

A Common Image Evoking the American Civil War: The Kepi Cap

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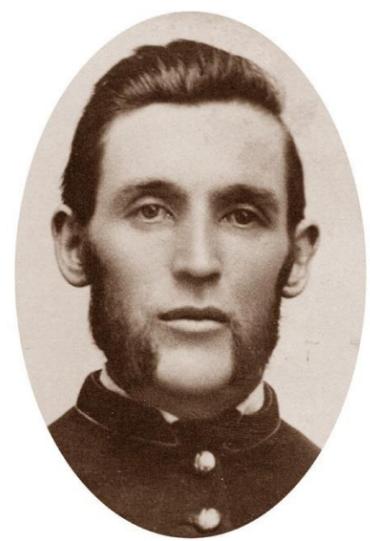
At the outset of the American Civil War 162 years ago in April 1861, neither side expected that it would go on for long or become a major conflict. Uniforms, therefore, were provided by the states and local cities and were all different in materials, colors and styles. The North attempted to have their soldiers all wear navy blue uniforms, but they often ran out of blue cloth and had to use grey. The lack of consistent uniforms led to confusion on the battlefield, leading soldiers in some of the early battles to be shot by their own side. Uniforms eventually became standardized, with the Union army wearing navy blue uniforms and the Confederates wearing grey.

The Union uniform consisted of a dark blue wool coat with light blue trousers and a dark cap called a forage cap or “kepi” after the French caps of that name. They typically wore shoes that went up to their ankles called "brogans." Their coats often had bright buttons that sometimes indicated the rank of the soldier or the state they represented. Other markings on the coat like piping or badges usually indicated the rank of the soldier.

The Union soldiers’ kepi caps were generally issued for fatigue use. They typically had a sunken top and squared visor and were often called "McClellan caps" after the Union commander of the Army of the Potomac, General George Brinton McClellan.

A Kepi Cap at BHSM

Among the collections of the Boylston Historical Society Museum (BHSM) is a kepi that was worn by John Gould Warner, who served in the 21st Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, Company D. It was kindly donated to BHSM in 1986 by his great grandson, John Burkhardt Sr. of Boylston.



John Warner Enlists To Serve the Union

John Gould Warner was born 17 September 1834 in Harvard, Worcester County, Massachusetts, the son of John Warner and Sally Gould. John married Alvira Eliza Hastings on 10 January 1857 in Clinton, Worcester County, Massachusetts. Called “Eliza,” she was a twin daughter of James Hastings and Eliza Washburn who was born to them in Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts on 22 June 1836. John and Eliza had one son, John Milton Warner, born 28 May 1858 in Harvard. Sadly, Eliza died from heart failure at the age of 25 years in Boylston on 24 June 1861. Less than a month later, the widowed John Gould Warner enlisted in the Union Army to fight the Confederacy. His young son was left in the care of his mother, Sally Gould Warner, while he served in the military.

Two Tours of Duty

John Gould Warner served two tours of duty. During his first tour, he worked mostly as a nurse in the Union General Hospital in Beaufort, Carteret County, North Carolina. When his original term of service was completed, he decided, having spent most of his time on the sidelines, to re-enlist. He spent the remainder of the war on the field in battles until 18 May 1864 when he was wounded during the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, suffering a surface ball wound to the foot. The rest of his war was spent the rest of his time recovering in Emory General Hospital in Washington, D.C. before returning home in August 1864.



A Full, Long Life

Although nine sons of Boylston who fought for the Union never came home, lost to death from mortal wounds or disease, John went on to live a full, long life. He remarried, had several more children and found work as a shoemaker and later, a milkman, in Boylston. At one time he and his family lived in the home on Boylston's Main Street that was once known as the Taylor Tavern. In 1917, at 82 years old, he was awarded the Boston Post Cane by the Selectmen for being the oldest man in Boylston. He ultimately succumbed to a fractured hip compounded by cardiovascular disease on 9 April 1920 at the age of 85 years, 5 months and 26 days. He was buried in Boylston’s Pine Grove Cemetery with a gravestone that is inscribed with the words “God is Love.”

Boylston Veterans of the American Civil War

More can be found about the life of John Gould Warner and the other brave sons of Boylston who fought for the Union in the new book, *Boylston Veterans of the American Civil War*, published by the Boylston Historical Collaborative and now available for sale at the Boylston Historical Society Museum.

Acknowledgements

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ducksters.com/history/civil_war/military_uniforms
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Wikipedia.org/wiki/Kepi