

The Shelter Tent.

by James Holbert

The army began issuing these tents in the spring of 1862. They went through considerable evolution during the war as advances were made in materials and construction techniques; the use of any one of the particular variations will date your impression as much as the date on your musket lock plate. Attention to the following items will insure that your tent will fit the time period of your impression.

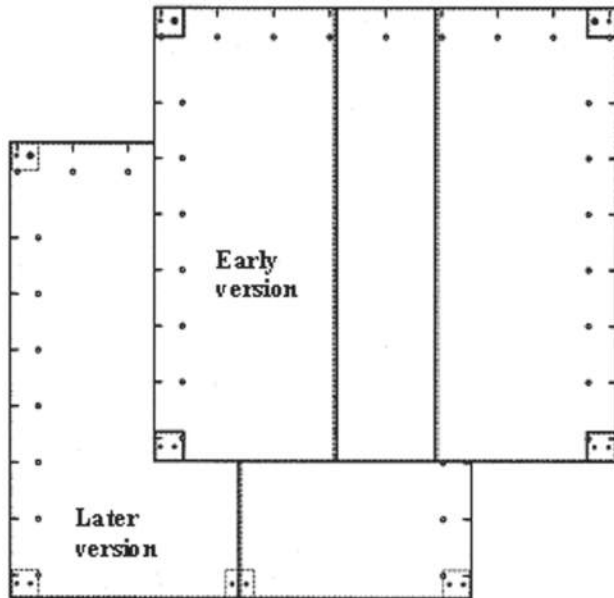


FIG 1. The two primary shelter tent construction types: three-piece (early) and two-piece (late).

Two Versus Three-piece Construction.

There were two major construction variations used in tents supplied during the war. Most shelter tents with an established early-war provenance appear to have been constructed of three pieces of material (FIG 1). This would account for the large amounts of 28.5 inch wide drill material inventoried by the quartermaster. The narrow center piece is required to make up the regulation length of sixty-six inches. In these tents, the center section will be narrower than the outer two that are sewn in full-width.

Later-war tents often conform to a two-piece style that was manufactured from 33.5 inch wide cotton duck.¹

It should be noted that Civil War-era manufacturers did everything they could to incorporate the selvedge edge of the cloth into an outside edge of the article they were making. Every hemmed edge in an item meant added amounts of labor-intensive sewing, and this mentality did not evaporate even with the advent of sewing machines. In most shelter halves, the edges at either end of the tent are usually un-hemmed selvedge.

Material: Duck Versus Drill.

Another issue is related to the actual *material* used in

the tents. The Quartermaster wanted them to be made from cotton duck or "sail cloth."² Unfortunately, this material was not available in significant quantities until later in the war. The tents examined by this writer were primarily made of cotton drill and tabby-weave linen canvas. One tent was actually made of a combination of materials, with different cloth used for the corner reinforcements and the tent itself.

Buttons: Bone Versus Stamped Metal.

The Quartermaster may have wanted tin buttons, but many of the early tents have the cheaper bone buttons instead. One shelter tent that I have actually examined also had small drill reinforcements of about 0.75 inch diameter used to back up the stitching used to hold the buttons on. This particular tent was made between late 1862 and mid-1863, so perhaps this button reinforcement is another early feature.³

Reinforcements, Pin Loops and Guy Ropes.

The earliest tent examined by this writer had *double* reinforcements at the four corners of the tent. In other words, there will be a square of fabric about four inches square sewn on *both* sides of the tent in each corner. The material used for these reinforcements may or may not be the same kind of material used in the rest of the tent. The two upper reinforcements are the tent pole reinforcements located along the ridge of the tent, and the two lower reinforcements are the pin loop reinforcements. These can be seen in FIG 1. The two grommets in the upper reinforcements are different sized: the larger one, located towards the inside of the tent, is a locating grommet through which the end of a tent pole was to protrude. The smaller one towards the edge was for a guy rope. At some point, the extra layer of reinforcement was dispensed with, and each reinforce was made of a single piece of cloth sewn on one side.

The pin loops were a piece of cord that had each end pushed through a grommet on the foot of the tent and knotted. The knots prevented the cord from pulling through the grommet.

An extra pin loop reinforce was added along the foot of the tent in the center of tent towards the end of the war. Some early tents had this extra pin loop added by the soldiers in the field.

The line used in the guy ropes and pin loops was usually made from 1/4 inch hemp rope. Hemp is a darker, more pliable fiber than the manila or sisal line used in most reproductions.

Size.

