

# VISITORS ASK

*In this column, we present a round-up of some of the more intriguing questions that visitors ask about the History Center's exhibits. This issue's questions about the Civil War exhibition are answered by Curator of History Leslie A. Przybylek.*

HHC, photos by Rachel Lynn Schoen.



## Q: Why did Civil War soldiers wear hot wool uniforms?

**A:** For most Civil War soldiers, especially on the Union side, wearing wool wasn't a matter of choice. Their wool uniforms were issued by the federal government. In the South, alternate fabrics such as cotton cloth, jean cloth, and "homespun" cloth were used for uniforms (sometimes these were homemade). In warm weather, soldiers of both sides often removed their jackets and relied on cotton shirts. And yes, cotton fabric was still available in the North, where it was used for shirts, linings, women's dresses, and other accessories. The United States maintained trade with England throughout the war, and English textile factories never stopped running. Confederate stores of cotton were also seized each time a Northern victory made further inroads South.

For the Union army, the choice of wool was about durability, not comfort or fashion. In the 1860s, fine wool cloth was the highest quality and longest-lasting fabric on the market. It was simply the best choice for making government-issued clothing that needed to last as long as possible. But wool didn't always guarantee quality. Some early Civil War contractors responded to urgent orders for military uniforms with goods made of a cheaper wool fabric called "shoddy." After a few months of use, the clothing fell apart, and a new word for "poor quality" entered the American language.



## Q: Are the stores at the entrance to the Civil War exhibit based on real companies?

**A:** Yes and no. The names you see on the stores are based on real businesses that appeared in the Pittsburgh city directory in 1863. So Hullihen & Orr were actual dentists, and Ruth Dunner really did sell fruits and candies to satisfy the sweet tooth of Pittsburghers in the 1860s. But the physical buildings are not direct matches—the structures are based on representative examples of the types of architecture that we might have seen during that period. Unfortunately, very few photographs or printed images of Pittsburgh's city streets

survive from the Civil War era, so it is extremely difficult to determine what a specific building or business address looked like in the 1860s.



## Q: Did they have ruled paper with colored lines during the Civil War?

**A:** Yes, although the exact date that it became widely available is difficult to pinpoint. The use of hand-ruled paper dates back hundreds of years, when it was used by kings and clergy. But hand ruling was obviously expensive. The wider availability of ruled paper didn't happen until the 1800s, after new technologies helped to make both the paper and printed lines more affordable. The first paper-making shop in America opened in Philadelphia in 1690, when "rag" paper was, literally, made out of old rags. The first newspaper in America was printed by about 1705, but the first machine built to mechanically "rule" paper wasn't patented until 1770 in England. There are surviving examples of blue-ruled paper in the United States going back to the 1820s (in college exams), but these may have been imported. Ruled paper was more commonly used in ledger and account books until around the time of the Civil War, when the use of wood pulp as an ingredient lowered the cost of general writing paper and made it much more accessible to the average person. There are definitely examples of stationery with printed colored lines that date to the 1860s. 