
The British Sutler During the American War for Independence

By Gregory S. Theberge

During the eighteenth century, the consumption of alcoholic beverages was widely accepted as a means of recreation and entertainment among all of the social classes of England and Her colonies. While certain intoxicants could be found at home, it was the Public House or local tavern which commonly served the populace for public gatherings and news dissemination. They were frequently used as the location for many town and political meetings. Given the difficult rigors of daily life for many of the common workers of London, it was not uncommon that these people were found ending their week at one of the many Public Houses which were readily available. These Establishments frequently served as employment agencies for many of the trades and it was not unusual that they were used as a location where wages were paid out at week's end. Considering that Recruiting Sergeants often frequented these establishments in search of recruits to fill His Majesty's Regiments, it was natural that alcohol would also play a role in British military service.



RECRUITS.

During the American War for Independence, it was generally considered that soldiers who engaged in physical labor did so more favorably when they were given generous quantities of spirits to drink. This was due to their alleged "medicinal properties." Per the Regulations of General, Sir William Howe in 1777, rum was

issued to the troops at a daily ration of one quart to every six men. Working parties were often issued an extra half pint above this allowance and guards who served in inclement weather were often given an extra quarter pint for their service. According to the Proceedings of a Board of General Officers, the British army in North America consumed more than 360,000 gallons of Rum per year which made it the single largest item of expense among all government provisions.

Besides their daily allotment, the soldiers of His Majesty's Forces often found the need to consume additional quantities of spirits beyond which was generally considered "medicinal". Unfortunately, many of these men found a source for their desire through unscrupulous women who followed the army and sold their questionable product beyond the lines of military jurisdiction. Contemporary accounts reveal that there was a great deal of trouble for General Gage's army during the occupation of Boston in 1775. Besides having to contend with excessive drunkenness, the army found itself dealing with the deaths of several men after they had consumed tainted drink at one of the many Dram houses operated throughout the town by soldier's wives. The army tried to ban the operation of these establishments as best as it could throughout the course of the War.

As a means of controlling the sale and consumption of alcohol to its troops, the British army established a system of licensing Sutlers to each of its Regiments or Corps. The Sutler was "let-out" a house or stall for a fee which was determined by the Commanding Officer of his assigned body. In turn, the sutler was answerable to his Commanding Officer for the sobriety and well being of the men which were under his command. Strict adherence to military protocol was established. Any diversion from the rules of operation would mean the loss of the Sutler's license and the confiscation or destruction of his goods. No soldier was allowed to purchase spirits from a sutler licensed to another Regiment or Corps. No spirits were to be sold after 9 O'clock in the evening, before reveille, or on Sunday during the hours of Divine Service or Sermon. All sutlers were regulated by their Commanding Officer to provide good and wholesome provisions to the men and at a fair Market price. Interestingly enough, there was also military jurisdiction watching over the Commanding Officer to ensure that he did not receive a financial profit from the operation of the canteen which was under his command.

Contemporary accounts reveal that sutlers offered a wide range of goods for sale. Unfortunately, detailed inventories are rare. All contemporary accounts reveal that sutlers sold alcohol. Rum was primarily the most common beverage available. It was usually drunk in the form of Grog (cut with water) but could also be mixed with other ingredients (water, citrus juice, nutmeg and sugar) to form Punch. Due to the infrequent availability of these ingredients, punch was usually much more expensive and, as a result, shows up less frequently in period accounts. When fresh lemons, limes or oranges were unavailable, a sutler could try to obtain bottled juices or concentrates such as "How's Celebrated Acid" - a concoction of concentrated

lemon and orange juice sold by the box, dozen or single bottle. Advertised in several Halifax newspapers of the period, it claimed that "one teaspoon of which makes a quart of punch." Brandy and Porter were favored by many of the officers. Contemporary accounts reveal that Claret and the fortified wines (Port and Madeira) were commonly available to the troops. Although malt beverages (beer and ale) and cyder are rarely found in contemporary sutler inventories, it seems probable that they would have been sold if a sutler was able to obtain them since they can be found in contemporary inventories of taverns during this period.

Besides alcohol, soldiers could also find for sale a variety of foodstuffs available in either the cooked or raw state. Contemporary accounts reveal the sale of sugar, coffee, chocolate, ham, and bacon. Sausages were commonly sold at fairs during this period as were gingerbread cakes. The men could also purchase tobacco and tobacco pipes. Tobacco could be obtained in either a "pigtail" twist or packaged in individual "papers." In addition to alcohol, foodstuffs and tobacco, a soldier could also purchase, on occasion, the small essentials of life at his Regimental Canteen. Small items such as hard soap are well documented.

