

Andrew F. Smith

DID HUNGER DEFEAT THE CONFEDERACY?



▲ **SOWING AND REAPING.** Left: "Southern women hound their men on to rebellion." Right: "Southern women feeling the effects of rebellion and creating bread riots." (Frank Leslie's Newspaper, May 23, 1863)

Letters, diaries, newspapers, and governmental communiques written in the South during the Civil War increasingly mention food shortages, hunger, and fears of famine as the war progressed. Reminiscences written after the war concur with these contemporary accounts. As Basil Gildersleeve, a Confederate officer and later a classics professor at Johns Hopkins University, wrote retrospectively: "Hunger was the dominant note of life in the Confederacy, civil as well as military."¹ Why did the South—the preeminent agricultural region of the nation—suffer from hunger, and what effect did this have on the outcome of the Civil War?

Southern Scarcity

Prior to the Civil War, the prairies of the Midwest were opened for settlement, and Americans began to convert vast new areas into agricultural land. At the same time, the Mississippi River system provided Midwesterners with an easy route over which to send their agricultural goods to the South. As a result, it became less costly and more efficient for the plantation owners to purchase food from Midwestern farmers than to grow it themselves.² During the two decades before the war, the Midwest thus supplied considerable food to the South.

When the war began, the Federal government imposed a blockade on the Confederacy to stop the export of cotton and the import of military equipment and supplies into states that had seceded. The blockade had a crucial unintended consequence: it greatly reduced the amount of foodstuffs going into the

Confederacy.

Confederate leaders were well aware of the South's reliance on imported food, and from the beginning of the war, they encouraged Southerners to increase the production of staples. Plantations, powered by slaves, answered the call by decreasing cotton production and increasing food crops. As a result, food production on southern plantations soared during the first year of the conflict. It was a different story on smaller farms, however. With a large percentage of southern men under arms, there were far fewer farm laborers to work the land. As agricultural historian Charles Ramsdell wrote of Southern agriculture, "There were large sections of the country—the small farm sections, primarily—almost bare of agricultural labor. The result was a marked decline in production."³

Moreover, as Federal armies steadily gained control of Confederate territory, many food producing areas were cut off, contributing to an even greater decline in total food production. The war also devastated agricultural areas still within the Confederacy—such as northern Virginia, much of Louisiana, and northern Mississippi—and this too reduced Southern food production. To avoid the fighting, plantation owners near Union lines moved their households and slaves further into the interior, which removed yet more productive agricultural land from cultivation and also brought more hungry mouths deeper into the South. Meanwhile, slaves who remained on plantations became less willing to work, especially if plantation owners and their overseers were away fighting the war. Other slaves headed for Union lines, seeking whatever opportunities were available. By the war's end, the total number of former slaves behind Union lines numbered one million, many of whom joined the Union army or worked on Union-controlled plantations.⁴

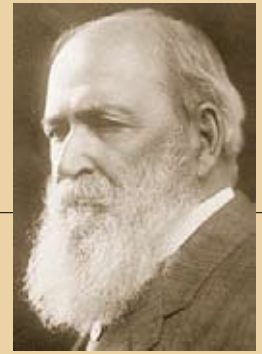
Beginning in the second year of the war, the loss of agricultural areas and the loss of farm laborers began to affect agricultural production. Bad weather added to the Confederacy's subsistence problems by significantly decreasing grain production in the South. Less grain meant less feed for animals, which caused a decrease in meat production.

Weather, refugees and loss of agricultural land weren't the only reasons for the Confederacy's growing food crisis. Confederate

policies also contributed to decreased food production. Impressment (confiscating agricultural goods to feed the troops), for instance, discouraged Southern farmers from growing surplus food. Meanwhile, Southern economic policies produced hyperinflation, which made food hoarding and speculation inevitable. The most rational economic behavior was to buy and store commodities, whose values at least kept pace with inflation. Financially, it was in the best interest of those with Confederate currency to exchange it as quickly as possible for commodities, which could be stored and sold at a later time for more money.

Because the Union blockade prevented coastal shipping and Union gunboats patrolled rivers, railroads took on a crucial role for transporting goods, troops and military equipment. Before the war, the South had imported virtually all of its railroad equipment. When the war began the Confederacy thus had few factories that could build train engines, rolling stock, rail track or the machinery and equipment needed to sustain the region's transportation needs. Moreover, the Confederate government made no effort to launch such efforts nor did it encourage private enterprise to do so. Early in the conflict the South also failed to centralize its railroads so that they might run more efficiently, and it did not encourage blockade runners to bring in heavy equipment for railroads, when doing so might have made a difference.

The Confederacy did appoint a railroad czar who had little authority or power. In December 1861 he requested that the Confederate government exempt skilled railroad men from conscription, and supply much needed equipment to repair the railroads. If this were not done, he warned, "the railroads will very soon be quite unable to meet requirements of Government." More than a year later, in April



▲ Former Confederate officer Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve wrote after the war that "Hunger was the dominant note of life in the Confederacy, civil as well as well as military."

◀ Cotton production on plantations was curbed, and the production of staples expanded. But no means was found to get the excess food to the areas that needed it.



◀ On November 17, 1862, Confederate Secretary of War George W. Randolph resigned, after less than eight months in office, as a result of Jefferson Davis's refusal to countenance trading with the enemy in order to subsist the army.

1863, the *Richmond Sentinel* pointed to transportation as the bottleneck in the supply system, and recommended that the Southern railways be coordinated by a “master mind” in order to transport provisions from where they were grown to where they were needed.⁵ But these suggestions, which had been made by others, fell flat because of the laissez faire economic policies of the Confederate government.

As a result, southern railroads slowly deteriorated, making food distribution increasingly difficult. When the main railroad lines began to give out, Southerners cannibalized smaller trunk lines, decreasing the total number of miles served by the railroads, thus weakening the overall system. Even when not interdicted by Union soldiers, the railroads could not transport enough food to feed civilians, the military, cavalry horses, and draft animals. Moreover, when food was available, inefficiencies in transportation prevented adequate distribution. Civil War railroad historian George Edgar Turner concluded that “Tons of bacon, rice, sugar and other perishable foods spoiled in accumulated masses while soldiers in near-by Virginia famished for want of them.” Historian Charles W. Ramsdell pointed out that Lee’s army starved, “not because there was no food in the Confederacy, for it was plentiful in many portions of Georgia, Alabama, and Florida, but because the railroads simply could not carry enough of it.” When Petersburg and Richmond were cut off, and “the remnant of the feeble roads wrecked by Sherman’s destructive march through Georgia and the Carolinas,” Ramsdell continued, “the stoppage of all supplies followed, and the long struggle was over.”⁶

The South also had problems with its roads and wagon transportation. Southern roads were mainly unimproved, which meant that when it rained, they filled with mud and became impassable. Even in good weather, the Confederacy’s wagon transportation was inadequate, largely because of the scarcity of draft animals, thousands of which had annually come from the Midwest before the war.⁷ Although Southern armies purchased or expropriated large number of mules, oxen, and horses, these animals had to be replaced regularly. The animals also had to be fed as they traveled, but transporting bulky and heavy forage required even more draft animals. The military often commandeered or impressed animals from farmers as needed, which caused yet more problems: Without draft animals, farmers could not plant, harvest or transport their crops, further contributing to food shortages.⁸

