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# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Title: Civil War Camp Life

By: David J. Gerleman, Ph.D.

### Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	Title. City: Publisher, Year.
Billings, John D.	<i>Hardtack and Coffee</i> . ed. Richard Harwell, Boston, MA: George M. Smith & Co., 1887.

### Books

Author	Title. City: Publisher, Year.   “Title,” in <i>Journal</i> ##, no. # (Date): #.
Acken, J. Gregory ed.	<i>Blue-Blooded Cavalryman: Captain William Brooke Rawle in the Army of the Potomac, May 1863-August 1865</i> . Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2019.
Adams, John G. B.	<i>Reminiscences of the Nineteenth Massachusetts Regiment</i> . Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1899.
Aldridge, Katherine M. ed.	<i>No Freedom Shrieker: The Civil War Letters of Union Soldier Charles Freeman Biddlecom</i> . Ithaca, New York: Paramount Publishing, Inc., 2011.
Ambrose, Stephen E. ed.	<i>A Wisconsin Boy in Dixie: Civil War Letters of James K. Newton</i> . Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961.
Barton, Michael and Larry M. Logue, eds.	<i>The Civil War Soldier: A Historical Reader</i> . New York and London: New York University Press, 2002.

Bliss, George N.	<i>'Don't Tell Father I Have Been Shot At': The Civil War Letters of Captain George N. Bliss, First Rhode Island Cavalry.</i> ed., William C. Emerson with Elisabeth C. Stevens. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2018.
Browning, Judkin and Timothy Silver	<i>An Environmental History of the Civil War.</i> Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
Carmichael, Peter	<i>The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies.</i> Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018.
Eby, Jr., Cecil D. ed.	<i>A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War: The Diaries of David Hunter Strother.</i> Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
Gallagher, Gary W., ed.	<i>Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander.</i> Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
Gillet, Mary C.	<i>The Army Medical Department, 1818-1865.</i> Washington: United States Army Center of Military History, 1987.
Hacker, J. David	"A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," in <i>Civil War History</i> , 57, No. 4, 2011, 307-48.
Huffman, James	<i>Ups and Downs of a Confederate Soldier.</i> New York: William E. Rudge's Sons, 1940.
Humphreys, Margaret	<i>Marrow of Tragedy: The Health Crisis of the American Civil War.</i> Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013.
Madden, David, ed.	<i>Beyond the Battlefield: The Ordinary Life and Extraordinary Times of the Civil War Soldier.</i> New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.
McCarthy, Carlton	<i>Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life in the Army of Northern Virginia, 1861-1865.</i> Richmond, VA: Carlton McCarthy and Company, 1882.

McPherson, James	<i>For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War.</i> New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
Parker, John L.	<i>Henry Wilson's Regiment.</i> Boston: Press of Rand Avery, Co., 1887.
Patrick, Marsena Rudolph	<i>Inside Lincoln's Army: The Diary of Marsena Rudolph Patrick, Provost Marshall General, Army of the Potomac.</i> ed. David S. Sparks. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964.
Rhodes, Robert Hunt, ed.	<i>All for the Union: The Civil War Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes.</i> New York: Orion Books, 1985.
Robertson, Jr., James I.	"Chaplain William E. Wiatt: Soldier of the Cloth," in <i>Rank and File: Essays in Honor of Bell I. Wiley</i> , eds. James I. Robertson, Jr., and Richard M. McMurry. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1976.
Small, Abner R.	<i>The Road to Richmond.</i> ed. Harold Adams Small. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957.
Snedden, Robert Knox, Charles E. Bryan, Jr., and Nelson D. Lankford, eds.	<i>Eye of the Storm: A Civil War Odyssey.</i> New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
Stillwell, Leander	<i>The Story of a Common Soldier of Army Life in the Civil War, 1861-1865.</i> n.p.: Franklin Hudson Publishing, Co., 1920.
The Survivors Association	<i>History of the Corn Exchange Regiment, 118th Pennsylvania Volunteers.</i> Philadelphia: J. L. Smith Publisher, 1888.
Tyler, Mason Whiting	<i>Recollections of the Civil War.</i> ed. William S. Tyler. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912.
Van Alstyne, Lawrence	<i>Diary of an Enlisted Man.</i> New Haven: The Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Company, 1910.
Ward, Joseph R. C.	<i>History of the 106th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers.</i> Philadelphia: F. McManus, Jr. & Company, 1906.
Wiley, Bell I.	<i>The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy,</i> (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1943.

_____.	<i>The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union</i> . Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1952.
_____.	<i>The Common Soldier of the Civil War</i> . New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975.
Wilkeson, Frank	<i>Recollections of a Private Soldier in the Army of the Potomac</i> . New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1887.
Woodworth, Steven E.	<i>While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers</i> . Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001.

