How America Eats
A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture

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Food and the Founding

In his classic study *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, historian Edmund Morgan argued that by racially unifying wealthy and poor whites, the institution of slavery made the development of the ideas that inspired the American Revolution possible. He claimed that the institutionalization of slavery solved the problem of class tensions that might have prevented the development of ideas of egalitarianism. Because people of African descent were perceived as being less human and thus not entitled to the natural right of personal freedom, a form of republican thinking developed where "zeal for liberty and equality could go hand in hand with contempt for the poor and plans for enslaving them." Thus in Morgan's analysis, the arrival of Africans in the New World was a necessary prelude to the political experiment that became the United States. African slavery and American freedom were conceived side by side and interdependent on each other.

The African presence was also a vital component in creating a unique American culture, the bedrock of which was the creative cuisine created by enslaved cooks who combined African, Native American, and European ideas to create a new style of cooking. Although their contribution to American foodways was an involuntary one, African influence was central in the creation of food habits that signaled a departure from English customs. Staking a claim to a unique food identity was important to a new nation that wished to distinguish itself as a distinctive political, social, and cultural space. However, citizens of the young country did not always recognize or appreciate the cultural contributions of enslaved Africans, and not all African Americans had equal opportunities to influence cooking styles. Africans' influence varied regionally in proportion to their percentage of the population. Furthermore, some
enslaved people had few foods to experiment with and often went hungry. Their suffering, too, is an emblem of Morgan’s reminder that the freedom and prosperity of some was purchased with the suffering of others. An understanding of America’s founding foodways must begin with an examination of the arrival of the African.

THE EMERGENCE OF A MULTIRACIAL CUISINE

The white Virginians who paradoxically both depended upon Native American food and regarded it with some skepticism soon had to respond to yet another set of ideas about food and cooking, which were introduced to the colony by people of African descent. In describing the origins of the food habits of the United States, culinary historian Jessica Harris has said that “three is a magic number” because the cuisine that emerged was the result of the intermingling of the foods and cooking techniques of various European, Native American, and African peoples. The first documentation of Africans arriving in the Chesapeake comes from records kept by the Virginia Company, the investors who began the colonial enterprise. A brief passage refers to a Dutch ship that visited the colony and traded its cargo—twenty Africans who were likely from Angola—with the Virginians. The human cargo was “bought for victual.” By 1619 the colony had a more stable stock of food than in the previous decade, and they used their surplus food to purchase these human beings. The origins of slavery in the Chesapeake are thus intertwined with the history of the colonial food supply.

The earliest African inhabitants of Virginia held an ambiguous social position. They were not yet automatically considered slaves for life and likely had a status similar to that of white indentured servants, poor Europeans who exchanged their labor for passage, food, lodging, and the future promise of land ownership. Indentured servants would pledge their labor for a set time period, often seven years. They worked under harsh conditions, clearing forests, planting the soil, and performing various domestic tasks. Working conditions were so brutal that many died before their term was over. Those who endured had to live under harsh rules. Servants could not leave their employers without receiving severe penalties, and they could be corporally punished for even slight infractions. Not only did they have to contend with grueling physical labor and strict rules, but they also had to make do with crude accommodations and coarse food.

Elizabeth Sprigs, a servant in the Chesapeake in the eighteenth century, wrote a letter home to England complaining of the conditions she labored under, saying, “What we unfortunate English People suffer here is beyond the probability of you in England to Conceive, let it suffice that I one of the unhappy Number, am toiling almost Day and Night . . . and then tied up and whipp’d to that Degree that you’d not serve an Animal, scarce any thing but Indian Corn and Salt to eat.” For Sprigs, being physically punished was a fate as cruel as being forced to subsist primarily on Indian corn, an item that a new arrival from England would not have recognized as proper food for human consumption. Richard Frethorn similarly grumbled about hard labor and insufficient food, reporting that he had to “work hard both early and late for a mess of water gruel and a mouthful of bread and beef.” Conditions were so bad that English authorities considered indentured servants a suitable form of punishment and transported undesirable elements of English society, debtors and criminals, to places like the Chesapeake. To some, imprisonment in the Old World would have been preferable to unremitting labor and possible early death in Virginia.

