

From gunpowder to fertiliser: How Confederates used human waste during the American Civil War and Reconstruction

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ABSTRACT: The American Civil War changed the South's relationship to human and animal excrement. Wartime blockades and exigencies that limited access to international guano markets required the Confederate States of America to develop new sources for saltpeter – a key ingredient in gunpowder. In service to the Confederacy, chemists in the Nitre & Mining Bureau, like Joseph LeConte and Nathaniel Pratt, developed methods to produce saltpeter from human and animal waste. Through the labor of enslaved men and women, they collected nightsoil from latrines and nitre pits built on the region's plantations and coordinated the process of transforming the contents of these waste-filled pits into saltpeter.

In the Postwar period, Emancipation and guano's high cost left planters searching for a different method to fertilise their fields. In response, former Confederate scientists established fertiliser factories and phosphate mines using the knowledge they had gained from their war time experiments producing saltpeter. The production of commercial fertilisers dramatically intensified cotton and tobacco production throughout the South. As the use of commercial fertilizer and agricultural debt increased consequently, many agricultural reformers lobbied southern legislators to enact legislation that policed livestock fencing to encourage the collection of manure. They also lobbied for the creation of agricultural experiment stations to develop better fertilizers and police the content of commercial mixtures. This set the stage for multiple environmental disasters that emerged in the region during the twentieth century as the relationship of Southerners to human and animal excrement continued to change over the next century.

CV:

Education

University of Georgia
Ph.D. History 2021-
UNC at Wilmington
Master of Arts History (2021)
UNC at Chapel Hill
Bachelor of Arts in History (2015)

Publications

"Bigfoot Swims" in "Life With and Without Animals," special issue, *Humanimalia* 13 (Forthcoming 2023).

Recent Conference Presentation

"Improving the Pig," Commodities of Empire International Workshop, Free

University Berlin, 2022.

Grants and Awards

J. Donald Hughes Graduate Research Fellowship, ASEH, 2023