ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Soldiers' Pay

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The motivations which animated men to fight in the Civil War ranged from patriotic fervor to coercion, but perhaps nothing concerned the average Civil War soldier, whatever his reasons for being a soldier, more than his pay. When men first rushed to volunteer in the United States and Confederate armies, a private's wage was $11 per month—a relatively scanty sum which, for perhaps most enlisted men for the duration of the war, was in constant arrears several months at a time. How much money the army owed him and when he—or his dependents back home—might expect to have his due is a common theme found in Civil War correspondence. Understanding the details of soldiers' pay can also illuminate for researchers the meanings behind scribbled references to various money matters, bounties, debts, and so on, commonly found in primary documents involving Civil War soldiers.

In August 1861, United States Congress passed an act increasing the private's pay to $13 per month.[1] Soldiers could also occasionally earn anywhere from 25¢ to 40¢ extra per day by working extra-duty.[2] Numerous forms of bounties from the enrolling states provided men substantially greater economic incentives to enlist (and re-enlist, should they choose to do so) than the soldier's Federal wages. A Vermont volunteer, for example, earned besides his Federal pay a

[1] In both United States and Confederate armies, pay was scaled proportionately according to rank, and both the Federal and Confederate governments adjusted their pay scales during the war. For a detailed description of the Pay Departments, their responsibilities, and a chart of army wages, readers should refer to *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States of 1861*, Article XLV, and *Regulations for the Army of the Confederate States*, Article XLIV, and the subsequent revisions to these manuals. After Senate Bill No. 69 calling for the government to pay its soldiers $15 per month failed, the Senate passed Senate Bill No. 72 raising the soldier's wages to $13 per month on August 6, 1861.

[2] *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1861. With a Full Index*, (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1862), 127; *Regulations for the Army of the Confederate States, as adopted by Act of Congress, approved March 6, 1861*, 143.

state bonus of $7 per month, plus the promise of a $100 bounty from the state to be paid out to the veteran at the conclusion of his service.[3] A private in the 7th Vermont Infantry campaigning in the South could therefore tease friends and family back home by writing, "I feel sorry for you farmers who have to mow and sweat for $15 a month ... come down to dixie ... get your little $20."[4] A Massachusetts soldier confessed he was better paid as a soldier, "then working at my trade" of carpentry, "supposing i got constant work which i could not."[5] The Northern soldiers' was a vastly better arrangement than any of the states in rebellion could offer their volunteers. In December 1861, a cash-strapped Confederate Congress voted to award a $50 bounty and six-day furlough to one-year soldiers who re-enlisted. A Virginian who had not yet served could get, at best, a $50 cash advance bounty by volunteering—at least until Spring 1862, when Confederate Congress began conscripting men to sustain its armies.[6]

In the Confederate and Union armies, officers earned substantially more than the privates and noncommissioned officers under their command. Unlike the regular enlisted men, however, officers were responsible for making their own arrangements for obtaining food and clothing. "We officers have to buy every thing we get," explained a recently elected lieutenant to his wife. Once elevated from the ranks to company command, he would pay out of pocket for his "rations, books, candles, clothes," and everything else. "In fact," he wrote, "the government furnish[es] us nothing but our tents." Like many other officers during the war, this lieutenant sporadically pooled his resources with his fellow officers to afford certain privileges appropriate to his new station which were luxuries to the common enlisted man. Officers could not only foot a larger grocery bill, for example, but often paid a cook to prepare their meals and a washer to clean their clothes.[7]

Army Regulations for both the Federal and rebel armies insisted a soldier's pay should never be in arrears for over two months, but with the important caveat: "unless the circumstances

[3] *The Daily Green Mountain Freeman* (Montpelier, Vermont), October 9, 1863, 3.
[4] Kenena Hansen Spalding, ed., *Tuf as a Boiled Owl: The Civil War Letters of Proctor Swallow, 7th Vermont Volunteer Regiment.* Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2006), 17.
[5] Lawrence Kohl and Margaret Richard, eds., *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh Color Sergeant 28th Massachusetts Volunteers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 20.
[6] *The Weekly Advertiser* (Montgomery, Alabama), March 19, 1862, 4.
[7] Michael J. Larson and John David Smith, eds., *Dear Delia: The Civil War Letters of Captain Henry F. Young, Seventh Wisconsin Infantry, 1861-1864*(Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 29.