Contemporary sources from the American War bear witness to the fact that sutlers used huts, stalls, or tents to sell their wares from depending on the mobility of the army. Unfortunately, contemporary written sources do not go into any great detail on how these establishments appeared when the army was on the march. It is documented, however, that Sutlers were allowed a horse to transport their goods. We can therefore assume that their establishments may have been of significant size in order to faithfully serve the Regiment or Corps they were licensed to. Regimental canteens were normally located at the rear of a camp, usually behind the Colonel's tent and in front of the camp kitchens.

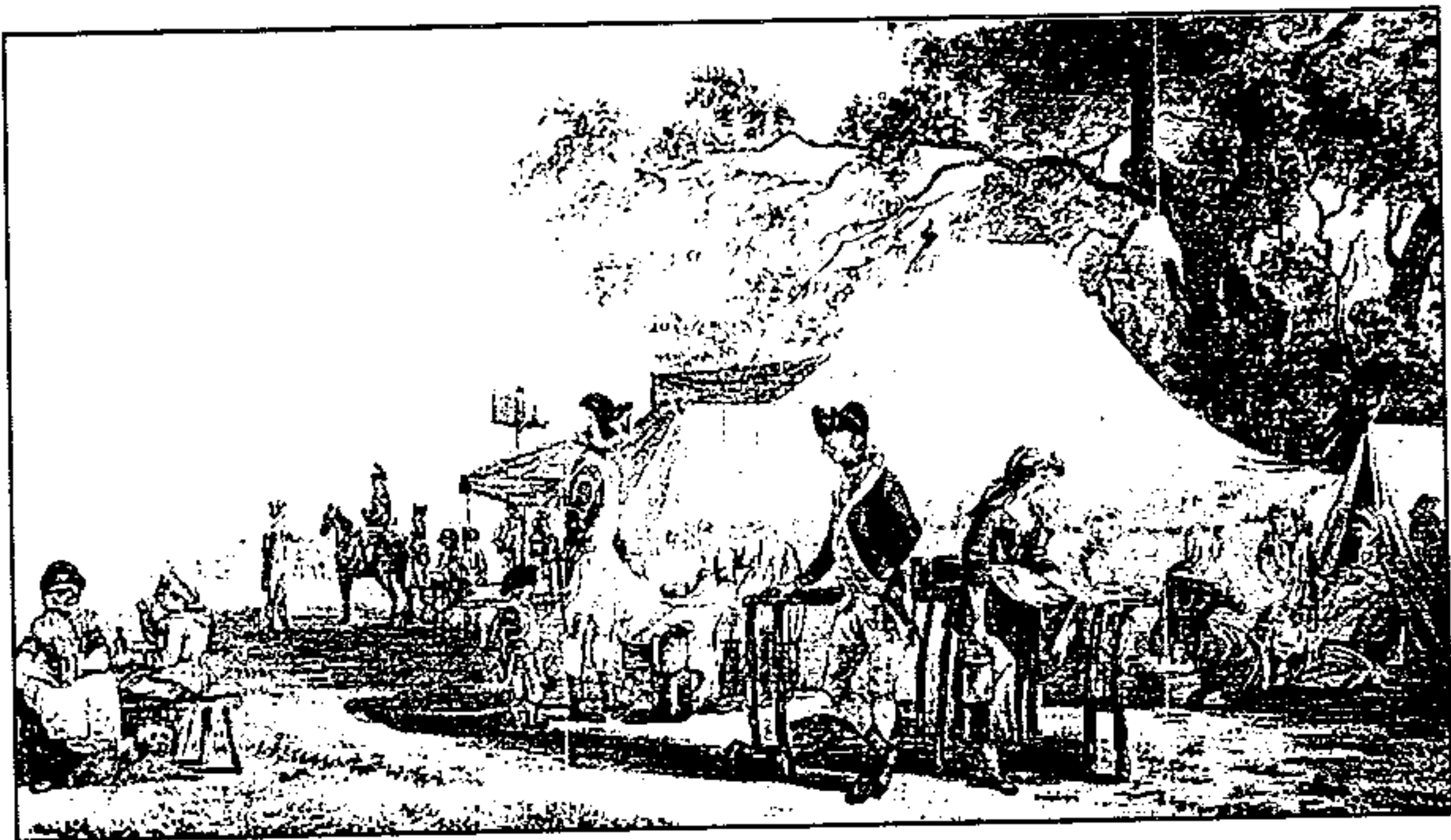


Sutler's stall

During the 1780 Encampment of Hyde Park (London), Mr. Paul Sandby executed a series of ink and watercolor illustrations which demonstrate the activities of military camp life in exacting detail. Two of these illustrations clearly show the existence of sutler's booths and the furnishings which compliment them.



