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Historic Philadelphia Foodways: A Consideration of Catfish Cookery

Teagan Schweitzer

This article explores the consumption of catfish in the Philadelphia area during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Although not extremely popular in the region today, in the past this fish was an important part of the culinary landscape, in particular as part of a meal referred to as “catfish and waffles.” Evidence from zooarchaeological and documentary research is used to justify this claim.

Cet article explore la consommation de la barbue de rivière (aussi appelé poisson-chat) à Philadelphie à la fin du XVIIIe siècle et au début du XIXe siècle. Quoique ce poisson ne soit plus populaire de nos jours, il a été un aliment important du paysage culinaire dans le passé, particulièrement comme ingrédient dans un met qu'on appelait « poisson-chat et gauffres ». Nous tentons de confirmer ceci à l'aide d'éléments de preuve zooarchéologiques et de recherche documentaire.

Introduction

If an inquiring mind should write to any newspaper in Pennsylvania, New York, or almost any State for that matter, and ask the editor to name the favorite Philadelphia food fish, that editor would almost certainly reply with great promptness and without the necessity of consulting authorities, that it is the catfish. The editor would have good reason for giving such an answer. Half a century ago it was a great dish when properly cooked and served with waffles and coffee (Meehan 1897: 594).

This article addresses foodways in Philadelphia in the first half of the 19th century, most specifically the prevalence and significance of that well-known, although almost forgotten, regional specialty, catfish. As the quote above would suggest, catfish were extremely well liked and in demand in Philadelphia in the 1800s, so much so that the fish's popularity in and around the city was an established fact practically throughout the rest of the country. Although catfish was formerly one of the signature fish of the Delaware Valley, its importance in Philadelphia culinary history has nearly been lost in the sands of time. This paper, therefore, refocuses the spotlight on this oddly whiskered aquatic creature, in the process providing some important insights into Philadelphia's diverse and unique culinary past.

The research presented here is part of a larger historical archaeological project focusing on the foodways of Philadelphia ca. 1750–1850 from a zooarchaeological and culinary historical perspective (Schweitzer 2010). Information provided relies principally upon the confluence of data derived from archaeological faunal remains and documentary evidence.

The Zooarchaeological Data

In a survey of seven Philadelphia-area archaeological sites with 21 features dating to ca. 1750–1850 (TAB. 1) (FIG. 1), catfish were one of the most commonly identified fish, second only to shad and striped bass. These archaeological contexts mainly consist of privies and cisterns, and relate to residential assemblages associated with the households of wealthy gentlemen farmers or merchants, middle-class artisans, and working-class tenement inhabitants. Additionally, several assemblages are associated with taverns, and one assemblage is associated with a free black family living in downtown Philadelphia. Catfish were present in household deposits associated with all represented social classes, as well as all tavern deposits.

Catfish were identified in 9 of the 21 features (TAB. 2) (Schweitzer 2010: 633). Taking into account the context of excavation—several of these sites were excavated and analyzed in the 1980s, a time before the collection and documentation of fish bones was an explicit priority in historical zooarchaeological research—it is clear that the catfish was an integral part of the Philadelphia food landscape at this time. This is particularly surprising for the early sites, since catfish were unknown in England before the late 19th century (Smiley 1885: 433–434). This meant that, once they arrived in Pennsylvania, many people probably cooked with catfish for the first time.

Zooarchaeologically speaking, catfish bones tend to be more robust than many of the other food fishes available in this area in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This fact may well contribute to both the higher abundance

Table 1. Date and NISP data for Philadelphia zooarchaeological assemblages, ca. 1750–1850 (Schweitzer 2010: 631).

