

New Hampshire in the Civil War Lesson Plan

Hardtack: Soldiers' Experiences during the Civil War

Created by New Hampshire in the Civil War workshop participants and the New Hampshire Historical Society, 2014–15

Topic: Soldiers' Experiences during the Civil War

Level: Middle School and High School

ABSTRACT / SUMMARY

Objects as well as written documents serve as concrete links to the past. A piece of Civil War hardtack in the collections of the New Hampshire Historical Society is a unique object that can be used in demonstrating how to use physical objects to answer research questions. Students' analysis of the hardtack is guided by the Analyzing Primary Sources worksheet found on the Library of Congress's website.

QUESTION / TASK

What does examining a piece of hardtack tell us about soldiers' experiences during the Civil War?

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Learn to use primary and secondary sources to answer research questions
- Discover the realities soldiers faced during the Civil War

SEQUENCE OF ACTIVITIES

1. Using a photograph of hardtack, complete the Analyzing Primary Sources worksheet
2. Read the John D. Billings's description of hardtack and rations during the Civil War
3. Obtain or make hardtack and eat it
4. Hypothesize how hardtack would be useful in wartime
5. As a soldier in the Civil War, write a journal entry or a letter home describing your experience preparing and eating hardtack

ASSESSMENTS

In the persona of a soldier, each student will write a letter home or journal entry describing preparing and eating hardtack during a 3-day march.

PROJECT DURATION

In-Class Time (estimated): 2 class periods

Out-of-Class Time (estimated): 6 hours, includes 4 hours slow-baking time, if making hardtack at home

NOTES

This is a great group project.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Archival and Special Collections

“Salt Junk and Hardtack,” broadside, 1865

S 1996.603.52

Library Collection

Billings, John D. *Hardtack and Coffee, or the Unwritten Story of Army Life*. Boston: George M. Smith & Company, 1888. 973.78 B598

Museum Collection

Biscuit / Hardtack, 1865 1969.040

Utensils (knife, spoon, fork), 1861 1959.029

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Primary Sources:

“Civil War Letters of the Christie Family,” letter, Thomas D. Christie to Sarah J. Christie, September 8, 1862. Accessed July 22, 2015.

<http://www.mnhs.org/library/christie/letters/transcripts/td620908.php>

“The Civil War Letters of Forrest Little,” letter, Forrest Little to his mother, October 16, 1861. Accessed July 22, 2015. <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/the-civil-war-letters-of-forrest-little/letters/october-16-1861>

“William W. Bentley Letter, 1861,” letter, William W. Bentley to his mother, June 13, 1862. Accessed July 22, 2015.

<http://digitalcollections.vmi.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15821coll11/id/1042>

Secondary Sources:

Butler, Stephanie. “Desecrated Vegetables: The Hardships of Civil War Eating,” *History: Hungry History*, 2013. Accessed July 22, 2015.

<http://www.history.com/news/hungry-history/desecrated-vegetables-the-hardships-of-civil-war-eating>

Colleary, Eric. “Civil War Recipe: Hardtack (1861),” *The American Table*, 2013. Accessed July 22, 2015. <http://www.americantable.org/2013/06/civil-war-recipe-hardtack-1861/>

This site includes a recipe for making hardtack. Commercial hardtack can also be found for sale at Civil War reenactment sites.

Evans, Suzy. “Civil War Rations and Hard Tack Crackers,” *The History Chef*, 2011. Accessed July 22, 2015. <http://lincolnlunch.blogspot.com/2011/06/civil-war-rations-and-hard-tack.html>

Godoy, Maria. “Civil War Soldiers Needed Bravery to Face the Foe, and the Food,” *New Hampshire Public Radio: The Salt*, 2013. Accessed July 22, 2015.

<http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/07/02/198042487/civil-war-soldiers-needed-bravery-to-face-the-foe-and-the-food>

Rothman, Dan. "Hardtack and Coffee—the Daily Life of a Civil War Soldier," New Boston Historical Society, 2013. Accessed July 22, 2015
<http://www.newbostonhistoricalsociety.com/civilwar-p2.html>

"What Did Civil War Soldiers Eat?" Civil War Trust, n.d.
<http://www.civilwar.org/education/pdfs/civil-war-curriculum-food.pdf>

Wheeler, Linda. "Hardtack is Easy to Make, Hard to Eat," *Washington Post*, 2004. Accessed July 22, 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A46037-2004Dec8.html>

"Teachers Guide, Analyzing Primary Sources," Library of Congress, n.d. Accessed July 22, 2015.
http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Primary_Sources.pdf

"Primary Source Analysis Tool," Library of Congress, n.d. Accessed July 22, 2015.
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/>

QUOTES REGARDING HARDTACK AND RATIONS

An army runs on food for fuel. John Billings, a Massachusetts Civil war veteran, was prompted by reminiscing during a vacation in a White Mountain hotel to write his memoir of life in the Army of the Potomac titled *Hardtack and Coffee*. His term for hardtack was "hardbread."

I will speak of the rations more in detail, beginning with the hard bread, or, to use the name by which it was known in the Army of the Potomac, Hardtack. What was hardtack? It was a plain flour-and water biscuit. Two which I have in my possession as mementos measure three and one-eighth by two and seven eighths inches, and are nearly half an inch thick. Although these biscuits were furnished to organizations by weight, they were dealt out to the men by number, nine constituting a ration in some regiments, and ten in others; but there were usually enough for those who wanted more, as some men would not draw them. While hardtack was nutritious, yet a hungry man could eat his ten in a short time and still be hungry.[115–16]

Hardtack could be a dependable staple of the soldier's or sailor's meal. It could also be moldy, too hard to eat by itself, or full of maggots and weevils. Billings described the uses of hardtack, saying maggots and weevils could be skimmed off the top of the coffee when hardtack was crumbled into the hot liquid.

I have already spoken of their being crumbed into coffee, giving the "hardtack and coffee." Probably more were eaten this way than in any other, for they thus frequently furnished the soldier his breakfast and supper.[116]