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*AFRICAN AMERICANS AND SOUL FOODS*

Soul food represents a cooking style originated by African-American slaves out of necessity.<sup>1</sup> The problem was cotton and other cash crops and the way they rendered food production to a kind of afterthought. In many parts of the South, slaves produced much of their own food. With little time available to see to their own needs, they concentrated on vegetables that were easy to grow and store. Their meats were coarse and fatty, not by choice but because of their masters' begrudging attitude and chronic penny-pinching. Offcuts of meat, offal, and other cheap foods continued to dominate the African American bill of fare after slavery because most families could not afford "to live high on the hog." Yet, black people remained undaunted. They made up for their rough, simple cuisine with a loving attitude in the kitchen and an open-handed generosity with whatever food they had.

Today's soul food harks back to those earlier times. Much of its richness as a cuisine stems from its pork specialties. Chitterlings or chitlins (intestines of hogs slow cooked and often eaten with vinegar and hot sauce), cracklins (fried pork skin), fatback (salted pork fat generally used to season vegetables), ham hocks, hog jowls (sliced and usually cooked with chitlins), souse (made from pig snouts, lips, and ears), pigs' feet (sometimes pickled), and pork ribs rank among the most famous. Country fried steak (beef dredged in seasoned flour and deep fried), beef neck bones, fried chicken (with cornmeal or seasoned flour breading), and fried fish (often dredged in cornmeal) also count as mainstays. Under the heading of vegetables, soul food menus feature

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<sup>1</sup> See Cathryn Boyd Burke and Susan P. Raia, *Soul and Traditional Southern Food Practices, Customs, and Holidays. Ethnic and Regional Food Practices*, Ethnic and Regional Food Practices (American Dietetic Association and the American Diabetes Association, 1995).

black-eyed peas, lima beans, okra (fried or stewed), red beans, and sweet potatoes (sometimes called “yams” in the United States). Other classics include biscuits, chow-chow (a spicy pickle relish using a variety of vegetables), cornbread, grits (boiled cornmeal coarsely ground), hot sauce (cayenne peppers, vinegar, and spices), rice, sorghum, and watermelon.

Nutritionists consider a diet heavy on soul foods unhealthy.<sup>2</sup> Concerns arise primarily from the common convention of cooking and seasoning with pork fat and because so many dishes are fried, usually in lard or hydrogenated vegetable oil. These practices produce dishes packed with energy and dripping with trans fatty acids. “Trans fats,” as they are often called, arise from the process of hydrogenating unsaturated oils. This causes them to become solid and act like saturated fats. Trans fats raise the level of low-density lipoprotein in the blood and increase the risk of coronary heart disease. They also decrease levels of high-density lipoprotein that helps remove cholesterol from arteries. All told, a steady diet of soul food without significant exercise leads to disproportionately high occurrences of obesity, hypertension, cardiac and circulatory problems, and diabetes, all too often resulting in early death.

Its dangers notwithstanding, many African Americans think of soul food as comfort food. Soul food for them calls to mind family and friends and, in keeping with its name, it is believed to feed the spirit as well as the body. People regard it as part of their ancestral heritage and as an emblem of ethnic identity. Soul food restaurants ranging from chicken shacks to upscale clubs exist all across the nation, and in big cities with large Black populations one finds them in especially large numbers.

This was not the case toward the end of the nineteenth century when economists and early nutrition scientists began studying food consumption among African Americans. Blacks in big

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8.

cities like Philadelphia and Washington, DC ate sweet potatoes, but otherwise soul foods were scarcely seen. Nutritionists found diets prototypical of modern soul food only in the rural South.<sup>3</sup> This chapter recounts these traditions and examines their relationships to geography and commerce. It compares African American diets across a rural-urban continuum reaching from remote regions of Alabama and eastern Virginia into metropolitan areas of the Northeast. The progressive expansion and improvement of diet along this continuum and the absence of soul foods at the metropolitan end appears to have been a response to available alternatives in the marketplace and a result of rational choices on the part of Black consumers.

### **TUSKEGEE AND THE BLACK BELT**

Of the thousands of Southern towns and villages steeped in cotton culture and potentially good sites for a close look at the traditional African American food habits of plantation society, W. O. Atwater, Director of the United States Department of Agriculture's Office of Experiment Stations (OES), picked Tuskegee, Alabama, home of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Destined to become one of America's foremost schools of higher education for blacks, the institute was only four years old at this point, but already its principal was a respected figure among educators and well on his way toward becoming a nationally famous authority on matters of race. Director Atwater regarded Washington as a trustworthy

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<sup>3</sup> W. O. Atwater and C. D. Woods, "Dietary Studies with Reference to the Food of the Negro in Alabama in 1895 and 1896," U. S. Department of Agriculture Office of Experiment Stations Bulletin No. 38 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897); Isabel Bevier, "Dietary Studies among the Negroes in 1898," in *Dietary Studies of Negroes in Eastern Virginia*, U. S. Department of Agriculture Office of Experiment Stations Bulletin No.71 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899); H. B. Frissell, "Dietary Studies among the Negroes in 1897," in *Dietary Studies of Negroes in Eastern Virginia*, U. S. Department of Agriculture Office of Experiment Stations Bulletin No.71 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899). *in 1897 and 1898*, by H. B. Frissell and Isabel Bevier, U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Experiment Stations Bulletin 71 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1899).

collaborator. He understood the value of dietary studies, and he gladly accepted the research appointment Atwater offered him. H. M. Smith, an OES scientist, organized the actual study.

