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Virginia Food Heritage  
PLAC 5500

**Research and Policy Ideas: African-American  
Food Heritage at the University of Virginia**

- I. Background
- II. History of African American Food Heritage at the University
- III. Planning Ideas for Consideration
- IV. Conclusion

## **I. Background: Why African American food heritage?**

This paper was written for the Virginia Food Heritage class taught in the graduate planning department at the University of Virginia. There were six “affinity groups” with one of six food-related focuses: production, processing, preparation, retail, celebrations, and the University of Virginia’s food system. Each group was charged with coming up with ideas to promote food heritage incorporation in each focus.

The research and planning ideas below are those from the University of Virginia team. They focus on a pre-existing food heritage site, the Thomas Jefferson Demonstration Garden, created according to Jefferson’s vision for a plot of land used for educational purposes. At first, the goal was to attract more people to the garden and create a proposal for an event. Upon further research, the specific focus changed to that of incorporating African American history into food heritage at the University.

### *Preliminary Case Studies*

Other colleges have created or hosted food heritage events, including University of Vermont (UVM) and Haskell Indian Nations University. Many “fests” occur in Vermont that celebrate foods local to the region, some with long heritages. The “Applefest”<sup>1</sup> at the UVM only occurred in the dining halls, and did not involve the community much. The “Indigenous Food Day”<sup>2</sup> event at the Haskell American Indian University included a community gathering, including panels on health and indigenous foods. They hosted a potluck community dinner that targeted community members, farmers— all stakeholders. There was not much involvement of

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<sup>1</sup> “Local and ‘Real’ Food Development.” *Sustainability*. UVM Dining Services. Web. 6 May 6, 2012. <<http://uds.uvm.edu/social.html>>

<sup>2</sup> “Food Day: October 24, 2011.” KU Center for Sustainability. Web. 6 May 2012 <<http://www.sustainability.ku.edu/events/foodday.shtml>>

the students. About fourteen participated in a cooking contest, but it was certainly not a “campus” event.

In the end, the preliminary case studies provided a good starting point and initiated the need for deeper enquiry into the University’s history. The garden event will hopefully cross the boundaries between the student body and the community. The Demonstration Garden because is already a testament to the University’s food heritage, and it needs more support if it’s going to last.

The Demonstration Garden’s history described how Thomas Jefferson had expressed his strong desire for a botanical garden to be constructed in the last few months of his life, including in letters written to Professor Emmet.<sup>3</sup> The “TJ Demo Garden” was created to realize Thomas Jefferson’s unfulfilled desire to create a botanical garden on Grounds. He wanted the garden to foster the study of botany. On the Demonstration Garden website, Jefferson is quoted, saying he “wanted work on the garden ‘to be pursued at all spare times.’” Yet, who would do the work of constructing and maintaining the garden? Who would plant, hoe, and weed? Two hundred years ago, slaves would do the work. With this thought in mind, I decided to learn more about food heritage’s connections to African American history, specifically at the University of Virginia.

## **II. History of African American Food Heritage at the University**

### *Introduction*

In the last few years, Central Virginia has witnessed an explosion of interest in food systems, including a new focus on food heritage. The hottest topic has been “buying local,” as is

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<sup>3</sup> Fox-Bruguière, Lily. "Historical Context" *Thomas Jefferson Demonstration Garden*. TJ Demo Garden, Web. 6 May 2012. <<http://tjdemogarden.wordpress.com/historical-context/>>. Excerpts from: Lily Fox-Bruguière, “An Uncultivated Legacy: Jefferson’s Botanical Garden at the University of Virginia,” (M. Arch. Hist. Thesis, University of Virginia, 2010),

seen with the “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” stickers on many bumpers throughout Central Virginia, sponsored by the Piedmont Environmental Council. Charlottesville was recently named the “locavore capital of the world.” Slowly, people are beginning to discover and learn about Virginia’s heritage foods as well. Many, but certainly far from all, local foods are heritage foods.

“Heritage” connects a food to a place or community and its history. “Heritage foods” can include everything from certain breeds of cattle specific to a region, or even a great-grandmother’s coveted peach cobbler recipe. It should be emphasized that food heritage is always reinventing itself, as the places and communities connected to the food evolve. Many populations have a deep connection to their food, as their history is embedded in the stories of meals, recipes, and cultural traditions. African American foodways and the past of soul food have been a largely unstudied heritage food, especially in Central Virginia.

