

“Starvation Will Stop It”: Poverty on the North Carolina Home Front

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In March 1863 Caleb Hampton of Davidson County wrote to his nephews in the Confederate army. He described hopelessness on the North Carolina home front and prayed that “this hellish war will Stop.” He hoped the leaders would end the war but grimly predicted, “I think Starvation will Stop it.” Federal armies defeated hungry Confederate armies on the battlefield, but not before North Carolinians experienced a tedious day-to-day struggle with poverty.

Most North Carolina farmers lived in relative comfort before the war. Families relied on bountiful crops for food and cash. Merchants traveled over unpaved roads to bring clothing and farm equipment that could not be made at home. And on a nearby farm or in the next town lived relatives who could help out in the event of an illness or other disaster. It was a sound and carefully balanced economy, but unprepared for the enormous disruptions brought by the Civil War.

The Civil War disrupted North Carolina farm families. Young men enlisted in the army, and as the war continued, older men also joined or were drafted. The absence of around 125,000 men left most North Carolina farms without fathers, husbands, or sons to do the heavy work or make critical financial and agricultural decisions. In addition, the Union blockade of Confederate ports and the breakdown of roads and railroads caused the cost of food and other supplies to rise dramatically.

People missed salt the most. Without that preservative, food spoiled. The state’s food production declined as men who harvested corn and wheat went off to war. Much food was diverted to the army, and every scrap of bread or meat became a valuable possession. North Carolina’s mills produced cloth only for the army. Sources of fabric for clothing from outside the state and the South were cut by the blockade. Medicine, as well as food and cloth, disappeared from merchants’ shelves by late 1862.

Poverty-stricken families clearly expressed their frustrations and blamed “speculators” and government policies for their sorrows. Speculators stashed food and supplies in order to sell them at the highest prices. The pangs of hunger increased when moneyless families knew their neighbors might have food in their houses but intended to sell it only for a great profit. T. H. Smith of Davidson County urged Governor Zebulon B. Vance to seize one hundred sacks of flour from speculators in Thomasville “for the benefit of soldiers family’s,” or there “must assuredly be some starvation.” Also, government agents often went to farms and took food to be sent to soldiers in the army. Families did not mind sending provisions to their relatives in the

ranks, but they thought the agents took too much food from the poor and did not leave enough to feed families.

Ill-prepared state leaders tried to relieve the shortages. In December 1862 the legislature reserved \$400,000 to give to counties for their citizens. County justices bought salt, bacon, and flour for agents to distribute to the needy. Yet the extent of near-starvation outweighed the efforts to prevent it. The legislature appropriated \$6 million over the next two years, but families in the countryside continued to go hungry.

Some women took paid work and at times completely left the farm and their families to earn money. Wool and cotton mills producing cloth for soldiers' clothing throughout the state employed women as weavers. Other women, bound to their farms by children or chores, sewed together uniforms for the state. Mary C. Moore of Rowan County noted in a letter to Governor Vance that sewing trousers earned her only fifty cents a pair, and jackets brought only seventy-five cents. She might earn one dollar a day, Mary lamented, but at the time, flour cost fifty dollars a barrel.

Women learned to "make do or do without." Advice appeared in newspapers, and was passed between friends, on how to substitute common items for necessary goods that people could not obtain. Dried and ground okra passed for coffee. Boiled watermelon produced sugar. Wicks dipped in pine tar and wrapped around a corn cob provided light in the absence of candles. Some women made stiff wooden shoes to wear instead of leather ones. Other women fashioned hats and bonnets out of pine straw.

Hungry North Carolinians reacted in different ways. A few, like Mary Moore and her friends, participated in "bread riots" in which they forcibly took food from speculators' and government warehouses. The shortages caused many people to question their loyalty to the Confederacy. Some women called for an end to the war under any circumstances, or they urged their men to desert from the army to return home and protect their families. Most North Carolinians on the home front remained loyal to the Confederacy, but with each tedious day of hunger and privation, they earnestly wished for an end to the war.

**At the time of this article's publication, Christopher A. Graham worked as an assistant curator at the North Carolina Museum of History.*