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# Repast

Quarterly Publication of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

## Episodes in African-American Food History *Part 2*



An ice cream sandwich vendor in an alley in Washington, DC, one century ago.

Photo: Charles Frederick Weller, *Neglected Neighbors: Stories of Life in the Alleys, Tenements and Shanties of the National Capital* (1909)

# THE TRUE ORIGINS OF BOSTON BAKED BEANS

by Edgar Rose

*Our summary of Lucy M. Long's Sept. 20 talk to CHAA on regional American foodways (Winter 2010, p. 3) caught the attention of Repast subscriber Edgar Rose of Glencoe, IL. In her talk, Prof. Long had mentioned Boston Baked Beans as a classic example of a regional American food, describing it as a custom that allowed colonial Puritans to eat a warm meal on Sunday without violating the Sabbath.*

Your wonderful *Repast* is a constant source of enlightenment to me, and I enjoy every issue very much. However, I would like to comment on the statement about Boston Baked Beans that was attributed to Prof. Lucy Long. Boston Baked Beans is certainly a regional American food and has a relationship to avoidance of violating the Sabbath. But the formative link appears to have been with the Jewish rather than with the Christian Sabbath.

## Repast

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When I lived in the Boston area from 1947 to 1953, this dish was served by many restaurants, but quite a few would serve it only on Saturday evenings, which, as was explained to me, was the traditional time to eat Boston Baked Beans. This timing was taken for granted and quite puzzling to me. Though some people tried to explain this custom to me using Prof. Long's reasoning, it did not really account for why Saturday evening was the traditional time for Bostonians to enjoy this meal. For the explanation to make sense, Sunday night would have had to have been the traditional consumption date—not Saturday night.

A few years after my sojourn in Bean City, around the mid-1950's, I came across an article in *Gourmet* magazine by the famous author of historical novels, the Maine native Kenneth Roberts. He wrote that colonial and early post-Revolution Boston ship captains would sail to Amsterdam, bring goods to those countries, buy goods after arrival there and sail back to Boston. While in Amsterdam they would frequently stay for a few days in the homes of their trading partners, some of whom were Jews.

To digress slightly, there is an old Jewish dish, *cholent*, which to this day is consumed on Saturday evenings by observant Jews. It consists of cheap, tough, very fatty beef and beans. It used to be taken before Friday's sunset to the local baker—also a Jew—who would put it into his hot, but otherwise empty, bread oven. Right after Saturday's sunset the housewife would send one of the kids to pick up the hot *cholent*, and serve this warm dish to the family after the menfolk returned from the synagogue. Because the bread ovens were solidly-built brick affairs, they held without restocking their gradually diminishing heat well into the pickup time for the *cholent*.

*Cholent*—a dish that goes back to at least the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, and might be an adaptation of *cassoulet*—is almost identical to Boston Baked Beans, except for the latter's use of inexpensive salt pork or bacon instead of fatty beef. Roberts's thesis was that the Boston ship captains would have been served a form of *cholent* by their Jewish hosts, fell in love with it, and brought the recipe back to their home city. Thus the custom of eating Boston Baked Beans—essentially *cholent* modified with pork—on Saturday evenings.

Brazil has a famous traditional dish called *feijoada*—beans baked with several fatty meats. To this day it is only eaten on Saturday at noon. One speculates whether this might be a derivation of *cholent* introduced to Brazil by the *conversos*. [The *conversos* were Iberians whose Jewish—or in other cases, Muslim—ancestors had converted to Catholicism during its Reconquest of the peninsula. The *conversos* included pork routinely and conspicuously in their diets as an emblem of their adherence to Catholicism.—Ed.]

Interestingly, Van Camp used to advertise that their baked beans were “slow cooked for 24 hours in brick ovens”.



## Book Review

# TRANSPLANTED ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

by Leni A. Sorensen

CHAA member Leni Ashmore Sorensen of Crozet, VA is African-American Research Historian at the Monticello estate near Charlottesville. In 2005 she completed a Ph.D. at the College of William and Mary, with a dissertation on fugitive slaves in Richmond, 1834-44. Her most recent article for Repast was, "Curdled with Gizzard Skin: A Recipe from James Hemings at Monticello" (Fall 2007). In addition to writing and research focused on foodways and garden ways in African and African-American history, for a quarter-century Dr. Sorensen has demonstrated fireplace cookery at museums and historical sites. She still cooks cornbread and other items with the nine-inch cast-iron skillet that her Alabama-born stepfather passed on to her in 1953.

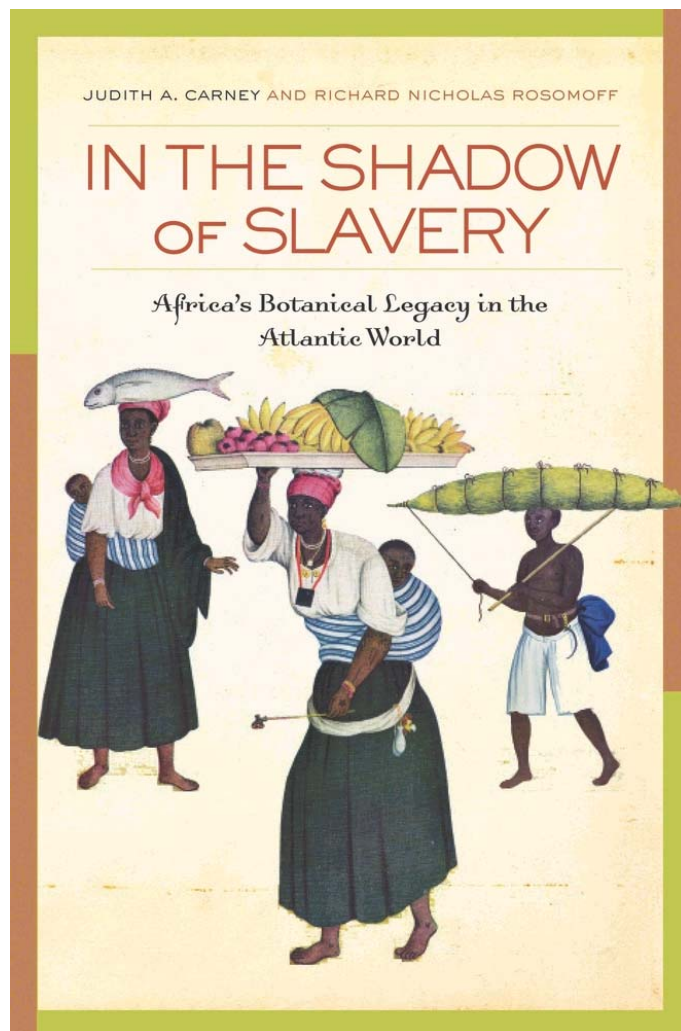
Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff  
*In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical  
Legacy in the Atlantic World*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009  
280 pp., \$27.50 cloth

Carney is the author of the excellent and important book *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. This new volume takes us far past rice and deep into the agricultural heritage of African peoples before, during, and after the Atlantic slave trade to the Americas.

In a detailed description, the authors trace the various 'exchanges' of crops and domesticated livestock across the Old World into and out of Africa. There was the Monsoon Exchange, in which crops from within Africa were shipped to India during one phase of the annual monsoon currents, and crops from Southeast Asia were brought into Africa on the return leg of that sea journey during the other monsoon phase.

There was a lesser-known Muslim Exchange that brought coffee ("the esteemed *arabica* type", which originated in Ethiopia) as well as kola nut, melegueta pepper, and gum arabic into medieval European markets. In the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century there was an Atlantic Exchange of sorts as Portugal and Spain first conquered and then created plantations on the islands that lie off the West Coast of Africa, the Madeira and Canary Islands. The introduction of African plantain and banana supplied the foodstuffs necessary to feed ever larger populations of African slaves brought in from the



African mainland to grow sugar on the islands. With the voyages of Columbus, the New World became a player in the exchange of crops, food, and peoples in the much better known Columbian Exchange.

The ever-expanding slave trade had become, by the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the engine driving these cultural, economic, and botanic exchanges. With the pressures of the Portuguese sugar trade, which began as early as 1440, the island of Madeira became the home to enslaved African plantation workers and sugar cane. By the decade of 1450-60 Madeira "soon became the single largest sugar producer in the Western world, anticipating by half a century the plant's [sugar cane] diffusion to the New World."

Very quickly, Europeans participating in the many layers of the slave trade and living along the West coast of Africa had to depend on African crops to feed soldiers and commercial agents, since temperate zone crops such as wheat, barley, rye, and grape vines were unsuccessful. Thus, Europeans themselves had to change their diets when in the tropics, usually under duress. Food production had to cover residents on the coast, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, in ever growing numbers, slaving vessels had to be provisioned for the Middle Passage to Brazil and the Caribbean. The authors present a wealth of documentation to help us understand the complexities of that aspect of the slave trade not often explored.

