

NOMENCLATURE OF THE BAYONET BELT (Model of 1828 Illustrated)

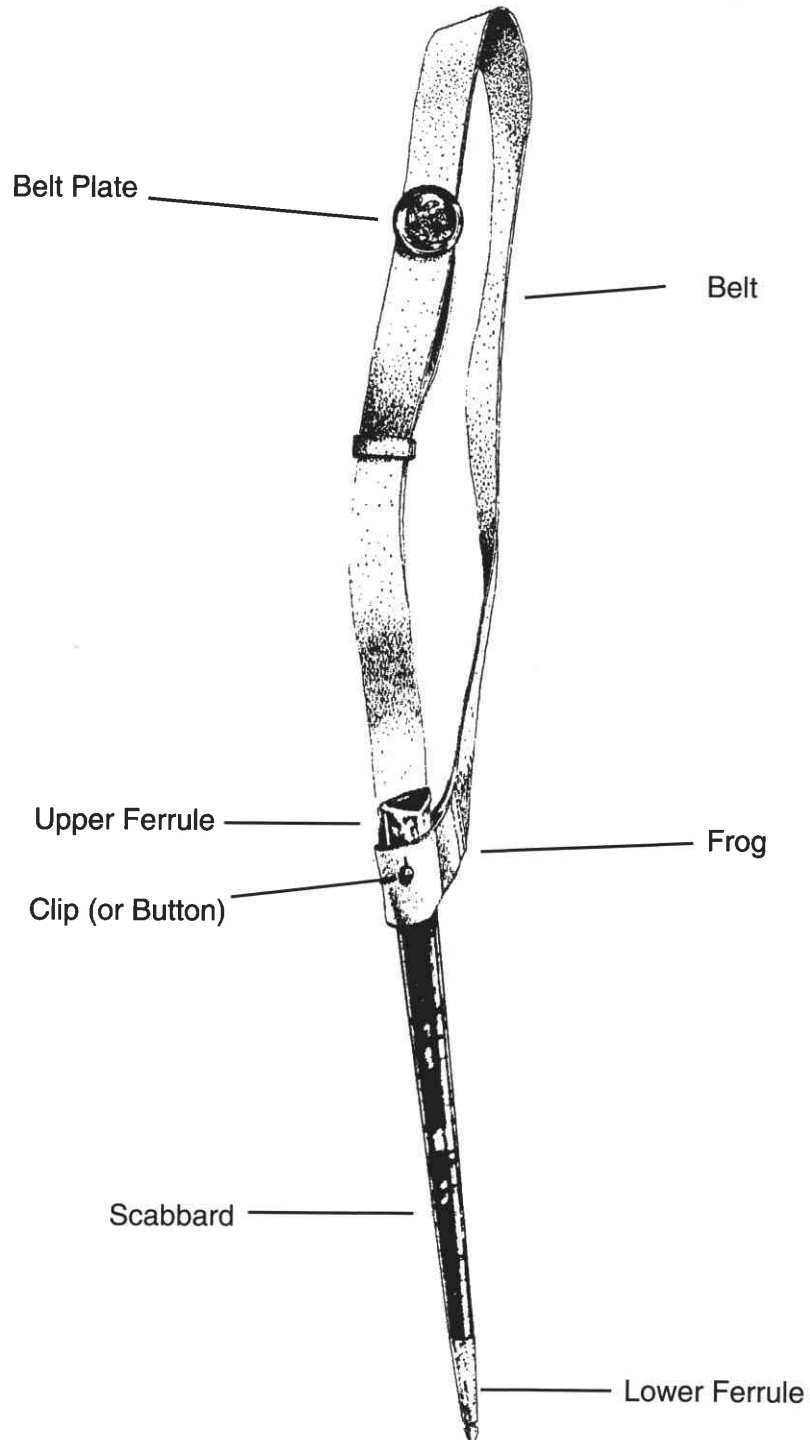


Figure 1

Bayonet Belt Plates of the U.S. Army

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The various insignia used by the Regular Army of the United States has always been of significant interest to historians and collectors. They represented the established pattern of their respective periods, often providing the basis for militia variations and embellishments. Considering the small size of the Regular Army during the first half of the 19th century, and heavy usage to which insignia were subjected, it should not be surprising that the result has been a low survival rate and relative scarcity of many early patterns. Compounding the lack of examples is the difficulty of extracting information from primary sources, particularly the National Archives. Thus the story of insignia changes has unfolded slowly.

