

# What Did Civil War Soldiers Eat?

Union Fare		Confederate Fare	
Hardtack	Hard “crackers” made with flour, salt, and water. More on this subject later!	Cornmeal	For Johnnie Cakes and <i>Cush</i> : beef and cornmeal fried with bacon grease
Meat	Salted pork, bacon, or beef soaked with potassium nitrate (saltpeter)	Meat	Salted beef or bacon soaked with potassium nitrate (saltpeter)
Flour		Dried peas	
Cornmeal			
<b>In lesser amounts:</b>		<b>In lesser amounts:</b>	
Molasses		Molasses	
Salt and pepper		Hardtack	Not frequent due to flour shortages
Coffee or tea		Coffee or tea	Union blockades meant no coffee beans, so they used peanuts, chicory, okra, wheat, corn, bran, acorns, rye, peas, sweet potatoes, and dried apples to make something similar.
Sugar		Sugar	
Rice or hominy	Corn that has been soaked and washed to remove the hulls		
Dried beans or peas		Peanuts	“goober peas”
Desiccated vegetables	Dehydrated, shredded vegetables packed in cakes	Fresh vegetables	When available
Milk	Gail Borden’s condensed milk – a new invention!		



*Cooking for the Cause: Confederate Recipes, Documented Quatations and Commemorative Recipes.* Patricia B. Mitchell, 1988.

*Union Army Cooking: 1861-1865.* Patricia B. Mitchell, 1990.

## Hungry? How about worm castles and desecrated vegetables?



"Hardtack"  
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The daily ration of Civil War soldiers was pretty simple. This is primarily because they couldn't preserve food like we do today. Canned foods had been available after 1809; however, it was difficult to transport to troops on the march (*Cooking for the Cause*, 5).

Hardtack was the Union soldiers' main source of food because it was cheap to make, easy to transport, and lasted a long time. Today, we still have hardtack that was made during the Civil War! It was extremely hard because it was baked in northern factories and stored in warehouses before it was finally shipped to soldiers on the battlefields. It was so hard many soldiers broke their teeth trying to eat it!

Some of the nicknames soldiers had for hardtack were teeth-dullers, sheet-iron crackers, flour tile, ship's biscuit and hard bread. They also called it worm castles because there were often weevils and maggots in the crackers. To eat this hard bread, soldiers often broke it up with a rock or rifle butt and softened it by putting it in their coffee or heating it in grease. They had a favorite dish called Skillygallee, which was fried pork fat with crumbled hardtack.

*While before Petersburg, doing siege work in the summer of 1864, our men had wormy 'hardtack,' or ship's biscuit served out to them for a time. It was a severe trial, and it tested the temper of the men. Breaking open the biscuit and finding live worms in them, they would throw the pieces in the trenches where they were doing duty day by day, although the orders were to keep the trenches clean, for sanitary reasons.*

*A brigade officer of the day, seeing some of the scraps along our front, called out sharply to our men: "Throw that hardtack out of the trenches." Then, as the men promptly gathered it up as directed, he added, 'Don't you know that you've no business to throw hardtack in the trenches? Haven't you been told that often enough?' Out from the injured soldier heart there came the reasonable explanation: "We've thrown it out two or three times, sir, but it crawls back" (Union Army Camp Cooking: 1861-1865, 18).*

What are "desecrated vegetables"? According to Abner Small of the 16th Maine, the government asked someone to come up with a *vegetable compound in portable form, and it came – tons of it – in sheets like pressed hops. I suppose it was healthful, for there was variety enough in its composition to satisfy any condition of stomach and bowels. What in Heaven's name it was composed of, none of us ever discovered. It was called simply 'desiccated vegetables.'* Ben once brought in just before dinner a piece with a big horn button on it, and wanted to know "if dat 'ere was celery or cabbage?" I doubt our men have ever forgotten how a cook could break off a piece as large as a boot top, put it in a kettle of water, and stir it with the handle of a hospital broom. When the stuff was fully dissolved, the water would remind one of a dirty brook with all the dead leaves floating around promiscuously. Still, it was a substitute for food. We ate it, and we liked it, too (*Union Army Camp Cooking*, 26-27).