*continued on page 7*

# EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN FOODWAYS



## THE CASE OF OKRA SOUP

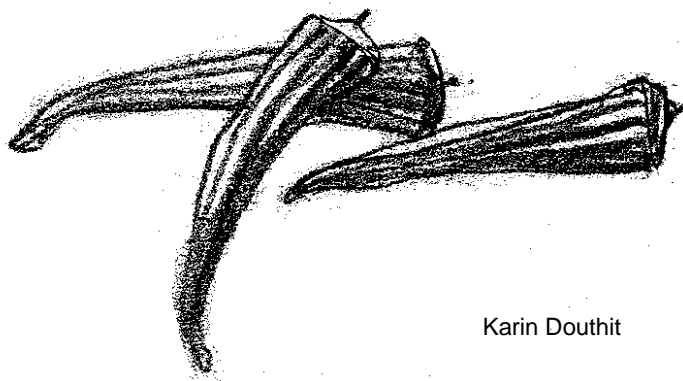
by Michael W. Twitty

*Michael Twitty is a native of Washington, DC and a student at Howard University. He has been an on-site interpreter of African and African-American history and culture for the Smithsonian Institution (Festival of American Folklife), the National Park Service, and the Menare Foundation, where he is Director of Interpretation. Michael self-published a book, Fighting Old Nep: The Foodways of Enslaved Afro-Marylanders 1634-1864. He also teaches Hebrew school at four congregations.*

Defining "Early African American Foodways":  
The Trouble I've Seen...

Nothing seems to slake our thirst for the simple and the quaint aspects of our past more than the study of early American foodways. A certain crisp delight seems to fall off the lips of culinary historians as they pronounce the word "receipt" or discuss the fancies of Mr. Jefferson or share attempts at recreating 18<sup>th</sup>-Century ice creams. When the historian has access to significant documentation and a strong common historical, social, and cultural context, the culinary past becomes comfort food for the mind. Food is clearly as much a record of our evolving sense of being "American" as are our voting trends, wardrobes, or belief systems. To study American food is to exercise our collective gustatory memory, to be in touch with the part of our identity that is intimate, powerful, and multi-sensory.

This leaves those of us who study the origins of early African American foodways in a bit of a lurch. Our human subjects came from Old World societies that were based on oral traditions and highly context-derived meanings. There was little dietary stratification in these societies, and food was used as a form of communication, as "medicine", and as a means of relating to the natural and spiritual worlds. How does one compare this heritage with that of Western Europeans, who came from a blend of oral and literary traditions including written recipes, low-context forms of communication, class-stratified consumption of food, and different notions of food aesthetics? To go back to England for hints of heritage and legacy is linguistically and culturally no great leap for most American culinary historians. In the developing fields of African American culinary history, culture, time, and space are not as forgiving, and demand a wider, more diverse, more international perspective. Beyond all of that, our human sub-



Karin Douthit

jects do not grow in increasing liberty to freely explore, document, or openly pass down their traditions in the Republic to come— they are enslaved and largely denied the same avenues that ensure easy study of and identification with their European American contemporaries.

Among foodies and living-history interpreters, the lament is common, and frequent: "There's just not much documentation for what the slaves were eating and cooking." To which is often rejoined, "Well, I suspect they were eating pretty much what lower-class whites ate at the same time— it was all the same." Both statements reflect a critical lack of inquiry into the food narratives brought to America by enslaved (not "slaves") Africans and how these narratives were enhanced and enriched by their contact with exotic peoples— i.e. Europeans and Native Americans. One of the major issues is that early American food history has not properly melded with (and indeed has lagged behind) the trends and themes of African American cultural studies and historiography. Another problem is that the notion of documentation has not broadened enough to accommodate alternative forms of knowledge found in Africa and the African Diaspora. Finally, there is little effort to move beyond the generic ("African" or "West African") to the specific ("Igbo" or "Balanta") and an active investigation into what those terms mean in terms of culinary traditions.

Anyone who studies African American foodways before, say, the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century must in essence be an Africanist. *Ignorantia cultura Africana non excusat!* It is unfortunate that the majority of ink spent on the subject of African foodways in the United States rarely if ever reflects an interest in tracing dishes from one coast to the next. It is our duty here to reverse the trend, and put the same statistics that have come to document the presence of specific ethnic groups in other aspects of early African American culture to use in documenting that presence in plantation kitchens.

Born of competing visions, an epistemological braid has woven together history, cultural anthropology, archaeology, botany, religious studies, linguistics, literature, and other disciplines in a single project: to trace the metamorphosis from newly arrived enslaved Africans to Afri-Creole lives and identities to African American ones. It has been a contentious and complex discussion, with very few scholars arguing for full grounding in African cultures, and yet fewer advocating the old theory that enslaved Africans lost all of their culture. What has collectively emerged is an understanding that enslaved Africans certainly brought and retained key elements and aspects of their Old World selves, but through coercion/control and creolization

(being born in the New World and absorbing its unique cultural opportunities) they fused new, more dynamic identities to cope with the new conditions and to struggle to acquire the freedom promised to others but denied to them and their progeny.

However, in all of this debate and dialogue, one area has largely escaped discussion and, despite the exciting developments in scholarship, has in fact remained separate: foodways. Enslaved Africans reinterpreted their foodways to fit the world they found. In food we see a world that is not suspended between a struggle of African authenticity versus Creolizing compromise. Rather, it was a dance between living in an exotic European-based exile, on the one hand, and remembering and re-creating both generalized and cultural-specific versions of a culinary Africa, on the other.

More important than concise answers, we need great questions that can make the dialogue as fertile as possible:

- Which African ethnic groups were brought across the Atlantic?
- To which states and regions were they brought, and why?
- What cultural traits and skills made these ethnic groups especially desirable, and how did any of those relevant details impact their culinary traditions?
- What did the shift in ecology and economy mean for them, for their cultural shift from Africans to Afro-Creoles to African Americans, and for their influence on other racial groups and classes?
- How do African American dishes, ingredients, and flavoring traditions compare and contrast with those in West, Central, and Eastern Africa, and with parallel traditions in Latin America and the Caribbean?
- When and under what circumstances did dishes cross racial/class lines?

### Flows of Language, Flows of People

Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) is a member of the mallow family, relished for its mucilaginous pods that thicken soups and stews and also provide a crispy vegetable when picked young. It is an indigenous African cultigen, and spread from that continent to India and other parts of Asia at an early date. Okra would become the signature vegetable in Africa's contribution to global foodways.

That we call this plant and its fruits "okra", rather than any of the other common names used across large swaths of West and Central Africa, is significant. The Creole word *okra* owes its etymology to *okwuru* / *okwulu* / *okro* among the dialects of the Igbo language of southeastern Nigeria and the cognate term *nkru* / *nkrumah* among the Twi speakers of present-day Ghana. (A word *okra* exists in Twi, but it is one of the terms for "soul".) Slave trader Captain Hugh Crow noted that at the port of Bonny (in southeastern Nigeria) and throughout West Africa, there was no want of "ocra... well known throughout the West Indies as an ingredient in making soup." Joachim Monteiro, writing about Angola in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, described okra under cultivation and being sold at market. Okra was not only valued for its pods, but also for its edible leaves and seeds, and was used as a medicinal plant, especially to ease the birthing process.

Among French speakers, okra is often known as *gumbo*, owing to the KiMbundu and Ovimbundu terms *ochingumbo* and *ki-ngumbo*, respectively, contributed most likely by way of Haitian Kweyol (on the eve of the Haitian Revolution of the 1790's, over 51% of Haitians were from Central Africa). The term *gumbo* morphed in the Caribbean and northern South America into forms such as *gumby*, *gumbs*, *gombo*, *quiabo*, and *giabo*. *Gumbo* entered into our lexicon through Louisiana and the Lower Mississippi Valley. In Louisiana the term *fevi* also persisted, being the Fon(gbe) word for okra. (The Fon are the same ethnic group that established the Kingdom of Dahomey and brought the Vodun religion to Haiti and Louisiana.)

There are an array of words for the plant and fruit in West and Central Africa, including *kanja* among the Wolof and Fulani and *kanjo* in Bamana and Manding, but despite the widespread knowledge of these languages used in West Africa for trade, it was "okra" and "gumbo" that were preserved in American English.

What is significant about the word "okra" is that it points to origins in the transport of people and cultural legacies from the British Caribbean to the colonial Tidewater. Slave societies in early America were often satellite cultures of Afro-Caribbean slave societies in the West Indies, in which both whites and Blacks had interaction for a long period of time. Jamaica and Barbados were particularly important in relationship with the colonial Chesapeake Bay region and the Carolina coast focused on Charleston. Settlers, crops, and, indeed, enslaved workers helped "seed" colonial and cultural life in both regions. Just as the corn seed planted in the colonial Chesapeake originally came from the West Indies, okra might have traveled a similar route. Planters often had family on these islands, and traveled back and forth from the West Indies. About 10% of the enslaved workforce in the Chesapeake came from the Afro-Caribbean, and South Carolina's earliest enslaved workers under British rule were merely transplants from Barbados.

