Uniforms of Conflict

The Civil War and Standardized Sizing · 1861–1865

> **Content note:** This chapter includes accounts of people killed, injured, or held captive. Preview this story before class: The Spread of 'Shoddy'.

GUIDING QUESTION

Did the Civil War's demand for uniforms modernize American industry, or did it mainly reward profiteers?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 1861 to 1865, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 2 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Shoddy, Quartermaster, Ready-made clothing, Anthropometry, Depot.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 5 (1844–1877)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)

5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions
15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (2 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket

Day 2 (50 minutes)

5 min · Key terms matching
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions
25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms

Shoddy: E · Quartermaster: D · Ready-made clothing: A · Anthropometry: B · Depot: C

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.
2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

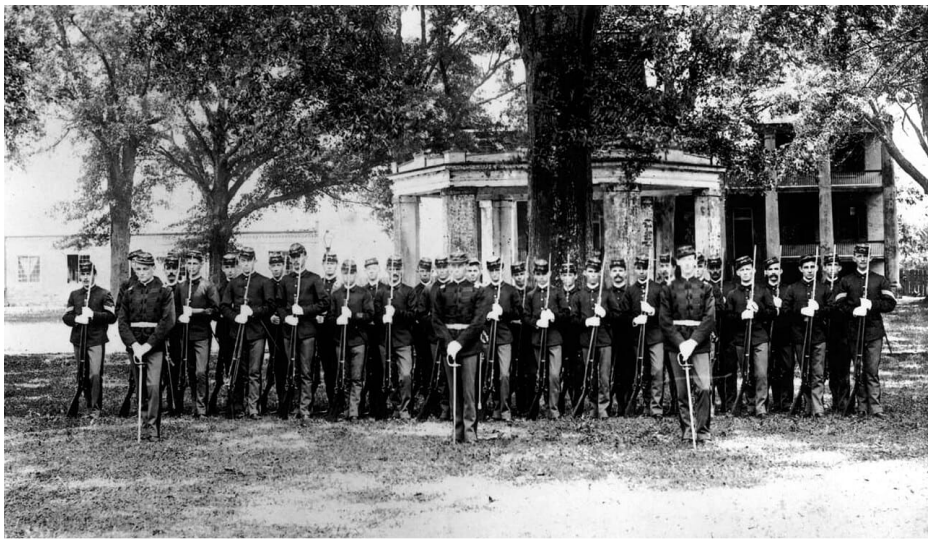
PART 2

Read

The Civil War demanded the first true mass production of apparel in American history. To clothe more than two million Union soldiers, the industry adopted a new language of fit—and gave a new word to the language of fraud.

The Union's need for uniforms created a sudden, colossal demand for ready-made clothing. To make garments in volume, the Quartermaster's Department specified uniforms in a small set of numbered sizes, graded by breast and waist measurements, so that contractors could cut thousands of identical pieces; historians of government contracting credit the war with spreading standard men's sizes into postwar civilian clothing. The U.S. Sanitary Commission, meanwhile, measured thousands of soldiers in detail and

compiled the heights and ages of more than a million volunteers. The same urgency that encouraged standardized fit also invited fraud: contractors sold the government cloth made of reworked rags, and 'shoddy'—an old woolen-trade term—became a national byword for cheap goods and profiteers.



Union soldiers in standardized uniform during the occupation of Baton Rouge. Andrew D. Lytle, Union soldiers in formation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana State University Libraries Special Collections. Public domain.

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

1861

The Brooks Brothers Contract

In April, New York State contracts with Brooks Brothers for 12,000 uniforms; complaints about cloth and fit lead to an investigation, and the firm replaces 2,350 suits at its own expense.

1861

The Quartermaster's Mandate

As volunteers pour in, the Quartermaster's Department contracts for uniforms in numbered sizes, pushing clothing makers toward mass production.

1863

The Sanitary Commission Survey

The U.S. Sanitary Commission begins measuring soldiers' bodies; by war's end it has detailed measurements for nearly 24,000 men.

1865

Ready-Made Survives the Peace

Manufacturers turn wartime capacity and sizing practices to the civilian menswear market.

PART 4

Key terms

Shoddy (answer E)
Cheap cloth made from shredded, reused wool that fell apart quickly; the word came to mean any poor-quality goods sold for profit.

Quartermaster (answer D)
The military officer or department responsible for supplying troops with clothing, food, shelter, and equipment.

Ready-made clothing (answer A)
Garments produced in standard sizes ahead of time rather than sewn to fit an individual customer.

