

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Sutlers

By **Richard H. Holloway**

Early on the morning of April 6, 1862 during the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, Confederate Major Felix Dumonteil led the 13th Louisiana [Orleans Guard] Infantry Battalion through the abandoned camps of the 6th Iowa Infantry Regiment. He opened the flaps on one of the tents and saw a Yankee hiding within. Dumonteil drew his pistol and aimed it at the cowering Unionist who quickly pleaded with the major not to kill him. If spared, he promised to divulge where the unit's hidden provisions were stored. Once he realized he would not be harmed, the relieved Iowan first revealed the underground ovens in which thousands of loaves of bread were discovered. Afterwards, the captive Northerner showed Dumonteil where the sutler stores were concealed. Inside the shelter, there were enough provisions to give a banquet to 10,000 people.

The cache of goods contained cooked hams, marinated oysters, cases of sweet and sugarless biscuits, barrels of Goshen butter, apples, oranges, refined sugar, whiskey, cases of grapes, cognac, bottles of anisette and other liquors, peppermint candy, quantities of cheese, cases of smoking and chewing tobacco, barrels of fruit juice and syrup, coffee brewing on abandoned campfires and much more. His unit had been on the long march for days so Dumonteil quickly determined to dispose of the luxurious foods and goods. The major ordered his men to form battle ranks and then commanded them to stack their arms. After a few short words, the men were dismissed to divide up the sutler's valuable merchandise.¹

The men gorged themselves on the sumptuous repast without apparent concern of the war being waged around them. For nearly a week, the Louisianans had only been issued a single molded biscuit daily, so they swiftly took advantage of the spoils of war. Once their appetites were sated, the Southerners loaded up their canteens with cognac and their knapsacks with provisions for future consumption. The battalion then rejoined the battle, albeit at a slower pace due to their heavier load courtesy of the sutler of the 6th Iowa.

A sutler was a merchant who sold various items to soldiers. They either followed an army on campaign or operated in cities near military garrisons. Being in a dangerous situation was a

¹ Goshen is a town in Orange County New York. The term Goshen butter appears as early as 1816. Farmers in the Goshen area supplied butter to New York and the name became famous all over the country.

fairly common occurrence for sutlers in the field. Occasionally, even troops behind their own lines encountered trouble. An ambulance containing a Nebraska sutler and his clerk, along with two Union artillerymen and their black driver was making its way across a safe portion of Union-held territory. The five men were traveling at dusk between Leavenworth and Kansas City, Kansas when they were spotted by two mounted Missouri troopers. The duo observed the sutler was drunk, the sutler's clerk was making noise and the pair of cannoneers appeared fast asleep. The Missourians called out for the driver to stop but he sensed danger and whipped his horses into a faster gait.

The Confederates, who turned out to be Second Lieutenant William Gregg and First Sergeant John Jarrette took off in hot pursuit of the wagon. These brigands were part of Captain William Quantrill's company of partisan rangers and not in the mood to chase after the travelers. As Jarrette and Gregg closed the gap, the clerk screamed at the top of his lungs while the inebriated sutler fumbled with his revolver and finally took an errant shot at Jarrette. Meanwhile, Gregg galloped ahead and shot the lead horse, causing a rapid end to the ambulance's forward progress. The two Southerners summarily dispatched the entire crew aboard with the exception of the two soldiers who were both regulars and native Irishmen. The Yankees were released the next morning while their captors absconded with the stores from the deceased sutler's wrecked conveyance.

In addition to the edibles, a sutler would sell almost anything a soldier could desire. These were commodities of all descriptions and included camp equipment, clocks, watches, clothing, drugs, games, hair dyes, jewelry, lanterns, locks, eating utensils, glasses and wallets. The aforementioned encounter at the Battle of Shiloh gives an example of the amount of merchandise available for soldiers in the field, but sutlers were also stationed in prisons, forts and other permanent posts throughout the country, both north and south.

The word sutler came into the English language by way of the Netherlands. The definition is derived from the Dutch term originally meaning one who does dirty work. Sutlers initially began plying their wares in America during the era of the French and Indian War. Eventually every U.S. fort or cantonment required at least one sutler on post. Sutler items and prices were usually what the market would allow and sutlers were subject to little regulation. By the onset of the American Civil War, the Federal government implemented a series of rules to govern sutlers and the cost of their merchandise. The 1861 U.S. Army regulations stated that governmental sutlers were appointed by the secretary of war with each post being allowed one sutler as well as each regiment in the field, and the sutlers were to be selected by the post or regimental commanders.

During the latter part of 1861, government officials began tweaking their basic rules concerning sutlers. All existing regulations of sutler appointments were rescinded and only the secretary of war would choose the sutlers. This, in turn, was altered yet again, whereby the

secretary would maintain his appointment power but the appointment depended upon the recommendation of the senior officer of the post or regiment. The next year brought more adjustment with the power of appointment of the sutlers given to the army's adjutant general. The next major change came when prices were to be set by the commanding officer of the unit or post the sutler was assigned to. All of these regulations evolved over the course of the war as Congress felt their way through the benefits and problems. Army lobbyists were also on hand when Congress met to explain the needs of their men. Many commanders, especially the ones with units in the field, were otherwise occupied due to more pressing needs so most sutlers managed to elevate their prices well above their set rates.