This article will document just one aspect of that story, the changes in the patterns of the bayonet belt plates used by the U.S. Army from their gradual reintroduction prior to the War of 1812 until the termination of their use in the 1840s. The plate is just one of the two basic components of the bayonet belt, the other being the belt itself, which terminates in a frog. Although considered a separate item by the Ordnance Department, bayonet scabbards were invariably purchased and manufactured along with the belts as complete sets. The drawing of a Model of 1828 Bayonet Belt (Figure 1) illustrates the basic components of the set.

The bayonet belt, common during the Revolutionary War, was discarded in 1793 when the troops of the new U.S. Legion were ordered to throw away their frogs and scabbards, keeping the bayonets permanently affixed to their muskets.¹ This practice was gradually reversed after numerous complaints from field officers prompted General Wilkerson in 1799 to order "The troops are all to be supplied with Bayonet Scabbards, and those who have not crossbelts are to attach them to their belly boxes, in the manner most convenient."²

As the bayonet belt was reintroduced during the first decade of the 19th century it likely bore a plain



brass plate, oval in shape and with a slightly convex face. Some of these plates may have been reused from the large stocks of surplus Revolutionary War equipment, and at least one known Model of 1808 bayonet belt has such a surplus plate affixed to it.³ These surplus plates generally have two integrally-cast loops through which holes were drilled and a retaining device placed, either a leather thong or wire. They were intended as decoration rather than to adjust the length of the belt, since they had no hook.

The type of plate with integrally cast studs (to which were riveted hexagonal heads) and a hook on the back was definitely procured with the first contracts for Model of 1808⁴ accoutrements. A typical contract of the War of 1812 period for accoutrements between Tench Coxe, Purveyor of Supplies, and Abraham P. Foering & John Welsh, Saddlers of Philadelphia, dated 25 February 1812, includes "four thousand bayonet belts, with two and one half inch oval brass plates with clasps, and scabbards complete..."⁵

A contract with George Green & Son dated 6 March 1812 is only for such plates, specifying "10,000 Brass oval plates and clasps, complete, for Bayonet Belts. To pass inspection, at sixteen cents, 2½ inches wide..."⁶ An accompanying receipt dated 7 April 1812 for \$160.00 acknowledges delivery and payment for 1,000 plates under this contract.⁷

A bayonet belt plate of this type is illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. It is cast brass, 2½" across by 3¼"

This paper was done in cooperation with Mr. Frederick C. Gaede, Fellow of the Company of Military Historians and noted collector of Dingee accoutrements. My collection of plates, his research in the archives, and our combined interests created the paper.

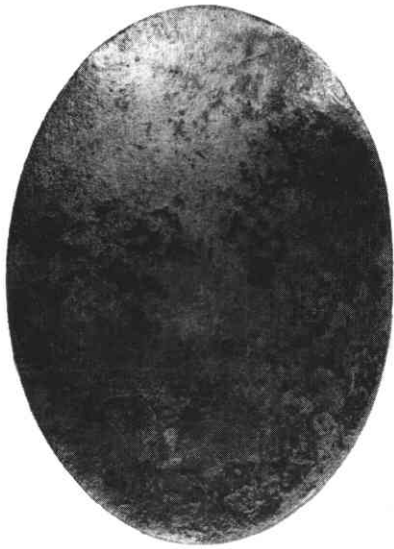


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

high, and has riveted head fasteners on the back. It was found at Fort Mifflin in a context of late 18th and early 19th Century military artifacts. While it could well date from before ca. 1808, it clearly exemplifies the pattern of shoulder belt plate specified in contracts of the War of 1812 period.

More commonly encountered than the 2½" wide plate and known through several dozen examples - many recovered archeologically from 1812 sites - is another plain brass plate illustrated in Figures 4 and 5. While also cast, this pattern tends to be slightly smaller. Theories for this smaller size include shrinkage of the brass after casting, with the 2½" plates having been used as masters; and that, to conserve leather during the War, belts less than 2½" wide were procured with correspondingly narrower plates. No definitive information about the origin of these smaller plates has been discovered from the research done to date. It is of interest to relate that Major Rufus Baker, in charge of the Allegheny Arsenal near Pittsburgh (an arsenal of accoutrement manufacture), noted in August, 1831, that "There are not at this Arsenal any of the new, or present pattern Belt Plates. The only kind I have ever issued to the Militia has been a plain, cast, oval plate, of which we have made many thousands."⁸ Thus it is possible that examples of this pattern plate, heretofore believed to date from the War of 1812 period, could have been manufactured and used by militia units well after the War.

