

Selecting a Reproduction McClellan Saddle for Reenacting and Living History.

By

James A. Ottevaere

There are two specific elements that are essential in selecting and evaluating a reproduction McClellan saddle. One is the quality of materials and workmanship and the other is authenticity. These weigh about evenly in selecting the best reproduction saddle, but quality of materials and workmanship is a bit more important when we consider safety, durability and maintenance. The fit of the saddle to the horses' back is an over-riding concern, this topic has been covered in a previous article, so I'll concentrate on the quality of materials, workmanship and authenticity here.

The first and often the most important measure of the materials and workmanship of the reproduction saddle is simply its overall appearance. If it looks sloppy, poorly made, lightweight, or too heavy, shows poor craftsmanship, it is then best trust your instincts. It is probably not what you've been looking for. If it looks good, solid, well put together and neatly finished, then take the next step and make a detailed examination of the materials and workmanship.

The original Ordnance Department specifications required that the saddle fittings be made of "heavy harness leather". This material was described as, "at least 10oz weight". Today we usually think of heavy harness as 12-14oz weight material. The fittings especially the straps should all be cut from the back and upper sides of the hide (not bellies) of vegetable tanned harness or bridle leather. Some makers use "stuffed" harness leather or untreated vegetable tanned skirting leather for saddle fittings, which is acceptable, but stuffed harness should be avoided for bridles and halters and plain vegetable tanned leather should be well and correctly oiled as part of the finishing process of the saddle. The strap leather should be split down to 12-14oz and not used as it comes from the hide. To check the leather quality, look on the flesh (back) side. It should be close grained, smooth, flat, hard and not spongy or too flexible. The thickness of the straps should be consistent. They should not be 14oz at one end and 11oz at the other, and it should only be dyed on the grain (top) side. (Note: One ounce weight is 1/64 inch thickness, i.e.: 16oz leather weight = 1/4 inch thick)

The black dye on the grain side should be uniformly applied and should have a flat satin, not shiny or hard surface appearance. Some

more than enamel and will not hold up to hard use. The flesh side should be un-dyed and free of dye bleeding. Its color should be more like mahogany than white pine. The edges should be dyed black, but not edged with enamel. The dye should not wipe off onto your hands. If it does, scrub the surface with a soft white cloth and if the dye still comes off it is poor quality dye work and probably cannot be corrected.

The straps should be of uniform width throughout their full length. There should be no wavy edges or nicks. The curves of the skirts, sweat leathers and stirrup hoods should flow neatly. All cut strap ends should be square. The edges of all leather pieces and details should be beveled neat and smooth with a No. 2 beveler. The upper edges of the saddle skirts should be gently skived (shaved) down to about 3-5oz leather weight to blend with the saddle seat. Straps may be creased, but this was not common. Some contractor made and officer saddles had this feature, but most enlisted saddles were plainly finished. In fact, few contractor's made McClellan saddles were beveled, strap creased or edge dyed, but beveling, at least, should be a must on a modern reproduction saddle.

All stitching should be at least seven stitches per inch; eight stitches per inch were prescribed by the Ordnance specifications. By comparison, custom English bridle work has about 12 to 16 stitches per inch. Thread should be heavy, at least five cord or #207 or larger. Natural or artificial sinew is never used. The correct authentic thread is waxed five cord natural linen. Some saddle makers, particularly those that use some machine stitching in their work use poly and poly blend thread. This is quite acceptable provided it is not bright white. This type of thread is available in a "neutral" shade that is difficult to distinguish from linen.

The use of machine stitching in reproductions of early McClellan saddles is a matter of choice between you, the customer, and the saddle maker. Hand stitching is technically correct and is preferred for any high quality saddle, but some saddle maker's are very good with a saddle stitching machine and many contractors used a combination of hand and machine stitching. Consider also that machine stitched saddles are often less expensive and if properly done are quite durable. Regardless of the thread or stitching method, the stitch lines should be grooved and all stitches should be tight and sunk slightly below the leather surface, and the holes should be filled by the thread. The stitch lines should be straight and even on both sides and the individual stitches should be of the same length and spacing on both sides of the piece. The finished thread ends should be neat and no loose thread should protrude from

times the width of the strap and 2 1/2 times the strap width from the billet end. There should always be an odd number of holes in the billets, usually five except on the girth billets which have more. Holes should be oval not round, and the buckle tongue should pass through the strap freely, but snugly.

