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## Some Thoughts on African-American Foodways

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A few years ago I had the opportunity to analyze the animal remains from Nina Plantation (16PC62), a c. 1820s-1890s sugar plantation in central Louisiana on the banks of the Mississippi River. Excavated in 1993 and 1994 by R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates on behalf of the US Army Corps of Engineers, New Orleans District, the project included investigation of the Main House and two structures in an Outbuilding Complex associated with African Americans, although the slave quarters proper were not excavated (since that area was not in danger of destruction by the Mississippi River). The site has the advantage of an 1851 alluvial flood deposit that serves to distinguish antebellum and postbellum occupations in both areas of the site. This coincides as well with a change in ownership of the plantation in 1857, from a French Creole family to an Anglo-American family from Philadelphia (Markell 1996). Thus, it was possible to analyze differences in French, Anglo-American, and African American diets; differences in pre-Emancipation and post-Emancipation African American diets; and whether the differences could be attributed to ethnicity, economic position, or both. This analysis brought several things to mind that seem to have relevance for understanding the variability of African American foodways in a plantation setting, and which I would like to discuss here.

The Outbuilding Complex at Nina Plantation appears, from the material culture, to have been where African Americans resided, first as slaves and later as tenants (Markell 1996). One of the Outbuildings, Structure 1, probably served as a residence for enslaved African American and tenants as well as a kitchen for the Main House residents. The function of the second Outbuilding, Structure 2, is somewhat less clear, although butchering and food preparation occurred there as well. Deer, raccoons, rabbits, turkey, doves and pigeons, alligator, and suckers were consumed only in the Outbuildings. The residents ate some species that also were consumed at the Main House, including cow, pig, chicken, squirrel, ducks and geese, and turtles. Some species, such as opossum, occur in small amounts at the Main House, but in larger amounts in the Outbuilding area. This is especially true of fish; although catfishes, gar, bowfin, drum, and sunfishes occur at the Main House, they played a much greater role in the diet at the Outbuilding area. Comparison of earlier French period (c. 1820-1851) with later Anglo period (1851-1890s) diets at the Outbuilding area indicates an increase in domestic species and a marked decrease in the use of wild mammals, birds, and fish in the later period. A similar pattern is seen at the later Anglo Main House.

The evidence from Nina Plantation brings to mind discussions about differences in the ways enslaved African American and tenants obtained their subsistence. Because assemblages associated with the later tenant period Outbuildings at Nina seem much more like those associated with the Anglo Main House in their increased use of beef and sharp reduction in wild animals, one might be tempted to assume that the plantation owners, the Allens, were controlling what meat provisions were even available to African-American tenants. In other words, the shift in the African American diet at Nina in the same direction as the new owners' shift might be taken to suggest greater owner control of meat sources during the Anglo period.

However, what the faunal data might be revealing is an effect on men's and women's time. If the plantation owner no longer provided food rations (as he/she might have done in the antebellum period), then a tenant family would have to spend more time (outside of work on the sugar plantation) growing its own crops and otherwise getting food for subsistence. Less time would be available for both hunting and agriculture, such that a choice might have been made for investing time in gardens near the house rather than in procuring wild animals further a field. It might have made more sense for the tenants to have purchased were available from the plantation owner or from nearby stores, even if this meant a change in diet.

It is also possible that African-American tenants wanted to change their diets, i.e., preferred the same foods as the Anglo owners, or wanted to demonstrate their ability to purchase a similar array of foods. This could be read both as "buying into" the ideology of the dominant classes as well as "in your face" resistance to the dominant class by co-opting one of the signs of that class its food choices. At Nina Plantation, with the shift from slave to tenant status, the African-American diet changed from one dominated by pork and wild species to one dominated by beef and virtually devoid of wild species.

I think it is difficult to determine whether the meat diet we see revealed in the slave and tenant households on plantations truly reflects African or African-American food preferences or whether it reflects slave and tenant choices from a limited range of available options. Certainly some culinary practices, such as reliance on stews and "one-dish" meals, and the use of certain plant foods, such as okra and cow peas, can be traced to Africa (Ferguson 1992; Wagner 1981; Hall 1991). However, pigs' feet, stereotypically an African-American food preference, occurred in higher proportions in the French and Anglo Main Houses at Nina than in the slave and tenant Outbuildings; in the case of the earlier French period, the percentage was much higher at the Main House. During the later tenant period, there was a marked decrease in consumption of pork in the Outbuildings and a corresponding increase in consumption of beef. High and medium food value cuts of beef increased and the less meaty cuts decreased, suggesting that African-American tenants at Nina were better off economically, and perhaps physically, than their enslaved predecessors had been.

In addition to the change in work and "free" time that is part and parcel of the shift from slavery to tenancy, there are the very real differences between French and Anglo-American systems of slavery to consider. One article of the French Code Noir (Black Code) forbade owners to workslaves on Sundays and holidays, leaving this time available for enslaved men and women to engage in their own pursuits which might include, among many other things, hunting and fishing as well as bartering and selling goods and services (Ekberg 1985:215). We know relatively little about North American French plantations archaeologically, to know how this might be revealed materially; however, the subject has been examined by historians for the middle Mississippi valley (Ekberg 1985) and the Louisiana colony in general (Usner 1987). The much greater consumption of wild mammals and fish by enslaved African Americans at Nina during the period French Creoles owned the plantation suggests access to and time for acquisition of those resources in a way that is consistent with the Code Noir.

Another factor to consider is the economic base of the plantation under study, which is related to its environmental setting. One would expect quite a lot of variation in food consumption between

those who lived on coastal rice, indigo, and sea cotton plantations, upland tobacco, cotton, hemp, and wheat plantations, and sugar plantations; between those who lived on the banks of large rivers and oceans and those who had only creeks or ponds nearby; between those who lived near heavily forested areas and those near open grassland or prairie. When we combine the different kinds of labor that were required of enslaved men and women for different plantation economies with the variation in nearby plant and animal resources, it is clear that comparisons and generalizations about African American subsistence on plantations can be neither easy nor facile. Temporal and technological changes also must be brought into the picture. For example, late nineteenth-century changes in meat processing and in shipping meant more people had greater access to domesticated meats than before, especially if they lived along major waterways.

All of these factors (the ethnicity of owners, overseers, slaves, and tenants); economic position; economic base of plantation; environmental setting; temporal/technological context) need to be taken into consideration when looking at similarities and differences in African-American foodways on plantations. (Even more variability would be expected, of course, when African-American contexts in non-plantation settings [enslaved and free] are examined.) The foods people ate reflect access to, choices about, and preferences for, particular resources and can tell us much about the role of subsistence in planter-slave and planter-tenant relations on plantations. To even begin to understand this, we need faunal and botanical data from many more kinds of plantations in various environmental settings dating to several different periods. Hopefully, research in the not-too-distant future will include increased attention to topics such as these.

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