

# Coffee and the Confederacy

by Ed Williamson

Back last May, I referred to coffee as part of a soldier's ration. At the time, space prevented me from giving full credit to coffee and the role it played in the War Between the States. I am happy to dedicate this article to the nation's beverage of choice.

To tell the story, we must go to before the 1770s. In the United States, coffee wasn't widely accepted until the American Revolution, when Great Britain implemented taxes and tariffs on imported tea. These tariffs infuriated American colonists, ultimately triggering the Boston Tea Party in December of 1773.

As a result, patriots were persuaded to enjoy coffee instead, as tea remained unpatriotic. In a letter to his wife, John Adams declared that he wished for honestly smuggled tea, but when refused and offered coffee instead at an inn in Falmouth, Massachusetts, he stated: "I have drank coffee every afternoon since, and have borne it very well. Tea must be universally renounced. I must be weaned, and the sooner, the better."

Other patriots followed suit, and as unpalatable as coffee may have once seemed, it became the preferred drink after the Revolution. In October of 1832, a change in army rations added to the climbing rate of coffee importation: President Andrew Jackson substituted coffee and sugar for a soldier's daily rations of rum and brandy, citing complaints from military officers of insubordination and accidental injuries from overindulgence. (To my Navy brethren, this is when the rum ration ended!)

With this modification, the importation of coffee into the U.S. rose from 12 million pounds per year to more than 38 million pounds. Coffee became the alternative to alcohol consumption, helping soldiers refuel, stay focused, and push through difficult situations. At the same time, the change in military rations further popularized coffee with the American public, and by 1840, New Orleans had become the second largest importer of coffee in the United States, thanks to its relative location to Brazil. At the outbreak of the War Between the States, the United States imported more than 182 million pounds of coffee, with New Orleans distributing beans both throughout the Southern states and into New England. After the South seceded in April of 1861, the North began a blockade that strangled foreign importation into the South, including coffee. The blockade didn't work for the first two years, but as the Mississippi River trade route fell to the Union on July 4, 1863 with the capture of Vicksburg, the blockade began to take effect and coffee became scarce.

Coffee became such a luxury to the Confederate soldiers that after battles and burial details under a flag of truce were sent out to bury the dead the soldiers would trade coffee for tobacco. Many a desperate, successful charge into Union lines by the Confederate troops was fueled by rumors that the Union soldiers had coffee in their ration bags. As the supply of coffee dwindled

to nothing, many recipes for substitute coffee were tried and discarded. The best recipe was: "...to save the seeds of persimmon after they have boiled, and you let out the slop, for they are excellent for coffee, rather stronger and rougher than the genuine, hence, I mix two parts of dried sweet potatoes to one of persimmon seed. Dr. Buck says this coffee is equal to Java coffee! By boiling the seeds are rid of all mucilaginous substances, and just right for coffee or buttons. If you use them for buttons, the washer woman will hardly break them with her battling stick. For coffee, they should be parched twice as long as any other substitute, so as to make them tender to the centre." From "The Southern Banner," Athens, Ga., Oct. 28, 1863.

After the War, coffee rebounded to its original status and was again enjoyed by the Nation at large. Many ingredients that were used to stretch coffee during the War continued to be used because they enhanced the coffee's taste. Chief among these was chicory, a product of the endive plant. Coffee with a high caffeine content tends to taste bitter. By mixing chicory with the bitter coffee, it takes away the bite. Some of the substitutes survived as well. Charley Post, of the Post Cereal Company, developed a coffee substitute made of roasted wheat, wheat bran and molasses that he marketed as Postum in 1895. This hot beverage is still sold to this day.

(Many thanks to the American Battlefield Trust website and the [postum.com](http://postum.com) website for information used in this article.)