The rivets should be crowned and peened smoothly and should have no rough edges. Nor should the rivet ends be cut too long. The rivet heads and burrs should be sunk even with the surface of the leather. When used, all rivets are copper on the 1859 Model McClellan saddle. Although rivets in the strap ends were not prescribed for early Civil War period saddles, they were widely used by contractors by the end of the war. It's a good idea that all strap ends be riveted for added strength. That is why they were added during the period.

The brass screws attaching leather details to the saddle tree should all be sunk flush to the surface of the leather. The screw heads attaching the saddle skirts should all be finished parallel to the ground. All brass screws should be #6 x 3/4 inch.

Running loops should be made with two rows of full length stitches. They should not be stapled or cross stitched. Standing loops should be securely stitched beneath the turn back of the chape.

All other hardware should be iron, not brass, and all should be hard black lacquered (japanned). Girth strap "D" rings should be 2 inches across and the four side bar rings should be 1 1/4 inch inside diameter. The ring staples should be bent strap iron, not castings. These should be driven into the side bars straight and even. The ends of the ring staples should not protrude on the underside of the side bar. They should be hidden beneath the rawhide covering. If a reclaimed M1904 or later tree is used the ring staples should be turned over and driven back flush into the side bar. Semi-circular foot loops did not appear for attaching the rings until much later. All the foot staples should be the "low" type. There are those that claim that the "high" foot staples were used in the latter part of the Civil War for securing the saddlebags. There is no documentation for this until 1885, but the high foot staples do make it easier to run the saddle bag billet through. So this is a matter of personal choice and is not likely to detract from the authenticity of your saddle. The stirrup strap buckles and coat strap buckles are iron bar buckles, black japanned.

If a new reproduction tree is used, the rawhide should be a creamy off-white color. There should be no lumps, nicks or bumps on the seat and the raw hide should be smoothly and tightly applied. The lacing should be pulled tight and should be located so as not to chafe either the

mounting, even slightly the tree is unsound. Make sure that there are no cuts or slits in the rawhide and that all the lacing is sound and present. The color of the rawhide on a reclaimed M1904 saddle tree will likely have some russet brown staining from the leather cover. There is no way to remove this staining. It is best left as is. Do not scrub the rawhide or use strippers to attempt to remove it, you will only damage the rawhide.

Quality of materials and workmanship can be somewhat subjective, but authenticity is not. There is a specification for the way an 1859 McClellan should look. If the reproduction doesn't meet the requirements of the specification it is less than an authentic 1859 McClellan.

The authentic 1859 Pattern reproduction McClellan cavalry saddle should look something like this:

All leather parts to be made of heavy harness leather (12-14 oz). All hardware is iron, black jappaned. All buckles are iron, bar type, black jappaned, and four ring staples of strap iron, black jappaned driven into the sidebars. Stirrup hanger loops on a new tree should be steel wire rectangles, on a reclaimed M1904 or later, stirrup hangers are brass truncated. They may be easily jappaned black. It is not recommended that the M1904 stirrup hangers be replaced. This may destroy the tree and is not necessary. The girth strap "D" rings should be iron, black jappaned, without stops (spades) for the earliest saddles, but using stops is acceptable, since common lore is that the stop was in use late in the Civil War. The stop (spade) "D" ring was an improvement and is well worth using on a reproduction. Stirrup hoods should not have "US" embosses. Rivets should all be copper. Stitches should be a minimum of 7 per inch, 8 are better and thread should not be bright white. 38 brass screws should be used to attach the saddle skirts. Stirrups should be "bell" shaped. Toe kicks are advisable and not inaccurate although not specified. Sweat leather loops should be formed of cased leather. There should be three rows of stitches and one rivet (if used) on all the straps. Copper rivets were not specified in the early specifications for the 1859 McClellan Pattern saddles found in the 1861 Ordnance Manual and did not officially appear until 1874. Some collectors and historians believe that copper rivets were part of a series of 1863-4 contract modifications and that copper rivets were required thereafter, which may be the case although conclusive research has not been brought forth in this regard. Anyway, there is some additional historical research that shows that copper rivets were widely used by contractors after 1864. There is also

