

## **Forgotten Federal ‘Generic’ Garments:**

### **Part 1, the Federal Infantry Uniform Jacket & State Issue Shell Jackets**

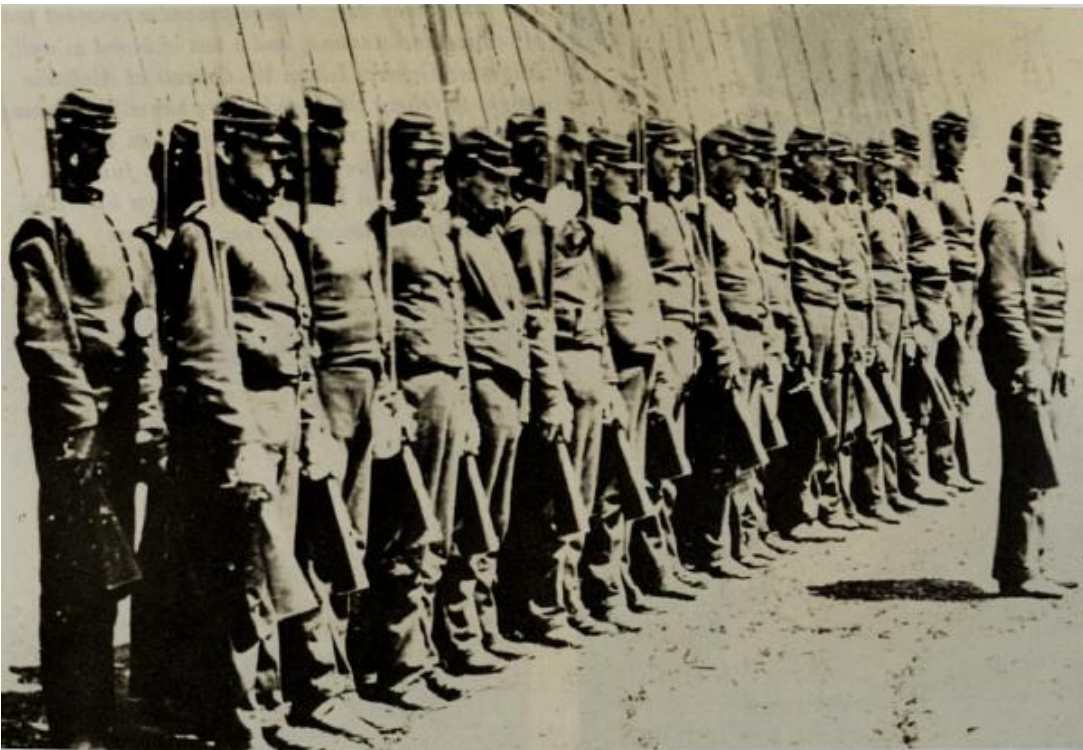
**KC MacDonald**



**This mid-war Carte de Visite of two unidentified Federals aptly illustrates two common garments frequently missing from Union ‘generic impressions’: the shell jacket and the private purchase sack coat. This two part series will consider photographic evidence for these unsung garments.**

Sometime during the authentic rush to construct ‘generic’ impressions, some major Federal garments have been dropped in the dust. The most important of these is the Federal Shell Jacket. Though such garments still crop up in Authentic, single-impression units, especially those representing units from New York, they are rarely trumpeted as appropriate wear for the ‘Generic Hardcore’. This article will attempt to strike a blow against this myth.