The food heritage of African Americans has a long and complex history dating back to slavery, and evolving into what is popularly known as “soul food,” which is still changing now. Documents on the history of slavery describe the slaves’ diet, food apportioned to them, slave garden plots, and how they prepared and cooked food for themselves and whites. “Soul food” evolved from the foods that slaves brought from Africa, foods their masters provided, and new foods evolved as well. In an interview with Mozell Booker, long-time resident of Fluvanna County, she emphasized the connection between the food her family eats today with the history of the evolution of African American foods. She was intensely aware of the connection to slave history, when slaves would receive leftovers from their masters, such as pig feet.<sup>4</sup> The body of research regarding food heritage of slaves at the University of Virginia (U.Va.) was minimal, but there have been recent initiatives to dig deeper into its history.

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<sup>4</sup> Booker, Mozell. Personal Interview. 24, Feb 2012.

## *Slavery and Food at the University*

There is a lot of research on Virginia's slave history, and a plethora regarding Thomas Jefferson's conflicting opinions on slavery. There were a number of sources about the University and its history, with various references to slaves. Just in the last decade, students, community members, and Faculty have started doing research *specifically* on the lives of slaves at U.Va. Although the recent work has been generally comprehensive, the time it took to do this research reflects a concerning omission in the body of research on the University's early history.

In her dissertation on institutional slavery in Virginia, Jennifer Oast includes a discussion of slaves at four Virginia colleges: William and Mary, the University of Virginia, Hampden-Sydney College, and Hollins University. She explains that at U.Va., only a handful of slaves were owned by the institution itself.

"Many more slaves who worked on campus were owned or hired by the hotelkeepers, private contractors who boarded the students and oversaw the cleaning of their dormitories. Additionally, there were many other slaves living in the university community as the personal slaves of professors and their families. Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison laid out the regulation that no student could 'keep a servant, horse or dog.'"<sup>5</sup>

As one can see, the slave was equivalent to a pet; he or she was a piece of personal property. Community scholar Gale Schulman notes, "Of the 107 people associated with eight professors in the listing of the 1830 Federal census for Albemarle, 66 or 61.7 percent were enslaved ...[and] in 1840 these numbers were 54.7 percent."<sup>6</sup> The slaves were often misleadingly referred to as "house servants" and they "did the cooking, served the food, tended the children

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<sup>5</sup> Oast, Jennifer. "Forgotten Masters: Institutional Slavery in Virginia, 1680-1860." Dissertation, Chapter 5. College of William & Mary, 2009. She cites: "Minutes of the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia," 73, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>6</sup> Schulman, Gayle. "Slaves at the University of Virginia." September 2004, 4. Document can be found at [http://www.locohistory.org/Albemarle/Slavery\\_at\\_UVA.shtml](http://www.locohistory.org/Albemarle/Slavery_at_UVA.shtml).

and the livestock, and did the bidding of their owner.”<sup>7</sup> Many of the slaves “lived near where they worked – in the Pavilion and Hotel cellars,” and eventually, additions were required and some new slave quarters were built in the Pavilion gardens.<sup>8</sup>

There was not much information about slave gardens at the university, in stark contrast to the lengthy descriptions about the cultivation practices of slaves at Monticello. It seems as though the overseers provided the slaves with most of their food. Neale writes that “the university specifically hired a cook to feed the laborers and the overseer was charged with procuring food. A small laborers’ garden provided some vegetables, but, more often, the overseer –the hotelkeeper—would buy food, such as bacon, from locals and traveling salesmen.”<sup>9</sup> This reference to “a small laborers’ garden” is unique, and not referred to explicitly in other research. Although the slaves prepared satisfying meals for students and faculty, they themselves were “provided inferior food... typically, they ate corn and bacon but would occasionally receive beef...the slaves would... not receive more than half a pound [of bacon] per day.”<sup>10</sup> In “The University of Virginia’s Yards and Gardens,” no mention is made of slave gardens, but perhaps her main source of research, the University Board of Visitors minutes, do not contain any references to slave gardens because the slaves were primarily owned and cared for by the hotelkeepers or professors. Farm work was likely a part of their lives, though.

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<sup>7</sup> Schulman, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Neale, Catherine S. “Enslaved People and the Early Life of the University of Virginia.” Undergraduate thesis, University of Virginia, 2006, 25. Citing: Proctor’s Papers, Box 1, Folder James Harrison – Contract, 1820.

Proctor’s Papers, Box 1, Folder Receipts, 1820, July 30, 1820.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Neale, 35. Citing: Proctor’s Papers, Box 5, Folder: An Estimate of the Expenses of the University for one year 1825. The Proctor paid Thomas Draffin ten cents per pound of bacon, according to Proctor’s Papers, Box 6, Folder Receipts 1826, May 28, 1826.