and durability to high stress points of the sewn straps. These were sewn with linen thread, which although stronger than cotton, (which some contractors used) was still not entirely up to the hard use and low maintenance given the saddle by cavalry troopers.

When considering whether to use copper rivets on your reproduction saddle you may want to consider this: if you are using hand stitched linen thread in your construction you may want to add copper rivets for durability. If you are bothered by not having a pre 1862 reproduction and do not wish to use copper rivets, you may want to use some of the newer poly blend high UV resistant thread in a neutral color (not white). When pulled through black "kit" and beeswax it looks very much like linen. It is waterproof and twice as strong. This is a choice for you to make, depending on your preferences you're your relationship with the saddle maker.

Another item for consideration and preference is the use of a "toe kick" in the stirrup. These are straps about two inches wide that are either riveted or stitched to the inside of the stirrup hood and riveted or screwed to the leading edge of the stirrup tread. These were never part of the specifications for the 1859 Pattern McClellan saddle or for that matter, any other pattern McClellan saddle. So a saddle built to exact specifications would not have these toe kicks, but as a practical matter about one in five original 1859 Pattern saddles have this feature. I have a number of original 1859 McClellan saddles in my collection and during the course of many years of saddle research I have examined many more. Toe kicks are present on a good share of these. The stirrup tread depth of the early stirrup tread was quite narrow, nominally three inches, but some were a little less. The specifications required that the distance between the back of the tread and the bottom edge of the stirrup hood was to be six inches. This meant that there was a three inch opening from the front edge of the tread to the lower edge of the hood. This was enough space for the trooper's toe and sometimes his entire foot to get caught between the tread and the hood, occasionally with tragic results for the trooper. Toe kicks nearly eliminated this possibility, so they were often added by company and regimental saddlers, some officers insisting that they be incorporated on their personal saddles. This is also a decision for you to make, toe kicks make a safer saddle, but they are not "regulation". Like many things regarding McClellan saddles, there are no absolutes. There are many variations and some individualizing was, and is, acceptable, just as it is with uniforms and accouterments.

If you have confidence in your saddle maker, you may want to trust him to make the leather details from accurate patterns, of the

patterns from other reproductions, not all of which are accurate. So these patterns simply perpetuate the errors of their predecessors.

All the correct reproduction iron hardware is now commercially available, so there is no excuse for the saddle maker to use substitute materials for buckles, rings staples and other fittings. Insist on authentically reproduced period hardware, materials and best techniques of the saddler's art. Avoid leather straps that are either too light or too thick and rigid. A competent saddle maker will have the correct tools to split the leather to exactly the correct weight. As I point out early on in this article, do a bit of research and trust your instincts. In the end, the saddle must look right.

Many reproductions of McClellan saddles for sale today are sub-standard in both quality and authenticity. If compared to the guide that I have provided above most would fail the test of materials and workmanship. Many are made from poor quality, inexpensive materials and are mostly fabricated by hobbyists, turned part-time entrepreneurs. These saddles tend to copy other reproductions and only serve to perpetuate mistakes and errors of previous poor craftsmanship. These "saddle makers" generally have neither the experience nor the shop tools necessary to construct a high quality reproduction saddle. Yet they regularly sell these monstrosities to reenactors for \$650 and more. I doubt that there are more than a handful of saddle makers that have shown that they are capable of turning out a quality reproduction McClellan saddle. If you intend to purchase a custom made saddle, or even if you intend to purchase one ready made from the saddle maker's catalog don't be reluctant to ask the saddle maker to show you samples of his work. Ask about his experience and references and see how his product compares to the quality, materials, workmanship and authenticity described above.