Smith began fieldwork in the spring of 1895 assisted by J. W. Hoffman, a Tuskegee resident and member of the institute's staff. The two men conducted daily inventories of the foods consumed in representative households through much of June. Hoffman undertook another round of fieldwork on his own in December. He continued to monitor the types of food and the quantities consumed through February, creating as a result a record of winter eating habits. The institute's farm manager recruited subjects for both phases of the project. All told, he enlisted the cooperation of eighteen families, including his own.

The families involved represented a range of social and economic conditions. Several of them resided in Tuskegee proper. Most, however, were tenant farmers and plantation workers, some living as far as nine miles away. Those in or near Tuskegee lived in relative comfort, especially if they were attached to the institute. Others, particularly folks employed on large plantations, lived in hopeless poverty. They represented the majority of African Americans inhabiting the so-called "Black Belt," a fertile plain stretching approximately 300 miles (480 kilometers) across central Alabama and northeastern Mississippi.

The Black Belt's African Americans for the most part were members of a rural proletariat or working class. Around Tuskegee, most rented between twenty and sixty acres of land and worked it behind their own mule or ox. Many families had at least one pig and several chickens. Those living in and near the village usually kept a cow. People dedicated most of their land to cotton, their cash crop. For the table, they grew corn, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, and sorghum, though rarely did anyone raise enough of these commodities to meet their own family's needs.

To make matters worse, only a few households kept kitchen gardens for raising collards, turnips, and other vegetables.

Cotton's prior claim on people's time and energy applied to every man, woman, and child strong enough to lift a hoe. Planting began in March and ran through June. It demanded an all-out effort at the same time of year farmers might otherwise be planting subsistence crops. Then came picking with another round of labor just as intense. It got underway in mid-August and continued through November. In between planting and picking came a "laying-by time." This interlude for resting up, visiting family and friends, and attending camp meetings lasted four or five weeks. Tenants and plantation hands normally spent the winter doing little or nothing. A few collected wood and sold it. Some repaired fences. Others made chairs or baskets, but hardly anybody found wage work.

*Photo 3.1. "African American Couple Sitting in One-Room Cabin near Fireplace" (c. 1900). Cooking pot hangs over the fire; dinnerware is on the table.*

Tenant housing throughout the region consisted mainly of one or two room log cabins meagerly furnished. Family members generally possessed a couple of rope bedsteads, a few corn shuck mattresses, and some patchwork quilts. Here and there someone owned a clock, but more often than not it failed to keep time. Usual household objects included a cupboard, an assortment of dishes, and a wooden chest or perhaps an old trunk for keeping food and clothing. In addition, there was often a pine table, several chairs, a pair of andirons, and an iron pot. Not many black folks owned a cooking stove.

Homemakers prepared meals in front of a fireplace, relying on lard, cornmeal, molasses, and a few fatty pieces of salt pork as staples. Table 3.1 shows these foods as the core components of

the Tuskegee diet.<sup>4</sup> The table also identifies wheat flour as a core item, but only recently had it become cheap enough to use on a regular basis. This means the biscuit was still a newcomer to local tables.

*<Table 3.1. Typical Winter-Spring Diet, Tuskegee, 1895–1896>*

Cured pork, on the other hand, was a long-standing favorite. However, by the 1890s it was no longer a local or even a regional product. Instead, in cabin after cabin Smith and Hoffman found commercially packed bacon from Chicago. Seldom did they see lean pork. Around Tuskegee the very term “meat” meant fatty pork. Some locals claimed they knew of no other sort of meat except chicken and certain wild species such as possum and rabbit.<sup>5</sup>

Area families generally cooked the same simple meals day after day. Preparations began by placing a thin slice of bacon or salt pork in a frying pan and mixing cornmeal and water to make a dough. This was plunked onto a skillet or the flat surface of a hoe. The skillet or the hoe along with the frying pan were positioned over a fire for ten or fifteen minutes. The dough by then had baked, and the pork was fried crisp. For a finishing touch, some molasses might be mixed into the leftover grease to make “sap.” It served as a kind of gravy to accompany the corn bread or “hoe cake.”

