



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

How the Civil War Created Coca-Cola

By Norman J. Dasinger, Jr., July 31, 2020
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Advertising signs at the Coca-Cola Museum, Atlanta



John Pemberton, the original creator of Coca-Cola

John S. Pemberton served as lieutenant colonel of the 3rd Georgia Cavalry Reserves as a part of the Confederate States Army. He was hit in the chest with a saber in the battle of Columbus, Georgia, fought April 16, 1865—seven days after Lee surrendered at Appomattox. It was a painful and lingering wound.

Before the war, he had graduated from medical school in Philadelphia and had opened a drugstore as part of his medical practice in Columbus. He really liked chemistry and inventing new drugs to treat his patients. Now, it was time for him to treat himself, and soon he became addicted to the opiate-based medicine he was using for his pain.

In 1866, in order to try and stop his addiction, he began to develop medicines that would ease his pain but would not contain morphine or opium-based extracts. He tried many different recipes and substances, but none worked.

Finally, he found a combination of alcohol and an extract from the coca plant (today we would call this cocaine) that would help. He soon had the thought this might benefit other wounded warriors, so he traveled to Atlanta in order to perfect his formula for more widespread consumption and maybe make a little money for his wife and only son.

Pemberton and an Atlanta friend—Willis Venable—removed the alcohol and by accident included carbonated water, making it a possible refreshing fountain drink instead of a medicine.

And Coca-Cola was born!

The first year—1886—Venable and Pemberton sold maybe \$50 of the new beverage/medicine. But Pemberton was a forward thinker and believed he had something that would eventually be popular. He created shares of his new company, and by 1887 another druggist—Asa Candler—bought most of those shares for \$2,300. Today, knowing what we know, we would ask, Why would he do that? Pemberton had become very sick (his addiction issues returned) and he needed money, so he agreed to sell almost all of his business to Candler except for a small percentage he reserved for his only son.

The inventor of Coca-Cola died in 1888 from stomach cancer. Soon, his son, also an addict, sold the remainder of the shares to Candler, who began to aggressively market the drink in Georgia and throughout the Southeast. Eventually Pemberton's concoction would become an iconic symbol. How many Cokes do you think are served every second worldwide? And it all began because of the Civil War.



An early Coca-Cola advertisement

It may be strange, but it is important to acknowledge our modern-day connections to the Civil War are really not that far removed from our daily lives.



Believed to be the first coupon ever, this ticket for a free glass of Coca-Cola was first distributed in 1888 to help promote the drink.



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