African-American foodways are an important part of southern cooking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1999, the Southern Foodways Alliance, an organization devoted to the preservation of traditional Southern foods and recipes, was formed. In 2002 the Cape Fear Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina introduced the theme in lectures and exhibits, What’s Cooking in the Cape Fear-Wilmington Food in the 19th Century. Subsequent annual programs celebrated Flavor of the Past in collaborations with other historic sites and local restaurants.

Traditional repositories of historical documents such as museums and libraries yield little information about foodways. Their holdings are primarily concerned with white male-dominated concerns such as economics, politics, and wars, the activities which they themselves reported. More difficult to locate are sources for the study of women and family histories. This is particularly true for evidence that documents the patterns, changes and continuities in the production, procurement, preparation, and consumption of food. Such information should be of vital interest to scholars who are interpreting the past in museums and other venues, and to reenactors, writers, educators, and docent trainers. More important, is the fact that the study of food is essential to any comprehensive study of social and cultural history.

By 1860, Wilmington was the largest port and city in the state. Its population numbered approximately 5000 whites of various ethnicity, 4000 slaves, and 600 free blacks. The white planter-oriented population originally migrated to the area primarily from the Albemarle and Chesapeake regions of North Carolina and Virginia, and the merchant and planter settlers came from the South Carolina low-country. Flour and exotic foods such as coffee beans, spices, almonds, coconuts, and spirits were imported for local markets and plantations; rice and peanuts were exported to American and foreign markets. African-American foodways are a synthesis of African, Caribbean, European, and Native American products adjusted to New World conditions. Because slaves were usually denied an education, food records and recipes were rarely written by the slaves but instead transmitted among themselves by oral tradition. Most written slave recipes are versions recorded by white persons.

Antebellum Period – Details of African-American foods are based on purchase records of slave owners

African-American foodways in the Antebellum period include lists of food purchased for slaves based on the owners’ interpretation of the most productive return for their work. Most planters thought pork and corn very nutritious for health without concern for the food traditions of the black community. Plantations in the neighboring Lake Phelps area of the Albemarle recorded that an adult slave received a pound of cornmeal or other grain such as rice daily, a pork ration of 2 to 5 pounds weekly (depending on the cut of pork), about a gallon of molasses a year; and red peppers, various greens, sweet potatoes, beans, and watermelons throughout the year. Also reported are foods gleaned by African-Americans from fishing, hunting (oyster, turtle, rabbit, deer, bird, opossum, and raccoon), and gardening (beans, peas, greens). Nearby low-country plantations immediately south of North Carolina at St. Helena Island and areas...
such as Edenton recorded rations for working Negroes as rice or peas, sweet potatoes, pork or bacon, beef, and molasses varying with seasons of the year and holiday time. Recipes included those for bread such as hoecakes/ashcakes and for meat to flavor plant-based vegetable dishes boiled, mashed, and fried in cakes, porridge-like dishes, and seasoned stews. A list of cooking implements used by area slaves suggests one-pot meals were the norm.  

Narratives illustrating actual African-American tastes and flavors are found in more obscure locations and usually tell of foods that slaves were fed by the big house. An 1842 slave narrative by Lunsford Lane, a Raleigh slave, describes one food event. “The pot-liquor in which the meat was boiled for the great house, together with some little corn-meal balls that had been thrown in just before the meat was done, was poured into a tray and set in the middle of the yard and a clam shell or pewter spoon given to each of us children, who would fall upon the delicious fare as greedily as pigs.”

Slave narratives, plantation records, census mortality schedules, and physicians’ records retrieved after the Civil War depict an impoverished diet and harsh mode of life without complete examples of food intake and recipes. Slave records and newspapers generally report plantation work and runaway activities with little about foodways beyond the core pork and corn ration. Foodways of African-American families described primarily by recollection and imagination lack detail of their many flavorful cooking components.

