

☆1839 FORAGE CAP☆

SOMETIME DURING THE WINTER OF 1838–1839 Major General Alexander Macomb, Commanding the Army, determined on a change in the leather forage cap which had been regulation since 1832. Macomb had always shown an unusual interest in all items of the Army's dress, but no reasons for this particular change have come to light. His decision was probably influenced, however, by the rather unattractive appearance of the leather cap, no matter what its practicality, plus the popularity of the flat, cloth visored cap, similar to the 1825–1833 pattern, in both the British Army as an undress hat and American racing and hunting circles as an informal sporting or "hacking" cap.¹⁴⁸

Following a tour of inspection of a number of installations in the northeast, Macomb went to Florida in the late winter of 1839 where a good portion of the Army was struggling with the knotty problem of the removal of the Seminoles. Sometime before his departure for Florida he had proposed a cap change to the Secretary of War and been told to go ahead. On 17 April he wrote Major Levi Whiting, then head of the Clothing Bureau, inclosing drawings and a brief description of a new cap he had in mind. The officers' model was to be of dark blue cloth with a chin strap of black patent leather and a silk oil cloth cover for bad weather. Enlisted personnel were to be issued a cap of similar design and cloth, but without ornament except for colored cap bands, red for artillery, white for infantry, yellow for dragoons, and sky blue for ordnance. Officers' ornaments were to be embroidered on separate pieces of cloth which might be put on or taken off at pleasure. He instructed Whiting to contact Mr. St. John in New York and have him make pattern caps for officers.¹⁴⁹

Whiting replied that Macomb's drawings had been copied at the Topographical Bureau, approved by the Secretary of War, and were then being lithographed. The Secretary had decided that the caps of the officers

and men were to be alike, that "bands"—presumably the colored bands—were to be added to the officers' caps, and that the ornaments were to be of metal rather than embroidery.¹⁵⁰ The lithographs (fig. 34), which were in color, were forwarded to St. John with the request that pattern caps be furnished the Commissary General of Purchases so that he might have patterns made of the enlisted men's model to aid him in making his estimates for the next clothing year.¹⁵¹

The previous July the former Bureau of Topographical Engineers had been made an independent corps of the Army, and during the fall and winter a distinctive uniform for it had been under consideration by the War Department. In April 1839, Colonel John Abert, Chief of the Corps, submitted to the Secretary of War a description of the uniform complete with carefully delineated drawings of its components and trimmings, one of which (fig. 35) illustrated a forage cap almost identical to that in the lithograph prepared for Macomb.¹⁵² Since both were prepared for lithographing at the Bureau, the two caps must be considered the same except for the cap band. In May the uniform regulation for the new Corps was approved and published. It described a forage cap as follows:

Of dark blue cloth, with an oil silk cover, to be worn in rainy weather; black patent leather visor; cap band of black silk and worsted lace, two and one-fourth inches wide, with oak leaves and acorn figure. Device in front: a shield between two oak leaves, wrought of the same material and corresponding in form with the device at the bottom of the skirt of the coat. The whole to correspond with the pattern to be deposited in the Topographical Bureau. The forage cap must always be worn with the frock coat¹⁵³

Although the cloth forage cap was approved in principle before summer and patterns of the officers' model had been made and forwarded to uniform makers, it was not until December that the final details



Figure 34.—Proposed Forage Cap, 1839. War Department lithograph. National Archives.

of the enlisted men's model were settled. The caps were to be made of a waterproof cloth developed by Samuel Lawrence of Lowell, Massachusetts, with a "cape" attached to the rear which could be lowered to cover the neck in bad weather. There were also several small changes in the chin strap.¹⁵⁴ Contracts were let early in 1840 at an average price of \$1.30, although no caps were to be issued during the clothing year ending 31 October 1840.¹⁵⁵ The pattern was also adopted for the Corps of Cadets at West Point and the cap's price set at \$2.34.¹⁵⁶

Irvine experienced considerable difficulty with the contractors of these caps—he had had none with the dress cap makers—and in May 1841 he decided to have them made, as the clothing for the Army was, by outside seamstresses on a piecework basis, the leather trimmings to be bought on contract and added at the arsenal.¹⁵⁷ The "waterproofed" cloth furnished by

