

New England: Freedom Findin' & Food Fixin'

By P. Elizabeth Wilson
for Kraft, Inc.

Wars have been fought and whole subcontinents won not only for the sake of more meat or fish or grain, but for the very spices and condiments with which to preserve and flavor them. Securing a good supply of meat and grain turned cavemen into city dwellers years ago. Civilizations sprang up on rich soils bordering fish-filled rivers. And lest we forget, it was the ever expanding quest for spices that opened up the new world. Pepper played a role in the fall of the Roman Empire and tea played a role in the American Revolution. Entire monetary systems have been based on salt. The idea that the palate has truly been the teacher of art and the giver of ingenuity rings clear in America since the colonial days and life among Black New Englanders is no exception.

When the Indians met the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock another aspect of American cuisine was born. To flavor the dried salted beef, dried fish, cheese and beer the Pilgrims brought on their trip, they were more than eager for the fresh food ideas the Indians offered. The greatest among which was the knowledge of corn. Grown easily and requiring little care, corn was a major ingredient of the Indian's diet.

The Indians also taught the settlers how to grow the native American beans. Green beans, limas, kidney beans and pea beans (for New England casseroles) were all gifts of the Indians and joined corn as a source of hearty nourishment in pre-revolutionary days. Additionally, there were pumpkins, sweet potatoes and squash for several varieties. This new wisdom, coupled with the expertise the first slaves had of farming and cooking, helped develop a new era of gastronomy in the Northeast corner of these United States.

Since Africa was one of the first places where man cultivated food, the slave was already familiar with maize, cassava, rice and yams. Although he may not have recognized the pig that the Europeans introduced to this country, he would recognize goats, cows and sheep. Escaped slaves who once worked in the sugar processing industry in the West Indies often lived on wild hogs in the brush where salt was unavailable. Consequently, they developed some cooking practices and refinements on curing pork without salt. Watermelon, too, was



The 54th Regiment was the first Black division from the north to serve in the Civil War. This monument on the Boston Common is dedicated to these soldiers who volunteered their services to the cause rather than accept a wage less than that of white soldiers.

probably brought by the slaves or slave traders because it is native to tropical and southern Africa. For the New England heritage of cooking we have to thank the bounteous generosity of the land, the cultural contributions of the American Indian and the remarkable ingenuity of our cooks.

In 1638, the trade ship "Desire" arrived in Boston Harbor with a cargo of tobacco, cotton and African slaves. Some slaves came to be masterful servants and apprentice craftspeople including printers and doctors. Others transported farm products to the market and in some instances even traded in the absence of their owners. As their numbers increased, these skilled and professional individuals found themselves locating in an area of Boston known as Copp's Hill in the North End. This first Black settlement was known as "New Guinea" because many of the Africans sold into slavery during this period were captured near the Guinea Coast of Africa. By 1705 there were well over four hundred slaves in Boston.

In New England throughout the 1700s activities were concentrated

on freeing the country from English rule and Blacks played no small part in helping America attain that freedom. One of the first to pay with his life for liberty was Crispus Attucks. On March 5, 1770, he led a demonstration in front of the Old State House. The Redcoats fired in to the crowd killing Attucks and four white comrades in what came to be known as the Boston Massacre. A monument commemorating this historic event was erected in 1888 on the Boston Common by the Black citizens of the city.

Black patriots fought beside white colonists to help repel further British assaults in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Salem Poor was there earning his heroic reputation for which he was awarded one of the highest military commendations. His officers reported: "To set forth particulars of his conduct would be tedious. We would only beg leave to say, in the person of this said negro centres a brave and gallant soldier. The reward due to so great and distinguished a character, we submit to the Congress."

This report is now part of the official archives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In recent times Salem Poor was honored by a postage stamp issued on March 25th, 1975.

Free Blacks fought in the Revolution along with slaves who were promised freedom in exchange for their allegiance. After 1778 Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island formed Black regiments.

Perhaps one of the most famous of these was the 54th Regiment, the first Black division from the north to serve in the Civil War. The members volunteered their services to the cause, refusing to accept a wage less than that given to white soldiers. On a monument dedicated to these soldiers in the Boston Common the inscription reads: *The Black rank and file volunteered when disaster clouded the Union cause without pay for 18 months till given that of white troops...together they gave to the nation and the world undying proof that Americans of African descent possess the pride, courage and devotion of patriot soldiers. 180,000 such Americans enlisted under the flag. 1863-1865.*

The Boston Massacre and 54th Regiment monuments are only two of the sixteen landmarks on the Black Heritage Trail, a walking tour that explores the history of the Beacon Hill area during the 1800s when it was the heart of Boston's Black society.

By 1800, eleven hundred of Boston's 25,000 inhabitants were of African descent. The city became a major station on the Underground Railroad to Canada and a haven for escaped slaves. But with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 this growth slowed. Even though the Massachusetts Supreme Court abolished slavery throughout the state in 1783 this national law of mid-1800 gave Southern owners legal sanction to retrieve their runaway slaves.

Nevertheless, New England Blacks formed a strong community aware of the mainstream of American political thought. Some of these individuals worked as street laborers, coachmen, window cleaners, sailors and barbers. The necessity and result of using all our natural resources gave us - in the course of several generations - an expertise in environmental adaptivity. This adaptivity provided the opportunity to make great gains. Many Blacks organized and petitioned courts and legislatures to decree against slavery and others, despite almost insurmountable odds became prominent in literature, medicine, religion, business and social reform.

In his "Inner City Bicentennial Booklet 1776-1976," profiling for the inner city youth the prominent part their ancestors played in the creation of the United States, John E. Rogers of the University of Hartford cites Prince Hall the best known of the Black colonial leaders.

As the most important figure among Boston's colonial people of color, Prince Hall fought against slavery, petitioned for schools for Blacks, used his own home for one of the original Black schools in Boston, and even petitioned the Continental Congress through George Washington in the cause of free Blacks when it had decided early in the war to limit the use of Black men.

Hall was also responsible for founding the African Masonic Lodge in America, whose charter is directly from England.

(Next week: New England Recipes)

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