African-American cooks were taught recipes of the master’s kitchen

Slaves who cooked in the plantation kitchen were taught the recipes of the mistress. Cookbooks appearing in the Cape Fear in the 1800s are attributed primarily to European origin. The most popular English cookbook in America for over a hundred years was found at Tryon Palace in New Bern, The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy by Mrs. Glass. Southern cooking became renowned with the publication of The Virginia House-wife by Mrs. Mary Randolph (1824), who adapted European recipes to Virginia food and to skills of slave cooks. The expertise of a food historian is needed to deduce the African-American contribution. Karen Hess, a food scholar of the food and flavors of African and American heritage, showed that Mary Randolph had recipes prepared by slaves who enhanced them with seasonings familiar to Africa and the West Indies - ginger, saffron, thyme, sage, sweet basil, shallot, and hot pepper. Archival records such as library papers and letters provide written records of foods served in homes of well-to-do local families that were prepared by, but not for, African-Americans working outside the master’s home. Recorded recipes are rice bread and Sallie White Cake, rice and tapioca pudding, rice griddle cakes, roasted oysters, and Floating Island. Histories and stories reported by whites provide additional evidence of foods likely prepared by African-Americans. Examples are cited by Frederick Law Olmsted as he comments on rice plantations in early North Carolina travels, James Sprunt recording foods enjoyed by historical figures, Daisy Lamb naming household foods and recipes in her diary, and Miss...
Ellen Bellamy mentioning food and food events in *Back With the Tide*. The African-American cook brought African food skills to the kitchens of the big homes and in turn introduced European recipes to black families.

Although African-American food was not familiar to most other cultures, white cookbook authors included African-American recipes popular with all levels of the population. In 1847 Sarah Rutledge published *The Carolina Housewife* with low-country African-American recipes such as Hoppin’ John (black-eyed peas and rice) with the Gullah thumbprint from the nearby seacoast and islands of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Gullahs are characterized by their distinctive dialect and by one of the oldest African-American traditions of cooking by flavor and taste. Gullah families preserved recipes, stories, and traditions without precise proportions or ingredients and adjusted what was on hand to duplicate the desired flavor.

**African-Americans wrote cookbooks to teach recipes**

Sarah Gray’s 1964 University of North Carolina thesis tracing the publication of cookbooks 1796 – 1896 listed no black authors through the 1960s. However, cookbooks were authored by African-Americans in the 1800s to train domestics and butlers to serve elite white families of European heritage. Examples of these cookbooks are Robert Roberts, *Roberts’ Guide for Butler & other Household Staff* (1827); Malinda Russell, *A Domestic Cook Book* (1866); and Abby Fisher, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows about Old Southern Cooking* (1881). Cookbooks by these African-Americans emerged from domestic experiences of the cultural heritage of the families for whom the authors worked.

This scene was repeated in the middle 1800s in many Wilmington homes of wealthy whites such as the Latimers, the Bellamys, and the Martins. In Wilmington the African-American slave may have cooked for a family of about ten members and a similar number of slaves living on the property. In addition, slaves of members of the Wilmington Soldiers’ Aid Society (SAS) cooked for Confederate troops in the field, at Fort Fisher, and at the Wilmington railroad station. Thanks and accolades from military groups and individuals expressed in the newspaper were to SAS members. There was no mention of the African-Americans who prepared the food.

Manuscript cookbooks usually contain handwritten family favorites of previous and current times shared with friends for special occasions and recipes that needed proportions and directions for success. Often the specialty items were prepared by the family member who recorded them. Two such documents have been identified – one from the Harriss (1862-64) household in Wilmington and one from the McKay-Cromartie papers (1700 and 1800s) in nearby Bladen county. No manuscript cookbooks by African-Americans have been reported during this time period in the area.

*The Wilmington Daily Journal* contained local cultural food events by German, Greek and Jewish groups and features by famous cooks such as Mary Randolph and Alexis Soyer. The newspaper had advertisements from Wilmington bookshops announcing the arrival of popular women’s magazines including *Godeys’ Lady’s Book*. This magazine circulating throughout the North and South focused on women’s health, child care and recipes before, during, and after the Civil War but never mentioned war, theology, or politics, topics considered unsuitable for women.

In 1863 *The Confederate Receipt Book, A Compilation of Over One Hundred Receipts Adapted to the Times* was authored to help white families deal with the loss of the African-American domestic. The cook was known for her ability to make apple pie without apples, and to turn “pork fat and flour into rich gravies, stale bread and cold rice into sweet puddings, left-over meats and vegetables into soups, stews and baked dishes.”