Lawrence also caused difficulties, and Irvine dropped him as a supplier and went to other sources for "waterproofed" fabric.¹⁵⁸

Colored bands for forage caps were called for in the Macomb lithographs for both officers and enlisted men. The two extant copies of the print, however, carry the handwritten comment "These bands for non-comd. officers and soldiers only," and one the comment "No Bands for Officers." A letter from Major Whiting to a Mr. B. de la Pierce of New York states: "You will perceive by the written remarks that the colored bands have been dispensed with. . . ." ¹⁵⁹ De la Pierce was a well-known hatter and uniform maker who apparently specialized in work for officers. There is no record of his having contracted to make caps for enlisted men. It must be inferred that Whiting meant bands were dispensed with for officers' caps only. No photograph of an officer wearing this headpiece with such a band

is known. On the other hand, a number of contemporary Mexican War illustrations show enlisted men wearing bands of white, red, and yellow. A careful search of Quartermaster General records for the period reveals no purchase of any material for such specific use.¹⁶⁰

Illustrative of the care with which clothing estimates were made at this period is the following list of components and estimated costs of the forage cap in 1843-1844:¹⁶¹

Forage Cap—

7	inches 6/4 waterproof blue cloth	\$.53 ¹⁷ / ₃₆
9 ¹ / ₂	inches 7/8 muslin, unbleached	17 ¹ / ₁₂
2	skeins blue thread no. 35	11 ¹ / ₂
1 ¹ / ₁₀	sheet of wadding	11 ¹ / ₂₄
2	buttons	15 ³ / ₇₂
3 ³ / ₄	yards black galoon	15 ¹ / ₁₂
1	yard cane	21 ¹ / ₉₆
3 ³ / ₁₀	oz. curled hair	73 ¹ / ₁₆₀
	Leather trimmings	22 ¹ / ₂
	Cuttings & making	18
	Actual cost	\$1.017 ¹⁵ / ₁₅
	Est. cost	1.011 ¹ / ₂

Another aspect must be considered. A number of these caps have been examined, all from the War Department Collection and thus assumed to be enlisted issue items. Some definitely show signs of wear, but none shows any evidence of ever having had a band attached, and all have the folded "cape" which could be let down to cover the neck in bad weather. Because of the cape and the positioning of the buttons at either end of the chin strap, the band would have had to go under the cape, thus largely negating its effectiveness as a distinguishing device. Oddly enough, the one known authenticated officer's cap (fig. 36)¹⁶² and all the caps shown in contemporary photographs of officers are capeless (see also fig. 37). However, all the enlisted men's caps examined have capes, including one definite pattern piece. The best explanation for the appearance of the bands in so many contemporary illustrations is that they were secured by individual troop units and worn without War Department authorization. A known instance is the Regimental Band of the 1st Dragoons, which was authorized by the regimental commander "a double stripe (like Sergeants) on their

