

# U. S. BUCKLES AND PLATES 1830-1860

by Harry J. Repman

I have made a rather arbitrary decision to discuss US plates and buckles from 1830-1860, but for what I hope are logical reasons. The Ordnance Manual of 1839 describes these pieces in rather general terms but with Ordnance Manual of 1841, and later, there is a precise description so that we know exactly what we are dealing with. This era saw the expansion of the regular army, plus a War and a proliferation of various forms of accouterments. This was the time of the appearance of the Circular eagle and oval US plates familiar to the Civil War collector, the disappearance of the traditional white buff leather and the attachment of the bayonet to the belt with the resultant absence of the crossed belts on the chest of the soldier of the flint lock era. Finally, my field of interest is the enlisted man of the regular army. Equipment of officers and the militia is a whole separate field, not covered here.

I don't have all the equipment, and there is a lot I do not know, but this that we discuss today will give us a base line to which we can add in the future. There are several ways that this equipment can be classified, and in an attempt at simplification, I have chosen the headings that you see here. The soldier of, say, 1850, would use various combinations of this equipment.

## NCO WAIST BELT M.1832-33 (Figure 1)

My first group consists of the NCO waist belt plate for the short roman pattern NCO sword. Campbell and Howell refer to these as Model 1833, but others feel they appeared in 1832. The plate consists of two round pieces joined by an S-hook for buckling. The right hand piece has an eagle with head to the left, wings drooping, three arrows in the right talon and an olive branch in the left talon. There is an extension of the left half of the belt to form a flap behind the buckle. Note that the connecting loops of the segmented belt are round brass rings.

1. The left hand piece of the Artillery NCO buckle had crossed cannon barrels between the letters US.
2. The left hand piece of the Infantry NCO buckle had three stacked muskets over a small drum, between the letters US.
3. The third buckle, referred to as "Branch Immaterial" had a raised US on the left hand piece.

## CLASP BUCKLE WITH RAISED U S (Figure 2)

Campbell and Howell state that in 1836 the S-hook NCO belt was replaced with a round clasp buckle in which the branch designation was



replaced by the raised letters US. Note that there is no belt extension behind the buckle and the loops holding the segmented belt together are square instead of round. This is the common "foot artillery sword" of the collector and is described as the "sword belt for foot artillery" in the Ordnance manual of 1841 through the Ordnance manual of 1861. As we will see later, the belt plate was changed in 1861. These were issued to gun crews and other non-mounted artillerymen—the "foot artillery"—but references in the Ordnance manuals lead me to believe this outfit was also issued to NCO's of other branches.

The belt for the Sabre for Mounted Artillery is a white buff belt, no provision for an over-the-shoulder strap, two sabre slings and the same round clasp buckle with raised US as seen on the foot artillery sword. This sabre is first mentioned in the Ordnance manual of 1841, and referred to by collectors as the "Light Artillery Sabre". It was used through the Civil War.

A third use for this clasp type buckle with the raised US is for a rare belt which I have never seen, but we should know about it should the happy accident occur. The Ordnance manual of 1850 speaks of sapper's accouterments. The sword belt (buff leather) is two inches wide. There is a sliding frog and "belt-plate, like that for the artillery." If you see a plain white buff belt, no brass rings, no sabre slings (and no holes where the stitching was), and the clasp type buckle with raised US as on the Foot Artillery Sword or the Light Artillery Sabre, you have a real goodie.

## CIRCULAR EAGLE PLATE

My next group is the circular eagle plate. The soldier of the flint lock era wore white buff belts over his shoulders which crossed on his chest, one to hold his cartridge box and one to hold his bayonet. The plate was always on the bayonet scabbard shoulder belt, or "bayonet belt" as the regulations described it, and prior to 1839 it was

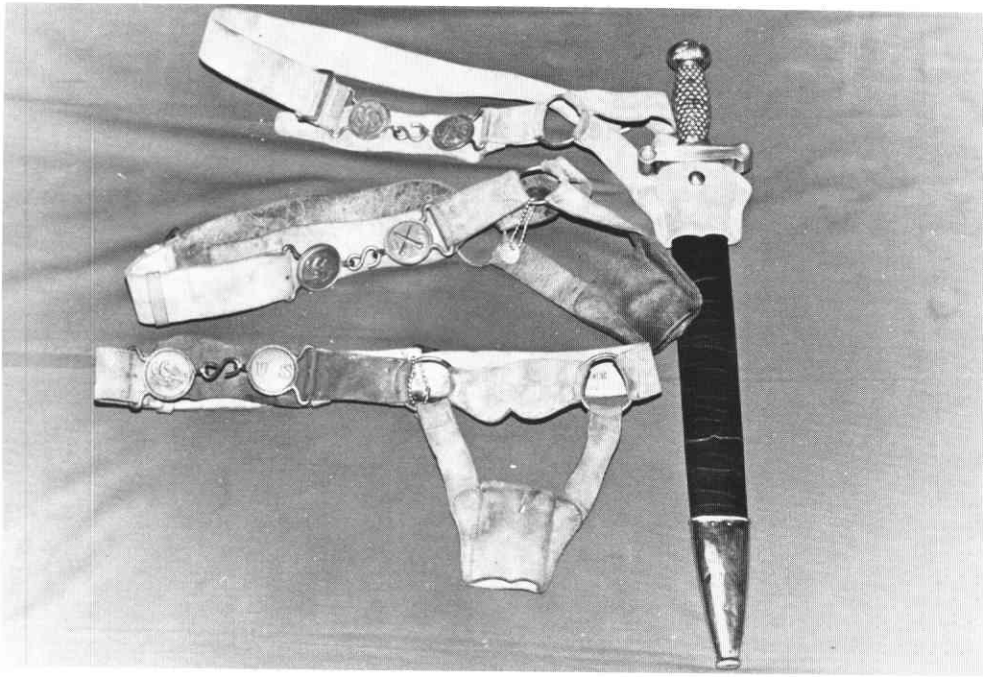


Figure 1. The three NCO waist belts M. 1832-33.