The Encampment in Hyde Park MDCLLXXX




Paul Sandby, R.A.: The Military Encampment in Hyde Park, 1780


Careful examination of these works reveals the existence of tentage in either the form of a Marquis roof or a wooden braced fly. A sign declaring the business of the establishment can be clearly seen. Beneath these awnings exist sawbuck tables and wooden green benches where numerous military and non-military visitors engage in conversation and drink. A woman is seen selling what appears to be spices, fruits and heart-shaped cookies utilizing a scale, basket and cloth covered "tavern" table. Additional women are shown selling foodstuffs from a brazier and metal kettles. Others, possibly laundresses, are shown engaging in drink and conversation. A small dog passes the time away in both views. A crude wooden bench and table complete the scene.

During the British occupation of New York in 1776, Mr. John Inglis, a local merchant, was issued a license to operate as a futler to the First Battalion of Light Infantry which served under General, Sir William Howe. Associated with the Philadelphia Campaign, it is the Establishment of Mr. Inglis which I have tried to faithfully recreate. As there are no contemporary descriptions of Mr. Inglis' canteen to follow, I have relied heavily on the Sandby illustrations for my recreation. Furnishings which are used are faithfully reproduced from original artifacts in public and private collections. Many can be seen in George Neuman's "Collector's Illustrated Encyclopedia of the American Revolution" and "Early American Antique Country Furnishings." These include such items as furniture, griddle irons, kettles, dinnerware, corkscrews as well as tin cups and containers. If you take a close look, you may find one or two original pieces which are actually illustrated in these works. Punch bowls are copied from original specimens in my personal collection. A brass keg spigot is similar to the example excavated at the New Windsor Cantonment. Additional items, such as jingling bells, can be found in Ivor Noel Hume's "A Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America." All of the glassware used are copies which have been excavated from North American British campsites. They can all be seen in "Glasses of the British Military" by Olive R. Jones and E. Ann Smith. Note the variety of wine glasses, "Firing" glasses, and tumblers. Sample one of many foodstuffs from a faithfully recreated "Quart Pickle Bottle." All in all, you will not be disappointed with a visit to our Establishment if you are a true historian of the American War.

As with everything, one person cannot claim his or her accomplishments without the acknowledgement and gratitude of the assistance from others. Thanks are extended to Mr. Philip Dunning for his help in the initial research and direction of this project. I also thank the assistance of the band of loyal refugees who assist me in our weekend adventures. These fine folks of the 40th Regt. of Foot include Roy and Debra Najecki, Donald C. Dailey, Donna Peretta, Niels Hobbs, Kathryn Leonard, Rachel Welter and last but not least my wife, Karen Theberge (AKA Mrs. Elizabeth Loring). We are all proud members of the British Brigade and the Brigade of the American Revolution and take a great deal of pride in our interpretation. We hope you all enjoy our hospitality.



A List of Contemporary Sources for the Licencing
of Sutlers to the British Army during the
American War for Independence



General Orders, America

London, undated (probably January, 1775)

"Altho' canteens have been allowed the several Regiments for the convenience of the foldiers, there are notwithstanding still complaints of foldiers wives keeping dram fhops in the different parts of the town, where men get intoxicated in a very extraordinary manner, and two foldiers have been killed (with the poisonous liquors they fell) in one night.

The Commanding officers will make enquiry amongst their Regiments, and give in return fuch women af hire rooms in the town to fell drams, where they live, and from whom they hire rooms."

General Orders, W.O.

