

## Title:

Why are Our Clothes Made to Standard Sizes?

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407

## Summary:

Like so much in American life, the standard clothing sizes we use today can be traced back to the Civil War. If that answer sounds glib, it isn't meant to be. The Civil War was the pivotal event in American history, marking a transition to the modern era, and heralding changes that stood until the 1940s.

## Keywords:

clothes,mens,jackets

## Article Body:

Like so much in American life, the standard clothing sizes we use today can be traced back to the Civil War. If that answer sounds glib, it isn't meant to be. The Civil War was the pivotal event in American history, marking a transition to the modern era, and heralding changes that stood until the 1940s. It even changed the way we buy our clothes.

## Antebellum Clothing Sizing

Prior to the Civil War, the overwhelming majority of clothing, for men and women, was tailor-made or home-made. There was a limited variety of mass produced, standardized clothing items, mainly jackets, coats, and undergarments, but even these were only produced in limited quantities. For the most part, clothing for men was made on an individual basis. The Civil War changed that.

## Mass Producing Uniforms

During the war, the Northern and Southern armies both needed large quantities of uniforms in a hurry. The South, without a large industrial base, relied primarily on home manufacture for uniforms, and through the war Southern armies typically suffered from a shortage of clothing. The North changed garment making history forever.

It quickly became apparent that the Northern armies could not be supplied with uniforms using traditional modes of clothing production. Fortunately, the North had a well developed textile industry that could meet the challenge.

When the government began to contract with factories for mass produced uniforms, the textile manufacturers quickly realized that they could not make every uniform for a particular soldier. The only option was to standardize the soldiers' uniforms. They sent tailors to the armies, to measure the men, and saw that certain measurements, of arm length, chest size, shoulder width, waist size, and inseam length, would appear together with reliable regularity. Using this mass of measurement information, they put together the first size charts for men's clothing.

After the War

So why didn't the textile companies go back to the older production methods after the Civil War? The answer lies in profits, as with many things in business. Clothing manufacturers saw that the standardized sizes they had introduced significantly reduced the manufacturing cost of men's clothing; rather than make one item for one man, they could make one size of an item, mens jackets for example, for a group of men. Suddenly, clothing was easier to produce, mass production became the staple of discount men's clothing, and the clothing industry would never be the same again.