The particular plate used here to illustrate this smaller pattern is 2⅝" wide by 3¼" high, cast and of fine quality. When obtained it was still affixed to a black leather belt and double frog, retaining a standard

bayonet scabbard of the Model of 1808 pattern. A bayonet of the 1808-1812 period with a large "US" stamped into its face also accompanied the set. A mate, on the same pattern belt and with the same scabbard, is now in the collection of Parks Canada. Both were purchased at the Baltimore Gun Show, at different times, and both came originally from New York State.

A shoulder belt plate that was probably considered as a successor to the plain brass plate has been previously known only through approximately a dozen examples that were intended for officer's use. One of these silver plated copper examples was recovered at the site of Fort Atkinson, occupied exclusively by the Regular Army from 1820-1827.⁹ Recently, however, a non-excavated example considered an enlisted plate has been discovered, and is illustrated in Figures 6 and 7. It is manufactured with a stamped pewter face crimped to an iron backing, with a wire fastener applied to the reverse. Measuring 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ " across by 3 $\frac{1}{16}$ " high, this unique plate was obtained in the greater Philadelphia area from an antique dealer.

It is probably not coincidental that this plate was produced from the same die pattern used for the 1814 shako plate.¹⁰ Evidence that white metal plates for use on enlisted soldiers' bayonet belts were at least considered concurrently with the shako plate is provided in the following letter, date 14 January 1815, from Callender Irvine, Commissary General of Purchases, in Philadelphia:

Sir: I have forwarded to your address a Box containing pattern Garments, which I request you will cause to be delivered to Major Genl Scott. The difficulty of procuring white Cap Plates & plates for the Bayonet Belts of Infantry that will bear a polish, has induced me to propose that Brass plates, like those accompanying this letter shall be substituted for white - They are easily cleaned and will at all times have a handsome appearance. I also send a Brass Cockade for Arty. Lay them before Genl Scott with the foregoing explanation.

Respectfully &c . . . "

Although its use as a bayonet belt plate remains to be conclusively documented, this pattern is certainly the most handsome shoulder belt plate associated with the Regular Army.

Although there may be some question about the extent to which the previously discussed plate was distributed as a bayonet belt plate, there is no question about the one following. By December, 1819, an oval brass plate with the raised letters "U.S." was being specified in contracts for infantry accoutrements, as noted in the following letters. On 11 December 1819 Colonel Decius Wadsworth of the Ordnance Depart-



Figure 6

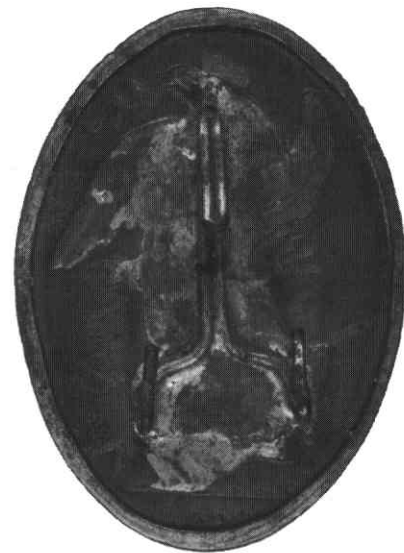


Figure 7

ment, Washington, DC, informed Robert Dingee, an established accoutrement contractor in Yonkers, NY that:

Mr. Armitage of Philadelphia has forwarded to his office a sample of the Breastplate for the Bayonet Scabbard, made of rolled brass with Letters U.S. embossed. This Pattern I think much superior to that in common use. The Hooks by which it is to be fastened to the Belt are much more firm and durable. The Breastplate of the new pattern is offered at 15 cents, being only a trifle dearer than the old.¹²

In increasing a contract to 5,000 sets of infantry accoutrements of 28 December 1819, Wadsworth informed the contractor, J. Lukens & Son of Philadelphia, that "I shall expect the Breastplate will be of rolled Brass according to the pattern forwarded to this Office by Capt. Rees which I understand you have seen."¹³

The plate illustrating this pattern, Figures 8 and 9, was obtained from an old Philadelphia collection. It



Figure 8



Figure 9

measures $2\frac{1}{8}$ " across by 3" high, and has a wire fastener held to the face by a thin layer of poured block tin. Unlike later plates, it is not completely filled in flush with the edge.

