

# CIVIL WAR CAMP LIFE

*Private Sam Watkins of the 1st Tennessee regiment described the common Civil War soldier as “the one who did the shooting and killing, the fortifying and ditching, the sweeping of the streets, the drilling, the standing guard, picket, and vedette [signalman], and who drew (or was to draw) eleven dollars per month and rations, and also drew the ramrod and tore the cartridge....” These were farmers, storeowners, laborers, and schoolteachers ranging in age from 18 to 45. Rising at six to the bugle’s call of reveille. Following roll call, to ensure no one had deserted during the night; the day might begin with a communally cooked breakfast of meat and a potato, a chunk of bread and a cup of coffee with a spoonful of brown sugar in it and occasionally milk and butter.*

## MESS SET



During the Civil War soldiers carried durable and lightweight eating and cooking utensils which would be carried in their haversack. In addition to a fork, spoon, and knife plates, cups, and pots of tin-plated sheet iron were common.

## HARD TACK



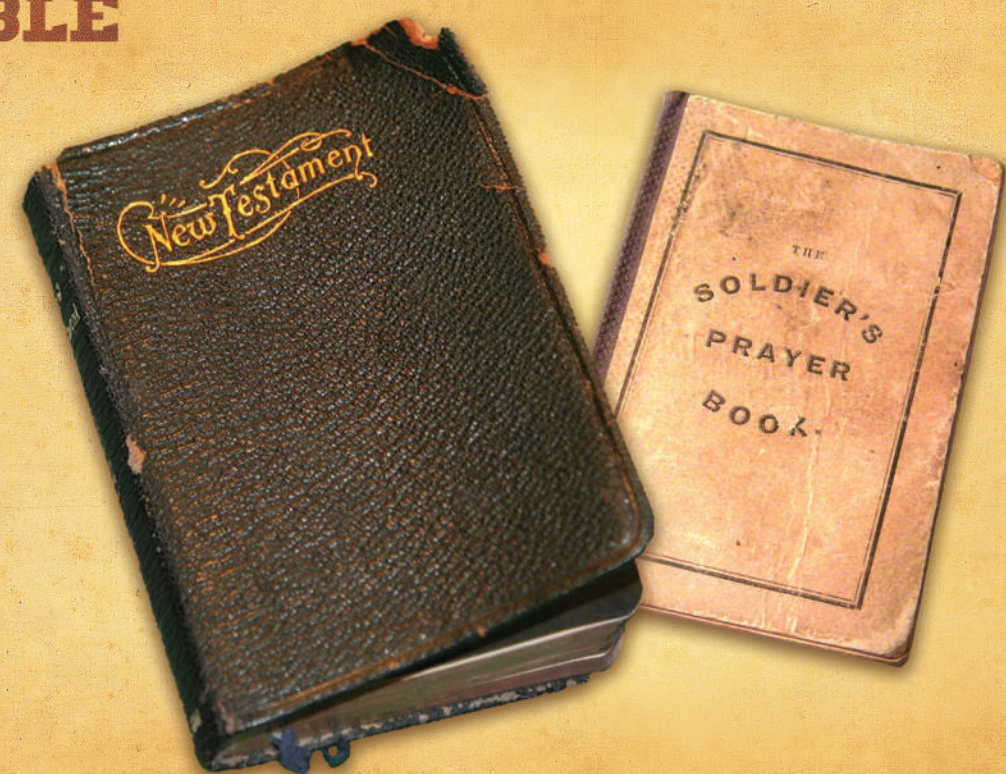
This cracker, baked from flour, water, and salt, was the main staple of the soldier’s diet because, if kept dry, it would preserve indefinitely. Because of their hardness, soldiers would refer to them as “tooth dullers” or “sheet iron.” While campaigning troops carried three days of rations which included thirty hardtack crackers. The preferred way to prepare them was to soften them in water then fry them in bacon grease, but on the march, soldiers ate them “raw” with a piece of salt pork, bacon, or some sugar.

## CONFEDERATE PAPER CURRENCY



With secession in 1861, the Confederacy continued to use United States coinage and currency while striking coins at the New Orleans Mint. With copper, silver, and gold bullion in short supply, and with the fall of New Orleans to Union forces in 1862 the Confederacy came to rely on paper promissory notes guaranteeing payment “six months after the ratification of a treaty of peace with the United States of America.” As the odds of victory waned and the value of the Confederate bills plummeted, many southerners preferred to place their faith in U.S. coins. A soldier’s wage was only \$11 per month; less than half the average salary before the war. Pictured above is a \$5 Texas note and other Confederate currency.