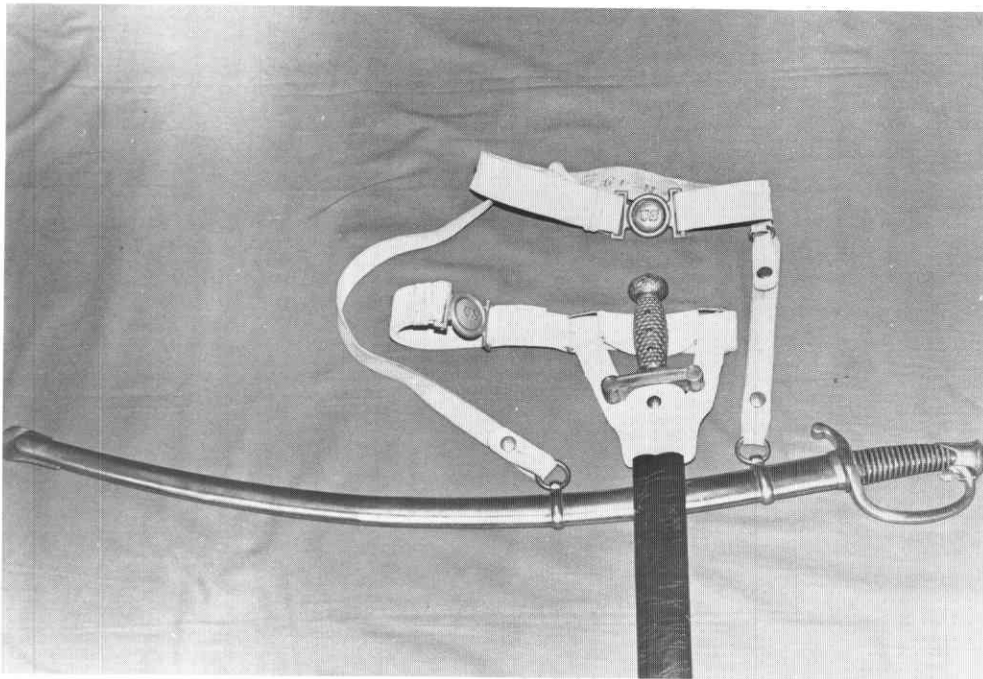


Figure 2. The "light artillery sabre" belt and the "sword belt for foot artillery."

oval or square, usually plain but some had a raised US. The cartridge box belts, as in this model 1842 box, were without any provision for a plate. Regulations of 1839 describe a bayonet belt plate, round, brass, with eagle—the familiar circular eagle plate of the Civil War (Figure 3). The Ordnance manual of 1841 again describes it as a plate for the bayonet belt but says "Note. The bayonet belt is about to be discontinued; the bayonet scabbard will be attached to a frog sliding on the waist belt." With the discontinuance of the shoulder bayonet belt, the circular eagle plate was used on the cartridge box belt, where it stayed on all boxes through the Civil War. The Ordnance manual of 1841 also states "The frog of the non-commissioned officer's shoulder belt is made double, to receive the sword scabbard" (Figure 5). Peterson says the NCO sword was adopted by the

War Department in 1840. The Ordnance manual of 1850 describes an NCO sword shoulder belt of white buff leather, and the manual of 1861 describes one of black buff leather, each with the circular eagle plate (Figure 5). The circular eagle plates for the bayonet belt and the NCO sword have 3 iron hooks; the circular eagle plates for the cartridge box belt have 2 "eyes of iron."

#### THE LARGE OVAL U S

The large oval US on the flap of the cartridge box is first described in the ordnance manual of 1841. The first ones I have seen are on the .69 caliber box which I associate with the M.1842 percussion musket. Whether they were meant to be used on the box for the 1835-40 flint musket, I do not know. It may be that the 1835-40 flint musket

Figure 3. The bayonet shoulder belt. Top - an earlier plain oval plate. Lower - The circular eagle plate.

