

# What's Cooking? Civil War Rations

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**SUBJECT**

American Studies

Unit: Civil War

Lesson: Civil War Rations

**TEACHER**

NMCWM

**GRADE**

04/08

**DATE**

Drafted: 4/21/2020

**TIME REQUIRED**

45/60 Minutes

**OVERVIEW**

Rations, the allotted food and supplies given during wartime and other crises, were important to the health and general wellbeing of the soldiers during the Civil War. The rations would have given soldiers a consistent source of food, despite the lack of holistic nutrition. For example, the rations were typically distributed without fresh vegetables. Non-perishables, such as flour, rice, dried fruit, and hardtack, were more conducive for travel and long-term use. While rations for the Confederates and Union soldiers differed, both were generally insufficient in providing necessary nutritional balance to stave off digestive illnesses. These digestive illnesses commonly manifested as diarrhea and dysentery, which could be deadly to the soldiers.

In addition to the lack of overall nutrition of the rations, the way in which soldiers prepared their meals was unhealthy as well. Soldiers, or sutlers, would fry rationed food to make the meals more appetizing and accessible. The fried food only exacerbated the conditions that caused cases of diarrhea and dysentery to crop up among the regiments. While Civil War surgeons had a basic understanding of the importance of fresh produce and non-fried foods, it was difficult to provide regulated meals that were sufficient in providing all of the necessary aspects of a healthy diet. In this sense, poorly prepared food that lacked in nutrition was another deadly aspect of camp life, in addition to amputations and widespread disease.

This activity is designed to allow students to explore the food and supplies typical of rations during the Civil War and learn how a general lack of nutrition was detrimental to the health of the soldiers. The students will use this knowledge to compare and contrast their meals today with those eaten by the enlisted soldiers during the Civil War.

PHASES	4 <sup>TH</sup> GRADE	SECONDARY
CURRICULAR STANDARDS	SS.400.50.03.c Analyze regional differences in the Civil War and its effects on people in Maryland.	SS.AS1.80.02 Compare and contrast the goals, resources, key figures, and strategies of the North and South.
OBJECTIVE(S)	Students will be able to identify and explain the types of food contained in Civil War rations and the overall impact of the limited diet on the health and of the soldiers.	Students will be able to identify and explain the types of food contained in Civil War rations and the overall impact of the limited diet on the health of the soldiers. The students will be able to use what they have learned to better understand how meals today compare to those eaten by Civil War soldiers.
INFORMATION REQUIRED	Civil War rations Health problems caused by Civil War diet Principles of a healthy diet	Civil War rations Health problems caused by Civil War diet Principles of a healthy diet
ACTIVITY	<p><b>Engage:</b> Rations, the allotted food and supplies given during wartime and other crises, were important for the health and general wellbeing of the Civil War soldiers. What kind of foods do you think Civil War soldiers ate while enlisted?</p> <p><b>Explore: Distribute reading excerpt from Appendix A.</b> Read the excerpt on soldiers' eating habits during the Civil War. What sickness was common among soldiers based on their diet?</p> <p><b>Explain: Distribute quote from Appendix B.</b> Utilizing the quote written by John D. Billings, brainstorm a meal or recipe that contains at least three or four of the ingredients issued to the Union</p>	<p><b>Engage:</b> Rations, the allotted food and supplies given during wartime and other crises, were important for the health and general wellbeing of the Civil War soldiers. What kind of foods do you think Civil War soldiers ate while enlisted?</p> <p><b>Explore: Distribute reading excerpt from Appendix A.1.</b> Read the excerpt on soldiers' eating habits during the Civil War. What sickness was common among soldiers based on their diet? Using the reading, give specific examples of ways the sickness could have been prevented.</p> <p><b>Explain: Distribute quote from Appendix B.</b> Utilizing the quote from John D. Billings, brainstorm a meal or recipe that contains at least three or four of the ingredients issued to the Union soldiers. Using the list as a reference, what foods</p>

