



Sutlers of the Civil War

Civil War sutlers were the nineteenth century's equivalent of the modern US Army's post exchange (PX) or commissary. Soldiers in the field patronized these traveling storekeepers to purchase needed goods and desired luxuries that were not provided by the US government.

If your ancestor was a sutler, there are records and publications that may provide insight on his activities and store inventory. Even if your ancestor wasn't a sutler, knowing more about his regimental sutler (or sutlers in general) will broaden your understanding of your Civil War soldier's experiences by learning about what items soldiers purchased to enhance their every-day lives in the field.

Sutlers were usually selected by regimental officers, although some obtained the post by appointment from the Secretary of War or a state governor. Some sutlers had previous mercantile experience while others were former officers. A sutler usually had a business partner who purchased goods and handled other logistical details in northern cities.

The sutler had to obtain military permission to transport a specified list of items in civilian ships or wagons. Procedurally, the sutler needed

the regimental commander to approve a specific list of goods ("sutler's invoice"), which was then forwarded to his superior for approval, and then to the Quartermaster General in Washington, DC. Then, for example, to send his goods in one ship from Baltimore to New Bern, North Carolina, the sutler needed the Quartermaster General to (1) submit a request to the Secretary of the Treasury (who supervised the collectors of customs) to allow the vessel to leave the port of departure and (2) notify the Secretary of the Navy of the intended vessel's voyage. Finally, once the goods arrived near the seat of war, the sutler needed a "store"—usually a wagon or a tent. When troops settled down to winter quarters, the sutler might add log walls to his tent for more comfort and security.

The scarcity of official coins and currency resulted in two things. Soldiers bought goods on credit, signing promissory notes authorizing the sutler to collect the amount owed at the next pay day. Sutlers also issued metal or cardboard tokens in 5-, 10-, 25-, and even 50-cent denominations, so that they could make change when soldiers bought items with cash. Of course this change was only "good" at the sutler's store. Photographs of many tokens are included in



Sutler Adolph Krebs. Asst. Sutler C. L. Straub.

Sutler Adolph Krebs and assistant sutler C. L. Straub in Luther S. Dickey, History of the 103rd Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer Infantry, 1861–1865 (Chicago: L. S. Dickey, 1910), p. 30A.

William M. Schenkman, *Civil War Sutler Tokens and Cardboard Scrip* (Bryans Road, Md.: Jade House Publications, 1983), which is the most comprehensive work on this subject. Sutlers whose prices were considered exorbitant might get roughed up or have their inventory cleaned out in a mass robbery by disgruntled patrons.

Where to begin your research

A list of more than fourteen hundred sutlers, sutler's assistants, or clerks named in records in the custody of the National Archives and other sources was published in John E. Tobey and Nicholas H. Ellis, *U.S. Army Sutler, 1861–1865* (Wellsboro, Penn.: Milatus Publishing, 2012) (to purchase, contact Nic Ellis, nhellis2008@gmail.com). This book also has much detail about the rules and procedures under which sutlers operated, as well as descriptions and photographs of the goods they sold. Another useful book is Francis A. Lord, *Civil War Sutlers and their Wares* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1969).

Published regimental histories (many are online) often mention sutlers. For example, Luther S. Dickey, *History of the 103rd Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer Infantry, 1861–1865* (Chicago: L. S. Dickey, 1910), includes more than twenty mentions plus photographs of regimental sutler Adolph Krebs and his chief clerk C.L. Straub. Similarly, Robert S. Westbrook, *History of the 49th Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Altoona, Penn.: Altoona Times, 1898), includes

eight references to sutlers, but only one specifically names the "old Sutler, Robinson, [who] visited the regiment" at Poolville, Maryland, on 15 July 1864. Sutler Harry C. Smith's products and prices are noted in Thomas E. Pope, *The Weary Boys: Colonel J. Warren Keifer and the 110th Ohio Volunteer Infantry* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2002).

Published county histories (many are online) may mention a man's wartime occupation as sutler or sutler's assistant. For example, Linn W. Mason "went into the army with" an unnamed sutler in 1861 and stayed two years, according to *History of the Counties of McKean, Elk, and Forest, Pennsylvania...* (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Company, 1890). A.R. Graham "was appointed Sutler for the Nineteenth Ohio Volunteer Infantry, and was with that regiment until 1863," according to J.B. Mansfield, *The History of Tuscarawas County, Ohio* (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Company, 1884).

Federal records

The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, DC.: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901) (OR) was published in four series comprising 128 volumes. Fortunately for today's researchers, the OR is online and completely searchable on the Ohio State University website, <http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/sources/records/>, and Cornell University Library's Making of America website, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moawar/waro.htm>.

