

Emily Lau

Ms. Milhizer/Mr. Irish

American Studies

5 February 2018

Food: The Backbone of the Union's Victory

The foundation of the Civil War was built upon the ability to quickly transport food to the massive number of soldiers dispersed among the vast battlefields across the country. Many of the provisions transported were created to endure many days in the fields and camps. The South tended to receive less diversified and smaller rations due to the multiple blockades imposed by the North, prompting the unspoken belief that the necessity to stay alive trumped the moralities of the men. The lack of food often led to looting, bartering among enemies, and hastened deaths for both sides of the war. As a result of distinct economic and transportational situations between the Union and Confederacy, the differing food rations distributed amongst both sides led to detrimental effects on the lives of the citizens and villages that eventually accumulated to a Northern victory.

The economy of the South was highly dependent on the agriculture that was exported around the world, especially to European countries. Cotton was the leading export of the South, as they produced “two-thirds of the world’s supply of cotton.”¹ The majority of the exports from the United States, prior to the Civil War, also came from Southern states. The utter importance of cotton to the South’s economy was stressed in Hon. James H. Hammond’s speech to the Senate in 1858:

¹ Arrington, Benjamin T. “Story (U.S. National Park Service).” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior

What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? I will not stop to depict what everyone can imagine, but this is certain: England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South. No, you dare not make war on cotton.

No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton *is* king!²

However, cotton was a labor-intensive crop, requiring the labor of millions of slaves brought over from Africa. The economic pattern between slaves and cotton that developed quickly became essential to the growth of the plantation business.

Consequently, agriculture became exceedingly popular in the Confederate states, its popularity only strengthened by the ideal weather and the copious amounts of fertile land that characterized the Southern states. The plantation system that became the foundation of Southern values yielded most of the wealth to upper class plantation owners. The expanding gap between the rich and poor only encouraged the growth of agriculture at the expense of industrialization, as the economy of the South was dominated by the affluent. As a result, the impact of the emphasis on an agrarian economy in the South became transparent in the detrimental effects shown through the lack of expansion in transportation, as the South was believed to only contain “twenty-nine percent of the country’s railroad tracks.”³ The necessity of manufacturing and the construction of trains and canals quickly faded in favor of developing the agricultural realm, leaving industrialization to their Northern neighbors. Therefore, the South was hurt throughout the Civil War, as they were forced to rapidly industrialize and develop a vast and effective transportation system.

² Hammond, James T. “On the Admission of Kansas, Under the Lecompton Constitution.” 4 Mar. 1858, Senate Floor of the United States, Washington D.C. Address.

³ Arrington, Benjamin T. “Story (U.S. National Park Service).” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior

On the other hand, the Northern economy worked its way towards a more industrialized and manufactured economy that was significantly more developed than the primitive agricultural economy that prevailed throughout the Southern states. The industrialized economy paid great dividends towards the war effort for the North, who was producing “ninety percent of the nation’s manufacturing output”⁴ in 1860. The idea of manufacturing and mass production also translated to the agricultural sector, as the farmers in the North, although limited in number, used new mechanical inventions to stimulate productivity.

Transportation in the North was much more advanced than what was in place in the South. Due to the spirit of industrialization that spread throughout the Northern states prior to the Civil War, the necessity for an advancement of transportation grew apparent in order to reach the growing number of urban centers. The American System, as set by Henry Clay, mostly benefited the North, as railroad lines were built mostly in the Northern and Western states. In addition, as many Southerners left Congress due to secession, Congress passed many economic bills that were beforehand denied due to strong southern opposition.⁵ Subsequently, prior to the beginning of the war, the North had an unmistakable advantage over their Southern counterparts.

Transportation and economic opportunities played a decisive role in the food quantity and quality that was served to the Civil War soldiers. The differing economies indirectly influenced the varying foods distributed among the men, as a more advanced and industrialized economy would have had an easier time providing resources to its men. Transportation of food heavily relied on the availability of the railroads, as the use of trains was prevalent in order to mass

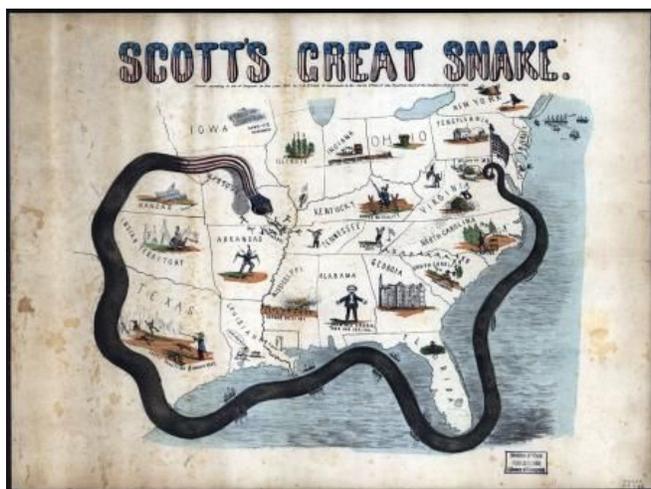
⁴ Arrington, Benjamin T. “Story (U.S. National Park Service).” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior

⁵ Arrington, Benjamin T. “Story (U.S. National Park Service).” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior

transport large quantities of food across the country. Transportation and the economy were directly linked, as the Northern, manufacturing economy necessitated a vast, modern railroad and canal system to ship finished goods throughout the country and worldwide. Due to this advantage, supplies reached Northern lines more rapidly than their Southern equivalents, allowing the experimentation of differing types of rations to occur.

Another advantage instituted by the North included the formation of a blockade in order to confine the South within their borders. Lincoln proclaimed it into effect on April 26, 1861:

Whereas, for the reasons assigned in my Proclamation of the 19th instant, a blockade of the ports of the States of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas was ordered to be established.⁶



As shown in the cartoon to the left, the blockade completely engulfs the coast and any outlets that could have been used by the Southern states.⁷ The plan, also called Scott's Great Snake, is symbolized by the giant anaconda 'strangling' the Confederacy. As planned, the blockade

successfully prevented Confederate smuggling and shipping of supplies, especially food rations and weapons necessary towards the war effort.⁸

As a result of the Union blockade that was implemented, Confederate soldiers often

⁶ Union Blockade Proclamations, April 19, 1861; Presidential Proclamations, 1791-1991; Record Group 21; General Records of the United States Government; National Archives.

⁷ Elliott, J.B. "Scott's Great Snake." *Library of Congress*

⁸ "The Union Blockade." *North Carolina Digital History*, U.S. Department of State

received poorly varied rations. Most soldiers received rations of hardtack, “a stiff, flavorless cracker that could cost somebody a tooth if they bit into it,”⁹ along with salt pork and/or beef. The most important aspect of a ration was coffee, an indispensable item for the long nights that battles would often entail, but the Confederates often lacked coffee and other nutrients due to the blockade. As a result, the Rebels often starved from lack of food, and were forced to forage the forests and loot their victorious missions in order to stay alive. This critically weakened Confederate forces on several occasions, as soldiers were forced to divide their time between fulfilling their personal needs and their professional needs. The prisoners of the Rebels received even more pitiful rations, as detailed by J.B. McCracken, a Richmond camp prisoner:

As long as we was there we got just half a pound of bread, once ounce of poor meat, and a pint of slot called by them, bean soup. It was made of a poor quality of beans and muddy water out of the river James.¹⁰

Quality food was a rarity to Confederate soldiers, and prisoners often received the short end of the already short stick.

On the contrary, Union soldiers received a more varied and nutritious ration, due to an advanced transportation system that spanned across the country. The creation of the United States Sanitary Commission, “trained to find and distribute food to soldiers stationed in the field,”¹¹ allowed the men on the field to receive a constant supply of food. The rations of a camp Union soldier often included hardtack, salted pork or beef, sugar, salt, vinegar, potatoes, and occasionally, dried fruits and vegetables.¹² Nevertheless, the soldiers would receive the most

⁹ Godoy, Maria. “Civil War Soldiers Needed Bravery To Face The Foe, And The Food.” *Npr.org*, 3 July 2013

¹⁰ McCracken, J. B. “Camp Parole August 6th/63.” Received by Juliana Smith Reynolds, *Library of Congress*, 6 Aug. 1863.

¹¹ Avery, Tori. “Civil War Cooking: What the Union Soldiers Ate.” *Thehistorykitchen.com, Pbs.org*, 21 Sept. 2012.

¹² Butler, Stephanie. “Desecrated Vegetables: The Hardships of Civil War Eating.” *History.com*, 5 July 2013.

important ration of all, coffee. While the quality of the coffee was often compromised to feed the millions stationed in camps and fields, it was an invaluable supply, as said through Charles Nott:

The coffee you probably wouldn't recognize in New York. Boiled in an open kettle, and about the color of a brownstone front, it was nevertheless the only warm thing we had.¹³

While the rations that the Union forces received were not the tastiest nor most varied, they were enough to fortify the soldiers. The North was able to spend time and energy that was not otherwise available to their opposition, as they were not forced to search for provisions to keep them alive. This small advantage created that slight edge necessary to lead the Union to a victory.

