

# Feeding Lee's Army of Northern Virginia

Michael C. Hardy



Savas Beatie  
California

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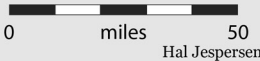
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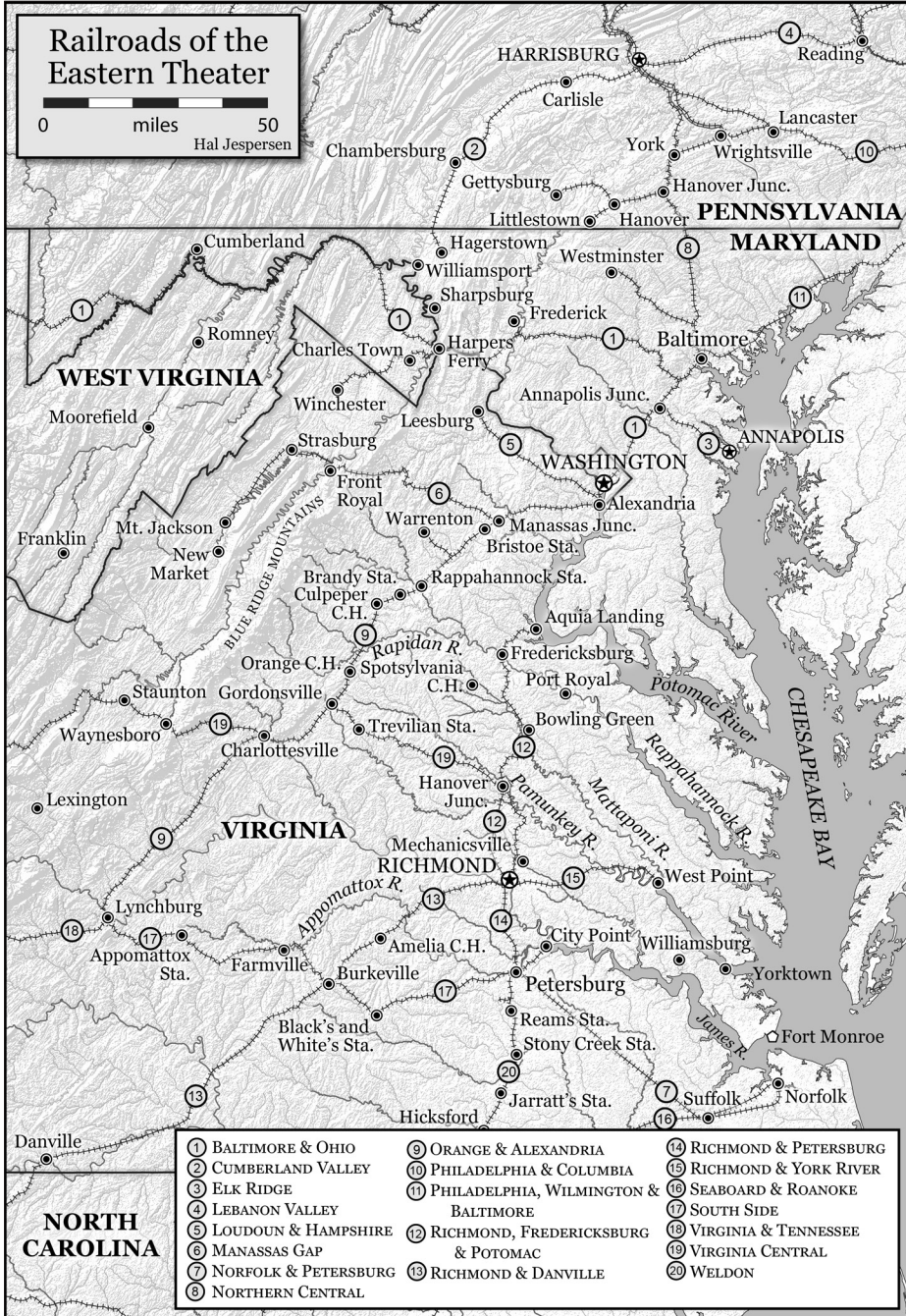
Dedicated to all the readers who encouraged this project as it simmered and asked after its progress. How grand it would be to have everyone gathered around the table to share a meal and to return thanks for our blessings.

I am grateful for the opportunity to preserve the history of brave men who were often hungry, the cooks who struggled to feed them, and families who longed to have them well-fed and home.