of the case render it unavoidable."[8] Unsurprisingly, circumstances frequently did render it impossible to pay the soldiers on time, sometimes for several months at a time. Officers and enlisted men complained bitterly about the paymaster's absence because the longer the army held a soldier's pay in arrears, the more likely he was to become indebted to sutlers—merchants accompanying the army, while their families back home often had to depend on the charity of neighbors and relief associations. An officer protested in a letter home, "the regiment has never yet been paid off, which makes it rather 'tight papers' with us." "When the pay-master does put in an appearance," he continued, "he will settle up in short order having but one person to pay—Barney Hoops, Sutler. We are all mortgaged to him." [9]

Sutlers provided a wide range of essential and non-essential goods to soldiers, such as soap, reading material, and (illegally) alcohol—all at exorbitant prices. While army regulations specified exact measurements and increments of pork, salt, coffee, and so on to be distributed to each man, this hardly ever corresponded with reality in the field and especially while on campaign. Supplementing the army diet, which was typically sour if not tasteless and worm-ridden besides, with fresh or canned food from sutlers was, therefore, often the soldier's largest living expense. Union soldiers who dug-in around Petersburg, Virginia in 1864, for example, could expect to pay sutlers around 75¢ for a pound of butter, 50¢ for cheese, 30¢ for crackers, and 8¢ for apples.[10] Around the same time, a Confederate prisoner under guard of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry reported sutler prices at 50¢ for a pint of molasses and 5¢ for two crackers.[11] Following a hard march, a famished soldier short on rations could devour a week's wages' worth of goods sold by the sutler—and at $5 for twenty to twenty-five some odd sheets of paper, $3 for a pack of

[8] Revised US Army Regulations, 341; CS Army Regulations, 201.
[9] Gregory Acken, *Inside the Army of the Potomac: The Civil War Experience of Captain Francis Adams Donaldson* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998), 197.
[10] Harry F. Jackson and Thomas F. O'Donnell, *Back Home in Oneida: Hermon Clarke and His Letters*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 161.
[11] Dickinson, Henry C. *Diary of Capt. Henry C. Dickinson, C. S. A.* (Denver, CO: Press of The Williamson-Haffner Co., n.d.), 76.

envelopes, and another $3 for roughly five ounces of ink, he could hardly afford to write home about it.[12]

Just as one Union officer was complaining of "tight papers," on account of spending at the sutler's, another officer wrote, "we are expecting the paymaster soon and we need him verry much for every officer is heels over head in debt. It costs something," he fumed, "to live in the army."[13] These officers yet earned "quite a nice sum," in the eyes of privates, however, whose family back home poverty tended to hit the hardest. A Massachusetts private, for example, wrote his wife to do her best to "keep our furniture if you possibly can," and encouraged her to inquire "about the relief mony," which she was entitled to draw.[14] The 16th Connecticut Infantry became so fed up with their wages in arrears, they wrote their governor that unless their pay, "was forthcoming or some proper reason was given why we did not receive it, we should consider our contract with the government null and void." They were finally paid.[15]

While waiting for the paymaster to make his appearance, soldiers could also end up owing the army money. Although volunteers received a few dollars of allowance for clothing each year, the quality of clothing distributed by the quartermaster many soldiers found entirely inadequate for the wear and tear of campaigning. Allowance, for some, simply could not keep pace with the disintegration of "shoddy" (the term for material made from recycled cloth, namely wool, entered the language during the Civil War) trousers, brogans, and underwear. Once an article of clothing could no longer be patched and sewn back together, soldiers faced the choice of writing pleading letters home for new clothing or overdrawing with the quartermaster with funds deducted from his pay. One soldier, who wrote home to his wife for a new pair of socks, was proud to report his thrift

[12] Wiley, Bell I. *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), 196.
[13] Larson, *Dear Delia*, 253.
[14] Kohl, *Irish Green*, 17, 33.
[15] Lesley J. Gordon,, *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War*(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 74.

in getting a pair of pants. "I bought a pair of pants from a discharged soldier for $2.00," he wrote, "if I had drawn a pair[,] the government would have charged $3.30."[16]

Both governments naturally expected officers and soldiers to pay for the loss or destruction of public property. For example, each soldier could expect to have his wages docked for ammunition expended without orders[17]—though it is exceedingly rare to encounter such a charge. An especially neglectful soldier could experience a complete stoppage of his pay upon losing his gun or accouterments—but these cases are circumstantial.[18] Over sixty soldiers of the 2nd Texas Infantry lost their guns in a stampeding retreat at the Battle of Shiloh, for example, but none appear to have been docked pay. Only a month or so later, however, a private of the same regiment suffered pay stoppage for losing his gun and accoutrements while inbound to a hospital.[19] A rebel soldier from Alabama forfeited a month's pay after stealing honey from a civilian.[20]