Coffee was critical to a soldier's life on the battlefield. The coffee sack to the right contains materials necessary to roast a cup of coffee, indispensable to the long hours that a soldier's life demands.¹⁴ While Union soldiers were allowed the 'luxury' of



coffee beans, although unripened, Confederate soldiers were forced to become creative, using peanuts, chicory, rye, peas, and dried apples in order to brew their cup of joe. Hence, as the war dragged on, coffee was just one item on a list of disadvantages presented to the Rebel soldiers. The longer the war was sustained, the amount of suffering the soldiers, especially the Confederate side, faced only increased, as the problem of starvation and exhaustion grew rampant among battle camps and fields.

¹³ Avery, Tori. "Civil War Cooking: What the Union Soldiers Ate." *Thehistorykitchen.com, Pbs.org*, 21 Sept. 2012.

¹⁴ "Coffee Sack." *Smithsonian.edu*.

While both sides of the war acquired differing food rations, a similar problem persisted among both Union and Confederate camp: the inability to cook the rations that were given to them. In a society where the women did the cooking, Northern and Southern soldiers remained unequipped in the basic skills of cooking and were thrust into a world that quickly forced them to adjust. The men would organize themselves into groups to divide the cooking among them or if they were lucky, have a cook to prepare a large meal.¹⁵ No matter the situation, cooking often remained rudimentary and tasteless, as cooks needed to efficiently provide mass amounts of food for the soldiers.¹⁶

In addition, the effects of the often inedible and repetitious rations led to a new common enemy. Often overthought, the silent, but deadly, killer of malnutrition lurked throughout the battle camps, no matter the soldier's loyalty. The unfortunate were struck down with scurvy and diarrhea, some of the diseases that followed starvation. Hospitals were no better at providing sustenance, as they lacked the resources in order to properly fulfill a patient's demanding diet.¹⁷ As more and more soldiers succumbed to the deadly diseases that followed malnutrition, armies on both sides, but especially the Confederate army, contained insufficient numbers to properly fight a war. Under the circumstances, the lack of quality food created much bigger problems than what was initially imagined, and only increasingly affected the decisions that led to a Northern victory.

Diets in the Civil War affected more than what was usually seen and reported, as villages and communities suffered as a result of poor rations. Multiple soldiers, especially the Confederates, were forced to forage or raid nearby communities in order to stay alive. However,

¹⁵ Butler, Stephanie. "Desecrated Vegetables: The Hardships of Civil War Eating." *History.com*, 5 July 2013.

¹⁶ Davis, William C. *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray*.

¹⁷ Davis, William C. *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray*.

the Southerners were often sympathetic to the rebel soldiers, and no matter their economic situation, fed them generous amounts of food, attempting to save them from starvation. Mrs. I.E. Doane told of her account as a child in Colleton County, South Carolina:

These, ragged and half-starved, passed in hordes, raiding their provisions, killing their chickens, hogs and cattle. Although this was hard, Mrs. Cummings did not begrudge food to these soldiers... Her mother and 'Mudder' [would bake] hoecakes in the kitchen for these hungry soldiers, who were so ravenous that they could not wait for the bread to be browned on both sides, but would snatch it from their hands and eat it half-cooked.¹⁸

The starvation was evident for the Confederates, however, it accumulated to where it severely punished the families and communities around the camps. Often families would lose the winter's provisions in an attempt to feed the undernourished men. Another account as told by Mrs. Ernestine Weiss Faudie of Sandy Creek, Texas emphasizes the hardships as faced by the villagers:

When any of the soldiers on either side came thro our place they took anything they could find, the rebels felt that they had a right to it for they were fighting for us. They took our horses and killed our hogs and cows to eat, and took our corn.¹⁹

Her family was forced to supplement or replace their daily provisions with fillers because of the lack of rations and supplies to run their daily lives. The patriotism spread throughout Southern communities fueled their willingness to help towards the war effort, however they were penalized gravely for their generosity, losing whole winter provisions to the soldiers.