However, among the perhaps two dozen known examples of this Model of 1819 bayonet belt plate are two recovered at Ft. Snelling, Minnesota, which began its career as an active military post in 1819 when companies of the 5th U.S. Infantry Regiment began its construction. What is unusual about these two plates is their construction closely follows that of the previously described plate - the sheet brass face is crimped over a flat iron backing piece, to which are soldered the iron wire fasteners.¹⁴ All other known examples have the fasteners retained by block tin, as described above.

The oval brass U.S. plate was destined to remain the Army's bayonet belt plate pattern for only about seven years. Considering the growing popularity of

the eagle as an insignia device it was probably inevitable that it would be introduced - or reintroduced - to the bayonet belt plate. In 1826, Moritz Furst, a medal engraver residing in Philadelphia, traveled to Washington, DC, with the initial samples of the round eagle plate. The evolution of this pattern is well documented in the correspondence of the period, beginning with the following letter from Colonel George Bomford to Lieutenant T. J. Baird, in command of the Frankford Arsenal, dated 14 October 1826:

Sir: A die sinker of Philadelphia, whose name is not at present recollected, recently presented, at this Office, several specimens of plates for belts and caps. He has been authorised to make a few merely for trial. It is proposed to make sixty plates for Bayonet belts, and Non-Commissioned Officers sword belts, made of brass; and the same number of copper plated. They are both to have an impression of an eagle on the face of them; and are to be provided with hooks, on the inside, like the present pattern brass plates, which have the letters U.S. on the front. The oval form, of the present pattern, is not well adapted to the purpose of receiving the figure of an Eagle; for the figure must necessarily be placed in the direction of the longest, or shortest, diameter of the plate; and as the plate passes across the breast in a diagonal direction, the Eagle would not have an erect posture, but would appear to be falling over to one side. For this reason, it is determined to have the hooks on the inside, placed in a direction oblique to the direction of the Eagle, so that when the belt is in its proper place on the soldier, the eagle will be erect.

In order that there may be sufficient space on the inside of the plate, for placing the hooks, the diameter of the plates must be a little greater than the width of the belts; the latter is $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches, the plates should be $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

The yellow plates are to be made of brass of a superior quality, and it is stated, that both the yellow, and white plates, will require nothing more than simply washing with water, to keep them clean and bright.

The person who proposed to make these plates, will call on you for instructions upon the subject; and when they are completed he will deliver them to you. For this parcel he is to receive fifty cents for each; at which rate you will pay him.

When the plates are delivered, you will report the fact, and forward three of each kind to this Office, upon receipt of which, instructions for the disposition of the remainder will be given.

To prevent errors in placing hooks, no more than one or two should be fixed, before submitting them to your examination.

Respectfully, &c...¹⁵

Two weeks later, on 28 October 1828, Baird responded:

Sir: I have given Mr. Furst the necessary instructions about the plates. In your letter you say sixty plates of each kind, for Bayonet & N. Com. Officers Sword Belts. As the latter will I presume be waist Belts the position of the hooks will have to be different. I therefore wish to know the number of each. Mr. Furst is under the impression that you spoke of a small square plate, (with

an Eagle, which he shewed you,) being enlarged for the Sword belts, but your letter saying nothing upon the subject I have concluded you mean the same plate for both. You must be under a mistake relative to the Brass only requiring "washing". He says it was only the white that he meant. The yellow are to be made of Sheet Brass such as the present U.S. plate, which I believe is the best quality of brass that can be found but will require a little Chalk or Whiting to clean it.

Early information upon the subject is desirable as I presume the die is by this time finished, and he is at present at leisure.

I have the honor to be...¹⁶

Bomford replied promptly, four days later to be exact, with the clarifications Baird needed:

Sir: Your letter of the 28th Ult. has been received. The belt-plates may be as follows: Vis.—of the yellow plates let eight be for waist belts, and fifty seven for shoulder belts, making sixty four in all, of the yellow plates. Of the white plates, let six be for the waist, and fifty four for the shoulder belts, making sixty white plates. The waist and shoulder plates may be similar in all respects, except the position of the hooks...