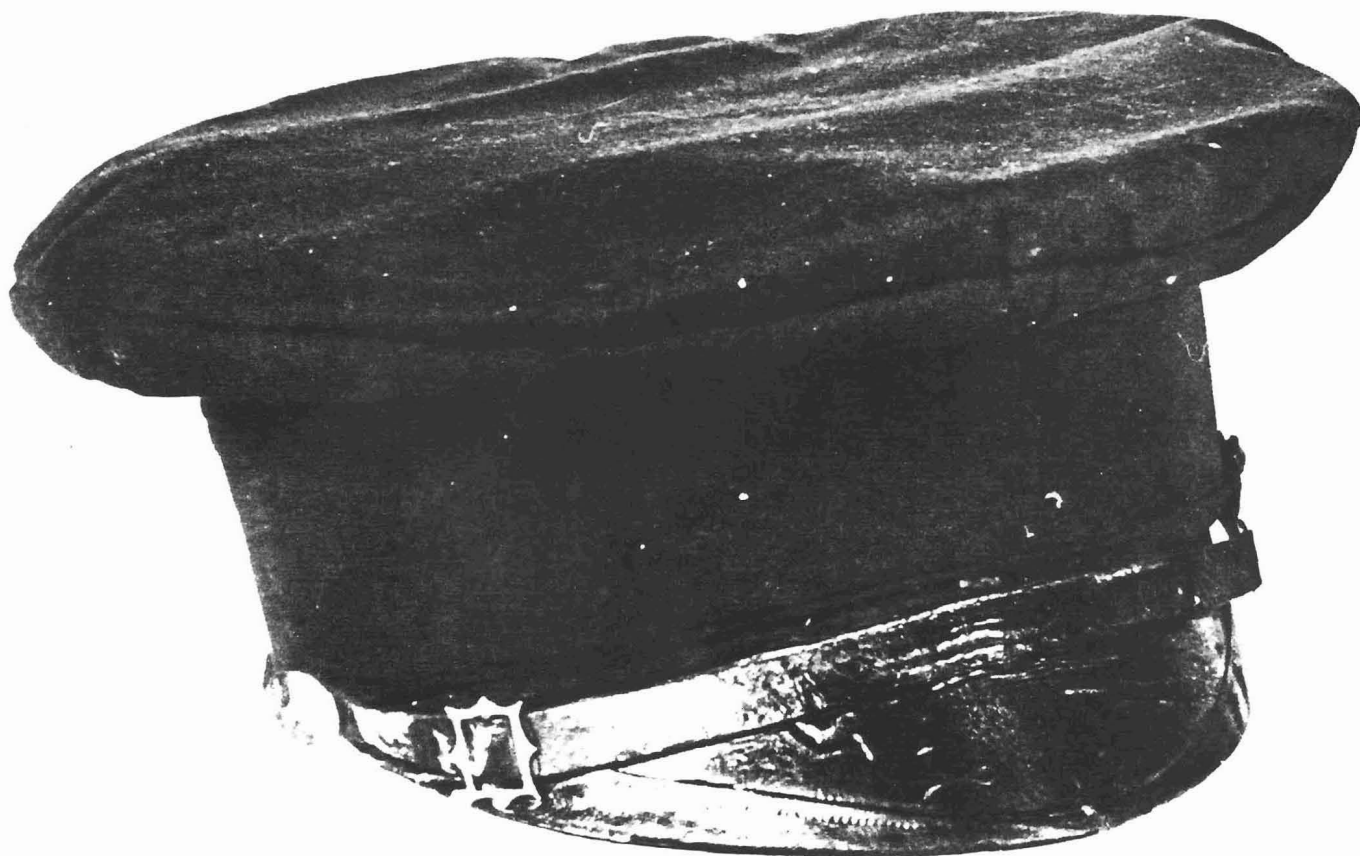


Figure 36.—Officer's Forage Cap, 1839-1851. West Point Museum.



Figure 37.—Lt. B. W. Armstrong, 1st Dragoons, ca. 1845. National Archives.

Wool Overalls and two yellow bands of worsted or cloth around the Cap with the number of the Regiment on a blue ground in front.”¹⁶³ It should be noted that while an organizational band wore the uniform of the regiment or corps to which it belonged, the commanding officer might purchase from post or company funds “such additions in ornaments as he may judge proper.”¹⁶⁴

The cadets at the Military Academy undoubtedly wore a band on their forage caps even though the regulars apparently did not. Since changes in cadet dress were generally settled—at least during this period—by direct correspondence between the Superintendent and the Secretary of War without reference to the Commanding General or the Quartermaster General,¹⁶⁵ this is not unusual. One such band has survived (fig. 38), worn by General George M. McClellan when a cadet 1842–1846. It is of black velvet, 2 inches wide and the edges turned under and tacked, 22½ inches in circumference.¹⁶⁶ The device “U S M A” in modified Old English script lies within a wreath of laurel with palm fronds on either side, the band of gold embroidery of highest quality and workmanship.