Major General Henry Wager Halleck became so disgusted with sutlers that he wanted the entire system abolished. Reports were being received in Washington, D.C. which stated some sutlers were gouging soldiers for a profit of more than 300%. In addition to the high price tags on merchandise, provost marshals were on the lookout for sutlers who were selling obscene materials and shoddy products. Military officials would also confiscate sutlers' wares that had been smuggled onto government wagons to save on transportation fees. Differences of opinions were rampant concerning the merchants as some officials maintained that sutlers were a necessary evil, while others lamented the loss to families at home that were being deprived of much needed funds.

Major General Ulysses S. Grant issued an order in late 1862 which expelled Jewish sutlers from the entire expanse of his department in Tennessee. He gave them only twenty-four hours to vacate themselves from his command and any traders that tried to return would be immediately arrested and confined as regular prisoners. Other Union departments followed suit with similar directives focused on all sutlers. Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler actually tasked gunboats to patrol the James River in search of ships laden with sutler stores in order to

levy taxes before they were able to disembark and sell their goods.²

On occasion, the adversaries of sutlers came from their own allies. Two Union sutlers appeared after payday in an area along the Federal lines near Petersburg in June 1864. They carelessly drove their cart up and down behind the breastworks, within rifle range of the enemy, while selling tobacco to individual enlisted men. Faced with such easy targets, the Confederates opened fire and managed to wound the horse and kill one of the sutlers. When the surviving sutler attempted to turn back, the injured steed bolted and turned over the cart in a ditch. Nearby Northern soldiers rushed upon the scene and helped the shaken up sutler get on his feet but only after cleaning out his cache of tobacco.

Due to the inflated costs of the items sold to the soldiers, retribution was often carried out by random theft. Soldiers would cause a distraction while others would pocket items from the sutler's store to be divided later. Other troopers would cut the ropes on the sutler's tent and in the pandemonium grab as much as they could reach and run away before the merchant could push away enough canvas to break free. Union Colonel Marcus Spiegel of the 120th Ohio Infantry Regiment, one of the few Jewish field grade officers, solved the problem of finding an honest sutler. Spiegel appointed his own brother, Joseph, who stabilized the trade in the unit and after the war started a popular mercantile store.

Confederate sutlers were little different from their northern counterparts. Despite scant records, the information available points to the Southern government being more accepting of sutlers. They realized the benefit of sutlers among their volunteer troops as long as they adhered to some cursory regulations. As there were a lot fewer sutlers in the Confederacy, there were, in turn, fewer adversarial incidents involving sutlers. While many Union sutlers were independent contractors, Confederate sutlers served a dual role as soldier and sutler. This meant there was a

² While some modern scholars have argued that it was the vocation of sutler that Grant expelled from his department and not those specifically of Jewish faith, the message itself refutes any of those suppositions. The infamous general order no. 11, issued on December 17, 1862, states, "The Jews, **as a class** violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby expelled from the department within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order." They are also not taking into account Grant's previous order on December 8th, which proclaimed, "cotton speculators, Jews and other Vagrants having not honest means of support, except trading upon the miseries of their Country" were instructed to leave the region or face conscription. After being informed of Grant's order by a Jewish supporter, Lincoln immediately had Halleck officially rescind the document. There is also evidence that Grant's father's visit with him earlier in the day on the 17th, and who along with three Jewish merchant brothers he brought with him, might have irritated Grant enough to issue the controversial directive. The elder Grant travelled with them to his son's headquarters to act as their agent "to procure a permit for them to purchase cotton" while pocketing 25% of the profits they earned. The younger Grant was so indignant he angrily exclaimed to the Jewish trio that they, "entrapped his old father into such an unworthy undertaking."

better chance of them being wounded or killed in the conflict and their goods divided among the unit's survivors. With most of their wares sold, some sutlers like Dennis Jefferson Cannon of the 19th Louisiana Infantry Regiment stationed at Pollard, Alabama, simply disappeared like so many other deserters.

Sutlers were often the butt of jokes among military personnel. Attempts to make light of sutlers also managed to enter into civilian life on the home front. While attending the play "Pocahontas" at the National Theater in Washington, DC, several members of the audience, including U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, thoroughly enjoyed when one of the actors ad-libbed a line and loudly compared the famous John Smith character to a sutler in a degrading manner.

After the Civil War ended, sutlers maintained a strong presence in the American military late into the nineteenth century. The job was not a particularly popular one with only one former sutler becoming well known besides Joseph Spiegel. James Anthony McGinnes was better known by his stage name, James Anthony Bailey. The impresario Bailey joined with master entrepreneur Phineas Taylor Barnum to create one of the most popular and longest lasting circuses in the history of the United States.