Evidence suggests that like their white counterparts, early African arrivals to Virginia could earn their freedom if they survived a term of indenture. Because their living conditions were similar, poor whites and blacks often felt a sense of class solidarity in opposition to government officials and large landowners. They socialized with each other, engaged in interracial sexual relationships, and sometimes cooperated by attempting to escape from bondage together. James Revel, a seventeenth-century English convict who was deported to the colonies as a punishment for theft, later wrote of the similarity in status between the white and black underclass, poetically recording, “We and the negroes both alike did fare, Of work and food we had an equal share.” The relationships between white and black servants were so close that the ruling classes became fearful of the possibility of the development of a large, angry, and unified working class, which could threaten their control over the colony. They decided that they needed to find a way to break this potentially powerful alliance and to begin to make distinctions between white and black laborers.

They drew upon their prejudices toward people with darker skin as a justification for making differentiations between these groups. In 1640 John Punch, a black man, ran away from his master along with two white companions, but the three were captured by colonial authorities. His friends were sentenced to whippings and had additional years added to their terms of indenture. For Punch, however, the penalty was much harsher. The judge declared, “Being a negro . . . John Punch shall serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural life here or elsewhere.” Soon all people of African descent living in Virginia were enslaved. Not only were they condemned to spend their lives in bondage, but a 1662 Virginia law decreed that children were to inherit the status of their enslaved mothers.

The temptation to debase African American laborers was particularly strong in the final decades of the seventeenth century because the supply of white indentured servants was beginning to shrink. Economic opportunities for the poor were improving in England. Furthermore, numerous horror
stories about harsh conditions in the colonies reached Europe, and potential indentured servants were growing more reluctant to sign several years of their lives away. At the same moment, the price for African laborers, who could be procured through the already well-established transatlantic slave trade, decreased. The temptation of an abundant, permanent labor supply pushed the colonists into the institutionalization of racial slavery.

The colony had an insatiable appetite for labor due to the recent introduction of tobacco cultivation into the region. The first adventurers in the colony may not have found gold, but they found something that had the potential to earn them tremendous profits when they discovered that tobacco grew well in the climate. Cultivating the plant was, however, incredibly laborious. Because of the demand for workers, decade by decade the number of Africans in Virginia increased from 25 in 1625 to more than 210,000 by 1775. The vast majority of these enslaved workers labored growing tobacco, but many played vital roles in making sure that the colonists—both those who worked in the fields and those who benefited from their labor—were fed. Africans worked at cultivating food crops and in colonial kitchens, making a tremendous impact on the foodways of the American South in the process.

Culinary encounters between Europeans and Africans began on the coast of Africa. European slave traders, with assistance from their African trading partners, designed an elaborate system for procuring, temporarily housing, and then transporting African captives to lives of slavery in the Western Hemisphere. Captured Africans were marched from the interior of the continent to the coast, housed in holding facilities, packed into cramped slave-trading vessels, and taken to New World plantations to work. The valuable human commodities had to be provided with sufficient food on every leg of their journey, and a complex trade network was created to provide the vast quantities of food necessary to fuel the slave trade. Various coastal African peoples, many who were enslaved themselves, were enlisted to grow crops and to provide animal protein to not only sustain the enslaved Africans who were to make the Atlantic crossing but also feed European traders and military personnel.

European slave traders were deeply concerned with the mortality of their human cargo. Every captive who died reduced the profit margins of their slave-trading venture. Because of this, the captains of slave ships traded advice with one another about how to manage their operations. They exchanged opinions about how tightly to pack their ships with human bodies, how to improve sanitary conditions below deck where the chained captives were held, and how they should exercise, control, and care for the health of their cargo. Traders hired surgeons to travel on the vessels and to monitor the health of their captives. These surgeons brought with them the prevailing medical sensibilities of the day, and they may have supported the idea that emerged that the slaves fared the best on the voyage if they were fed familiar foods. Once again, food and identity were seen as synonymous. Certain foods were seen as best suited for certain people, and eating foods that were not appropriate for one's particular constitution, social class, or racial group might have disastrous health consequences. One trader was reluctant to feed his captives maize despite its enthusiastic and rapid incorporation into African cuisines. He preferred to feed them African yams, saying, "No other food will keep them." Even the ubiquitous maize was, in his observation, "disagreeing to their stomachs."

Captains of slave ships thought carefully about what kinds of food they should feed their captives. Historian Marcus Rediker claims that some even took into account the specific regions in Africa where the enslaved came from when choosing their menus. Slaves from rice-growing Senegambia and the Windward Coast might be given rice, while slaves from the Bights of Benin and Biafra may have been fed yams, an important food in the local diet. Slave ships were also stocked with sorghum and black-eyed peas, foods of African origin, along with manioc and corn, plants that were introduced to the continent as part of the Columbian Exchange.