Now and again families had other things to eat. “Cracklin bread” was made by frying fat until it was crisp; crushing it into a mixture of cornmeal, water, soda, and salt; and then baking it like ordinary cornbread. Collards or turnips were boiled with pork fat to give the vegetables a

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<sup>4</sup> The table divides core components into primary and secondary items. Foods counted as primary, were present in at least fifty percent of the households sampled. Items not seen in 50 percent of households inventoried but listed for at least 25 percent are regarded secondary core foods. Those not noted often enough to qualify as core items are regarded as typically peripheral foods.

<sup>5</sup> See Atwater and Woods, "Dietary Studies with Reference to the Food of the Negro in Alabama in 1895 and 1896," 20.

“rich taste.” Those who owned a cow used its milk to make a watery butter. It was churned in little clay vessels called splashers. Members of the household ate the butter fresh and had a little buttermilk to drink most of the year. Sometimes during late autumn or winter, fresh pork and sweet potatoes might be served, and every so often someone prepared a possum. The cook on such occasions seasoned the carcass with red peppers and baked it surrounded by sweet potatoes in a big pot.

Vegetables other than sweet potatoes were peripheral to the diet of most residents. Only the unspecified greens listed in Table 3.1 showed up in an appreciable number of kitchens. The researchers came across collards only once. Every other vegetable they tallied was found exclusively in but one household--the home of the institute’s farm manager. His family’s use of dried apples and strawberries and the consumption of blackberries and peaches by another family associated with the institute accounted for all of the fruits identified in the Tuskegee study.

Other disparities existed between families connected to the institute and those unconnected. Institute families were singular in their use of chicken and mutton, and with but one exception the families of institute employees accounted for all of the beef consumption reported. In addition, the diets of institute families were twice as varied as those of ordinary farmers. Some of them subsisted on just four commodities for the entire two weeks they were observed.

The underlying problem was that tenants and plantation hands all across the Black Belt remained in a kind of bondage many decades after emancipation. Instead of frank slavery, African Americans in Alabama labored under a form of debt peonage locally referred to as “the mortgage system.” Landowners under this arrangement made loans to tenants, which enabled them to buy seed, tools, and provisions sufficient to last the growing season. Tenants in return signed a “waive note,” giving lenders first right to whatever portion of the crop they needed in

order to settle the debt. What with high rates of interest, a tenant had little cotton left to sell after the landlord took his share. Even a tenant who made good money on a crop had to subsist for a time on scant rations because more often than not savings were spent by February. In the meantime, households exhausted whatever surplus corn and molasses they had set aside, compelling members to rely all the more heavily on purchased provisions. This continued until there was no more credit. From that point on, family members went hungry until spring arrived and once again credit became available.

### **EASTERN VIRGINIA**

The Atwater and his OES colleagues followed up their Alabama study with two projects in eastern Virginia. The first looked into the eating habits of black families settled in the Great Dismal Swamp of Franklin County.<sup>6</sup> The second dealt with families in Elizabeth City County and the city of Hampton, a Chesapeake Bay port on the north side of Hampton Roads.<sup>7</sup> Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (today's Hampton University), a federal land-grant school dedicated to the education of African and Native Americans, sponsored both inquiries.

H. B. Frissell, principal of the institute, compiled the Franklin County dietaries. The venture seemed destined to fail at first. Recruiting subjects and weighing their foods required traveling back and forth everyday through a malaria-infested area seldom visited by outsiders. The unusual comings and goings alarmed local whites and provoked outcries against the project. Frissell responded with patient explanations and eventually calmed their fears.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Frissell, "Dietary Studies among the Negroes in 1897."

<sup>7</sup> Bevier, "Dietary Studies among the Negroes in 1898." Elizabeth City County no longer exists. It merged with the city of Hampton in 1952.

<sup>8</sup> Frissell, "Dietary Studies among the Negroes in 1897," 7.

Frissell's research, which took place during the spring of 1897, involved twelve households. Most of them lived in tiny cabins near their cultivations on small tracts of rented land. Dwellings typically were built of boards and equipped with a fireplace. This was often a family's sole source of light as well as heat. Few of them afford to purchase lamp oil or candles.

The farmers cultivated the swamplands by creating "dead-tree farms." These were started on forested plots by girdling the trees and removing the underbrush. This established a clearing littered with dead tree trunks. Cotton, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and other crops were planted amidst the debris. Farmers produced most of their own food in this way. Agricultural efforts were supplemented with earnings from odd jobs. Compensation usually came in the form of "rations" rather than money. As a result, a number of families never purchased foodstuffs from the store. Some visited it occasionally but only to buy a few cents worth of salt. Others regularly bought canned goods and small quantities of baking powder, green coffee, tea, and vinegar.

