

Who Painted the Canteens?

By Tom Belton *

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Images may differ from those in the original article.

As the curator of military history at the North Carolina Museum of History, I often work with unusual objects that provide glimpses into the lives of average North Carolinians. In 1994 I received a phone call about a collection of objects associated with Alfred May (1843–1906), of Pitt County, who had served as a Confederate soldier during the Civil War. May’s two grandsons donated these objects, or *artifacts*, to the museum.

The May collection was enormous, by a curator’s standards. It included a rifle and pistol, a shelter-half (tent), a jacket and pants, a knapsack, a haversack, a cartridge box, personal items such as a comb and a pouch of soap fragments, a wooden canteen with the name “Wooten” carved on it, and a metal canteen with painted Confederate flags and the wording “Alfred May Orderly Sgt., Co. F 61 Reg. NCT CSA.”



May’s name appears not only on the canteen but also on the pistol and rifle. These three artifacts can be like primary documents identified as belonging to Alfred May. But what about the canteen with the name Wooten scratched on it? That had become a mystery. I believed it unlikely that the May canteen had been painted during the war. Ordinary items such as paint proved quite scarce at that time. Also, the paint’s condition looked too good to have been exposed to months of sun and rain by a soldier’s use in the field.

Left: Alfred May’s U.S. Model 1858 metal canteen features painted Confederate flags. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

The May family speculated that Alfred had utilized the wooden canteen during his early war service and later stopped using it after somehow obtaining the more substantial metal, Union army canteen. That seemed possible. The Wooten canteen had been made in the South, where metal was scarce, and wooden canteens often leaked. I accepted this idea until a few months later—when another painted canteen appeared at the museum.

On a Saturday morning in 1995, I was at work when the front desk receptionist called me and said a visitor had a painted canteen that he wanted to donate. To my amazement, I found that this canteen had the same flag pattern as the May canteen, although its paint was in much poorer condition. The visitor said that the canteen had belonged to Edward Wooten, who, like Alfred May, was from Pitt County. The canteen’s owner had been across the street in the North Carolina

State Archives checking primary sources such as wills and census records to learn more about Wooten, his ancestor. In reviewing his research information, I discovered that Edward Wooten’s sister, Ida, had married Alfred May in 1875, ten years after the Civil War had ended. I now had proof through archival records that marriage connected the May and Wooten families.

Intuition told me that the wooden canteen with the name Wooten on it had once belonged to Edward Wooten. At some point, Edward apparently gave his wooden canteen to his sister, and it eventually became part of the May collection.

However, I still did not know who had painted the metal canteens, or when. Fortunately, another document soon provided that information. The May family discovered, among old family papers, a letter written on September 18, 1891, by Edward Wooten. Wooten—who became an Episcopal priest after the war and died in Wilmington in 1925 at age eighty-seven—wrote to his sister, Ida, thanking her for painting his canteen, which he had just received, with “the beautiful and appropriate ornamentation.” It seems likely that Ida painted her husband’s canteen at the same time.



Edward Wooten’s U.S. Model 1860 metal canteen features painted flags. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

A combination of luck and primary sources had solved the mystery of “who painted the canteens?” What historical mysteries might artifacts or other primary sources help you solve?

*At the time of this article’s publication, Tom Belton worked as the curator of military history at the North Carolina Museum of History.