

# PRODUCING FOOD/NEGOTIATING POWER

THE POTOMAC RIVER WAS A LUCRATIVE SOURCE OF TRADE AND COMMERCE FOR PLANTERS AND SLAVES WHO, WHEN POSSIBLE, USED THE INFORMAL ECONOMY TO BARTER AND EXCHANGE FISH FOR OTHER GOODS.



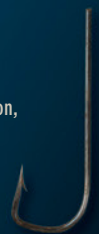
*Washington at Mount Vernon, 1797,*  
Nathaniel Currier, 1852  
Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

## FISHING FOR FOOD

Slaves at the Mount Vernon plantation, like the elderly "Father" Jack, often were tasked with catching fish, using a simple line and hook, for George Washington's dinner.



Fishing line, 1760–1800 and  
fishing hook, ca. 18th century  
Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association,  
Fishing Line: Gift of Camille E. Bryan, 1958



# FREEDOM

SLAVERY WAS NEVER BENEVOLENT OR KIND. DESPITE THE REALM OF OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED A SLAVE, SHE OR HE ALWAYS DESIRED FREEDOM AND LIBERTY.



*George Washington and Family, Thomas*  
Prichard Rossiter, ca. 1858–1860  
Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



## FROM ENSLAVED CHEF TO FREEDMAN

Ever aware that he was in bondage, Hercules, considered George Washington's favorite "capital cook," longed for freedom. On February 22, 1797, Washington's 65th birthday, Hercules escaped and was never heard of again.

Portrait possibly of Hercules, attributed to Gilbert Stuart, ca. 1795–1797  
Courtesy Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza/Scala/Art Resource, NY

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22

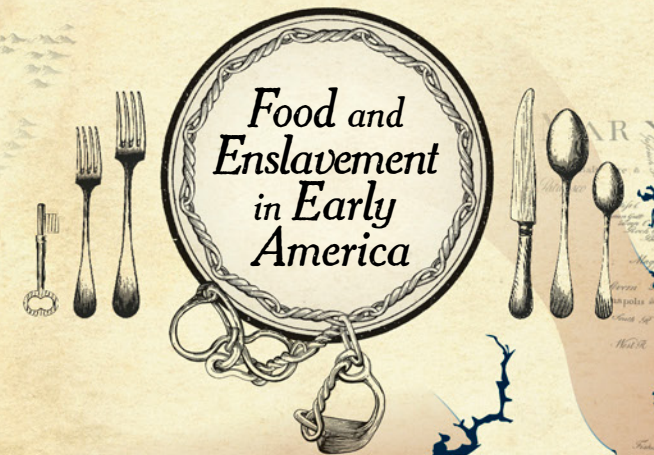
June  
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# FIRE *and* FREEDOM:



WHAT STORIES CAN MEALS TELL  
US ABOUT PEOPLE AND PLACES?

MEALS can tell us how power is exchanged between and among different peoples, races, genders, and classes.



U.S. National Library of Medicine

The National Library of Medicine produced this exhibition.  
Guest curator: Psyche Williams-Forsen, PhD  
Designer: The Design Minds  
Research assistance provided by staff at The Washington  
Library at George Washington's Mount Vernon.

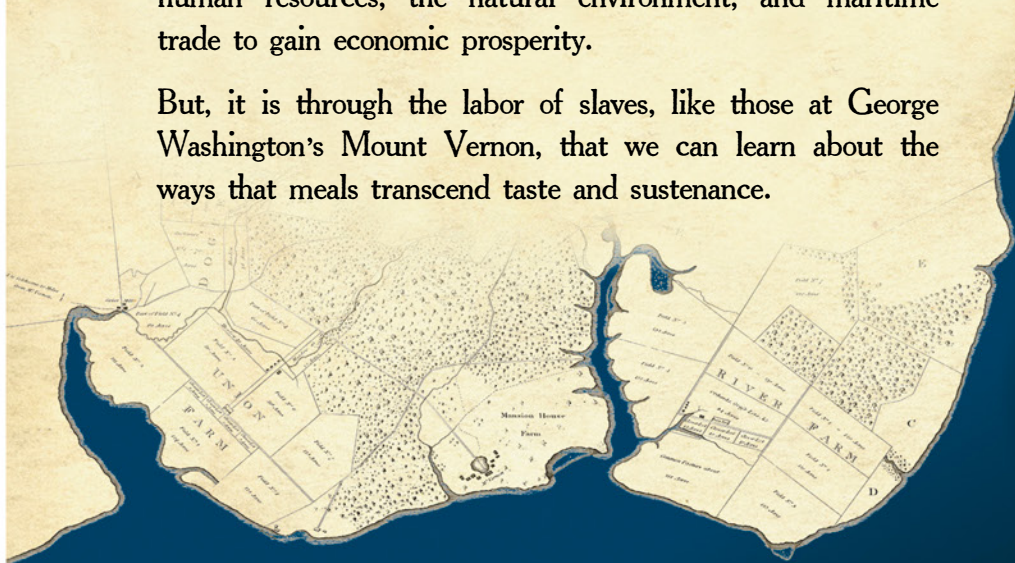
[www.nlm.nih.gov/fireandfreedom](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/fireandfreedom)



IN THE CHESAPEAKE REGION, during the early colonial era, European settlers survived by relying upon indentured servants, Native Americans, and African slave labor for life-saving knowledge of farming and food acquisition. Without this knowledge, Europeans suffered poor nutrition, in addition to widespread illness caused by the lack of medical care.

