among lumbermen and boatmen in much the same way as sailors decorated their frocks. Hearts, trefoils, crescents and vines were popular motifs.

When shopping for "replica" civilian shirts, look for products which are patterned after original garments. If a merchant cannot cite the source of the product, pass it up. Also look for period-appropriate details described above such as gauging, hand-felled seams and buttonholes, narrow seams, vent reinforcements, small buttons and historically supportable fabrics. A shirt does not have to be entirely hand-sewn to be appropriate but even machine-made garments had hand-sewn buttonholes. Be prepared to pay as much for a good shirt as for an accurate pair of trousers and be prepared to look long and hard. Sadly, there are few merchants who offer products which can bear close comparison with originals.

NOTES

[1]Stephen E. Osman, "A Tale of Two Shirts," *Military Collector & Historian*, Vol. XLV, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), Washington, DC: The Company of Military Historians, 67-72.

[2]Leslie D. Jensen, "A Survey of Confederate Central Government Quartermaster Issue Jackets, Part I," *Military Collector & Historian*, Vol. XLI, No. 3 (Fall, 1989), Washington, DC: The Company of Military Historians, 109-112; Ross M. Kimmel, "Enlisted Uniforms of Maryland Confederate Infantry: A Case Study, Part II," *Military Collector & Historian*, Vol. LXI, No. 4 (Winter, 1989), 186-187.

[3]Printed cotton and linen shirts used in the Indian trade had been common from at least the 18th century and possibly constituted one of the larger attempts at mass production of shirts in North America.

[4]This collection, housed at the De Soto National Wildlife Refuge, was the cargo of the sunken Missouri River steamer *Bertrand*, which went down on April 1, 1865. Most of the cargo was intended for the mining districts of the Upper Missouri.

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