# Railroads of the Eastern Theater



Hal Jespersen



- |                        |  |                         |
|------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| ① BALTIMORE & OHIO     | ⑨ ORANGE & ALEXANDRIA                  | ⑭ RICHMOND & PETERSBURG |
| ② CUMBERLAND VALLEY    | ⑩ PHILADELPHIA & COLUMBIA              | ⑮ RICHMOND & YORK RIVER |
| ③ ELK RIDGE            | ⑪ PHILADELPHIA, WILMINGTON & BALTIMORE | ⑯ SEABOARD & ROANOKE    |
| ④ LEBANON VALLEY       | ⑫ RICHMOND, FREDERICKSBURG & POTOMAC   | ⑰ SOUTH SIDE            |
| ⑤ LOUDOUN & HAMPSHIRE  | ⑬ RICHMOND & DANVILLE                  | ⑱ VIRGINIA & TENNESSEE  |
| ⑥ MANASSAS GAP         |  | ⑲ VIRGINIA CENTRAL      |
| ⑦ NORFOLK & PETERSBURG |  | ⑳ WELDON                |
| ⑧ NORTHERN CENTRAL     |  |                         |

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CV</i>	<i>Confederate Veteran</i>
DU	Duke University
NCDAH	North Carolina Department of Archives and History
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
<i>SHSP</i>	<i>Southern Historical Society Papers</i>
UGA	University of Georgia
VMI	Virginia Military Institute

*Photos have been placed throughout the text for the convenience of the reader.*

## Introduction

“I am as harty as a pig, able to eat all I can get and more too,” David Parker wrote home as his regiment was mustered into Confederate service at Camp Magnum, near Raleigh. “We have corn bread and bacon and pease and wheat bread and rise a plenty, but I can not eat it without something to wash it down.” Parker recalled all the buttermilk he had wasted over the years and wished for it now. David Parker was not a wealthy man. He owned a farm valued at just \$250, with \$279 in personal wealth, according to the 1860 census. However, on March 21, 1862, Parker, with his brother Elijah, enlisted in a local company being formed in the North Carolina mountains for the 54th North Carolina Troops. At 34 years old, he left behind his wife, Nancy, and four children under the age of eight.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike many in his company, Parker had some cooking experience. Not long after arriving in camp, he began cooking for his mess of fifteen, earning a dollar per man per month, doubling his salary as a private. In August, the regiment was assigned to garrison duty in Richmond. Parker wrote home in November that he was still cooking for a mess of fifteen, a chore that excluded him from guard duty. But he was starting to complain, as all they had was beef and crackers. “I don’t think I can stand the scarcities much longer,” he confessed to Nancy, adding that he had lost seven pounds. When sick, he wrote home in December that he had to spend “a site of money” to purchase items to help him recover. Even though he remained a private, Parker had a promotion of sorts in January 1863, now cooking for the officers of his company. “It is given up that I am the best cook in the company,” he wrote. Gathering firewood, bringing water, tending the fire, and cooking were his sole responsibilities. A month later, the men were complaining of

1 Riley Henry, ed., *Pen in Hand: David Parker Civil War Letters* (Morgan Hills, CA, 2014), 8.

short rations. However, due to his unofficial position, Parker ate well, better than any of the other privates.<sup>2</sup>

Parker survived the battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg unscathed. While stationed near Orange Court House in September, he became an entrepreneur. Parker purchased three bushels of peaches for \$23, borrowed a horse to transport them back to camp, and then sold the peaches for \$47. It is unclear how often he repeated the strategy, for, on November 11, Parker was captured at Rappahannock Station and sent to Point Lookout. Paroled around March 9, 1864, Parker returned to his regiment and was wounded in the forearm on September 24 at New Market. Before being wounded, he found the food in the Shenandoah Valley much to his liking. Apples and corn were plentiful; “they cost us nothing but to go into the orchards and get them.” Nevertheless, army-issued rations were sparse.<sup>3</sup>

Parker's letters showed a marked difference when he returned to the army from his hospital stay. “It is the hardest time in this army that I have saw since I have been out in the service and if it does not get better the soldiers will not stand it long. They are all threatening to run away if they don't give them more to eat,” he wrote on December 20, 1864. Rations had increased slightly by his December 28 letter, yet he was concerned that the surplus might not last. Many of his messmates in the Confederate army were leaving, heading home, or toward the Federal lines. Parker did not want to desert, “but hunger will make men do that they do not want to do. So long as Jefferson Davis does feed me . . . I will stay with him.” Parker wrote that the good rations he had enjoyed at the end of December were just a “Christmas spree,” and prospects were as bleak as ever. “We do not get enough to eat,” he confided. Parker, however, stayed until the end. He was wounded, probably on April 2, 1865, as the Federals swarmed over the works around Petersburg. He lingered in a Richmond hospital until April 14, when he died, another casualty of a cause lost.<sup>4</sup>

David Parker's letters provide a rich narrative regarding the story of food in the Army of Northern Virginia. Rations were plentiful early on, and his cooking abilities worked to his advantage. There was always more to eat at the officers' table. Frequently, there was a farmer's field or orchard to raid while on active campaign. As the Federal armies closed in, cutting off outside foodstuffs to the army in Virginia, many began to slip off, unable to endure long, cold nights with practically nothing

2 *Ibid.*, 5–6, 44, 45, 59, 62.