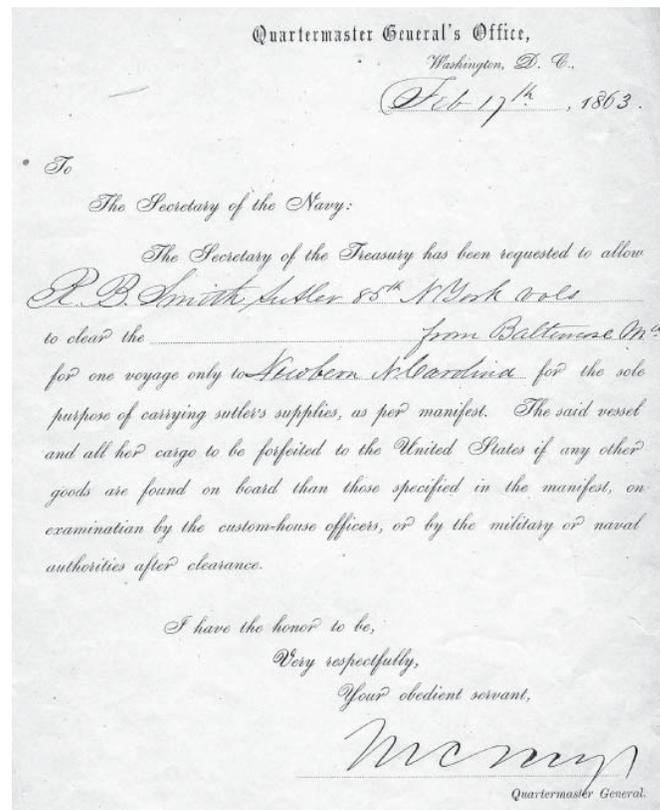
Sutlers were mentioned in official correspondence for a variety of reasons. For example, Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry informed Captain and Assistant Adjutant General Louis J. Lambert on 3 November 1862 that S.A. Cooley, sutler of the 6th Connecticut Infantry, had "labored most energetically and effectively throughout the night, superintending the boats used in carrying the wounded on board the transports" in connection with an expedition to Pocotaligo, South Carolina (OR, Series 1, Volume 14, pp. 164–69). Company G of the 19th Kentucky Infantry voted to recognize sutler W.A. Rhodes as its "private or

non-commissioned officer most conspicuous for gallantry and good conduct in the battle" of Chickamauga in 1864. (OR, Series 1, Volume 30, Part II, p. 539). Sutlers were civilians who were not expected to partake in battle, but some, like Cooley and Rhodes, may have if their own lives or livelihoods were at risk.

The U.S. *Serial Set* (available online as a ProQuest database at NARA facilities and at some libraries) contains the published records of Congress. During the 1890s, sutler George McAlpin of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry and his heirs pursued reimbursement of \$6,906.18 in fees wrongfully collected by customs officials at Baltimore on shipments totaling \$235,074.69 worth of merchandise that McAlpin sent southward in his capacity as sutler during the war (H. Rep. 2186, 52nd Cong., 2nd Sess., Serial Set 3140, 1892). In the 1870s John Zumstien, sutler of the 5th Ohio Cavalry, requested reimbursement of \$4,016.64 in food and other goods stolen from him on 7 April 1862 by Union troops who lacked government-issued provisions following the battle of Shiloh (H. Rep. 213, 45th Cong., 2nd Sess., Serial Set 1822, 1878).

The Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General (RG 92) in the National Archives, Washington, DC, contain three record series specifically about sutlers. First, the "Name Index to Press Copies of Letters Sent Granting Permits to Sutlers, 1863–1865" (Entry 468, NARA identifier 619173), is a single, thin volume that lists more than four hundred sutlers with regiment, vessel upon which goods were to be shipped if known, and the page number of the related permit in entry 469.

Second, "Press Copies of Letters Sent Granting Permits to Sutlers, 1863–1865" (Entry 469, NARA Identifier 619175), contains copies of the Quartermaster General's requests to the Secretary of the Navy to allow sutlers' vessels to sail between ports. The information given is the date of the request, the name of the sutler, identification of his regiment, the name of the vessel on which the goods were to travel if known, and the destination port. "Press" or "letterpress" copies were usually made with a



Fair copy of permit to R. B. Smith, sutler, 85th New York Infantry to clear a vessel from Baltimore, Maryland, to Newbern [sic], North Carolina, from "Press Copies of Letters Sent Granting Permits to Sutlers, 1863–65" (RG 92, Entry 469, NARA Identifier 619175). Most permits in this series are press copies.

screw-powered press and blank tissue paper. A letter freshly written in special copying ink was placed on a dampened tissue page, and then the mechanical press was screwed down tightly. The pressure and moisture caused an impression of the letter to be retained on the underside of the tissue sheet. This somewhat blurry impression could then be read through the top of the thin paper. Because the permits were pre-printed "fill in the blank" forms, only words inserted into the blanks appear in press copies.