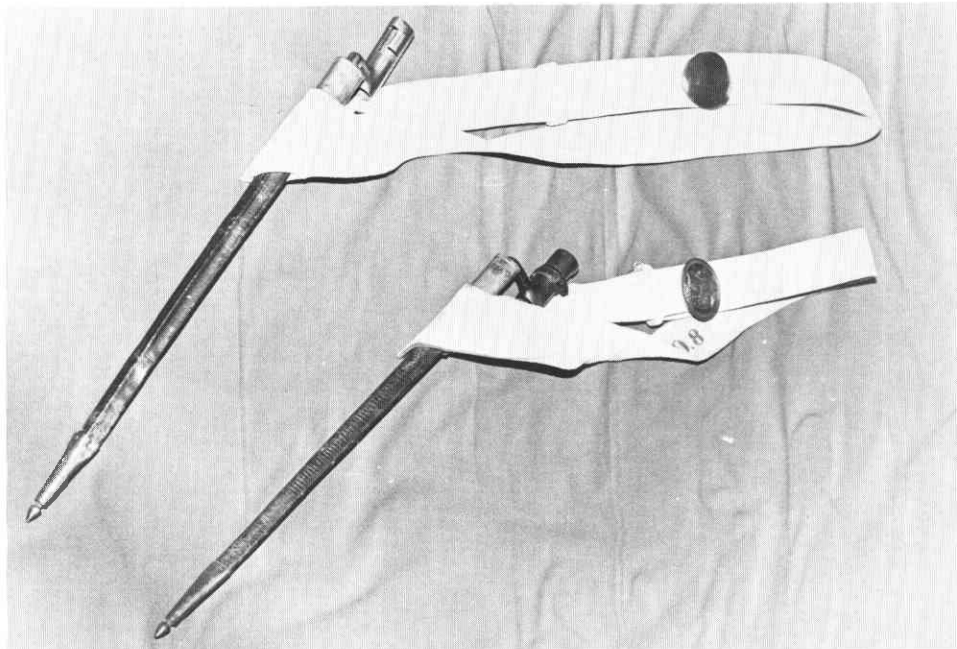
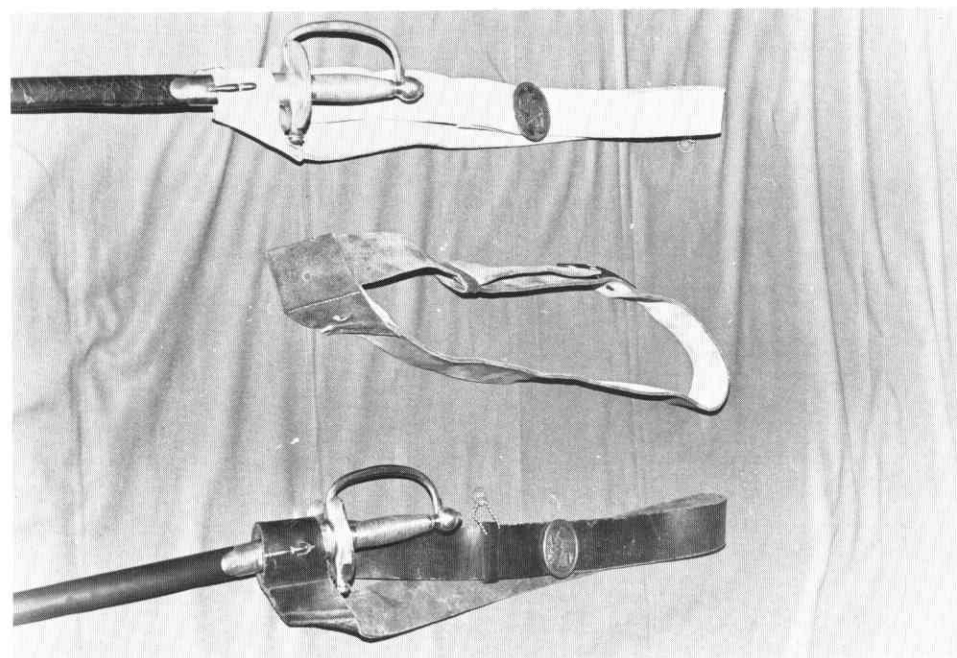


Figure 4. Cartridge boxes and belts.

- Left - M1842 box with plain belt
- Middle - M1842 box with circular eagle plate
- Middle - The 69 caliber box
- Right - M1855 rifle-musket box



Figure 5. The NCO swords and sword shoulder belt. In the middle is the belt with the double frog for sword and bayonet.





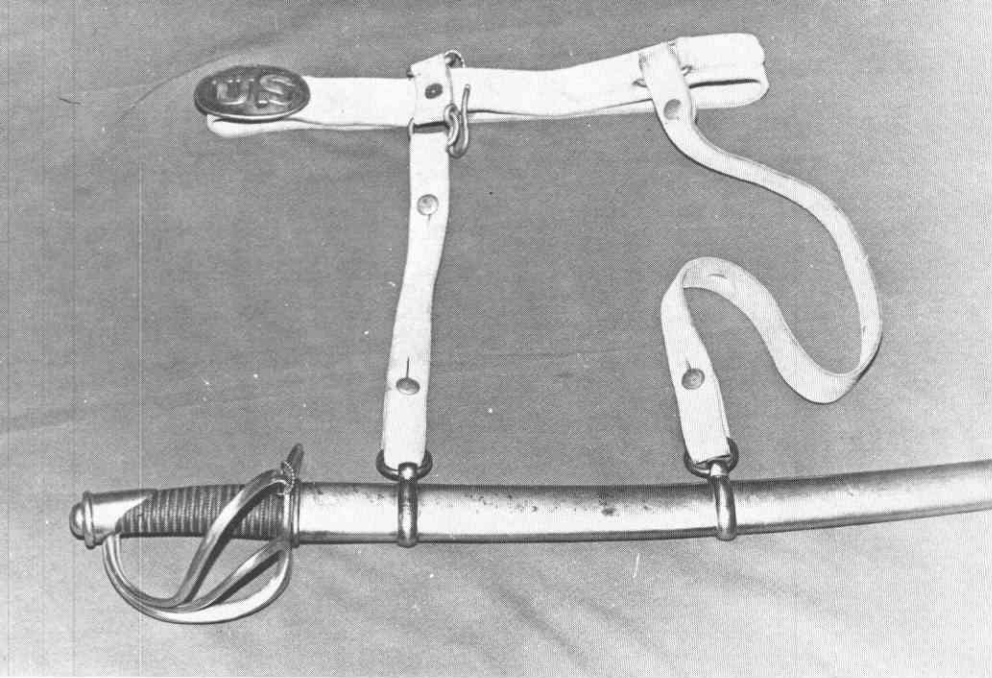


Figure 6. The dragoon sabre belt.