Probably as a concession to the bitter winter weather at West Point, the cadets were originally allowed to add a band of fur to the caps, a practice discontinued by order in 1843.¹⁶⁷ As in the case of the leather forage cap, the cadets had to be told how to wear the new one, a number of them having removed the stiffening of the crown to give a more rakish appearance.¹⁶⁸ It should be noted that no extant photograph of a cadet wearing this cap shows the presence of a cape as on the enlisted models. The order published in 1846 describing the dress of the newly organized Company of

Sappers, Miners and Pontoniers, the “Engineer Soldiers”, prescribed for wear on the forage cap a “band of black cotton velvet with a yellow castle in front according to drawing and pattern in clothing bureau”.¹⁶⁹

When the 1844 Uniform Board met it considered carefully both the quality of the forage cap and the quantity issued. It was the considered opinion of the members that (as had proved true with the 1825 pattern) one cap issued every five years was not sufficient. They recommended that one cap “as improved by Col. Stanton” be issued annually unless an oil cloth cover was provided (a commentary on the “water-proofed” cloth used). With the oil cloth cover, provided, caps should be issued three times in the five year period.¹⁷⁰ It is not known what Stanton’s improvements were, but they apparently involved both the quality and the pattern.¹⁷¹ Despite the recommendation of the board the cap continued to be issued only once in five years.

The caps that have been examined, supplemented by the officer’s specimen (fig. 36)¹⁷² fall into three basic types within the general pattern. Type one (figs. 39–41), which in profile is most similar to those illustrated in the lithographs, has a sharply pointed, almost perpendicular patent leather visor, 2½ inches at its widest and 10½ inches from side to side, welted to the headband with leather. A patent leather sliding chin strap immediately above the visor terminates in two brass general service buttons. The whole of the cap proper is of dark blue wool cloth. The crown is 10½ inches in diameter, with the rise to the crown of four pieces 2 inches high, welted to the crown. The headband is 2½ inches wide of one-piece construction. Attached to it is the “cape,” 4 inches wide when unfolded, buttoned to the headband at the chin strap



Figure 38.—U.S. Military Academy Forage Cap Band, ca. 1842–1846.



Figure 39.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 1.

terminals, and tied across the front with black silk ribbons when folded. The whole of the interior of the cap is lined with unbleached muslin or with glazed cotton, with cotton batting between the lining and the crown and the rise. The headband is lined in front with pasteboard to give a firm seat for the insignia. The sweatband is of soft black patent leather. All but one specimen has a cane grommet in the welt between the crown and the rise. One specimen carries the remains of a round red wax seal on the sweatband

indicating that it was probably a pattern piece.

Type two (figs. 42–46) is basically the same in appearance as type one except that the visor, rather than pointed and nearly perpendicular, is more nearly horizontal and rounded. The blue cloth is of a somewhat heavier quality, the crown is not padded, the padding between the lining and the rise is of horsehair, and the headband is reinforced all around with leather rather than pasteboard. Whether these changes constitute Colonel Stanton's improvements is not known.



Figure 40.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 1.



Figure 41.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 1.



Figure 42.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 2.



Figure 43.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 2.



Figure 44.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 2.