## BIBLE



Literacy in the 1860s was high. Soldiers wrote and received letters, and read Beadle’s Dime Novels, newspapers, and magazines like Harper’s Weekly that featured artwork by artists such as Winslow Homer and Alfred Waud. Bibles and religious publications were also popular. The Soldier’s Prayer Book, specifically addressed the spiritual welfare of those who faced the terrifying prospect of combat and death on the battlefield.

## PLAYING CARDS



Described as “Months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror,” military life was no picnic. “In between our stated duties, we had some time in which we could amuse ourselves as we chose, and we had many means of entertainment. We had a chessboard, a set of quoits, dominos, and cards; and there was the highly intellectual game of push pin open to all corners.” While the U.S. Army Regulations of 1861 stipulated that gambling was prohibited officers and enlisted men participated equally to pass the time and relieve the tedium of camp life.

## SEWING KIT



Campaigning was hard on the soldiers and their uniforms. Soldiers repaired torn uniforms using sewing kits, also known as “Housewives,” that contained thread, needles, scissors, and patches cut from discarded clothing.

## TOILETRY SET



The U.S. Army Regulation of 1861 stated that, where convenient, soldiers should bathe once or twice a week, but in the field, soldiers were a grimy group, splattered with blood, dirt, and gunpowder. When given the opportunity, they boiled their uniforms and bathed in rivers near camps. Many men carried small “dirty” bags in the knapsack containing soap, combs, toothbrushes, mirrors, tooth powder, and foot powder.

## FIRESTARTER KIT



Matches, known as “Lucifers,” had existed for more than thirty years by 1860. Unreliable when damp or wet soldiers also carried iron strike-a-lights and flint for making sparks to light tinder comprised of small twigs and leaves, or scraps of fabric or paper. On sunny days a magnifying glass might be used to light a campfire by focusing the sun’s light on the tinder. The beam of light would be focused into a tight, perfect circle so that the tinder could begin to smoke and smolder. Soldiers took special care with their magnifying lenses, as they could be easily broken.

## JAW OR JEW’S HARP



Music was an important part of soldiers’ lives, whether it be singing on the march or by the campfires at night. At the beginning of the Civil War soldiers were issued a harmonica, a tin whistle, or a Jaw or Jew’s harp as a means of improving morale. Evidence of their popularity is found in the hundreds of harmonica and jaw harp fragments found at camp and battle sites.

## CAMPSITE



During the Civil War canvas tents came in a number of shapes and sizes. Hospital tents might house twenty patients, officer’s tents would sport canvas walls and cots, and soldiers might use basic two-man shelter tents like that shown above. To make sleeping more comfortable the enlisted men would place grass, hay, or pine boughs between oilcloths to form a makeshift mattress.

## VOICES OF THE CIVIL WAR

*“It has rained for a week and the roads are muddy. After marching for twenty miles it is not pleasant to lie down at night in the wet without any cover. I am tired—in fact I never was so tired in my life. But Hurray! It is all for the Union.”*

—Elisha Hunt Rhodes (Union),  
Second Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry

*“Instead of growling and deserting, they laughed at their own bare feet [and] ragged clothes.... Weak, hungry, cold, wet, worried with vermin and itch, dirty, with no hope of reward or rest, [they] marched cheerfully to meet the well fed and warmly clad hosts of the enemy.”*

—Carlton McCarthy (Confederacy),  
Army of Northern Virginia

*“I wish you could take a peep at us tonight in our snug, cosy quarters... about half are writing, some reading, and some building castles to live in when the war is over. We are a merry set of fellows having all the necessities of life and some of its luxuries. Now sir, I have yet to see the first soldier who does not get everything he needs in the way of rations or clothing.”*

—Anonymous (Union)  
5th New Hampshire Regiment

Sunday Sept. 21, 1862

Dear Folks,  
On the 8th we struck up the refrain of “Maryland, My Maryland!” and camped in an apple orchard. We went hungry, for six days not a morsel of bread or meat had gone in our stomachs - and our menu consisted of apples and corn. We toasted, we burned, we stewed, we boiled, we roasted these two together, and singly, until there was not a man whose form had not caved in, and who had not a bad attack of diarrhea. Our under-clothes were foul and hanging in strips, our socks worn out, and half of the men were bare-footed, many were lame and were sent to the rear; others, of sterner stuff, bobbled along and managed to keep up, while gangs from every company went off in the surrounding country looking for food... Many became ill from exposure and starvation, and were left on the road. The ambulances were full, and the whole route was marked with a sick, lame, limping lot, that straggled to the farmhouses that lined the way, and who, in all cases, succored and cared for them...

—Alexander Hunter (Union)

*“Ate my whole’s day ration at one meal. Slim, very slim. But half loaf is better than no bread.”*

—Berry Benson, (Confederacy)  
Georgia

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