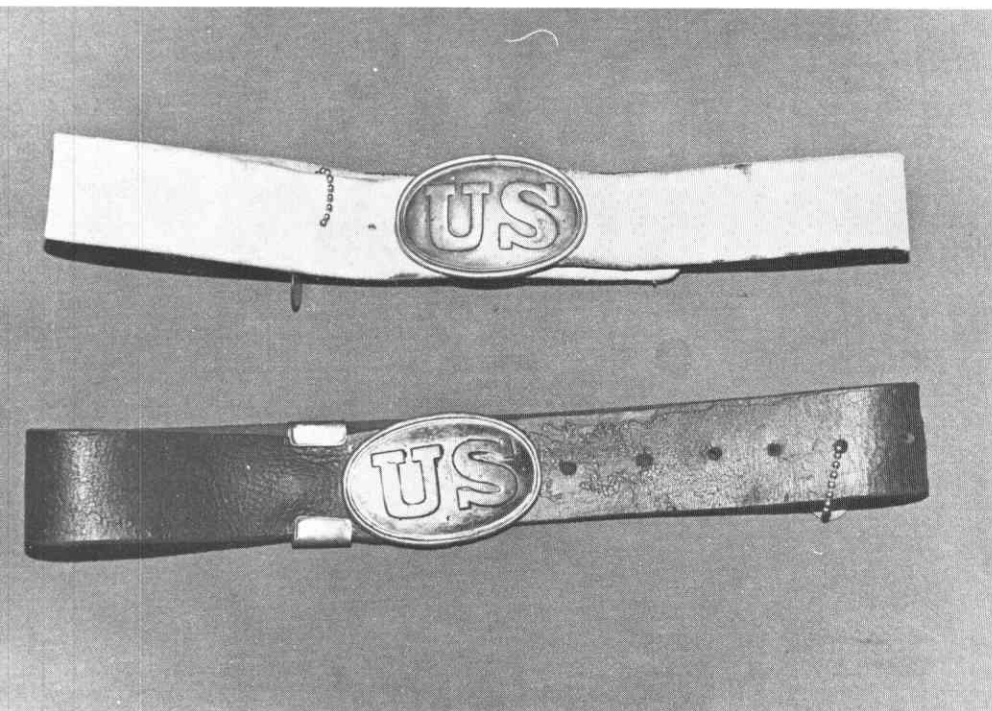


Figure 7. The white buff rifleman's waist belt, M1850, and black bridle leather infantry belt of the Civil War.

and the 1842 percussion musket used the same box, but this is another subject for another day. I have three boxes with the large oval US - the 1842 musket Cal. 69; the 1855 rifle-musket box Cal. 58, and the special Cal. .69 box made up in 1860-61 for the conversions used in the Civil War. This .69 Cal. box is described in the ordnance manual of 1861. These cartridge box plates have the familiar two eyes of iron.

The large oval US was also used as a buckle on three belts.

1. The Dragoon Sabre belt, mentioned in regulations of 1839 but first described in the ordnance manual of 1850. White buff, with 2 sabre slings and a brass ring for an over-the-shoulder strap (Figure 6).
2. The rifleman's waist belt, as described in the ordnance manual of 1850, a white buff belt

2 inches wide (Figure 7).

3. The black bridle leather belt of ordnance manual 1861 - the belt of the Civil War (Figure 7, lower).

#### THE SMALL US PLATE

The ordnance manual of 1841 describes a Carbine-cartridge box and a pistol cartridge box, each to have on the flap a "plate brass, oval, 2.8 inches long and 1.6 inches wide, lettered US". The infantry waist belt was buff leather, 1.5 inches wide, with a "plate, brass, the same as for carbine cartridge box". The rifleman had the same waist belt and plate. In 1850 the rifleman changed to the wide belt and large US plate but the infantry used the same narrow belt and small US plate.

Another use of the small oval US plate was on

Figure 8. Left - Rifleman's box  
 Right - Pistol cartridge box.  
 Below - Two examples of the infantry belt with a small oval US.