Finally, "Bills, Invoices, Sutler's Papers, and Other Records, 1862–1865" (Entry 470, NARA Identifier 4708933), contains two subseries. First, there are more than 850 "sutler's invoices" (lists of goods) that sutlers wanted permission to transport and sell, arranged by date of filing at the Quartermaster General's Office, Washington, DC. The second part contains records of election as sutler, requests for clearances of vessels,

Goods sold by sutlers



Items listed on the standard sutler's invoice approved by the Office of the Quartermaster General included fresh and dried apples, dried beef, blacking (polish), bologna sausages, books, boots, Bristol brick (cutlery polish), brooms, buttons, blacking brushes, clothes brushes, hair brushes, tooth brushes, butter, candles, cheese, cigars, uniform clothing for officers, codfish, combs, comforters, crackers, crocus (metal polish), tin cups, drawers, eggs, emery (polishing compound), figs, buckwheat flour, gloves, handkerchiefs, pocket knives, knives and forks, leather, lemons, pocket looking glasses (mirrors), mackerel, matches, canned meat, milk, molasses, mustard, needles, newspapers, armor oil (mineral oil), sweet oil, oranges, canned oysters, sauce pans, wrapping paper (for food), pencils, pepper, pins, smoking pipes, tin plates, tin coffee pots, poultry, raisins, razor strops, razors, rottenstone (for polishing), sardines, scissors, shoe strings, stationery, shaving soap, soap (for hand washing or bathing), shoes, socks, spoons, suspenders, shirts, syrup, thread, tobacco, smoked tongues, trimmings for uniforms, twine, canned and fresh vegetables, wallets, tin washbasins, and yeast powder.

Many other items were also sold. For details, see John E. Tobey and Nicholas H. Ellis, *U.S. Army Sutler, 1861–1865* (Wellsboro, Penn.: Milatus Publishing, 2012).

requests to transport specified goods, and other correspondence, all arranged by the page numbers assigned in entry 468. Names and regiments of sutlers are provided in the file-level descriptions of this series in NARA's Online Public Access (OPA) catalog at <http://www.archives.gov/research/search/>.

Finally, the Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821–1920 (RG 393) contain more than a dozen registers and lists of sutlers kept by various army commands; letters sent that relate to sutlers; and accounts of sutler E.F. Moffett at Johnson's Island and Sandusky, Ohio. Space limitations prevent discussion of these records in greater depth in this article. To learn more about them, use the advanced search function in the OPA catalog at <http://www.archives.gov/research/search/>. Enter the search term "sutler"; level of description, "series"; and record group number "393." Hit "search." Then, narrow your search further by clicking on "1860–1869" to reduce the date span.

Records about sutlers can be found in numerous other record groups. For example, in the Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917 (RG 94), there are a few "consolidated military files" for sutlers in NARA Microfilm Publication M1064, *Letters Received by the Commission Branch of the Adjutant General's Office, 1863–1870* (527 rolls). The "file" for Alfred Smith of Mishicot, Wisconsin, consists of a three-page record of his election as sutler of the 21st Wisconsin Infantry on 17 March 1864, in place of John Johnston, who had resigned (File S-454-CB-1864).

In the Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury (RG 217), there are "Records of Disallowed Claims of Sutlers, ca. 1864–1893," which are arranged alphabetically by name of sutler. The files usually consist of affidavits, correspondence, and other supporting documents, but most of the claims were rejected because of a lack of evidence of indebtedness of the soldier on the muster rolls or payrolls of his military unit.

Sutlers and their employees were civilians subject to military discipline so they are found



*Tent of A. Foulke, Sutler, at headquarters of 1st Brigade, Horse Artillery, Brandy Station, Virginia, February 1864. Photograph by James Gibson. LC-B817-7165. Courtesy Library of Congress. Online: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp2003000260/PP/>. Foulke is the fourth man from the left. The tent's sides are made from logs due to the semi-permanent nature of winter quarters, which lasted from December 1863 to April 1864. For more about Foulke, see Marlan H. Polhemus, "'A. Foulke, 1864,' Tracing a Civil War Inscription," *American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin* 85 (2002): 25–33.*

in courts-martial files in the Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) (RG 153). Sutler James R. Cole of the 125th New York Infantry was exonerated of charges of selling intoxicating liquor to enlisted men at his courts-martial on 5 January 1864. Private Francis Hastings testified that he purchased a bottle from Oscar Roe, who was employed as a teamster by Cole but not authorized to sell goods. Other persons called as witnesses were Chaplain Ezra D. Simons, Private C.I. Wilkins, and Cole's clerk, J.L. Vandewater. Another clerk, Ransom Cole, was also mentioned (File LL-1625). Names of persons charged with offenses are indexed in the OPA catalog.

Other archival records

State and local archives may also have records created by sutlers. For example, the Ohio Historical Society (Columbus) has diaries of Charles Ludlow Morehouse of Tiffin, Ohio,

that record his activities during the Civil War as a sutler, soldier, and store clerk (OCLC 47017538). The New York Historical Society (New York City) has a due bill payable to sutler S. Rightmyre of the 109th New York Infantry, unissued, to be used by soldiers in need of money with the sum to be deducted by the sutler from the soldier's pay at a later date (OCLC 58779070). Materials such as these housed at larger archival institutions can be discovered using OCLC WorldCat at <http://www.worldcat.org>.

In sum, finding records about a man's career as a Civil War sutler is a lot like assembling a jigsaw puzzle—you have to find one piece at a time. 🌲

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