Respectfully &C...¹⁷

A month later Bomford directed that 55 plates be sent to Fortress Monroe to outfit a company of artillery, and 51 plates to St. Louis for a company of infantry, in order to field test the new pattern.¹⁸ Either the test went well, or there was an opportunist at Fortress Monroe, for on 1 January 1827, 55 additional plates, "for the other Light Company of the Regiment"¹⁹, were requested. This was followed on 30 January 1827 by Captain Rufus L. Baker's request for "500 breast plates (new pattern) [for] issue to the troops composing the Arty. School of practice".²⁰

Bomford responded by directing Baird on 10 February 1827 to "procure 500 breast plates from Mr. Furst, of the same pattern as those formerly ordered..., except that all the hooks should be placed as to answer for shoulder belts..."²¹ Baird confirmed that the order had been placed with Furst and accepted at 31 cents each on 16 February 1827.²²

By separate letter on the same day Baird provided to Bomford the following comments on the new plates:

Sir: I have been reflecting upon the nature of the plated belt plate furnished some time since, and have become satisfied, in my own mind, that the rough usage to which such things are liable to in the hands of soldiers, in Guard rooms, in Marches &c will render the Copper visible [sic] in a very short time. I have therefore had the enclosed plate struck upon a Semi metal, which will bear rubbing, retains its polish pretty well, and will, I think, match the buttons and other ornaments better than the plated.

They will perhaps cost a few cents more than the others, but this will be more than balanced by the wear. These suggestions are however only respectfully

submitted to your judgment.

I am very respectfully...²³

The formula for "Semi metal" is provided in a letter from Major G. Talcott, commanding the Watervliet Arsenal: "They are 12 parts pure tin 1½ lead and ½ Bismuth which was found to be the best composition after many trials."²⁴

There does not appear to be any report from St. Louis on how the white plates fared in the hands of troops, nor any additional mention of the subject in the correspondence examined until 18 months later. On 2 August 1828 Robert Dingee was given a contract for accoutrements, among which were

5,000 Bayonet belts, 2¼ inches wide,...5,000 Bayonet scabbards, 2,000 of which are to be mounted with brass, the balance of them to be mounted with semi-metal (white) the lower band to be 3 inches, and the upper band two and a half inches long, and to be varnished outside and inside...²⁵

Ordered along with this new Model of 1828 belt and scabbard (which replaced those of the Model of 1808) were "5,000 Belt plates, 2½ inches in diameter, 2,000 of which are to be made of sheet brass the balance of semi-metal..."²⁶

Records accompanying this 2 August contract indicate through September, 1829, 3,190 yellow (sheet brass) and 3,660 white metal plates were delivered, at 18 cents and 23 cents respectively.²⁷ It appears that with this contract sufficient plates were procured to begin a general issue to the Army. It is the only known contract for white metal plates after Furst's, although in an exchange of correspondence in August, 1829, about poor quality white metal plates Major Talcott states: "I cannot believe that the belt plates made at his post [Watervliet Arsenal] are objectionable."²⁸

Four years later, on 10 March 1832, an additional 3,000 "belt-plates, brass" were ordered from Dingee, to be "of good substantial Sheet brass and filled in with block tin, and in point of workmanship equal to those delivered by the said Robert Dingee under his contract with the United States dated the 2nd day of August 1828."²⁹ The price dropped to 15 cents each. With this documentation the 1834 *Regulations for the Government of the Ordnance Department* listing of the pattern for the Army at that time as "belt-plate, round, brass, with eagle — 17 cents"³⁰ is clearly just confirming what had been introduced 8 years before. The familiar pattern illustrated in Figures 10 and 11, used in various configurations by the Army for almost 50 years, thus began as an experiment in 1826.

Numerous examples of these 2½" round eagle plates are known in brass, with possibly the earliest example in the National Museum of American History collection and illustrated as Figure 93 in Campbell & Howell's book, *American Military Insignia, 1800 – 1851*.³¹ With the brass face crimped over a tin back it could represent a pre-production piece intended to obtain approval of the pattern, and its certainly predates the construction specified in Dingee's second contract for this plate.

Very few examples are known in white metal: one is illustrated as Figure 44 in Sydney Kerksis' book, *Plates and Buckles of the American Military, 1795–1874*,³² and another here in Figures 12 and 13. Acquired in 1983 from an antique sale in North Carolina, it bears the backmark of "T. Smith N-York", whose connection with the Ordnance Department (if any) has not been established.

Returns published in the *American State Papers* for the fourth quarter of 1834 indicate a total of 1,644 yellow and 350 white metal belt plates in the field with Regular Army infantry companies.³³ The use of white plates is not noted thereafter (nor are they listed in the 1834 *Ordnance Regulations*), indicating they were most likely being phased out as existing stocks could

be issued.

With the discontinuance of the bayonet belt, following the May, 1840, recommendations of the Ordnance Board,³⁴ the round brass eagle plate continued to be manufactured, but with two looped wire fasteners for attachment to the cartridge box belt (Figure 14). It also continued to be issued with the three prong wire fasteners, as illustrated in Figure 15, for use with NCO shoulder belts carrying the new Model of 1840 NCO Sword.