Even when familiar foods were served, they were not prepared in the customary style of any West African cooking tradition. The slave traders
were fixated on the idea of serving familiar food items but did not attempt to adopt cooking techniques that the enslaved people would have recognized. During the journey from Africa to the Americas, the enslaved were often fed a gruel that became known as “Dab-a-Dab,” which consisted of boiled grains and beans of whatever variety was available combined with yams. It was often seasoned by a condiment the sailors referred to as “slabber sauce,” made of palm oil and malagueta pepper, two ingredients widely used in African cooking. Some of the flavors of the African continent were thus represented in the food served onboard slave trading vessels, but the food was designed for ease of preparation and did not pay homage to traditional recipes. Sometimes enslaved women were given the job of cooking meals, either on their own or alongside the ship’s cook. In those instances, it is possible that African culinary traditions were more discernible in the final product.

Surprisingly, sailors aboard slave ships frequently complained that the enslaved ate better than they did, and one reported that he in fact felt “obliged to beg victuals of the slaves,” whose food was generally both more abundant and of better quality than that of the crew. The sailors subsisted on salted beef, which slowly deteriorated into its brine throughout the course of the voyage, ship’s biscuits that were often filled with vermin, dried peas, and grog, a drink made with water, weak beer, and rum. When supplies were running low, the men were often put on “short allowance” and would have to perform their laborious tasks while hungry. Common sailors represented a lower-class element of English society, and the typical slave trader cared far more about the health of his valuable cargo than about the fate of the crew members, who could be easily replaced should they succumb to illness.

Despite the attempts of many slave traders to keep the captives healthy by providing them with the foods that the traders believed they were the best suited to eat, the issue of eating became a source of contention onboard. Many captives resisted their enslavement by refusing to eat. This was such a common occurrence on these voyages that a special tool, a speculum oris, a metal mouth opener, was designed. The contraption would hold open the mouth of slaves who refused to eat so that sailors could force gruel down their throats. Alexander Falconbridge, a surgeon on a slave-trading ship, described even more brutal means for forcing the enslaved to eat:

Upon the Negroes refusing to take sustenance, I have seen coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel, and placed so near their lips, as to scorch and burn them. And this has been accompanied with threats, of forcing them to swallow the coals, if they any longer persisted in refusing to eat. These means have generally had the desired effect. I have also been credibly informed that a certain captain in the slave trade poured melted lead on such of the Negroes as obstinately refused their food.

In these slave voyages, enslaved people refused food as a form of resistance to circumstances that were otherwise beyond their control. By their actions they showed their oppressors that they preferred starvation and death to captivity. On their part, the slave traders used food as a tool of oppression as they appropriated the bodies of Africans as a way to make a profit, stripping them of volition even in the most basic decision of whether they chose to live or die.

James McWilliams convincingly argues that “America’s culinary history is inextricably linked with suffering.” The transatlantic journey of enslaved people from Africa to the Americas is one of the most brutal among the historical circumstances that brought about these New World culinary encounters. More than ten million African Americans made it across the Atlantic in what has become known as the “Middle Passage,” the second leg of a trade network that went from Europe to Africa, to the Americas, and then back to Europe. Not only did the captives aboard the ship have to cope with the psychological turmoil that came from being taken away from their homes and families and the culture shock of encountering not only Europeans but Africans with different cultures and different languages, they also endured physical pain. Slave quarters on ships were hot, filthy breeding grounds for diseases. Slaves had little physical space to move or to perform bodily functions. Their skin was often rubbed raw by the friction of the boat’s movement. In describing the horrendous conditions onboard ship, surgeon Alexander Falconbridge employed a culinary metaphor, writing that the floor in the area where the slaves were housed “was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house.”

When the enslaved people disembarked to their new homes in various places throughout the Americas, they showed a remarkable resiliency. They formed new family and kinship networks and created a hybrid African American culture, which had strong antecedents in the societies that they left behind. One of the places where traces of African cultural continuity were the most obvious was in the culinary realm. The enslaved people not only brought memories, religious beliefs, and traditions of art and storytelling with them, they also clung to physical traces of Africa in the form of the foods that they brought with them. Sometimes deliberately and other times unintentionally, slave-trading vessels brought African botanical gifts to the New World. African millet, sorghum, black-eyed peas, okra, watermelon, species of sesame, and African rice were soon cultivated in garden plots grown by enslaved people throughout the Americas. Many of these foods also found their way into local recipes still prepared throughout the hemisphere.

