

An 1898 General Officer's Blue Field Coat

Headquarters of the Army General Order 38, 1898, authorized for general officers a seldom seen coat. One example, shown below, was worn by Joseph Wheeler, of Alabama. Wheeler was one of the very few officers to rise to general in both the Confederate and United States armies. Pond Spring was the home of Joseph Wheeler after the Civil War. It is located in rural northern Alabama, west of the city of Decatur and three miles east of Courtland. The state of Alabama now owns the recently restored Pond Spring.



Wheeler graduated 19th in his class from the US Military Academy in 1859 and resigned to join the Confederate Army on April 22, 1861. He initially joined the First Dragoons (now the First Cavalry), then transferred to the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen (now the Third Cavalry) in 1860. He was a major general in the Confederate army and after the Civil War served as a lawyer for the Southern Railroad. He was a member of the US House of Representative for the 8th District of Alabama from 1881 to 1883 and from 1885 to 1898. Wheeler served as a major general of U. S. Volunteers May 4, 1898 to April 12, 1899, brigadier general U. S. Volunteers April 12, 1899 to June 16, 1900, and brigadier general U. S. Army June 16, 1900. He retired September 10, 1900 and died January 25, 1906. He is one of two figures from the State of Alabama represented in the Congressional Statuary Hall.

On May 4, 1898, Joe Wheeler, Sr., became a major general of volunteers and commanded the 5th Corps cavalry. Leonard Wood's and Teddy Roosevelt's 1st Volunteer Cavalry (the Rough Riders) was part of Wheeler's command. One of the great stories of the diminutive Wheeler (he was 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighed only 120 pounds), is that when the US forces attacked and the Spanish soldiers began to retreat, Wheeler, now of course wearing Union blue, reverted to his days in gray when he shouted, "Come on boys, we've got the Yankees on the run now!"

The authorizing order described the coat, "A blouse of dark blue cloth or serge, with four outside pockets with flaps, rolling collar, double breasted with two rows of buttons, grouped according to rank, same kind as those worn on dress coat. The skirt to extend from one-third to one-half the distance from the hip joint to the bend in the knee. The shoulder straps will always be worn with this coat." All other officers were authorized a similar single breasted, five-button coat that also had four pockets covered with flaps and a roll collar.

Wheeler's 1898 coat, made by J. G. Hass, is shown at the right as it is now displayed at Pond Spring, including Wheeler's dress belt. Photos show he often wore a leather service belt with this coat but that belt is lacking in the extensive Pond Spring collection. One interesting aspect of this coat is a small horizontal pocket that has a vertical opening in the center of the chest, directly between the two rows of buttons. The pocket opening starts at a line connecting the center two buttons, and extends to the lapel. Each sleeve has three buttons that close the cuff.



The coat is lined with black polished cotton. A standard label inside the right interior pocket is for J. G. Haas, Lancaster, Pa. The sleeves are lined with white cotton with narrow black stripes.

The figure below is of Wheeler and other officers in Tampa, Florida, wearing an amazing variety of uniforms. Only Wheeler, who is in the front row and has a white beard, is wearing the 1898 general's field coat although the officer standing, second from the left, is wearing the version for non generals.



Wheeler often wore an eight-button vest with this coat. The vest was not called for in the order that authorized the coat. The front of the vest is made from wool but the short collar is of polished cotton, as is the back of the vest. The two upper pockets are 3-1/4 inches wide and the lower pocket openings are 4-1/8 inches across.

An interesting aspect of the shoulder straps is that they are sewn to the coat so a single point of each star points to the shoulder seam. Normally generals' straps were worn with a single point of any star going towards the wearer's neck.

