

Analyzing the Harvard Diet Using the Harvard Yard Collections

Connor Sakmar

Learning Objective

- To learn about the progression of the Harvard and New England diet by analyzing and learning about objects excavated from Harvard Yard.

Time

- 25-30 minutes (can be extended)

Materials

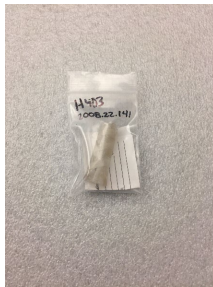
17th Century "Table"



- Clockwise starting from top left:
 - 992-9-10/103668: Dark reddish-brown slip glazed redware vessel body and rim fragments, 1 rim fragment with yellow slip decoration
 - 992-9-10/103670: Sheep bone, Mammal bone fragments, 1 vertebral fragment sawn
 - 987-22-10/106291: Plate, Earthenware, tin-glazed, blue on white; base sherd, handpainted floral design
 - 992-9-10/103740: Shell fragments, likely oyster
 - 992-9-10/103664: Bird bone fragments, likely turkey

- 011.14.401: Spoon, Cupreous, latten spoon, fragment; with wear marks indicating it was used by right-handed individual

18th Century “Table”



- Clockwise starting from top left:
 - 992-9-10/103673: Bone, mammal, fragments (notice the knife mark)
 - 987-22-10/106293: Tea cup, Scratch blue stoneware base sherd
 - 987-22-10/100135: Fork, Ferrous metal fork fragments, 3 tines, heavily corroded
 - 983-4-10/58811: Plate, pearlware, Blue on white handpainted shell/feather-edged pearlware plate rim and base fragment, white paste
 - 2008.22.141: Glass, handblown, stem; clear, leaded, decorative air twist, acid etched circular decoration
 - 992-9-10/103672: Knife handle, Bone handle, utensil, fragments; carved

Procedure

- Before the lesson: Lay out the objects on the classroom table so that they are visible to the students yet far enough away that they will not accidentally make contact/touch the objects themselves. Make sure there is room for students to move around the table.
- Introduce the topic of diet. To make it relatable one could bring up the current dining system. (*Time permitting: ask students how they think students at Harvard in the seventeenth and eighteenth century ate food and what kinds of food they would eat.*) Introduce the stories of Goody Eaton and the Harvard students in 1807, along with any

other contextual information that the instructor deems important and relevant. Point out the differences in the way/what people ate in the two centuries and then explain to the class that these objects show how these differences developed. **(4 minutes)**

- Ask the students to silently observe the objects for a couple minutes, making sure they can see each object. Make sure to tell the students to make mental observations and guess which century each object is from. **(3 minutes)**
- Once they've generated their own thoughts, go through each object with the entire class. Ask the students to form two "tables"; a seventeenth century table and an eighteenth century table. Ask each student, one object at a time, which objects they think would have been found on a seventeenth century table, and which they think would be on an eighteenth century table. A simple reasoning for why they organized the objects a certain way could be useful as well. Make sure to have a sign or some designated area to move the objects into the chosen "tables". **(4+ minutes)**
- After finalizing the tables, reveal to the students which objects belong to the seventeenth century and which objects belong to the eighteenth century. Ask them what differences they see between the two "tables". If the students get stuck, ask them to focus on certain groupings (i.e. the bones, the utensils, or the tableware). **(6 minutes)**
- Based off the differences that the students notice, provide more details on the objects and what they may have been used for. For objects that are not obvious, do not tell the students right away. Give them hints as to what the object is and how it may relate to the other objects or specific groupings. Ultimately, focus on guiding the students to making the connections between objects. Allow for open discussion. Note this step and the previous step may blend together. **(5 minutes)**
- Synthesize all of the observations and details made by the students and tie them back to the original stories, making sure to reiterate the important parts of the story and providing historical context. Point out that the objects demonstrate the gradual change in diet that is never explicitly written and bridges the gap between the two stories. **(3 minutes)**
- *Note: It is important that students realize the key relationships between the objects. The evolution of utensils plays together well with the evolution of food eaten. Recognizing that the bones evolve from wild game and uncut bones to the cut/chopped beef relates to the fact that no knives or forks are found in the seventeenth century. This in turn relates to the fact that bowls are more common in the seventeenth century since people were eating stews and mush and were using spoons instead of forks and knives. This general rise in sophistication of diet also coincides with the increasingly ornate kitchenware, and the adoption of tea (as evidenced by the tea cup, plate). While nicer kitchenware was found in the seventeenth century as well, the copying of both the British diet and the way in which they consumed their food is evident as the eighteenth century progresses. The beauty of this lesson plan is that it does not matter which relationship students pick up on first, it is just up to the instructor to move the students in a direction that slowly connects the dots. After all the dots are connected, concluding with the stories that were started with, or even summarizing all the observations made by the students, ties all of the objects together into one cohesive narrative.*

Additional Resources on Food in Colonial America

- **Primary sources:**

Harvard Commons Records, 1686-1829

Digital repository of archival materials documenting the maintenance and development of commons at Harvard College, including records of foods regularly consumed by students and tensions between administration's efforts toward economy and student complaints over quality of food served; available from colonialnorthamerica.library.harvard.edu.

- **Secondary sources:**

Deetz, James. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. Rev. and Expanded ed. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1996.

- Den, Trudy. *The Early American Table: Food and Society in the New World*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- McWilliams, James, E. *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America*. Art and Traditions of the Table. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- O'Connell, Libby Haight. *The American Plate: A Culinary History in 100 Bites*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2014.
- Oliver, Sandra L. *Food in Colonial and Federal America. Food in American History*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005.