Solutions

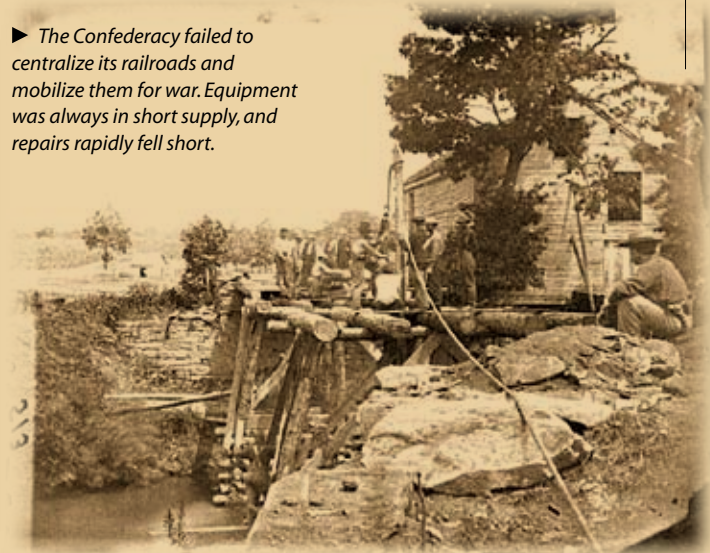
Southerners offered various solutions to the Confederacy’s food problems—and some might have worked. One potential solution was to provide cotton to the Union in exchange for

provisions. This idea had been raised early in the conflict, but Confederate President Jefferson Davis opposed it, believing it would demoralize civilians as well as the army. On October 30, 1862, the Confederate Secretary of War, George W. Randolph, sent a letter to Jefferson Davis stating that “the Army cannot be subsisted without permitting trade to some extent with Confederate ports in the possession of the enemy. The alternative is thus presented of violating our established policy of withholding cotton from the enemy or of risking the starvation of our armies.”⁹ Davis refused to sanction the trade, and Randolph resigned.

On January 3, 1863, the new Secretary of War, James A. Seddon, diplomatically told President Davis that “The harvests of the past season have not generally proved propitious, and notwithstanding the much larger breadth of land devoted to the culture of cereals and forage the product in many extensive districts of the Confederacy is below the average, and in some threatens scarcity.” Davis paid no attention. Shortly after, in February 1863, the editor of the *Daily Southern Crisis*, a newspaper published in Jackson, Mississippi, put it less diplomatically: “There is more to fear from a dearth of food than from all the Federal armies in existence.” He then asked, “Who can fight starvation with hope of success?”¹⁰

The failure to solve the Confederate food problems led to a series of bread riots that shook much of the eastern Confederacy beginning in 1863. With the exception of such events in Richmond and Mobile, the Southern bread riots were relatively small affairs, and authorities dealt with them easily and with no deaths and few injuries. Nevertheless, the riots reflected real problems in the South and provided additional wake-up calls for Confederate leaders to address crucial problems with the Southern food system. But Southern leaders responded largely with proclamations

▶ The Confederacy failed to centralize its railroads and mobilize them for war. Equipment was always in short supply, and repairs rapidly fell short.



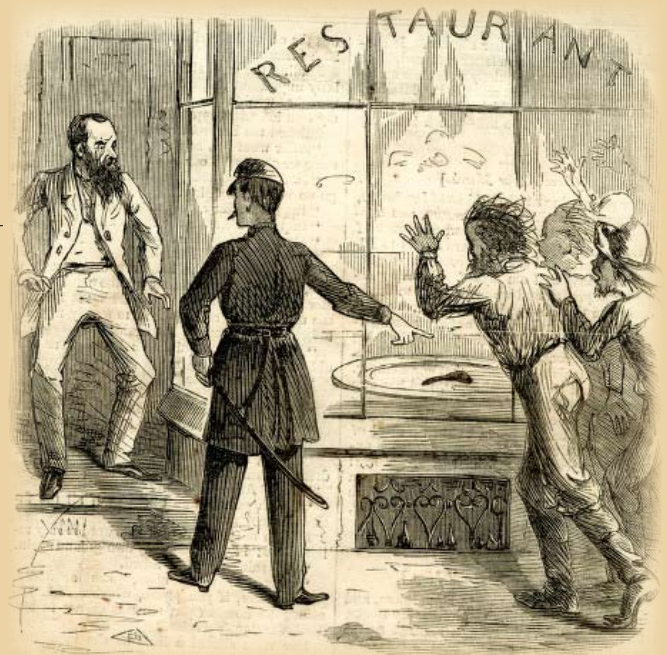
► **"A DANGEROUS NOVELTY IN NEW ORLEANS"**

Officer of the Provost Guard: "Hi! Look here, you—Eating House Keeper. Take the Mutton Chop out of your Window, or we shall have a riot presently!" (Harper's Weekly, June 21, 1862)

and band-aid solutions. As a result, food problems that the Confederacy might have solved in 1863 became almost insoluble within a year.

