

Shelter for Civil War Soldiers

From a paper written by John H. VandeVate of Woodberry Forest School, this is a glimpse of how troops found shelter in the Orange County area during the Civil War:

“,,In the warmer months, when long marches and extended campaigns were everyday occurrences, soldiers usually carried ‘Dog Tents’. Dog tents were fairly small squares of canvas with buttons along one side and button holes along the other. These tents were too small for the men to live in unless they doubled up, buttoned their canvas squares together, used their rifles as poles--bayonets stuck into the ground and slept [close together]. Many tent mates would hang scraps of cloth, coats, or ponchos, if they could be had, over the openings of these tents. Often, six or more men would get together, making one large sheet of their dog tents. Such sheets were mounted on poles like a table. Many men could sleep comfortably and dryly under these sheets unless a slanting rain blew up. These tents were often enhanced by bush arbors which supplied more shade and protection.

“In the Southern army even these bare minimums were often lacking. Men slept in holes, on fence rails or logs, or just stretched out on the ground under the stars. When it rained, sleeping in the mud was a last resort--although not entirely unheard of. On the other hand there are instances, early in the war, of Union soldiers throwing away tents along the road side on long marches. Soon scarcity stopped such wasteful practices.

“...In the winter when the armies were stationary for long periods of time, finding shelter was a different story. The weather required more protective structures than canvas sheets. Imagination and ingenuity were the keys to keeping comfortable. An excellent example of such ingenuity can be found in William Dame’s diary, *From Rapidan to Richmond*. Dame, a gunner in the First company of Richmond Howitzers of Longstreet’s corps, was preparing to spend the winter of 1863 at **Morton’s Ford--nineteen miles northeast of Orange**. These are the experiences he relates:

‘Having arrived at their destination and being informed that they would spend the winter there, the First company began to prepare for the long winter ahead. Each group of tent mates chose a site for their winter lodgings. Dame’s group of four chose a site in the pines below the knoll. They all worked digging a hole ten feet square and three feet deep. Then the four men cut, hauled and squared logs twelve to eighteen inches thick and twelve feet long. With these logs they built three walls around the hole, each four feet high. Half of the fourth wall was covered by a chimney made of short split logs and mud. Inside, at the base of the chimney, a fireplace was made by laying down rocks,¹ The remaining half of the open wall was covered by an old tarp. This acted as a door. Despite these careful

¹ John H. VandeVate, *Camp Life and the Civil War Around Woodberry Forest*, published privately, date unknown, p.9. A copy is on file at the Orange County Historical Society.

efforts, the walls were still quite porous. When the weather really got cold, no one wanted the wind blowing through the walls. To prevent this Dame's group dug a hole in the rich hard red Virginia clay, poured in water, and mixed up mud to chink the holes in the walls with. For further protection from the cold, Dame's group banked the dirt which had been removed from the initial hole against the walls. All was ready except the roof. Here lay the problem. Dame solved this dilemma by pulling a canvas sheet over a pole set in the center of their hut and attaching it to the walls. To prevent water leakage the men dug a drainage ditch around the perimeter of their adobe. This done, they had a house warming.^{1 2}

"Upon stepping inside their new home, Dame and his companions found something lacking--furniture, lights and a bed. Undaunted, Dame and his friends began building again. First they made a crude bunk from squared logs. This frame they filled with cedar twigs to serve as a mattress. Stools were made of logs, boxes, and pine slabs; tables of unended hardtack boxes. Lights were made from candles stuck in bayonets whose points were stuck in the ground. Others used sardine cans full of grease with old rags for wicks.

"Others followed Dame's example but every hut reflected some mark of the personality of its builders. Some split logs to make wooden floors, others made peculiar beds. One such bed is recorded in Henry Berkeley's diary, Four Years in the Confederate Artillery. The entry goes like this:

'November 24, (1862). Woolfolk's artillery camped on the east side of the Telegraph Road, Fredericksburg: we fixed up our bed off the ground on some pine poles putting little twigs a foot deep on top of the poles and some hen's nest grass on the top of the twigs. This made a very comfortable bed and we slept first rate that night, a thing we had not done for some time, owing to the ground being so damp and cold.'³

² *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.