The ability of enslaved people to shape the cuisine of a particular region varied from place to place, typically in proportion to their percentage of the population in a given area. In Virginia, where Africans constituted a minority of the population, the English imprint on the region’s food was more predominant than the African one. John L. Hess and Karen Hess also suggest
that European food practices may also have been even more prevalent in households that had access to English cookbooks. Thomas Jefferson’s wife, for example, often read printed recipes to her enslaved cooks, limiting their ability to utilize traditional African techniques. Nonetheless, the English-derived cuisine of the region quickly took on certain aspects of an African culinary sensibility. This happened despite the fact that slaves in the Chesapeake were not as frequently permitted to plant their own gardens and thus to cultivate preferred foods as enslaved people living, for example, in the Carolinas or the Caribbean. They generally had to depend on rations given to them by slaveholders, who, unlike the traders, did not feel compelled to feed them traditional African foods but instead furthered their transformation into becoming African Americans by feeding them North American foods.

The ruling class had incentive to make sure that enslaved people had a reasonably adequate diet, but they did not take pains to make sure that enslaved people were given varied or preferred foods. They carefully doled out allotments of corn, which became the backbone of the slave’s diet, and much smaller quantities of meat, generally fatty pork or sometimes, particularly in the colonial period, salted fish. Planters wanted to make sure that their slaves’ food would provide them with sufficient energy to perform the arduous tasks related to tobacco cultivation, but the planters did not want to spend a penny more than necessary feeding slaves. The slaves’ diets were designed to be enough to keep them alive but were certainly not sufficient for keeping the enslaved eater satisfied or well nourished.

Children who were not old enough to be productive laborers were fed an even more meager diet of cornmeal mush or cornbread, vegetables, sour milk, and various kitchen scraps. They typically ate their meals communally out of a trough similar to that used to feed animals. Robert Shephard, who had been enslaved in Kentucky, recalled that the children, who were often dirty because they were minimally supervised while their parents worked, ate with filthy hands. “Sometimes dat trough would be a sight ... what was in de trough would look like real mud what had come off our hands.”

Slave diets improved between slavery’s seventeenth-century origins and the institution’s nineteenth-century zenith. During the latter period, corn remained the most significant item in the slave diet, but enslaved people began to eat larger quantities of meat. Historian Sam Bowers Hilliard estimates that average slave rations during this era consisted of about a peck of corn per adult enslaved person per week. Pork allotments varied, depending upon the whims and resources of owners, the time of year, and the arduousness of the work being performed at any given time but generally ranged from between two and five pounds a week. These staple items might be augmented by vegetables such as collard greens, sweet potatoes, cabbages, and turnips. Enslaved people might also be given some fruit if it was grown on the plantation as well as small and occasional quantities of things such as molasses, tea, coffee, salt, and alcohol. The price of slaves increased after the 1808 end to the transatlantic slave trade. Around the same time, a radical and outspoken abolitionist movement emerged in some Northern states. These factors caused slave owners to improve the material conditions of their slaves, including their diets. The slaveholding class made these improvements out of necessity rather than benevolence in order to protect its valuable investments and to bolster pro-slavery claims that the institution was a “positive good.” However, even during this period, some slaves went hungry.

While he was enslaved in Maryland, Frederick Douglass remembered receiving “less than half a bushel of corn-meal per week, and very little else, either in the shape of meat or vegetables.” Even those who received a sufficient quantity of food often suffered from malnutrition because of the lack of variety in their diets. Enslaved people suffered from conditions related to poor nutrition, such as pellagra, scurvy, and anemia. Both hunger and a desire for diversity in their diet caused slaves to scavenge for wild foods, hunt, fish, and steal from their masters. Douglass was loath, however, to call the act of hungry slaves taking food from their masters “stealing.” After all, when slaves took additional food, their actions inevitably benefited the master since “the health and strength derived from such food were exerted in his service.”