Ultimately, trading did occur across enemy lines. Many Northerners and Southerners viewed trading with the enemy as unpatriotic; others considered it treason. In reality, however, official policies regarding trading between the lines were ambiguous from the beginning and continued to be so throughout the war. By mid-1864, Lucius Northrop, the Confederate Commissary General, concluded that the army needed to acquire large quantities of imported meat. "If the Army is to be kept up to its present numbers, it will require at full rations 81 million pounds of meat. Of this a very large part must come from abroad, and much of it, of necessity and in common prudence, is wanted instantly." The Confederate government responded by offering exorbitant profits to those who could import meat through the blockade and between the lines. During the second half of 1864, blockade runners brought an estimated 3.5 million pounds of meat into the Confederacy. One of these blockade-running entrepreneurs, an Englishman named Thomas Taylor, was offered a contract with a 350 percent profit on any provisions he could bring in within three weeks. Taylor left Wilmington, North Carolina, for Nassau in the Bahamas, and eighteen days later he returned with enough beef to generate a profit of £27,000.¹¹

The foodstuffs generated by this trade were intended for Southern armies, but much of it never reached the soldiers. Some of the supplies rotted in warehouses while awaiting railroad transportation. Because the Confederacy was unable or unwilling to assign soldiers to guard supply depots or supply trains, many of the food stuffs ended up in the stomachs of railroad workers and their families. Other heisted meat ended up in the hands of speculators who sold it to the highest bidder. While the southern troops faced food shortages, the well-to-do in the Confederacy ate well, and



many did so right up to the end of the war.

Changing Union Strategies

Food played an important role in a number of military campaigns during the Civil War. The most obvious were the Union sieges of the Mississippi River towns of Vicksburg and Port Hudson in 1863. As a military tactic, these sieges prevented food from entering the two towns, which contributed directly to their surrender. Strategically, the sieges at Vicksburg and Port Hudson also prevented food and supplies from Texas from reaching other Southern states. Because of the loss of Texas beef, the South had to reduce meat rations for Confederate soldiers east of the Mississippi River.¹² The Mississippi River also had strategic value for Northern commerce. After the successful Union sieges of Vicksburg and Port Hudson, Midwestern farmers could once again send provisions down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. In addition, Southern farmers and plantation owners with access to the river began selling molasses, cotton, and other commodities to Union traders, and this trade with the enemy sapped Confederate morale.

Most important, the Vicksburg campaign represented a sea change in the Union strategy to end the war. During the first two years of the war, Northerners believed that there was strong support for the Union in the South, and that Southerners would eventually come to their senses, reject the firebrand secessionists, and rejoin the Union willingly. However, after Northern armies occupied large areas of the Confederacy in Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Virginia, it became clear that most Southerners viewed Northern forces as conquerors rather than liberators. Much of the support which had existed for the Union in the South before the war had vanished once the conflict began. A new strategy needed to be developed to win the war. The Union strategy thus shifted from attempts to woo Southerners back into the United States to the idea of "uncivilized war," "total war," "scorched earth," or "hard war."

The 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign in Virginia was one example of this new policy. The Union wanted to

Letter from a North Carolina farm from a desperate woman to the governor: "A crowd of we poor women went to Greensborough yesterday for something to eat as we had not had a mouthful of meet nor bread in my house what did they do but put us in gail in plase of giving us aney thing eat . . . I have 6 little children and my husband is in the army and what am I to do?" [1863]



▲ James A. Seddon (1815-1880) succeeded George Randolph as Confederate Secretary of War. Although more diplomatic, he was no more successful in getting Jefferson Davis to address the increasing shortage of food.