Frissell characterized the local diet as "hog and hominy." The bulk of it, as in Alabama, consisted of cornmeal mixed with water and then baked. Combining the local cornmeal, which contained a considerable amount of bran, with the brackish, muddy waters of the Great Dismal Swamp produced a distinctive dough. This was inserted directly into the hot ashes of the fireplace to be extracted a few minutes later as "ash cake." On the hog side, Franklin County's residents enjoyed more variety than folks around Tuskegee. In addition to belly bacon and lard, people partook of salt sides (side bacon) and boiled pork shoulders. Fresh fish was a principal component of the diet. Sweet potatoes, cabbage, and mustard greens came to the table regularly, often accompanied by a bit of smoked or salted herring for extra flavor. Occasional foods included ham, pork sausage, pork jowl, eggs, milk, brown sugar, and molasses. Families in some households ate dried apples, canned tomatoes, and canned peaches, and in the spring they had

collard sprouts and strawberries. Frogs, turtles, and snakes were on the table at certain times of the year. Now and then Frissell also recorded the consumption of fresh beef (both flank and shoulder), dried beef, beef liver, pork liver, chitterlings, haslet (meat loaf from pork offal), chicken, eel, white bread, sponge cake, canned blackberries, and various pickles.

Atwater asked a student, Isabel Bevier, to collect the Elizabeth City County and Hampton diaries.<sup>9</sup> These were places culturally core little resemblance to the Great Dismal Swamp where farmers approximated a kind of folk community. The residents of the Elizabeth City-Hampton area took part in a more metropolitan way of life. Nearly everyone was immersed in commerce. Many had small plots of land on which they raised cash crops twice a year. Early vegetables were shipped north. Later in the season, growers dispatched potatoes, peas, sweet corn, and various fruits to Washington, DC and other nearby markets. Besides this truck farming, African Americans held jobs in the local fishing industry and in the shipyards at Newport News. In Hampton, they pursued a variety of trades and professions and owned a number of local businesses.

*<Photo 3.2. "Sixth Street Market (Typical Vegetable Men), Richmond, Va." (1908?).*

*African American truck farmers provisioned the towns and cities throughout the Tidewater region.*

Bevier conducted her research during the spring of 1898. She kept track of food consumption in seven households, three in Hampton and four in the countryside nearby. Two of the families in town lived in large, well-furnished homes. All of the others resided in small frame houses. The interior walls in these homes were covered with newspaper, and furnishing

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<sup>9</sup> Bevier, who would go on to become the founder of the Department of Household Science at the University of Illinois, studied with Ellen Richards at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. See Juliet Lita Bane, *The Story of Isabel Bevier* (Peoria, IL: C.A. Bennett, 1955).

ordinarily consisted of no more than a couple of chairs, a bench, a table, and a cupboard.

Cooking stoves were uncommon. About the half of the people in the county owned a cow. Most kept chickens and a pig, and families generally raised vegetables such as corn, sweet potato, and cabbage in small gardens.

Consumption patterns reflected Hampton's location and commercial orientation. Fresh fish was a primary component in the local diet. Pork was consumed as frequently and in even greater quantities. Families that kept a pig butchered it in December and ate it over the course of the winter, but most people had to content themselves with "white meat," the local euphemism for salt pork shipped from Chicago. County residents also purchased various forms of commercially processed beef. Indeed, smoked, chipped, and corned beef combined counted as another primary element in the typical diet. Bacon, ham, and chicken amounted to secondary foods.

Dairy products were peripheral. This was because most milk got churned into butter and traded at local shops for other provisions. These included cornmeal, wheat flour, rice, granulated sugar, and cabbage. White bread was popular as well, and since most families did not own an oven it was mainly store bought. Still, there were those who disdained commercially baked bread and avoided it entirely. Biscuits and "hoe cakes" led the way as the two most popular kinds of bread.

## **URBAN COMMUNITIES**

The dietary studies of Ellen Richards and Amelia Shapleigh in Philadelphia and the domestic budgets collected by S. E. Foreman in Washington, DC, documented the food consumption of African Americans living in densely populated urban communities. Carried out in 1892 and intended to assess the nutrition of the various ethnicities served by a local settlement house, Richards and Shapleigh's work recorded the food purchases of five African American

households.<sup>10</sup> Foreman, who tabulated the expenses of nineteen impoverished households both summer and winter in 1905 and '06 identified two of his cases as African American.<sup>11</sup>

We have only bits of information about the groups that took part in these studies. Richards and Shapleigh's notes identified two of the households they studied as childless. The others contained as many as five children. Adult women outnumbered adult men by more than two to one. One of Forman's African-American households consisted of an elderly rag picker, his wife, and three children. The other, headed by a flour-mill worker and his wife, contained five children. The rag picker brought home about five dollars a week. His wife took in washing. Each week she earned an additional two or three dollars. This family occupied four rooms with no running water in a two story frame building located in an alley. The flour-mill employee earned nine dollars a week. His wife too did laundry to help make ends meet. The family rented a two-story frame house containing four small rooms and no toilet.

