

The McClellan Saddle

Submitted by Mike Nugent



The 1859 McClellan Military Saddle

During the American Civil War there were a variety of saddles in use by the Federal Cavalry. The Model 1847 Grimsley saddle remained popular, especially among Dragoon veterans, and the Hope saddle and Model 1861 Artillery Drivers saddle saw cavalry service as well. The Model 1859 McClellan, however, was by far the most common saddle used by Union horse soldiers.

Figure 1: "Near" side view

Six years before the Civil War, then Captain George Brinton McClellan served as a member of a military commission to study European military tactics, weapons, and logistics. While in Europe, McClellan observed battles during the Crimean War, focusing on the organization of Engineer and Cavalry forces. On his return to the United States, McClellan proposed a cavalry manual adapted from the Russian Cavalry. He also developed a cavalry saddle which was a modification of a Hungarian model used in the Prussian service and included features found in Mexican and Texan saddles as well as characteristics of the Hope, Campbell, and Grimsley saddles.

Under Secretary of War (and future President of the Confederacy) Jefferson Davis, the Army conducted field trials to determine the most practical and efficient equipment for the Cavalry and Dragoons. In addition to the new saddle developed by McClellan, a number of other styles were considered including the standard service Grimsley, the Hope, Campbell, and a Jones "adjustable tree" saddle.

Serviceability and cost were factors that contributed to the Army's adoption of the McClellan saddle over its competition. The "horn" on the Hope saddle was undesirable for a military saddle and construction of the Campbell and Grimsley saddles used large amounts of leather and brass, increasing both cost and weight. The McClellan saddle was simple, less expensive, lightweight, sturdy, and durable. Its open-tree design allowed one of three sizes to comfortably fit most horses. The saddle was adopted by the War Department in 1859 and nearly half a million were produced before the end of the Civil War.

Figure 2: "Off" side view with saddle bags and side fenders attached

The McClellan saddle features an open, metal-reinforced wooden tree. Saddle skirts of harness leather are screwed to the sidebars. The rigging is similar to that found on the Hope saddle. Stirrups are hickory or oak. The prototype



Model 1857 McClellan saddles had the wooden tree covered with a thin, varnished, black leather cover. The stirrups were hoodless and also covered with varnished leather. All hardware on the saddles was made of polished brass. The Model 1859 (the model selected for adoption) featured a more durable rawhide-covered tree. Stirrups were of bare wood and stirrup hoods were added. The 1861 Ordnance Manual called for the brass hardware to be replaced with "blued" iron, although in practice the iron hardware was usually "japanned," covered in a durable black varnish.



Accessories for the McClellan saddle included small saddle bags, a nose bag for the horse's grain, a curry comb, picket pin, and lariat. A thimble or "boot" on the right or "off" side of the saddle held the muzzle of the cavalryman's carbine.

Figure 3: Detail of the rawhide-covered, open tree

Three slots in the cantle (reinforced with brass fittings) allowed leather straps to secure a blanket roll. Similarly, the saddle's pommel had a slot and two iron fittings where three more straps could secure a blanket roll or overcoat. Iron rings allowed for the easy attachment of canteens or other accouterments. Although contrary to regulations, cavalrymen frequently attached their sabers to the left or "near" side of the saddle. The saddle was generally used with a Model 1859 Dragoon saddle blanket, blue and bordered with an orange stripe (the Dragoon branch of service cover), rather than with the more ornate shrabraques or saddle coverings.

Confederate cavalrymen prized captured McClellan saddles. By 1862 saddlers in the Confederacy were manufacturing copies with russet leather and even tarred or painted linen rigging.

After the Civil War the McClellan saddle went through a number of modifications. Budgetary concerns and the huge stockpile of saddles in the Army's inventory ensured that it remained in service despite several recommendations that it be replaced. The Model 1904 and Model 1913 McClellan saddles were again produced in large numbers during World War I, and remained in service until the Army disbanded its mounted units at the dawn of World War II. After serving the Cavalry for more than 80 years, McClellan saddles are still commonplace in mounted police units around the United States.

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<http://www.bufordsboys.com/McClellanSaddle.htm>