London, undated (probably February, 1775)

"When foldiers are found frequenting houfes occupied by foldier's wives who fell liquor without a license, from whence the greateft irregularities proceed, and the liquor fold in fuch houfes proves fatal to many foldiers. The commanding officers will direct fuch perfons to be carried before a Magistrate with proper witneffes who will order them to be fined, and proceeded againft in other respects according to the law"

General Orders, W.O.
Boston, 22 June, 1775

"All persons belonging to, or followers of the Army, are forbid to sell spiritous liquors, excepting at the regimental Canteens, one and only one of them if allowed for each Regiment subject to the regulation of the Officer Commanding it; and as the appointment of the Sutler depends on the commanding Officer of the Corps, it is expected hence-forward they will be answerable for the sobriety of the Soldiers under their Command, all other sources for Spiritous liquors but that of the Canteen, being effectually stopped up from the A G Officers and Soldiers by the Proclamation"

General Orders
Boston, 14 October, 1775

"The Commanding Officers of Corps not to allow their Sutlers to sell liquors to Soldiers, or any other persons who do not belong to their respective Corps; Upon a conviction of a disobedience of this order, the liquors will be destroyed, and the delinquent not have leave to sell any in the future.

Women belonging to the Army convicted of selling Spiritous liquors, will be confined in the Provosts."

General, Sir William Howe's Orders
23 January, 1776

"The Commanding Officers of Corps to Suppress all Dram Shops in their Respective Districts that are not licensed by Brig.-Gen. Robertson."

General Orders, W.O.

White Plains, New York, 26 November, 1776

"No follower of the Army can be allowed a Horse Except the Sutler of each Regiment."

General Orders, W.O.

Rhode Island, 23 December, 1776

"No soldiers wife if upon any account to keep a shop, without permission in writing signed by the commandant, or Deputy Com-mandant of the Town, for which they must be recommended by the Officer Commanding the Corps to which they belong. The General is concerned that no recommendation will be given to any woman without a certainty she will not make bad use of it, by selling spiritous Liquors."

General Orders, W.O.

Rhode Island, 11 December, 1777

"Whereas the great Drunkenness that prevails among the Soldiers, proceeds from the Soldiers wives being allowed to keep little shops out of the districts of their Regiments, the Commanding Officers will give directions that they are not permitted to live out of the quarters of the Regiment they belong to."

Rules and Articles for the Better Government of His Majesty's
Horse and Foot Guards, and all other His Majesty's Forces in
Great Britain and Ireland, Dominions beyond the Seas, and
Foreign Parts, from the 24th day of March, 1778

Section. VIII. (page 20)

ARTICLE I.

"No Sutler shall be permitted to sell any Kind of Liquor or Victuals, or keep their Houses or Shops open, for the Entertainment of Soldiers, after Nine at Night, or before the Beating of the reveilles, or upon Sundays, during Divine Service or Sermon, on the Penalty of being dismissed from all future Suttling."

ARTICLE II.

"All Officers, Soldiers, and Sutlers, shall have full Liberty to bring into any of Our Forts or Garrisons, any Quantity or Species of Provisions, eatable or drinkable, except where any Contract or Contracts are or shall be entered into by us, or by Our Order, for furnishing such Provisions, and with respect only to the Species of Provisions so contracted for."

ARTICLE III.

"All Governors, Lieutenant Governors, and Officers commanding Our Forts, Barracks, or Garrisons, are hereby required to see that the Persons permitted to suttle shall supply the Soldiers with good and wholesome Provisions, at the Market Price, as they shall be answerable to Us for their Neglect."

ARTICLE IV.

"No Governors, or Officers, commanding any of Our Garrisons, Forts, or Barracks, shall either themselves exact exorbitant prices for houses or Stalls let out to Sutlers, or shall connive at the Exactions in others; nor by their own authority, and for their private Advantage, shall they lay any Duty or Imposition upon, or be interested in, the Sale of such Victuals, Liquors, or other Necessaries of Life, which are brought into the Garrison, Fort, or Barracks, for the Use of the Soldiers, on the Penalty of being discharged from Our Service."

Simes, Thomas
The Regulator
"Of the Colonel and His Duties"
London, 1780

"No non-commissioned officer's or soldier's wife is to fettle or sell liquors without permission; and leave will be granted to such as are particularly recommended by commanding officers of companies, and who will pay due attention to all orders concerning them.

That no sutler off to harbor any body in the line of the regiment without the Major's leave.

No more than one grand sutler and five petty ones will be allowed; and any sutler who refuses to change the men's money, or ask reward, shall be drummed out of camp."