Table 3.2 combines the Philadelphia dietaries and Washington budgetaries in order to represent a typical African American urban diet for the cold-weather months. Here the absence of cured pork, cornmeal, and lard from the core diet signaled unequivocally a table very different from that set in black communities further south. With whole milk replacing buttermilk as a core item and with beef, white bread, and potatoes as staples, the diet outlined here appears to have been not much different from the diet of poor whites save for the presence of sweet potatoes. The near absence of green vegetables from the table represented a seasonal artifact. Foreman's

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen H. Richards and Amelia Shapleigh, "Dietary Studies in Philadelphia and Chicago, 1892-93," in *Dietary Studies in Boston and Springfield, Mass., Philadelphia, Pa., and Chicago, Ill.*, ed. Lydia Southard and R. D. Milner, U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Experiment Stations Bulletin 129 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1903), 37-98.

<sup>11</sup> S. E. Forman, *Conditions of Living among the Poor*, Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor 64 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1906).

summer budgetaries listed kale, spinach, spurrey, and string beans. Both of his subjects switched from cornmeal to wheat flour for the summer, but they continued to eat potatoes, sweet potatoes, and cabbage throughout the year.

*<Table 3.2. Typical Winter Diet, Poor African Americans, Philadelphia and Washington, DC, 1892–1906>*

Yet another early look at the eating habits of urban blacks emanated from a project undertaken in New York City by Alfred Hess and Lester Unger. From the fall of 1916 through the winter of 1917, they tracked the food consumption of a sample of African American mothers in order to discover the cause of rickets in children.<sup>12</sup> The two investigators suspected (wrongly) that the central problem was maternal nutrition. Research to test their hypothesis focused on the Columbus Hill area of the city where the incidence of the disease was especially high. Most of the residents of the neighborhood were black and most came from the West Indies.

Hess and Unger did not publish a detailed listing of foods consumed by the women they queried. They did report that most of them ate either meat or fish daily accompanied by rice or potatoes. Fruits and other vegetables were eaten on average twice a week except during late autumn and winter. The consumption of fresh vegetables during that part of the year fell to about once every ten days.

The researchers offered almost no information about the children's food consumption. However, we know now that rickets in children involves a deficiency of vitamin D and that the disease was an especially serious problem among blacks. The reason is that vitamin D is produced by skin stimulated by ultra-violet rays, normally from the sun. Dark skin impedes the

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<sup>12</sup> Alfred F. Hess and Lester J. Unger, "The Diet of the Negro Mother in New York City," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 70, no. 13 (1918): 900–902.

process. When dark-skinned people reside in northern latitudes and other places that receive scant sunlight the situation can be dangerous. Around the time that Hess and Unger were conducting their inquiry, an estimated eighty percent of all infants in Boston showed signs of rickets. Studies of the disease in New Haven, Connecticut and New Orleans, Louisiana found it to be widespread among African Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Few foods other than fish offer plenty of vitamin D. Liver, which happens to be a good source, has never been popular in the United States. Yet, it does show up in Table 3.2. Taking Philadelphia alone, sheep's liver ranked as a core food. Settlement workers may have recommended it to anxious parents, or perhaps feeding it to children regularly was a matter of common knowledge. Whatever the case, its salience suggests that African American households were actively addressing the threat of rickets.

### **THE INSTITUTE FOR COLORED YOUTH**

The Institute for Colored Youth (now known as Cheyney University of Pennsylvania) may have stood amidst a rustic landscape, but it was an institution commitment to modern and progressive ideas. This was exemplified in a nutritional context in 1906 when the administration found itself no longer able to find suppliers willing to provision the school's kitchen at wholesale prices.<sup>14</sup> This created the potentially ruinous prospect of having to provide sixty boarding students with nutritious and affordable meals while paying retail prices for the products used to prepare them.

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<sup>13</sup> R. T. Steinbock, "Rickets and Osteomalacia," in *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*, ed. Kenneth F. Kiple (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 978–80.

<sup>14</sup> Institute for Colored Youth at Cheyney, *Applied Domestic Science Daily Menus for the School Year and a Dietary Study for October* (Philadelphia: Press of E. A. Wright, 1909).

School officials addressed their predicament aggressively, applying contemporary management principles at every turn. Staff kept a watchful eye over the storeroom, kitchen, and dining room. They received instructions to measure everything and to exercise the strictest economies from initial purchase to final disposal. Faculty members integrated cost reduction into the domestic science curriculum, and they engaged the entire student body in finding ways to reduce expenses. These endeavors paid off. By the end of the 1907-08 school year, the cost of feeding a Cheyney student had been pared to twenty-one cents a day.

