

Donation of the Month

Confederate Officer's Artillery Frock Coat

1975.18.9

Donor: Betty Swearingen



Things aren't always as they seem

The Civil War pitted the Northern states against the Southern states in a war that tore the country and families apart. Today wounds have healed, but many remain committed to keeping the memory of this tragic period alive. It was an uneven battle with most of the foundries and factories residing in the North causing the Confederacy to struggle to provide arms and uniforms for its soldiers. However, what the Confederacy didn't lack were people willing to fight for their homes and livelihood.

After the South seceded from the union, and the battles began, the Confederate government struggled to maintain a uniformed army amidst the lack of resources and independent nature of the militias. Since the end of the Revolutionary War the United States had not maintained a standing army, but relied on state militias. Each militia had their own colors; and uniforms were often provided by the state. This wide range in styles and colors did not bring a sense of uniformity to the battlefield. By contrast, the Northern army was provided a standard Federal blue uniform. In order to maintain some semblance of order, the Confederate government issued General Order No. 4, which spelled out uniform guidelines. It stated that uniforms were to be cadet gray double-breasted tunics extending to half way between the knee and hip, more commonly called a frock coat. A standing collar and twin rows of brass buttons along with a French style hat called a kepi completed the uniform. To distinguish rank different color braiding, and sashes were used; and to distinguish service branch different colors on the collar and hat, as well as lettered buttons were used. For example, artillery unit's sported red on their collars, sleeves and hat; as well as, brass buttons with the letter "A".

Many soldiers found this uniform difficult and dangerous to fight in; and they quickly abandoned it for the shorter shell jacket or civilian clothing. To make matters worse the Confederate government was never able to provide enough uniforms for the growing army, and soldiers were asked to provide their own. This caused the uniformity the government was striving for to break down. Not to mention, as uniforms wore out soldiers simply replaced them with civilian clothing or looted uniforms from deceased soldiers. Therefore, many soldiers went to battle sporting Federal blue or the homemade butternut uniform.

This uniform pictured on the right was reportably worn by the donor's uncle, and is the standard drab gray frock coat style. Frock coats were worn by many men during the Civil War; and while easy to come by they were stiff and uncomfortable to fight in. The red accents designate the artillery branch of the army. Artillery, while important in today's wars was overlooked during the early part of the Civil War. Because of this artillery officers were the last to shed their frock coats for the shorter shell jacket. This coat also shows some independence with the stripes on the sleeves, not standard issue; and some resourcefulness, as the buttons on the coat are Union issued brass buttons for the infantry unit.

Even before the war ended memorialists began reenactments at battle sites across the nation; and replicas of uniforms and arms began being made to outfit the reenactors. This fact makes it very difficult to authenticate Civil War materials. Many items, such as the coat, have family stories to back up their claim; however true or not, without documentation the claim will always be clouded by doubt. Without any documentation authenticity comes down to what the object can tell you. Many of the markers on this jacket date the coat to the period of the war; but, the stripes on the sleeves, the Union buttons, and the lack of soiling on the interior point toward coat being worn for a very short time. Could it be a replica for reenactments, or is it the real thing only worn for a short period? Further research and study of the coat may turn up a definitive answer to the question, but until then it is just a beautiful example of the type of uniform worn by a Confederate artillery officer.

Despite the Confederate governments struggle to outfit its army, the men continued to fight on. Most didn't care about the political ramifications or even understand the reason for the fighting beyond a wish to keep the status quo. As the war came to a close, many began to commemorate the various battles with reenactments complete with men dressed in replicated uniforms. This fascination has kept the memory of this tragic period of American history alive, but it has also caused problems authenticating what was actually worn during the fighting.