Given the monotony of their food rations, enslaved cooks had to find creative ways to diversify their diets and learned to become expert cooks with available ingredients. Even in areas where they were not allowed to grow their own gardens, they could emulate traditional Native American techniques and collect wild foods like greens, fruits, and berries. They also hunted and fished. Archeological evidence reveals that in addition to the domesticated animals that slaves received in their rations or took from their master’s food supplies, enslaved people ate a variety of fish and wild animals, including catfish, opossums, squirrels, and various birds. Many of the wild greens and animals that enslaved people encountered reminded them of similar food products they had known in Africa. Speaking specifically about Igbo transplants to the Chesapeake, historian Frederick Douglass Opie argues that they “did not have that much adapting to do .... They only had to find an alternative to palm and kola nut oil for frying fish and poultry and making soups and stews.” Julia Banks, who was a slave in Texas, recalls fish fries that exemplified Americanized African techniques: “The men used to go up to the lake, fishin’, and catch big trout, or bass, they call ‘em now; and we’d take big buckets of butter ... and we’d take lord too, and cook our fish up there, and had corn bread and hoecakes ... it sure was good.”

The hoecakes that accompanied Bank’s fish fry were a Southern equivalent of the Johnny cake and were ubiquitous in the slave diet. They received their name from the alleged fact that enslaved people with scarce kitchen equipment sometimes cooked the cakes, which in their most basic form contained only cornmeal and water, over a fire using the back of an agricultural
hoe as a cooking surface. Simple foods like corn flatbreads and fish could be pleasing to the palate if well prepared, and many enslaved people prided themselves on their ability to make the most of what was available to them. Frederika Bremer, a Swedish visitor to a plantation in South Carolina, had the opportunity to sample a lunch prepared for slaves by an enslaved cook, which consisted of beans and hoecakes. Afterward she raved that she "had seldom tasted better or more savory viands."

The slave owners themselves were the primary beneficiaries of the culinary imaginations of their enslaved cooks. In the master's kitchen slaves had a much wider variety of ingredients to work with and could create elaborate feasts. Even in the Chesapeake, where English foodways predominated, African ingredients made inroads into the local diet. Because more than a hundred edible greens flourish in Africa, African cooks came to the Americas knowing how to prepare them and how to temper their bitterness. In the American South they slow-cooked collard greens, a plant that originated in Africa and quickly became popular in Southern cooking, and seasoned them with small pieces of meat. They urged the consumption not only of the greens themselves but also the nutritious liquid they were cooked in, which became known as "pot-lidder." Okra, another vegetable that originated in Africa, also was widely adopted into the Southern diet. Mary Randolph's classic 1824 cookbook *The Virginia House-wife* includes a recipe for stewed gumbo prepared with onions, butter, and tomatoes.

Regardless of the specific ingredients they used, African American cooks prepared the dishes their masters ordered using what Charles Joyner has called "African culinary grammar." By using familiar techniques and ingredients and subtly altering European recipes, enslaved cooks were able to exercise creativity and to pay homage to their traditional culture. In so doing, they were able to demonstrate that although their labor had been stolen from them, intangible things, such as cultural expression, could be altered over time and circumstances but never completely usurped. For example, they seasoned foods liberally with pepper, introducing an African preference for spicy foods into many Southern dishes. The fact that spicier foods are still more prevalent in regions of the country where slavery was the most entrenched than in many other areas is confirmation of a lingering African influence. Fried chicken, which has become a quintessential American food, was developed in part by enslaved cooks. African cooks commonly fried fowl in vegetable oil, and African Americans combined this tradition with European recipes that called for breading pieces of chicken and briefly frying them before stewing them. The breaded, deep-fat-fried chicken that emerged from plantation kitchens united these techniques.

In areas with a black majority population, such as the colony of Carolina, African American influence on the cuisine of the region was even more pronounced. The majority of the white settlers who came to Carolina in the late seventeenth century came from the island of Barbados, an English colony where sugar was cultivated. Because of its small geographical size, the sugar plantations could not expand indefinitely to provide holdings for succeeding generations of white Barbadians. Therefore, many younger sons who would not inherit substantial property came to Carolina in search of new opportunities. From the very beginning, they built their society on slavery. Their dependency on enslaved labor was so pronounced that by 1710 the colony had a black majority.

Like their neighbors in the Chesapeake, the white settlers in Carolina originally struggled to find a commodity or staple crop that would make them wealthy. They produced tar and turpentine and bred cattle with some degree of success. However, the key to the economic development of the region was ultimately the cultivation of rice. The decision to grow rice was directly tied to the large African presence in the colony. Planters in Carolina encouraged their slaves to cultivate garden plots and to take a much larger responsibility for feeding themselves than in the Chesapeake. Furthermore, enslaved people were often permitted to sell the surplus foods they produced and the animals they raised at market. Inspired by the desire to supplement their diets as well...
as to earn money, slaves planted a variety of African foods in their garden plots, including okra, sesame, sorghum, and African red rice. Historian Judith Carney speculates that Carolinian planters may first have experimented with rice cultivation after seeing the plant growing in their slaves' gardens.