In ‘campaigner’ literature there is a boggling dearth of reference to the Federal Shell Jacket or Roundabout. When it is mentioned, it is usually with reference to the fact that certain states – especially New York and Illinois -- had special ‘state issue’ jackets that could be appropriate for those specific impressions. Only CJ Daley ([www.cjdaley.com](http://www.cjdaley.com)) seems to be giving the Federal Shell Jacket its due, noting that “similar jackets appear in photos of Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin., and Missouri troops.” To this list I can add Michigan and Pennsylvania (see Figures 1&2, below). However, it is not always clear whether these men are wearing specific state-issue jackets or shell jackets of *Federal* manufacture. This is because national uniform jackets, intended for general infantry issue, were made in quantity at the Schuylkill arsenal. Of these Daley notes that the Schuylkill infantry uniform jacket was “the most commonly issued jacket worn during the war. It can be seen in images in every theatre of the war.” Unfortunately, I am unaware of any researcher who has tried to disentangle Federal from State issue shell jackets or summarise their characteristic in any meaningful way. Here, I will try to make a first tentative attempt at this -- as well as list available patterns and ready-made shell jackets.



**Figure 1. (left) Mid-War Image of a company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan, veterans of both Fredericksburg and Vicksburg, all wearing Federal Uniform Shell Jackets, (right) an unidentified Michigan soldier from a CdV wearing a similar jacket.(Company image is from Davis 1983:IV:48; CdV is from the author’s collection).**





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**Figure 2.(left) A confirmed mid-war usage of a shell jacket in the 16<sup>th</sup> Michigan: Private Eugene Thompson, killed 7 May, 1864 in the Wilderness Campaign (private collection); (right) Another Eastern theatre usage of the shell jacket, in this case Corporal J. Umstead of 51<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania Infantry, Co. C (reproduced from Military Images 3(4):13).**

**Is there a Union ‘Shell Jacket’ typology?**

Defining the Union ‘shell jacket’ is made difficult by the scarcity of individual garment studies. Back issues of *The Watchdog* and recent issues of *Military Collector & Historian* yield nothing. One must return to Frederick P. Todd’s (1980) dated (though monumental) *American Military Equipage: 1851-1872* for a starting point. Concerning the Federal issue shell jacket, also confusingly known as the ‘fatigue jacket’ (as opposed to the ‘fatigue blouse’):

*The fatigue jacket of 1851 carried a standing, hooked-up collar about 3 inches high. By 1861 the collar was reduced to barely 1.5 inches and was open in the front. It was commonly fitted with cloth shoulder straps and sometimes with cloth belt loops on the sides. There were 8 to 12 small buttons down the front, and two on the cuff of each sleeve. Originally these cuffs had been slashed – thus the buttons – but by 1861, with wider sleeves in vogue, the slash was often sewed up for much of its length.*

However, this definition was from early in the ‘systematic uniform research movement’ and seems to be conflating both State and Federal Shell jacket elements. In my cursory study of definite images of Federal infantry use of this broad jacket type the following variables can be enumerated:

- Presence or absence of eye-hooks on collar (closed or open collar)
- Pesence or absence of epaulettes
- Presence or absence of belt loops
- Presence or absence of external pockets
- Number of buttons: 8, 9, 11, or 12
- Type of Buttons (‘fatigue blouse’ or ‘cuff ‘size)
- Plain front (cut straight across) or ‘polka-skirted’ front (dip at centre front midline).
- Plain cuffs (straight across) or chevron cuffs
- Piping or no Piping and -- if piped -- its location.

The only constants appear to be the presence of 2 cuff buttons and the use of good quality dark blue wool broadcloth!

The variation in these jackets may eventually be ascribable to some definite ‘types’, such as Schuylkill Depot Issue, New York State Issue, Ohio Issue, and Illinois Issue (maybe more) . Unfortunately, only the New York State type (known as the ‘1861 New York State Pattern’) is currently well documented.



**The 1861 New York State Pattern**



**Figure 3. The New York State Jacket: Variations on a theme...(left) 1864 image of a New York National Guardsman [29<sup>th</sup> Regiment] wearing the 1863 Chasseur-inspired variant of the 1861 state issue jacket with polka skirt, 9 buttons, chevron cuffs and extensive piping; (middle) 1861 image of a New York infantryman [46<sup>th</sup> Regiment] wearing the ‘regulation’ version of the 1861 state issue jacket, note the scalloped front & plain cuffs [the ‘X’ patch on his pocket refers to the regiment’s nickname, the ‘Tenth Legion’]; (right) 1862 image of a Sergeant of the 143<sup>rd</sup> New York wearing yet another variant of the regulation jacket, note absence of piping. (These three images were originally published in McAfee & Langellier 1996).**

Impression guidelines for New York living history units inevitably feature a ‘New York State Jacket’ option. Such jackets are usually correctly specified to have: 8 buttons (1861 New York State issue variety), standing collar, one outer pocket (placement variable: either side, opening at 4<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> button from the top) functional epaulettes, belt loops, chevron cuffs with two cuff buttons, and piping.

