

## Colonial Foods in Western New England

Much of this chapter is taken from a pamphlet entitled Foodways in the Northeast, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, Annual Proceedings, 1982.

We will address the foods our predecessors raised and ate locally, and will set the stage by giving a written account focusing on the Connecticut River Valley and the uplands to the west. The period we are talking about is between 1740 and the 1760s. This is ideal for us in Colebrook and the surrounding towns, as it is the period that our founding fathers still lived in Windsor and Hartford. The generation that brought the original settlers to these hills established our communities and, initially at least, would have been familiar with the foods covered by this article.

Almost immediately, they began a modification process tailored to our particular soil types and climate. The latter part of this chapter will consist of facts and figures gleaned from local ledgers and written accounts.

The Massachusetts frontier in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century consisted of a line of forts commencing at the Connecticut River Valley just south of the Vermont border and stretching westward to the New York State line. These forts were necessary as the first line of defense in the French and Indian War (1744-1763). The inhabitants of these forts often took their families with them, and thus brought along eating habits and foodways of the mostly English people of the eastern section of New England. In this way the tastes and habits of the western New Englanders was established.

A study of contemporary store ledgers indicates the following: pigs slightly predominated over cattle as a meat source. Sheep were barely represented.

No known cookbooks have survived from these frontier establishments during this time period.

One of the most revealing documents about diet was compiled in Deerfield in 1745. It shows the English preference for pork and beef, even though pork was more expensive, with relatively little veal or mutton. They consumed four times as much wheat as Indian corn. 8% of a certain minister's salary went for alcoholic beverages (cider, rum, metheglin {a flavored mead} and wine), as well as malt for brewing beer (it happened to be seven times the amount expended for the education of his two daughters).

Little is known of the garden vegetables, but a shipment of seeds from Boston in 1757 indicated 4 different kinds of cabbage, 2 of lettuce, 2 turnips, onions, squash, cucumber, 4 kinds of peas, radish, parsley, parsnips, beans, asparagus and an assortment of herbs.

Vast amounts of salt were bought for the preservation of meats. No evidence of ducks or geese being sold has been found, although they must have been present, as their feathers were a salable item.

Potatoes, whose origin was the Andes Mountains of South America, were taken to Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century had become a food staple in Ireland. They were introduced into New England by the Scotch-Irish in 1718, and after becoming established in the Connecticut River Valley, became a food staple throughout the entire region.

Spices available were black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, mace, allspice and ginger. Allspice was quite cheap, as it was native to the West Indies. One-half pound was sold for approximately what a half-ounce of cinnamon cost.

The most important sweetener was cane sugar, both white and brown. Maple sugar was locally produced, and sold or bartered; it was not to be found as an item in store ledgers. Little mention is made of honey, but beeswax was a marketed item. Molasses was a large seller, but possibly much of it was converted to rum, rather than used as a sweetener.

In 1750, the cost of a pound of tea in Deerfield was £3/10/0, (three pounds, 10 shillings, no cents), the same as a large family bible. One small cup of tea was about the same price as a dram of rum (¼ cup).

Thus whenever thin, eggshell-thin salt glazed ware is dug up at a colonial site, the owners were more than likely to have been members of the elite class.

Some unanswered questions emerge from the study of old ledgers originating from the Connecticut River Valley. Why, for example, was there a “run” on the sale of coffee pots by the residents of Deerfield in 1742 when coffee was very expensive and doesn’t show up in the surviving ledger books? The same is true of mustard pots; mustard not being an item ever found as a sale item from any of the stores. Were these containers used for something else? Did the average household raise their own mustard and preserve it in commercial containers?

Beer was rarely sold, but hops and malt were, so home brewing was the answer. Sometimes beer materializes in the guise of flip, a concoction of beer and brown sugar into which a hot iron is plunged, then fortified with rum or brandy.

During most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, rum was very cheap and very strong. It was sold over the counter in gallons, quarts, jills (½ cup) and dram (¼ cup) shots.

No two regions in western New England had the same wage scales, nor did they eat the same foods. Never the less, strong similarities exist, especially when compared to other regions such as Pennsylvania or any of the southern states.

Compare what we have just read with the following information, a compilation from several ledgers in the possession of the Colebrook Historical Society. The earliest are from the ledger of the Salisbury store of Lane and Colver; the others belonged to Daniel Sears of Sandisfield, Massachusetts and Enos North of Colebrook.