The school celebrated by publishing a volume containing a dining hall dietary for the month of October plus daily menus for the entire school year.<sup>15</sup> These records show that officials, in spite of their zeal for cost-cutting, saw to providing students with generous portions of a wide variety of dishes. Throughout the drive to reduce costs, they received plenty of meat (especially cuts of fresh beef), milk, butter, bread, and potatoes. These core components of the dining hall's menu were supplemented nearly every month with fresh fish, mutton or lamb, rice, and tomatoes. Other items came and went at with the seasons. Apples, a staple in October, disappeared by January. Eggs, hardly seen in October, became a core food in April. Such changes reflected periodic availabilities and prices. Other switches, such as the sudden appearance of a generic breakfast cereal as a core item of diet in July, may have been opportunistic--a good price for whatever reason at the time. During the month of October, the kitchen used more than ninety-five different commodities. Weekly menus listed approximately seventy distinct dishes. Many of the recipes came from Fannie Farmer's *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Fannie Merritt Farmer, *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (Little, Brown and Company, 1896).

## CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of soul food had not been invented. No equation existed between African American identity and any particular style of food. Food habits among blacks ranged from the traditions of the rural South to the middle-class tastes seen at the Institute for Colored Youth where the popularity of beef outranked pork and an appetite for wheat always surpassed a taste for corn (maize).

From the standpoint of culinary tastes and preferences, there was but one obvious thread common to African American culture. The sweet potato had a home everywhere. More than bacon or corn bread, sweet potato occupied an important place in African American diets from the cotton lands of the Black Belt to the slums of Philadelphia. This was obscured somewhat by its seasonality. From an annual perspective, for instance, sweet potato appeared to be a secondary item in the Tuskegee diet (see Table 3.1). When autumn and winter rolled around, however, it stood out as part of the diet's primary core. As such, the sweet potato was fried, boiled, or roasted. It might be baked directly in fireplace ashes or in an oven. Sweet potatoes served as an ingredient in biscuits, breads, muffins, pies, soufflés, and stews. They were baked with pork and apples and sometimes twice baked with brown sugar, raisins, and spices. The sweet potato at the Institute for Colored Youth often arrived at the table mixed with egg, flour, and baking powder, then fried and served as a puff. It was a dining-hall regular in whatever guise.

In Philadelphia and Washington, where researchers looked at black and white families in identical circumstances, the sweet potato proved to be distinctive. Immigrants from Europe were unfamiliar with it; other whites mostly ignored it. Nationwide and regardless of the time of year, sweet potatoes appeared in about twenty-five percent of the dietaries gathered during the Atwater

era. However, they showed up in nearly fifty percent of the dietaries recorded among African Americans.

Sweet potatoes were a favorite of the nineteenth century South.<sup>17</sup> However, we cannot assume that the fondness of northern blacks for the sweet potato represented Southern heritage. Bacon, a cultural universal among African Americans in the South, counted as a secondary commodity among poor blacks in Philadelphia and Washington. There bacon was more popular among certain whites, especially English and Irish immigrants. Other southern standbys, including ham, chicken, cornmeal, and hominy, occupied the periphery of the African American diet in Philadelphia and Washington. Pork sausage, rice, beans, and cabbage rated as core items, but these same items were just as popular among whites.

Today we think of all of these foods as important components of the soul food tradition. As such, they represent southern roots and the African American ancestral experience. A century ago, however, most of these foods were not prominent on African American tables, even in the rural South. Beans, for example, were all but absent from the typical diets of Tuskegee or Franklin County. Dried peas and rice were rarely encountered. The Tuskegee series lists cowpeas twice and rice three times. Just one of the dozen families visited in the Great Dismal Swamp ate peas. None used rice. Leafy greens such as collards and mustard, basic to the soul food tradition, were found in just five Tuskegee homes.

Some meats regarded as traditional also made rare appearances. Ham was peripheral to the typical diets of African American households in eastern Virginia and entirely absent from

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<sup>17</sup> Sweet potatoes appear in approximately 40 percent of the food inventories taken in the homes of Southern Whites.

Tuskegee. Chicken showed up in three of the Virginia dietaries and just twice in Tuskegee. The Tuskegee fieldworkers did not see pork sausage at all. The Virginia studies cited it only three times.

Location and time of year, of course, can be blamed for some these absences. In Franklin County, for instance, the dietaries contained no evidence of anyone eating rice and beans. However, given greater access to markets, rice and beans became mealtime regulars, as exemplified by the typical diet in Elizabeth City-Hampton where rice qualified as core item and beans numbered as important peripherals. Conversely, the sweet potato remained a staple in Franklin County even in the spring, but it was missing at that time of the year from menus in the Hampton area. Chicken, absent from Tuskegee households during the cold months, became a peripheral part of the diet in the spring. Fresh pork appeared in twenty-five percent of Tuskegee's households in the winter, but it went entirely missing in the spring.