### Organizations

### Web Resources

### Other Sources

### Scholars

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### Topic Précis

The vast majority of Civil War soldiers’ military service was spent in army encampments waging a daily struggle to fend off the boredom, sickness, and “mind-harrowing sameness” of camp life. Disease claimed more lives than battle. Unsanitary living conditions and poor diets endemic to camp life resulted in long-term illnesses, intestinal problems, and addictions that plagued them into postwar old age. However, camp life also had its bright spots of comradeship, relaxation, humor, and raucous fun enabling men exposed to myriad dangers opportunities to decompress and regenerate for weeks or months as the armies ceased maneuvering and settled into fixed winter quarters. Civil War soldiers’ first experience with army camp life occurred soon after enlistment and many men looked back at the time spent at their initial training camps as a halcyon interlude of

playing at being a soldier but as soldiers campaigned the gritty reality of army camp life began to emerge: bad food, crowded quarters, illness, and an utter lack of privacy or alone time even for short snatches. Camp life in the field during the active campaign season differed in length of stay and levels of attainable comfort from longer static winter camps, but they shared the same fundamental characteristics of men seeking rest, food, and shelter. There were also differences in how the army service branches of infantry, artillery, and cavalry each experienced camp life as their duties and opportunities for comfort varied. When an army halted for a few days, weeks, or months, unit commanders sought suitable campsite locations, preferably on elevated and undulating topography to aid drainage, provide some form of natural shelter, with fuel and a reliable water source nearby and with access to road or rail supply routes and men constructed shelters from frame tents to pup tents. Winter quarters camps were more permanent with each company having two rows of huts separated by a street and soldier's huts ranging from crude shebangs to small crude or quite elaborate huts. Heat was supplied by fireplaces; cabin interiors could be quite comfortable.

Food was a major preoccupation. Enlisted men usually divided into messes taking turns at cooking. Union troops often received a variety of food supplies considered generous for the era, such as fresh beef, beans, rice, tea, salt, vinegar, molasses, desiccated vegetables, fresh potatoes, and sometimes flour. Confederate troops dealt with less reliably regular deliveries and far less diversity of supply, but men of both armies sought to supplement their monotonous diets by local foraging for chickens, hogs, sheep, vegetables, butter, and milk with honey being particularly prized. The Union army issued hardtack biscuits, the Confederates issued corn flour. Union forces also benefited most from advances in industrial food preservation technology, for example, the ability to compress vegetables. Both sides sought supplies from home and used the services of camp sutlers to supply luxuries or food not normally available through arm rations.

Once men settled in sedentary winter camps, the routine of military life resumed with daily reveille, roll call, drill, sick call, policing the grounds, guard mounting, drill, preparation for inspection or parade, retreat, tattoo, and lights out. Men could be kept relatively clean in camp, certainly far better than on active field service and regular bathing was encouraged, if not always practiced. Camp life also allowed for washing, mending, and replacing garments frayed or worn-out in active service. One unheralded olfactory component of Civil War camp life was the prevailing stench of human waste. In spite of efforts to establish latrines, the sanitary problem of men relieving themselves was never fully solved.

Disease was an inescapable concomitant of camp life that claimed more lives than combat. Even as the first recruits crowded into training camps, contagious diseases like measles spread with devastating effect among farm boys raised in relative isolation who had little immunity. Men suffered from scurvy, malaria ('the Shakes'), pneumonia, erysipelas, septicemia, blood poisoning, jaundice, typhoid fever, and diarrhea—the latter two being the biggest killers that medical science could do little to prevent. Along with battling unseen camp viruses and diseases, soldiers also had to combat more observable afflictions in the form of vermin— blood-seeking parasites like ticks, chiggers, and bedbugs, yet the soldier's greatest scourge was lice.

While army leaders busied themselves securing the equipment, sustenance, and

medical care their men needed, morale-building, amusement, or diversions were left up to the men's own devices. Boredom was a universal army experience. Soldiers organized camp sporting events, revived childhood games like marbles, and played chess, checkers and cards. Wagering added extra layers of excitement and soldiers bet on everything from horse or louse races, pitching quoits (horseshoes), climbing greased poles as well as faro and 'chuck-a-luck' with cash, coffee, or tobacco used as winning stakes. If not engaged in physical activities, men indulged their creativity by using camp detritus to fashion an array of trinkets like pipes and rings for their own use or to send home as mementos from the front. Civil War armies were highly literate for the era with Union armies having higher overall literacy rates making reading a major source of camp diversion. Soldiers read anything they could get their hands on. Writing and reading letters from home was a universal diversion.

Family members and religious leaders feared what camp life would do to the morals of young men removed from the civilizing home influences of books, art, and women. An overriding fear was that they would "smoke, drink, recite and listen to coarse stories, and indulge in badinage and games" and return home "as wild as Cossacks". Military chaplains sought to combat the moral degradations of army life by preaching and proselytizing amongst the troops and distributing religious tracts like *Why Do You Swear?*. Despite the chaplaincy's best efforts, military life remained a school of vice and every camp had its provost marshal's stockade confining offenders as the wheels of military justice turned.

Soldiers considered it a doleful day when marching orders arrived to break camp—often when least expected or desired—heralding renewed military operations. Men rushed to decide what accumulated comforts to keep, what keepsakes or clothing could be sent home, and what was superfluous to be thrown onto the bonfires that soon burned in every company street. Veterans inspected new recruit knapsacks advising from experience what was needed and what could be tossed out—weighty items, such as books, should be discarded as it was difficult enough to transport the necessities of life. Food was always to be given precedence; canteens should be topped off at every stream; only comfortable clothing suited to marching should be worn as lugging extra garments was pointless; straggling was to be avoided, and weapons were always to be kept handy. On the first morning of the new campaign the men marched off and only a few miles on the march and men unconditioned by camp life began casting off additional items even if it meant being charged for lost government property. Overcoats, extra blankets, and other paraphernalia soon littered the roadsides as soldiers stripped down to the fighting essentials of a blanket, a gum-blanket, a single piece of shelter-tent, and their haversack and weapons. The boredom, routines, and pleasures of static camp life were over once again, and active field service resumed.

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