Wheat in Salisbury in 1781 sold for 7-8 shillings (\$2.34 to \$2.68) per bushel; oats for 2 shillings 8 pence (.89 cents); rye for 4-5 shillings (\$1.34 to \$1.67) and Indian corn for 4 shillings (\$1.34) per bushel.

A set of cups and saucers cost £1/10 (one pound ten shillings, or \$10.00) in 1782. The popularity of mustard pots, which puzzled the researchers from central and northwestern Massachusetts in 1742, appear in our ledgers as well; as a matter of fact, we can go them one better: our ledgers record the sale of soy cruets. We can only wonder what that was all about during the war year of 1780.

The price of tea was dramatically reduced from 1750 (\$23.45) to 1781 (\$5.36), and the price further eroded to \$4.02 per pound the following year.

Alcoholic consumption was high in these uplands as it was elsewhere in the colony. Two types of rum were available; West Indies and New England. West Indian was slightly more expensive by 16 cents per quart. In 1781 one quart of New England rum cost \$1.00. Jamaica spirits were also a good seller at \$1.34 per quart. By the 1790s, a quart of rum in Sandisfield cost .72 cents, and continued downward until by 1804 one gallon cost only \$1.83. By volume, the winner by far was cider, and it was dirt-cheap. There was a lively trade in making cider barrels, and money was made by the transport of

these barrels both full and empty, as well as trucking apples from farms to the cider mill of choice. In 1821, 1 barrel of cider, holding 31 ½ gallons, cost \$1.00, decreasing to .67 cents by 1826. In 1835, 4 gallons of cider cost .33 cents and one gallon of vinegar cost .12 cents.

Salt was used to preserve meat and fish in barrels or crocks. By today's standards, it was used in prodigious amounts, and we are left to marvel that those who consumed all this survived at all. In the 1790s, a half-bushel of salt cost the equivalent of \$1.00; by 1824 the same amount cost .34 cents.

In the category of meats, the three most popular were beef, veal and pork. Unlike what the research in Massachusetts revealed, mutton, turkeys and chickens occasionally show up on our ledgers. Veal in 1781 cost 4 pence (.11 cents) per pound; in 1805, .07 cents, and from the period of the War of 1812 until the 1830s, stabilized at .04 cents per pound. Beef in the 1790s cost .05 cents per pound and remained between .03 cents and .05 cents at least through the 1830s, with the exception of the years encompassed by the War of 1812, when inflation skyrocketed beef to .16 cents per pound. Pork was likewise affected at this time, rising to .33 cents per pound before finally settling back to its regular price of .10 or .11 cents per pound.

Among the grains, wheat was the most important, not only as a food item, but also as a median of exchange. Hard currency was an extremely scarce item, and the barter system prevailed. Ledger books abound with such as "...equivalent to 3 bushels of wheat." During the War of Independence, the price of wheat was established at from the equivalent of \$2.34 to \$2.68, depending upon the time of year. It dropped back down to about \$2.00 thereafter. Oats, on the other hand, averaged less than one dollar, usually selling in the vicinity of from .65 to .85 cents per bushel. The lowest figure discovered locally for oats was in 1825, when .37 cents would buy a bushel.

Potato prices remained quite stable for generations. During the War of Independence, one bushel sold for .50 cents; by the 1830s, the price was .33 cents. During the economic depression following the crash of the stock market in 1929, the price of a bushel of potatoes hovered around .10 cents per bushel. A blight hit Litchfield County in 1935 or thereabouts, which all but wiped out the crop – all except those farmers who had sprayed their crop with copper sulfate and lime, thus preventing the dreaded blight. The price of potatoes that year jumped to .50 cents per bushel. This windfall paid the taxes that year on more than one farm in these parts; my father's being one of them.

Two hundred years ago and more there were specialty items that carried a high price, but then, as today, some people felt that they had to have them. One such is snuff; selling for \$6.20 for ¼ pound. One of the most expensive items we have run across is the price of a pair of oval glasses (the assumption is that they were eye glasses), which in June 1781 cost the equivalent of \$167.50. A man would have to sell a lot of beef at .05 cents per pound to buy a pair of those! Vanity also carried a high price; the cost of a large looking glass in 1781 set the purchaser back \$93.80.