The enslaved workers brought from Barbados and Jamaica in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were unusual in that they were predominantly people from Kwa-speaking societies from the "Gold" and "Slave" coasts of Africa. Most prominent in Jamaica and Barbados slave societies were the Akan peoples, including the Asante, Fante, and 20 other Twi speaking groups; their non-Twi neighbors, the Ga; and in a cluster from southeastern Nigeria, the Igbo and their non-Kwa speaking neighbors, the Efik, the Ejagham, the Ibibio, and the Ijo. The earliest Afro-Carolinians were likely Twi-speaking Akan, while a significant portion of the direct trade from Africa to Virginia, a little over half, came from either southeastern Nigeria or central and southern Ghana, where the English term "okra" originated.

### Okra Soup: National Dish of Early African America and the Original Crossover Dish

Okra soup was one of most common dishes found along the 3,500-mile stretch of coast of West and Central Africa. From the *kanjadaa* of the Wolofs of Senegal to the *kingumbo* of the KiMbundu people of Angola, each ethnic group seems to have had its own treatment of the dish.

*continued on next page*

# OKRA SOUP

*continued from page 5*

“Ochra Stew. *Obe ila*. Ochra is cut into pieces, boiled and added to stew sauce or meat stew as in making vegetable stew.”

—William Bascom, “Yoruba Cooking”

What we know about okra in early America is sparse and tantalizing. Okra was documented by Sir Hans Sloane in Jamaica in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and it was noted by Peter Kalm in Philadelphia in the 1740’s. Kalm found it growing in city gardens, where it was “reckoned a dainty... especially by the Negroes”, and he also noted its use in “soups”. There are scant references to okra in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century, but by 1781 Thomas Jefferson commented in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “ochra” was one of the garden crops of Virginia. Luigi Castiglioni noted okra in South Carolina in 1787: “an annual herb with mallowlike flower... which was brought by Negroes from the coast of Africa and is called okra by them.”

While some interpreters have made okra out to be a late bloomer among Southern foods and soups, Mary Randolph included okra in her 1824 *Virginia Housewife*. She prepared okra with tomatoes, with butter, and in soup. It is not really probable that okra soup emerged out of nothing or even out of what some have called a Louisiana French influence. After all, okra soup is okra soup, not gumbo (it lacks a roux), and judging from the reference Mary Randolph makes to “an earthen pipkin” (a type of earthenware cooking-pot, essentially slave-made colonoware), this was a recipe that went back to perhaps the earliest beginnings (1680-1720) of the forced migration of West and Central Africans to Virginia. It is curious: why does a “modern” woman need such a “primitive” earthenware utensil to bring soup to table? As other cooks would later explain, iron pots darkened the okra and its broth in an unsightly way. All told, this mention of the pipkin in several recipes points to an earlier origin than can be documented in written records.

Early Southern kitchens knew and loved the addition of okra in soups, not only among African America but also among the slave-holding planter aristocracy, from Philadelphia to the Chesapeake and Tidewater, to the Carolina Lowcountry and on to the Lower Mississippi Valley and Louisiana. Mrs. B. C. Howard’s *Fifty Years in a Maryland Kitchen* (1873), which reflects practices dating back to the 1820’s, has no less than a dozen recipes explicitly recommending the addition of okra. One can also cite Sarah Rutledge’s *Carolina Housewife* (1847). Okra soup was the earliest, most common and appreciated of all the dishes the South inherited from West and Central Africa. It was often found in the personal receipt books of Southern white women from Maryland to Louisiana, permeated the Southern cookbook tradition, and was commonly cited in agricultural journals such as the *Southern Planter* and *Southern Cultivator*.

While Mary Randolph’s okra soup is iconic and oft-quoted, other okra soups from the cookbooks of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century southeastern Tidewater are stunning in the parallels maintained between similar recipes found in West Africa and those found in the South. Some okra soups, such as Marion Cabell Tyree’s 1878 version in *Housekeeping in Old Virginia*, required a fried chicken as soup base, as do the okra soups of Nigeria, for example those prepared among the Yoruba in the southwestern region of that nation. Others, such as the

## Okra Soup: A Version from the Quarters

*I offer here a version of okra soup that might have been enjoyed in the quarters of a Chesapeake Bay area plantation, based on my interviews with elders from Southern Maryland and my survey of regional slave narratives. — MWT*

- 2 medium yellow onions, sliced or chopped
- 3 tablespoons of flour
- 2 or three tablespoons of bacon drippings, lard, vegetable oil, or butter
- 2½ quarts of water
- 1 dried or salted fish, soaked and drained overnight
- 1 cup of salt pork or bacon pieces
- 3 cups of tomatoes, chopped
- 2 lbs. of okra, sliced into pieces
- 2 long red cayenne peppers or fish peppers, sliced in half
- herbs of your choice (bits of parsley, rosemary, basil, etc.)
- salt to taste
- 1 cup of cooked crabmeat, or fresh fish pieces, optional

Heat the oil or drippings in a pot, until hot but not smoking. Dust the onions with the flour, then sauté them in the heated oil until translucent. Add the water, salted fish, and bacon pieces, and cook for 2½ hours. This will create the stock for the soup. Add the rest of the ingredients and stew another 2 hours.

Baltimore-specific okra soup of Mrs. B. C. Howard, added crab or bits of fish, similar to the okra soups of the maritime peoples of coastal Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ghana. Still others, like the Gumbo Soup recipe in the 1845 *Domestic Cookery* by Elizabeth Ellicott Lea, a Maryland-born Quaker, resembled Fulani dishes but used their authors’ favorite meat— beef— to make a rich and hearty stew. Other okra soups were fairly vegetarian and might only add a bit of smoked or salted fish, as in Senegal and Gambia. While we can quote West and Central African cuisine in the interpretation of these dishes, in the absence of more corroborative data we cannot be definitive in attributing their exact origins. Still, it is likely that these African influences played a strong and defining role.

Many crossover versions of okra soup prepared in white households evidenced a creole spirit in their own way, quoting European American vegetable soups of the time. An example is the instruction for Okra Soup given by Mary Stuart Smith in her *The Virginia Cookery Book* (1885):

Differs from gumbo only in not having the meat fried which is put into it, and in the vegetables not being strained out. Okra and tomatoes may be put in plentifully, or in lesser quantity, according to circumstances. Half a dozen pods of tender okra and six or eight moderate-sized tomatoes will flavor beef soup nicely, if you are dependent upon a city market; but if you can draw upon a large country garden for supplies, a quart of each will be

none too many. Red pepper should always be put in, to suit the taste of your family; corn, Irish potatoes, and Lima beans are also acceptable additions to this soup, and even rice comes not amiss. The meat also may be varied according to family convenience; for a shin-bone of fresh beef, two pounds of any coarse, lean part of the animal, or the carcasses of any cold fowl or joint of meat of any kind, will answer almost equally well for a dish that may be found acceptable daily all the summer through, if the cook has any knack at utilizing the materials that are always at hand during that season for making a good and yet economical dish of soup.

Okra soup is profound in demonstrating the transformation of the American diet. Not only does it connect American and Southern traditions with a larger Atlantic food story, but it also illustrates something of the unique culture to be found in the early days of slavery, cross-Creolization, and the introduction of African cultures into America. It gives us a taste of the simple form of resistance represented by preserving and maintaining traditional dishes and foodways despite the ruptures of slavery. The dish speaks of a common culture and ethnic heritage that was created as many African ethnicities became one “race” in the colonial and antebellum caste systems. It also points to the degree to which white cooks and homemakers became participants in the foodways of the African Diaspora. ■

#### Further Reading

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## TRANSPLANTED *continued from page 3*

The authors break indigenous African foodstuffs into three major complexes: the Savanna complex of millet, melons, sesame and sorghum; the West African complex of melegueta pepper, the genus *Amaranthus* (African spinach), *akee* (a tree fruit used in cooking), okra, tamarind, African yam, and black-eyed pea; and the Ethiopian complex of coffee, finger millets, *lablab* (Hyacinth bean), and castor bean. They supply long lists and detailed charts. I have only mentioned plants the average reader will recognize immediately as having had an impact on our New World cuisines. Because so much of the African continent lies within the tropical zone, the crops grown across those great spans of African terrain were particularly well suited for transmission to the New World tropics.

The authors do a particularly noteworthy job of explaining the introduction of African foodstuffs as part of the crops grown on provision grounds for New World populations of African slave laborers. How the seeds, shoots, and varieties still evident today in the tropics of the Americas were first acquired is a long and fascinating part of the story. This book emphasizes change over time and region as factors that have to be considered to understand different foodways among plantation populations as far-flung as Brazil and Barbados.

The places where enslaved Africans grew their foodstuffs within the American tropics were as varied as the plantation owners saw fit to allow. But whether the plants grew in “the individual plots some plantation colonies granted them, on provision grounds, and in the yards surrounding their dwellings”, the food-crop complex persisted with a predominance of African plants: yam, plantain/banana, taro, and pigeon pea. From Brazil to the Caribbean, Africans from differing African origins combined and recombined their own culinary understandings with their skills at subsistence farming. All of this experimentation was intertwined with planting traditions learned from the Amerindians they encountered. This complex story has so often been obscured by the notion of the white owners being responsible for the transference of specific plants to Africa on the one hand or to the New World on the other. In that telling, the African him/herself becomes merely the brute labor force with little or no agency in the exchange. This volume's documentation rids us of that view, and we can form anew a more nuanced and rich interpretation of the Columbian Exchange, taken beyond the mere intellectual and economic efforts of the European botanist.