	Site and feature	Date	NISP	Catfish present?
1	Area F—YohF1 (ASI)	TPQ 1760	1,620	Yes
2	Area F—YohF1 (ASII)	TPQ 1783	2,497	Yes
3	Area F—YohF1 (ASIII)	TPQ 1825	527	Yes
4	Area F—114C3 (ASI)	TPQ 1783	1,018	No
5	Area F—114C2 (ASI)	TPQ 1823	720	No
6	Area F—YohC1 (ASI)	TPQ 1750	1,964	No
7	Merchants' Exchange Feature 1	Early 19th C	826	No
8	Chiller Plant Feature 2	1750–1780	8,914	No
9	Chiller Plant Feature 3	1750–1780	5,708	No
10	Dexter Site Feature 209	Late 18th C	4,929	Yes
11	Dexter Site Feature 269	Late 18th C	3,991	No
12	Dexter Site Feature 272	Late 18th C	6,081	Yes
13	Dexter Site Feature 273	Early 19th C	3,664	Yes
14	Block 1—Feature E (ASII)	TPQ 1820	1,388	No
15	Block 1—Feature G (ASI)	TPQ 1825	3,378	No
16	Block 2—Feature B (ASII)	TPQ 1820	5,797	No
17	Block 2—Feature B (ASIII)	TPQ 1830	4,170	No
18	Block 2—Feature E (ASII)	TPQ 1823	1,042	No
19	Stenton—Feature 14	Ca. 1740–1765	8,050	Yes
20	Block 3—Feature 91	Late 18th C–1840s	20,771	Yes
21	Block 3—Feature 193	1785–1795	3,200	Yes

and greater identifiability of catfish bones within these assemblages. This fact may have resulted in an inflation of the pervasiveness of catfish in comparison to other food fishes in Philadelphia zooarchaeological assemblages. Whatever the reason for their survival and identifiability, however, it is evident that the use of catfish in the culinary traditions of the Philadelphia area deserves closer inspection.

The Catfish of Pennsylvania

Only three catfish species are of concern in relation to foodstuffs in 18th- and 19th-century Pennsylvania—the white catfish and the brown and yellow bullheads (Steiner 2000). All three of these species are bullheads, meaning that they are contained within the *Ameiurus* genus in the family Ictaluridae. White catfish can range up to roughly 15 lb., brown bullheads top out at around 3 lb., and yellow bullheads

are generally slightly smaller than that (Steiner 2000). All three of these species are possibilities for the catfish identified in the Philadelphia sites mentioned here, though the catfish species most frequently mentioned in historical accounts is the white catfish (Meehan 1893: 32). Unfortunately, species-level identification of catfish from these sites was not possible.

Catfish in the Delaware Valley

Catfish were extremely plentiful in and around Philadelphia (FIG. 2). The Schuylkill River and its tributary, the Wissahickon Creek, in particular, were well-documented sources for these popular local fish. The word Wissahickon is actually a combination of two Lenape (a local Native American group) words: *wisamickan*, meaning catfish creek, and *wisaucksickan*, meaning yellow-colored stream (Keyser 1872: 91). In addition to being