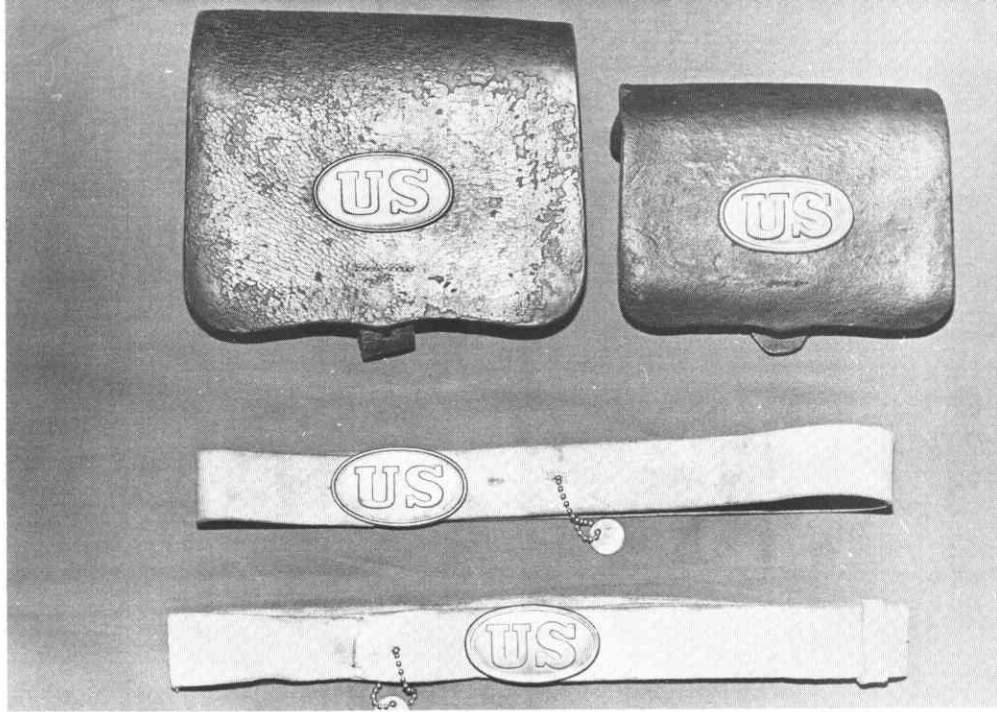
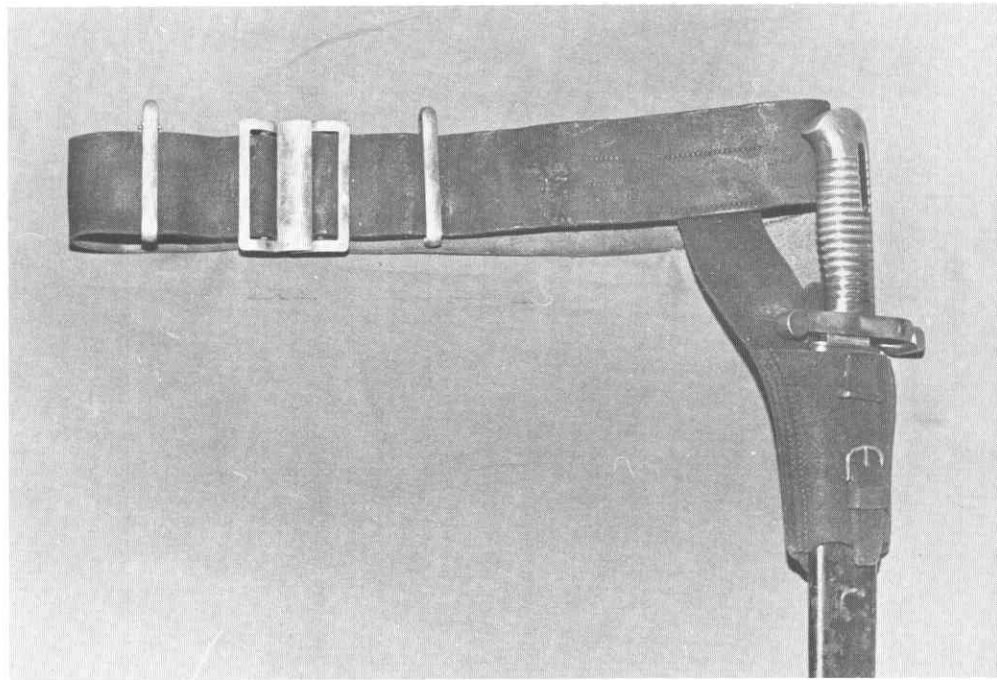


Figure 9. M. 1855 rifleman's belt.



the rifleman's box; the best way to tell a rifleman's box is the absence of buckles and the supporting straps for the shoulder belt. The first rifleman's box had narrow loops for the 1.5 inch belt. The ordnance manual of 1850 describes a rifleman's box with wider loops to receive the 2 inch waist belt and a cartridge box plate "like the infantry waist belt plate" - in other words, the small US plate. There was a third rifleman's box with no plate but again, this is another subject for another day.

#### M. 1855 RIFLEMAN'S BELT (Figure 9)

In 1855 a rifle was adopted by the Army, .58 in caliber and using Maynard's tape primer - U.S. rifle model 1855. A special belt was designed, actually a

belt with frog for the sabre bayonet integral to it. It is described in the ordnance manual of 1861 as "1 brass buckle No. 10"—which really tells us nothing. The buckle is a rather plain, 2 piece clasp type and when connected has the appearance of a rather ordinary civilian type belt buckle. The manual describes "2 loops, with eyes, (brass) to slide on the belt."

#### RECTANGULAR SABRE - BELT PLATE

The final group of buckles is the familiar Sabre Belt Plate of the Civil War Cavalry. Campbell and Howell state that this was described in Army Regulations of 1851 and was to be "gilt, rectangular, two inches wide, with a raised bright rim; a silver wreath of laurel encircling the 'Arms

