

COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE COMMON TENT

Stephen Osman

The lowly common tent (a.k.a. "A" or wedge tent) housed American soldiers from the Revolution to the Civil War, showing remarkably little change over those years.¹ But in procuring a tent, as with so many other replicated items offered to Civil War reenactors today, the buyer is faced with endless variety of products purported to be authentic. The best way to compare these offerings is to examine the government's own specifications for tents issued to Civil War soldiers.

In the fall of 1864 Chief Inspector of Tents A. Flomerfelt proposed manufacturer specifications for all tents, an edited version of which was published as Quartermaster General Office General Orders Number 60, dated December 12, 1864. Flomerfelt's specifications described the same tents used for years by the army, along with the Sibley and shelter tent versions. Enough details are provided in these orders to allow accurate reconstruction today.

Description of Common Tent

Dimensions when finished:

<i>Height when pitched</i>	<i>6' 10".</i>
<i>Length of ridge ""</i>	<i>6' 10".</i>
<i>Width when pitched</i>	<i>8' 4".</i>
<i>Height of door ""</i>	<i>5' 6".</i>
<i>Width of door ""</i>	<i>1' at bottom and 9" at top.</i>

<i>From top of ridge to lower edge of roof when pitched</i>	<i>8' 1/2".</i>
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To be made of cotton duck 28 1/2 inches wide, clear of all imperfections, and weighing ten ounces to the lineal yard.

Ends of tent to be cut with a sweep of four inches from the corner to the center.

To be made in workmanlike manner, with not less than two and one half stitches of equal length to the inch, made with double thread of five-fold cotton twine, well waxed. The seams not less than one inch in width, and no slack taken in them.

Grommets must be worked in all the holes, and to be well made with waxed cotton twine.

The doors and stay pieces to be of the same material as the tent, the stay pieces on the end and ridge of tent to be nine inches square.

The sod cloth to be seven-ounce cotton duck, nine inches in width in the clear from the tabling, and to extend around the tent.

The tabling on the foot of the tent, when finished, will be one and a half inches in length.

The door lines to be of six-thread Manilla line, three feet long in the clear.

The foot lines to be of six-thread Manilla line, sixteen inches long in the clear.

Twelve door strings, one inch in width, and fourteen inches long in the clear.

All lines to be well whipped, one inch from the ends, with waxed twine and properly knotted.

Description of Common Tent Poles.

Ridge, 6 feet 10 inches long, 2 1/2 inches wide, 1 7/8 inches thick; bands on each end 2 inches wide, secured by two screws 1 inch long; 1/2 inch hole 1 inch from each end.

Upright 7 feet 4 inches long, 2 inches thick; bands on upper end 1 3/4 inch wide, secured by 2 screws 1 inch long; spindles, 3/8 inch iron, to project out 1 1/2 inch, and inserted 2 inches in upright. Bands and spindles to be galvanized.

Description of Common Tent Pins

Sixteen inches long, 1 1/4 inch wide, 1 inch thick, 1 notch 3 inches from top.

For each common tent there should be 14 pins.²

Common tents were all hand sewn during the Civil War, with hand-worked grommet holes on the ridge and in pairs along the bottom for the "foot lines." These stake loops were positioned at each seam line. Pins were to be of white oak, the ridge pole of white pine and the uprights of ash or "other suitable wood."³ Other features missing on most replicas available today include the sod cloth and the reinforces at the ridge ends.

With these specifications you can rate the various replicas on the market, or perhaps encourage your favorite supplier to upgrade his offerings.

SOURCES AND NOTES

¹Descriptions from 1807, 1812, 1826, 1832, and 1846 have been examined and show only minor variations in dimensions and a change from linen to cotton after the Mexican War. National Archives, Record Group 92, Entries 2118 (Commissary General of Purchases, Letters Received), 2117 (CG of P, Letters Sent), and 225 (Consolidated Correspondence File).

²The printed specifications closely follow those in Flomerfelt's letter and enclosures to Col. Herman Biggs, Nov. 21, 1864. National Archives, Record Group 92, Entry 225, "Tents."

³*Quartermaster Manual*, 1865. Unpublished manuscript, National Archives, Record Group 92.

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Publisher's Note: We are aware of no currently available reproduction common tents that include many of the features described in Mr. Osman's article. Therefore, we prefer not to recommend the products of any supplier at this time. We understand, however, that Panther Lodges, P.O. Box 32L, Normantown, WV 25267; (304) 462-7718 apparently offers a common tent with a sod cloth. This is a start toward better reproduction common tents. We hope other improvements will follow. Of particular value in better capturing the appearance of Civil War era tents, common and otherwise, would be more use of thread or twine-lined grommets, instead of the brass ones so often used on reproduction tents today.

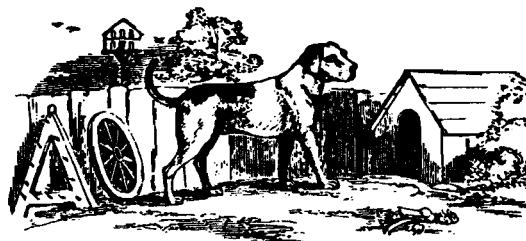
We seriously hope that reenactors who make their own tent poles and pins (and don't most of us?) will take heed of the descriptions provided here.

They are easily followed and would add considerable uniformity and realism to our camps. It is not unusual to visit a reenactment camp and see hardly any poles and pins that match from tent to tent -- a misleading situation when one recalls that these items were objects of fairly standardized manufacture and mass issue.

While on the subject of common tents, please allow us to solicit an article of *The Watchdog* about the frequency and locations of use of such tents during the Civil War. "Hard-core" reenactors tend to condemn common tents pretty universally, and it is certainly true that common tents are not appropriate for every living history event. But we wonder where and when they were really used. Have you ever looked closely at the photographs of the encampments of Grant's army at Vicksburg? Look through the chapter entitled "Jewels of the Mississippi" in Volume IV, *Fighting for Time*, of the *Images of War* series. You will see a lot of common tents. Our favorite period photograph of a common tent in use, which we recommend our readers examine closely by the way, appears on page 287 of Volume V, *The South Beseiged*, of *Images of War* -- and in many other places. It depicts a wedge tent near Atlanta in 1864. These are hardly the "early war scenarios" to which we tend to relegate common tents in reenactment use. We draw no conclusions and make no recommendations here, but simply point to the need for some detailed research into primary materials. Is anyone interested in taking on this project?

--N.H.

From a 19th Century spelling book; sounds like The Watchdog to us:



THE DOG.

This dog is the mastiff. He is active, strong, and used as a watchdog. He has a large head and pendent ears. He is not very apt to bite; but he will sometimes take down a man and hold him down. Three mastiffs once had a combat with a lion, and the lion was compelled to save himself by flight.