Anthropometry (answer B)
The scientific measurement of the human body, such as height, chest, and limb length.

Depot (answer C)
A military storehouse where supplies are collected, made, or distributed.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Annual Report of the Quartermaster General for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1865

Montgomery C. Meigs, 1865

> At the commencement of the war the department had but one depot for the supply of clothing and equipage, the Schuylkill arsenal, at Philadelphia. This was organized for the equipment of an army of 13,000 men. ... Eight or ten thousand work-people were employed in Philadelphia in the manufacture of clothing and equipage. ... Contracts were made for the supply of clothing ready-made. The manufacturers of the loyal States were urged to turn their machinery upon army goods. The clothing merchants who had, before the war, supplied the southern markets, made contracts with the department for the supply of army clothing, and in a few months the industry and manufacturing power of the country were turned into the new channel ...

Context: Meigs ran the Union army's supply system throughout the war. His report shows how a department built for a 13,000-man army mobilized private factories and thousands of seamstresses to clothe more than two million soldiers.

Source: Montgomery C. Meigs, Quartermaster General. Annual Reports of the War Department: Report of the Secretary of War, 1865. Government Printing Office (via Internet Archive). 1865-. https://archive.org/details/annualreportswa57deptgoog

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers

Benjamin Apthorp Gould, for the U.S. Sanitary Commission, 1869

> The andrometer is said to have been originally devised by a tailor in Edinburgh, named McDonald, who used it to determine the proper size for soldiers' clothing, for which he had undertaken a considerable contract with the military authorities. ... It enables the total height, breadth of neck, of shoulders, and of pelvis, the length of legs and height to the knee to be measured with greater accuracy and rapidity than otherwise would be possible ... Instruments of this kind were constructed for the Sanitary Commission in 1863, at the office of the U. S. Coast Survey ...

Context: Gould, an astronomer, led the Sanitary Commission's effort to measure Union soldiers' bodies. His survey studied soldiers' health and physique. The Army's uniforms were already cut in four numbered sizes, and historians credit that contracting practice, rather than the survey, with spreading standard men's sizes into the postwar ready-to-wear trade.

Source: Benjamin Apthorp Gould. Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers. Hurd and Houghton for the U.S. Sanitary Commission (via Internet Archive). 1869-. https://archive.org/details/investigationsi00goulgoog

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Corroborate
Compare "Annual Report of the Quartermaster General for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1865" (Montgomery C. Meigs, 1865) with "Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers" (Benjamin Apthorp Gould, for the U.S. Sanitary Commission, 1869). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. According to Meigs, how did the Quartermaster's Department solve the army's clothing shortage after 1861?
2. Meigs wrote this as an official report at the war's end. What problems, such as the early "shoddy" uniform scandals, might a quartermaster general have reason to downplay?
3. Gould describes an instrument first designed to size soldiers' clothing. The Sanitary Commission measured 23,785 men, while the Army already issued uniforms in four numbered sizes. What could a survey like Gould's reveal about soldiers' bodies, and what can it not prove about where ready-made clothing sizes came from?
4. Clothing sizes today vary widely from brand to brand. Should there be a national standard for clothing sizes, like the numbered sizes the Army used for uniforms in the 1860s? Argue your position.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?
2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

TRAGEDY

The Spread of 'Shoddy'

War profiteering, recycled rags, and a word that entered everyday speech.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/birth-of-shoddy

INNOVATION

Measuring the Union Army

How wartime measurement shaped ready-made sizing—and what the myth of 'S, M, L' gets wrong.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/anthropometric-survey

IMPACT

Uniforms and the Black Soldier

When the right to wear blue was an argument for citizenship.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/uniforms-and-citizenship

Places: Georgia

SOURCES AND CREDITS

The Civil War to 1880 (A History of Government Contracting). George Washington University Law School. https://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=history_gov_contracting&filename=8&type=additional

Benjamin Apthorp Gould. Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers. U.S. Sanitary Commission / Hurd and Houghton. 1869-. https://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1869_Gould_soldiers_CUL-DAR.LIB.228.pdf

Communication from the Governor transmitting the report of the Board of State Officers named in the act of April 16, 1861. State of New York (via HathiTrust). 1862. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t0gt60k3r

Image: Andrew D. Lytle, Union soldiers in formation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana State University Libraries Special Collections. Public domain.

Threading America, presented by Anatar. Read the full chapter at https://www.threadingamerica.com/chapters/uniforms-of-conflict. This edition was generated on November 9, 2026.