



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

That Indispensable Civil War Coffee!

By [Ann Hertzler](#)

In 1832 President Andrew Jackson ordered coffee and sugar substituted for the daily liquor ration in the military, thereby introducing into soldier's lives a habit that helped them through the difficult times of the Civil War. During the war, speculators bought up all the coffee for Northern armies in order to charge the U.S. government a high price, but agents in England purchased ship-loads and prevented the action. A Southern woman described the shock in home life when President Lincoln blockaded Confederate seaports on 19 April 1861. By 1862 coffee supplies were exhausted. Coffee prices escalated, often higher in areas densely populated, invaded or occupied by the Union. Price per pound in 1861 was \$3.00; in 1862, \$1.50 to \$4.00; in 1863, \$5.00 to \$30.00. By 1864, coffee was going for \$12.00 to \$60.00!

In the 1860's, coffee recipes were written for both the 'hearth' and the new 'iron stove'. Recipes were by weight (one ounce of powder to 3/4s of a pint of boiling water, to make three full 'dishes') or household measures ('two great spoonfuls' or 'two heaped tablespoonfuls' to each pint of water). Florence Nightingale's 1861 *Directions for Camp and Hospital Cooking*, used by both the South as well as the (Northern) U.S. Sanitary Commission had a coffee recipe for 100 men. Although water resources (rivers, ponds, and puddles) often added to dysentery problems, coffee making was a safety factor because the boiling process killed water-borne pathogens.

In The Camp

Officers were given a cash allowance to purchase supplies. The Army of the Potomac figured camp rations for every 100 soldiers as 'ten pounds of green coffee, or eight pounds of roasted and ground'. Inexperienced camp cooks usually made coffee of inferior quality. The same pots used to boil meat, potatoes and soup were used to wash clothes and to boil tea and coffee. Two to three day's marching rations of coffee and sugar were apportioned in piles as soldiers received them and mixed them together in paper, oil-silk, cloth or rubber bags before getting wet, spilled or stolen. At noonday halts or at the end of a day's march, the soldier kindled a campfire and brought water to boil in his tin dipper or 'mucket' held on the end of a stick by a wire bail. He then boiled the coffee-sugar mixture to the desired hue, usually getting darker and strong enough to float an iron wedge the longer a man served in the army! A little hot coffee might be poured into his plate to clean it; perhaps hardtack was crumbled into the coffee also.

In the second year of the war, the Union commissary distributed a coffee extract mixed with sugar and milk which looked like axle grease. Called 'essence of coffee' and packed in half-gallon tins, a teaspoonful mixed with a cup of hot water produced 'instant coffee', a beverage the men

would not drink. It was soon discontinued. The Union bought large quantities of the 'new' (1856) canned condensed milk from **Lewis** or **Borden**, an item seldom available to troops on the march. Soldiers could purchase condensed milk from the sutler or receive it in boxes from home or get milk from the army's dairy herds. Stray cows were even milked occasionally, but were more likely slaughtered for food.

Men under Grant in 1862 in eastern Tennessee and Mississippi confiscated a huge coffee mill in which they ground hard corn, using the meal for making mush, giving most of them the 'Miss Quick Step'.

In The Hospital

In 1864 in Richmond's general Hospital No. 9, coffee was served on the 'regular' but not on the special diet. Inspection records of Richmond's Jackson Hospital noted that supper consisted only of bad imitation coffee and one slice of baker's bread; breakfast only 3 or 4 ounces of cold coffee in a cup instead of the usual allowance of one pint. In view of scarcity, Confederate Surgeon General Moore directed on 2 December 1863, that coffee should be used solely for medicinal effects as a stimulant. Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond had a barrel of coffee donated by women of the South when food supplies were cut off and sold at exorbitant prices. A July 1863 report said: At Gettysburg we moved up to the depot, close by the town,...a first-rate camping ground, in a large field directly by the track, with unlimited supply of delicious cool water. Here we set up two stove, with four large boilers, always kept full of soup and coffee....Men (including the Rebels) who missed the trains of ambulances to Harrisburg had their wounds attended to and were bathed and fed. We varied our dinners with custard and baked rice puddings, scrambled eggs, codfish hash, corn-starch, and always as much soft bread, tea, coffee, or milk as they wanted'.

The U.S. Sanitary Commission describes improvising coffee preparation in hospital menus in camp kettles suspended from long poles; in cast iron caldrons to boil soup, vegetables, meat and tea in succession; in fireplaces, on small sheet iron stoves and on small army stoves.

Coffee Substitutes

Coffee Houses, homes and armies extended coffee with other ingredients or used no coffee beans at all because of availability or to economize. Some described adulterated coffee as delicious, others as nauseating. An 1853 'receipt' book said that no coffee substitute had been found to have the flavor of true coffee.

Doctor Thomas F. Wood noted that the hotels in Richmond were not providing genuine coffee but only miserable rye substitutes. In the North:

The diet-kitchen manager of a large military hospital in Madison, Indiana, discovered that the surgeon-in-charge was tampering with the hospital coffee supply, having kitchen workers dry and reuse the grounds, which they occasionally mixed with logwood. Wittenmyer appointed a USCC woman colleague to the task of determining if charges were true....Ultimately, the investigation resulted in the surgeon's resignation.

In 1833, Mrs. Child offered alternatives for the 'frugal housewife' - roasted dry brown bread crusts, rye grain soaked in rum, or peas the same as coffee. Chicory was used as substitute by poor classes or to improve flavor. Acorns, barley, beans, beets, bran, chestnuts, chicory, corn meal, cotton seeds, dandelion, okra seeds, sweet potatoes, peas, peanuts, persimmons, rice, rye sorghum molasses, sugar cane seeds, watermelon seeds and wheat berries were parched, dried, browned or roasted to make ersatz coffee.

Recipes

To prepare **sweet potato coffee** we pared the potatoes, cut into small bits, dried and parched, adding a little butter before taking from the oven and grinding. Tubers, like **carrots** or **yams** were cut into small pieces, dried, toasted and ground up. A "receipt" for coffee from **ripe acorns** was to wash them in the shell, parch until they open, remove the acorns and roast with a little bacon fat. A recipe for **rye coffee** (1 cup=about 1 1/4 cups ground extra fine) was 1 or 2 tbs. Ground rye/serving; add boiling water and boil 10 minutes. Hunt's breakfast powder consisted of rye (boiled, dried and roasted with a little butter) ground like coffee. Dandelion coffee directions were to cut the roots into small pieces, roast in the oven until brown and crisp as coffee, and grind. **Peanut coffee** called for 1/2 cup peanuts, 1/2 cup wheat or rye and 1/2 cow peas. Roast all to a rich coffee brown; grind and make as for postum. To more or less habitual coffee drinkers, one-third or one-half real coffee will make the above recipe more acceptable.

For more information on coffee, please click [HERE](#)

Then of course, there was the opinion of the *Macon* (Georgia) *Telegraph*:
TO CHEAPEN COFFEE: - Don't use the stuff. There isn't one cook in five hundred who ever did anything else than abuse it. Some of the papers are recommending substitute- parched beans, rye, breadcrusts, acorns, etc. Swamp mud will blacken water just as effectually, but neither of will make coffee....coffee fills your stomach with mud banks and shoals, against which the bark of human life is often wrecked. The greatest humbug in the world...is coffee! Think of paying forty cents a pound for charcoal to embitter and blacken the water you drink. The practice should be suppressed by the Board of Health, if there were no war to do it. [Quoted in the *Wilmington Daily Journal*, 3 October 1861.]