3 *Ibid.*, 102, 123.

4 *Ibid.*, 133, 142. Parker's date of wounding is unknown, only that he was admitted to a Richmond hospital on April 3.



to eat. Parker's experiences resembled those of numerous other Confederate soldiers. There were many reasons Confederate armies were unsuccessful in their endeavors to fend off Federal advances. In *Feeding Lee's Army of Northern Virginia*, I contend that foodstuffs played a significant role in the demise of the Confederate army in Virginia.

Bell Irvin Wiley explored foodstuffs in a broad sense in a chapter entitled "Bad Beef and Corn Bread," in his classic, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1943). Wiley places the blame for hungry Confederates not on production, but on distribution, faulting Commissary General Lucius Northrop, who tied everything in red-tape bureaucracy. There was also a lack of salt to preserve meat, inadequate transportation, a deficiency in the Confederate finance department to pay farmers, and even a lack of packing materials to ship foodstuffs. The loss of the Mississippi River impeded transporting supplies from further west. Other historians have also surveyed foodstuffs. William C. Davis examined both sides in *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and Gray* (2003), as did Joan Cashin in *War Stuff: The Struggle for Human and Environmental Resources in the American Civil War* (2018) and Judkin Browning and Timothy Silver in *An Environmental History of the Civil War* (2020). Four other books bear special mention. Andrew Smith's *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War* (2011) and R. Douglas Hunt's *Agriculture and the Confederacy: Policy, Productivity, and Power in the Civil War South* (2015) are essential contributions to the overall understanding of food in the South during the war. Jerrold Moore's *Confederate Commissary General: Lucius Bellinger Northrop and the Subsistence Bureau of the Southern Army* (1996) comes to the defense of a person considered by some the most hated man in the Confederacy. Arguably, the most important book is Richard Goff's *Confederate Supply* (1969). While there are more recent volumes on logistics, Goff's tome is still the best on the subject. However, that landmark text looks at the subject of food across the South, while this present study is concerned with only the principal army in Virginia, providing a much more focused analysis.<sup>5</sup>

My interest developed in the last two decades of the 20th century. I was heavily involved in Civil War interpretation, and the food-related questions of visitors drove me to letters and diaries in search of answers. Then in the late 1990s, while working on a book on the 37th North Carolina Troops, I came across a soldier's letter thanking the people back home for a box. The box contained eggs, only one of which broke in transit. How was this logistical miracle accomplished? The eggs were packed in sawdust, I discovered. Later, while writing a history of the Branch-Lane brigade, I devoted almost five pages to food in the army. These

5 Bell Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (Baton Rouge, 1943), 96–97.

pages moved me to believe that the subject warranted additional research. A rich array of sources, along with the strategic and historical importance of the Army of Northern Virginia, led to a focus on these men and their experiences with food.

When it comes to sources, a great emphasis has been placed on war-time letters and diaries, instead of relying upon elderly soldiers writing decades later. War-time letters and diaries narrate an almost daily history of food being issued (or not) by the army, foods from home, rations eaten on campaign, or meals provided in hospitals. There are a few instances when post-war accounts do figure into the narrative. For instance, Carlton McCarthy, a former private in the Richmond Howitzers, wrote in 1882: "The historian who essays to write the 'grand movements' will hardly stop to tell how the hungry private fried his bacon, baked his biscuit, and smoked his pipe." This volume seeks to remedy this oversight. Private McCarthy, I hope your skillet is good and greasy.<sup>6</sup>

### *Acknowledgments*

Projects like this take a long time to develop, incurring many debts of gratitude over that period. I posted several times each week on social media as I wrote this book, and many people responded with helpful comments and suggestions. This is a new way to crowd-source history.

Several people helped in many ways. Mark Wade has a profound knowledge of Maryland soldiers. John Winebarger fielded numerous questions concerning the medical profession, and Charlie Knight patiently answered all my questions concerning Robert E. Lee.

