

Colonial Foods

The archeological dig that was undertaken in the fall of 2007 at the site of Richard Smith's forge in Robertsville unearthed bits and pieces of ceramic and porcelain, and as we are able to ascertain to a small degree what sort of lifestyle was being enjoyed by the general population by the interpretation of these shards, now might be an opportune time to take a look at the core of everyday life in an isolated outpost during the Colonial period – their diet.

Very little written material has survived from this period concerning food, but by studying period ledgers and an occasional journal, we can gain an insight. Here is what our research has yielded on the subject:

The French and Indian Wars stretched from 1744 to 1763, causing a line of defensive forts to be constructed from the Vermont- Massachusetts border westward to the New York line. The inhabitants, who sometimes took their families with them, also brought along eating habits and foods of the English population of east-central New England.

Pigs slightly predominated over cattle as a meat source; sheep were barely represented. No known cookbooks have survived from this time period along the frontier establishments.

One of the most revealing documents about diet was compiled in Deerfield, Mass. 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. Eight percent of one minister's salary went for alcoholic beverages such as cider, rum, metheglin (a flavored mead), wine and malt for brewing beer. This happens 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 included four different kinds of cabbage, two lettuce, two turnips, onions, squash, cucumber, four types of peas, radish, parsley, parsnips, beans, asparagus and an assortment of herbs.

A Sharon, Connecticut diary from 1779, in which there is a detailed description of the food served on Thanksgiving Day of that year is revealing:

“Of course we had no roast beef. None of us have tasted beef this three years back, as it all must go to the army, & too little they get, poor fellows. But Nayquittymaw's hunters were able to get us a fine red deer, so that we had a good haunch of venison on each table. These were balanced by huge chines of roast pork at the other ends of the tables. (A chine is the whole, or a portion of the backbone of an animal.) Then there was on one a big roast turkey & on the other a goose & two big pigeon pasties. There was an abundance of good vegetables of all the old sorts & one that I do not believe you have yet seen. It is called sellery [celery] & you eat it without cooking.

Of course we had no wine, but good cider is a sufficient substitute.”

A vast amount of salt was bought for the preservation of meats. No evidence of ducks or geese being sold has been found, but they must have been present as their feathers were a saleable item. Dried fish was sold by the quintal (a unit of 100 lbs.).

Potatoes originated in the Andes of South America, taken to Europe in the sixteenth century and by the seventeenth century had become a food staple in Ireland. The Scotch-Irish introduced them to New England in 1718 and they came to central and

west-central Massachusetts shortly thereafter. From there they spread to the other English settlements.

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

Most important sweeteners were sugar, both white and brown. Maple sugar was locally produced and sold or bartered. Little mention is made of honey, but beeswax was a marketable item. Molasses was a large seller, although it is likely that much of this 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 and a half pounds, worth about \$17.00). This is the same price one would pay for a large family bible. One small cup of tea cost about the same as a dram of rum. Thus whenever thin, eggshell-thin salt-glazed ware is dug up in a colonial site, the owners were more than likely to have been members of the elite.

Studies of old ledgers present us with some unanswerable questions. Why, for example, was there a “run” on coffee pots by the residents of Deerfield in 1742 when coffee was very expensive and surviving ledgers don’t show evidence of coffee sales? The same is true of mustard pots; mustard was not 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 preserved it in commercial containers?

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

During most of the eighteenth century, rum was very cheap and very strong. Sold over the counter in gallon, quart, jill (1/2 cup) and dram (1/4 cup) shots.

One of the buildings that once stood near the forge in Robertsville was a satellite of the main store, located in Salisbury. The Colebrook Historical Society owns the ledger of the Salisbury store that spans the years 1779-1785. A few of their entries cast light on sales at the forge site in 1781 - for example:

A cup and saucer set £1/10/0 (about \$7.25) in 1782; a soy cruet and mustard pot, \$3.84; tea, one pound, \$2.88; West Indies rum, .84 cents per quart; New England rum (made in Rhode Island), .72 cents per quart; Jamaica spirits, .96 cents per quart; one pound loaf of sugar, .66 cents; veal, .09 cents per pound.

Also, in general, one-half bushel of salt cost about \$1.00, while one-half bushel of wheat cost about .23 cents; one bushel of turnips cost .39 cents; one bushel of potatoes cost .50 cents; one pound of cheese cost .10 cents and one quarter pound of snuff cost \$6.20.

The last entry is to show that tobacco products were as disproportionately priced in Colonial times as they are today.

Historic Bytes

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