

Overview: Food and the Civil War South

Instructions: Read the following text. As you read, underline at least two facts you learn. Then, below the text, write a question about something more you would like to know about food during the Civil War.

By the time of the Civil War, the food of the Southern United States had been deeply influenced by the continuous intermingling of peoples who lived there over hundreds of years. European influences and ideas about food interacted with and were changed by the foods of native and enslaved peoples. For example, the corn grown by native peoples became a staple of the Southern diet. Enslaved people brought their own food traditions and seeds with them from Africa and the Caribbean that influenced the food they ate, but also the food of the white people they interacted with and cooked for. For example, sweet potatoes, okra, and barbeque all were introduced to the United States by people of African descent. These relationships between peoples and foods played a significant part in the Civil War.

The Southern economy was agricultural, but much of it was devoted to the production of cash crops like cotton, and less to the production of food. Before the Civil War, the South imported a significant portion of its food from Northern states, including most of the beef, pork, wheat, and dairy products like cheese and butter that its people consumed. At the start of the war, some Southerners realized that Northern military planners might use food as a weapon and try to starve the South. Southerners hoped that the South's many farms could produce enough food to feed the population during what they hoped would be a very short war.



Three Confederate prisoners near Gettysburg, July 15, 1863. The phrase, “an army marches on its stomach,” suggests that soldiers need to be fed well to fight well. Confederate soldiers and the people of the South suffered from shortages of food during the Civil War.

“Let it be understood at once, that the planter who cultivated cotton where there is such an urgent demand for food, is in effect giving aid and comfort to the enemy.”

—*Southern Cultivator*, an agricultural journal,
March/April 1862

Northern military strategy included denying the Southern Army the resources it needed to fight, including food. The Civil War was fought mostly in the South and destroyed farmland, crops, and livestock. Northern forces fed their soldiers by taking food from the farms and civilians in Southern states. The Union forces also blockaded Southern ports and prevented the transportation of food up and down the Mississippi River.

Hunger was a significant part of daily lives of Confederate soldiers. They had to spend considerable time foraging to supplement what they ate. By 1864, daily rations for soldiers were eight ounces of flour and four ounces of pork per day. The food shortages affected civilians in the South as well. Poorer Southerners suffered more than soldiers. Many went hungry at times; small numbers starved to death. Thousands of women took part in food riots, often called “bread riots,” in cities in which they ransacked stores and warehouses in search of food.

“If there is anything in this town to sell, in the shape of meat or breadstuffs, we would be pleased to learn where it is. If our friends in the country ever expect to send any thing here—particularly corn, corn meal, syrup, potatoes, turnips, etc.—now is the time to do it! There is also great demand for provender of all kinds—hay, fodder, shucks. Indeed every thing is in demand—even fire wood. Send on quickly, or many persons and animals must perish!”

—A notice that appeared in *Southern Watchman*, a newspaper from Athens, Georgia, January 18, 1865

The poorest of all of the people living in the South were the four million enslaved people who made up one-third of the population. Enslaved people suffered the most from food shortages. This was for a number of reasons related to their status. In this time of scarcity, they were last to be given access to food. During the war, many enslaved people began to claim their freedom. In addition to the ever present danger of violence that people of color faced, shortages of clothing, food, and adequate shelter made them even more vulnerable to death through disease and starvation.