Piping colour seems to vary both in recommendations and in surviving uniforms with light yellow, light blue, blue-green and white all documented for infantry, as well as red for some militia units. It is not clear whether or not colour variation is due to the vagaries of central state production or to the existence of special ‘regimental’ uniforms. There is also considerable variability in the placement of piping. Sometimes it is entirely absent. Other times it occurs on the epaulettes only. Sometimes, especially on militia uniforms, it is present everywhere including the front and bottom margins of the jacket.

The ‘New York Jacket’ was defined in April 1861 state regulations and was eventually issued to more than one-hundred New York regiments (Smith 1996:104). The timing of its issue to various units seems to have varied. There are several photographs of New York units in the Army of the Potomac’s winter 1861/1862 camps attired in this jacket (see Langellier 2000: 43), and it is also documented in individual CdVs from this period (Figure 3). It has also been identified in photographs of New York regiments from 1863 and 1864 (see Table 1). The 1863 nine-button variant (see Figure 3), notionally inspired by limited imports of French Chasseur jackets early in the war, seems only to have been issued to National Guard/Militia units (Troiani 1999). Quartermaster’s records and images all seem to indicate that individual New York regiments went through various stages of issue of frock coats, New York jackets, and standard fatigue blouses (cf. McAfee & Langellier 1996). There is thus, as yet, no reason to believe that the issue of 1861 New York jackets was restricted to any particular period of the war.

## The Schuylkill Arsenal Federal Infantry Jacket

*The eleven button jacket ... is an enigma. I think it might have been manufactured by Schuylkill Arsenal in Philadelphia, for I owned just such a jacket in the 1960s, complete with the “SA” depot stamp in the sleeve lining. I have no idea why they were made this way or how they were distributed, but my original jacket supposedly had been worn by a member of the 7<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire infantry.*  
*McAfee (1982: 14-15)*

It is beginning to appear that Schuylkill products were probably the most widespread of Federal infantry shell jackets, issued to all Federal states and probably often mistaken for ‘state issue’ jackets. At present, however, specific information from surviving jackets is scarce. The best-described example belonged to Private D.M. Byam of the Federal Signal Corps and resides today in the Gettysburg NPS museum. Because of this fact, as C.J. Daley notes on his website, this type is often incorrectly referred to as the ‘Signal Corps Jacket’. In point of fact, however, it was often issued to the infantry branch.