**PHASES**

**4<sup>TH</sup> GRADE**

**SECONDARY**

	<p>soldiers. The more creative, the better!</p> <p><b>Elaborate: Distribute chart from Appendix C.</b> Fill out the chart to track the meals you have eaten recently while in quarantine. You only need to track what you have eaten over the course of one day. Include breakfast, lunch, dinner, and any snacks you have eaten. Based on your own chart and the guide on food groups, what food group do you think the soldiers could have consumed more of to be healthier?</p> <p><b>Bonus Activity: Distribute recipe from Appendix D.</b> Follow the recipe to bake some of your own hardtack. Do not attempt to consume unless the hardtack is softened! Create a journal entry describing the texture and smell. Would you want to eat this on a daily basis?</p> <p>In case baking is not an option, read the quote provided with the bonus activity. Create a journal entry that describes what hardtack is and what it might have looked like. Would you want to eat this on a daily basis?</p>	<p>could be added to make a more holistically nutritious diet?</p> <p><b>Elaborate: Distribute chart from Appendix C.</b> Fill out the chart to track the meals you have eaten recently while in quarantine. You only need to track what you have eaten over the course of one day. Include breakfast, lunch, dinner, and any snacks you have eaten. Based on the chart and guide on food groups, which food groups were missing from the soldiers' rations? If you were a soldier, which food groups would you prioritize as necessary for good health?</p> <p><b>Bonus Activity: Distribute recipe from Appendix D.</b> Follow the recipe to bake some of your own hardtack. Do not attempt to consume unless the hardtack is softened! Create a journal entry describing the texture and smell. Would you want to eat this on a daily basis?</p> <p>In case baking is not an option, read the quote provided with the bonus activity. Create a journal entry that describes what hardtack is and what it might have looked like. Would you want to eat this on a daily basis?</p>
<p>EVALUATION/ CLOSING</p>	<p>During times of hardship like the Civil War, certain foods and supplies can be difficult to access. Is there a particular meal you have been craving since being in quarantine?</p>	<p>During times of hardship like the Civil War, certain foods and supplies can be difficult to access. How does what you have been consuming during quarantine compare with the foods eaten by Civil War soldiers? Any similarities?</p>

## REQUIREMENTS

- This can be adapted to students needs as necessary.

## MATERIALS

- Worksheets attached.

## NOTES

This lesson can be done digitally in Microsoft Word or Google Docs. This can be modified so that students can use creative writing techniques or answer and meet certain requirements.

## Appendix A: Explore (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“Army food was apt to be particularly hard on recruits, who did their own cooking. In urging that the Army use trained company cooks, a military surgeon of long experience declared that ‘beans killed more than bullets.’ An abrupt rise in the diarrhea rate of a command could often be observed immediately after the eating of bean soup. The soldiers fried everything. They would fry cakes of flour and water in bacon fat; they would frequently fry rice and beans; and they invariably fried their issues of beef. Such were the consequences that one surgeon reported having seen every one of the four hundred men in his charge at least once, for digestive ailments, within a period of three months. A medical officer, trying to save his regiment from ‘death by frying pan,’ implored the men to put their meat on the end of a stick and toast it; but sutlers (men authorized to sell good goods to the soldiers) continued to do a rushing business in frying pans” (16). Adams, George Worthington. *Doctors in Blue: The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War*. OH: Morningside House, Inc., 1985.

## Appendix A.1: Explore (8<sup>th</sup> grade)

“Army food was apt to be particularly hard on recruits, who did their own cooking. In urging that the Army use trained company cooks, a military surgeon of long experience declared that ‘beans killed more than bullets.’ An abrupt rise in the diarrhea rate of a command could often be observed immediately after the eating of bean soup. The soldiers fried everything. They would fry cakes of flour and water in bacon fat; they would frequently fry rice and beans; and they invariably fried their issues of beef. Such were the consequences that one surgeon reported having seen every one of the four hundred men in his charge at least once, for digestive ailments, within a period of three months. A medical officer, trying to save his regiment from ‘death by frying pan,’ implored the men to put their meat on the end of a stick and toast it; but sutlers (men authorized to sell good goods to the soldiers) continued to do a rushing business in frying pans.”

The recruits not only suffered from their poor cooking, but from their inability to make a ration last from one issue to the next. A New York newspaper reported that at Washington a soldier on parade had ‘sunk to the ground from weakness’ because he had had no food for three days. Near-mutiny was rumored in a regiment which objected to its almost exclusive diet of that great army staple, fat salt pork.

No fresh vegetables were issued though ‘desiccated vegetables,’ a novelty detested by the volunteers, were sometimes offered them. Soldiers in the field, operating in an area where foraging was allowed, might supply themselves with vegetables at the expense of the enemy. But those in friendly territory had to go without, and suffer for it; or buy in the open market, paying from the ‘company fund,’ formed by the sale of a part of the regular ration issue. As only some 40 per cent of the troops had such a fund at their disposal, and as the fun idea seemed the only practical way to provide fresh food, butter, and milk, the Sanitary Commission inspectors encouraged it” (16-17). Adams, George Worthington. *Doctors in Blue: The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War*. OH: Morningside House, Inc., 1985.