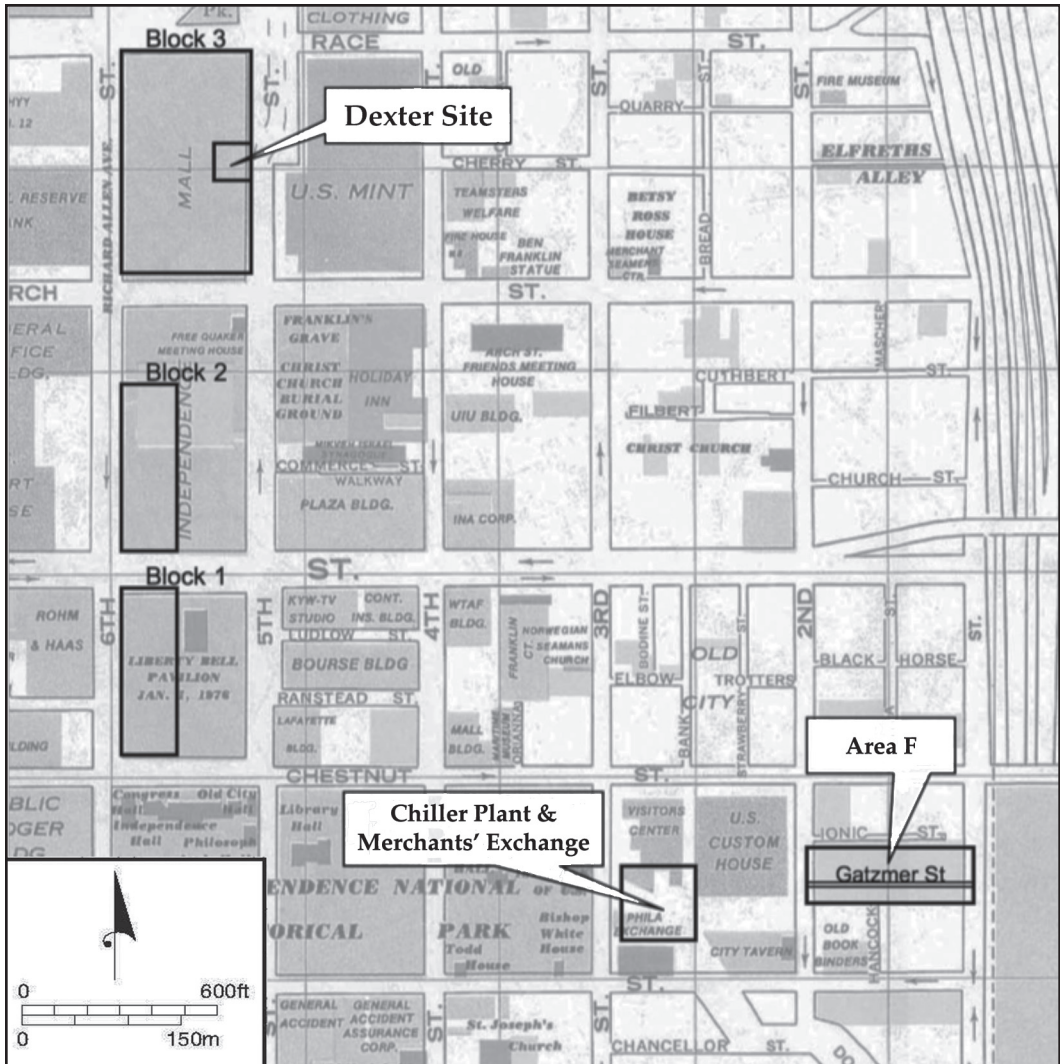


Figure 1. Map of downtown Philadelphia site locations. (Map by author; base map from Gerhardt [2006: 23].)

abundant, the Schuylkill River catfish “were famous and their qualities were so highly regarded that the United States Fish Commission introduced them into the waters of the Pacific slope” (Meehan 1897: 594).

The city’s most famous fisherman, Godfrey Schronk, active in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, frequently fished near the Falls of the Schuylkill, the site of the rapids in the river, and commented that it was not unusual for him to catch 3,000 catfish in a single night (Hanger 1869: 22). John Fanning Watson, in his *Annals of Philadelphia*, noted that this number was not abnormal:

I dare say there are persons still living in the neighborhood who have taken more than that number repeatedly, and that so late as 1817, I have seen men, in one scoop of the dip-net, have it so full of these catfish as to be unable to lift them in the boat, but were obliged to take them from out of it with their hands (Watson 1850: 476).

Catfish are a spawning fish in this area and were therefore available only during a certain season, usually beginning around 25 May and lasting some two to three weeks. During this period fishermen caught as many of the fish as possible and put them in artificial ponds until they were needed throughout the summer and

fall. The fish were so numerous that they were said to “blacken the narrow passages of the river” (Keyser 1872: 28; Meehan 1893: 32).

When not caught by consumers themselves, catfish were available in the markets for sale in bunches of four to six, depending upon size (De Voe 1867: 249). Price data from 1860 indicates that only porgies, which were sold by the pound rather than the bunch, were less expensive, so catfish appear to have been a very affordable fish (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1860).

Culinary Catfish

Catfish from the Wissahickon were said to be “dainty and toothsome and when served with the equally famous waffles brought visions of Paradise on earth” (Hines, Marshall, and Weaver 1987: 51). In a bulletin from the Pennsylvania Department of Fisheries, the authors commented that “the catfish is not only a good but a favorite food dish, of many people. When properly cooked, it is even delicious” (Mellinger 1904: 116). The texture and flavor of the fish are supposed to resemble that of eel (Goode and Gill 1903: 376).

