

**REPORT OF A
COMMISSARY OF
SUBSISTENCE, 1861-65**

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Report of a commissary of subsistence, 1861-65 by H. C. Symonds

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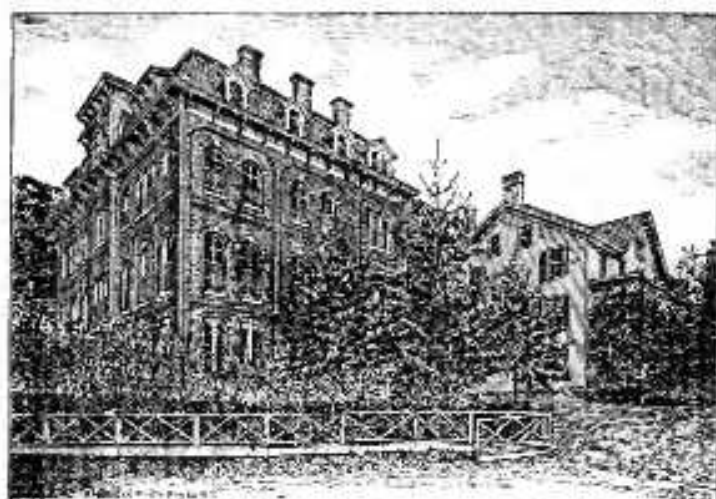
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H. C. SYMONDS

**REPORT OF A
COMMISSARY OF
SUBSISTENCE, 1861-65**

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OF A

COMMISSARY OF SUBSISTENCE

1861-65

BY

H. C. SYMONDS

FORMERLY MAJOR AND C. S. U. S. A.

VIREUN SCHOOL

SING SING, N. Y.

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INTRODUCTORY.

READING the Necrological Record for 1887 of the Association of Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy, and appreciating the meagerness of the records of the worthy men so obscurely enshrined in that volume, I have thought that I too had made a record worthy of preservation, if not example.

Having a conviction of sound health, and a consciousness of rectitude in all my official life, and believing that I can do better justice to my record than can the best friend, who must know but imperfectly of what he would write, I make this "Report of a Commissary of Subsistence."

It is flippantly said of staff officers, "that few die and none resign." It is true that they rarely leave the service, and this is, to a great extent, the reason why the field of self-glorification is left undisputed to those who traffic in the "fuss and feathers" of bloody war.

Custom, regulations, and law forbid their publishing or even disclosing operations, con-

ditions, or opinions except to and through regulated military channels, the various headquarters, which generally permit only such information as will inure to the glory or profit of those who compose the executive head of an army organization.

The staff of an army is executive and administrative. The executive staff (aides-de-camp, adjutants, and inspectors) is a personal attachment to the commanding general; transact their affairs at his head-quarters, appear to the unofficial world to be the stay and power of the organization, and generally manage to share in and often to absorb all the credit and reward of service well rendered.

They command the channels of communications and divert any odium for ill success to the shoulders of the wheel-horses of all campaigns, the quartermasters, commissaries, and ordnance officers. The adjutant and the inspector at a head-quarters are generally officers of superior attainments and quality. With an able commander, they are really assistants, and everything about such a command is in order, ready for service and successful in results. The others of the executive staff will be careful, prudent, and sober, but are, at best, little more than shoulder-strapped orderlies, with superior facilities for idleness, dissipation, and intrigue.

Many generals gathered around them a staff of golden calves or of personal and familiar dependants, and such were usually failures in the day of trial. Some generals selected their staff officers from the best material within their commands, and such were usually successful at all times.

Each general, however, kept on hand a full complement for his executive staff, who had no responsibility or anxiety other than attached to their personal safety or comfort.

This is true, not merely of the proper executive staff, but of that part which belonged to the administrative staff of the army (ordnance, quartermaster, commissary, medical, pay), because these chiefs of departments habitually had an assistant or assistants, who carried all accountability for property and performed all those duties for which the law and regulations had provided these same chiefs.

These working officers of the supply departments are the ones whose exploits I wish to set forth in these pages.

Whether in the purchase and manufacture, in forwarding and preserving, or in issuing the supplies, they were the backbone, the staff and the stay of the army.

They worked twelve hours a day for twelve months in the year, and could never satisfy the

craving maws and the reckless prodigality of the defenders of the Republic.

The men of strategy, together with many men wanting in strategy, without counting the men of politics, made the cost of that war more than double what it should legitimately have been.

It has been a frequent and flippant charge with many ill-informed people, that but for the stealings of quartermasters and commissaries the war would not have cost one-half as much as it did, and it has often been the sneer of the better informed that those who did not steal when they had the chance were too big fools to know what the war was for. In this connection the following incident is worth relating. Some years ago I was traveling in central New York, and the papers contained an account of suicide by one who had been a commissary of subsistence in Baltimore during the war, and had figured in some scandalous transactions. A gentleman sitting next me in the car remarked that it was terrible to think of the rascalities of those officers in the war.

I said that I had been in the war and had had a good opportunity to know something of the work of the quartermasters and commissaries, and that I thought he was greatly mistaken; that I did not think there had been,

relatively at least, much stealing in those departments; that, of course, instances could be cited, but that it was by no means general.

He was very positive, and I asked him if he was a business man doing a large business, so that I could demonstrate the matter. He said he was doing a very large business. I asked him if he thought they had stolen ten millions,—yes; if they had stolen twenty millions,—yes; thirty millions,—doubtful; forty millions,—no. I asked him if he, as a business man, would not be content if his losses by ramage did not exceed one per cent. He said that he should.

I called his attention to the fact that forty millions would not be one per cent. of the cost of the war. I was, in many respects, largely responsible for the work of some three hundred commissaries of subsistence during a good part of the war, and I do not believe their possible pilferings could have amounted to one hundred thousand dollars, and I know there were no *stealings* in that part of the army during that time.

The losses the country suffered do not belong to those who were responsible for the logistics of the war, but they do belong, in an eminent degree, to those who had charge of the strategy and the politics of the war. I can conceive