

Food for Thought

A View Toward a Richer Interpretation of the House Museum Kitchen

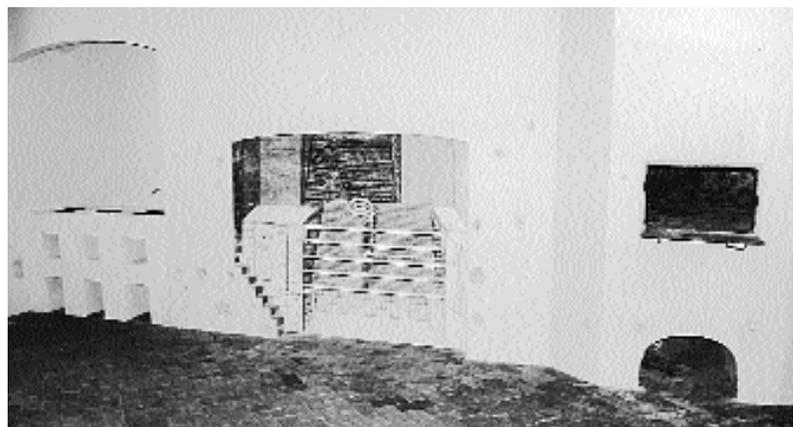
Over the past 25 years, a growing effort to interpret domestic life at house museums has awakened visitors to the rich tapestry of intertwined and evolving relationships that is a house, and us. In site after site for more than a century, kitchens and related spaces were misunderstood, viewed as unimportant, put to administrative or service uses, or shaped into preconceived forms. At Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's first kitchen became a public restroom, while his show-stopper 1809 kitchen served as a post office and gift shop until it was re-invented in the 1940s as a pastiche of the Colonial Revival kitchen and filled with wood-ware that had no connection to Jefferson or his sophisticated, French-influenced kitchen. Monticello was not an isolated example. After Mount Vernon's kitchen was gutted and the physical evidence of its past glories were obliterated during the 1890s, it was fitted with the iconic down-hearth fireplace, pot crane, and clock jack. Shortly after Hampton National Historic Site in Towson, Maryland, was awarded historic designation in 1948, the kitchen wing was converted to a tea room run by an independent contractor under a 50-year lease. For decades, visitors to the recreated Governor's Palace kitchen at Colonial Williamsburg were treated to a charming vision of a costumed black cook seated by a roaring fire, the table beside her cluttered with quaint accouterments of the kitchen. Above her hung innumerable bouquets of herbs, while off in the corner stood a spinning wheel. These are easy images to have fun with today. To be fair, though, as Kenneth L. Ames pointed out in *The*

Colonial Revival in America, interpretation is as much about now as it is about then. The men and women who altered these spaces, assembled these tableaux, and wrote of the past did so to the best of their ability.

Our challenge is to review the evidence and attempt to interpret kitchen spaces with new clarity. Staff at Colonial Williamsburg, Monticello, The Octagon in Washington, DC, and the Hermann-Grimma House in New Orleans, are among those who have begun this process. Each of these sites has spent considerable time, money, and effort to piece together evidence of the historic form of long-demolished 18th- and 19th-century kitchens and to understand something of who cooked there and what they cooked. Each has reconstructed or is planning to reconstruct, at considerable expense, a kitchen with iron range and stew stove, cooking technology long ignored because it did not mesh with the Colonial Revival insistence on the cozy down-hearth fireplace.

Staff at these sites might well envy staff at Hampton, one of the few houses in the nation where the kitchen survives much as it did in the early 19th century. The cooking range was removed and the fireplace was fitted with a pot crane and cauldron to provide colonial ambiance for the tearoom, and the early bake oven was mis-

The recently restored kitchen at The Octagon illustrates the classic stew stove-roasting range-bake oven arrangement. The range is cleverly represented by an illustration since its actual historic form remains obscure.





Hampton's stew stove and roaster offer many possibilities for interpreting the kitchen and those who labored there.

takenly identified as a mid-19th century summer kitchen and demolished, but the stew stove and the Rumford-style roaster built into the side of the fireplace were retained, so that when the lease on the tea room expired in 1998, and the National Park Service gained control of the kitchen spaces, these vestiges of Hampton's once grand kitchen remained.

Kitchens such as these help counter the Colonial Revival mystique and shed new

light on forgotten foodways as well as stimulate the re-examination of the role of the kitchen within the interpretative plan. While ignoring the kitchen or displaying it as a quaint anachronism, house museums commonly showcase the beautifully restored dining room and the many parties held there. They generally fail, however, to draw visitors into the fecund web of supporting activities that made these parties a pleasure to attend. Re-interpreting the dining room along with the kitchen and other supporting structures, and describing how the food got to table and who raised and prepared it, would give visitors a more complete and compelling view of the intertwined and evolving relationships within—and outside—the household. Such an interpretative approach would end, not begin, in the dining room.

Hampton is a good site for such interpretation and helps illustrate how this approach might be implemented. Not only could its kitchen provide a focus for interpreting cooking technology and the people who worked there, but its dining room and many supporting structures are intact or have been restored, and a significant documentary record exists to support a rich interpretation. If Hampton's kitchen, dining room, Home Farm, dairy, smoke house, ice house, kitchen garden, orangery, and butler's pantry were linked through interpretation, the intertwined and evolving relationships of French *émigrés*, inden-

tured servants, slaves, freed African Americans, and the Ridgely family from the estate's earliest days to the post-Civil War period could be presented to visitors in a compelling and insightful manner.