But the days of the bayonet belt and white buff crossbelts were numbered in the Regular Army, and tied to their demise was that of the bayonet belt plate.

NOTES

1. United States Military Academy Library, Orderly Books for the United States Legion, 1792-1794. Volume 5, 9 October 1793.
2. National Archives, RG 94, Office of the Adjutant General, Wilkinson Order Books, Microfilm Edition M654, 20 April 1799.
3. Frederick C. Gaede, "U.S. Infantry Accoutrements: Model of 1808", *Military Collector & Historian*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 3 (Fall, 1985), p. 104.
4. The word "Pattern" is more correct for the period, but for the sake of consistency with numerous arms publications which have used the word "Model", and because "Model" was introduced to accoutrement nomenclature at a later date, it is used here.
5. National Archives, RG 92, Office of the Quartermaster General, Consolidated Correspondence Files, "Foering, Abraham P."



Figure 10

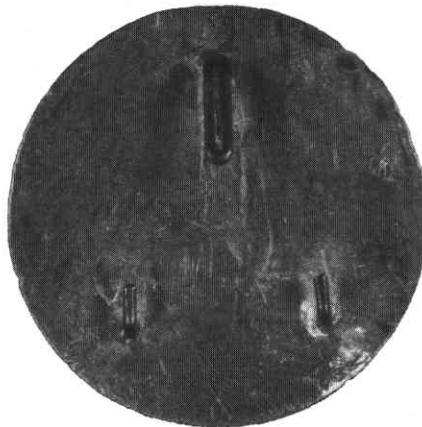


Figure 11



Figure 12

6. Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *The Papers of Tench Coxe*, Microfilm Edition, Series 1, Reel 32.

7. *Ibid.*

8. United States Military Academy Library, Rufus Baker Papers, Letter Books for Allegheny Arsenal, 1829-1839, 26 August 1831.

9. Nebraska State Historical Society, *Publications in Anthropology*, Number 8, *Archeological Investigations at Fort Atkinson (25WN9) Washington County, Nebraska, 1956-1971* (Lincoln: 1979), p. 51.

10. J. Duncan Campbell and Edgar M. Howell, *American Military Insignia, 1850-1851* (United States National Museum [Smithsonian Institution] Bulletin 235, Washington, D.C.; 1963), pp. 15-16.

11. National Archives, RG 92, Commissary General of Purchases, Letters Sent Book "D", 14 January 1815.

12. National Archives, RG 156, Office of the Chief of Ordnance [hereafter NA, RG, OCO], Letters Sent, Book 6, 11 December 1819.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Personal communication from Mr. Stephen E. Osman, Program Manager, Historic Fort Snelling, MN.

15. NA, RG 156, Entry 3, OCO, Letters Sent, Volume 12, 14 October 1826.

16. NA, RG 156, Entry 21, OCO, Letters Received, 28 October 1826.

17. NA, RG 156, Entry 3, OCO, Letters Sent, Volume 12, 1 November 1826.

18. *Ibid.*, 30 November 1826.

19. NA, RG 156, Entry 21, OCO, Letters Sent, 10 February 1827.

20. *Ibid.*, 30 January 1827.

21. NA, RG 156, Entry 3, OCO, Letters Sent, 10 February 1827.

22. NA, RG 156, Entry 21, OCO, Letters Received, 16 February 1827.

23. *Ibid.*, 16 February 1827.

24. *Ibid.*, 26 August 1829.

25. NA, RG 156, Entry 78, OCO, Contracts for Ordnance and Ordnance Supplies, Volume 1,2 August 1828.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. NA, RG 156, Entry 3, OCO, Letters Sent, Volume 16, 26 August 1829.

29. NA, RG 156, Entry 78, Contracts for Ordnance and Ordnance Supplies, Volume 2, 10 March 1832.

30. *Regulations for the Government of the Ordnance Department* (Washington, DC: 1834), p. 53.

31. Campbell and Howell, *American Military Insignia*, p. 48.

32. Sydney C. Kerksis, *Plates and Buckles of the American Military, 1795-1874* (Stone Mountain, GA: 1974), p. 50.

33. *American State Papers*, Military Affairs (Washington, D.C.: 1860), Volume V, p. 336.

34. Roy T. Huntington, *Accoutrements of the United States Infantry, Riflemen, and Dragoons, 1834-1839*, (Museum Restoration Service, Historical Arms Series No. 20, Alexandria Bay, NY: 1987), p.23.



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15