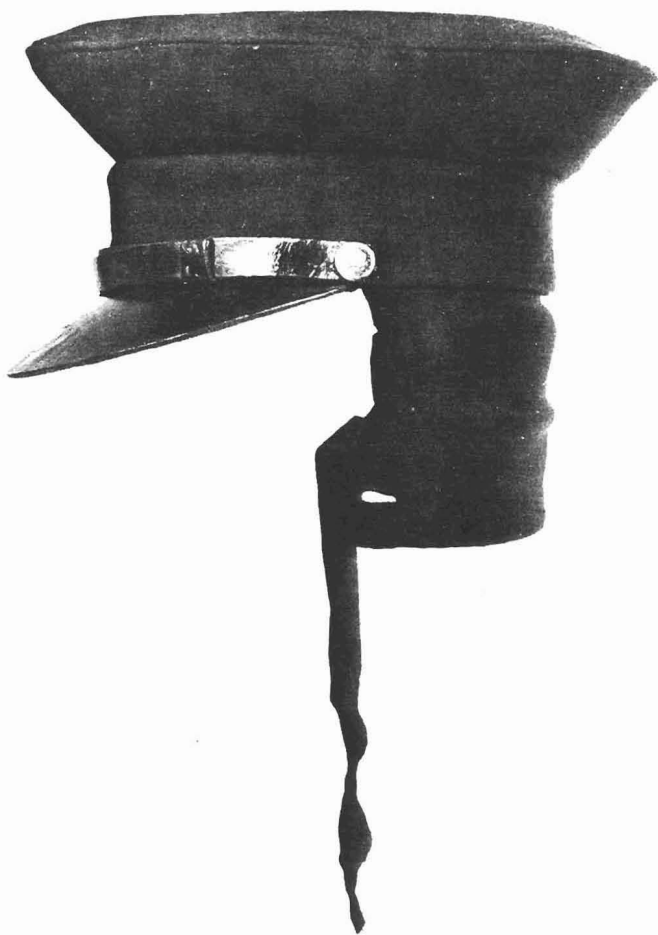


Figure 45.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 2.

Type three is identical to type two except that it carries no chin strap, and the cape, when folded, since it could not be buttoned to the chin strap buttons, is attached by means of a metal hook fitting into a threaded eye (fig. 47). This type is the latest of the three, dating no earlier than 1851, the cloth portions being machine-stitched throughout.¹⁷³ None of the specimens bears a maker's mark and, with the exception of the pattern piece, must be assumed to postdate Irvine's decision to manufacture the caps at Schuylkill.

The caps worn by officers in the several extant photographs and the Duncan cap in the West Point Museum are all type one. The only difference between this cap and that of the enlisted men is in the stitched visor.

The "water-proofed" feature of the cloth is interesting. If it was developed by Lawrence, who first submitted samples to the War Department, he did not patent it. The waterproofing was a method of treating

the cloth with a compound (ingredients unknown) rather than a method of weaving, for Lawrence also "water-proofed" cotton drilling and paper, the latter proposed for use in making cartridges.¹⁷⁴ In any case, the process was not successful as evidenced by the numerous complaints to the 1844 Uniform Board and the board's recommendations that an oil cloth cover be provided.

NOTES

¹⁴⁸ Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 140, and pl. 12. For an excellent representation of the "hacking" cap, see lithograph "Peytona and Fashion's Great Match," H. R. Robinson, New York, 1845, in Peters Coll., Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴⁹ Macomb to Whiting, 24 Apr. 1839, LR, Cloth. Bur., tray 65, RG 92, NA.

¹⁵⁰ Whiting to Macomb, 17 May 1839, LS, Cloth. Bur., RG 92, NA.

¹⁵¹ Two copies of this lithograph are extant: in Records of the Office, Chief of Engineers, Record Group 77 (hereinafter cited as RG 77), drawer 173-3B, Audio-Visual Branch, NA, and in CG of P, LR, tray 69, RG 92, NA. For these pattern caps see Whiting to St. John, 31 May 1839, LS, Cloth. Bur.; Irvine to Maj. Lorenzo Thomas, acting head of the Cloth. Bur., 2 July 1839, LS, CG of P; Thomas to Irvine, 5 July 1839, LS, Cloth. Bur.—all RG 92, NA. The clothing year ran from 1 Nov. to 31 Oct.

¹⁵² Drawer 178-9, RG 77, Audio-Visual Branch, NA.

¹⁵³ L. Thomas, AAG, to Col. J. J. Abert, 7 May 1839; Abert to Officers of Corps of Topographical Engineers, 8 May 1839—both in T.E., LS, Microfilm Roll 66, RG 77, NA. The actual order, undated, is found between the entries for 8 and 9 May.

¹⁵⁴ Whiting to Irvine, 4 Nov. 1839, LS, Cloth. Bur.; Irvine to Whiting, 8 Nov. 1839, LS, CG of P; Whiting to Irvine, 23 Dec. 1839, LS, Cloth. Bur.—all RG 92, NA.

¹⁵⁵ Irvine to Ebenezer Drury, Phila., 16 Mar. 1840, LS, CG of P; contract with John T. Holloway, Phila., in Irvine to D. L. Brown, a cloth manufacturer, 16 Apr. 1840, LS, CG of P; Whiting to Col. John Walbach, 4th Arty., 18 Sept. 1839, LS, Cloth. Bur.; Whiting to Lt. Col. Alexander Fanning, 4th Arty., 9 Sept. 1840, LS, Cloth. Bur.—all RG 92, NA. The new caps were actually issued in limited quantity as early as September, probably to recruits. See Irvine to E. S. Fayssoux, MSK at Phila., 19 and 22 Sept. 1840, CG of P, LS, RG 92, NA.

