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A Taste of the Civil War: Barbara Sanders' Lecture on Civil War Era Food

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Abstract

There are few ways to better immerse oneself in the past than through food. It is relatively easy to follow a recipe from the Civil War era and enjoy the same cuisine as Union and Confederate soldiers. In this way, one can experience the past in a most interactive way. Experiencing the past was accomplished in the lecture "Hearth, Hardtack, and Hospital: A Close Look (and Taste) of Civil War Era Food," given by Gettysburg National Military Park education specialist Barbara J. Sanders. The lecture focused on the topic of the interaction between history and food, specifically in the Civil War.

Keywords

Food, Hospitals, Medical History, Savannah Labbe, Soldier Life

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Taste of the Civil War: Barbara Sanders' Lecture on Civil War Era Food

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)

There are few ways to better immerse oneself in the past than through food. It is relatively easy to follow a recipe from the Civil War era and enjoy the same cuisine as Union and Confederate soldiers. In this way, one can experience the past in a most interactive way. Experiencing the past was accomplished in the lecture "Hearth, Hardtack, and Hospital: A Close Look (and Taste) of Civil War Era Food," given by Gettysburg National Military Park education specialist Barbara J. Sanders. The lecture focused on the topic of the interaction between history and food, specifically in the Civil War.



FRYING HARDTACK.

Many soldiers would fry their hardtack to make it more appetizing. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Sanders's lecture, while directed at an older audience, was just as interactive as one she might give to a younger audience. She provided samples of food from the Civil War era for the audience to try and showed the audience how rations were issued, having an officer stand with his back to the rations, randomly reading off names of the soldiers to make sure that no soldier was purposefully getting a larger ration than another. She also ground up some coffee beans with a bayonet, as the soldiers would have done. All of these activities helped the audience better experience and imagine what a soldier's diet and food preparation habits would have been.

Sanders discussed three main areas of Civil War food: food at home, in camp, and in the hospital. With the section on food at home, Sanders provided a comparison between what the soldiers would have eaten during the war and what kinds of food they would have eaten before the war—foods that they were missing out on. On the home front, families would grow most of the food they ate and knew precisely where all of their food came from—much unlike today. The audience engaged in a matching game in which parts of a pig were matched with what those parts were used for. For example, the bladder of a pig was often made into a ball for a child to play with. This emphasized the fact that no food was wasted and virtually every part of the pig had a use. There were also samples of sweeter foods that would be found on the home front, such as pumpkin pie and sweet potato pie.

In contrast to the home front, soldiers had far fewer options for food. There is more information on what the Union soldiers' diets consists of, but both sides supplied their troops with a meager ration of food. Each day, Union soldiers received one pound of hardtack, three quarters of a pound of salted meat, 1.28 ounces of sugar, .6 ounces of salt, and .24 ounces of sugar. Their Confederate counterparts received even less, getting a half pound of bacon, eighteen ounces of flour, and some rice. Sanders had portioned out the exact amount of each item that a Union soldier would have received, providing the audience with a visual image of just how little food was in the soldiers' rations. The soldiers tried to make this food as palatable as possible through methods such as softening the hardtack with water or crumbling it on top of soup.

Sanders ended the lecture with a discussion of food in Civil War hospitals. The food was marginally better in the hospitals, except in the wake of battle when most of the medical staff and supplies had to move on with the army, leaving the wounded behind with little supplies until everything could be organized and gathered. There were three different types of diets for those in the hospital: full, half, low, and extra. The full diet started at 6:00 AM with a breakfast of coffee, bread and butter, and bacon or meat stew. Dinner at 12:00 PM included a meat and vegetable soup and bread. For supper at 6:00 PM, the soldiers received tea, bread and butter, well stewed dried fruit, and maybe some molasses or mush. This section provided an interesting glimpse into a topic that has not really been explored: hospital food during the Civil War and what doctors during that time period considered nourishing and healthy for the recovering wounded. To finish the lecture, the audience got to enjoy a type of food made specially in the hospital called

“beef tea,” along with many other samples of Civil War cuisine—a fitting way to end an engaging and interactive lecture that provided a glimpse into the past.