

Virgil Historical Society Newsletter

November 2019

Virgil, NY

Issue #10

Meeting times: third Thursday of September, November, March, and May

7PM

Virgil Town Hall, 1176 Church St, Virgil NY

Next meeting: November 21, 2019

Speaker: Tom Jewett: **“Cortland County Soldiers Help Turn the Tide at Gettysburg”**

Local Virgil resident Tom Jewett will be facilitating the discussion of Cortland County soldiers in the Civil War. Tom is a former Air Force Staff Judge Advocate (JAG) and has previously served as our District Attorney. He is a long time student of the Civil War.



Given the interest in Civil War topics, we expect that this will be a well-attended event. Please spread the word and invite all of those war buffs. We will be serving hardtack biscuits to enhance the experience! Let's hope the weather cooperates this year.

MINCEMEAT, HARDTACK, AND SALTPORK

Thinking about foods people ate in the Civil War era brings up the topic of mincemeat. I have diaries kept by my great-great-grandmother Nancy Ann Wells who lived near Friendship, NY. She kept a daily diary from 1857 through 1894, just a few lines each day mentioning the weather, the farm and household chores accomplished, who visited, and occasional feelings and observations. Overall, it paints a vivid picture of life on a nearly self-sufficient, gradually prospering farm in western New York state.

One of the items she frequently mentions baking is mincemeat pies. Unlike our confectionary mincemeat pies of today, her pies actually contained minced meat and suet. She would make a dozen or so pies at a time and keep them (for a few months) in the cold storage pantry off the kitchen. They ate them for breakfast. I wish I had one of her recipes, but I suspect she just threw in whatever was available. Meat that was a bit spoiled was used; the vinegar, spices and sweetness in the pie covered up the rancid taste. Early on, I'm sure she had no raisins and I'm guessing the main fruit ingredient was dried apples. Sweetener was "molasses", which was her term for homemade maple syrup. Perhaps she had some spices, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves. Back in the Civil War days, mincemeat pie was the king of American pies, and the soldiers on the battlefield must have craved it mightily.

What they ate was largely salt pork, black coffee, and hardtack. Hardtack was simply flour, water, and salt baked into a hard cracker. It could be stored for a very long time. Soldiers dunked the hard cracker in their coffee to soften it up for eating. Many a soldier described scraping the mold off their hardtack, or scooping the floating weevils out of their coffee after softening up the insect-ridden cracker. Apparently the weevils didn't affect the flavor much. When the men were lucky enough to come across a pig, they would fry the hardtack in animal fat, a special treat. Confederate soldiers were issued cornmeal more often than hardtack.

Salt pork was usually the belly or the back of a pig, highly salted to preserve it. There are descriptions of hair and skin attached to the meat. The meat was packed into barrels and carried with the troops. We come to an understanding of the term "scraping the bottom of the barrel." The meat undoubtedly turned rancid in the summer heat. Soldiers had to carry their own cooking utensils to fry their meat and drink their coffee.



Salt pork in a wooden barrel

Past events:

Marsha Powell's cemetery tour before Halloween was a success, and participants enjoyed Hollenbeck's cider and doughnuts afterwards.

Upcoming events:

We're keeping an eye on the Benner farm, where Gary Pelton thinks we'll find Native American artifacts. When the field is plowed, we hope to do a survey of the upturned soil. Please let me or Gary know if you'd be willing to help with this.

The Marathon Area Historical Society is offering afghan blankets as a fundraiser. These afghans have pictures of prominent Marathon landmarks. Find the order form at their facebook page "Marathon Area Historical Society – MAHS"

Nov 16, The Jersey Tenors, Part 2: Make America Macho Again! Cortland Repertory Theater, 2pm. Tickets at www.cortlandrep.org

December 9, Christmas Messiah in Cortland. Hosted by Symphoria and Syracuse Pops Chorus. At the United Presbyterian Church in Cortland. Tickets at experiencesymphoria.secure.force.com 7:30-9:30pm

December 13 and 14, A Buddy Holly Jolly Christmas. Hosted by Cortland Repertory Theater, tickets at www.cortlandrep.org

SEE YOU NOVEMBER 21st AT 7pm! Our next meeting after that will be in March.



Church St, Willett NY c. 1908