

The Evolution of the United States Army's  
Enlisted Rank Structure and Insignia  
1776- Present

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I. Introduction

A. References

1. Insignia of Rank, Enlisted Personnel, Retrieved 3 October 2004, from the World Wide Web:

<https://www.perscom.army.mil/tagd/tioh/rank/enlisted.htm>

Insignia of Grade, Enlisted Personnel, Retrieved 28 September 2004, from the World Wide Web:

<http://usmilitary.about.com/library/milinfo/blstripehist.htm>

- B. Abundant sources of information were available both on the internet and the USASMA LRC.

II. Body – Evolution of the NCO ranks and insignia through major conflicts

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**L579 NCO History Brief Outline**  
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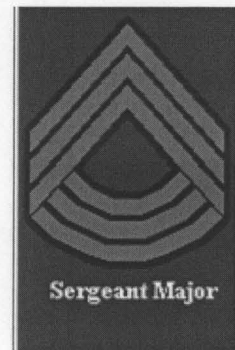
Every major conflict in the United States Army's long history has ushered in substantial changes in the enlisted rank structure and its identifying insignia. The Army's time-honored process of applying past lessons learned to current operations is evident in the evolution of enlisted ranks. From the time of General George Washington's Continental army to the twenty-first century, the Army has evolved from a ragtag band of colonists to the premier professional fighting force it is today. Along the way, the enlisted rank structure has also evolved to acknowledge and encompass the ever-increasing demands for technical and tactical expertise in the NCO Corps. Today's Army enlisted rank structure and insignia combines remnants of old British and French ranks as well as vestiges of an old system of specialized ranks meant to identify those with technical skills. In addition, it contains provisions for the purely American invention of the rank of Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA.)

Human society has always needed the means to quickly determine who is in charge. When armies were small and everyone in a fighting group knew each other, the need for insignia or markings denoting leadership was unnecessary. But as armies became larger and added specialized groups of fighting elements, the need to be able to tell who was responsible for what became more and more evident. General George Washington recognized this need and ordered members of his Continental Army to wear different colored pieces of cloth on their sleeves to identify their place in fighting units. Since his background was in the British Army, he used the British rank names such as Corporals and Sergeants that we still have today. As evidenced by one his first orders to the Continental Army, "...as the Continental Army has unfortunately no uniforms, and consequently many inconveniences must arise from not being able to distinguish the commissioned officers from the privates, it is desired that some badge of distinction be immediately provided; for instance that the field officers may have red or pink colored cockades in their hats, the captains yellow or buff, and the subalterns green," he would have much preferred that his troops wore proper uniforms with real insignia on them, but since there was little money for that he had to adapt and overcome.

By the time of the War of 1812, the United States Army had become better funded and proscribed uniforms with epaulettes to denote enlisted ranks. The period after the War of 1812 leading up to the War with Mexico in 1846 saw the advent of the use of chevrons to denote enlisted ranks. There were six enlisted grades ranging from Private to Sergeant Major and regiments were identified by the color of the chevrons. "Rockers" appeared for the first time and were used on the Sergeant Major insignia. The illustration to the right shows the insignia of a artillery Sergeant Major in 1846. This period also saw the first of what would become a series of inverting the chevrons from up to down and back again.

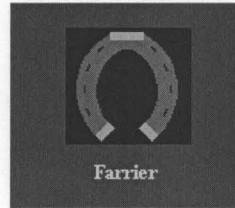
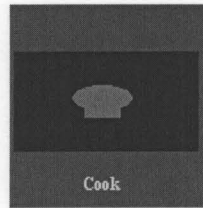
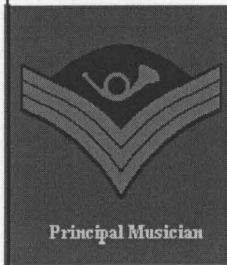


By the time of the Civil War era in the 1860s, the enlisted rank structure consisted of seven grades. The color of the chevrons continued to denote regimental affiliation and the chevrons were worn points down. The figure to the left shows insignia of a Civil War artillery Sergeant Major.



Illustrated to the right, this era also saw the diamond introduced to the First Sergeant's insignia of grade.

The period between the War with Mexico and the Spanish-American War in 1898 saw the first time addition of symbols to denote specialized duties. This is illustrated in the examples below. As you can see, colors continued to denote regimental affiliation and chevrons continued to be worn points down



The Army's enlisted rank structure and corresponding insignia of the World War I era (1914-1920)

**U.S. Army**  
**NCO Ranks and**  
**Insignia**

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\*\*\*List Book here: