

From the Archives of “The Light” Newsletter of the 5th MI, Co. K

Infantry Waist Belts Will Eichler

I promised you last month that I would share with you some of the research that I've been doing catching up on the army waist belt. Well, here's the short version. The army issued their belts with keepers, or ways of holding the end to the belt. We are used to seeing keepers made of brass. It is like the belts most of wear. It is also the “5th Approved” belt on our guidelines. This is correct if we are portraying events that happened after the middle of 1863. There is a little debate in the scholarly world, but we know the keeper went into production sometime in the first half of 1863. When you consider it takes time to get the new belt from the arsenal to be issued in the field, we can safely say the first guys were just getting them at the time of Gettysburg. Out west, it would have most likely been even a little longer.

So what was used before the brass keeper? It was a simple leather loop. Check out Kurt or Beau's belt to see what they looked like. They were a pain to use, which is one reason the army might have moved away from. It takes a little learning to slip the belt plate through the loop (depending on the maker). Kurt modified his to make it easier. My early war belt is on order and we'll see how it comes in.

The most common leather for an early war belt is Buff. In this case, buff denotes a tanning process, not a color. The belts were blacked. Later, waxed leather was used. It is a little easier (read that cheaper) to make, but still had the look of buff leather. Both of these had the rough side of the leather out. Last came grain leather. We see a lot of this in re-enacting today. The tanning process leaves the leather smooth and it appears shiny in CDV's of the time.

The final piece of the belt to talk about is the buckle. Early in the war the buckle used is now called the “puppy-paw” buckle. Turn your buckle over and look at the two pieces that grasp the leather on the side you don't remove from the belt. They either look like two puppy paws or two arrowheads. You can tell which one you have. If you are building up an early war belt (1861-at least 1863) you should have a puppy paw buckle.

There you have it, in a concise version. Why do I bring it up? Our goal as leaders in the 5th is to help guide you to kits that will allow you to go to any event in the nation and step right into the ranks. Several of us were talking about going to a living history of 2nd Bull Run on the actual battlefield this summer. It fell through based on the date. However, as we read through the uniform requirements, we ran into the issue of the waist belt with a leather keeper. While I don't think we need to amend the guidelines to show a new “5th Approved” please keep adding an early war waist belt in mind as you look for cool new ways to improve your kit. Have a great month and I'll see you in Indiana!