

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

September, 2008

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

“Send me, Gods! a whole hog barbecu'd.” The History of Barbecue by Philippe Halbert



Many of us today celebrate summer with outdoor gatherings and cookouts. Like us, early Americans also took advantage of the warm weather and took their festivities out of doors. Especially in the Southern colonies,

barbecues and “fish feasts” were enjoyed at all levels of society, from the enslaved to the planter class, and brought family and friends together the same way our modern outdoor reunions do today.

The practice of grilling foods outdoors is not a new one, having arguably existed since the earliest humans discovered fire and made the transition from raw to cooked meats. The first recorded instance of barbecues was made by early Spanish explorers led by Christopher Columbus, who observed what was called *barbicu* or *barbicoa* by natives of what is now Haiti in the 1490s. Using wooden racks, fish and game were laid on such framework structures under which were slow-roasting fire meant to help preserve the meat for later consumption. On arriving at a Timucuan village in Florida in the 1560s, French explorer and artist Jacques Lemoyne recorded being received with freshly grilled fish, lizards, and alligator. English explorers part of the “Lost Colony” in the 1580s described similar cooking techniques by the native peoples of the Outer Banks.

Although it appears that these native forms of “barbecue” were more a means of food preservation, by the early-eighteenth century the tradition of the barbecue as it is known today appears to have become well-entrenched in many circles. As early as the 1660s, “barbecue” appeared

in print in English. In the 1730s British author Alexander Pope wrote in his Second Satire on the Second Book of Homer “Send me, Gods! a whole hog barbecu'd” in reference to the increasingly widespread and popular cooking technique. In a footnote Pope describes barbecue as “A West Indian term of gluttony, a hog roasted whole, stuffed with spices and basted with Madeira wine.” Twenty years later, and the following quote surfaces on page 24 of the Gentleman’s Magazine of May of 1753: “Let’s each hold a gen’rous barbicu feast.” Period imagery depicts the meat, which was not limited to pork, being cooked most often on spits as well as in pits.

Philip Vickers Fithian provides firsthand

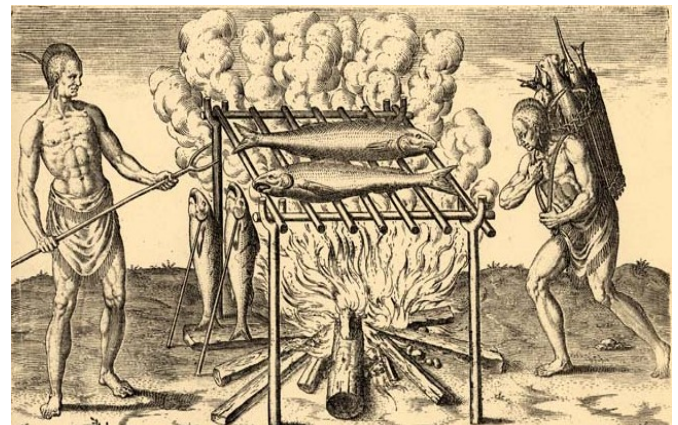


Figure 1 Natives of the Outer Banks “browvyling” fish, in a 1590s engraving by Theodore DeBry based on a 1583 water-color by explorer John White

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Jim Bartlinski, Curator
Sarah Arnold, Curator of Education



Figure II Florida natives barbecuing alligators, fish, and small mammals in a 1590s engraving by Theodore DeBry, based on a 1560s watercolor by French explorer Jacques Lemoyne

accounts of barbecues and outdoor feasts in colonial Virginia. Well-known for his accounts of plantation life in the years immediately preceding the War of Independence, this New Jersey native was educated at Princeton and employed as a tutor to the children of Robert Carter of Nomini Hall from 1773 to 1774. Fithian wrote in his journal that on the fourth of September 1774, he “was invited this morning by Captain [Gibbs] to a Barbecue: this differs but little from the Fish Feasts, instead of Fish the Dinner is roasted Pig, with the proper appendages, but the Diversion and exercise are the very same at both.”

Fithian also details seven fish-feasts between July and August of 1774, noting the accompanying drink, music, and dancing. Although large-scale commercial fishing was undertaken with large sein nets throughout the colonies, recreational fishing with a hook and line was also enjoyed by members of the gentry, and prior to “fish feasts” men and boys (and even women and girls on occasion) would often go to nearby rivers and streams to catch the evening’s supper.

