



1-16-2019

Overpriced Stamps and Mystery Pies: The Complicated Legacy of Civil War Sutlers

Savannah Labbe
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Labbe, Savannah, "Overpriced Stamps and Mystery Pies: The Complicated Legacy of Civil War Sutlers" (2019). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 320.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/320>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/320>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Overpriced Stamps and Mystery Pies: The Complicated Legacy of Civil War Sutlers

Abstract

In every story, including ones about historical events, there are people who inevitably end up in the background. These people are ever-present but deemed unimportant to the story, like the Union Army sutler depicted next to his makeshift store above. Sutlers were merchants who would follow the Army around, selling the soldiers things they were not issued but might have wanted, such as paper and envelopes for writing home. The reason why the sutler is often left out of history is not just because they were only indirectly related to the fighting, but also because they were greatly disliked by most Civil War soldiers. Sutlers are commonly depicted as scum because they sold goods at exorbitant prices and often took a lien on a soldier's pay. Soldiers saw sutlers as horrible people who were just trying to take advantage of the suffering and loss of war in order to make an easy profit. While this was true of many sutlers, they still provided an important and invaluable service to an overtaxed Union Army and their complicated legacy deserves to be discussed. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Civil War Sutlers, Stamps, Legacy

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Overpriced Stamps and Mystery Pies: The Complicated Legacy of Civil War Sutlers

By Savannah Labbe '19



A Civil War Sutler's "Fruit and Oyster" Shack (via Library of Congress)

In every story, including ones about historical events, there are people who inevitably end up in the background. These people are ever-present but deemed unimportant to the story, like the Union Army sutler depicted next to his makeshift store above. Sutlers were merchants who would follow the Army around, selling the soldiers things they were not issued but might have wanted, such as paper and envelopes for writing home. The reason why the sutler is often left out of history is not just because they were only indirectly related to the fighting, but also because they were greatly disliked by most Civil War soldiers. Sutlers are commonly depicted as scum because they sold goods at exorbitant prices and often took a lien on a soldier's pay. Soldiers saw sutlers as horrible people who were just trying to take advantage of the suffering and loss of war in order to make an easy profit. While this was true of many sutlers, they still provided an important and invaluable service to an overtaxed Union Army and their complicated legacy deserves to be discussed.

Although sutlers had been a feature of the U.S. Army long before the Civil War, they became significantly more important to army life during the 1860s. Prior to the Civil War, the sutler's role was not as prominent in army life because the army was rather small, so providing enough supplies for the men was easier. Sutlers were also much more regulated in that they were subject to the articles of war and the rules and discipline of the army. For example, they were unable to sell alcohol to soldiers or keep their shops open during church services. However, this all changed during the Civil War. The army grew from under 20,000 men in the beginning of the war to over 2 million by the end of the war, and the war department was unprepared to supply all these soldiers. Sutlers stepped in to fill that gap, providing the soldiers with supplies that either the army did not provide them with or that the army just did not have enough of for every soldier. In the Civil War, sutlers provided soldiers with necessities for the first time instead of just miscellaneous goods. The sutlers were also now considered civilians who were not subject to army discipline or regulation, allowing them full control of what they sold and how much they sold it for.

Now free from army interference and enjoying a monopoly on the market, sutlers quickly began supplying soldiers with products at high costs. There was supposed to be only one sutler per regiment, although this was not strictly adhered to in practice. They were usually appointed by colonels, the secretary of war, or a political influence such as the governor of the state the regiment was from. Being the sutler of a regiment was a highly sought-after position and sometimes sutlers would even pay for this privilege since it was so lucrative. A sutler in the 15th Wisconsin reportedly made \$100 to \$150 in a day, a profit that could easily total \$12,000 a year. Since Sutlers were the only ones who could sell goods to soldiers, they could essentially charge whatever they wanted. The sutler in the photograph above would have probably charged exorbitant prices for his goods, especially tobacco. Tobacco was highly coveted in the Union Army because most men smoked or chewed it, but the army did not issue tobacco rations. The Confederates were issued a plug of tobacco, but that was because tobacco was grown in the South and was more easily accessible. Since it was harder to come by in the North and it was not issued by the Union Army, sutlers would sell it to soldiers for ten times the normal rate. They also overcharged for postage stamps, which was highly illegal.