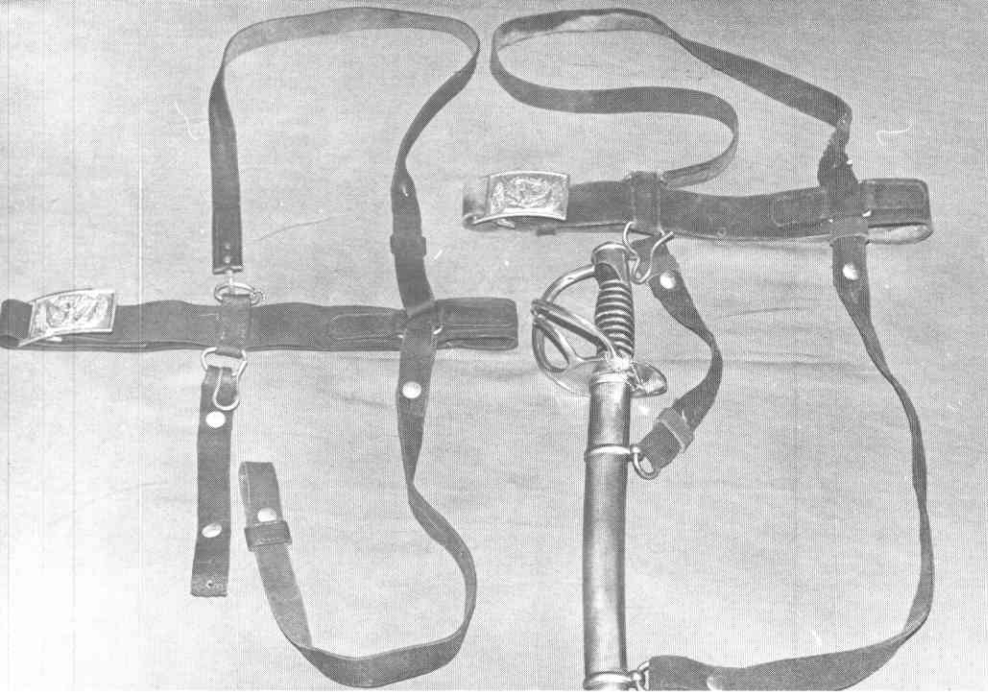


Figure 10. Belt for light cavalry sabre with rectangular buckle. Left - Black bridle leather of the Civil War  
Right - An earlier black buff leather belt

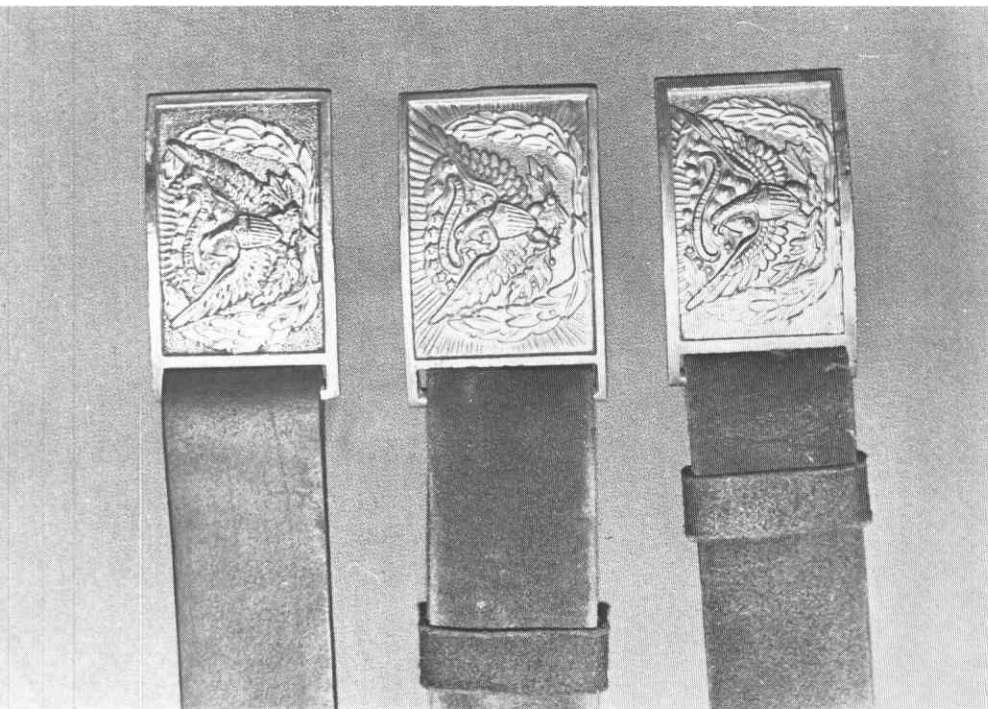


Figure 11. Variations in the size and design of the rectangular sabre belt buckle.

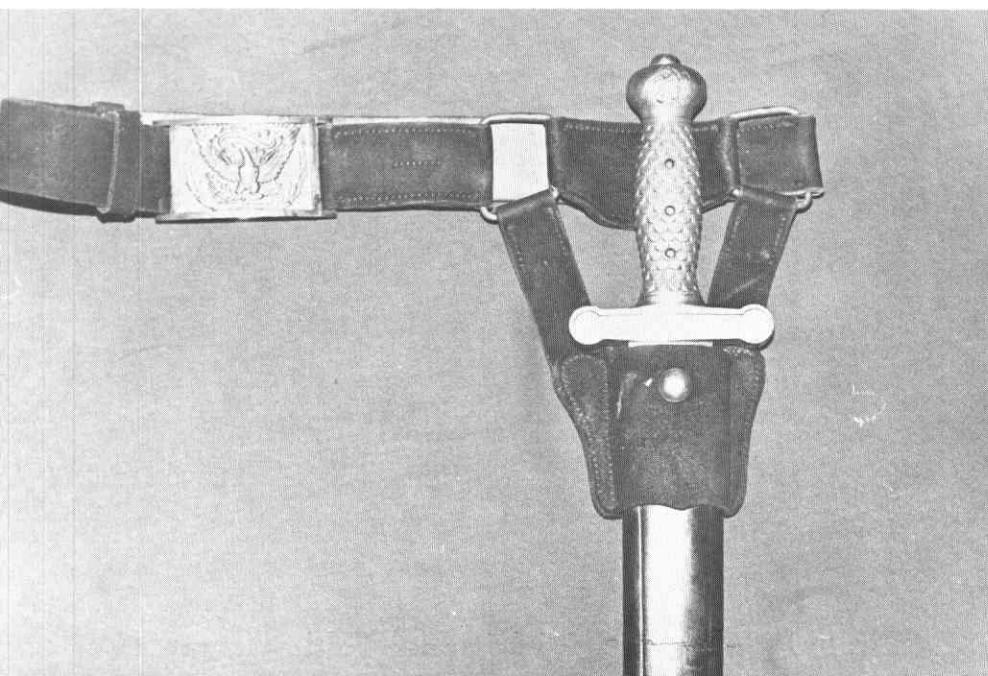


Figure 12. M1861 sword belt for foot artillery.



of the United States.' Ordnance Manual of 1861 describes a sabre belt of buff leather. While it does not say dyed black, we know that the white buff was discontinued in the 1850's. If you look closely you will see that this early buckle is wider than the Civil War buckle, the tongue on the reverse is smaller and cast integral with the buckle rather than being brased on, and the wreath of laurel stops at the wings rather than extending above the wing tips. During the War these sabre belts were turned out by the thousands and made of black bridle leather rather than buff (Figures 10 and 11).