¹⁵⁶ "Proceedings of Board of Inspectors of Clothing," 1840, MS book in USMA Library. The difference in price between the enlisted and cadet models (the latter included 34 cents profit for the storekeeper) indicates the difference in quality between officers' or cadet caps as opposed to those of enlisted men.

¹⁵⁷ Irvine to M. Howard, Jan.-Apr. 1841, in CG of P, LS; Irvine to W. H. Scovill, button manufacturer, 10

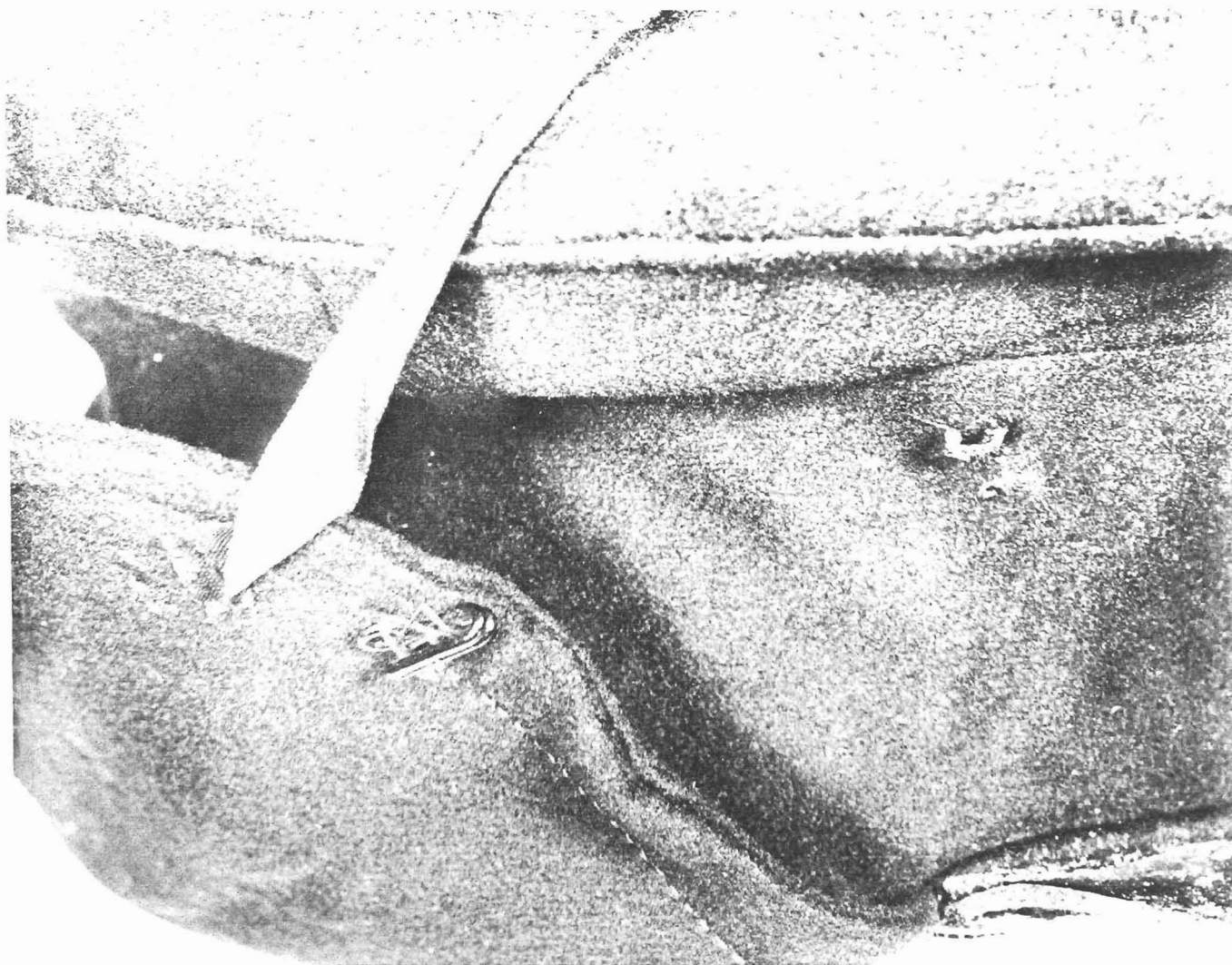


Figure 47.—Forage Cap, 1839–1851, Type 3. Detail.

