

The Case for the Contract Variant Issue Shirt

by William Brewster

Shirts were one of the most frequently issued items during the Civil War, yet soldiers rarely appear in photographs wearing the single button 1851 pattern shirt. This absence gives rise to the idea that shirts may have been issued which differed from army specifications. In fact, analysis of photographs reveals that soldiers often appear wearing placket front shirts that are *consistently similar in style*. The combination of these factors suggests the existence of a contract shirt.

What was the government contract shirt? Unfortunately, it appears that this question may never be completely answered. The only specifications for shirts published by the U.S. Army during the 1860's are for the 1851 pattern or "issue" shirt. Therefore, initial documentation for contract shirts relied exclusively on photographs. Through examination it was possible to develop a list of six identifiable elements.¹

1. A distinctive collar that curves away from the shirt opening. This results in a space at the front of the neck as seen on some civilian shirts. Although similar, it is cruder in appearance.

2. A placket front that closes with three buttons. The 1851 pattern shirt has a slit opening that closes with a single button.

3. Stamped utility buttons. These buttons are common features of U.S. military clothing and equipment of the 1860's. They should not be confused with the stippled button found on civilian and officer's clothing of the period.

4. Reinforcement straps running from the neck to the sleeves along the top of the shoulder. A feature also of the

1851 shirt.

5. Drop shoulder sleeves. Again, as also seen on the 1851 shirt.

6. An unusual pull or draw running from the armpits toward the collar. This was an observed effect; not a design feature.

Although shirts with some or all of these details regularly appear in photographs, pointing to the existence of a non-1851 pattern issue shirt, physical documentation did not exist making verification of these details possible.²

In 1990 Ken Smith had the opportunity to examine a shirt in the West Point collection that was reported to have design features consistent with the photographic evidence; curved collar (of folded, one piece construction), three button placket, shoulder straps, and 5/8" utility buttons.³

Examination of the shirt also provided an explanation for the unusual

pull originating at the armpits. Although manufactured with drop shoulder sleeves, the shirt has no gussets. In drop shoulder construction, gussets are a necessity, creating the required ease for a proper fit. Without gussets the sleeves would bind at the armpits creating the unsightly draw seen in the photographs.

As previously noted, drop shoulder sleeves and reinforcement straps are features common to shirts of the 1851 pattern. In addition, two other features associated with the single button issue shirt were present on the West Point example. The body of the shirt is constructed from one piece of fabric and reinforcements are located at the termination of the body and cuff slits.

Further evidence that the West Point shirt may be of government contract manufacture is found in the size similarities between this shirt, a contract shirt of the 1851 pattern, and the government specifications.⁴ Government shirts were to be of one size.

The following features are elements of the West Point shirt that may be considered indicative of contract clothing.

1. Machine sewn seams. Machine sewing was commonly used in most contractor produced clothing.

2. Construction of blue wool flannel

Detail of blue wool flannel shirt in West Point collection, photographed by Ken Smith. Three tin buttons close the placket, with single buttons on each cuff. Note inset breast pocket which differs from the usual overlaid pocket style.



nel. Issue shirts are usually noted as being white or gray. In February of 1864 a contract was given to Alex T. Lane of Philadelphia for 100,000 shirts of blue twilled flannel.⁵

3. Breast pocket. Pockets were present in the photographic examina-

ods of assembly commonly associated with articles of contract manufacture.⁶

When the evidence is considered in its entirety, a strong case is made for the existence of contract variant shirts. Hopefully this information will result in further photographic and physical

suggest that the contract shirts were limited to this form, only that the distinctive features presented here were observed in photographs and later validated by physical examination of the shirt in the West Point collection.

² Steve Adolphson and Larry Strayer. Phone conversations and correspondence 1990.

³ Ken Smith examined the West Point shirt using predetermined list of criteria.

⁴ Original contract shirt in the collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Specifications for the issue shirt are from the unpublished Crosman Manual 1865.

⁵ Steve Osman. Phone conversation and correspondence January, 1994.

⁶ This conjecture is the author's.