Initial experiments in rice cultivation were done using the red African variety of the grain. Ultimately, Asian varieties were imported into the colony, and white rice became predominant. Regardless of the origin of the rice, it was cultivated using African techniques. Enslaved Africans taught their owners how to irrigate fields and how to engineer necessary controlled flooding. They introduced the planting technique whereby a worker in a rice field would use his or her foot to open up a hole, drop a seed in, and then close the hole with the foot. They also made the baskets used in winnowing, the process where the rice was tossed so that the hull would separate from the grain. The hull had already been loosened from the grain by a large pestle of the kind used in West Africa. Planters in Carolina were so dependent upon enslaved people for their knowledge of rice cultivation that they began deliberately importing enslaved workers from regions of Africa where rice was grown.

Not only did Africans introduce the idea and the process of rice cultivation in Carolina, they also showed the ruling class how to cook it. They favored boiling rice, removing it from the heat, and letting it sit long enough for the grains to fully absorb the moisture. They preferred eating grains that were separate and identifiable rather than a mass of indistinguishable gluey rice. African cooks also developed dishes that drew on ancestral techniques and ingredients. For example, "Hoppin' John," a classic Carolina dish containing rice, black-eyed peas, and salt pork, was developed by enslaved cooks. Jessica Harris argues that the dish is similar to a Senegalese dish, chienou niebe, that contains black-eyed peas, rice, and beef. The use of meat as a condiment or a seasoning rather than as the main component of the meal is a common technique not only in "Hoppin' John" but also in other classic dishes from the Low Country. This style of cooking is another manifestation of "African culinary grammar," for West Africans did not share the English obsession with large quantities of meat with their meals. They were accustomed to using meat as a condiment or seasoning for a starch-based meal.

Despite the fact that racial slavery was predicated on a belief in black inferiority, white culinary stereotypes of Africans were not as negative as those associated with Native Americans. While Native American eating habits were seen as savage, Africans quickly gained the reputation of having, as one slaveholder put it, a "natural genius" for cooking. Planters took great pride in the talent of their African American cooks, and many allowed them a great degree of latitude in running the kitchen and in deciding what to prepare. These freedoms could be, and certainly sometimes were, taken away by the plantation mistress who supervised the household servants. Nonetheless, the tenacious belief that black cooks had innate ability to prepare good food took root. The emergence of this favorable stereotype may be attributed in large part to the fact that black cooks, unlike Native American ones, operated under white supervision and within a mostly European paradigm of which ingredients constituted acceptable foods. Regardless, from the establishment of slavery until structural changes in the southern United States as the result of the civil rights movement in the twentieth century, mostly female cooks of African descent played an unparalleled role in the preparation of Southern meals and in the creation of the unique cuisine that emerged from that region of the country. The role of African American cooks in creating the founding foodways of the United States cannot be overstated. In fact, many of the men who gave birth to the idea of an independent nation, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, grew up eating food prepared by African American cooks.

FOOD AND THE FOUNDING

Seventeenth-century European American eaters had been, out of necessity, more concerned with survival than with elegance in dining. The precariousness of their food supply led them to adapt and, albeit reluctantly, to eat foods that were available rather than foods that were preferred. From the perspective of the Puritans, the simple eating habits that had been born of necessity also had a sound theological basis. Plain cuisine did not reflect false pride or gluttonous indulgence that might distract eaters from concentrating on their spiritual lives. Despite the attempts of New Englanders to glorify American food habits that originated due to scarcity, hungry American eaters expanded their meager early diets as soon as they had the means and the available resources to do so. In the eighteenth century, new attitudes about food were revealed in a proliferation of kitchen equipment and in a new concern about creating a designated cooking space.

Inventories of eighteenth-century households reveal that as soon as early Americans achieved a reliable subsistence they began purchasing more kitchen and dining equipment. Many cooks now had access to more specialized cooking utensils, such as devices made to toast bread or specifically to cook fish. Particularly prosperous householders might own tin kitchens, imported from England. These barrel-shaped devices contained a spit and were placed next to the fire and used for roasting meat. By the eighteenth century, those who could afford it built kitchens that were separated from the rest of the house. No longer was the kitchen the center of a family's living space, a place where cooking took place only incidentally alongside other household tasks. In these newly designed spaces, food preparation was considered a significant enough activity to require its own room.