**1900s African-American recipes reported in standardized/formula style**

Primary sources of authentic African-American recipes in the early 1900s are practically nonexistent. Romantic and mythical films, novels, cookbooks, and ephemera in the early 1900s present accomplished black cooks as “colorful” mammys and Aunt Jemimas cooking the master’s food. This stereotypical image suggested a well-fed, happy figure enjoying her position. In addition white cookbook writers copied recipes of black cooks including their speech in recipe directions. Miss Howard Weeden wrote poems such as *Beaten Biscuits* in the southern dialect of the African-American and drew beautiful portraits of former slaves. Red or white handkerchief or bandanna head coverings symbolized subservience instead of the original African meaning of status and personal pride. The reality is that very few whites in the antebellum south had mammys or slave cooks. Soul food, a contemporary term introduced about the 1960s, usually refers to links of African-Americans to their African past. Unfortunately, some cookbooks often present “black soul food” as foods rejected by other racial groups and stigmatized as greasy, salty, starchy, and unhealthy, even though whites often consumed the same fare.

Cookbooks by African-Americans started to appear in print in the mid-1900s with evolving recipes based on standardized measures, losing the creative genius of cooking with what was on hand fresh from the garden. The first national African-American cookbook, *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro*
Beaten Biscuits

Of course I’ll gladly give de rule
I meks beat biscuits by,

Dough I ain’t sure dat you will mek
Dat bread de same as I

’Case cooking’s like religion is -
Some’s ’lected and some’s ain’t.

An’ rules don’t nomore mek a cook
Den sermons mek a saint.

Two hundred licks is what I gives
For home-folks never fewer

An’ if I’m ’specting company in,
hundred sure!

By Miss Howard Weeden
in Bandanna Ballands, 1899

Image 3: This poem written by Miss Howard Weeden in her compilation of poems, Bandanna Ballands, is an example of a white woman recording African-American foodways. In this poem, Weeden affects a dialect.

The African Heritage Cookbook (1971) by Mendes tracked food use and recipes from Africa and the West Indies to the United States thereby capturing some of their historic cooking genius. Two of the first southern African-American cookbooks were of general significance. One by Verta Mae Grovesnor in 1970 contained South Carolina, Gullah-Geechee recipes reflecting an international culture and cooking with lots of love and lots of family. Grovesnor’s simple but privileged classic soul food cooking followed tradition and intuition, a cooking style she defined as vibration cooking.

The second by the Darden sisters from Wilson, North Carolina, issued in 1978 exemplified ancestors’ recipes and stories. The Dardens presented the elegant side of southern cooking with a gastronomic social history of African-Americans. Other national African-American cookbooks appearing by the 1970s began to exhibit diverse multicultural examples. Some recipe books featured topics such as soul food, vegetarian, barbecue, down-home, Sea Islands, Creole, or collections of famous individuals such as Mama Dip, Pearl Bailey, and Mahalia Jackson.


1930 – African-American Cooking in the Cape Fear

In the early 1920s, the iron stove introduced during the Civil War was still popular, many new kitchen gadgets were being invented (wire whips, mechanical egg beaters, and electric kitchen appliances) and the first supermarkets were emerging. Packaged foods beginning to appear were canned soups, salad dressings, bottled flavorings, and prepared seasonings. Wilmington’s famous Polite’s Pepper Sauce was developed by a local African-American in 1911 but went out of business in 1918 because of bottle and can shortages during World War I. The appearance of standardized recipes developed for new kitchens and market products resulted in a loss of unrecorded recipes.

An oral survey was designed to ascertain food patterns of African-Americans in the Cape Fear area following recommendations of The Southern Foodways Alliance. The Oral History Initiative was used to design open-ended questions to interview people seventy to ninety years old about the early 1900s. Conversations centering around food and flavors were “icebreakers” which reduced tensions, established comfort zones and rapport, and often digressed to stories such as acquiring food, share-cropping, voting, and family and community happenings. About a dozen African-Americans were selected through friends, museums, and churches and interviewed in 2005-6. They individually reported foods and recipes eaten during their youth and their work in the community - vegetable truck farms, the oyster industry, and peanut farming. They also talked about cooking on the railroad, in clubs and restaurants, including those at Seabreeze—a beach town with restaurants, a nightclub and fishing pier for Middle and Upper Class African-Americans from all over North Carolina to vacation until desegregation allowed them to use all the local beaches in the late 1960s. A second set of interviews occurred with similar African-American seniors in a local church over a series of meetings in 2007. Findings of African-American foodways from both groups were presented to docents from local area historical sites and museums.