The production team at Savas Beatie are great folks to work with. I am particularly grateful to Theodore P. Savas for taking a chance on this unconventional topic, and to Sarah Closson, Sarah Keeney, Veronica Kane, and David Snyder for their hard work on this project.

Finally, many thanks to my readers: Lee White, Charlie Knight, John Guss, and John Winebarger. Your comments helped make this book all the better. And as always, to Elizabeth Baird Hardy. Thanks for your reads, comments, and feedback. Thank you for being as interested in this story as I am.

6 Carlton McCarthy, *Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life* (Lincoln, 1993), 16.

# Prologue

## Pre-War Foodstuffs

“We live on fat bacon and bread—hard fare in comparison with home, but we must get used to it, for we are going to get no better during the campaign.” James Edmondson, 4th Virginia Infantry, penned these words to his wife Emma from Harper’s Ferry in April 1861. Edmondson’s sentiment was expressed frequently over the next four years. From the lowest private to the highest general, the volunteer soldiers missed foods that once graced their tables.<sup>1</sup>

In 1860, the Southern states boasted vast and diverse resources in agriculture. Some areas, like those along the Mississippi River, grew cash crops such as cotton, procuring some of their foodstuffs from mid-western farmers. Other regions, like Louisiana, specialized in one or two crops, such as sugar and molasses. Steamers supplied port cities with food from far and wide along the coast. Coffee came from South America, tea from East India, and fine wines from Europe. The growth of railroads in the 1850s allowed luxury items to be transported inland while moving staple goods from the interior areas to larger markets. However, most farmers were subsistence farmers, growing what they needed, with a little extra to sell or barter to procure items they could not grow, such as coffee and salt.

Pork was the staple of just about every diet. Hogs were killed in the fall, salted, and smoked, providing meat for months. Cattle could not be preserved as efficiently, so Southerners ate beef less frequently. Poultry was often a treat, as eggs were more important than meat. Coastal area residents consumed fish and oysters. Wild game, such as deer, squirrel, and rabbits, bedecked the tables of many abodes. Corn was ground into meal, and thus cornbread was more prevalent than

1 Charles Turner, ed., *My Dear Emma: War Letters of Col. James K. Edmondson, 1861-1865* (Verona, VA, 1978), 5.

wheat bread. Also, corn became hominy or grits, or it was boiled or roasted. Rice, in certain areas, was also very common. Turnips, sweet potatoes, and peas were staples. Irish potatoes were more common further north. Fruits, including apples and peaches, were plentiful. They were eaten fresh, made into pies, and dried for wintertime use. Milk was drunk separated as “sweet milk” or as buttermilk. Lamb and mutton were more common among the affluent, and the luxury foods a person could buy in a large city included refined sugar, cheeses, raisins, almonds, and ice.<sup>2</sup>

Among those filling the rank and file of the Confederate forces, pre-war diets were simple and provided adequate nutritional value for their daily lives. While their army rations could mimic tables at home occasionally, there was never enough fare to help them endure the exertions of camp and campaigns.

2 Sam Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake* (Athens, GA, 1972), 37–69.

## Chapter 1

“We are having a right hard time  
of it in the eating line”

### Army-Issued Food and Food in Camp

“**W**e get plenty to eat such as it is, hard crackers and crackers hard,” William Stilwell, 53rd Georgia Infantry, wrote home on July 1, 1862. Stilwell and his fellow Georgia soldiers had not seen much of the war. The regiment was recruited in the spring of 1862, arriving in Virginia during the Seven Days campaign. For Stilwell, foodstuffs never really improved. He wrote of living on half a cracker and parched corn and spending almost all his money on apples and bacon when he was sick. He also mentioned the area around Winchester being “eat out of everything,” of rations lasting two days instead of six, and trying and failing to catch fish. “Southern people were never made to starve,” he complained in a letter home in April 1863.<sup>1</sup>

From the infant days of the Confederacy in Virginia through the surrender at Appomattox, officials struggled to keep the armies fed. The Subsistence Department, with commissaries in the field, never had enough vegetables, vinegar, or salt. As the war progressed, soldiers often found their issued meat rancid, while the meal or flour was poorly ground and full of husks and insects. Meager nourishment frequently led to disease and, in some cases, death. For the remaining men, bad food or lack thereof led to hunger, low morale, theft, and eventually, desertion. By war’s end, the steady decline of already limited foodstuffs through the war years left Robert E. Lee a fraction of the army he could have commanded.