With a final chapter on ‘memory foods’ and African and Afro-American market women (which, in my opinion, could have been longer), the book ends in a way that left me wanting more, yet with so much to absorb that I will have to reread it and dip into it many times to savor the bits I've missed. As it is, there are 73 pages of detailed notes, with material and bibliographic citations for further research screaming from every page. ■

# WHAT EARLY DIETARY STUDIES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS TELL US ABOUT SOUL FOODS

by Robert T. Dirks

*Now residing in Chicago, Robert Dirks is an Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Illinois State University who has specialized in the study of U.S. and international food traditions. His Ph.D dissertation, completed at Case Western Reserve Univ. in 1971, was a study of Networks, Groups, and Local-Level Politics in an Afro-Caribbean Community. He has since published several historical studies of American foodways and nutrition, based in part on data from USDA agriculture experiment stations. Dr. Dirks was guest curator for the current exhibit, "Come & Get It! The Way We Ate 1830-2008", running March 28, 2009 through August 6, 2011 at the McLean County Museum of History in Bloomington, IL.*

Soul food represents a cooking style originated by African-American slaves out of necessity.<sup>1</sup> The problem was cotton and other cash crops, and the way they rendered food production in many parts of the South to a kind of afterthought.

The way the story usually goes, slaves had to produce much of their own food, and with little time available to see to their own needs, they concentrated on vegetables that were easy to grow and store. Their meats were coarse and fatty, not by choice, but because of their masters' begrudging attitude and chronic penny-pinching. Off-cuts of meat, offal, and other cheap foods continued to dominate the bill of fare after slavery because most families could not afford "to live high on the hog". Yet, Black people remained undaunted and made up for their rough and simple fare with a loving attitude in the kitchen and an open-handed generosity with whatever food they had.

Today's soul food harks back to the foodways and dishes of those earlier times. Much of its richness as a cuisine emerges from its pork specialties, among the most famous of which are chitterlings or chitlins (intestines of hogs slow cooked and often eaten with vinegar and hot sauce), cracklins (fried pork skin), fatback (salted pork fat generally used to season vegetables), ham hocks, hog jowls (sliced and usually cooked with chitlins), souse (made from pig snouts, lips, and ears), pigs' feet (sometimes pickled), and ribs. Country fried steak (beef deep fried in flour and usually served with gravy), beef neck bones, fried chicken (with cornmeal or seasoned flour breading) and fried fish (often dredged in cornmeal) count as mainstays. On the vegetable side, one finds black-eyed peas, lima beans, okra (fried or stewed), red beans, and sweet potatoes (sometimes called "yams" in the United States). Biscuits, chow-chow (a spicy pickle relish using a variety of vegetables), cornbread,

grits, hot sauce (cayenne peppers, vinegar, and spices), rice, sorghum, and watermelon represent other soul food classics.

Medical experts consider a diet heavy on soul foods unhealthy. Concerns arise primarily from the common convention of cooking and seasoning with pork fat and because so many dishes are fried, usually in lard or hydrogenated vegetable oil. These practices produce dishes packed with energy and dripping with trans fatty acids. "Trans fats", as they are often called, come from hydrogenated cooking oils. These begin as unsaturated liquids, but in hydrogenated form, they become solid and act like saturated fats. Trans fats raise the level of low-density lipoprotein in the blood ("bad cholesterol") and increase the risk of coronary heart disease. They also decrease levels of high-density lipoprotein that helps remove cholesterol from arteries. All told, a steady diet of soul food without significant exercise leads to disproportionately high occurrences of obesity, hypertension, cardiac and circulatory problems, and diabetes, all too often resulting in early death.

The dangers notwithstanding, many African Americans think of soul food as comfort food. It recollects family and friends and, in keeping with its name, it is supposed to feed the spirit as well as the body. People regard it as part of their ancestral heritage and as an emblem of ethnic identity. Soul food restaurants ranging from chicken shacks to upscale dining rooms exist all across the nation, and in big cities with large Black populations like New York and Chicago, one finds them in especially large numbers.

This was not the case around 1900 when researchers studied food consumption among African Americans in New York, Philadelphia, and other metropolitan areas. Dieters collected back then told of Blacks eating sweet potatoes in such places, but otherwise soul food ingredients were scarcely seen. Projects conducted in the South did document diets prototypical of modern soul food, but at the time they existed as regional rather than strictly ethnic traditions.

This article recounts these historic diets and examines their relationships to geography and commerce. It compares African American eating habits across a rural-urban continuum reaching from remote regions of Alabama and Eastern Virginia into metropolitan areas of the Northeast. The progressive expansion and improvement of diet along this continuum and the absence of soul foods at the metropolitan end appear to have been a response to available alternatives in the marketplace and a result of rational choices on the part of consumers.

## Tuskegee and the Black Belt

Of the thousands of Southern towns and villages dedicated to cotton culture and otherwise well qualified to host the USDA's Office of Experimental Studies' (OES) first look at African American food habits, Director W. O. Atwater and his staff picked Tuskegee, Alabama, home of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute and its principal, Booker T. Washington.<sup>2</sup> Destined to become one of the country's foremost schools of higher education for Blacks, the institute was only four years old at this point, but already Washington was a respected figure among educators and well on his way to becoming nationally influential. Atwater saw him as a reliable



collaborator and had no trouble convincing him of the value of dietary studies. Washington received an administrative appointment and won federal dollars for the institute. Atwater sent his own investigator, H. M. Smith, to actually carry out the project.

Smith did not work alone. He began fieldwork in the Spring of 1895 assisted by J. W. Hoffman, a member of Tuskegee's staff. The two men completed their work in June. Hoffman undertook another round of research in December and worked through February to record Winter eating habits. The task of recruiting subjects for both phases of the project fell to the institute's farm manager. He enlisted a total of 18 families, including his own.

This small sample covered a range of social and economic conditions. Several families resided in Tuskegee proper. Most, however, were tenant farmers and plantation workers, some living as far as nine miles away. Those in or near the village lived in relative comfort, especially if attached to the institute. Others, especially those employed on large plantations, lived in dire poverty and were typical of the majority of African Americans inhabiting the so-called "Black Belt", a fertile plain stretching approximately 300 miles (480 km.) across central Alabama and northeastern Mississippi.

The Black Belt's African American inhabitants were for the most part a rural proletariat. Around Tuskegee, they rented between 20 and 60 acres of land and worked it behind their own mule or ox. Many families owned at least one pig and several chickens in addition to a draft animal. Folks living in and near the village usually kept a cow. They devoted most of their land to cotton, their cash crop. For subsistence, they raised corn, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, and sorghum, but rarely did anyone grow enough of these to meet household needs year around. To make matters worse, only a few families kept kitchen gardens for growing collards, turnips, and other vegetables.

Cotton's prior claim on people's time and energy extended to everyone strong enough to lift a hoe. Their labors peaked for several weeks twice a year. Beginning in March and running through June, planting demanded an all-out effort. This was the same time of year farmers would otherwise be putting in subsistence crops. Picking got underway in mid-August and continued through November and was every bit as intense as planting. In between planting and picking came a "laying-by time", an interlude for resting up, visiting, and attending camp meetings. People normally spent the Winter doing little or nothing. Folks occasionally collected wood for sale, repaired fences, or made chairs or baskets, but very few found wage work.

Living conditions were meager. Tenant housing throughout the region consisted mainly of one- or two-room log cabins barely furnished. Families usually possessed a couple of rope bedsteads, corn-shuck mattresses, and patchwork quilts. Some owned a clock, though often it failed to keep time. Typical household goods included a small cupboard, a few dishes, a wooden chest or old trunk for holding food and clothing, a pine table, a few chairs, a pair of andirons, and an iron pot. Not many families possessed cooking stoves.



**Children of plantation sharecropper Lonnie Fair prepare food on a wood stove in a sparsely furnished shack in Mississippi.**  
(1936 photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt/ LIFE)

Homemakers prepared meals in front of the fireplace using fatty pieces of salt pork, lard, cornmeal, and molasses. Table 1 shows these at the core of the Tuskegee diet. The table also situates wheat flour as a core item, but it had become cheap enough to use as a staple only recently. The biscuit at this point was a newcomer to local tables.

*continued on next page*

**Table 1. Typical Diet, Tuskegee, Alabama  
Winter and Spring 1895-1896**

	Meat & Dairy	Grains & Dried Legumes	Fats, Oils, Sugars & Starches	Roots & Tubers	Other Veg.	Fruits & Miscell.
Primary Core	bacon	cornmeal wheat flour	lard sugar molasses			
Secondary Core	fresh pork milk buttermilk		butter	sweet potato	greens	
Periphery	egg	rice cowpeas				

## DIETARY STUDIES *continued from page 9*

Cured pork, on the other hand, was a long-standing staple. However, by the 1890's it was no longer a local or even a regional product. In one cabin after another, researchers found commercially packed bacon from Chicago. The very term "meat", they learned, meant fatty pork. Some of their subjects claimed to be unfamiliar with any other type of animal flesh except chicken and certain game species such as opossum and rabbit. For that matter, not many whites in the area ate any meat other than salt pork. When Atwater and his colleague, Charles Woods, visited Tuskegee, they seldom saw beef on the hotel menu.