My final specimen is what Ordnance Manual of 1861 calls "sword belt for Foot Artillery." It is buff leather dyed black and has the belt plate "like that for the cavalry sabre-belt"—the familiar eagle and wreath of laurel. This, then, makes 3 types of what we refer to as the "foot artillery sword" (Figure 12).

1. The S-type buckle with the three different branches; actually NCO swords.
2. The common foot artillery sword with clasp buckle and raised US and
3. The same sword but with the rectangular eagle and wreath buckle.

Except for minor variations in the fullers and different dates on the blade, the "Roman Pattern Sword" was the same in all three groups and throughout its entire usage in the US Army.

This discussion was meant to correlate the

buckles and plates with the equipment on which they were used, and is not a survey of plates and buckles as such. The plate and buckle collector will note many variations—a single wire hook, double wire hooks, "puppy-feet" studs, arrow head studs, and wire studs on the back of the plate. The single stud on the large US buckle may be behind the U or the S. These plates are being reproduced in large numbers. A few generalities may be helpful. The large US plates were not usually symmetrical - more of a goose egg shape; the reproductions are perfect ovals. The single buckle stud is marked "replica" in some - if ground off this stud will be much thinner than the double stud. Connecticut Valley Mfr. buckles have brass wire escutcheon pins cut off and bent for all three studs. Brass wire hooks on the buckle or brass "eyes of iron" on the cartridge box plates are always signs of a replica. Some of the wire hooks and "eyes of iron" are non-magnetic metal; the originals were always iron and therefore magnetic. The best thing, as Harold Peterson says in his new book, is to look at as many originals as possible—develop a "feel."

I am appreciative of the many members who participated in the discussion and from whom I learned much. Ralph Arnold very kindly brought and discussed several items from his extensive collection. These are illustrated and described in figures 13 and 14.

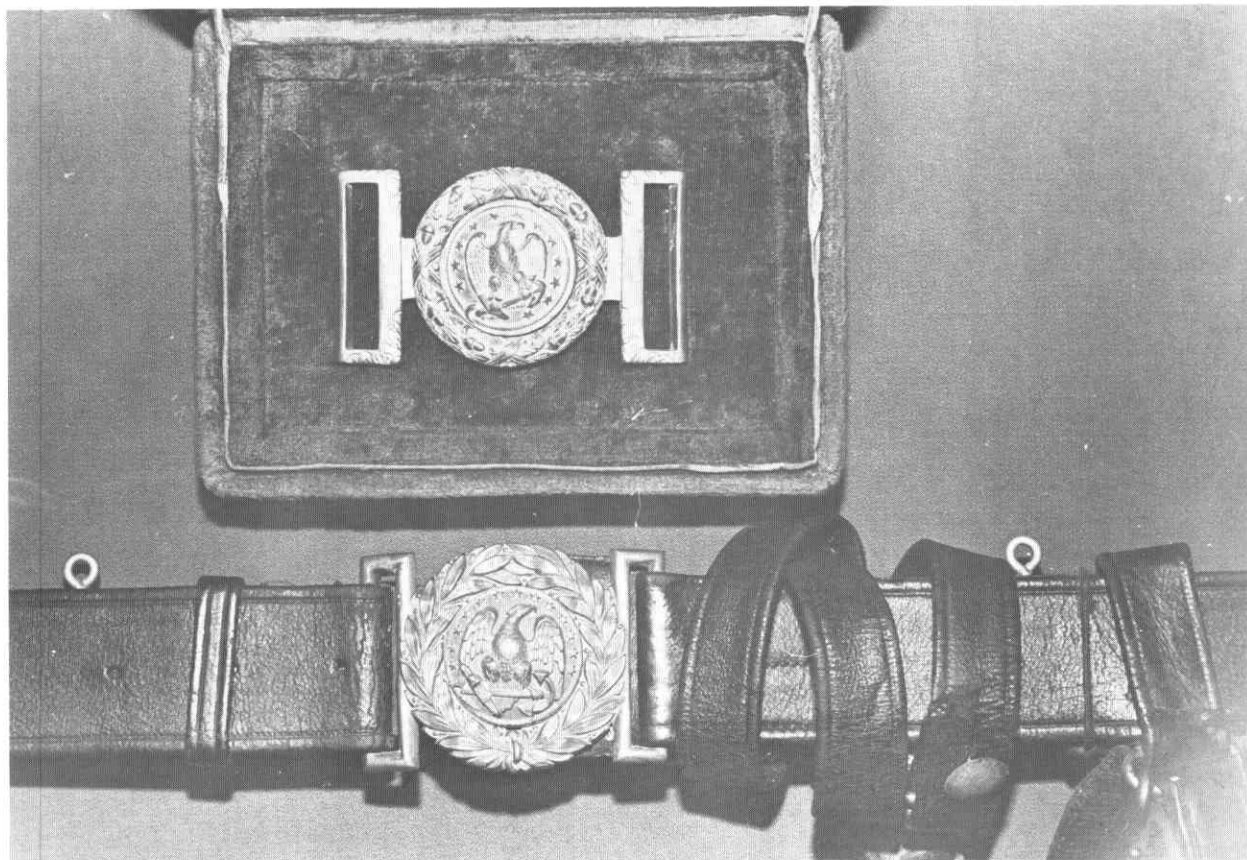


Figure 13. U. S. Naval Officers' Belt Plates—An Addendum from the Ralph Arnold Collection.

