



A 19th Century Slave Diet



Introduction

Booker T. Washington once wrote that “Not much religion can exist in a one-room log-cabin or on an empty stomach.” Booker T. Washington was born a slave on the Burroughs plantation in Franklin County, Virginia on April 5, 1856. He spent his first nine years of life an enslaved child on the piedmont Virginia tobacco plantation. He was one of 10 slaves owned by James Burroughs in 1861. The slaves made up 80% of the property value of the plantation. In 1881, Washington became the leader of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama (today Tuskegee University). Much of the information below is from his autobiographical works *The Story of My Life and Work* and *Up from Slavery*, where in each, he describes his young life in the beginning chapters.

The Kitchen Cabin

Washington wrote about the kitchen cabin where he lived with his mother, brother and sister. “The cabin was not only our living-place but was also used as the kitchen for the plantation. My mother was the plantation cook. There was no wooden floor in our cabin, the naked earth being used as a floor. In the center of the earthen floor there was a large, deep opening covered with boards, which was used as a place to store sweet potatoes in the winter.”

“An impression of this potato-hole is very distinctly engraved upon my memory, because I recall that during the process of taking them out I would often

come into possession of one or two, which I roasted and thoroughly enjoyed. There was no cooking-stove on our plantation, and all the cooking for the whites and slaves my mother had to do over an open fireplace, mostly in pots and skillets.”

The family got their meals like “dumb animals get theirs. It was a piece of bread here and a scrap of meat there. . . a cup of milk at one time and some potatoes at another. Sometimes a portion of our family would eat out of the skillet or pot, while someone else would eat from a tin plate held on the knees using nothing but hands. . . to hold the food.”

Breakfast

The usual diet for slaves was cornbread and pork. Washington wrote that he did not see very much of his mother since she had to leave her children early in the morning to begin her day’s work. “The early departure of my mother often made the matter of securing my breakfast uncertain. This led to my first intimate acquaintance with animals.”

He went on to describe that it was the custom to feed boiled Indian corn to the cows and pigs. “At the times when I had failed to get any other

breakfast, I used to go to the places where the cows and pigs were fed and make my breakfast off the boiled corn, or else go to the place where it was the custom to boil the corn and get my share there before it was taken to the animals.”

“If I was not there at the exact moment of feeding, I could still find enough corn scattered around the fence or the trough to satisfy me.”

Different accounts exist as to the number of meals slaves had daily.

Necessity, Theft, & Ambition

“One of my earliest recollections is that of my mother cooking a chicken late at night, and awakening her children for the purpose of feeding them. How or where she got it I do not know. I presume, however, it was procured from our owner’s farm. Some people may call this theft. But taking place at the time it did, and for the reason it did, no one could ever make me believe that my mother was guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery.”

Booker T. Washington once saw two of the young mistresses on the Burroughs plantation eating ginger-cakes with visitors to the plantation. He said

that at that time those cakes seemed “. . . to be absolutely the most tempting and desirable things that I had ever seen; and I then and there resolved that, if I ever got free, the height of my ambition would be reached if I could get to the point where I could secure and eat ginger-cakes in the way that I saw those ladies doing.”

Washington later described the food shortages on the plantation during the Civil War due to the blockades and how it affected the owners much worse than the slaves. The owners had gotten used to eating expensive items prior to the war and the slaves were barely affected by lack of these items.

Slave Diets in Virginia

Archaeologists have recovered detailed information on living conditions during the period of slavery. Findings include information on housing, use of space, foodways, household equipment, personal possessions, and sometimes information on health care and hygiene. Some records kept by planters on food, clothing, and other allotments augment the archaeological discoveries.

Faunal remains in excavations have confirmed that livestock such as pigs and cows were the principal components of slaves' meat diets. Other

sites show remnants of wild species such as opossum, raccoon, snapping turtle, deer, squirrel, duck, and rabbit. This evidence suggests that slaves supplemented the rations given them by their owners. Other sites contain lead shot, gun flints, and gun parts providing that some slaves had access to fire arms.

Other excavations include oyster shells, lead fishing weights, fishhooks, and fish bones and scales. Traces of walnuts, grapes, blackberries, and hickory nuts have also been found as evidence of what would be part of a slave diet.

Slave Resistance through Foodways

Some form of meat was usually used in soups or stews by enslaved people. These one-pot meals would combine meat, vegetables and broth stretching out the meal proportions. This style of simmering meals over an open fire emulated West African cuisine which relies heavily on stewed meals. Maize, rice, peanuts, yams and dried beans were found as important staples of slaves on some plantations in West Africa before and after European contact. Keeping the traditional "stew" cooking could have been a form of subtle resistance to the owner's control.

The "potato hole" or root cellar may also have been a sign of resistance to the slave owner. Archeologist Bill Kelso reported that these pits in tidewater and piedmont Virginia may have been a "product of black culture." Archeologist Anne

Elizabeth Yentsch suggested that the practice of storing valuables in pits may have African origins. Her interpretation was based on an English sea-captain who observed the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria storing valuables under the floors of their houses into the 19th century. Approximately 40-60 % of the Africans imported to Virginia were Igbo according to Yentstch's interpretation. Archeologist Doug Sanford says they should not be used as a marker for African American presence because they are found among other cultures. However, they do suggest a means of defining space and status reflecting a method of day-to-day resistance. Some owners raised the cabins containing these root cellars off the ground thwarting the slaves' attempts to create their own personal space and sense of place within the plantation.

Booker T. Washington's Legacy

W.E. B. Du Bois, a sociologist, civil rights activist and contemporary of Booker T. Washington, published a monograph on *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*. It was one of a series of research studies published through Atlanta University. In May 1906, health professionals reviewed Du Bois' research, calling for local health leagues to provide information about preventative medicine and urging existing health organizations to create programs addressing health care needs of African Americans. They passed a resolution stating that they "did not find any adequate scientific warrant for the assumption of the Negro race is inferior to other races in physical build or vitality. The present differences in mortality seem to be sufficiently explained by conditions of life."

By 1913, a community-wide sanitation campaign was conducted by the Negro Organization Society. This caught the attention of Booker T. Washington.

As one of the most powerful African American men at the turn of the 20th century, Booker T. Washington viewed the poor health status of black Americans as an obstacle to economic progress and issued a call for "the Negro people...to join in a movement which shall be known as Health Improvement Week." Health Improvement Week evolved into National Negro Health Week and was celebrated annually for over 35 years.

Sources used for information contained in this publication:

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