

The Wisconsin State Blouse

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Private Andrew Jackson McDonald, Company "C", 20th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, wearing the Wisconsin State Issue Blouse
[photo credit](#)

With the advent of magazines heavily laced with portrait images of Civil War soldiers, new and amazingly varied Civil War uniforms have come to light. Many of these are late-war quazi-zouave modifications, while others reflect circa 1862 state issues.

Several states, including New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio, issued what could be termed a "state issue" uniform. That is, these states had either established militia laws and traditions from which uniform regulations were codified, or at least an active Adjutant General's and Quartermaster's offices which could recommend clothing for the state's soldiers. Much of the early state issues were gray uniforms. Wisconsin was no exception, borrowing much of its uniform tradition from a tolerably well developed militia system and the militia regiments of New York State.

Indeed, the first eight infantry regiments raised by Wisconsin for the war were clad in either gray frock coats, or modified gray shell jackets modified from the SNY militia pattern.

But the early Union fiascos at Bull Run, and elsewhere, in the summer of 1861 demonstrated the need for a standardized Federal uniform throughout the remaining United States. New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio and other states rushed to re-issue its troops with dark-blue kersey jackets, of varying styles and features to suit the whim of the particular state, or Federal regulation frock coats and sack coats. Wisconsin joined the procurement frenzy. In late summer, 1861, the state began to solicit and receive bids for what today has been termed a "Wisconsin State Blouse" or state-issue sack coat.

Early work on this subject was first done by the eminent historian Mr. H. Michael Madaus. In early conversations with this author (principally surrounding an image of Private Hyde, 16th W. V. in the collection of the Milwaukee Public Museum) Mr. Madaus indicated that the state issued a blouse that features a frock coat

style collar trimmed in a sky blue welt, a five-button front set in Wisconsin State seal buttons, with "a contract for 5,000 let to a firm in New Jersey" or so stated the author's notes from that conversation. Mr. Madaus had intended to write an article on the coat at that time, but had been side-tracked with other projects. To date, no other work on the Wisconsin State Blouse has been published, to the author's knowledge.

Enter Mr. Mike Thorson and Mr. Scott Meeker, who commenced a research quest for primary source material on the WSB in November, 1996. This was the first real effort made on the subject since Mr. Madaus' preliminary work. The findings of this on-going project are offered by this author, through the gracious permission of Mr. Thorson and Mr. Meeker. It should be noted that this is their work-- this author is merely the chronicler.

On August 22, 1861, a broadside from the State of Wisconsin Quartermaster General's Office, sent to the state's newspapers, solicited "Sealed Proposals" for army supplies "to be received at this office until Friday, the 30th day of August" which included:

"5,650 Coats and Pants, the State to furnish Cloth and Buttons";
"5,650 Over Coats, the State to furnish Cloth and Buttons";
"Cash payment at sixty days from date of delivery"; "Sample suits of clothes on the 30th inst., may be seen at this office."

As a result of this public offering, the Wisconsin Quartermaster General considered some thirty-two bids. Among the categories examined were listed: "Coats, Pants, Jackets, Over Coats." However, there was no mention of "Jackets" in the solicitation for bids. Mr. Thorson believed that this category was added after the bids started coming in with quotes for jackets, also.

One of these bids was a quote from A.D. Fittsworth & Bros. for 3,000 pants ".88 no lining, 1.00 with lining." The notation for "lined" trousers is interesting, and a theme that is recurrent in Wisconsin's uniforming efforts during this period.

On Sept. 2, 1861, a letter to Wisconsin's Governor Randall was received from General John C. Fremont, Headquarters, Western Department authorizing the state of Wisconsin to fully equip 2 regiments of infantry "provided the equipment is made strictly in accordance with existing regulations of the army - the uniform to be of dark blue all wool cloth." This and other correspondence changed the face of continued procurement of gray uniforms and commenced a quest for regulation blue uniforms.

That same day, a letter went out from State Asst. Q.M. Gen. Van Slyke to the firm of Huntington & Wadsworth, Chicago:

This department has decided upon adopting a Dark blue Army kersey blouse & pants, The blouse to be lined in sleeves & back with all wool flannel.
The pants lined in back & seat, and made as per sample here. Should you see fit to send sample suit of this material (Blouse & pants of same goods) - Blouse coming full to the chair when sitting down.

