

Curator's Choice

Civil War Canteen

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Because Jamestown is known primarily for its role in establishing the British colonies in America, little is discussed about the activities that took place on the island during the Civil War period. Just as the location was an important strategic outpost for the English colonists in 1607, the Confederates looked to Jamestown Island as the best defensive location to protect Richmond, the capital of the South and a major industrial center in 1861. Confederate troops constructed five earthworks to protect the island and control the river traffic to prevent the capture of Richmond, (Riggs 1997). Jamestown was occupied by both Confederate and Federal forces throughout the war.



Figure 1: Civil War canteen found at Jamestown in the 1930s archaeological excavations.

A canteen was an essential piece of equipment for any soldier and there were many types and designs of canteens used by both Civil War armies. A classic design of the Federal forces after 1861 was the metal "bullseye" type (Model 1858) where rings were pressed into both sides of the canteen. Canteens made of wood or leather were also used, and they could be personalized by carving into the wood or painting the cloth cover with their owner's name and company number (Field and Smith 2005).

The canteen would have been issued with a dyed wool or cotton cover, some with a leather sling. The cover, in particular wool, would not only provide padding to prevent a leak if dropped and to muffle sound, but also would help cool the canteen through evaporation. The covers were produced through a mixture of machine and hand sewing, each modified by the soldier to fit. Often the canteen covers would be removed and used for patching uniforms.

Companies that produced large quantities of canteens were located primarily in the North, so Confederate soldiers had to rely on wooden canteens, crude blacksmith products, or whatever could be found on the battlefield. Despite having greater access to canteens, the North still had difficulty providing the necessary quantity, and found they had an increase in problems, such as leaking, due to the number of different manufacturers used (Jones 2007).

This Civil War canteen (Figure 1), found in archaeological excavations in Jamestown in the 1930s, is known as a drum type and could have been used by either the Confederate or Union army. Originally, the canteen was round with a wide band and three loops for straps. The drum canteen was considered inferior to the lighter "bullseye" canteen.



Figure 2: examples of civil War canteens. On the left, Confederate wooden drum type, the bottom canteen personalized (Echoes of Glory 1998, 209); on the right, Union canteens, the top canteen a "bullseye" type with woolen cover, the middle canteen a drum type, and lower left canteen of leather (Echoes of Glory 1998, 208).

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