George Washington was known to enjoy such outdoor pursuits. In 1769 the Colonel “went in to Alexandria to a Barbicue and stayed all Night” winning eight shillings at cards during the course of the event which lasted three days. A journal entry dated 18 September 1773 records Colonel Washington hosting his own barbecue. Other entries from his journals illustrate what was served at barbecues besides meats. In May of 1773

Washington recorded buying “45 weight” of flour “for barbecue,” seemingly for making bread or biscuits. The colonial tradition of the barbecue remained with Washington into his presidency; after laying the cornerstone of the Capitol Building in 1793, he and his fellow statesman dined on a five-hundred pound barbecued ox in the newly founded Federal City of Washington, D.C.

Barbecues and outdoor gatherings were widely popular among early Americans of African descent, both free and enslaved. Nicholas Creswell, an English visitor to the colonies from 1774 to 1777, recorded attending a barbecue along the Saint Mary’s River between Georgia and Florida in 1774. He described it as a “great number of young people met together with a fiddle and banjo played by two [N]egroes, with plenty of toddy, which both men and women seem to be very fond of.” The barbecue took on a distinct transformation as it was adopted by these people, forcibly taken from their homeland and transplanted in a foreign environment. As Creswell’s description of the banjo and other African instruments played during such get-togethers demonstrates, the barbecue took on a multicultural flavor among enslaved communities. Modern American barbecue traditions in large part derive from this fusion of European, African, and the new American cultures.



Figure III “The Fishing Party” by William Hogarth, 1733, depicts a gentry family and servant engaged in recreational fishing with a hook and line



Figure IV Detail from "The Old Plantation," ca. 1790-1800, which shows the mixing of traditional African and new American culture often present at barbecues in enslaved and free black communities.

As the eighteenth century progressed, so, too, did the development of the barbecue. What had originally been a sort of "potluck" gathering, with guests bringing different dishes to share, soon become an elaborate display of fortune and hospitality. As planters grew wealthier, it soon became the custom for one household to host an entire

outdoor event. In 1772 Landon Carter of Sabine Hall complained that "this is our third Barbecue day. I think it an expensive thing. I confess I like to meet my friends now and then, but certainly the old plan of every family carrying its own dish was both cheaper and better, because then nobody intruded, but now every one comes in and raises the club, and really many only do so for the sake of getting a good dinner and a belly full of drink." Carter continued, adding "barbecues and what-not deprived some of their senses."

Carter was not the only one who did not appreciate the manners that often characterized barbecues. Visiting Alexandria in 1796, the famous early American architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe commented that "about half-past eight the Philadelphia company of players who are now acting in a barn in the neighbourhood came in a body. Once, in Virginia, these drinking parties had a much more modest name-they were called 'barbecues.' Now they say at once a 'drinking party.'"

Did John Carlyle share such an opinion on barbecues? Although he wrote to his brother George that he "live[d] a very disagreeable life and kep[t] little company" after Sybil Carlyle's death in 1769, he was at the same time just developing his

Torthorwald plantation. Erecting a dwelling house ca. 1770, perhaps Carlyle saw Torthorwald as an escape from city life and memories of past losses, hosting barbecues of his own there with his three surviving children and neighboring family and friends.

Further Reading:

Carson, Jane. Colonial Virginians at Play. Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1989.

Creswell, Nicholas. Journal 1774-1777 . Ed. Samuel Thornley. New York: Dial Press, 1924.

Fithian, Philip Vickers. Journal 1773-1774. Ed. Farish. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978.

Latrobe, Henry. The Journal of Latrobe: Being the Notes and Sketches of an Architect, Naturalist, and Traveler in the United States from 1796 to 1820. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1905.

Smith, Daniel Blake. Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth Century Chesapeake Society. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Girl Scouts at Carlyle House



Girl Scouts®

In addition to a new school program, Carlyle House is launching two new programs designed specifically for Girl Scouts. The programs, one for Brownie Girl Scouts and one for Juniors, will cover all of the activities necessary for the girls to earn a badge. The programs will include a tailored house tour and one or more craft activities. Girl Scouts completing the program will also receive a special Carlyle House badge. The programs will be available weekday afternoons and weekends.