Tuskegee families prepared simple meals. Cooking involved placing a thin slice of bacon or salt pork in a frying pan and putting some dough made from cornmeal and water in a skillet or on the flat surface of a hoe. These implements were then placed over a fire for about 10 or 15 minutes. The pork was fried crisp by this time. People often mixed molasses into the leftover grease to make "sap", which they poured over their corn bread or "hoe cake". Such was the standard repast throughout the year.

Now and again, there were additions and variations. During late Autumn or Winter, fresh pork and sweet potatoes were sometimes served, and occasionally someone prepared an opossum dinner. For this, the carcass was seasoned with red peppers and baked surrounded by sweet potatoes in a big pot. Everyone made "cracklin bread" from time to time by frying fat until brittle and crushing it into a mixture of cornmeal, water, soda, and salt. In addition, people boiled collards or turnips with pork fat every so often. The fat, they said, gave the vegetables a "rich" taste. Cow owners had milk, most of which they converted to butter in little glazed earthenware churns called "splashes". Churning produced a small saucer of watery butter. Folks ate it fresh and enjoyed the buttermilk as a beverage.

Vegetables other than sweet potatoes were peripheral to the typical Tuskegee diet. Only the unspecified greens listed in Table 1 showed up in an appreciable number of households. Researchers came across collards only once. Every other vegetable they tallied, including beets, cabbage, green corn, okra, onions, string beans, and tomatoes, was found exclusively in but one household, that of the institute's farm manager. His family and another family associated with the institute ate the only fruits identified in the study.

The disparity between families connected to the institute and the other families studied went beyond fruit and vegetable consumption. Institute households were singular in their use of chicken and mutton, and with but one exception, they accounted for all of the beef consumed. The diets of institute families were twice as varied as those of other folks. Ordinary households in some cases subsisted on as few as four commodities over the course of two weeks of observation.

The underlying problem was that tenants and plantation hands all across the Black Belt remained in a kind of bondage for many decades after Emancipation. Instead of frank slavery, African Americans in Alabama labored at this time under a form of debt peonage locally referred to as "the mortgage system". Landowners under this arrangement made loans,

enabling tenants to buy seed, tools, and provisions sufficient to last the growing season. Tenants in return signed a "waive note", giving lenders first right to whatever portion of the crop they needed to settle the debt. What with high rates of interest, a tenant had little cotton left to sell after the landlord took his share. Even a tenant who made good money on a crop had to subsist for a time on scant rations because usually savings were gone by February. In the meantime, households exhausted whatever corn and molasses they had in store, having to rely all the more heavily on purchased provisions until they exhausted their credit. People at this point had to go hungry and wait until the following Spring when, once again, credit became available.

### The Dismal Swamp, Eastern Virginia

The OES followed up its Alabama study with two projects in Eastern Virginia. The first looked into the eating habits of Black families settled in the Great Dismal Swamp of Franklin County.<sup>3</sup> The second dealt with families in Elizabeth City County, including the town of Hampton, a Chesapeake Bay port on the north side of Hampton Roads.<sup>4</sup> Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (today's Hampton University), a U.S. land-grant school dedicated to the education of African and Native Americans, sponsored both inquiries.

H. B. Frissell, principal of Hampton Institute, compiled the Franklin County dietaries based on 12 household inventories collected during the Spring of 1897. The venture seemed in jeopardy at first. Recruiting subjects and weighing their foods required traveling back and forth through a malaria-infested area seldom visited by outsiders. Because of the unusual comings and goings, local whites became alarmed. Fortunately, Frissell's patient explanations calmed their fears.

The project focused on the foods and consumption patterns of humble farmers, most of whom rented small tracts of land and lived in tiny cabins near their cultivations. Frame dwellings covered with boards contained a fireplace for cooking and heating as well as lighting, since few families had the means to purchase lamp oil or candles.

Farmers cultivated in the Great Dismal Swamp by establishing so-called "dead-tree farms". This required girdling the trees on a piece of land, removing the underbrush, and planting cotton, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and other crops amidst the still-standing trunks. Food in this area was largely home produced, and landlords customarily collected rents in produce (sometimes as much as half of the crop). Some farmers supplemented their agricultural efforts with earnings from odd jobs. They received their wages in the form of "rations" rather than money. A number of families never went to the store or at most purchased a few cents worth of salt. Others occasionally bought canned goods and small quantities of baking powder, green coffee or tea, and vinegar.

Frissell characterized the local diet as "hog and hominy", similar to Alabama's. It was somewhat more varied, however. For one thing, bacon was not the only form of pork other than lard in the core diet (see Table 2). People boiled pork shoulders and ate boiled ham fairly often. Side meat was fried and served with a cornbread called "ash cake". People made ash cakes from unbolted cornmeal containing large amounts of bran.

Table 2. Typical Diet, Franklin County, Virginia, Spring 1897

	Meat & Dairy	Grains & Dried Legumes	Fats, Oils, Sugars & Starches	Roots & Tubers	Other Veg.	Fruits & Miscell.
Primary Core	pork shoulder salt pork herring	cornmeal wheat flour	lard sugar	sweet potato	cabbage greens	
Secondary Core	bacon fresh fish					
Periphery	ham pork sausage pork jowl egg milk	corn bread	brown sugar molasses		collard sprouts canned tomato	apple strawberry canned peach

They mixed the meal with water, which was often brackish and muddy, but added no salt or leavening. The cake baked directly in the hot ashes of the fireplace.

Table 2 shows at the core of Franklin County's diet several foods that were peripheral to Tuskegee's. Sweet potatoes, cabbage, and mustard greens came to the table frequently, often accompanied by a bit of smoked or salted herring for extra flavor. Franklin County residents also had local fish and ate frogs and turtles and even snakes at certain times of the year. Fresh beef (both flank and shoulder), dried beef, beef liver, pork liver, chitterlings, haslet (meat loaf from pork offal), chicken, and eel were items inventoried in at least one household. Other uncommon foods included white bread, sponge cake, canned blackberries, canned peaches, and various pickles.

#### Elizabeth City County, VA

Atwater dispatched a student, Isabel Bevier, to collect dietaries in and around Hampton, VA during the Spring of 1898.<sup>5</sup> The town and the surrounding county of Elizabeth City were far removed from the Great Dismal Swamp. Indeed, if we

take the Franklin County sample to represent an approximation of a folk community (small, isolated, culturally homogeneous, producing first and foremost for subsistence with little use for cash), Bevier's materials, collected from seven households, stand a world apart and represent a much more metropolitan way of life.

Everyone in Elizabeth City County was immersed in commerce and industry. Many owned small plots of land on which they raised two crops a year. Early vegetables were shipped north. Later in the season, potatoes, peas, sweet corn, and various fruits went to Washington, DC and other nearby markets. Besides this truck farming, African Americans held jobs in the local fishing industry and in the shipyards at Newport News. They also plied a variety of trades and professions in Hampton or owned businesses there.

Bevier conducted three of her dietaries in Hampton proper and four in areas outside of town. Two of the families in town lived in large, well-furnished homes. The others lived in small frame houses. The walls inside of these were covered with

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**A study of the cow by a class at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, Virginia.**

Photo:  
Frances Benjamin Johnston, c. 1900.

Harvard Art Museum/  
Fogg Museum, on  
deposit from the  
Carpenter Center for  
the Visual Arts, Social  
Museum Collection.



**The dining table of a graduate of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, Virginia.**

Photo:  
Frances Benjamin Johnston, c. 1900.

Harvard Art Museum/  
Fogg Museum, on  
deposit from the  
Carpenter Center for  
the Visual Arts, Social  
Museum Collection.

## DIETARY STUDIES *continued from page 11*

newspaper, and the furniture frequently consisted of no more than a couple of chairs, a bench, a table, and a cupboard. Less often, there was a stove. About half of the county's residents owned a cow. Most kept chickens and a pig and raised vegetables such as corn, sweet potato, and cabbage in small gardens.

Consumption patterns reflected Hampton's location and commercial orientation. Not unexpectedly, fresh fish was a primary constituent in the local diet, but pork was consumed as frequently and in even greater quantities. Families fortunate enough to own a pig killed it in December and ate it over the course of the Winter. Most, however, had to content themselves with "white meat", a euphemism for salt pork shipped from Chicago. County residents also purchased various forms of commercially processed beef. Indeed, if smoked, chipped, and corned beef are taken together, they counted as yet another primary component in the typical diet. Bacon, ham, and chicken were all secondary.

Dairy products were also peripheral. Those who owned a cow built a box-like structure and called it "the dairy". It stood near the house on wooden legs about two feet above the ground. Whatever milk the cow produced was taken there and churned into butter. The children drank the buttermilk. The butter itself went to the store in exchange for groceries. Primary foods brought home from the store included cornmeal, wheat flour, rice, granulated sugar, and cabbage. White bread was also popular and mainly store-bought. Still, there were those who regarded bread as tasteless and avoided it entirely. As a result, biscuits and "hoe cakes" made from cornmeal ranked as the most popular breadkinds.

