

## Haversacks

Napoleon Bonaparte is famous for his declaration that "an army marches on its stomach." This truism reflects his belief that a military can only function effectively if its soldiers are well sustained. The haversack of Civil War usage was the soldier's primary vehicle of sustenance throughout the war. Although much has been written about foraging, pillaging, and begging, the simple fact remains that the vast majority of the food that a soldier consumed during his term of service would have been furnished through the Quartermaster's Department and carried on his person in the humble haversack.

For the common infantryman of both sides, the haversack was a simple cloth bag, with a button of buckle closure that was carried on his left side with a cloth strap over his right shoulder. While the general form was similar for both sides, the patterns varied dramatically. This article will give a general overview of some different styles in haversacks, traits to look for and avoid, some sources for good haversacks, and general tips.

### **Federal Haversacks**

The Federal haversack that saw the most service, and is PEC (Period, Everyday, and Correct) for almost every Federal impression is one we are all familiar with; the "Tarred" Regulation Haversack. Almost every sutler carries a "tarred haversack" which they will be happy to label as a "Federal Haversack" if it will get you to purchase it. All sorts of dimensions, constructions, and finishes are snatched up by reenactors who have been swindled with Pakistani imitations. Unfortunately, most of these are "sight copies" of other reproductions. Just as a picture gets fuzzier when you copy the copy, so too does the "tarred" haversack. First of all, there are two variants of the Regulation haversack. For ease of distinction, they are usually labeled "Early War" and "Late War."

The two styles are almost identical, with the exception of how the leather closure strap is attached. On the "Early War" haversacks, the strap and the buckle is sewn to the cloth of the haversack. On the "Late War" haversacks, the strap and buckles are attached with a copper rivet. Now, special attention should be paid to the size. One of the most glaring deficiencies in reproduction Federal haversacks is being far off the mark with regards to the original dimensions. They are either made grossly oversized, or else they are longer than they are wide, both of which are incorrect. Surviving originals range from 11 1/2 inches square to 12 1/2 inches square. The straps were issued between 40-48 inches long. The buckle should be a steel roller buckle, (watch out for brass and painted stainless steel!) and the seams inside should be flat felled like the seam on the leg of a pair of blue jeans, not left raw. There should be an interior bag in both models made of cotton drill. On the "Early" Patterns, it is affixed to three bone buttons. On the "Late" model it is affixed to paper-backed tin buttons. Button holes were originally handsewn.

Sources: The absolute top of the line Federal haversack is available from [www.haversackdepot.com](http://www.haversackdepot.com). Their haversacks are \$57. They have two different styles based on two different originals. While \$57 may seem expensive for a haversack, Jarnagin (the next level down on the quality meter) is still going to run you \$40 and it is actually cheaper than Regimental Quartermaster's quality haversack. The difference is readily apparent when you receive the haversack. The linseed oil paint looks dramatically different from the modern enamel used on Pakistani copies. I own a Haversack Depot haversack and I will personally vouch for the quality.

### **Confederate Haversacks**

There were a myriad of Confederate haversacks that saw usage during the war. There are dozens of surviving originals, and millions more did not survive because their utilitarian value ensured their continued use after the war. Many patterns, fabrics, and closures were used so identifying individual styles is out of the scope of this article. Instead, let's look at some general thoughts on Confederate haversacks. Confederate haversacks came from many sources. At the outset of the conflict, many volunteers came equipped with their own "ration bags" at the behest of advice from local newspapers and "Guides for Volunteers." Some were inherently practical bags of cotton or canvas, while some were heavy contraptions

of ornamented leather. Those who didn't come so equipped were often provided with the patriotic productions of local ladies' groups. Soon however, the Confederate Quartermaster Department took over the issue of haversacks, which probably had a field life of less than six months due to rot and wear. Intermixed with these, private purchase haversacks and haversacks sent from home probably still worked their way into the mix.

If you are looking for a specific impression, try researching for originals from the time period and theater you want to portray. You can pay between \$30 and \$60 for a well made generic Confederate haversack, but you can just as easily make your own. I made four over the course of the week to sell, and with a little practice and about \$4 in materials, you can easily make your own. Try acquiring the "Confederate Sketchbook" for pattern ideas. As a general rule, the best all around Confederate haversack is a simple white cotton bag with a button closure. Try to avoid super-sized haversacks. I've seen some that are almost 2 ft long. Most surviving originals are about a foot either way. In the way of buttons, look for wooden dish buttons, white glass buttons, or documented Confederate utility buttons. Try and stay away from Federal tin buttons and spun pewter buttons. If you want to go with a different style, document it.

The issue of using captured Federal haversacks frequently comes up. There are several diaries and letters which reference "raiding the haversacks of the dead" or stealing food from prisoners. Most of these references however don't mention the taking of the actual haversack, just items from the haversack. While I am sure that captured Federal haversacks were frequently used, a majority of Confederate soldiers probably drew their cornbread and pork from a common cotton satchel.

### **General Tips**

- 1.) A Haversack is for food, not for the items that are supposed to be in a knapsack or bedroll. 3 days rations doesn't leave room for things like bibles, candles, sewing kits, etc. Practical experience makes me believe that the only things a soldier might have carried in them besides his food would have been things he might need on the march. I carry my pipe and pipe tobacco in mine along with my utensils and a tiny piece of fat lighter.
- 2) Since you've taken the impedimenta out, put some period food in for the weekend. Even if you don't plan on campaigning. A confederate might carry a foraged sweet potato, two or three red potatoes, (don't get the Idaho spuds!) a carrot or two with the stalks, an apple if they are in season, and maybe some cornbread wrapped in a rag. Pick two or three to give your haversack some shape.
- 3) Most reenactors affix their tin cups to their haversacks. I do when I carry my Federal haversack. If it rattles or makes noise however, consider moving it. Any long march gets really annoying to your pards. It can be looped through a haversack strap, or tied with a leather thong to the haversack strap. Work your gear out over a weekend. Noise might make the difference between life and death for a soldier 140 years ago.
- 4) Adjust the length of your haversack strap. Most original haversacks and canteens have straps which would put them around the height of the hip, but most reproductions come with straps to circumscribe the widest girth. If a normal sized fellow puts them on as is, then they hang near the knees. Try running at the double quick with it on, and you will see why they were issued so short. If they are at or above the hip, they won't swing at a jog, and they rest easily behind the left elbow on the march. Don't knot the strap, but cut and re-sew it.
- 5) Don't put the haversack under your belt. On the march, it would make it almost unaccessible. If you're wearing a knapsack, wear your canteen and haversack over the knapsack straps.