May 1841, CG of P, LS; Irvine to John Gether, Cloth. Estab., 8 May 1841, CG of P, LS; John T. Holloway to Irvine, 16 June 1841, CCF (caps)—all RG 92, NA.

¹⁵⁸ Irvine to Brown, Phila., 16 Apr. 1840, CG of P, LS; Irvine to Brown, Phila., 11 May 1841, CG of P, LS; Irvine to Francis S. Skinner, Boston, 11 May 1841, CG of P, LS; Tyson to Wm. Phillips, 24 Dec. 1841, CG of P, LS—all RG 92, NA.

¹⁵⁹ Whiting to B. de la Pierce, 25 Aug. 1841, Cloth. Bur., LS, RG 92, NA.

¹⁶⁰ Estimate of the Quantity and Price of Materials and the Cost of Cutting and Making Clothing for the Army of the United States for the Years 1843–1846, CG of P, 2 vols. (Masterson 67), RG 92, NA. These books list in minute detail every type of material used in the manufacture of forage caps. Other records investigated—yearly price lists, contracts, etc.—also fail to mention the bands.

¹⁶¹ Estimate of the Quantity and Price of Materials . . . , op. cit.

¹⁶² Formerly belonging to Lt. James Duncan, 2d Arty., an 1834 USMA graduate. USMA collections.

¹⁶³ Order No. 26, H.Q. 1st Dragoons, Fort Leavenworth [Kansas], 31 Dec. 1846, in U.S. Army Comds., Regtl. Records, Order Book, H.Q. 1st Drags., 13 Jan. 1841–18 Apr. 1850, p. 147, RG 98, NA.

¹⁶⁴ *General Regulations for the Army* (Washington, 1841), p. 392.

¹⁶⁵ There are numerous letters concerning cadet dress between Supt. Delafield (1838–1845) and the Sec. of War in various files in the National Archives.

¹⁶⁶ This would make it fit either a size-two or size three cap. For sizes and diameters of headgear, see, for instance, contract with H. Cressman, 23 Mar. 1843, CCF (Cressman), RG 92, NA.

¹⁶⁷ "Proceedings of Board of Inspectors of Clothing, Jan. 1842," MSS in USMA library. Order No. 4, H.Q. Corps of Cadets, 3 Apr. 1843, in *ibid*.

¹⁶⁸ Order No. 31, H.Q. Corps of Cadets, 7 July 1842, in *ibid*. The order not only forbade the removal of the stiffening but also ordered the cadets to replace it or purchase a new cap.

¹⁶⁹ G.O. 18, H.Q. of the Army, 4 June 1846, RG 94, NA.

¹⁷⁰ Uniform Board Report, 27 Apr. 1844, A.G. Doc. File B 136, 1844, Box 150, RG 94, NA.

¹⁷¹ Jesup to Capt. J. B. Scott, 4th Arty., 13 Apr. 1844, Cloth. Bk., LS, RG 92, NA.

¹⁷² There are also several period photographs of officers wearing this cap.

¹⁷³ The sewing machine is generally considered to have come into commercial use in 1850. But as late as 1861 all work at the Schuylkill Arsenal or under its supervision was done by hand, with the exception of cloth portions of caps which were machine stitched. See Capt. Roger Jones, Asst. QM to Quartermaster General M. C. Meigs, 28 June 1861, CCF (Schuylkill Arsenal), RG 92, NA.

¹⁷⁴ Irvine to Whiting, 7 Dec. 1839; Irvine to David Brown, Phila., 11 May 1841; Irvine to Francis Skinner, Boston, 11 May 1841—all CG of P, LS, RG 92, NA; Contract No. 31, 25 Feb. 1842, with Paul Thurlo, House Doc. 68, 27th Cong., 3rd Sess. (Serial 420).