

How latrines lost the war: Race, waste, disease, and demoralisation in the Confederate Army

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ABSTRACT: The improper handling of human and animal waste led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands during the American Civil War. Historians understand the Confederate Army's reforms regarding latrines as part of the effort to control disease. But the significance of these changes in terms of discipline has yet to be explained. Curbing waste-related disease in army camps required asserting unprecedented power over the white Southern man's body.

In the antebellum South, waste practices were divided along racial lines. The racialisation of waste was challenged during the Civil War when white Southern men were subjected to restrictions similar to those imposed on the enslaved. The Confederate Army's efforts to maintain a healthy military force challenged common soldiers' conceptions of white supremacy. When the opportunities presented themselves, soldiers resisted military authority by relieving themselves where they wished.

Using court martial records, military regulations, and the writings of common soldiers, I argue that the ways soldiers did (or didn't) use latrines influenced a unit's military effectiveness. During campaigns, soldiers exploited indiscipline and lack of permanent camps by ignoring latrine regulations. These practices aggravated existing epidemics, which often compounded the demoralization of defeat and retreat. In contrast, when the use of latrines was enforced in permanent encampments, the decline of disease and stricter control of behaviour stiffened a unit's disciplinary posture.

Slavery shaped how white Southerners relieved themselves, which influenced how they conceived of themselves. That ideology proved incompatible with the latrine, and the consequence was a war partially lost by waste indiscipline.

CV:

Education

2025 (Expected) – Ph.D., History, University of Georgia
- 2023 International Law Certificate Program
2021 – B.A., History, Minors in Civil War Era Studies and Public History,
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Publications

2022 – “Smoking War: Civil War Soldiers and Tobacco” *Civil War Monitor* 12

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Forthcoming

2025 – “The Ideal Pleasures of Dreamland’: The Experience of Tobacco in the Civil War Era” in *The Civil War on Drugs*.

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