¹⁸ Martin, Chlotilde R., and I. E. Doane. "[Mrs. I. E. Doane]." *Library of Congress*

¹⁹ Cowan, Effie, and Ernestine Weiss Faudie. "[Mrs. Ernestine Weiss Faudie]." *Library of Congress*

As the Confederates began the slow decline into defeat, the lack of supplies persisted, essentially starving them to death. One company was “reduced to picking kernels of corn out of the horse dung”²⁰ in order to eat. Starvation was only exacerbated by the weak transportation system set in place by the primarily agrarian South, the Union blockade destroying the little that was there. While most upper-level officials were allowed the luxury of a fulfilled stomach, most of the infantry slowly ceased to exist due to the lack of rations. The will to live frequently trumped the morality of the soldiers, leading them to commit immoral and indecent acts to feed their growling and desperate stomachs. Thus, illegal acts, including conspiring with the enemy, often went ignored, as the mantra, every man for himself, rang throughout the camps. The sense of loyalty and comradeship from before were quickly lost as the men sought for anything that provided them nutrients. As agony between the soldiers increased, humanity became secondary to survival, as even the dead became valuable resources for the living. Even the nearby villages were abused for the commodities that they ‘offered’: free sources of food and shelter. One story tells of the despair of Confederate soldiers:

In 1863 in Virginia, one farmer invited a Confederate general to his dinner table, but before the general arrived, some of his men came first, one impersonating their commander, and they devoured the feast just as the general approached, leaving him nothing but the debris of their meal.²¹

The soldiers were willing to be severely punished in order to feed their dying bodies, demonstrating the sense of desperation within the soldiers in the midst of war, which created indestructible and corrupt personas that only heightened with increased starvation.

²⁰ Davis, William C. *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray*.

²¹ Davis, William C. *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray*.

From the beginning, the South was severely disadvantaged, and the lack of food and resources swiftly led to an impoverished and incapacitated South in comparison to an increasingly powerful North. The lack of resources was a crucial problem, as battles were lost by the South because soldiers were sent to collect food supplies to feed the men. General Lee was pressured to split up his forces, weakening his army, in order to forage for rations, culminating in a loss at the Battle of Gettysburg, a pivotal conflict in the war. He lost up to twenty-eight thousand men, wreaking havoc on his forces.²² The Civil War came to an eventual and painful victory for the Union at the conclusion of the Battle of the Appomattox Court House, helped by thousands of deserting Confederates, no doubt stimulated by malnourishment.²³ The lack of rations, as assisted by the Union blockade, indirectly led to the Confederacy's loss to the Union. The weakening morals and physical strength of the men, combined with the devastation of the surrounding communities in the Southern states were only encouraged by the mass starvation and hysteria experienced by the troops of the war, essentially forming the cornerstone to the North's success.

²² Godoy, Maria. "Civil War Soldiers Needed Bravery To Face The Foe, And The Food." *Npr.org*, 3 July 2013

²³ "Appomattox Court House." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009

Works Cited

- “Appomattox Court House.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009,
www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/appomattox-court-house.
- Arrington, Benjamin T. “Story (U.S. National Park Service).” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/resources/story.htm%3Fid%3D251.
- Avery, Tori. “Civil War Cooking: What the Union Soldiers Ate.” *Thehistorykitchen.com*, *Pbs.org*, 21 Sept. 2012.
- Butler, Stephanie. “Desecrated Vegetables: The Hardships of Civil War Eating.” *History.com*, 5 July 2013.
- “Coffee Sack.” *Smithsonian.edu*. https://www.si.edu/object/nmah_1429643
- Cowan, Effie, and Ernestine Weiss Faudie. “[Mrs. Ernestine Weiss Faudie].” *Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/item/wpalh002243. Accessed 21 Oct. 2017.
- Davis, William C. *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray*.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=WlZrG8aZyT4C&q=diet#v=snippet&q=diet&f=false>
- Elliott, J.B. “Scott's Great Snake.” *Library of Congress*,
www.loc.gov/resource/g3701s.cw0011000.
- Godoy, Maria. “Civil War Soldiers Needed Bravery To Face The Foe, And The Food.” *Npr.org*, 3 July 2013,
www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/07/02/198042487/civil-war-soldiers-needed-bravery-to-face-the-foe-and-the-food.
- Hammond, James T. “On the Admission of Kansas, Under the Lecompton Constitution.” 4 Mar. 1858, Senate Floor of the United States, Washington D.C. Address.

Martin, Chlotilde R, and I. E. Doane. “[Mrs. I. E. Doane].” *Library of Congress*,
www.loc.gov/resource/wpalh3.31040314/?sp=3&st=text. Accessed 22 Oct. 2017.

McCracken, J. B. “Camp Parole August 6th/63.” Received by Juliana Smith Reynolds,
Library of Congress, 6 Aug. 1863.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/mreynolds.010003/?sp=1&st=text>

“The Union Blockade.” *North Carolina Digital History*, U.S. Department of State,
www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-civilwar/5460.

Union Blockade Proclamations, April 19, 1861; Presidential Proclamations, 1791-1991; Record
Group 21; General Records of the United States Government; National Archives.