

“Measures Not at All Pleasant”: Hard Times on the Home Front

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“Having from absolute necessity been forced into measures not at all pleasant to obtain something to eat by the cruel and unfeeling speculators who have been gathering up at enormous prices, not only bread stuffs but everything, even down to eggs chickens & vegetables, to carry out of our own state for the purpose of speculating upon them, we feel it is our duty, honored and esteemed Gov. to inform you truthfully of our proceedings.”

—Mary C. Moore, “soldier’s wife,” writing to North Carolina governor Zebulon Vance, March 21, 1863

“The families are nothing but women and children . . . if they had the corn planted they could tend it . . . most of them are poor people and provided if it was planted they might make support for the year coming, for we do not know how long the war will last and if it lasts another year some of us are bound to perish.”

—Ezra Bullock, soldier, writing to Vance, March 26, 1863

In April 1861 United States president Abraham Lincoln called for troops to suppress a growing rebellion in the Southern states. Like most leaders in the North and South, Lincoln believed that any real fighting would end quickly. There likely would be one or two large battles, they thought. If the United States, or Union, forces won, the rebellion would end. If the Confederate States of America won, it would become a separate nation. On May 20, 1861, North Carolina joined the group of 11 Confederate states that seceded, or withdrew, from the United States.

In the rush to field an army, each side allowed soldiers to enlist, or join, for one month or three months—thinking that the fighting would cease before those terms of service ran out. The first major battle, fought in July 1861 at the small town of Manassas, Virginia, near a creek named Bull Run, ended with a Confederate military victory. President Lincoln, however, said that he would continue to fight to preserve the United States as a whole. He refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Confederate government. What most people at first thought would be a brief confrontation became a lengthy struggle. It would last four bloody years. Neither side was prepared for this extended fight.

A prolonged war meant soldiers had to remain in the army longer than planned. It also meant that goods, like food and clothes, would be in short supply for both military forces and people at home. United States forces blockaded Confederate seaports. They tried to keep ships from taking materials out and tried to prevent goods from other countries from reaching the Confederacy. At first, the blockade did not work very well; however, the longer the fighting continued, the more effective the tactic became. By spring 1863, many basic goods—such as coffee, sugar, and

flour—proved very difficult to buy in the South. Salt, badly needed for food preparation and preservation in the days before electricity, became extremely scarce. North Carolina built saltworks along the coast to harvest salt from seawater, and desperate farmwomen scraped smokehouse floors to recover what salt they could.

The demand for such scarce items drove up prices. The high prices attracted people who would invest in buying the goods, then sell them at an even higher price to make as much money as possible. Citizens of North Carolina grew to dislike speculators, as these people were called. Keeping soldiers in the army longer than expected led to another home front problem. When it came time to plant crops in 1863, men serving in the military were not available to help with the farmwork. Tar Heels became discontented over both of these issues. Many sent letters appealing to Governor Zebulon Vance. Some even took matters into their own hands.

Speculators drove up the cost of supplies in Salisbury until local women acted against them. Forty or 50 women—remembered in primary sources only as soldiers' wives—gathered in town. They began going from business to business, demanding that shopkeepers sell them goods at a fair price. North Carolina's government had set the price of a barrel of flour at \$19.50, but merchants had been going against the regulation of such price controls to sell flour for as much as \$50 a barrel. At first, the Salisbury merchants refused to cooperate. The women threatened to take the goods without paying at all. Confronted by such hostility, the shopkeepers, one by one, agreed to the citizens' demands. After losing 10 barrels of flour to the group, merchant Michael Brown immediately wrote the governor to complain and ask for help.

Mary Moore, a Salisbury woman, also wrote to Governor Vance. She detailed the hardships that women in the state faced and described the greed of the speculators. In December 1863 the General Assembly of North Carolina passed a measure to provide relief for the wives and families of soldiers serving in the Confederate army. The law granted money that county officials could use to purchase goods, for the benefit and use of these families. This aid eased the problem of shortages enough to end the riotous actions of the Salisbury women. Of course, the law helped families all over North Carolina.

Most Tar Heels depended on agriculture to survive. Some soldiers received letters from their families asking them to return from the battlefield and plant a new crop. Soldiers like Ezra Bullock, of Edgecombe County, then wrote to Governor Vance begging for leaves of absence so they could go home and work to save their families from going hungry. Women such as Mary Owens petitioned the governor for the release of sons or husbands so that they could work on farms. The military needed soldiers, though, and could not afford to let them leave. Men were torn between the needs of the Confederacy and the needs of their families. Some deserted the army long enough to slip home and plant crops, before returning to battlefields. Vance assisted these men by offering a general reprieve from punishment if any soldier who had gone home for such a purpose would come back to the army.

The unexpected length of the war created hardships on the home front that affected everyone. By 1865, food became so scarce that soldiers in the Confederate army, as well as their families at home, faced starvation. In the end, the Confederacy collapsed as much for the lack of food and other supplies as for defeat in battle. Details of these hard times and unpleasant measures are

preserved in the records at the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh. This article used letters to the governor and some newspaper materials. The State Archives stores many more records of the era that the public can research. Documents and other primary sources help modern Tar Heels remember the Civil War.

**At the time of this article's publication, A. Christopher Meekins was the correspondence archivist at the North Carolina State Archives and chaired the symposium subcommittee for the Office of Archives and History's Civil War sesquicentennial committee. He earned an MA in history from North Carolina State University and has written on dissent in Civil War-era North Carolina.*