

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Supplying the Armies

By Michael A. Martorelli

Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Wilson, Mark R.	<i>The Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861-1865</i> . Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Books and Articles

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year. “Title,” in <i>Journal</i> ##, no. # (Date): #.
Goff, Richard D.	<i>Confederate Supply</i> . Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1969.
Hess, Earl J.	<i>Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation</i> . Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017.
_____.	<i>Civil War Supply and Strategy: Feeding Men and Moving Armies</i> . Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020.
Huston, James A.	<i>The Sinews of War: Army Logistics, 1775-1953</i> . Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History United States Army, 1966, Ch. 11-15.
Miller, David W.	<i>Second Only to Grant: Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs</i> . Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 2001, Ch. 11 to 26.

Risch, Erna	<i>Quartermaster Support of the Army: A History of the Corps, 1775-1939.</i> Washington, D.C.: Quartermaster Historian’s Office, Office of the Quartermaster General, 1962. Ch. 8-10.
Wilson, Harold S.	<i>Confederate Industry: Manufacturers and Quartermasters in the Civil War.</i> Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002.

Organizations

Web Resources

Other Sources

Scholars

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Topic Précis

In the Civil War, both the United States of America and the Confederate States of America were confronted with the almost unimaginable challenge of supplying enormous armies with enough food, clothing, ammunition, transportation, and other impedimenta to prosecute the war. Quartermaster Departments (QMDs) were economic giants tasked with procuring, transporting, and distributing everything the soldiers needed except weapons, food, and medicine (all provided by other departments). Prior to the War the small Union army was supplied by the federal government which had developed the infrastructure to do so. Because the Confederacy had to establish the infrastructure and procedures of its procurement, transportation, and distribution activities from scratch, that challenge was much more difficult than the one the Union faced. During the war commanders in the field were able to pursue their strategic and tactical objectives with little concern over the ability of the army’s supply departments to deliver the right products to the right location at the right time. But for the Confederates, their supply agencies’ inability to meet the temporal needs of a field army impacted the ability of field commanders to pursue the most appropriate military objective.

The surge in the size of the Union army as the war began put incredible stress on the Quartermaster’s Department (QRM). The QRM learned early on to rely on contracting civilian companies to provide goods and do some of the transportation work to get supplies to the armies. As the War progressed procedures for seeking bids from contractors improved and quartermaster depots were set up to handle supplies.

The Confederate QRM was set up immediately after secession and acquired warehouse space in Richmond and began contracting with civilian companies to produce the necessary supplies. Subsequently the QRM set up warehouses and distribution depots in the CSA's various military commands with local purchasing and manufacturing. Supplies were also purchased in Europe. As the Confederates suffered defeats the ability of the QRM to supply the armies began to deteriorate.

By the third year of the War the lack of meaningful combat operations in most of the northern states was a great benefit to the production facilities operated by the QMD and hundreds of private contractors and supply depots were established throughout the Eastern and Western theaters. Tactical units of regimental size and larger had their own field quartermasters embedded with them. Senior quartermasters were designated in geographic areas. Purchasing began to be concentrated with a small number of manufacturers. The whole procurement process was streamlined and made more efficient. Waste and fraud was an issue which was investigated by various committees and commissions and subject to legislation, but did not unduly impact the operations of the QRM.

By 1863, the Confederate QRM was organized into thirteen purchasing districts throughout the Confederate states and assigned a principal officer to each of them which centralized purchasing away from individual armies but also kept it local geographically. By this time continuous fighting in all theaters not only cost lives but also depleted the various armies' supplies and transportation networks that provided replacements. The value of the Confederate dollar declined steadily in the weakening Southern economy. To try to offset the declining purchasing power of those contractors' receipts, the QRM expanded an earlier program of using cotton as currency. By 1864 additional financial difficulties including loss of control over purchasing made matters worse. In response the QRM imposed new contractual terms, established standardized patterns for uniforms etc. and was able to increase the amount of supplies significantly. However, the closing of ports for blockade runners, and shrinking of the Confederacy through military defeat meant that lack of supplies but a serious damper on the Confederate forces ability to operate as 1864 progressed.

In fighting the Civil War, both the USA and the CSA had to develop meaningfully new systems for procuring and distributing a wide range of supplies to their troops. The fact that the fighting lasted for four long years is a testament to their success. Since most of the fighting occurred in the states of the Confederacy, the Union did not suffer the loss of any of its manufacturing facilities or important supply depots. The CSA was not so lucky; it lost much of its limited industrial infrastructure to the federal armies that successfully prosecuted the war throughout its territory. In early 1865, Union victories along the Atlantic coast closed several ports previously used by blockade runners to bring the Confederate army meaningful quantities of supplies from European sources. Losing that aspect of its supply chain finally impeded the activities of the army to the point where it could not sustain operations in the field for more than a few months.