Charles E. Davis, 13th Massachusetts: *It was at Darnestown that we were first made acquainted with an article of food called 'desiccated' vegetables. For the convenience of handling, it was made into large, round cakes about 2 inches thick. When cooked, it tasted like herb tea. From the flow of lan-*

*guage which followed, we suspected it contained powerful stimulating properties. It became universally known in the army as 'desecrated' vegetables, and the aptness of this term would be appreciated by the dullest comprehension after one mouthful of the abominable compound. It is possible that the chaplain, who over heard some of the remarks, may have urged its discontinuance as a ration, inasmuch as we rarely, if ever, had it again (Union Army Camp Cooking, 27).*

For comparison, examine the contents of a jar of dehydrated vegetables. They can be found in the spice section at the grocery store. Imagine large cakes of this substance. Delicious, right? Try soaking it in a glass of hot water. Would you like to eat this for dinner?

The Union soldier also added to his diet by receiving care packages from home or buying food from sutlers. These were traveling salesmen that followed the army's regiments. Their prices were extremely high and sometimes their food was spoiled. Soldiers referred to them as vultures, and sometimes raided their supplies (Museum of the Confederacy, 8).

In general, Union soldiers had enough food, even if it was sometimes tasted terrible. The exceptions were when inexperienced or incompetent officers were in charge of distributing rations or when supply depots couldn't keep up with troops in times of quick troop movement and battle.

Confederate soldiers weren't as "lucky" as Union soldiers. Food was scarcer. Cornbread was the staple food. Using the cornmeal, they made Johnnie Cakes and *Cush*, which was cooked beef fried with bacon grease and cornmeal. They didn't have coffee beans in most parts of the Confederacy due to blockades, so they made coffee from just about anything – except coffee! Examine some of the coffees in your local grocery store. Do any of them contain chicory? What is chicory?

Neither army received meat that often. When they did get meat, it was usually too tough, too rotten, or too full of preservatives to be eaten.

Foraging (gathering food from the land or stealing it from farms) wasn't allowed, but officers usually looked the other way when it did happen. In August of 1862, Stonewall Jackson's men raided a Union supply depot at Manassas Junction, Virginia. A Rebel lieutenant wrote, *To see a starving man eating lobster-salad and drinking Rhine wine, bare-footed and in tatters, was curious (Cooking for the Cause, 5-6).*

Union General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote, *Convey to Jeff Davis my personal and official thanks for abolishing cotton and substituting corn and sweet potatoes in the south. These facilitate our military plans much, for food and forage are abundant (Cooking for the Cause, 20).*

According to Captain Chiswell Dabney, in fall 1864 the Confederates were living mostly on sweet potatoes. Men were so hungry that they were ready to fight just to get food. Scouts discovered cattle headed for the Union troops. All mouths began to water as they imagined



A sutler's bomb-proof shelter nicknamed "Fruit and Oyster House" in Petersburg, Virginia. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-B811-1051

eating fresh beef – quite a delicacy! They thought they had the cattle – but the Union army wasn't about to give up this valuable resource without a fight. In the end, the Confederates won because *veterans across their path determined to eat beef or die...* When they were all safe, they *proceeded to have the greatest beefsteak feast ever known in the army of Northern Virginia. As one of our men described it, we snatched the victuals right out of their mouths... Thus it was that General Grant gave us the great beefsteak feast, and we for a time let out our belts* (*Cooking for the Cause*, 7-9).

Hunger caused many soldiers to experiment with new foods. According to Dr. J. Richard Corbett, *Both Federals and Confederates craved "fresh" meat; and both engaged in killing cows and hogs belonging to civilians and distributing the meat among their troops. During the final months of the war, more than a few horses, mules, dogs, cats and even rats were eaten by soldiers, particularly prisoners of war* (*Cooking for the Cause*, 9).