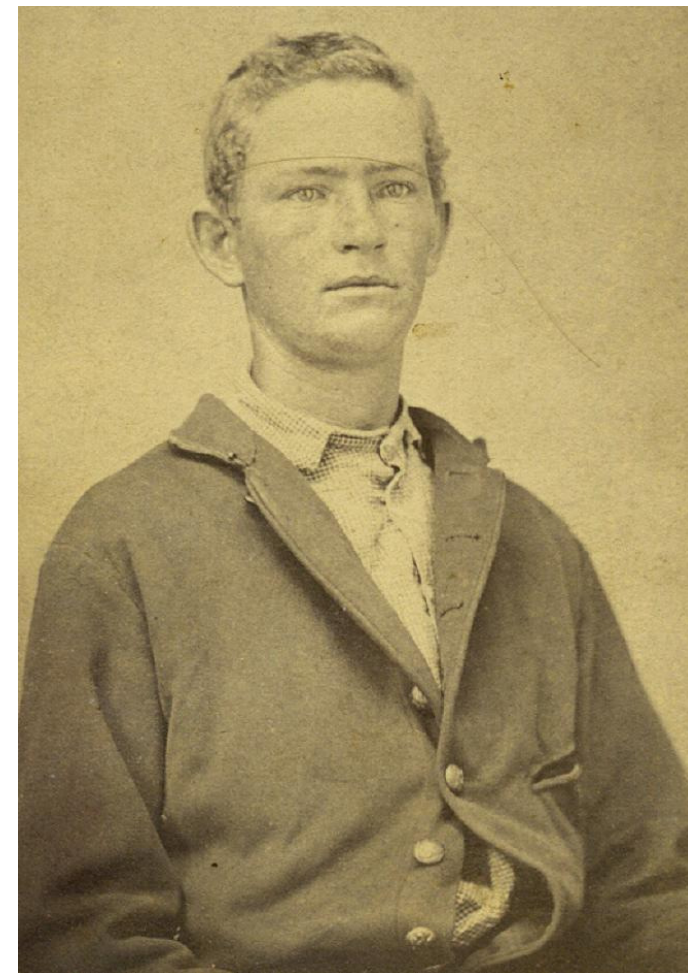
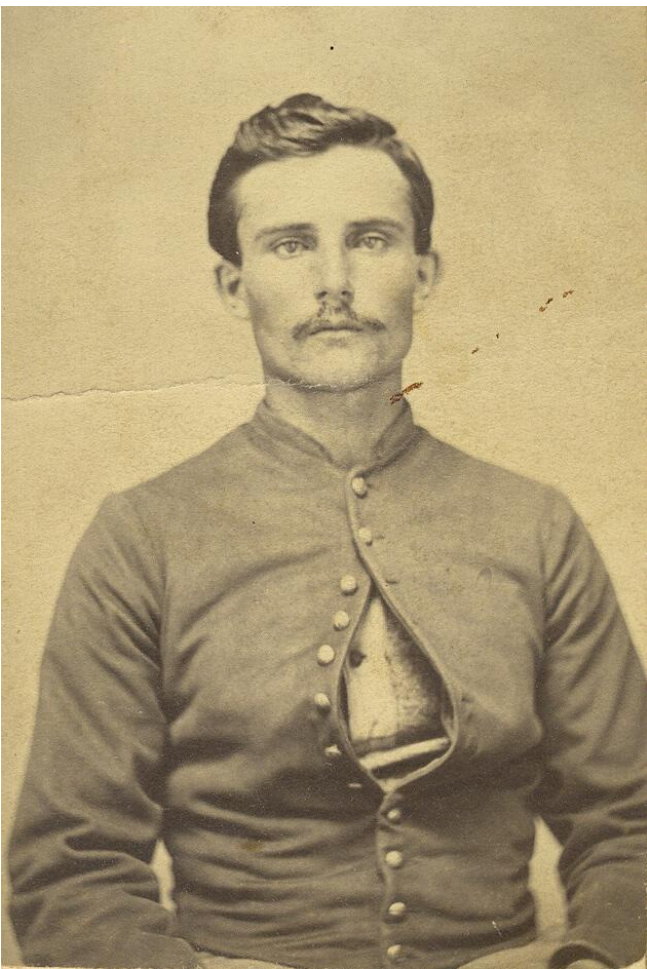
The Byam jacket is completely hand-sewn with dark blue thread and features: a low, square-cut collar, fastened with hook&eye; no epaulettes or piping; plain functional two button cuff; eleven button front (all cuff-sized general issue) with corded keyhole buttonholes; one interior pocket, and a quilted lining made out of checked cotton cloth. Other extant examples, according to Charlie Childs, feature domed flannel linings.

In Figure 4, there is a good photographic example of exactly this type of jacket being worn by a 99<sup>th</sup> Illinois infantryman. Likewise the jackets worn by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan infantrymen in Figure 1 appear to be of the Schuylkill type.