Whatever money a soldier had left to his name after the quartermaster's deductions and the sutler had settled with the paymaster, he usually sent home. Soldiers used a variety of methods to send money to loved ones—they often enclosed cash with letters or entrusted companions in the regiment, such as chaplains or mess mates headed home on furlough, to deliver the money to a family member in-person. A more modern method of sending money and other valuables was through express agencies. With their husbands in the service, the responsibility of managing the family's finances usually fell upon the wives back home. Some soldiers espoused more confidence in their wives' ability to steward their money than others, and as often as officers and enlisted men wrote to their wives about their pay, they usually also offered suggestions on how best to spend, save, or invest the money they were sending home. "But do as you think best," is a common refrain in these letters.[21]

[16] Mark Olcott and David Lear, *The Civil War Letters of Lewis Bissell: A History and Literature Curriculum*. Washington, D.C.: The Field School Educational Foundation Press, 1981), 75.
[17] Revised US Army Regulations, pg. 22, 505; CS Army Regulations, 20, 227.
[18] Revised US Army Regulations, pg. 153, 239, 342; CS Army Regulations 148-149, 202.
[19] Research on the Second Texas Infantry by the author; see: Compiled Military Service Record for Private William Wilson, Company A, 2nd Texas Infantry, National Archives and Records Administration.
[20] Wiley, *Johnny Reb*, 223.
[21] Larson, *Dear Delia*, 22, 78, 84; and M. Jane Johansson, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Theophilus and Harriet Perry* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 34.

There were several controversies surrounding soldier's pay worth mentioning for their deeper significance. For example, Confederate Congress invited public outrage in 1861 when it slashed the wages of regimental chaplains from $85 to $50 per month—a salary that ministers with large families to support could ill afford.[22] A consequence of slashing chaplains pay was a wave of resignations, creating vacancies of chaplains across the Confederacy. In many cases, these vacancies were then occupied by less zealous, or even insincere men hardly worth even the reduced pay. Ministers of the Gospel were in dire need in the armies at this time, many on the homefront believed, to combat sin running rampant in army encampments. Without godly stewardship, young men in the ranks—worried their wives and parents back home—would be corrupted by gambling, profanity, drunkenness, and prostitutes.[23]

By far, the biggest controversy surrounding pay in the Civil War involved Black soldiers. The character of the war changed in January 1863 when the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect and the Federal government invited states to muster in regiments of Black volunteers for service—designated United States Colored Troops. Initially, the Federal government appeared ready to pay USCT the same wages as its white soldiers. This was the obvious understanding of Black volunteers and their white enrolling officers, who, in the example of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Infantry regiments, published recruiting posters promising Black enlistees the same $13 monthly wage as white soldiers, plus a $100 bounty and clothing allowance. The War Department determined on June 4, 1863, however, that according to the Militia Act of July 17, 1862, the government was only obligated to pay Black men as laborers rather than soldiers. Black volunteers saw their wages reduced to $10 per month and were no longer entitled to an allowance to draw clothing—the government not only reduced the Black volunteer's status and pay, in other words, but it also deducted from that reduced salary $3 to cover its expenses to put these Black volunteers in uniform. The Massachusetts state legislature stepped in to make up the difference, but the USCT refused the gesture on principal. "We were told that we would be accepted by the

[22] *Richmond Enquirer [Richmond, Virginia]*, September 17, 1861, 2.
[23] For more on religion in the Civil War, see: Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

U.S. Government on the same terms as her other Regiments," wrote one soldier of the 55th Massachusetts Infantry, "do you call the same terms reducing pay, and receiving part pay from Mass[achusetts], and a part from the government at the same?"[24] It was not until June 15, 1863, that Congress passed a bill recognizing Black soldiers were entitled the same pay as white soldiers.

Until 1864, Confederate Congress resisted increasing the southern soldier's pay from the $11 rate it had been since the beginning of the war. Inflation had rendered the Confederate dollar worthless. In June 1864, however, both governments provided their enlisted men raises for a final time during the war. Union soldiers earned $16 in the last year of the war, while a farcical raise of seven dollars meant the Confederate soldier was paid in Confederate money $2 more than the Union soldier's greenbacks.[25]

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[24] Edwin S. Redkey, ed. *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army 1861–1865*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235-6.
[25] Act of June 9, 1864 relayed to the army in General Orders, No. 53in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies,* 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series IV, volume 3, sec 1, p. 492. (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, IV, 3, sec. 1, 492).