## How Do I Cook This Stuff?

When Civil War soldiers were hungry, they just walked to the camp kitchen, popped a few hot dogs in the microwave, and then ate at the table. If that wasn't enough, they could make a late night run to the local convenience store. Right? Not quite.

Here's the problem: you are on the march. Your equipment is as light as you can make it. (Marching is hard work; you don't want to carry extra "stuff" if you don't need to.) The food is given out to the tired, hungry soldiers: meat and flour.

You don't have a frying pan, bread pan, or ANYTHING to cook with. So, what on earth are you supposed to do with the flour? Eat it out of your handkerchief? How do you make it into something "sort of" like bread?

Take a minute to discuss this problem with the rest of the students in your group. Write your ideas down on a separate sheet of paper. When you are finished, go to the next page to find out how they solved the problem.

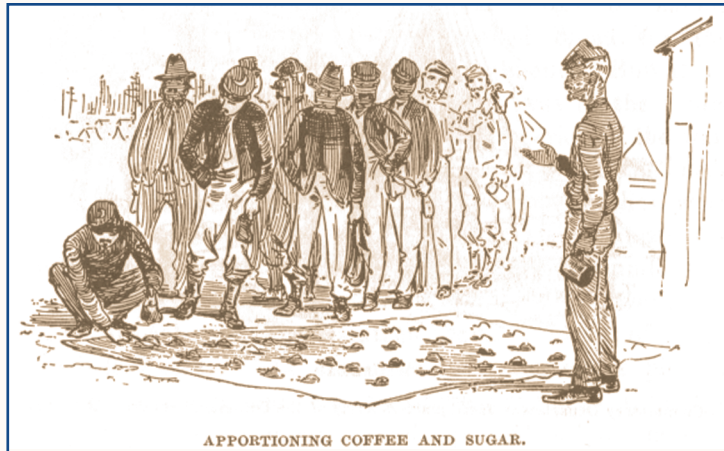


Illustration from *Hardtack and Coffee*. By John Billings; Illustrations by Charles W. Reed

## Solution:

Berry Benson, a Southern scout who was being held in a Union camp, tells how the Union soldiers cooked their rations of beef and flour: ...*The meat could be broiled on the coals, but how to cook flour without oven, frying pan, or something, how even to make it into dough? Some heated stones after mixing the dough in dirty handkerchiefs; some baked in the ashes. One creative soldier made the dough into a long rope, which was then wrapped spirally round a ramrod, the ramrod being laid horizontally before the fire on two small wooden forks set in the ground. By turning the ramrod, all parts of the dough were by turns exposed to the fire and so baked, being broken off in pieces when done. It then miraculously disappeared* (Cooking for the Cause 15).

Many soldiers cooked in their individual tin dippers. Sometimes, a few men bought a frying pan to share, taking turns carrying it on marches. (Would you want to carry a frying pan when you are marching? Can you imagine being that desperate for good food?) Col. Polk of North Carolina wrote of the scarcity of cooking equipment: *There are seventy-six in my company now and we have three small vessels to cook in. They seldom get cool* (Cooking for the Cause, 15).

## What is Hardtack?

Why people would do this with good flour we don't know.

But, here is how you make hardtack.

Note: unless you have steel dentures, soak the hardtack before you bite into it.

Mix one part water with five parts flour and a little bit of salt. (Depending on how humid or dry your house is, you may need more or less water.) Roll very flat and cut into crackers about 3 inches square. Punch 16 holes in the crackers. Bake in a medium oven until hard (about 20 minutes). Allow to cool.

When finished, the hardtack should be incredibly hard and tasteless. If you hit it with your fist and it doesn't dent, crumble, or break, you did it right. For the true hardtack experience, add a couple worms. ☺

When finished, donate the crackers to a local hunting club for skeet practice. Or, have a contest for the most creative use for this stuff. This could be a good fundraiser!