While some traditional foods actually may never have been central to African American diets, others lost popularity moving from isolated, rural settings toward increasingly metropolitan environments. Such was the case with bacon, salt pork, and cornbread. For example, families in Franklin County ate salt sides and belly bacon but almost no beef. Around Hampton, a more commercial area, salt sides remained at the center of the typical diet, but corned beef and other types of cured beef were also popular. Fresh beef and pork, often reduced to sausage, bumped bacon to the secondary core in Philadelphia and Washington and pushed salt pork to the periphery of the typical diet. Finally, at Cheyney we see pork in any form other than ham served only sporadically.

<Photo 3.3. “Hampton Institute, Va.—a Graduate (Dining) at Home” (c. 1895). The eating habits of the rural South had little influence on diet and nutrition among well-educated blacks and those residing in northern cities.>

The diminished importance of cornmeal and bacon products in urban and more cosmopolitan settings was largely an economic matter. Cornmeal in eastern Virginia cost families a mere half-cent per kilogram. In Philadelphia, customers paid twice as much. Consequently, Italian immigrants, noted for the inflexibility of their eating habits, used cornmeal more often than blacks did. Bacon in rural Virginia could be had for as little as a penny per kilogram. A kilo of salt pork cost about four cents. The price for both of items increased to five cents in Hampton and Philadelphia. At that price, a person could buy fresh pork chops and shoulders. Beef rounds and chuck sold for only a penny or two more. Besides that, spoilage was not the big problem in cities that it was in rural areas. Nearby shops in the city sold fresh meat in small quantities.

### **NUTRITIONAL SUPERIORITY OF METROPOLITAN DIETS**

Blacks in metropolitan areas were generally better nourished than their rural counterparts. This is evident from the average nutritional values presented in Table 3.3. Here the values for Tuskegee represent the diets of tenant farmers and plantation laborers and pertain exclusively to the spring. This renders them directly comparable to the statistics for eastern Virginia. For Philadelphia, all of the dietaries represented were collected during the winter. The averages for Cheyney apply to October. Note, however, that in spite of these seasonal differences, and no matter that one set of averages came from urban welfare recipients and the other from an educated elite, the Cheyney and Philadelphia values align closely with one another. Furthermore,

their diets rank higher in protein and are more varied in composition than their less metropolitan counterparts.

< Table 3.3. Average Nutritional Values, Various African American Diets, 1895-1906 >

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization's (WHO) consider 0.75 grams of high quality protein per kilogram of body weight as the world standard for a safe daily allowance.<sup>18</sup> By their yardstick, the protein contents of the diets represented in the table range from marginal or worse at Tuskegee to very generous at the Institute for Colored Youth. Tuskegee's problem was protein quality. The FAO/WHO recommendation, which amounts to 51 g/m/d for a 150-pound, moderately active adult male, assumes protein sources such as meat, fish, eggs, and milk. The table shows the Tuskegee diet as providing an average of only 23 grams of protein per man per day from these types of food. To make matters worse, the table represents the highpoint of the year in terms of protein supply. Franklin County residents did considerably better, owing in part to the ecological complexity of their wetlands with its fish and game resources. The average intake of protein from animal sources in Elizabeth City County and Hampton was slightly higher than that of Franklin County, and the intake in Philadelphia was higher still. Nevertheless, the consumption of animal protein in all of these communities was generally inferior to averages for poor whites. This was not true of total protein intakes, however. From Franklin Country to Philadelphia the total protein content of diets was comparable on average to white Americans, including salaried professionals. Similarly, the total protein value of meals served at The Institute for Colored Youth averaged about the same as the values calculated for meals consumed at schools restricted to white students. Indeed, if one takes averages at the

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<sup>18</sup> Joint FAO/WHO/UNU Expert Consultation, *Energy and Protein Requirements*, World Health Organization Technical Report Series 724 (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1985), sec. 6.1.

Institute as generally indicative of nutrition among comfortably situated blacks, it would appear there was nothing particularly distinctive about African American nutrition at the metropolitan end of the continuum. The cooks at Cheyney prepared meals along standard lines. The school's menu for the first fifteen days of October shows that the dining hall regularly met modern USDA minimum serving recommendations in the "meat," "dairy," and "vegetable" categories. As for "fruits," students received the prescribed minimum of two servings nearly every other day. Every day there was at least one fruit on the table. A minimum of three different items from the "bread, cereal, rice, & pasta" group were offered daily. An extra slice or two of bread and second helpings would have provided the six servings recommended for this category. The biggest problem was the two to five daily servings of "fats, oils and sweets," foods the USDA advised to "use sparingly."

Total fat intake at Cheyney was about the same as that recorded among African Americans living in Philadelphia and Washington, but it averaged considerably less than among blacks in Alabama and Virginia. This made sense in light of total energy intakes (see Table 3.3).

Agricultural labor, whether in Alabama's cotton fields or Virginia's backwaters, called for considerably more Calories than life on campus. Animal fat among farmers provided about one-third of the energy they needed. Proportionally this was about the same as among students and city dwellers.