## Philadelphia and Washington

Ellen Richards and Amelia Shapleigh's Philadelphia dietaries and S. E. Foreman's Washington budgetaries introduce us to the food habits of communities far more metropolitan in character than Hampton.<sup>6</sup> Carried out in 1892 and intended to assess the nutrition of the various ethnicities served by a local settlement house, Richards and Shapleigh's work recorded the eating habits of five African American households. Foreman, who tabulated the expenses of 19 impoverished households over three-week periods during the Summer of 1905 and again for two weeks during the Winter of 1906, identified two of his cases as African American.

We have only bits of information about the groups that took part in these studies. Notes concerning the Philadelphia households identified two of them as childless, the rest as containing from one to five children. Adult women outnumbered adult men in the sample, nine to four. Foreman wrote brief sketches of his households. One consisted of an elderly rag picker, his wife, and three children, ages 13, 14, and 17. The other, headed by a flour-mill worker and his wife, contained five children ranging in age from one to 14. The rag picker brought home no more than five dollars a week, but his wife took in washing, and each week she earned an additional two or three dollars. The family occupied four rooms with no running water in a two-story frame building located in an alley. The flour-mill laborer earned nine dollars a week, but his wife too did laundry to make ends meet. They rented a two-story frame house containing four small rooms but no toilet.

Table 3 combines the Philadelphia dietaries with Foreman's Winter budgetaries to represent a typical African American urban diet for the cold-weather months. Here the



**Table 3. Typical Diet of Poor African Americans  
in Philadelphia, Winter 1892 and Washington, Winter 1906**

	Meat & Dairy	Grains & Dried Legumes	Fats, Oils, Sugars & Starches	Roots & Tubers	Other Veg.	Fruits & Miscell.
<b>Primary Core</b>	fresh beef milk	white bread	butter sugar	potato sweet potato		
<b>Secondary Core</b>	pork sausage	rice beans			cabbage	
<b>Periphery</b>	fresh pork ham bacon pudding fresh mutton sheep liver chicken fresh fish egg	wheat flour oatmeal cornmeal scrapple hominny bun pie cake	lard	onion	canned tomato	apple

absence of cured pork, cornmeal, and lard from the core diet signal unequivocally a table very different from that set further South. With whole milk replacing buttermilk as a core item and with beef, white bread, and potatoes as staples, the diet represented here appears to have been not much different from the diet of the white poor, save for the core presence of the sweet potato.

The near absence of green vegetables from the table is a seasonal artifact. Foreman's Summer budgetaries listed kale, spinach, spurry, and string beans. Both Washington families switched from cornmeal to wheat flour for the Summer but continued to consume potatoes, sweet potatoes, and cabbage. Peanuts too were used in both Summer and Winter.

### New York City Mothers

In the Fall of 1916 and the Winter of 1917, Alfred Hess and Lester Unger measured the food consumption of African American mothers in New York City.<sup>7</sup> Their purpose was to discover the cause of rickets in children. The two investigators suspected (wrongly) that the central problem was maternal nutrition. Research to test their hypothesis focused on the Columbus Hill area of the city where the disease was especially common. Coincidentally, most of the residents were Black and came from the West Indies.

*continued on next page*



**African American  
tenements in the  
shadow of the  
Capitol building  
(Temple Court  
off D Street and  
Delaware Avenue  
SW), Washington,  
DC.**

Photo:  
Marion Post  
Wolcott,  
c. 1940,  
U.S. Farm Security  
Administration  
Collection.

## DIETARY STUDIES *continued from page 13*

Hess and Unger did not publish a detailed listing of foods consumed by the women they studied. However, they did report that most of them ate either meat or fish daily, accompanied by either rice or potatoes. Fruits and other vegetables were eaten on average twice a week. During late Autumn and Winter, the consumption of fresh vegetables fell to about one day in every 10.

As for the children's diets, the researchers offered almost no information. However, we know now that rickets is caused by a deficiency in vitamin D and that the disease was an especially serious problem among Blacks. The reason is that vitamin D is produced by skin stimulated by ultraviolet rays, normally from the sun. Dark skin impedes the process, and when dark-skinned people reside in northern latitudes and other places receiving scant sunlight, the situation can become dangerous. Around the time that Hess and Unger were conducting their inquiry, an estimated 80% of all infants in Boston showed signs of rickets. Studies of the disease in New Haven and New Orleans found it to be widespread, especially among African Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Few foods other than fish offer plenty of vitamin D. Liver, which happens to be a good source, has never been very popular in the United States, but still, it does show up as peripheral in Table 3. Taking Philadelphia alone, it counted as a core food. Perhaps settlement workers recommended sheep liver. Maybe families discovered its efficacy on their own. Whatever the case, its salience suggests that African American households were addressing the threat of rickets in at least one urban area.

### The Institute for Colored Youth, Cheyney, PA

The Institute for Colored Youth, located in Cheyney, PA and now known as Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, stood amidst a rustic landscape in the southeastern part of the state, but it was an exceedingly metropolitan institution committed to the most modern and progressive ideas of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This was exemplified in a nutritional context in 1906 when the administration found itself no longer able to find suppliers willing to provision the school's kitchen at wholesale prices.<sup>9</sup> The problem was to provide 60 boarding students with nutritious and affordable meals while paying retail for the ingredients.

School officials addressed their predicament aggressively and applied modern principles of management at every turn. Staff members kept a watchful eye over storeroom, kitchen, and dining room. Their instructions were to measure everything and to exercise the strictest economies from initial purchase to final disposal. Faculty integrated cost reduction into the domestic science curriculum and tried to engage the entire student body in finding ways to reduce expenses. These endeavors paid off. By the end of the 1907-1908 school year, the cost of feeding a Cheyney student had been pared to 21 cents a day.

To celebrate, the administration proudly published a dining hall dietary for the month of October, 1907 and daily menus for the entire school year.<sup>10</sup> These show that school officials, in spite of their concern for cost-cutting, did not saddle students with dreary and unappetizing meals. Throughout the economy

drive, Cheyney students received plenty of meat (especially cuts of fresh beef), milk, butter, bread, and potatoes. These standard components of the core diet were supplemented with fresh fish, mutton or lamb, rice, and tomatoes nearly every month. Other items came and went. Apples, primary in October, disappeared by January. Eggs, hardly eaten in October, became a core food in April. Such changes reflected seasonal availabilities and prices. Other switches, such as the sudden appearance of a generic breakfast cereal as a core item of diet in July, might have been opportunistic—a good price for whatever reason at the time. During the month of October, the kitchen used more than 95 different commodities. Weekly menus listed approximately 70 distinct dishes. Most of the recipes came from Fannie Farmer's *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*.<sup>11</sup>

### Continuities and Discontinuities

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the notion of soul food had not been invented, and there was no equation between African American identity and any particular style of food. Food habits ranged from the "hog and hominy" traditions of the rural South to the respectable middle-class tastes of the Institute for Colored Youth, where beef outranked pork and wheat always surpassed corn.

From the standpoint of culinary tastes and preferences, there was but one obvious thread common to African American culture. The sweet potato had a home everywhere. More than side meat and corn bread, it occupied an important place in folks' diets from the cotton lands of the Black Belt to the slums of Philadelphia. This was obscured somewhat by its seasonality. From an annual perspective, for instance, sweet potato appeared to be a secondary item in the Tuskegee diet (see Table 1). Nevertheless, when Autumn and Winter rolled around it became a primary food. As such, the sweet potato was fried or boiled into a soup or perhaps a pot of candied yams. It might be baked directly in the fireplace ashes or in an oven. Sweet potatoes were baked into biscuits, breads, muffins, pies, and soufflés. They were baked with pork and apples and sometimes twice-baked with brown sugar, raisins, and spices. At the Institute for Colored Youth the sweet potato often arrived at the table mixed with egg, flour, and baking powder, fried, and served as a puff. In whatever guise, it rated as a dining-hall regular.

In Philadelphia and Washington, where researchers looked at Black and white families in similar circumstances, the sweet potato proved distinctive. Immigrants might have been unfamiliar with it. Other whites outside the South appeared uninterested. Overall, sweet potatoes appeared in only about 25% of the dietaries gathered during the Atwater era. However, if one takes African American cases alone, they show up in nearly 50% of the dietaries collected irrespective of season. Among Southern whites, they appear in no less than 40%.

The picture was mixed for other Southern favorites. Pork sausage, rice, beans, and cabbage rated as core items in Philadelphia and Washington among Blacks, but these same items were also popular among whites. Bacon, which counted as a secondary commodity among Blacks, was more popular among certain whites, including English and Irish immigrants. Ham, chicken, cornmeal, and hominy occupied the periphery of

**African American children playing in the Defrees Alley, NE Washington, DC.**

Photo:  
Marion Post  
Wolcott,  
c. 1940,  
U.S. Farm  
Security  
Administration  
Collection.



the African American diet in Philadelphia and Washington and were used even less often, if at all, in white households.