The most popular, or at least the most renowned, catfish dish in 19th-century Philadelphia was called “catfish, waffles, and coffee,” sometimes shortened to just “catfish and waffles.” Historical sources differ on what exactly catfish, waffles, and coffee entailed. Some claim that these were the only three ingredients in the meal (Meehan 1893; Hines, Marshall, and Weaver 1987). Others, however, noted that “catfish, waffles, and coffee” was instead a colloquialism similar to the phrase “from soup to nuts” that is used today, essentially denoting a full-course dinner from beginning to end. In these descriptions the meal consisted of fried catfish and a relish, followed by beefsteak, with fried potatoes, stewed or broiled chicken, waffles, and coffee, with an optional dessert (Keyser 1872: 82). The catfish, waffles, and coffee were omnipresent in such descriptions, but not necessarily served atop and alongside one another. Catfish was often served with pepper hash, a traditional condiment made from a sour or sweet-and-sour combination of cabbage, chopped peppers, and

Table 2. Frequency of the fish that appear in Philadelphia archaeological features (Schweitzer 2010: 633).

Fish common name	Total number of appearances
Shad	14
Striped bass	10
Catfish	9
Herring	9
Atlantic cod	8
Mackerel	8
Bass	8
Sheepshead	5
Black sea bass	4
Sturgeon	4
Porgy	3
White perch	3
Flounder	3
Salmon	3
Tautog	3
Sucker	2
Temperate bass	2
Yellow perch	2
Skates/rays	1
Channel pickerel	1
Pike	1
Haddock	1
Freshwater bass or sunfish	1
Black drum	1
Anchovy	1
Bluefish	1
Sea trout	1

spices that had been pickled (Hines, Marshall, and Weaver 1987: 60).

East Falls, a neighborhood in northwest Philadelphia adjacent to what is today Fairmount Park, and formerly known as the Falls of Schuylkill, was *the* place to go to for the famous catfish, waffles, and coffee preparations in the mid-1800s. The roadhouses or inns located along the Schuylkill River in this

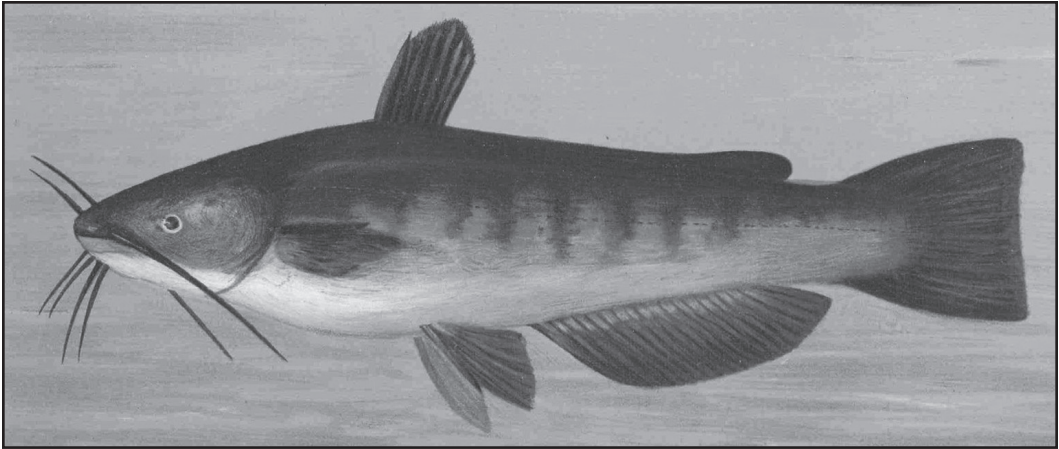


Figure 2. *The Common Bullhead or Horned Pout*. *Amiurus nebulosus*. Illustration. by J. L. Petrie, from William Harris's *Fishes of North America that are Captured on Hook and Line* (Harris 1898: plate 34). (Photo by the author, 2014.)

area, such as the Falls of Schuylkill Hotel, Wissahickon Hall, Bobby Evan's Hotel, or Maple Spring Hotel and Museum, served up this fare to one and all (FIG. 3). It was a local specialty and a tourist draw that made the Falls of Schuylkill a celebrated destination.