remove the valley as a source of subsistence for the Army of Northern Virginia and destroy railroads running through the valley that were Richmond's lifelines. The orders for the Union forces in the valley were: "Give the enemy no rest, and if it is possible to follow to the Virginia Central road, follow that far. Do all the damage to railroads and crops you can. Carry off stock of all descriptions, and negroes, so as to prevent further planting. If the war is to last another year, we want the Shenandoah valley to remain a barren waste."¹³

Union armies did just that. They destroyed most of the crops slated for harvest in the summer and fall of 1864. General Philip Sheridan, the successful commander of Union forces in the valley, boasted in a report that "I have destroyed over 2,000 barns, filled with wheat, hay, and farming implements; over 70 mills, filled with flour and wheat; have driven in front of the army over 4,000 head of stock, and have killed and issued to the troops not less than 3,000 sheep.... the Valley, from Winchester up to Staunton, ninety-two miles, will have but little in it for man or beast."¹⁴ Sheridan staunchly defended his actions in the Shenandoah Valley. As he explained to the Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War, "we were obliged to live to a great extent on the country. Forage had to be thus obtained for our horses, and provisions for our men, consequently many hardships were necessarily brought on the people."¹⁵

Another example of the changed Union strategy was Major General William T. Sherman's conquest of Atlanta and his march to the ocean. Georgia suffered a swath of devastation thirty to sixty miles wide and 265 miles long. Best estimates of the destruction by Sherman's armies include 10,000 horses and mules, 13,000 cattle, a half a million tons of fodder, and 13 million tons of corn, plus untold numbers of hogs, sheep, chickens, and vast quantities of sweet potatoes and other produce. Sherman's troops also demolished an estimated three hundred miles of railroad tracks.¹⁶ Southern railroads were already deteriorating and overburdened, and this destruction contributed to the difficulty the Confederates faced trying to send grain and beef from southern Georgia and Florida to the Confederate army in northern Virginia.

Sherman's subsequent campaign in the

Carolinas further disrupted the Confederate supply system and also reduced civilian food caches. One South Carolinian reported that along a sixty mile front tracks were "twisted into grotesque shapes, showed where the railroads had been; and the absence of the voices of poultry, sheep, or kine from the desolated fields and ruins along the roadside proclaimed the reign of famine and despair. The country was swept as clean of food as is a man's face of his beard by a well-plied razor."¹⁷

The Confederacy's Culinary Collapse

Throughout the war, civilians in both the North and South sent food to the fighting men and also fed the wounded, war widows, and soldiers' families. In October 1864, Northern civilians launched the largest effort to feed their armies and navy by preparing and sending Thanksgiving dinners to the Union troops and naval personnel. The Thanksgiving Dinner was a visible manifestation of civilian support for the Union military. The massive effort of Northerners to supply their soldiers with a good Thanksgiving meal in November 1864 was a tremendous boost to troop morale. Union soldiers and sailors believed that this gesture showed that Northerners were firmly behind them, and their spirits soared. Northern newspapers crowed about the feast.¹⁸

The Northern Thanksgiving dinner spurred Southerners in Richmond to do the same on New Year's Day for the Army of Northern Virginia. Despite the planning, food preparations, contributions, good intentions,



▲ Confederate Commissary General Lucius Northrop authorized extraordinary financial rewards for anyone who could bring meat through the blockade—but much that arrived rotted in warehouses for lack of transport, was appropriated by railroad workers, or ended up in the hands of speculators.



► *Jefferson Davis was unfitted both by experience and temperament for the executive position he occupied. He understood fighting, but had no conception of how to wage a modern war with its need to mobilize the nation's resources and measure them realistically against those of the enemy.*

optimistic projections and positive reports, the New Year's dinner was a bust. Little food reached the troops, and those who did receive some of the holiday menu found it very disappointing. One soldier wrote that the "citizens of Richmond and surrounding country made up a great New Year's dinner for the army and when it was sent out to us it consisted of 3 or 4 bites of bread and 3 bites of meat and it was quite a snack for a feast." Another who received one third of a loaf of bread and one third the usual ration of meat sourly noted that it was "rather a poor treat the troops thought after the extensive preparations the papers led them to believe were being made." Others called the dinner "a complete fizzle," a "Grand farce," and a "complete failure."¹⁹ In contrast to the North's effort, the New Year's dinner in the South demonstrated only scarcity, devious speculation and fraud, and wavering public support for the army and the war. As historian J. Tracy Power concluded in his book *Lee's Miserables*, the soldiers' disappointment at the dinner "could not help but increase the misery felt throughout the army."²⁰