Top - 1852 Regulation, numbered "160" on both parts plus "P" and "RBH" on outer part. Illustrated in 1852 regulations, and in "Accoutrement Plates" by Gavin (Fig. 30) showing similar plate worn by Admiral Farragut, now in the Smithsonian Institution.

Bottom - Circa 1855 through Civil War. Shown in "Plates and Buckles of the American Military 1795-1874" by Kerksis (Fig. 71) where it is described as the standard naval sword belt plate of the Civil War period.

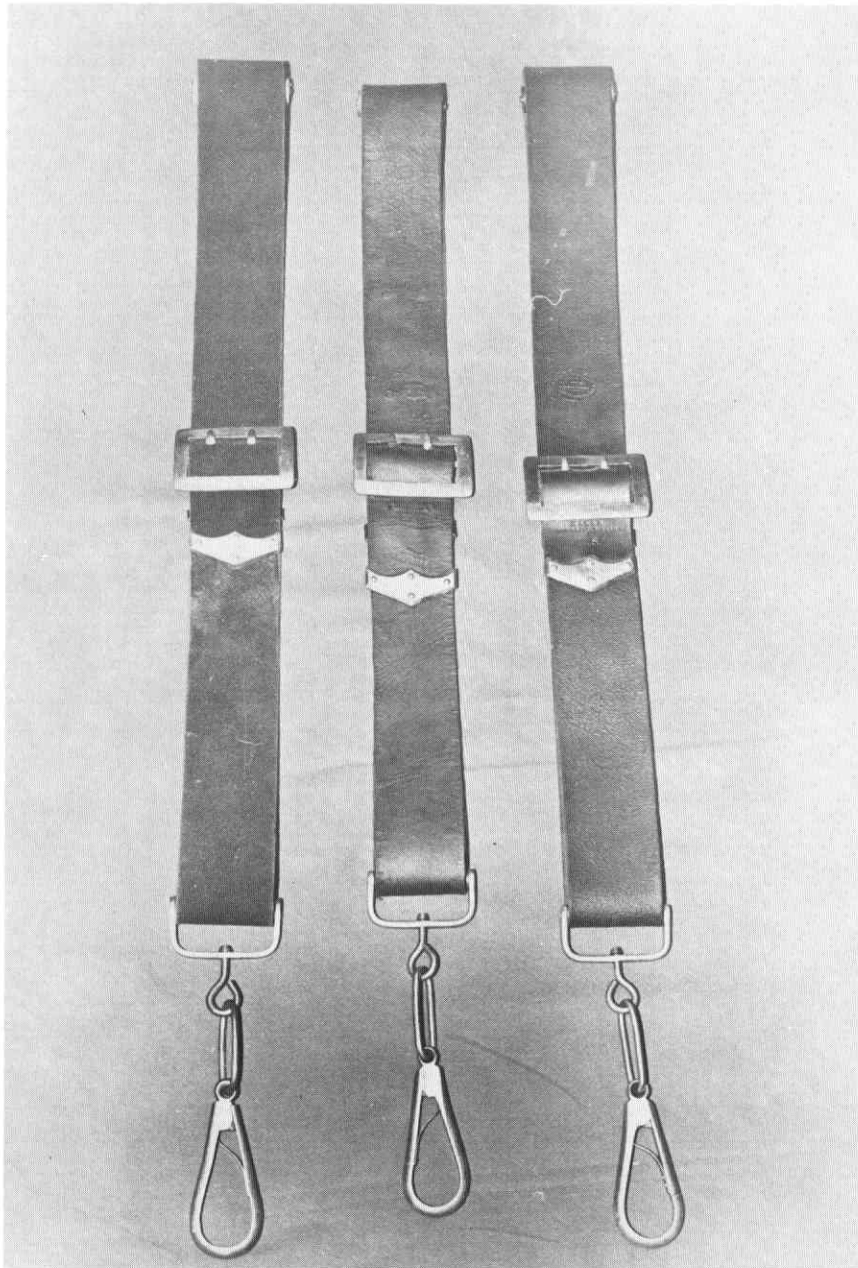


Figure 14. U. S. Cavalry Carbine Slings—An addendum from the Ralph Arnold Collection.

- Left - 1851-1861. Black buff leather, with buckle reverse, and also swivel, stamped "E. GAYLORD/CHICOPEE/MASS," the maker, and "T.J. SHEPARD," the U.S. inspector.
- Center - Civil War period. Bridle leather. The leather belt, buckle obverse, and swivel all stamped "E. GAYLORD/CHICOPEE/MASS, and "T.J. SHEPARD." Marked Gaylord sling buckles are rare and are the only ones found bearing a maker's name.
- Right - Civil War period. Bridle leather. Buckle unmarked but belt carries inspector's cartouche and maker's name "W. H. WILKINSON/MAKER/SPRINGFIELD/MASS/U.S." – important Civil War accoutrement contractor. Swivel is stamped "GAYLORD" and "T.J. SHEPARD," like the other two swivels.