Despite their perilous position, the colonists used human resources, the natural environment, and maritime trade to gain economic prosperity.

But, it is through the labor of slaves, like those at George Washington's Mount Vernon, that we can learn about the ways that meals transcend taste and sustenance.



MARITIME SPACES SERVED AS LANDSCAPES OF POWER FOR COLONISTS, BUT ALSO PROVIDED UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENSLAVED AFRICANS TO SEEK RELATIVE AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM.



**STIMULATING SLAVERY**  
Coffee (*Coffea Arabica*), can be traced back to Ethiopia. Merchants transported the plant by ship to the Caribbean. Widespread demand for the beans contributed to the rise of slavery and colonialism.

"Coffee" plate from *An Historical Account of Coffee. ...*, John Ellis, 1774  
Courtesy National Library of Medicine

# KITCHEN CONTRADICTIONS

PLANTATION KITCHENS WERE CHAOTIC, NOISY, SMOKY, SMELLY, SWELTERING, AND VERY DANGEROUS.



## KITCHEN DANGER

Enslaved cooks, such as Lucy and Nathan at George Washington's Mount Vernon, started work at 4:00 A.M. Preparing tasty meals over an open fire required hard and precise work.

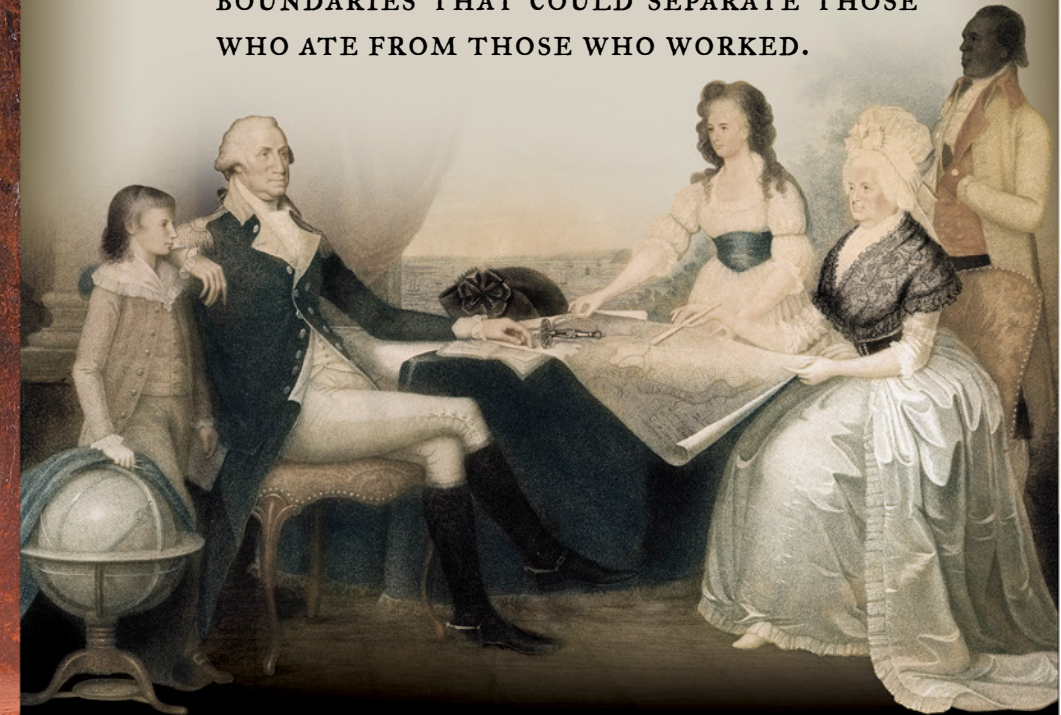
Sometimes, people got burned. If cooks unintentionally misgauged fire temperatures, they might destroy food. The changing seasons could spoil meats and turn vegetables to mush.

*Washington's Kitchen, Mount Vernon, Eastman Johnson, 1864*  
Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



# LABORED MEALS

SLAVERY PUT IN PLACE SOCIAL AND CULINARY BOUNDARIES THAT COULD SEPARATE THOSE WHO ATE FROM THOSE WHO WORKED.



## PRECISION AND EXACTITUDE

Servants' skills were invaluable, as they worked as the conduits between dining rooms and kitchens in wealthy homes. At Mount Vernon, under the watchful eyes of Martha Washington, Frank Lee, the enslaved butler, supervised the maids and the waiters to ensure the table was properly set, and the house meticulously cleaned.

*The Washington Family / La Famille de Washington, Edward Savage, David Elkin, 1798*  
Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

## BLENDED COOKING STYLES LEAVE A LEGACY

In contrast to a single cooking method, Lucy Lee, one of several enslaved cooks at Mount Vernon, most likely blended African, Native American, and European styles of preparation and cooking, thereby leaving her imprint on Washington family meals.

*The Prudent Housewife, Or compleat English Cook; ...*, Lydia Fisher, 1800  
Courtesy National Library of Medicine