Summarizing foods reported by these respondents showed many foods mentioned in the interviews are similar to foods of West Africa—rice, hot peppers, greens, sweet potatoes, okra, eggplant, peas, and beans enhanced with many sauces. Instead of naming exact ingredients and proportions, participants talked about food to achieve desired flavors and tastes and cooking from scratch without a written recipe.

Recipes were distinguished by ingredients indigenous to the area without nearby grocery stores and without processed food. Trying to recapture past recipes is difficult because recipes change as they transcend time even when prepared by the same cook, especially without precise amounts and without step-by-step instructions. Therefore, commonalities of recipe ingredients used by the two African-American groups were reviewed by the author to distinguish seasonings and flavors in
the Cape Fear area in the early 1900s. Four categories to achieve desired flavors and tastes resulted - frying, seasoning meat, vegetables, and sweets.

**African-American Seasonings of the 1900s: Frying, Seasoning Meat, Vegetables, and Sweets**

Pan-frying or deep-frying was with lard, butter or peanut oil. Deep frying, a skill learned in West Africa, contributed flavor and taste to chicken on Sundays and holidays and to fish brought weekly by the fish man. Lights or offal was fried with onions, okra, potatoes, sweet or savory fritters, and pan drippings were used to make gravy. Less desirable cuts of pork or cattle were turned into notable dishes. Fat was also used for face cream and for the hair. Respondents provided the following examples of using fat in cooking in the early 1900s:

- Skins from home butchering, the slaughter house, or a neighbor were sliced in cubes or strips, fried on top of the stove or in a wash pan over an outside fire, and cooked down into lard and cracklins. A drip can, grease pot, lard strainer, or sieve removed cooking crumbs and cracklings for a snack like potato chips or to add to sweet potato biscuits, corn bread, grits, or sauces.
- Chicken feet were prepared by cutting nails off, cleaning the feet, cooking to loosen and remove the skin, and then frying the feet. Testicles or mountain oysters were parboiled, sliced, battered and fried. Pigs feet were scrubbed well but not skinned; covered with water, salt and pepper; simmered whole or in halves till they fell apart; and then fried. Chit’lins were cleaned and scraped thoroughly on the inside, cut in pieces, and simmered three to four hours till tender.
- Seasoning meat provided flavor from the curing process. Examples were bacon grease or drippings, streak-o-lean (similar to bacon but thicker), fat back (also rendered as lard), streak-o-fat (mostly fat back), side meat, ham hocks, hog jowl, neck bones, sowbelly, middlings, white meat, white bacon, seasoning bacon. The following were common examples to these respondents from the 1930s:
  - Seasoning meat often provided the protein for the meal along with vegetable sources such as dried beans. It was often used to cook eggplant, okra, succotash, cabbage, collards, and other greens. For example, to prepare collards, every leaf was washed to get rid of dirt and bugs until the bottom of the water container was free of grit. Spotted or broken leaves were discarded. Big stems could be cut out or left in. Leaves were layered together, rolled and cut in \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch strips, and cooked on a low-boil with seasoning meat till tender. Some added a little sugar. Pot likker, the juice left after the greens were cooked, was served with corn bread or cornmeal dumplings, or with hot sauce.
  - Vegetables such as okra, celery, bell pepper, carrots, turnips, potatoes, tomatoes, and onions were used for seasoning. Verta Mae always recommended onions. Vegetables, alone or in combination, seasoned salads, stock, soups, casseroles, and main dishes, hot or cold-rice, bean, or macaroni dishes. The vegetables formed a “sauce” or seasoning to enhance flavors and to stretch a dish. The following examples illustrate use of flavorful vegetables for seasoning by respondents in the 1930s:
    - Cheap cuts such as pig’s ears or neck bones, and meats such as racoon, possum, squirrel, and venison were also seasoned with vegetables, garlic, herbs, salt and pepper. Hot peppers, hot pepper vinegar, or hot pepper sauce was added during cooking or at the table. Potato salad, macaroni salad, and shrimp salad had pepper. Hot peppers, hot pepper vinegar, or hot pepper sauce was added during cooking or at the table. Potato salad, macaroni salad, and shrimp salad had
  - Rice, a link with West African and Gullah cultures was a staple food consumed daily in the Carolinas and in the 1700s, often a part of many vegetable dishes. For example, Hoppin’ John with black-eyed peas and rice was often cooked with seasoning meat, hot spices and served with collards. Some families raised their own rice, cut it to dry, beat it in a mortar with two pestles to separate the chaff which they or the wind blew out.
  - Sweeteners used in different amounts were light or dark syrup, molasses, sorghum, or sugar. Other sweeteners were fruits such as apples and pears and sweet spices such as cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger. Recipes of the 1700s used little or no processed sugar. Some of the panelists’ memories are of local families growing sorghum and sugar cane which they took to the women’s prison in Wilmington to be made into molasses and syrup. Molasses is sometimes a generic name for sweetener. The respondents gave the following illustrations of cooking with sweeteners in the 1930s:
Small amounts of sweeteners were used to flavor cooked vegetables. Moderate amounts of sweeteners were a creative part of many dishes. Beans were seasoned with sugars, spices and bacon. Barbecue sauces were made with vinegar, hot sauce, catsup, brown sugar, syrup, and various fruits. Whole, sliced or mashed sweet potatoes were used in fritters or pies seasoned with brown or white sugar, spices, oranges or lemons, marshmallows, nuts, butter, or crushed cereal. Sweet potato pone was made from grated sweet potatoes, brown sugar or molasses, nutmeg, eggs, butter, milk and meal. Fried fruit pies were made from fresh peaches, pears, or sweet potatoes which were cooked down and used to fill large or small rounds of biscuit dough. The dough was folded over, pinched at the edge, and fried in hot oil. Bread pudding was made by soaking bread in milk and then adding eggs, brown sugar, melted butter, spices such as cinnamon or nutmeg, and fruits such as raisins, peaches, and applesauce. Gingerbread combined sugar, molasses, butter, eggs, flour, and ginger to make cake or cookies. Large amounts of sweeteners were used in preserves and toppings for “sop n biscuits,” cornbread, or grits which could be hot or sliced and fried. Brown Dog candy was one part each of sugar and peanuts, half as much water, and a few tablespoons of vinegar.

