

A “Taste” of Soldier Life

It's been said that “an army marches on its stomach” and feeding the army during the American Revolution was no small task. No refrigerators. No freezers. No convenient canned goods or grocery stores, no Grub Hub or Door Dash. What's a General to do?



Soldiers in the Continental Army were to receive regular rations that included bread, meat (beef, pork or a combination, or salt fish,) milk, beer, peas or beans, butter and vinegar if available. Vinegar was useful as a tonic and helped improve the taste of water with impurities (which was most water!) If bread was not available, a ration of flour or cornmeal might be issued.

Joseph Plumb Martin wrote in his memoir of soldiers being granted an “extra gill of rum” (a gill was a standard ration measure, 4 oz.) for retrieving an incoming cannon ball that could be returned to the British during the bombardment of Fort Mifflin in November, 1777.



Frequently rations were scarce and the soldiers resorted to foraging their surroundings, seeking food for themselves as well as their draft animals. In early 1777 a series of skirmishes known as the “Forage Wars” took place in New Jersey when the Continental Army, encamped at Morristown, frequently harassed British Army foraging parties, searching for food for their men and horses.

For a snack that would keep a long time (a *really, really* long time) the soldiers ate hard tack. This could be carried in their haversack and crumbled up and added to soups or stews if available, or even just soaked in milk, coffee or cider to soften up before eating. Hard tack is HARD but the three simple ingredients mean that it was unlikely to spoil.

Want to taste history? Here is a Hard Tack recipe you can try at home.

Hard Tack

3 cups all-purpose flour (you can use whole wheat flour, rye flour or a gluten-free choice)

2 teaspoons salt

1 cup water

Preheat oven to 375°

Mix flour, salt and water in a bowl to form a sticky dough.

Turn dough out onto a floured countertop and knead until smooth.

Roll out into a 9-inch square, about ½ inch thick – this is thicker than a cookie!

Use a sharp knife to cut into 3-inch squares (you will have 9 squares)

Use a wooden skewer to poke three rows of holes in each square

Place hard tack on ungreased cookie sheet and bake for 30 minutes

Remove from oven, turn hard tack over and return to oven and bake for additional 30 minutes

Let cool and store in a tin or glass container.

Dunk in milk, coffee, tea or cider, or crumble into soup or stew. If you decide to try it plain, we recommend having your dentist nearby!

Learn more! Check out these interesting online resources:

Smithsonian Magazine, “The Food that Fueled the American Revolution”

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-food-that-fueled-the-american-revolution-25701053/>

National Museum of American History, “What Did Soldiers Eat During the Revolutionary War?”

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2013/05/what-did-soldiers-eat-during-the-revolutionary-war.html>

Townsend's, “18th Century Soldiers Rations”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUt1ZHs3wQ8>

and here if you want to purchase some 18th century reproductions! <https://www.townsend's.us/>

Food History News, “As Many Fireplaces as You Have Tents”

detailed information on earthen kitchens created for large-scale food production in limited space

<http://revwar75.com/library/rees/kitchen.htm>