This letter clearly indicated the desires of the Wisconsin Quartermaster General's Department to comply closely with the wishes of U. S. Army Regulations and the Western Department, in matters of obtaining blue uniforms for Wisconsin soldiers. Although it would appear that both trousers and blouses were to be made of dark blue kersey, the state complied with Federal changes in regulations, which adopted sky blue as the recognized trouser wool color. Further, the full body and sleeve lining in "all wool flannel" dovetails with the state's earlier purchase of 27,000 yards of gray wool-flannel on August 22, 1861. This same material was earmarked for wool-flannel issue shirts, as well.

The Wisconsin Quartermaster Department then went on a blue wool cloth buying spree in the month of September:

Dates	Dark & Light Blue Kersey	Received From
Sept. 10, 1861	3,027,478 yards	Spencer Scott & Co., Newark, N.J.
Sept. 19 - Oct. 9, 1861	17,125 yards	Marcus Kohner & Bros., N.Y.

Dates	Dk. & Lt. Officer's Kersey	Received From
Sept. 19, 1861	62 yds light, 65 yds dark	Spencer Scott & Co., Newark, N.J.

In October, the state began letting contracts for "blouses and pants" to major East Coast uniform suppliers, among them Marcus Kohner and Brothers, 139 Duane Street, New York City; and Charles Mackin & Brother, 103 Liberty Street, New York City. If any firms from New Jersey were solicited and accepted bids for the WSB, the documentation remains to be discovered.

On October 8, Marcus Kohner received a telegram from the Wisconsin QM Department: "I want 2500 more overcoats same as your contract" Also, Mackin & Brother received a telegram from the Department: " I want 2500 over coats like sample coat at Hewett's What will you charge? Answer today" A same-day telegram to Mackin & Bros. from the Department stated: "Want to contract Over Coat at nine and a quarter. Also twenty one hundred fifty Infantry Sacks & Pants," the latter portion of the order indicated state blouses. The bid was accepted on October 11, and the state ordered the clothing; overcoats costing \$ 9.50 each.

On October 2, M. Kohner & Bro. of New York was telegraphed to send 500 "Blue Cloth Blouses, Blue Cloth Pants" equalling "500 Suits @ \$2.63. [for a total of] \$1,315.00." Kohner shipped the suits about a week later. This may have been part of a larger undocumented order, for upon inspection, Asst. Q. M. General W.A. Means, complained in a telegram back to Kohner:

In the first box of 1000 Infantry Suits there were about twenty five coats with the shoulder seam slanted & rippled over to three inches. This is over [too] much to be neglected as it is sort of distinct to the make of the garment.

Mr. Means was referring to the puffy shoulder insertion of the sleeve, which was inserted into the armhole of the body of the coat in a distinctive tailoring style known as "en gigot." Period images confirm that this feature is both distinctive and consistent among WSBs.

As previously mentioned, the state was supplying makers with both cloth and state seal rimmed buttons* for its uniforms. Further facts confirm continued use of Wisconsin State buttons. State Quartermaster General Treadway responded to a letter requesting state buttons on Nov. 23, 1861 from Lieutenant Benton McConnell, Q. M., 10th Regt. W. V. then stationed at Shepherdsville Ky.:

"Yours of the 20th inst. is at hand - I have no State Buttons hence the impossibility of sending you any." [This request is interesting, since the 10th Regiment was supposedly supplied with Wisconsin State Blouses as its initial issue. Mike Thorson has theorized that this order may be for replacement buttons.]

Further, an infantry frock coat cut according to regulations contained in the collection of the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum and ascribed to a sergeant in the 16th Wisconsin bears rimmed state seal buttons. Whether or not the state procured regulation clothing and affixed state buttons to them, or this was a soldier modification has not been determined.

Clothing of Wisconsin's commissioned officers also proudly bore Wisconsin State seal buttons from time to time. Although not issued from the state, such clothing items as the vest of 2d Lieutenant William Parr, 52d Wisconsin (See *Western Campaigner Gazette*, Vol. 1, Issue #1) are seen even very late into the Civil War.

A compilation of this information and series of photographic images of early war Wisconsin soldiers indicates that the WSB was:

1. Made of dark blue kersey;
2. Lined in sleeves & back with grey wool flannel;
3. Length cut to mid thigh. Blouse coming full to the chair when sitting down;
4. Standing collar trimmed with sky blue kersey welt. Hook & eye closure at bottom.
5. Closure with a five Wisconsin button front, evenly spaced from collar to waistline, button holes hand-sewn;
6. With a backseam and four-piece body;
7. Sleeves a simple tube with a plain, non-functional cuff with facing, lined with grey wool flannel, with the sleeve inserted into the armhole in the "en gigot" style.