## Illinois and Ohio State Jackets

The more one searches through provenanced Civil War images, the clearer it becomes that New York, Illinois, and Ohio infantry more commonly wore shell jackets than troops from other Union states. Troops from Illinois tend to mix obvious Schuylkill’s (Figure 4, left) with more enigmatic jackets. These include two main variants: a nine button jacket with epaulettes and a nine button jacket without epaulettes. On both the buttons seem to be of the same US general issue type featured on fatigue blouses. Both also seem to feature a higher collar than the Schuylkill arsenal variety. Some, may feature external pockets (like Private Bain’s, see Figure 5).





**Figure 4. Three members of the 99<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry, CdVs from the personal effects of Private Justin J. Newel**  
**(left. to right. Private T.W. Gates, unnamed gentleman with veterans stripes [probably Newel], and Private A.H. Bain). Gates jacket (left) is typical of the Schuykill type. Those of the two soldiers on the right may be Illinois state issue. These photos were probably taken by a field photographer in Louisiana or on furlough during the summer of 1864 (they all lack back marks and revenue stamps). [all images from author's collection]**





**Figure 5. Close up on Private Bain's jacket, 99<sup>th</sup> Illinois, Co.s D & A. Note hook & eye on collar and external pocket.**

On his website, CJ Daley describes a jacket issued to (or purchased by) an Ohio infantryman, and shows a few original images of id'ed Ohio troops wearing similar jackets. The surviving example is mostly machine-sewn, has a 9 button front, 2 cuff buttons, functional shoulder straps and a chevron cuff, with quilted blue denim lining, and a body of dark blue kersey. Only one Illinois image (of the 17<sup>th</sup> Illinois at Vicksburg in 1864) shows similar jackets with epaulettes, though given its scale details are hard to distinguish (Figure 6). However, on the original, two types of shell jacket can be discerned: a nine button epaulette shell similar to the 'Ohio type' and a nine and/or eleven button type without epaulettes. Elsewhere in both CdVs and identified group images, Illinois troops seem to usually wear shell jackets without epaulettes.

One demarcation point between Schuylkill and Illinois/Ohio and other state-issue jackets may turn out to be the number of buttons – with eleven being distinctive of Schuylkill. But, with as little data as we have, the 9 button plain type may simply be a variant of the Federal government issue from Schuylkill. More examinations of remaining original garments are needed to determine this issue.



**Figure 6. A Rare image of an entire regiment: the 17<sup>th</sup> Illinois photographed at Vicksburg in Spring 1864. For the most part the soldiers are wearing shell jackets. (from Davis 1983:IV:59)**

### **Timing of Issue for Federal Shell Jackets**

There is a good deal of uncertainty as to when the Federal infantry shell jacket was most common. According to discussions I have had with other Civil War uniform researchers, they are generally thought to have become common only in mid-1864. This supposition is based upon their very frequent occurrence in Carte des Visites taken during 1864 veterans furlough's. Indeed, some are even shown wearing their veteran's stripes on the jackets (see Figure 4 and McAfee 1982). A survey of published images, and time spent collecting provenanced CdVs, largely supports this observation -- though it appears they such jackets did exist as private purchase items (especially for NCOs), or were distributed to specific units, before this time.



**Figure 7. More Illinois soldiers, this time Company F of the 7<sup>th</sup> Illinois atop Lookout Mountain in June 1864. Both 11 button and 9 button shell jackets are in evidence (from *Echoes of Glory*, pg.124)**

In Table 1, I list all dated large group images in which I have been able to identify shell jackets. As stated previously, New York shell jackets have been demonstrated in use throughout the war. However, Schuylkill shells are hard to document before 1863 and the use of Illinois/Ohio state jackets can not yet be documented before 1864. This also holds true for datable CdV images. The reason for this delay may be that they are simply replacing the use of more expensive frock coats in some units. More image archives will need to be searched to arrive at firmer guidelines, although it appears safe to say that shell jacket use by Federal infantrymen from Illinois and Ohio (and other units serving in the West) was fairly common in the last two years of the war.



