

Of Worms and Weevils: Hard Living on Hardtack

Ariel Burriss

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



THE GETTYSBURG NATIONAL MILITARY PARK (U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE)

▲ Union soldiers in the Army of the Potomac eat hardtack as part of a meal.

◀ Hardtack taken from the Gettysburg battlefield, 1863. [front]

The most reviled object of a Union soldier's day-to-day existence was often not a Confederate rifle but a three-inch square cracker known as hardtack. An exercise in culinary simplicity, hardtack was made from a blend of flour and water, kneaded to a dough-like consistency, and then baked to a characteristic hardness that earned the cracker a myriad of colorful nicknames, including "tooth duller" and "sheet iron."¹ Despite its miserable reputation, hardtack was an integral part of the Union soldier's diet and often the only source of nourishment to be found on a long march. Though evidence exists that suggests Confederate soldiers were issued hardtack as well, far better known is the rebel "Johnnie Cake," a cornmeal based dish that was often made in the field.

Owing to its imperishable nature, preparation of hardtack was left to individual ingenuity and personal taste. Most popularly, the cracker was crumbled in coffee, though it was not uncommon for a soldier to soon discover the pot's surface brimming with dispelled vermin. Often left to sit in a railroad depot or government storehouse for weeks on end, the cracker was commonly infested with maggots and weevils due to improper storage.² This prompted many soldiers to toast their "worm castles," a few asserting their preference for cooked game.³ Hardtack could also be fried in pork fat or lard, creating a dish that the soldiers called "skillygalee." And if a soldier was lucky enough to have saved his sugar ration, or perhaps bought a can of condensed milk from

Hardtack

Mix 5 cups of flour to 1 cup of water containing a 1/2 tablespoon of salt

Knead into a dough and roll out to a 3/8 inch thickness

Cut into approximately 3-inch squares and pierce each with a fork or ice pick several times

Bake in a 400° oven for 30 minutes or until slightly brown⁶



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

▲ Winslow Homer's comic depiction of a soldier struggling to eat hardtack. Winslow Homer, "Life in Camp," part 1.

place of hardtack, another verse was added by the indignant men, this time ending with the plea "O' hard crackers, come again once more!"⁵

For those in the twenty-first century who would like to experience this Civil War staple, the following recipe comes from William C. Davis's *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray*. Watch your teeth. ✱

Ariel Burriss is a student at Frederick Community College and an intern with the Catoctin Center for Regional Studies.

- 1 Bell Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 237.
- 2 J.D. Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee* (Boston: George M. Smith, 1887), 116.
- 3 Wiley, 238.
- 4 William C. Davis, *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003), 41.
- 5 Billings, 118-119. This song, composed in 1861 in Missouri, is a parody of Stephen Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More."
- 6 Davis, 130.

a sutler, a dessert of sorts could be made.

The indestructible cracker soon developed a rich mythology. Soldiers often posed with coffee and hardtack gripped firmly in hand, and the biscuit would accompany more than one to the grave as a war memento.⁴

It was a relationship that inspired poetry and songs, including a parody that ended with the refrain "Hard crackers, come again no more!" Yet hardtack clearly had won a place in the soldiers' hearts if not their stomachs, for on the occasion that an officer served corn-meal mush in



▲ Union infantry soldiers on picket duty pose with hardtack and coffee, January 3, 1862. Left to Right: Sgt. J.N. Clark, Corp. G.W. Comfort, and Sgt. J. Heffelfinger.