The dish is perhaps most famously associated with the Falls of Schuylkill Hotel, which began serving catfish, waffles, and coffee starting in the early 1800s under the watchful eye of its proprietor Mrs. Watkins—the woman credited with introducing the dish to the area (*Ledger* 1904; Hines, Marshall, and Weaver 1987: 51). Catfish and waffles continued to draw patrons to the hotel long after Mrs. Watkins sold the business. The following passage describes, retrospectively, the pleasures of the catfish dinners at this establishment:

As an edible fish, the catfish takes front rank in the minds of many people. A number of years ago there was a famous resort near Philadelphia, on the Wissahickon, where a visitor was escorted by the native that he might enjoy the pleasures of catfish and waffles whose praises were sung as being rivals to the ambrosia and nectar of gods on Olympus (Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture 1914: 395).

And the following newspaper advertisement continues to play on Mrs. Watkins' catfish and coffee suppers to promote the hotel (Kinsell 1848).

THE OLD CATFISH AND COFFEE HOUSE.

FORMERLY MRS. WATKINS, FALLS OF SCHUYLKILL—This old established stand, the reputation of which has been so long established, is now under the direction of JOHN KNISELL. The proprietor is prepared to serve up breakfasts, dinners and suppers, to parties, at the shortest notice. A ride to the Falls of Schuylkill, with a Catfish and Coffee Supper, has long been justly celebrated among city epicures. The subscriber is prepared to do up the thing BROWN.

His bar is stocked with the best Liquors and Segars, and his well stocked table set out with the best the market affords.

The house is the second house from the city upon the Ridge Road, and the Schuylkill river steamboats convey passengers from Fairmont or Manayunk to the landing near the house, every half hour during the day. Stop and see me.

JOHN KNISELL

Catfish in Local Politics

The catfish was so popular and such an entrenched part of local tradition and lore that it became an important symbol in local politics. In the early 1800s John "Catfish" Miller emerged on the Philadelphia political stage. First appearing as a city commissioner, his nickname was derived from his unflinching love of catfish (*Tickler* 1809a). He was, aside from his public service roles, an