This pattern of food use in the early 1900s is described by a comprehensive 1980 doctoral study of foodways of Wilmington African–Americans. Traditional core foods of grandmothers’ diets during the 1940s were fatback, liver, neck bones, chicken, sweet potatoes, collards, mustard greens, turnip greens, cabbage, corn bread, fish, rice, grits, beans and peas. Gradually disappearing as core foods were sorghum syrup, wild game, poke salad, and buttermilk.  

Summary
This review of foodways shows that African-Americans have been contributing cooking information since their arrival in this country influencing famous Southern recipes and creating original recipes adopted by all levels of the population. At the same time African-Americans have been receivers of information in terms of the new world foods and European recipes. In many ways these findings about foodways parallel other economically disadvantaged groups in the Cape Fear area.

Information about flavor and taste of early 1900 African-American foodways in the Cape Fear suggested four ways food was used for flavoring: frying, seasoning meat, vegetables, and sweets. Most African-American seniors in this study use their cooking skills for family or community gatherings but lament that their grandchildren are not familiar with the tastes and textures of old time specialties such as macaroni and cheese, cornbread, rice and gravy. Food preparation skills to produce recipes and flavors of previous generations are lost as consumers distance themselves from their food and family origins.

Edna Lewis stated: “How much the bond that held us had to do with food...I decided to write down just exactly how we did things.” Food has united African-American families and communities and endorsed the importance of the extended family. Responses in this study indicated that difficult times in the Cape Fear area during the depression years were enriched by African-American families cooking together and sharing love, ideas and support during good times and bad.

Acknowledgements
The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance provided by Marian Hills, LuAnn Mims, Pat Hardee, Candace McGreedy (Lower Cape Fear Historical Society); Madeline Flagler (Bellamy Mansion Museum); Karen Smith (Cape Fear Museum); Faye Jacobs, and Margaret Bryant (New Hanover Department of Aging). A special thanks to the seniors participating in the interviews and to John Haley for his participation throughout and review of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

1. Southern Foodways Alliance, at the University of Mississippi, http://www.southernfoodways.com/about.shtml, University MS, established in 1977
A Beaten Biscuit Board and other 19th century kitchen implements are on display in the Latimer House Kitchen.