Thousands of recruits, eager to defend their new country, poured into Virginia in the spring of 1861. They were full of enthusiasm, and they were woefully

1 Ronald Moseley, ed., *The Stilwell Letters* (Macon, GA, 2002), 2–3, 10, 28, 60, 145.

unprepared for camp life. Some were clerks, merchants, students straight from the classroom and their teachers, local politicians, mechanics, railroad engineers, and even ministers. Most were farmers. While many had plucked chickens or butchered hogs, few had the culinary skills to prepare food properly. “The cooking department was the greatest obstacle . . . none knew the first principles of cooking,” grumbled a soldier from the 31st Virginia Infantry. While some newly minted soldiers attempted to downplay their lack of skill with a frying pan, others were brutally honest. “Our eating here is the worst feature,” a South Carolina soldier griped in late June 1861. “[W]e have plenty and that would be good if prepared right. Our biscuits are very different from those we were raised on. I do not know what I would give for a dinner at home. It makes me hungry to think of *clean* milk and butter and well baked bread even if there was not even salt in it. Do not believe that I am suffering for quantity *but for quality*. Oh the cooking. Everything else is better than I hoped for.”<sup>2</sup>

The soldiers were often separated into messes to help with cooking responsibilities. Some men gathered wood, tended fires, or hauled water from nearby sources. A trooper in the 3rd Virginia Cavalry told how his company was divided into messes of fourteen men each, with a corporal in charge of drawing rations. Those who were detailed as cooks were usually relieved from daily military duties, such as drill. Alexander McNeill, 2nd South Carolina Infantry, wrote that his mess contained fifteen members but had “two Negro cooks.” Most discovered that the enslaved brought from home, or free men of color hired along the way, knew as little about camp cooking as their employers. As the war progressed, men reorganized their messes to suit their tastes. Writing after the war, the famed South Carolina sharpshooter Berry Benson noted that the men drifted “together as their own social desires prompted,” and formed their messes.<sup>3</sup>

Ivy Duggan, 15th Georgia Infantry, recorded in August 1861 that his mess consisted of twelve men, with three men detailed to cook at a time. His shift came every fourth day. They did not have, nor did they want, a servant, he chronicled in his diary. “I think we cook very well under the circumstances.” Their mess equipment for twelve men consisted of “a camp kettle, a frying pan and a coffee pot.” Men arriving earlier in the war often had nothing to cook with or eat on. One member of the 5th Alabama Infantry recalled in July 1861 that their cooking utensils had

2 Ruth Dayton, ed., *The Diary of a Confederate Soldier* (Lewisburg, WV, 1961), 14; John Brinsfield Jr., ed., *The Spirit Divided: Memoirs of Civil War Chaplains* (Macon, GA, 2005), 19–20.

3 Blake Corson Jr., ed., *My Dear Jennie* (Richmond, VA, 1982), 7; Mac Wyckoff, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Alexander McNeill* (Columbia, SC, 2016), 77–78; Susan Benson, ed., *Berry Benson's Civil War Book* (Athens, GA, 1992), 7.

Private David C. Colbert, 46th Virginia Infantry Regiment, displays his tin canteen, pistol, and Bowie knife.

*Library of Congress*



been left during a recent move, and two or three different messes shared cooking chores using a spade.

As the quartermaster's bureau became organized, companies could requisition mess equipment. Major John B. McClelland was initially responsible for contracts with suppliers for mess equipment for Confederate forces in Virginia. One company that worked with the quartermaster department in Richmond was the Richmond Stove Works, Asa Snyder, proprietor. From 1861 through 1865, Snyder provided hundreds of cast iron kettles and skillets with lids, sometimes called spiders or biscuit bakers. Between October 1861 and March 1862 the Confederate army in Virginia received 3,520 pans, 1,318 kettles, and 500 skillets.<sup>4</sup>

The actual mess equipment of individual soldiers and officers—knives, forks, spoons, and plates—was purchased privately or brought from home, at least early in the war. A soldier in the 15th Alabama Infantry wrote home in January 1862 asking for a knife, fork, tin plate, and cup. Likewise, a Tar Heel soldier, in September 1863, wanted a “knife fork spoon & small tin plate so I can enjoy my beef & bread better.” A few months earlier, a member of the 27th Virginia Infantry sent a shopping list home. He wanted a baker or skillet with a lid, one tin kettle, six tin plates, cups, knives, forks, and a camp kettle. Some soldiers supplied themselves with captured tableware. A fragment of a letter from William Jackson,

