Hardtack
Video Podcast Transcript
Minnesota Historical Society

I’m Matt Anderson, a curator with the Minnesota Historical Society. While the Society’s primary goal is to document everyday life in the state, we do have a few items in our collection that fall just a bit outside of the ordinary. One of the most bizarre pieces in our collection is this item right here: it’s a piece of genuine Civil War era hardtack.

Anyone who’s done even the slightest research into the war certainly knows about hardtack. It was the armies’ primary foodstuff, both North and South. Essentially, it’s a large, thick cracker. Army officials loved the stuff. It was simple and inexpensive to produce, requiring only flour, salt and water. It was reasonably nutritious, and it lasted forever. Consider that this piece is 150 years old, and probably looks just as good as it ever did.

Long-lasting food was important to the military. The armies were always on the move, and hardtack could be produced in central bakeries and then shipped out to the troops in large quantities. It didn’t matter how long it took to reach them, nor how long the stuff remained in storage either back at the bakery, or up on the battlefront.

If it wasn’t stored properly, hardtack could get moldy, but it was issued just the same. The men would simply cut away the mold, or dunk their hardtack into their coffee to kill any insects that might be living inside.

The coffee served another purpose, too. Hardtack was notoriously tough to chew – soldiers were fond of calling the crackers “toothbreakers.” Hot coffee softened the bread and made it a bit more palatable. Other soldiers might fry their hardtack with bacon grease, or wet it into a dough to cook over a fire.

Normally we don’t keep food items as a part of the Society’s collection – we don’t want anything that might attract pests. Note that our hardtack is in a sealed bag, making sure that it’ll survive for another 150 years easy.