Although the War Department attempted to put a stop to it 1862, sutlers continued to sell overpriced stamps. If the sutlers did sell stamps for the correct price, they would just increase the cost of paper and envelopes to make up for the lost profit.

Not only did sutlers overcharge, their goods were often of terrible quality. The sutler in the photo above is selling fruit and seafood, and it was important that the soldiers had access to fruit to prevent disease. However, the fruit and other foods sutlers sold often did more harm than good. For example, the sutlers were especially famous for their "pies." These pies contained mystery meat and were often fried in condemned lard or grew rancid with age. One sutler made pies with meat from cats and dogs and sold it for 25 cents, \$6 in today's money. These pies not only landed soldiers in the hospital but sometimes even killed them. Due to these pies and other lethal products the sutlers sold, the doctors in the army became highly vocal against the sutler system because of the damage it caused to so many soldier's health. However, despite being so dangerous, the soldiers loved these pies and it would have been a slow day if a sutler only sold 650 of them. The soldiers were often so starved of good food in the army that they would resort to eating whatever the sutler sold, even if it had the potential to do significant harm to their health. The sutler knew this and made sure to take advantage of it, not caring how it harmed the soldier.

While it may seem that the sutlers were just scum trying to make a quick profit, they did provide some important services, often at a great danger to themselves. Not only did they provide soldiers with necessities they could not get anywhere else, their establishments often provided a social center where soldiers could relax, gossip, and even gamble. This social center was important to the soldiers in that it allowed them to escape army life and the horrors of battle for a little while. The sutler's shack in the photo above was probably one such establishment. It was made from wood, with a canvas top, indicating that it was a more permanent establishment in a place where the Union Army was camped for a long period of time. If the army was camped less permanently, sutlers would set up in tents or even sell from the back of a wagon. Sutlers would move along behind the army when it was on the march, risking their products to exposure, weather, and spoilage. They were also subject to the dangers of battle and raids, sometimes becoming casualties of battle or even taken prisoner by the enemy. Even if the sutler managed to escape unscathed, the enemy often raided sutlers' stocks and took everything. They were also subject to raiding by their own troops. Soldiers regularly became angry with the sutlers, who could lien up to 1/6th of their monthly pay, leaving the soldier with even less money to pay for the sutlers' overpriced goods. Often, soldiers would surround the sutler's tent, cut the ropes holding it up and, in the confusion, grab everything they could. Commanding officers would seldom reprimand their men for this activity. For example, the 20th Maine raided its sutler's tent and ate everything except for some nails and were not punished for it, due to the perceived necessity and justification for the "raid." Now the sutler was out of stock and had lost a great deal of money. While it may seem that the sutler charged exorbitant prices just to make as much money as possible, in fact they often did it to counteract the great dangers they faced and the possibility of losing all their products.

The sutler in the photo above was part of this complicated history. He sold fruit for the soldiers, which if in good condition was something they needed desperately to supplement their army diet. However, the fruit and other goods that this sutler sold were overpriced and most likely not of good quality. For this reason, sutlers were often hated and are now largely forgotten about in today's history. However, they were an ever-present part of the Civil War Army and because of this they deserve more attention in our studies of the war. The sutler was an integral part of the typical Civil War soldier's everyday life in the army, even if they they maintained an ambivalent place in soldiers' hearts. In unpacking their complicated legacy, we can more fully understand the intricacies, texture, and challenges of soldiering in Civil War armies.

Sources:

Delisi, James T. "From Sutlers and Canteens to Exchanges." *Army Logistician* 39, no. 6 (November 2007): 46–47. Accessed November 10, 2018.

McCormick, David. "Merchants Traveled with Civil War Troops." *Army Magazine* 67, no. 1 (January 2017): 30. Accessed November 10, 2018.

Spear, Donald P. "The Sutler in the Union Army." *Civil War History* 16, no. 2 (June 1970): 121–38. Accessed November 11, 2018.

Tapson, Alfred J. "The Sutler and the Soldier." *Military Affairs* 21, no. 4 (1957): 175-81. Accessed November 11, 2018.