“Scattered references to a farm [endowed to the University by Martin Dawson] in the minutes of the Board of Visitors indicate that the school [had] slaves...work on the farm.”<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, at Monticello, most of the slaves had an individual plot to cultivate. In the Monticello garden journal, Director Hatch writes: “a debate waged among southern plantation owners about the desirability of these gardens. Some argued they encouraged domestic tranquility and tied slaves more securely to the land. Others felt the gardens, and the independence they encouraged, led to discontent and distracted slaves from labor in the fields.”<sup>12</sup> The slaves often sold their produce to the residents of Monticello, since Jefferson’s gardens grew plants that were botanically interesting, but not useful for standard meals. Hatch continues: “Jefferson’s Memorandum Books...document hundreds of transactions involving the purchase of produce from Monticello slaves. This documentary record of the purchase of 22 species of fruits and vegetables from as many as 43 different individuals.”<sup>13</sup>

Jefferson attributed a few foods specifically to African Americans. He identified the “potato pumpkin, or an ‘early bearing squash,” okra, eggplant, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and West Indian gherkin, a “spiny round cucumber” as foods with primarily African roots. He also “attributed the introduction of sesame to the slave trade, and acknowledged an independent African horticultural tradition associated with the culture and use of this plant.”<sup>14</sup> Hatch cites Eugene Genovese, author of *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972), who “argued that slaves had a healthier diet than white southerners because of these gardens.”<sup>15</sup> The research on slave gardens in Williamsburg is also extensive, but more work needs to be done on those of

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<sup>11</sup> Oast, 226.

<sup>12</sup> Hatch, Peter J. "African-American Gardens at Monticello." *Twinleaf Journal Online*. (2001): n. page. Web. 6 May. 2012. <<http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/african-american-gardens-monticello>>.

<sup>13</sup> Hatch.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

slaves at the University of Virginia. Perhaps by researching further the professors' papers or on the hotelkeepers' lives, a more detailed idea of the "laborers' garden" could come to life.

The Thomas Jefferson Demonstration Garden is actually looking in to creating a slave garden across the street from the main plot. More research specific to the University is in the pipeline. This smaller simulation garden would serve as an example of a typical slave garden in the antebellum South. The process is just beginning, but support and further research is needed.

### *Race in Charlottesville*

In Charlottesville, there has been a lot of recent coverage of racial relations at the University of Virginia in the news. Perhaps this is why the body of research on slave history has grown only in the last decade. In 2007, the General Assembly issued a "statement of regret" regarding the institution of slavery, and the University Board of Visitors followed suit in 2011.<sup>16</sup> The same year, the Charlottesville City Council released an official policy for razing Vinegar Hill in the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> Vinegar Hill was a vibrant center of primarily African American commerce and housing.

In 2007, stirrings began about creating a project to reconcile Charlottesville's tumultuous racial history.<sup>18</sup> The final project became the University and Community Action for Racial Equity (UCARE). Their mission statement emphasizes three goals:

- Listen to and learn from community members who have lived and experienced those legacies [of slavery, segregation, and discrimination].
- Effectively communicate and raise understanding of this legacy within the University of Virginia as well as impacted communities.

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<sup>16</sup> Kessler, Aaron. "Board of visitors issues slavery statement of regret." *Daily Progress* [Charlottesville] 25 April 2007. Web. 6 May. 2012. <<http://www2.dailyprogress.com/>>

<sup>17</sup> Moomaw, Graham. "Charlottesville Officially Apologizes for Razing Vinegar Hill." *Daily Progress*. [Charlottesville] 7 Nov 2011. Web. 6 May 2012. <<http://www2.dailyprogress.com/>>

<sup>18</sup> UCARE. "Our History." *University and Community Action for Racial Equity*. UCARE, n.d. Web. 6 May 2012. <<http://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/ucare/about/our-history/>>



- Be a catalyst to generate commitment and actions that promote racial justice, equity, and reconciliation.<sup>19</sup>

Current initiatives include a class at the University called “Race and Repair” and support for a new, more significant slave memorial on Grounds.

### *Future Research*

A perfect example of a heritage guru, Michael Twitty is a historian who focuses on African American food heritage. For many years, he has researched the history of the “Afroculinary” tradition. He has presented at Monticello’s Food Heritage Festival and various other events across the country. Most recently, he has started a “Southern Discomfort Tour” as part of his Cooking Gene Project. The purpose is to trace his family’s roots, dating back to the time of slavery, through the South. The voyage will begin May 2012, and he hopes to learn about his ancestors specifically through the lens of the “foodways” of the past.