## Appendix B: Explain

“I will now give a complete list of the rations served out to the rank and file, as I remember them. They were salt pork, fresh beef, salt beef, rarely ham or bacon, hard bread, soft bread, potatoes, and occasional onion, flour, beans, and split peas, rice, dried apples, dried peaches, desiccated vegetables, coffee, tea, sugar, molasses, vinegar, candles, soap, pepper and salt” (111). Billings, John D. *Hard Tack and Coffee or The Unwritten Story of Army Life*. Edited by Maurice Filler. MA: Corner House Publishers, 1984.



# MyPlate Plan Menu

Record the food groups you eat and drink during the day for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and your snacks.

	FRUITS 	VEGETABLES 	GRAINS 	PROTEIN FOODS 	DAIRY 
<b>DAY 1</b>					

# MyPlate Food Groups

Food Group	What Counts As...
 <b>Fruits</b> - Whole Fruit - Fruit Juice	<b>1 cup of Fruit</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup fresh or canned fruit</li> <li>• 1 cup 100% fruit juice</li> <li>• 1/2 cup dried fruit</li> </ul>
 <b>Vegetables</b> - Dark Green - Red and Orange - Beans and Peas - Starchy - Other	<b>1 cup of Vegetables</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup fresh or canned vegetables</li> <li>• 1 cup 100% vegetable juice</li> <li>• 2 cups leafy salad greens</li> </ul>
 <b>Grains</b> - Whole Grains - Refined Grains	<b>1 ounce of Grains</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 slice of bread (1 ounce)</li> <li>• 1/2 cup cooked pasta, rice, or cereal</li> <li>• 1 ounce uncooked pasta or rice</li> <li>• 1 tortilla (6 inch diameter)</li> <li>• 1 pancake (5 inch diameter)</li> <li>• 1 ounce ready-to-eat cereal (about 1 cup cereal flakes)</li> </ul>
 <b>Protein Foods</b> - Seafood - Meat, Poultry, and Eggs - Nuts, Seeds, and Soy	<b>1 ounce of Protein Foods</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 ounce lean meat, poultry, or seafood</li> <li>• 1 egg</li> <li>• 1 Tablespoon peanut butter</li> <li>• 1/2 ounce nuts or seeds</li> <li>• 1/4 cup cooked beans or peas</li> </ul>
 <b>Dairy</b> - Milk and Yogurt - Cheese	<b>1 cup of Dairy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup milk</li> <li>• 1 cup fortified soymilk (soy beverage)</li> <li>• 1 cup yogurt</li> <li>• 1 1/2 ounce natural cheese (e.g., Cheddar)</li> </ul>

Charts modified and sourced from <https://choosemyplate-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/myplate/MyPlatePlanMenuTemplate.pdf>

## Appendix D: Bonus Activity

Recipe for Hardtack-

2 cups flour

1/2 tablespoon salt (optional)

1/2 to 3/4 cup water

With the help of a parent or guardian, preheat oven to 250 degrees F. Combine flour with salt in a mixing bowl. Add water and mix with hands until the dough comes together. Roll out on a table to about 1/3 inch thickness. With parent supervision, cut 3×3 squares from the dough. Place on baking sheet, and use a dowel (or similar tool like a straw) to make 16 evenly spaced holes in each square. Bake for at least four hours, turning over once halfway through baking. Cool on a rack in a dry room.

Recipe sourced from: <http://www.americantable.org/2013/06/civil-war-recipe-hardtack-1861/>

Alternative Activity-

“I will speak of the rations more in detail, beginning with the hard bread, or, to use the name by which it was known in the Army of the Potomac, *Hardtack*. What was hardtack? It was a plain flour-and-water biscuit...When they were poor and fit objects for the soldiers’ wrath, it was due to one of three conditions: First, they might have been so hard that they could not be bitten; it then required a very strong blow of the fist to break them...The second condition was when they were mouldy or wet, as sometimes happened, and should not have been given to the soldiers...The third condition was when from storage they had become infested with maggots and weevils” (113-115). Billings, John D. *Hard Tack and Coffee or The Unwritten Story of Army Life*. Edited by Maurice Filler. MA: Corner House Publishers, 1984.

**Additional Resources from the National Museum of Civil War Medicine:**

- [Eat Your \(Desiccated\) Vegetables](#)- A blog post containing information about Civil War rations
- [Nutrition and Hygiene Among Civil War Soldiers](#) – Director of Interpretation Jake Wynn interview John Heckman, the Tattooed Historian about a soldier’s diet and hygiene practices
- [Coffee in the Civil War](#) – Jake Wynn and Membership & Development Coordinator Kyle Dalton take a close look at coffee in the Civil War in this video

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