Unit	Date	Place	Sacks	Frocks	Plain Shell	Epaulette Shell	Source
93 <sup>rd</sup> NY, HQ Guard Co.	Sept. 1862	Sharpsburg	12	6	0	9 (NY Type)	TL-Antietam pp. 158-9
21st MI, Co.?	Spring 1863	Tennessee	20	5	2	0	TL-Chattanooga pp.26-7
2nd MI, Co.?	1863	?	0	0	15	0	IoW-IV- pg. 48
84th IL, Co.B	April 1864	Blue Springs, Tennessee	9	3	4	0	EoB - Atlanta pg. 205
61st NY, Co.K	Spring 1864	Virginia	2	14	1	1(NY Type)	TL-Petersburg pg. 111
78th PA, Co.?	Spring 1864	Chattanooga	33	1	3	0	TL-Atlanta pg.55
17th IL	Spring 1864	Vicksburg	6	2	11	15 ('Ohio Type?')	IoW-IV pg.59
7th IL, Co.F	June 1864	Chattanooga	3	0	15	0	EOG pg.124
47th IL, Co.E	August 1864	Oxford, Mississippi	4	21	4	0	IoW-IV pg.129
170th NY, Co.B	1864/65	Virginia	6	2	0	7 (NY Type)	IoW-IV pg.107

**Table 1. Frequency of determinate jacket types amongst enlisted men and NCOs on company or regimental images (officers, musicians, and indeterminate types not counted). Sources PL: TL = Time Life Series, IoW = Image of War Series, EoB= Echoes of Battle, EOG= Echoes of Glory.**

## Why Wear It?: A Question of ‘Noise’

The ‘generic soldier’ approach to living history began a necessary move away from overly frequent depictions of elite or quirky regiments back to the common soldier. But when we blindly cling to the sackcoat in our efforts to be ‘generic’ we may be missing a big part of Federal Civil War reality. The ratio of different jacket types shown in Table 1 clearly demonstrates that standard mid-to-late-war Federal regiments did not dress like toy soldiers. There was a good deal of ‘noise’ caused by differential timing of jacket issues and soldier preference. True, I hear you saying, but for the ten images listed above I can show you ten more where every soldier is clad in the same type of garment -- either a sackcoat or a frock coat. I will not deny it. But which generic 50% are we portraying? In other words, we need to be both generic (depicting the common soldier), but impression specific. A ‘common’ Federal regiment during its evolution would have spent its first month of service (or more) in no uniform at all, probably followed by frock coats, intermixed eventually with sack coats, and finally peppered with shell jackets. Individual regimental commanders may have chosen to either enforce or abandon uniformity. Those on campaign would have had no choice but to allow it. On the basis of information given above, it seems that especially in the West a mixed uniform was nearer to the rule. It is also worth noting that out of the approximately 1,434 Federal state infantry regiments (depending on how you count them), 550 (26.1%) were from New York, Illinois and Ohio.

Thus, I believe Federal shell jackets are worthy of representation, and belong on our clothes pegs. Their use, like that of an RDII, will of course be governed by the impression/ scenario of a given event. Also, they should not be worn by the entire unit (given the numbers in **Table 1** above about one-quarter of the company would seem about right).

## Where to Get Them

If you want a pattern, the only one currently available is from Charley Childs (County Cloth) for the Schuylkill jacket. As usual it is an excellent pattern and he can also supply the right cloth & buttons. Mr.Childs also tells me that he can sell the ‘Ohio’shell jacket in kit form. If you want to make a 9-button ‘Illinois’ type you could probably make appropriate changes to the Schuylkill pattern. Union cavalry jacket patterns will not work -- they have differently shaped collars, margins and interior features.

If you want ready made, then CJ Daley is your man ([www.cjdaley.com](http://www.cjdaley.com)). He has the Schuylkill jacket available with all external stitching hand-done for \$295. It looks the business. Likewise, the ‘Ohio’ shell jacket is available. Other complete Federal roundabouts, including New York State jackets, are usually obtainable via the Jersey Skillet Licker’s website ([www.skilletlicker.com](http://www.skilletlicker.com)).

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