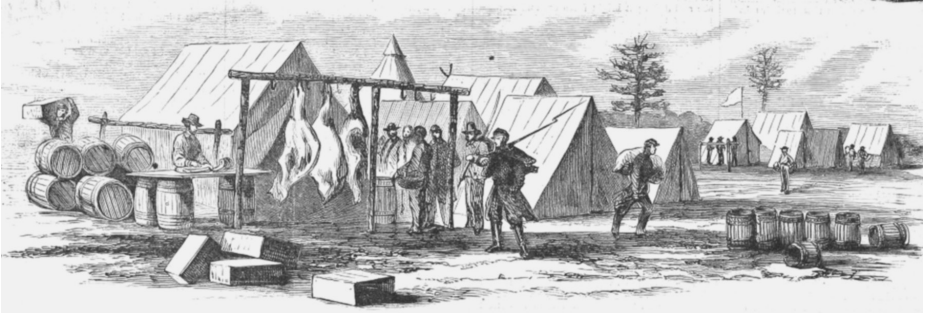
4 Ivy W. Duggan *Diary*, University of Georgia, 15–16; G. Ward Hubbs, ed., *Voices from Company D* (Athens, GA, 2003), 25–26; Asa Snyder, *Confederate Papers Related to Citizens of Business Firms, 1861–1865*, Roll 0962, M346, RG 109, NA; Harold Wilson, “Virginia’s Industry and the Conduct of War,” in Davis & Robertson, ed., *Virginia at War 1862* (Lexington, 2007), 26. McClelland died in August 1862, and in September 1862 was replaced by Maj. William G. Bentley. Major Bentley defined his duty as contracting “for the manufacture of Axes, Tents, Cooking utensils, Drums [and] Fifes” and for issuing of “Clothing, Tents, Camp [and] Garrison Equipage for the same.” William Bentley to Sir, June 14, 1864, William Bentley, Roll 022, M331, RG109, CMSR, NA.

8th Alabama Infantry, recalled collecting not only food, paper, and envelopes but a knife, fork, and spoon. One Georgia soldier picked up a knife, fork, and two spoons after one of the Overland campaign battles in 1864. By November 1863, the government shops in Richmond were building mess chests. Georgia Assistant Surgeon Abner McGarity wrote of placing a requisition for such a chest. He was surprised when it arrived promptly and “well furnished with everything necessary.” Lieutenant Colonel John Lilley likewise placed an order for a mess chest on March 17, 1864, and received his chest five days later, noting that it only cost \$5. Most of the mess equipment a soldier carried was made of tin, cheap and lightweight. Sometimes, finer ware might come from home, especially for officers. Charles Blackford, serving in the 2nd Virginia Cavalry, noted that his supper was being cooked and, “in another fence corner my table is spread with china your mother sent me, ready for supper.” When Gen. James Conner requested some china from home in September 1864, he asked his family to pack it in rice to withstand the journey.<sup>5</sup>

Early in the war, every infantry and cavalry regiment had an assistant commissary of subsistence officer, usually at the rank of captain. According to regulations, these men were bonded because they handled money. A regimental commissary officer was responsible for procuring food for his regiment. There were requisition forms to submit, and once rations were obtained, he had to keep them safe until issuing them to the men. In the early days, the commissaries were issued scales for weighing foodstuffs. These portions were then allocated to the individual companies through a non-commissioned officer. The company's non-commissioned officers were responsible for dividing portions equally among the men. Most regiments also had a commissary sergeant. The assistant commissary of subsistence was responsible for driving the wagons and livestock on campaigns and penning the livestock every evening while securing a guard. The wagons themselves belonged to the quartermaster's department. Officers purchased rations from the commissary for the war's first two and a half years.

5 Edmund Burnett, ed., “Letters of Barnett Hardeman Cody,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* (Dec. 1939), 2:363; Laura Peace, ed., *To Tranquillity* (Charleston, SC, 2018), 159; Turner, *My Dear Emma*, 118; Wayne Wood & Mary Jackson, eds., “*Kiss Sweet Little Lillah for me*” (Birmingham, AL, 2000), 50; Moseley, *The Stihwell Letters*, 261; Abner Embry McGarity, “Letters of a Confederate Surgeon: Dr. Abner Embry McGarity,” in Edmund Burnett, ed., *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* (Sept. 1945), 2:181; John Doak Lilley, “Diary of Lieutenant Colonel,” in Robert Driver, ed., *Augusta Historical Bulletin* (Fall 1991), 27:18; Susan & Charles Blackford, eds., *Letters from Lee's Army* (Lincoln, NE, 1998), 112; Mary Moffett, ed., *Letters of General James Conner* (Columbia, SC, 1950), 152. Both Robert E. Lee's and Stonewall Jackson's mess equipment, which survive, were made of tin. J. E. B. Stuart's pewter cup is in the collection of the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, VA.