On his blog, Twitty writes:

Food was used to empower and encourage self-reliance and self-respect among enslaved people and they were instrumental in creating Southern cuisines. Using the experience of my family's enslaved past, we want to tell that story, drawing attention to the bigger picture of the links between food, family, identity, and community. We believe food combined with genealogy can connect people of all backgrounds and serve as a vehicle for racial reconciliation and healing.<sup>20</sup>

He also writes on a blog called “Afroculinaria,” that contains some information about Southern and Virginian African American food heritage. He describes produce specific to African American tradition. For example, he writes about “little squashes known as cymplings or

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<sup>19</sup> UCARE. “Vision and Mission Statement.” *University and Community Action for Racial Equity*. UCARE, n.d. Web. 6 May 2012. <<http://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/ucare/about/our-history/>>

<sup>20</sup> Twitty, Michael. “Our Story.” *The Cooking Gene Project: the Southern Discomfort Tour*. The Cooking Gene. Web, 6 May 2012. <<http://www.indiegogo.com/The-Cooking-Gene-Project-The-Southern-Discomfort-Tour>>.

pattypans...[which] were one of the few squashes commonly grown and consumed by the enslaved community. The word ‘cymling’ was extended to dried gourds, so they were called ‘cymling gourds.’ ...My paternal grandmother’s family grew them down in south-central Virginia where the family has been since the 17th and 18th centuries.” His “Southern Discomfort Tour” will be coming through Central Virginia, and could be very helpful in drawing attention to and uncovering more information on food heritage of African Americans in the region.

#### **IV. Planning Ideas for Consideration**

##### *Gatherings in the Garden*

The Thomas Jefferson Demonstration Garden was created to realize Jefferson’s dream of having a botanical garden on the Grounds of the University. Constructed just last year, the garden already contains a variety of plants. Currently, they are growing cotton, peanuts, corn and other crops native to the area. The “TJ Demo Garden” serves as an educational environment for students, faculty, and community members to learn and discuss the agricultural heritage of Jefferson’s time. According to Jefferson’s original vision, the site was to be a “six-acre, trapezoidal botanical garden ... to be divided into two parts: four acres of planting beds on the flat ground, and two acres of terraced hillside for the collection of trees. In typical Jeffersonian fashion, the garden was to be enclosed by a serpentine wall. For the plants, Jefferson broadly stipulated “objects of use,” and those worthy of botanical study.”<sup>21</sup>

Hosting an event or meal in the Demonstration Garden could connect students, faculty, and the Charlottesville community. Central Virginia residents should be aware of the Demonstration Garden as a resource. It can and should be used by the greater community as a

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<sup>21</sup> Fox-Bruguière, Lily. "Historical Context" *Thomas Jefferson Demonstration Garden*. TJ Demo Garden, n.d. Web. 6 May 2012. <<http://tjdemogarden.wordpress.com/historical-context/>>.

gathering spot or educational visit. In order to link the food heritage at the University, which already has a presence, to the historical context of its time, it is vital to look at the historical contributions of African Americans. The purpose of the proposed meal would be first to learn about the history of food at the University and its links to slavery, increasing both awareness and education. The second, more important, purpose will be to foster a discussion of histories we do and do not learn, especially with regards to African Americans. This “Garden Gathering” would be a fusion of botany and history. The University and Charlottesville communities can learn about plant heritage, in addition to learning about the people who would most likely work in the gardens.

#### *Slave Garden at the University*

Furthermore, support for the construction of a slave garden is necessary. Research and planning are just in the beginning stages. The interns at the garden could use support and guidance from the community and scholars in order to create a garden more accurate to the University’s history. Many scholars have researched generic slave gardens of the south, but more research like that done at Monticello would be helpful at U. Va.. The University has its own slave history with a burgeoning body of research. Perhaps Michael Twitty’s visit to the area will spark interest and research on African American food heritage stories as well.

#### **Conclusion**

Although disconnected at the moment, the recent interest in agricultural and food heritage should be linked with African American history in Central Virginia. It is a worthwhile project in light of recent interest in race relations and reconciliation in Charlottesville. The “TJ Demo Garden” is tied to Jefferson’s traditions, but also fosters self-awareness of multiple historical

narratives. The absent history of slaves in the creation of the botanical garden and the food Heritage of U.Va should be addressed, and will foster further discussion on African American contributions to the University.

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- UCARE. "Our History." *University and Community Action for Racial Equity*. UCARE, n.d. Web. 6 May 2012. <<http://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/ucare/about/our-history/>> See also: "Current Projects" and "Vision and Mission Statement"