There used to be an incorrect assumption that the "early war" shelter halves were smaller than the "later war" tents. This probably stemmed from the fact that all of the surviving tents were somewhat smaller than the regulation size of 66.5 by sixty-three inches.⁴ In researching the size issue, an experiment was done by Don Rademacher. A tent was made of cotton drill to the quartermaster specifications, and then

washed. The resultant shrinkage brought the tent down to roughly the same dimensions seen in original shelter tents!⁵

Assuming that all the original tents were about the same size when they were made, the current dimensions of surviving halves vary greatly depending on the exact type of material used and the severity of usage the artifact endured during its service. For example, the following table gives the dimensions of seven original halves when compared with the 1864 specifications (all dimensions are in inches):

<u>Shelter Halves</u>	<u>Length</u>	<u>Width</u>	<u>Material</u>
<i>1864 Spec.</i>	66.5	63	cotton sail cloth
Gettysburg NPS A	64.5	57	linen duck
Gettysburg NPS B	64.5	59	linen duck
Three-piece Drill	62	63.5	cotton drill
Smithsonian	64	60	cotton sail cloth
Stametelos A	63.5	58	cotton drill
Stametelos B	63.5	58	cotton drill
Stametelos C	64	60.5	cotton sail cloth

The two Gettysburg halves (A and B) are early three-piece variants and are currently on display in the Gettysburg NBP Visitor's Center. The Three-piece Drill tent was recently sold by an artifact dealer to a private collector. One contractor made both Stametelos A and B, originally issued together and used by one soldier, and Stametelos C is a late-war, two-piece model.⁶

Common Features.

So far we have discussed the features that can date the issue of a shelter half; there were many constants that are present in most of the surviving shelters, no matter when they were made.

All had twenty-three buttons, with nine along the ridge end and seven on each end edge. All had a pair of hand-stitched grommets at each corner with the grommets being stitched in a heavy linen twine. Buttonholes and loop grommets were all hand-sewn. All were machine sewn in a rather long stitch, about eight stitches per inch.

Weight.

The overall construction of tents was definitely light. Original shelter halves weigh between twenty-four and thirty-two ounces. In comparison, a few modern reproductions that I have examined tipped the scales at between four and six pounds per half!

Makers.

Here are a few of the major manufactures of shelter halves during the war:

J. T. Martin	25,000 (1863)
Fox & Polhemus	100,000 (1862)
Joseph Lee	122,000 (1862-63)
H. S. McComb	169,000 (1863)
B. Hansell	85,000 (1863)

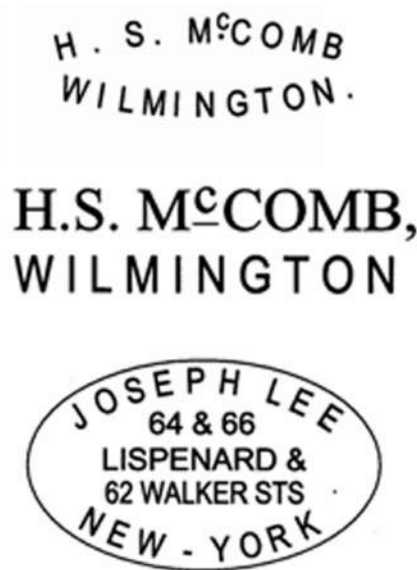


FIG 2. Samples of shelter tent makers' marks.

NOTES AND SOURCES:

Illustrations are courtesy of John E. Tobey. Beside the information on specific tents described in Patrick McDermott's article, information was provided on three other tents by John E. Tobey, Steve Rogers and Peter Westbrook.

1. After this article was released in the first edition of the *Columbia Rifles Research Compendium*, shelter tents were extensively researched and fully explained by Frederick C. Gaede in *The Civil War Shelter Tent* (Alexandria, Virginia: O'Donnell Publications, 2001).
2. *Quartermaster's Manual* (1865), unpublished manuscript, transcription provided by Jan-Henrik Berger.
3. This tent was a three-piece tent, probably made under the auspices of the Cincinnati Depot, and was owned by Stephen Rogers.
4. Researchers should beware of another set of dimensions (sixty-six by sixty-five inches) that appear in several wartime specifications. These dimensions were actually "historical typos" and are incorrect. Gaede, *Civil War Shelter Tent*, 32.
5. Patrick McDermott, "A Survey of Civil War Shelter Halves," *The Company Wag*, vol. 1, no. 2 (September 1988). This information has been made somewhat redundant by Gaede's research into contract specifications. There were no orders for shelters other than those in the size specified.
6. The data on all halves except "Three Piece A" is taken from a table printed in Patrick McDermott's "A Survey of Civil War Shelter Halves."