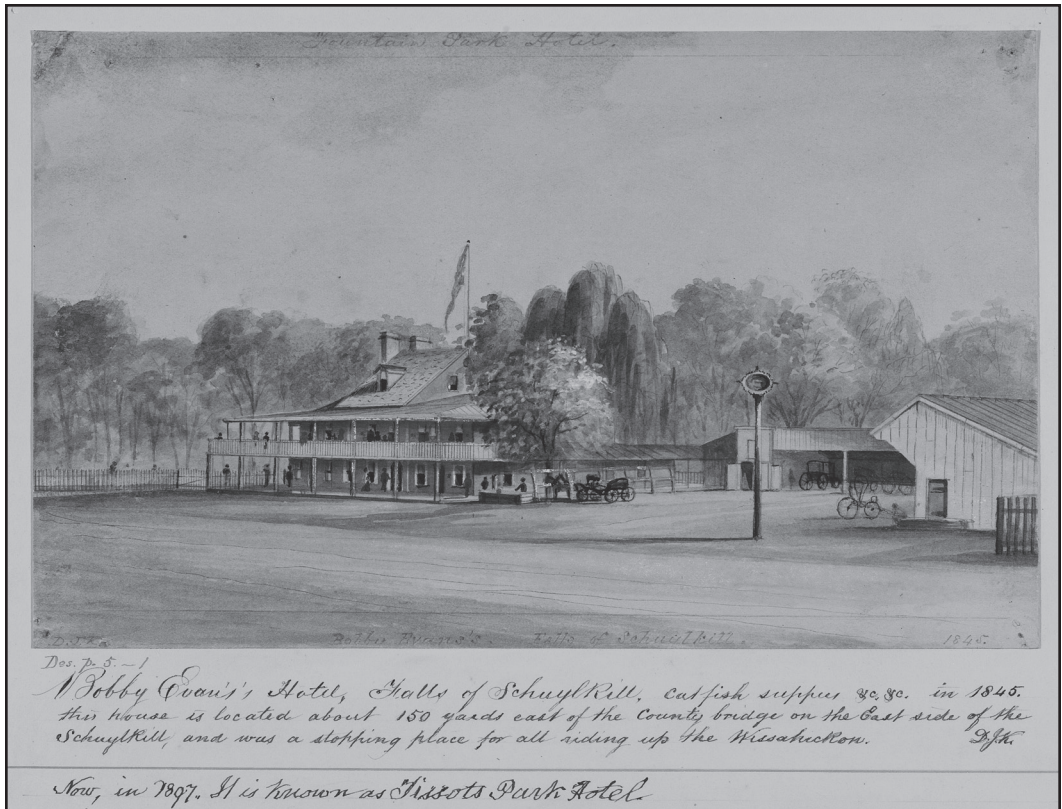


Figure 3. Bobby Evan's Hotel, 1845. Catfish and waffles made the inns along the Schuylkill River a tourist destination. (Image courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.)

innkeeper at the Hornet's Nest; a "grog weaver"; a lime, coal, and plaster seller; and the elected president of the Peashore Catfish Club; as well as the "Governour of the commonwealth of Catfish" (Tickler 1808a, 1809b, 1809c, 1809d, 1813). He became a political figure, but also a symbol of the catfish in human form. Articles in the newspapers, specifically the *Tickler*, which was published in Philadelphia from 1807 to 1813, showed a great deal of interest in this man, and even printed pieces about catfish under the heading "Interesting to John Cafish [sic] Miller and Others" (1808b), while simultaneously portraying the general catfish population as some of his greatest supporters: "The catfish are said to sympathize vastly with John" (Tickler 1809c).

As a leading "old school" Democrat, John Miller often hosted meetings at the Hornet's Nest Tavern (Tickler 1811a). Miller's political

reputation was grounded in his catfish-fishing prominence, and this association spilled over not only onto his associates, but on his opponents as well (Tickler 1811b):

On the 14th instant, a special messenger of John Catfish Miller's, with an appropriate suite, and adequate present of shadroe, presented himself at Race-street wharf, where the envoy extraordinary and plenipo, from the old school, presented his august personage, being 4 inches between the eyes, back black, and belly white—he announced that the white catfish had been sedulous to obey his royal mandate, and also, that the three piscatory tribes of his species, were to be thus designated until the ensuing election:—the John Catfish Millers to be old school; the John Ulrichs, or yellow bellies, to be new school, and the sea catfish, alias Tom Cashes, to be federal. TEAGUE, Sec'ry.

The presence in Philadelphia, in the first part of the 19th century, of a man whose political

and social career were built upon his dedication to the catfish only accentuates the significance of this fish, its fishing traditions, and culinary preparations within the local scene.

A Consideration of Catfish Cookery in Philadelphia

There is no doubt that catfish were an important part of Philadelphia's local food landscape in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and that the preparation of "catfish, waffles, and coffee" was a particular regional specialty that drew not only locals and tourists to the inns located at the Falls of Schuylkill, but also demonstrated Philadelphia's culinary prowess in the early 19th century. Despite its ready availability in local rivers and inexpensive cost in the market, the catfish in Philadelphia was deemed an epicurean treat. As recorded in a Pennsylvania Department of Fisheries bulletin: "Catfish do not belong to the aristocratic fishes although they have contributed frequently to the entertainment of aristocratic people, that is, to their appetites" (Mellinger 1904: 116).

Another important and more broadly applicable point to take away from this research is the quintessential role of the zooarchaeological data in pointing to the significance of catfish in the Philadelphia area in the first place. It was the evidence for the widespread consumption of catfish in and around the city, as demonstrated by the presence of catfish bones from multiple archaeological sites, that acted as the impetus behind more detailed investigations into the importance of catfish in the local culinary landscape. Archaeologists should take note that historical culinary research, guided by faunal and other archaeological data, has the potential to uncover a plethora of fascinating stories, such as this one involving the catfish.

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