



On doctor's orders, some people eat only salt substitutes, but un-medically speaking, there are no substitutes for salt. In fact, salt is one of the most common—and necessary—compounds in our environment. It's found—without being added—in the water we drink, in our vegetables, in our meats, and in nearly all foods. Canned and prepared foods are generally well salted, in some cases to hide a lack of other tastes.

Michigan produces great mountains of salt, five million tons last year, and has ranked fifth nationally for years. That's because the whole state was under seawater ages ago and massive salt beds were laid down here at that time. Great cavernous areas several thousand feet beneath Detroit, for example, have been mined out and would no doubt make spectacular subways if they weren't so deep and wandering. In Roman times, salt was far less common, and devastatingly hard to come by. Soldiers, for example, received their pay in a paper salarium—literally, a salt check—with which to buy the precious commodity. Our word salary of course comes from this salty Roman word, salary being money given to those who are worth their salt, some of which might be salted away as savings. In Medieval times in the castles of Europe, it was customary to place an enormous ornate salt cellar midway along the great dining table. Those of distinction sat above the salt; those of lower caste sat below the salt.

Our society today has come to use salt more as a way of changing the taste of foods than out of bodily necessity. Most humans obtain all the salt they need from natural sources. Eskimos, for example, never used salt, obtaining all they needed in the meat they ate. When salt was introduced to them, they rejected it as tasting bad.

The Confederacy suffered mightily from a salt shortage during the Civil War. The great mines at Kanawha, West Virginia, became a battleground early in the war, and when West Virginia sided with the Union, the South suffered a severe blow. In 1864, after several battles, the North captured Saltville, Virginia, the only major producing mine in the south, and dealt a severe blow to Confederate hopes for victory.

Michigan owes much of its early development to the opening of the Erie Canal—and the main item of freight on that canal was, you guessed it, salt. Immigrants from the ports of New York and Boston perched atop barrels of salt as they rode the Erie Canal boats across northern New York State to Buffalo, where they embarked on sailing vessels to take them into the Great Lakes settling grounds. The canal opened in 1825, and that allowed enough people to flow into the Michigan Territory so it could become a state in 1837.