The New York Gazette
The Weekly Mercury
28 April, 1777

"Last Monday about 50 of the Royal Bergen Volunteers under the Command of Capt. Van Alien, went in quest of a Party of Rebels that infested Clouster, who, on hearing of their Approach made off, but in pursuing them smartly some miles, they took three Rebel Suttlers, with their stores of Rum, Sugar, Coffee, Chocolate, etc. to the Amount of Seven Wagon Loads, without losing a man.

One of the Suttlers is named David Phillips, who formerly kept a Beer house at the Sign of the Horse and Cart in this City."

Lochéé, Lewis
 An Effay on Castremetation
 London, 1778

Distribution of the Depth of the Camp of a Battalion of
 Ten companies of 60 Men each, which is 253 Yards

	Yards
"From the second row of the batmen's tents, to the front of the grand futler	10
From the front of the grand futler, to the center of the kitchens -	15
From the center of the kitchens, to the front of the petty futlers' -	15
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The grand futler, for the sake of convenience, is placed
 in the rear of the colonel's tent."

Of the Camp of Cavalry

" From the front of the colonel's tent, to the front of the staff oficers' tents,	14
From the front of the staff officers' tents, to the front of the grand futler's -	15
From the front of the grand futler's, to the center of the kitchens - -	20
From the center of the kitchens, to the front of the petty futler's -	15
From the front of the petty futlers, to the center of the bells of arms of the rear guard - - -	15
	<hr/> 220"
Total depth	220"



Defining a "Sutler" using Contemporary Dictionaries



Johnson, Samuel
"A Dictionary of the English Language"
London, 1755

SUTLER: N.f. (soetler, Dutch; fudler, German): A man that sells provisions and liquor in Camp.

PUBLICAN: A man that keeps a House of General Entertainment.

Smith, George
"An Univerfal Military Dictionary"
London, 1779

SUTLER: In War, one who follows the army, and furnishes provisions for the Troops. They pitch their tents, or build their huts, in the rear of each Regiment, and about Headquarters.

PROVISIONS: In a military sense in prize all manner of eatables, food, or provender used in an army, both for man and beast.

PROVENDER: Dry food for Brutes; hay or corn.

Grofe, Captain Frances

"A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue"

1785

SUTLER: A camp Publican; also one that pilfers gloves, tobacco boxes, and such Small moveables (Former in Shakespeare (O), and good English)

It is interesting to note that the 2nd definition of a Sutler is "one that pilfers...". Could the word "Sutler" or the activity to "Sutle" be used in a completely different context than what we are used to? Perhaps it was used as a slang term that implied a robber or dishonest individual. There is one contemporary account that may back up this THEORY. It involves the description of a certain Capt. Hayden of the 1st Battalion, King's American Rangers (formerly of the 4th Battalion N. Jersey Volunteers). In a letter dated 1 October, 1784, Walter Patterson, Governor of St. John, Nova Scotia, writes (to Lord Sydney):

"Captain Hayden, when he first got the Command, shewed a disposition to be useful, and in hopes of confirming him in such sentiments; without waiting to know his real Character, I appointed him one of the Council. But I very soon discovered him to be a Tyrant where he had power. Avaricious and mean. He Sutled to his men in the lowest manner, and when they offended himself, he had them punished severely; often by his single authority: when at the same time he would screen public Robbers. I could not be on good terms with such a Character, for which reason he embraced every opportunity and occasion which Malice could invent to injure me.

He even obliged by threats of punishment one of his Men, to give false evidence against me, nevertheless, I continued him in the Council for sake of Peace. After the reduction of the Troops, the stories which were told of him, were so many, and so scandalous, I was ashamed of sitting at the same Board with him. He was charged with defrauding the Men, with Coining of Money, with drawing the King's Bounties for the disbanded men, and with appropriating the whole to his own use. I discovered myself he had made a false return, which I have had the honor to take notice of in a former Dispatch. He was bred a Watchmaker and has again taken up his Trade.

The above, and many other reasons, at least obliged me to vacate his Seat as Member of the Council. And I shall hope the measure will be honored with your Lordship's approbation."

Great Britain, Public Records Office, Colonial Clafs, Vol. 8 folios 108-109

It doesn't make sense that a Captain in the military operated a canteen.

There is one other source that may back up this Theory. Captain Frances Grose Describes a Whirligig in his "Military Antiquities" (1786):

The Whirligig, used for the punishment of "petit futlers, jews, brawling women, and such persons" was "a kind of circular wooden cage, which turn'd on a pivot; and when set in motion, whirled round with amazing velocity, that the delinquent became sick, and commonly emptied his or her body through every aperature."



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