House in the Forest

Through a combination of business acumen, forceful personality, and a continuing personal involvement in all aspects of his business enterprises, Captain Charles Ridgely (1733-1790) parlayed a modest inheritance into a large fortune and agricultural/industrial/commercial conglomerate at Hampton. By the time of his death, he owned more than 24,000 acres of land. His expanding affluence and position allowed him and his descendants to live among the symbols of his accomplishment, the most enduring of which was Hampton Hall, his "house in the forest" begun in 1783 and finished in 1790. Upon the captain's death, his nephew Charles Ridgely Carnan (1760-1829) inherited Hampton by taking the Ridgely name. It was the Ridgelys' intent from the start to make the house a show place where they could entertain in high style, so it was essential that the kitchen contain a stew stove, roasting range, and bake oven to enable the French chef and his staff to create the many and varied dishes for which the house became renowned.

The kitchen at Hampton is located in a square, two-and-one-half story building connected to the east side of the main house by a hyphen that Charles Carnan Ridgely expanded about 1815 to include a spacious butler's pantry. In 1829, John Ridgely (1790-1867) inherited the house and an outmoded kitchen; and in 1830, set about updating it. He added the Rumford-style roaster and, by 1852, had installed a cooking range. This range may have been used for decades, but was probably replaced by a later one that may have remained in place until 1948.

Thoughts on Interpretation

By the time the range was installed at Hampton, the stew stove was no longer essential but could still be pressed into service, and the roaster never lost its usefulness. The re-insertion of a c. 1852 cooking range in the kitchen fireplace at Hampton would set the stage for interpretation from the 1790s into the 1870s when that particular range was likely still in use. Interpreters could demonstrate the evolving technology and use of stew stove, roasting oven, and cookstove, a history interpreted at no other single site in America.

Before reaching the kitchen, however, visitors would explore the Home Farm. Here they would learn who tended the cows and who grew the crops, what they raised, and how they processed produce before sending it to the kitchen. On a hot day, they could revel in the coolness of the dairy where, in the mid-19th century, a French dairymaid prepared milk products destined for the Ridgely's table or the commercial market. They could experience the cramped quarters where slave husbandmen lived, and learn of the indentured servants who worked the fields before them. This is also a good opportunity for discussion about what workers at Hampton ate.

Leaving the farm, visitors would walk to the kitchen yard and explore the smoke house, ice house, orangery, and kitchen garden, tracing the intricate processes workers mastered to preserve meats and raise succulent fruits and vegetables for the Ridgely table. Visitors would then examine the site where the bake oven and its accompanying shed stood on the east wall of the kitchen. Here, slaves and hired workers not only baked bread and pastries, but washed vegetables and completed other tasks essential to readying food for cooking.

Entering the kitchen through the bake yard door, visitors would see a fine mid-19th century kitchen, replete with large iron cooking range, roaster, and stew stove. There is cabinetry on the walls and a large work table in the center of the room where the chef performed magic and called out orders to staff, white and black. Slave Anne Williams perhaps worked here, for she was a cook and nurse.

Moving on, visitors would enter the chef's room, his sanctum sanctorum, both bedroom and storage area for the valuable kitchen items under his charge, equipment, spices and such. They would next proceed to the butler's pantry, the link between the back and front of the house. Here the various plates of food to be placed on the table were made up in the kitchen, then carried through this room into the dining room. By the second half of the 19th century, the plates of food received a final garnishing here. The butler's pantry was the hub of a well-run household. In the English tradition, the butler or steward was the top ranking male servant—in the best of circumstances a good chef was just his equal. Glassware, silver, and china were stored in the butler's pantry, and here the finer items were washed and polished. The butler oversaw the setting up and serving in the dining room. He trained the waiters and made certain they placed the dishes and poured the wine just so for the Ridgely's and their guests. The histories of actual people involved in these activities would be threaded throughout the tour.

Visitors to Hampton and other sites that initiated a similar course of interpretation would be fortunate indeed for, upon walking from the butler's pantry and entering the dining room, they would have an understanding of the lavish table before them that no house museum tour in America offers today. By leading visitors through the process of food production and introducing those who made the dinner parties possible, house museums can tell a clearer story not only about kitchens and cooking technology, but about all who lived and worked there.

Cooking Technology

Stew stoves, roasters and, ultimately, cooking ranges allowed cooks to create sophisticated dishes nearly impossible to prepare on an open, down-hearth fireplace. The kitchen of any American household whose inhabitants ate fine cuisine almost certainly contained at least one of these appliances from the 1750s onward.

The stew stove, also called a potager, stew hole, or stewing stove, was built into kitchens from Canada to Louisiana until it was supplanted by the first practical cooking range in the early 19th century.* It performed a function akin to the modern cook-top. A masonry mass with at least one well where embers, or small fires, could

be placed beneath a cooking container to provide the cook with a controlled concentration of heat and a counter-height working surface. The stew stove enabled a chef to create the sophisticated style of food preparation known as haute cuisine.

A mode of preparation and presentation developed in Paris and the French courts of the 17th and 18th centuries, haute cuisine was embraced by the English gentry and brought to America by both the English and the French. This cuisine is characterized by artfully arranged plates of food and composed sauces that emphasize flavor and appearance. Its emergence signaled a fundamental shift in cooking technique. Prior

to this, there was little difference between French and English cuisine. Both relied on large fireplaces in which most food was either roasted or boiled, and large pots and cauldrons served as single cooking receptacles, as in cooking a boiled dinner of corned beef and cabbage. In haute cuisine, ingredients were cooked in several separate pans upon the stew stove and natural juices were reduced to create sauces, much as we do today. By the mid-18th century a further refinement was introduced—liaison (thickening). This thickening, or binding, of the sauce was the final step in a complex process, the successful results of which were the crowning touch to the finished dish. