

MANY a newly enlisted soldier received with his first suit of government clothing a strange looking pair of white flannel pantaloons. Veterans sometimes convinced the fresh fish that these were to be worn especially for parade, but sooner or later the recruit found himself properly wearing his first pair of underdrawers. The experience was not likely to be pleasant, even if novel. And those old army drawers were hardly the souvenir of one's wartime service to be preserved for future generations!

Most working men in the first half of the nineteenth century preferred long shirt tails to underdrawers. The army, concerned as always over the care and health of its soldiers, began issuing drawers in the mid-1820s. A looser cut to the legs of issued pantaloons, especially above the knee after 1822, may have contributed to the decision. Clothing material lists of 1828 and 1830 show a pair of the new flannel drawers to require  $2\frac{1}{4}$  yards  $\frac{3}{4}$  (27" wide) flannel,  $\frac{1}{4}$  yard  $\frac{3}{4}$  cotton drilling (likely for the waistband) and 2 suspender buttons.<sup>1</sup>

A civilian pattern published in 1838 describes a simple garment with one-piece legs seamed at the inside. Tape ties close slits at the bottom of each leg and tape laces through eyelet holes on the rear of the waistband. Two buttons close the front of the waistband while the fly area is left open or slightly overlaps.<sup>2</sup> A comparison of the pattern to the army material lists indicates that army drawers were made to reach to the ankle, unlike many knee-length civilian styles.

The pattern of army drawers likely changed in 1832, as did many other garments.<sup>3</sup> An 1835 list includes 1 yard of white tape but no longer mentions drilling; other lists of the 1830s and 1840s specify the required  $1\frac{1}{2}$  yards of flannel to be 'Canton.'<sup>4</sup> This new pattern was most probably the same considered the army standard through the Civil War.

The only known specimen of pre-Civil War army drawers (FIG 1) is preserved with other issue clothing and equipment exchanged with the Danish government in 1858. Undoubtedly a product of the piece good production system used by Schuylkill Arsenal, this pair is made of off-white cotton flannel. The drawers are ankle length with a waistband made of doubled flannel and closed with two metal buttons in front and with two pairs of eyelets behind. The flat felled leg seam is on the outside. The fly area is reinforced with an external facing wider at bottom than top and the slit on the outside of each ankle is tied with cotton tape.<sup>5</sup>

The few extant pairs of Civil War issue drawers are very similar to these. Differences include a wider waistband on some and the seam on the one piece legs which sometimes is on the inside rather than outside. The Federal government purchased ready-made nearly 11 million pairs of drawers

during the Civil War. Hundreds of thousands more were manufactured at clothing depots; Cincinnati alone produced 726,800 during the last year of the war! Most drawers procured were flannel and presumably of government pattern. However a sizable portion purchased were of other styles, especially knit. In August and September 1862 more than a dozen contracts were let for various styles of knit, grey ribbed, ribbed mixed grey and ribbed merino drawers, some ordered to match various numbered samples provided by bidders. Only a few variant patterns were purchased in later contracts, again including knit plus domet (mixed cotton and wool) flannel.<sup>6</sup>

The 1865 "Quartermaster's Manual" describes the flannel issue pattern thus:

Drawers— $2\frac{1}{8}$  yards of  $\frac{3}{4}$  canton flannel, weighing  $5\frac{1}{2}$  ounces to the yard; 2 white metal suspender buttons;  $2\frac{1}{2}$  skeins of No. 35 W. B. linen

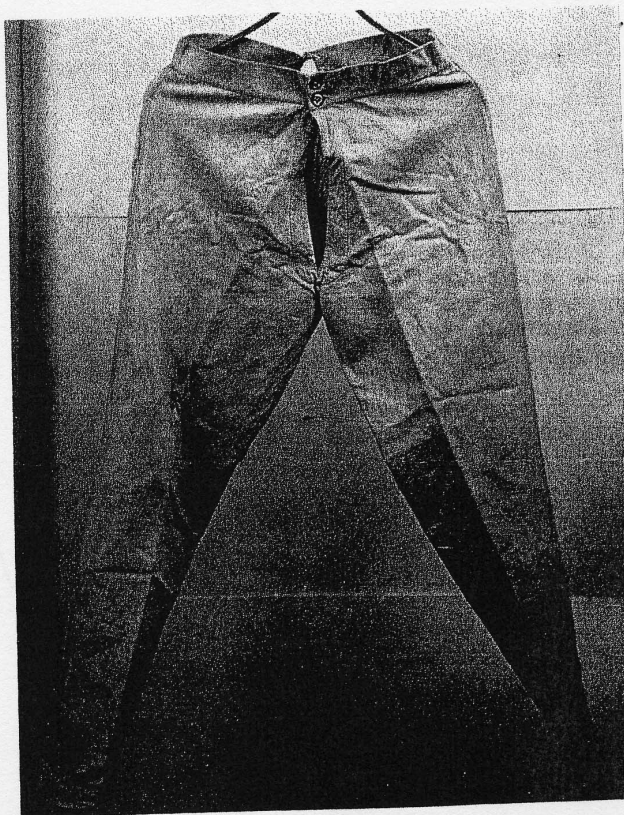


FIG1. Canton flannel army issue drawers sent to the Danish government in 1858 as part of an exchange of military uniforms and equipment. (Courtesy F. Gaede)

thread; 1 yard of  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch white tape. The  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inch slit at the bottom of each leg, to have their edges well hemmed; each end of slit for each leg to have  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a yard  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch white tape strongly sewn on.

#### DRAWERS—3 SIZES.

|                        | No. 1                | No. 2  | No. 3  |
|------------------------|----------------------|--------|--------|
| Length of drawers,     | 37 in.               | 38 in. | 40 in. |
| do. leg seam,          | 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ "   | 31 "   | 32 "   |
| Width of waist,        | 32 "                 | 34 "   | 36 "   |
| do. of band, when cut, | 4 in. for all sizes. |        |        |

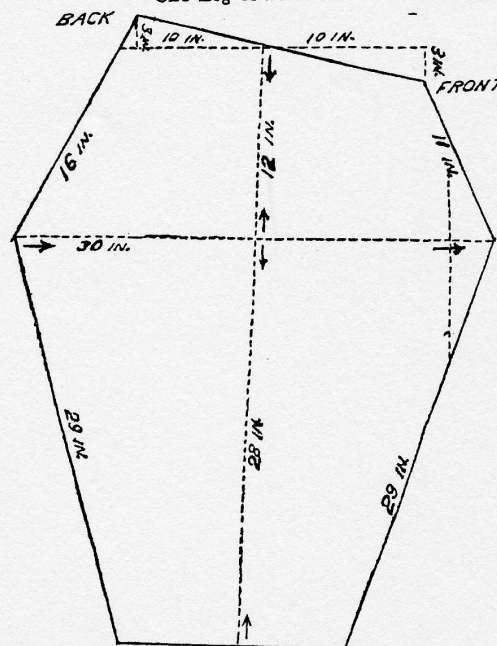
The "Manual" goes on to describe the all-cotton Canton flannel material for drawers as 27 inches wide, 48 threads to the inch in the filling and 56 to the inch in the chain, weighing  $5\frac{1}{2}$  ounces to the lineal yard and with the nap slightly raised. Drawers were baled in lots of 100 containing 20 size 1 and 40 each sizes 2 and 3. Four bales, each weighing 63 pounds, were usually strapped together for shipping.<sup>7</sup>

An original pair of issue drawers in a private collection is quite similar to the 1858 "Danish Exchange" pair. Issued to a Cyrus Batchelder of Bridgeport, Connecticut, the garment is marked with both a clear contractor and an inspector stamp.<sup>8</sup> Made of off-white cotton flannel, rough on the outside with a soft knap on the inside, they are ankle length with two button closures at the front of the waistband and tape ties securing the ankle slits. Each tie is 8" long and of  $\frac{3}{8}$ " wide cotton twill tape sewn into the bottom hem. All stitching is by hand. Each leg is of one piece of fabric flat fell seamed on the inside. A 4" pleat or dart located near each hip bone provides some fit below the waist. The waistbands are faced with the same flannel material and closed in the rear with a two pairs of worked eyelets.<sup>9</sup>

Army drawers were disliked by both the men and critical observers. An 1861 letter from a well meaning doctor dis-

#### FLANNEL DRAWERS.

##### One Leg of Drawers.



##### Half of Waistband.

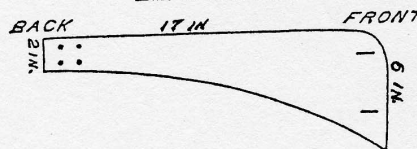
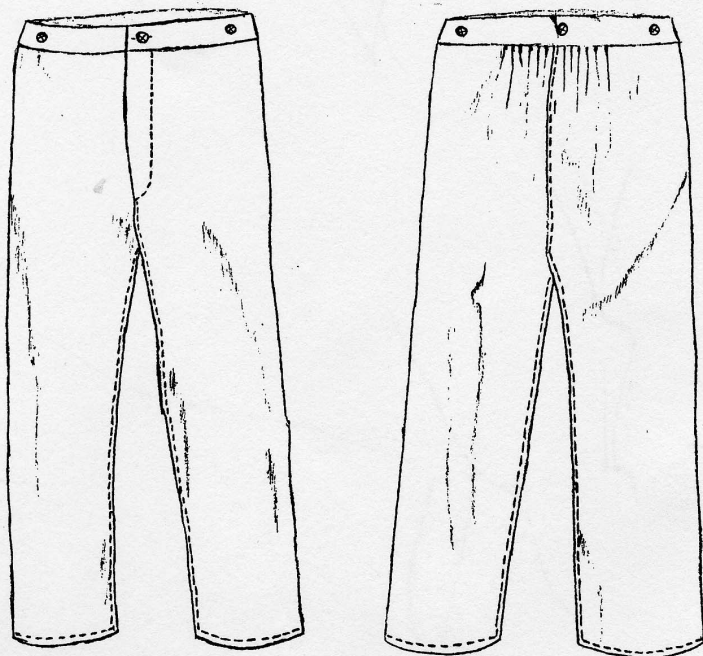


FIG 3 (above). Pattern for drawers to be made at home and sent to military hospitals as published in the The Sanitary Commission Bulletin in May 1864.

FIG 2 (left). Pair of drawers sewn from a cotton sheet by Orange S. King of the First Minnesota Regiment while interned at Libby Prison in 1861.





cusses the problems and offers an interesting solution:

In the camps of this region many soldiers suffer from ill fitting drawers. If large enough at first, washing them once or twice shrinks them so much as to render them very uncomfortable about the anal & genital parts—even if large they often cause great discomfort even in civil life. As now made, they create too much *stuffing* about the aforesaid regions—inducing sweating, heating, drafting & other diseases.

Please examine a new pattern—"Union Draws"—sent with this note. They possess the following advantages over the present pattern.

1. They require less material & less labor in making.
2. They are readily adjusted to men of different sizes—if too large by overlapping the upper posterior parts—or if too small by lengthening the cord between them—they being cut so low on the upper & inner part of the legs.
3. Obviating the stuffing in the crotch about the anal & genital region prevents heating, chafing, sweating & otherwise diseasing them—also prevents the accumulation of [?] otherwise absorbed by the stuffing.
4. They allow freedom to motion in walking, running, jumping, crouching & swimming. The present pattern if wet or once washed often binds the upper part of the limbs—and sometimes press hard upon the genitals &c &c.
5. In unusual exposure as in night service, or riding horseback, two pairs may be very comfortable worn—the present pattern cannot be on account of the increased amount of stuffing.
6. May lessen the time & convenience of *defecation* because they obviate the necessity of unbuttoning in the discharge of that function.

Old pants may be converted in draws of this new pattern in 2 minutes by cutting off the legs 2 to 3 inches—cutting out the crotch & one inch on

each side of the back seam—thus making old pants resemble the "Union Draws"—an idea of some value in case of a deficiency in draws &c.

If these hints & this new model for Draws are worthy of your consideration & conducive to the comfort & efficiency of our soldiers, I shall be glad.

P.S. Pardon me for saying that I have examined several specimens of army clothing by the Compound Microscope—and have found cotton shoddy & such materials that were purchased for pure wool. I would suggest this means of examining army goods, because you may determine even the percentage of *wrong* materials in a few minutes.<sup>10</sup>

Many soldiers relied on home or other sources for their under drawers. A typical pair was made by Orange S. King of Company D, First Minnesota Volunteers, while in Libby Prison (FIG 2). King's suit of top and bottom was donated to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1907. Of white cotton muslin and completely hand sewn, the drawers are seamed at the inside of the narrow, one piece legs which are gathered into the narrow waistband in the rear. The fly has a button only on the waistband which along with five other bone and tin buttons fasten it to the top. There is no method for size adjustment at the cuff or waistband. According to King's family, he had waited up all night for a comrade to die so that he could use the winding sheet for his suit of clothes.

Relief organizations serving in hospitals during the war found an acute shortage of underclothing for their patients. An appeal published in May 1864 (FIG 3) called on patriotic

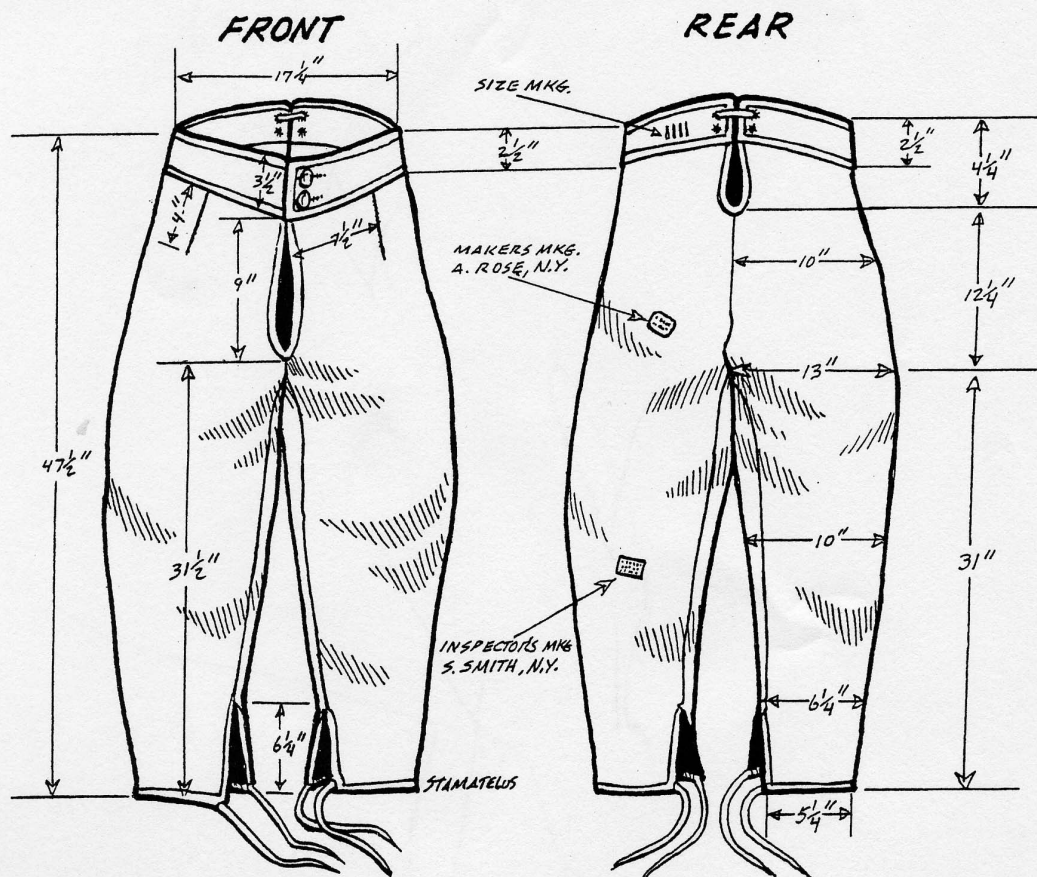


FIG 4. Sketch of a pair of regulation pattern canton flannel drawers made by contractor Alvin Rose of New York and issued to a Connecticut soldier during the Civil War. Courtesy James Stamatelos.

women to manufacture flannel drawers to fill this need:

Required for each pair of Drawers.

1 tape stay, one inch long, (for opening in back)

3 knots linen thread.

3 black bone buttons.

Narrow tape, for back of waistband (18 inches long.)

*Directions for Making.*—If the flannel to be used is less than thirty inches wide, put the point at the back close to the edge of the flannel and piece the fronts, as shown by the dotted lines above [see diagram].

The opening below the waistband in the back should be four inches long. The opening in the front should be seven inches long and faced with flannel or silesia, two inches wide. Two buttons should be put on the waistband in front, and one on the opening below. There should be four eyelet holes on each side of the waistband behind. Waistbands should be lined with silesia. Drawers to be closed to the ankle, and finished with hem.

Put the bottom of one leg against the bottom of the other, and two long triangular pieces of flannel will be left on each side, out of which, with the other small pieces, cut the collars and wrist-facings for shirt, and waistband for drawers. In cutting the second pair of drawers be careful that the slanting line of the top meets the slanting line left by the first pair, and go on as before.

Begin to cut the shirts at the other end of the piece of flannel, tearing off two yards for the body of each shirt. One sleeve and a half can be cut out of the width of the flannel, and in cutting a number of sleeves, one may be made to fade into the other.

Pieces of flannel are usually from 45 to 52 or 53 yards long and 26 inches wide.

Cut by the above patterns, it will take about 5½ yards for a shirt and pair of drawers. The diagrams allow for seams.<sup>11</sup>

That the old flannel drawers of the Civil War were not suitable for the new postwar regular army was obvious. The Woodhull Report of 1868 called for improvements:

The drawers ... should be of at least three grades and many sizes. One, thin and soft, with a large percentage of cotton in the fabric, to be worn in the hot weather; another quality, of about the same warmth that those now issued are when new but of better material, should be supplied for the ordinary service of temperate climates; and a very thick warm variety for the colder stations. The foundation of all should be wool, and the last-mentioned should be of it alone and of the very best quality. It might, furthermore, be advisable to have an extra grade of thick knit woolen specially made for the extreme posts.

The present drawers in combination with the present trousers are so oppressive in warm weather that the soldier often yields to the temptation and discards the former, to the prejudice of his health and ultimately of his comfort. The dusty cloth trousers become saturated with perspiration and are quickly filthy, while the unprotected legs are provoked by the most annoying irritation and excoriations, from their heat and coarseness. Company officers should be held responsible that their men always wear drawers, but, that they may always be worn, there should be a grade sufficiently light for the warmest climates. That wool should be the staple of the fabric is required by the same reasoning that has been applied to the shirts, with the additional one that the double fold made by it and the shirt over the abdomen would in many cases supersede the cholera-belts so often necessary. Why they should be of different grades is but a recapitulation of the previous argument: adaption to locality, ease of transportation, and trivial loss and inconvenience of something must be sacrificed.

The shape should be that of the proposed infantry trousers, and they should be fastened at the ankles with tapes. The interference with the circulation by ligation would be very trivial after a little experience, and the convenience of keeping both the drawers and the stockings in position, which cannot always be done with the button alone or with no fastening, amounts sometimes to a necessity.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the old pattern army drawers continued to be

issued into the 1870s. According to Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs in his report to the Surgeon General dated 24 April 1875, "The old stock of shirts and some of the sizes of drawers being about exhausted, the pattern of these articles have been improved. A new standard shirt was adopted on the 5th of August last, and a sample of the improved drawers is now ready to be submitted to the Secretary of War for his approval."<sup>13</sup> The old and new pattern seem to have differed primarily in the cut of the waistband and in better fit.<sup>14</sup> FIG 1 in Dean Nelson's article in this issue, page 110, shows the "shirt, drawers and stockings, old pattern" photographed by the Quartermaster Department, circa 1872. Always economy minded, Meigs waited until Civil War surplus was finally used up before moving toward better designed undergarments for soldiers.

*The author appreciates the assistance of Fellow James Stammatelos in providing the measured drawing and details of his well documented pair of regulation drawers and of Editor Frederick C. Gaede in providing copies of photographs of the "Danish Exchange" garments.*

## Notes

1. National Archives, Record Group 92, Office of the Quartermaster General, entry 2118, Coxe/Irvine Letters Received, Boxes 112 and 65.
2. A Lady, *The Workwoman's Guide* (London, 1838; reprint, Sturbridge Village, MA, 1986).
3. An extract of a December 1839 letter from Captain W. Kingsbury, St. Louis to Calendar Irvine mentions "several hundred pairs of drawers of the old pattern here." NA, RG 92, entry 2117, Commissary General Purchases Letters Sent, Book 0.
4. Canton flannel is defined as "a 2/2 twilled soft cotton fabric with a long nap" by Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987).
5. Details of the Danish uniform exchange can be found in Frederick C. Gaede, "The 'Danish Exchange' US Army Blanket," *MC&H XXXVI*, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 64-66.
6. A list of quartermaster clothing contracts from the Civil War compiled by Jerry Coates and Fred Gaede was surveyed for drawer contracts.
7. "Quartermaster's Manual" (Washington: GPO, 1865).
8. The contract stamp of "A. Rose / New York" refers to Alvin Rose who contracted for 255,000 pairs of canton flannel drawers in 1862 and 640,000 pairs in 1864. The inspector stamp "S. Smith / Inspector / New York" likely is for Joseph S. Smith who inspected clothing in New York between October 1861 and March 1862 and again between January and December 1864.
9. A photograph of this pair of drawers is in *Echoes of Glory: Arms and Equipment of the Union* (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1991), 127.
10. Dr. Charles A. Allen, Cambridgeport, MA, to Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs, 13 November 1861, National Archives, Record Group 92, entry 225 Consolidated Correspondence Files, "Drawers."
11. *The Sanitary Commission Bulletin* 1, no. 13 (New York, 1 May 1864).
12. Alfred A. Woodhull, *A Medical Report upon the Uniform and Clothing of the Soldiers of the U. S. Army* (Washington: GPO, 1868).
13. Surgeon General's Office Circular No. 8, *A Report on the Hygiene of the United States Army* (Washington: GPO, 1875).
14. Fellow Donald M. Kloster examined drawers and other items of the new pattern uniform photographed by the War Department in 1875 in his article, "Uniforms of the Army Prior and Subsequent to 1872, Part II," *MC&H*, XV no. 1 (Spring 1963): 6-14.