After New Year's Day, Confederate desertions grew into a flood. They deserted for many reasons, but at the top of the list was hunger. During January 1865, one captured Confederate deserter estimated that two hundred men were leaving Lee's army every day, partly due to poor and irregular rations. Confederate commander J. H. Duncan reported on January 21 that "desertions are becoming amazingly numerous, and ... the

main cause of this dissatisfaction" is "the controlling influence that prompts our men thus to desert—it is the insufficiency of rations. Our men do not get enough to eat." Duncan predicted that "unless something is done soon to remove this evil, which of all others weighs most heavily on the minds of the troops, I fear that the number of desertions will be greatly increased during the winter."²¹

Other soldiers deserted because of hunger back home. According to Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston, "it was not uncommon for a soldier to be written to by his wife, that so much of the food he had provided for herself and his children had been impressed, that it was necessary that he should return to save them from suffering or starvation. Such a summons, it may well be supposed, was never unheeded." Johnston warned that this "increased desertion from the army, further increase[ed] the likelihood of military defeat."²²

General Robert E. Lee was well aware of this food scarcity crisis. In a letter to the Confederate Secretary of War, he concluded that the main causes of desertions were "the insufficiency of food, and non-payment of the troops." He further remarked that "There is suffering for want of food. The ration is too small

for men who have to undergo so much exposure and labor." One Confederate soldier wrote to his family on January 30, 1865, lamenting: "I get so hungry that it makes me sick." Continuing, he remarked that "The reason they don't feed us any better may be that thay [sic] can not getit [sic]. . . . Our men can not and will not stand it much longer."²³

When Lee surrendered at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, the Army of Northern Virginia had an estimated 27,500 men. Yet only a few days earlier, on April 1, the Confederate army reportedly had 150,000 men on its rolls. Some soldiers were on leave; others were hospitalized, and still others were captured or had died along the way to Appomattox. But tens of thousands of soldiers, many of whom had supported the Confederate cause for four long years, voted with their stomachs and deserted in the final months of the war.²⁴ With so many desertions, the Army of Northern Virginia dissolved, and within a matter of weeks the Civil War was over.

From the first shot fired at Fort Sumter to the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, food scarcity played a crucial role in the Civil War. It affected the outcome of specific battles and it greatly influenced civilian support for the war and soldiers' morale. The Southern food crisis that emerged in 1863 could have been avoided had the Confederacy required increased food production on slave-powered plantations, which could easily have generated surpluses, and established an effective distribution system. Confederate leaders, many of whom were plantation owners, chose not to pursue these solutions due to their laissez faire

◀ **THE FOOD QUESTION DOWN SOUTH**

JEFF DAVIS. "See! See! The beautiful boots just come to me from the dear ladies of Baltimore!"
BEAUREGARD. "Ha! Boots! Boots! When shall we eat them? Now?"
(Harper's Weekly, May 9, 1863)



◀ HUNGER IN NEW ORLEANS

"The starving people of New Orleans fed by the United States Military Authorities."
(Harper's Weekly, June 14, 1862)

economic views, support for states' rights, and their own self-interest.

Recognition of the South's food vulnerability contributed to the shift in Union war strategy in 1864; thereafter Northern armies intentionally targeted and destroyed

Southern crops, farm animals, farm equipment, and agricultural production and storage facilities. This shift, coupled with Confederate policy failures, contributed to a massive number of desertions in Confederate armies during the last months of the war. There were many reasons for the Confederacy's defeat, but hunger and

the threat of famine is what tipped the scales in favor of its collapse.

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