The Wisconsin State Over Coat was:

1. Made of light blue kersey, weight of wool unknown;
2. Using a total of 11 Wisconsin State buttons - large and small. (based on a button shipment received in August, 1861 and prior to the big August 22 solicitation for bids);
3. Sleeves lined with "good twill muslin";
4. Coat body lined with "red wool flannel"; (*webmaster's note: The 1st Wis. Inf. (Reorganized) received an "emergency" issue of over coats lined with "blue wool flannel" from an unknown Cincinnati contractor.*)
5. Otherwise made in the "Regulation Army style", foot pattern for dismounted men (and mounted pattern for mounted men) - as far as can be determined.

Wisconsin State-issue Trousers were:

1. Made of sky blue kersey wool, weight of material unknown.
2. Lined in back and seat. (Some trousers made for the 8th Regiment stated "lined with brown sheeting" and "using canvas at the cuffs like your sample" Currently, it is assumed this manufacturing detail continued in subsequent lots of state clothing procured during this time period.

Authors like Mr. Michael McAfee, curator of uniforms and history at the State Forces, p. 1307). Indeed, available photographic images clearly supports the wear of the WSBs in the 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th regiments. The state's Iconographics Section of the Wisconsin State Historical Society has dozens of images of men in the 15th Regiment, most of which wear the regiment's initial issue--the state blouse.

The coat was also apparently available to regiments outside the traditionally accepted sphere of "9th - 16th Regiments." An unpublished image of several non-commissioned officers of the 1st Wisconsin (three Years) Regiment shows at least two sergeants clearly wearing the state blouse.

This is explainable due to the fact the the 1st Wisconsin was reorganizing during August of 1861 and likely

received an issue of state blouses either at Camp Scott or shortly thereafter-- a fact heretofore unknown prior to this research endeavor. An image published in *Military Images* magazine some years ago, plus an image in *Badgers for the Union: A Photographic Collection of Wisconsin in the Civil War*, p. 37, showed soldiers identified to the 17th Wisconsin Volunteers wearing the state blouse. Finally, an image of Private Andrew Jackson McDonald, 20th Wisconsin Volunteers, was pictured wearing a state blouse on p. 75 of Alan Gaff's *Our Boys: A Civil War Photograph Album*.

Messrs. Thorson and Meeker are to be commended for advancing the knowledge base of this long ignored Wisconsin state-issue garment.

* A note of caution for historical enthusiasts regarding buttons. The Wisconsin state buttons used in closure of the state issue blouse, overcoat, and officer uniforms after the 1861-2 procurement period bore the rather intricate state seal (adopted in 1851) and were brass two-piece rimmed buttons, similar in style to Federal staff buttons of the period. No other non-rimmed buttons have been seen in the period images, or documented in the state's correspondence. Of course, garments procured by the state from Federal arsenals or other Federal sources (or issued to Wisconsin troops from these sources) were generally supplied with Federal general service eagle buttons, of brass.

The state-seal rimmed style of button existed through the Indian Wars period, to be replaced by a domed rimmless brass button bearing the state seal at about the time of the Spanish-American War. The button was changed again around 1907-10, to basically a flat button in brass, bearing a greatly modified state seal.

Today, several vendors of reproduction buttons carry these later styles of Wisconsin state buttons. Neither version can be considered correct for replica Civil War-era state-issue clothing or regulation officer garments where the wear of state buttons was allowed.

"Wisconsin State Issue" items are being reproduced by the following:

Wisconsin State Blouse - Pete Brown, Goldberg Textiles, Salt Lake City, UT. Price about \$150. VISA/MC, check or money order accepted. (801) 467-2343 M-F 6pm-9pm MST, fax (anytime) (801) 944-8204. You must provide buttons - use originals or reproduction "staff" buttons only!

Wisconsin State Issue Canteen - Bill Hoover, Village Tinsmithing Works, Randolph, OH. Make sure to mention the "Wisconsin Contract Canteen" when ordering. Price approx. \$45. Check or money orders accepted. 330-325-9101.

Wisconsin State Issue Haversack - Made periodically by members of the 33d Wisconsin Living History group. Contact [Mike Thorson](#) regarding availability.

*"*Our Boys: A Civil War Photograph Album*" Alan and Maureen Gaff. 1996. Windmill Publications, Inc. Made possible and sold by the Grant County Historical Society, Lancaster, Wisconsin. 608-723-4925