Commissaries of a regiment or brigade might look similar to their counterparts in the Federal army. *Harper's Weekly*, April 18, 1863

With the influx of new troops in the Manassas area, the Commissary Department struggled to keep up with supplies. While still in Alabama, the Provisional Confederate Congress created the Commissary Department of Subsistence, placing Lucius Northrop at the head of the bureau. Born in Charleston in 1811, Northrop was a West Point graduate and veteran of service out West and in Florida. Wounded in 1839, he was dropped from the rolls and reinstated by his friend Jefferson Davis. He was still listed on the sick rolls when the war began. One of Davis's first appointments made Northrop a lieutenant colonel, placing him in charge of the Commissary Department. For this role, Northrop's qualifications were meager. He had his West Point education and years of service as a dragoon officer. He studied medicine, although he had not practiced, and he spent the winter of 1842-43 surveying the food-producing areas of the Southwest. While Northrop was honest and practiced excellent economy while in office (sometimes to his detriment), he was ill-prepared for the size and scope of the Confederate armies he was charged with provisioning.<sup>6</sup>

Northrop faced numerous challenges. He wanted to buy non-perishable foodstuffs in quantity, stockpiling needed items as a contingency plan. Yet he had little cash at his disposal. Instead, he had Confederate bonds issued by the Treasury Department, redeemable in months. Most farmers needed specie to buy supplies to re-plant and refused to take the bonds. There was scarcity, even in the agrarian South. Much of the South, especially areas connected to a railroad or a navigable body of water, cultivated cash crops such as cotton and tobacco. These areas imported various foodstuffs, such as hogs, from the Midwest. Areas with

<sup>6</sup> Northrop was Davis's third choice for the job. First to decline was Richard Griffin, then William Maynadier. Northrop himself wrote that he declined the position twice. Jerrold Moore, *Confederate Commissary General* (Shippensburg, PA, 1996), 48-49.

self-sustaining production, like the mountain South, lacked the means to grow surplus or transport crops. Northrop also faced excessive food bills coming from volunteer regiments. Often, when regiments were transferring from other states to Virginia, officers paid for the food their men consumed. These bills were submitted to Northrop's office for compensation. Northrop refused to pay, leaving officers to foot the bills. Commissary officers in regiments were also a challenge. They were appointed by regimental and brigade commanders and did not report to Northrop. Many were new to their jobs, and omissions in requisitions were frequent.<sup>7</sup>

Northrop himself created some early supply problems. Instead of paying the requested prices of Manassas-area farmers, Northrop stockpiled flour in Richmond, shipping it via the railroad to the soldiers encamped in the region. Accounting for the cost of transportation, the price was the same. Much of the salt pork for the army came from Tennessee, where prices were lower and hogs more plentiful. The distance and non-standard railroad gauges requiring the meat to be unloaded and reloaded in Richmond caused delays. There was one railroad into Manassas to transport troops, armaments, and foodstuffs. Eatables were often left rotting at depots.

Nevertheless, soldiers put a good spin on their plight in their letters back home. "We have always had plenty to eat. The fare, it is true is rough such as we are unaccustomed to at home. We did not expect to live in the way we have been raised. Here soldiers must and should willingly put up with soldier fare and without a murmur submit to the regulations of the Army," a member of the 2nd South Carolina told his family in June 1861. Others were more honest. A soldier in the 9th Alabama Infantry confessed at the end of July that they were living "very hard here nothing but Wheat Bread and meat and not enough of that."<sup>8</sup>

Manassas was a resounding Confederate victory. However, the Confederates' failure to follow up that victory with a march into the Federal capital left many public questions. Letters flowed back and forth between military leaders and politicians. Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Lee, Jr., the new chief commissary for the Army of the Potomac, precursor of the Army of Northern Virginia (ANV), wrote Davis on July 23, 1861, informing him that army supplies were "alarmingly reduced, in consequence of the non-fulfillment of requisitions of the Commissary General." Confederate general P. G. T. Beauregard telegraphed Davis, asking that

7 For a more in-depth look at the early problems faced by Northrop across the Confederacy, see Richard Goff, *Confederate Supply* (Durham, NC, 1969), 10–40; Moore, *Confederate Commissary General*, 51–60.

8 Goff, *Confederate Supply*, 20–21; Wyckoff, *The Civil War Letters of Alexander McNeill*, 44; John Carter, ed., *Welcome the Hour of Conflict: William Cowan McClellan and the 9th Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2007), 42–43.

Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard warned Confederate officials about the lack of food following the battle of First Manassas. *Library of Congress*

no additional troops be sent to him due to lack of rations. At the same time, Beauregard wrote to other Congressmen on July 29 that the “want of food and transportation had made us lose all the fruits of our victory. We ought at this moment to be in or about Washington. . . . God only knows when we will be able to advance. . . . Cannot something be done towards furnishing us more expeditiously and regularly with food and transportation?” The letter was read before Congress, and a resolution was sent to Davis, asking

about the condition of the Subsistence Department. Davis fired off his own letters. Beauregard contacted Davis again, saying “that some of his regiments were without food.” Davis wrote Joseph Johnston, stating that local citizens had flour and beef, obviously unaware of Northrop’s actions. If “the troops have suffered for food, the neglect of the subsistence department demands investigation,” Davis told Johnston. In the end, Davis defended Northrop, and Northrop removed Richard Lee, along with another commissary officer, William Fowle, who had worked with the army in collecting local foodstuffs.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the men in the camps around Manassas wrote disparagingly of their rations as the calendar slipped into August. A Maryland soldier stationed near Fairfax Court House stated that it was a “difficult thing to make bread and coffee good enough to support life.” They lacked yeast and any way to roll out biscuits. They frequently received corn meal and made “first-rate corn bread.” Local



9 Alfred Roman, *The Military Operations of General Beauregard*, 2 vols. (New York, 1884), 1:121–122; *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C., 1880–1901), Series 1, vol. 5, 767; Series 1, vol. 51, pt. 2, 204, hereafter cited as *OR*. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted.

people sometimes baked bread for the troops or sold them eggs and chickens. In September, an Alabamian recorded that at dress parade, the soldiers were told that they would be living for the foreseeable future on five days' rations of beef, and two of salt pork. "If they continue I think we will be learned to live on nothing, or only what we buy. We are now out of coffee and sugar and have had nothing but tough beef for three or four days, and from all appearances there is no prospect of a change soon." A few days later, a mess mate remarked that they were fed only beef. "[F]requently there can be seen men walking about, half bent with their hands upon their abdomens looking awful angry." By mid-October, the commissary was out of coffee. Instead, it began issuing whiskey, causing additional problems. One soldier wrote of getting "*bust head* whiskey." Those who did not drink sold their rations to others. By October 14, a member of the 33rd Virginia Infantry recalled that they could not "draw any more on account of some of the men getting drunk."<sup>10</sup>

Many soldiers wrote about supplementing their rations by purchasing foodstuffs from local community members. "We would have nothing to eat if it were not for what we buy," recalled a South Carolina soldier writing from Fairfax County on August 1. Soldiers visited neighboring farms to beg or buy food. Some citizens experienced a cash boom, while others saw their winter supplies seriously depleted. Soldiers bought anything they could. A man in the 45th North Carolina Troops bought turnips; an Alabamian, chestnuts and apples; a member of the 6th North Carolina State Troops purchased oysters, shucked, at \$2 a gallon; besides vegetables, a South Carolinian procured butter, mutton, milk, and chickens. Another South Carolinian wrote of purchasing chickens, eggs, butter, honey, potatoes, "and almost any thing else we want." Other soldiers walked or rode to some adjacent farm and dined with a family. Sergeant Alexander McNeill, 2nd South Carolina, wrote of walking half a mile for a meal near Vienna while on picket. Tar Heel Calvin Leach went "up the railroad" in mid-September and purchased peaches and some grapes a week later. Soldiers often complained about the high prices they were forced to pay. Writing on December 1, a Virginia soldier lamented that it took "a month's wages to buy anything now."<sup>11</sup>

## END OF EXCERPT

10 Randolph McKim, *A Soldier's Recollections: Leaves from the Diary of a Young Confederate* (New York, 1910), 46; Hubbs, *Voices from Company D*, 42–43, 61; Harland Jessup, ed., *The Painful News I Have to Write: Letters and Diaries of Four Hite Brothers of Page County in the Service of the Confederacy* (Baltimore, MD, 1998), 33.

11 Guy Everson & Edward Simpson, eds., *Far, Far from Home: The Wartime Letters of Dick and Sally Simpson, 3rd South Carolina Volunteers* (New York, 1994), 38; Thomas Cutrer, ed., *Longstreet's Aide* (Charlottesville, VA, 1995), 37; Ellen Stone, ed., *Letters Home to Baughn Mountain, 1862–1865* (n.p., 1979), 27; Carter, *Welcome the Hour of Conflict*, 97; Richard Jobst & Louis Manarin, *The Bloody Sixth* (Raleigh, 1965), 49; Wyckoff, *The Civil War Letters of Alexander McNeill*, 77–78, 84; Everson