Today, we think of these foods as important components of the soul food tradition. As such, they represent Southern roots and the African American ancestral experience. A century ago, however, most of these foods were far from prominent on African American tables, even in the rural South. Beans, for example, were all but absent from the typical diets of Tuskegee or Franklin County. Dried peas and rice were rarely encountered. The Tuskegee series consisting of 20 dietaries lists cowpeas twice and rice three times. Just one of the dozen families visited in the Great Dismal Swamp ate peas, and none used rice. Leafy greens such as collards and mustard, basic to the soul food tradition, appeared in just five of the Tuskegee dietaries.

Some meats regarded as traditional also made rare appearances. Ham was peripheral to the typical diets of African American households in Eastern Virginia and entirely absent from Tuskegee. Chicken showed up in three of the Virginia dietaries and just twice in Tuskegee. The Tuskegee fieldworkers did not see pork sausage at all. The Virginia studies cited it only three times.

Location and season, of course, can be blamed for some of these absences. In Franklin County, for instance, the dietaries contain no record of anyone eating rice and beans. However, given greater access to markets, rice and beans became mealtime regulars, as exemplified by the typical diet in Elizabeth City County where rice was a core item and beans were an important peripheral. Conversely, the sweet potato

remained a staple in Franklin County even in the Spring, but it was missing at that time of the year from menus in the Hampton area. Chicken, absent from Tuskegee households during the cold months, became a peripheral part of the diet in the Spring. Fresh pork appeared in 25% of Tuskegee's households in the Winter but went entirely missing in the Spring.

While some traditional foods actually may never have been central to African American diets, others frankly lost popularity as one moved from isolated, rural settings toward increasingly metropolitan environments. Such was the case with salted pork sides and cornbread. For example, families in Franklin County ate salt pork and almost no beef. Around Hampton, a more commercial area, salt pork remained at the center of the typical diet, but corned and other forms of cured beef were also popular. Fresh beef and pork, often reduced to sausage, bumped bacon to the secondary core in Philadelphia and Washington, and pushed salt pork to the periphery of the typical diet. Finally, at Cheyney we see pork in any form other than ham served only occasionally.

The diminished importance of cornmeal, bacon, and salt pork in urban and more cosmopolitan settings was largely an economic matter. Cornmeal in Eastern Virginia cost families a mere half-cent per kilogram, but in Philadelphia, customers paid twice as much. Consequently, Italian immigrants, noted for their inflexible food habits, used it more than Blacks. Bacon in rural Eastern Virginia could be had for as little as a penny per kilogram. A kilo of salt pork cost about four cents. The

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# DIETARY STUDIES *continued from page 15*

price for both increased to five cents in Hampton and Philadelphia. At that price, one could buy fresh pork chops and shoulders. Beef rounds and chuck sold for only a penny or two more. Besides that, spoilage was not the big problem it was in the country. Nearby shops sold fresh meat in small quantities.

## Nutritional Superiority of Metropolitan Diets

Blacks in metropolitan areas were generally better nourished than their rural counterparts. This is evident from the average nutritional values presented in Table 4. Here the values for Tuskegee represent the diets of tenant farmers and plantation laborers only and pertain exclusively to the Spring. This renders them directly comparable to the statistics for Eastern Virginia. For Philadelphia, all of the dietaries were collected during the Winter. The averages for Cheyney relate specifically to the Fall. Note, however, that in spite of these seasonal differences, and no matter that one set of averages came from urban welfare recipients and the other from an educated elite, the Cheyney and Philadelphia values align closely with one another. Furthermore, their diets rank higher in protein and are more varied in composition than most if not all of their less metropolitan counterparts.

Taking the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization's (WHO) 0.75 g of high quality protein per kg of body weight to be a safe daily allowance, the protein contents of the diets represented in the table range from marginal or worse at Tuskegee to very generous at the Institute for Colored Youth. Tuskegee's problem was protein quality. The FAO/WHO recommendation, which amounts to 51 g./day for an Atwater man-unit, assumes protein sources such as meat, fish, eggs, and milk. The table shows the Tuskegee diet as providing an average of only 23 g. of protein/man/day from

these types of food. To make matters worse, the table refers to what was probably the highpoint of the year in terms of protein supply. Franklin County residents did considerably better, owing in part to the ecological complexity of their wetlands and its ample fish and game resources. The average intake of protein from animal sources in the more metropolitan Elizabeth City County was slightly higher than Franklin County's, and in Philadelphia, it was higher still. Nevertheless, the intake of animal protein in all of these communities was generally inferior to averages for poor whites. This was not true of total protein intakes, however. From Franklin County to Philadelphia the total protein content of diets was comparable on average to that of white Americans, including salaried professionals. Similarly, the total protein value of meals served at The Institute for Colored Youth averaged about the same as that of white students.

Indeed, if one takes averages at the Institute for Colored Youth as generally indicative of nutrition among comfortably situated Blacks, it would appear there was nothing particularly distinctive about African American nutrition at the metropolitan end of the continuum. The cooks at Cheyney prepared meals along standard lines. The school's menu for the first 15 days of October shows the dining hall regularly met modern USDA minimum serving recommendations in the "Meat", "Dairy", and "Vegetable" food categories. In the area of "Fruits", students received the prescribed minimum of two servings about every other day, but every day there was at least one fruit on the table. At least three different items from the "Bread, Cereal, Rice, & Pasta" group were offered daily. An extra slice or two of bread and second helpings would have provided the six servings recommended for this category. The biggest problem perhaps was 2-5 daily servings of "Fats, Oils and Sweets", foods the USDA advises to "use sparingly".

Table 4. Average Nutritional Values, Various African American Diets, 1895-1906

PEOPLE & PLACES	Animal Carb. (g/d)	Animal Protein (g/d)	% Energy Animal Fat	% Energy Animal Products	% Food Budget Animal	
Cheyney Students (Fall)	36	79	32	n.d.	n.d.	
Philadelphia Poor (Winter)	17	59	34	44	59	
Elizabeth City County (Spring)	14	57	32	41	61	
Franklin County (Spring)	9	54	35	43	59	
Tuskegee (Spring)	11	23	33	38	55	
PEOPLE & PLACES	Vegetable Carb. (g/d)	Total Protein (g/d)	Total Fat (g/d)	Total Energy (kcal/d)	Variety (foods/wk)	
					Avg	Max
Cheyney Students (Fall)	378	112	118	3245	22	n.a.
Philadelphia Poor (Winter)	357	107	121	3001	20	30
Elizabeth City County (Spring)	447	110	151	3751	17	27
Franklin County (Spring)	445	111	165	3735	4	8
Tuskegee (Spring)	499	73	161	3882	4	5



Fat intake among the students was roughly the same as that in the other African American communities sampled by first-generation nutritionists. Fat consumption as a percentage of energy supply, as reported in Table 4, fell within a narrow range. It was lowest for Cheyney and Elizabeth City County, but barely higher for Tuskegee, and again only slightly higher for Philadelphia and Franklin County.

With respect to animal fats alone, much the same story. One might expect animal fats to have contributed less to energy values in Tuskegee and Franklin County because such tends to be the case in under-developed parts of the world, but neither Tuskegee nor Franklin County was truly under-developed. Tuskegee had a bucolic, agrarian look, but life there actually had a more industrial than agricultural ethos. Franklin County had "regressed" somewhat. Folks in the swamplands, especially after Emancipation, were able to find some refuge from the agro-industrial world and live as a kind of subsistence-oriented quasi-peasantry, but around Tuskegee that was never an option. Farmers all across the Black Belt had to pin their hopes on cash crops while sustaining themselves on credit and mostly store-bought foods. Thus, communities that on the surface seemed out of the economic mainstream were actually heavily involved in commerce.

The quintessential expression of this was Saturday shopping, an exercise as ritualistic as it was practical. From mid-morning on, tenants and laborers in the vicinity of Tuskegee converged on the town, ostensibly to pick up a few

supplies.<sup>12</sup> The actual shopping might have taken one person ten minutes or so to accomplish. Nonetheless, entire families made the trip and spent half the day standing in front of stores, smoking and conversing.

The scene on Sunday morning shifted from the shopping center to the church or, as Washington put it, to "some big meeting".<sup>13</sup> Ideally, this was to be followed in the afternoon by a substantial dinner, but as far as the rest of the week was concerned, there was little of the daily bread-breaking that is supposed to bring families together. Quite the contrary, mealtimes appeared straight out of a harried manufacturing setting. Sitting down at the table to eat a meal was an awkward experience because family members usually ate alone and often on the go. Father frequently would take his breakfast meat and bread in hand and be out the door and on his way to his field, eating as he went. Mother regularly took her meal alone in the corner, directly from the frying pan. Children too young to help in the fields ate in snatches while cavorting about the yard.