	Length:					Width		
	Body	Sleeve	Collar	Opening	Strap	Shirt	Sleeve	Wrist
West Point	30"	21-1/2"	17"	13-1/2"	9"	22-1/2"	16"	8-3/4"
Contract	32"	21"	16"	8-1/2"	9-1/2"	24"	15-1/2"	9"
Specs	34"	21"	16-17"	12"	9"	26"	20"	10"

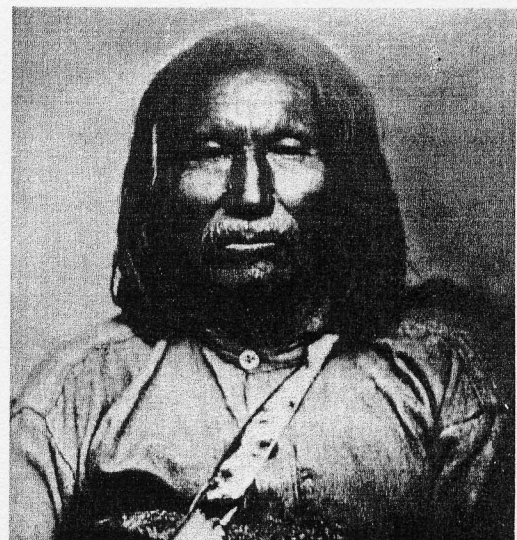
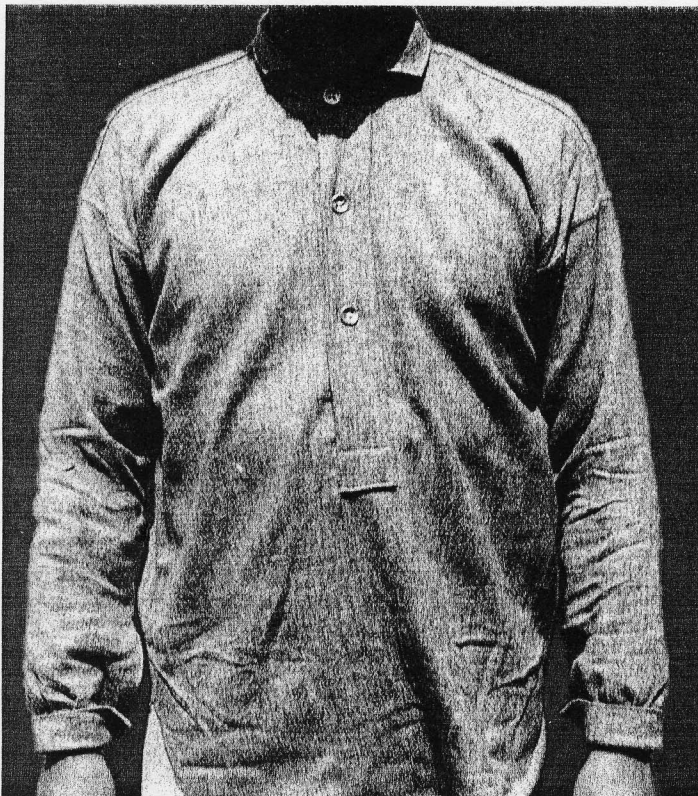
tion. They were not considered as an identifying feature because their appearance was inconsistent.

Although the West Point shirt is not attributed to military issue or use, its appearance and construction imply that it is indeed a government contracted garment. The lack of sleeve gussets, curved one piece collar, and machine sewing all suggest the expedient meth-

evidence coming to light and perhaps written documentation. Until that time the material is left to stand on its own merits.

Endnotes

¹ The author proposes one possible example of the contract shirt. I do not mean to



(Above) Photograph of Sitting Bear, taken in 1870 wearing what appears to be the transitional army issue shirt; note metal buttons, shoulder reinforcement and distinctive "pulls" from armpit to collar. (Los Angeles County Museum)

(Left) Reproduction shirt made by the author from dimensions taken from the West Point shirt. Notice the distinctive "pulls" running from the armpit to the collar caused by square-cut sleeves and body without underarm gussets.