

Feeding the Troops: The Refreshment Saloon

The Refreshment Saloon in the new Gettysburg Museum and Visitor Center offers visitors a glimpse into the diet of the Civil War soldier and efforts by volunteers to supplement government-issued rations.

While Union troops fared much better than Confederate soldiers, both sides suffered from a lack of fresh vegetables and fruit: Their meals were a high fat diet of meat and bread often cooked in a sea of pork grease. Soldiers from both armies relied on foraging, volunteer efforts (organized and individual) and care packages from home to supplement their diets. Soldiers' letters home are filled with references to the quality of the food in the camps -- and they had little good to say about it.

To support the troops passing through their towns, merchants and private citizens in some of the larger northern cities began providing "refreshments" for soldiers. Women from the United States Sanitary Commission and volunteers worked side-by-side to provide food, clean linens, washing facilities and the opportunity to write and post letters to their families. One Philadelphia volunteer refreshment saloon "was not a soldiers' living at all," one soldier wrote, but "was good enough for a first-class hotel."

Philadelphia residents started two volunteer refreshment saloons: the Cooper Shop and the Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloons. Together, they served more than a million soldiers. The original locations of these soldiers' rests have since been paved over by I-95 and no longer exist.

The Refreshment Saloon at the new Museum and Visitor Center at Gettysburg National Military Park has been made possible by an anonymous gift and is modeled after the interior of the Philadelphia volunteer refreshment saloons. The large open space is filled with rows of tables, a large stone fireplace and mural paintings reflecting the period and purpose of the saloons.

Sample menu items include peanut soup with "hardtack" soda crackers, Grandma Sarah's corn bread, local fresh fruit, roast turkey and Virginia ham sandwiches, Brunswick stew with buttermilk biscuits, and cast iron chicken pot pie.