The only thing genuinely "folk" about the Tuskegee diet was that it was plain and simple. No ordinary cotton farmer during the Spring of the year used more than five different commodities per week (see Table 4). For Franklin County's families, there was greater geographic potential for diversity, but for many, it went unrealized. Thus, as the table indicates, one household used eight food items per week. Others

*continued on next page*



**A successful Black-owned food store in Washington, DC.**

Photo: Kelly Miller and Joseph R. Gay, *Progress and Achievements of the Colored People* (Washington, DC: Austin Jenkins, 1917)

## DIETARY STUDIES *continued from page 17*

consumed just two or three. Elizabeth City's residents, fully engaged with metropolitan markets, enjoyed far greater variety with a weekly average of 17 distinct foods. The average came to 22 items per week for families living in town. But, surprisingly, welfare clients in Philadelphia did even better (see Table 4). For that matter, the two nearly destitute Washington families studied by Foreman purchased an average of 13 different foods per week, in effect enjoying a much greater variety of foods than the OES's sample of Southern farmers. Comparing average food expenditures among all of the groups for which we have data suggests that when African Americans had more money to spend on food they opted to diversify their diets rather than simply to eat more of the same.

Here it is important to stress the issue is not migration. At this point in American history, Blacks rarely relocated from the South to the North or from rural to urban locations. Nonetheless, some have interpreted the lack of interest in pork, cornbread, and other icons of Southern cuisine among urban Blacks prior to World War I as a kind of betrayal of African American culture. Tracy Poe, for instance, has portrayed the origins of soul food as a matter of African Americans no longer willing to "bend down to anyone", but just to be themselves.<sup>14</sup> According to Poe, Black Chicagoans prior to the Great Migration held fast to the integrationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington and aspired to respectable middle-class white values. Consequently, they emulated Euro-American foodways and looked down on Southern Blacks and their tastes as backward.

Unfortunately, Richards and Shapleigh offered no information about how the families they sampled felt about Southern cooking, nor do we know how the men and women attending the Institute for Colored Youth might react to the typical foods of the Black Belt. But, there are data to suggest cost and convenience were of concern. Folks in the city were not about to eat in a hog-and-hominy tradition when lean meat could be had for about the same price as pork fat and cornmeal was more expensive than wheat flour. The stage for the eventual success of Southern style food in the urban North would be set soon enough by the Great Migration and the arrival of masses of people anxious for a taste of home. Its christening as "soul food" awaited the arrival of the late 1950's and newfound commercial and political values attached to ethnic identity. By then, the infrastructure would be fully in place to eat like an Alabama cotton farmer who was somehow able to put the foods of Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter on the table every day, all year long, and never worry about a Winter of unremitting bacon, corn bread, and molasses. ■

### Endnotes

1. See Burke, 1995.
2. Atwater and Woods, 1897.
3. Frissell, 1899.
4. Bevier, 1899.
5. Bevier, who would go on to found the Department of Household Science at the University of Illinois, studied with Ellen Richards at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. See Bane, 1955.
6. Richards and Shapleigh, 1903; Foreman, 1906.

7. Hess and Unger, 1918.
8. Steinbock, 1993, p. 979.
9. Institute for Colored Youth at Cheyney, 1909.
10. Institute for Colored Youth at Cheyney, 1909.
11. Farmer, 1896.
12. Washington, 1901, p. 115.
13. Washington, 1901, p. 115.
14. Poe, 1999, p. 1.

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# MORSELS & TIDBITS

We read recently that British curry was a dish served on the ill-fated voyage of the *Titanic*. But what exactly is this “curry”—an authentic Indian dish, or a British colonial invention? That is one of the questions explored in *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006; 352 pp., \$28 cloth, \$15.95 paper) by Cambridge-trained historian **Lizzie Collingham**. Her study ranges well beyond curry to survey the entire history of the Indian diet, each chapter focusing on one particular food or beverage as a way to recount a specific era of culinary change. Examining the contributions of interlopers as diverse as Mughal, Portuguese, and British, Collingham argues that “authentic Indian cuisine” is itself a mythical construct, because the foodways of the subcontinent have been all flux and fusion throughout historic times.

Turmeric powder is perhaps best known as the key spice in curry. But people in India and elsewhere in Asia have also used the powder medicinally since ancient times, providing an effective treatment for fevers, colds, coughs, and wounds. Last year, a University of Michigan team of researchers, led by chemistry and biophysics professor **Ayyalusamy Ramamoorthy**, published their discovery as to why turmeric has these curative properties. They found that curcumin, the characteristic molecule in turmeric, binds to cell membranes and hardens the lipid bilayers there, making the membrane more rigid and thus resistant to viruses, carcinogens, and oxidants. Researchers at the UM Medical School are now investigating whether curcumin derivatives can be synthesized and used as pharmaceuticals.

**Henry B. Voigt**, a DuPont executive in Wilmington, DE whose menu collection was once profiled in an article in *Gastronomica* (Fall 2005), launched a blog this March called “The American Menu” ([www.theamericanmenu.com](http://www.theamericanmenu.com)). Visitors can inspect selected menus from his collection and read the stories behind them. Recent blog entries take up such topics as an April 16, 1865 menu from Massasoit House in Springfield, MA, marked with a black border of mourning because Pres. Lincoln had died the day before; menus from the short-lived craze for church suppers based on all-corn dishes (1886-1888); and the bilingual (French/English) menus of the restaurant at Holland House, a luxury hotel in 1890’s New York City, where the waiters were paid 83 cents a day but were fined 50 cents for talking together during lulls in service.

America’s first national business chain of any kind— long before McDonald’s, White Castle, or Horn and Hardart, even before Woolworth’s or Sears, Roebuck and Co.— was a network of eateries called Harvey Houses. Beginning in the 1880’s, Fred Harvey established his restaurants and lunch counters in the train stations of the Santa Fe Railroad, and eventually inside railroad dining cars, along highways like Route 66, and in big-city hotels. Now **Stephen Fried**, an adjunct professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, has completed the first biography of Harvey, *Appetite for America: How Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire that Civilized the Wild West* (New York: Bantam, 2010; 544 pp., \$27 cloth). The book recounts the impact on American culture of the business empire that Harvey and his family maintained for six decades. These restaurants— with their extravagant menus and wine lists and their uniformly courteous waitresses (“the Harvey Girls”),

even in the train stations of parched desert towns— set an industry standard for quality and service. The chain also introduced regional American cuisines to different parts of the country, and pioneered in Americanizing various international cuisines.

**On the Back Burner:** We invite ideas and submissions for *Repast*, including for these planned future theme-issues: Historical Stoves and Other Kitchen Equipment (Summer 2010); Dining in Medieval and Renaissance England (Fall 2010). Suggestions for future themes are also welcome. ■

## The Belly of Paris

This year marks the approximate 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Les Halles, the vast, crowded central food market of Paris that would thrive for more than eight centuries. In the year 1110 or thereabouts, King Louis VI granted to some peasant women the right to set up fish stalls outside his palace. In subsequent years other merchants paid the monarch to get their own share of space, and by 1137 the food market, at 21 acres, had become the world’s largest. In 1183, King Philippe-Auguste enlarged it still further and built two house-like structures (*halles*) to provide some shelter.

Les Halles, known as “the belly of Paris”, would play an important role in the excellence of French cuisine. Growers in the Île de France region surrounding Paris competed to bring to the huge market fresh produce and other foodstuffs that were of the highest possible quality, because these would command the highest prices in the constant haggling with customers. Farmers and fishermen hauled in their wares on animal-drawn wagons, and the buying and selling began before dawn. Purchasers included retail middlemen as well as chefs, housewives, and other cooks. A major upgrade of the facility, carried out in 1854-66 on orders from Emperor Napoléon III, involved the construction of 10 long pavilions of metal and glass— the first exposed-steel structures in Paris. Naturally, many restaurants flourished on the edges of the market; they were notable both for their cooking and for their ample portions.

The rise of industrial food production after World War 2 undermined the market’s importance, and in 1969 the pavilions were razed and the market was relocated to a modern truck-fed facility nine miles south, in the city of Rungis. The market at Rungis caters to large-scale middlemen, who buy foodstuffs there from throughout the region and sell them elsewhere in Europe.

Last year, Random House published in its Modern Library Classic series a new edition of *The Belly of Paris* (*Le Ventre de Paris*), Émile Zola’s famous 1873 novel set in and around Les Halles. This is the first new English translation of the story in 50 years. Food writer Mark Kurlansky did the translating and also supplied an Introduction and notes on history and food. His work has drawn accolades; as the blog [biblioklept.org](http://biblioklept.org) noted, “Not only does he have a keen ear for Zola’s revolutionary naturalism, he also captures the passion at the heart (or gut) of *The Belly of Paris*— a passion for food.”

# CHAA CALENDAR

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(Unless otherwise noted, programs are scheduled for 4-6 p.m. and are held at Ann Arbor Senior Center, 1320 Baldwin Ave.)

Sunday, May 16, 2010

## An Afternoon of Poetry:

- Marvin A. Brandwin, Emeritus Psychology Professor, Dept. of Psychiatry, Univ. of Michigan Health System, reading from his book, *A Smorgasbord of Verse: Easy to Digest Food Poems* (Ann Arbor, MI: Charing Cross Press, 2009)
- Chloé Yelena Miller, writer and online writing instructor for Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. and Northampton Community Coll., reading food-related poems from her blog, <http://chloeyelenamiller.blogspot.com/>
- CHAA members are invited to bring their favorite food-related poem to read.

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Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

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*First Class*