READINGS FOR WASHWOMEN “ON THE STRENGTH”

Primary Source Material

“It was the Opinion of the Officers of the 2d Brigdr G. Lincoln’s Division that 20 lb of good Soap would not be More than Sufficient to wash 100 Soldiers Linnen &c Pr week” (DLC:GW).”

“The commanding officers of regiments are to consult with the other field officers, and captains of companies belonging to their regiments, on what allowance of soap is absolutely necessary, with proper economy, to keep the soldiery clean; a report of their opinion, to be made immediately, to the board of General Officers, to sit to day agreeable to yesterday’s orders; who are to take the matter into consideration, and report their opinion of the same.”

“For the future the Commissaries are to Issue 5 Ounces of Soap for each Man pr Week and if it should ever happen that they have no soap to Issue they are by no means to give money in lieu of the Soap allowed and not drawn but to reimburse Commg Officers of Regts & Corps such sums as they shall have expended for that Article for the use of their Regt & Corps when not to be had at the Commissaries Stores, but in such Cases the Officers will Confine themselves to the above allowance, and no Soldier on any pretence shall be permitted to sell his Soap, and if detected in doing it shall be severely punished. This Ample allowance of Soap being made, The Commg Officers of Regts & Corps will be answerable hence forward the Men appear decent and Clean.”

“I conceive that if proper Persons were appointed to gather the dirty Tallow of the Beef Cattle slaughtered for our Army, which at present is carelessly thrown away, & of the Ashes which might be collected from the Huts, and furnished with large Kettles for Boiling Soft Soap, that the noncommissioned Officers & Privates of the whole Army might, soon be supplied with a sufficient Quantity to wash their Linnen, and a great quantity of Salt which must be used, for making Hard Soap saved to the United States. And if proper persons were appointed to Boil out the oil which the feet of the Cattle would produce, that a sufficient Quantity might be procured for Oiling the Arms, Accoutrements & Harness belonging to this Army.

[...]
These suggestions were included in the general orders of 12 Jan. 1778, but Maj. Gen. John Sullivan informed GW on 24 Jan. that a dearth of kettles made it difficult to boil the soap and oil properly.”

“The following hints are humbly submitted to the consideration of your Excellency. [...] The Commissaries also ought by all means, to provide a sufficiency of soap, and Vinegar, for on these, in a great degree depend the health of the Army.”

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“As it often happens, that the women who wash for the Soldiers are not punctually paid, by which means, they are unable to provide that quantity of soap the linen must require, and thereby sooner rub it out, the Pay-Serjeants should be directed to stop for washing from those, who are so idle to neglect a punctual Payment, and every week clear off the Women, who, by this method, can have no excuse for not doing justice to the linen.”  

Read Also (prioritize those in red):


Jane Ashelford, Care of Clothes (Chicago: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 1997).


Kathleen M. Brown, Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009)—skim this for significance.


Captain Bennet Cuthbertson, Cuthbertson’s System for the Complete Interior Management and Oeconomy of a Battalion of Infantry (Bristol, Great Britain: Rouths and Nelson, 1776), https://books.google.com/books?id=1SxEAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=intitle%3Abattalion%20intitle%3Aof%20intitle%3AInfantry%20inauthor%3Acuthbertson&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwihhuqK1K3MAhXMtYMKHU4UAqAQ6AEIHTAA#v=onepage&q&f=false.


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6 Bennett Cuthbertson, “Of the Stoppages necessary to be made in a Regiment,” A System for the Compleat Interior Management and Oeconomy of a Battalion of Infantry, (Dublin: Boulter Griers, 1768), 21,


Cat Tannenbaum Schirf, “Ways to Wash Your Linens: 18th Century Laundry” 18th Century Laundry: The Wash, accessed October 14, 2018, [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1E4jtM0yyFUfhDJlMC8UKmxMxvnjknv9MyUoAXMPlUI/edit#slide=id.p](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1E4jtM0yyFUfhDJlMC8UKmxMxvnjknv9MyUoAXMPlUI/edit#slide=id.p).