More generally, however, Table 3.3 indicates some difference in the contribution of animal products overall to total energy intake, particularly in the case of Tuskegee. There the percent of total energy derived from animal sources was relatively low; so too the percent of food budget expended on meats and other foods from animals. This can be attributed to the ecology and economy of the cotton plantation and the restraints it imposed on labor in prime growing regions

such as the Black Belt. Elsewhere, former slaves had options. Following emancipation in Franklin County, for example, many quit the “factory-in-field” regime of the plantation, resorted to the swamp, and adopted a kind of subsistence-oriented lifestyle. That was never an option around Tuskegee. Farmers all across the Black Belt had to pin their hopes on successfully raising crop after crop of raw material for one of the nation’s principal industries, while sustaining themselves on credit and mostly commercial foods. Thus, communities that had a primitive look to them and on the surface seemed removed from the economic mainstream were actually deeply immersed in America’s industrial economy.

This involvement expressed itself in social institutions such as going to town to shop on Saturday, an exercise that was as ritualistic as it was practical. Every week tenants and field hands converged on Tuskegee from mid-morning on, ostensibly to pick up a few supplies at the store.<sup>19</sup> The actual purchases would have required one person a few minutes to accomplish. Nonetheless, entire families made the trip, spending half of the day standing about the store fronts smoking and conversing. The scene on Sunday shifted from the commercial center to the church or, as Washington put it, to “some big meeting.”<sup>20</sup> This gathering ideally was followed in the afternoon by a substantial dinner, but as far as the rest of the week was concerned there was little of the daily bread-breaking that supposedly brings families together. Quite the contrary. Family members usually ate alone and often on the go.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, mealtimes unfolded as if straight out of a harried manufacturing setting. The man of the house took his breakfast in hand and was out the door, on his way to his field, eating his bacon and cornbread as he went. His wife took

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<sup>19</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1901). 115.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

her meal alone at the fireplace straight from the frying pan. The children too young to help in the fields ate in snatches while amusing themselves outside in the yard.

*<Photo 3.4. “Living Easy” (c. 1895). Children too young to work in the fields eating outside in the yard.>*

The only thing genuinely “folk” about the Tuskegee diet was its monotony. During the spring, farmers had no more than five different commodities to eat per week (see Table 3.3). For Franklin County’s families, the Great Dismal Swamp offered greater potential for dietary diversity, but for many households it went unrealized. Thus, as the Table 3.3 indicates, one family used eight food items per week. Others consumed just two or three. Elizabeth City-Hampton residents, fully engaged with metropolitan markets, enjoyed a far greater variety dining on a weekly average of seventeen distinct foods. The average per week came to twenty-two distinct foodstuffs for families living in town. But, surprisingly, welfare clients in Philadelphia did even better (see Table 3.3). For that matter, the two nearly destitute Washington families studied by Foreman purchased an average of thirteen different commodities per week, in effect enjoying a much greater variety of foods than the farm diets that OES investigators surveyed in the South. Comparing average food expenditures among all of the groups for which we have data suggests that when African Americans had more money to spend on food they opted to diversify their diets rather than simply to eat more of the same.

Here it is important to stress that the issue was not migration. Blacks at this point in American history did not regularly relocate from the South to the North or move from rural to urban locations. Nonetheless, some have interpreted the lack of interest in pork, cornbread, and other icons of southern cuisine among urban blacks living in the north prior to World War I as a betrayal of African American culture. Tracy Poe, for instance, portrayed the origins of soul food

as a matter of African Americans no longer being willing to “bend down to anyone” but instead standing up and just being themselves.<sup>22</sup> According to Poe, black Chicagoans prior to the Great Migration held fast to the integrationist philosophy of Booker Washington and aspired to respectable middle-class white values. Consequently, they emulated Euro-American foodways, and they looked down on southern blacks and their tastes as backward.

Unfortunately, Richards and Shapleigh offered no information about how the families they sampled felt about Southern cooking, nor do we know how the men and women attending the Institute for Colored Youth might react to the typical foods of the Black Belt. Nevertheless, there are data to suggest that cost and convenience were of concern. Folks in the city were not about to eat hog-and-hominy style when lean meat could be had for about the same price as pork fat and cornmeal was more expensive than wheat flour. The stage for the eventual success of southern style food in the urban North would be set soon enough by the Great Migration and the arrival of masses of people anxious for a taste of home. Its christening as “soul food” awaited the arrival of the late 1950’s and newfound commercial and political values attached to ethnic identity. By this time, the infrastructure would be fully in place to allow people to eat like an Alabama cotton farmer able, somehow, to put the foods of spring, summer, fall, and winter on the table all at once at any time of the year. As a cultural ideal, the soul food tradition has flourished historically detached from any need to worry about a winter of unremitting bacon, corn bread, and molasses.

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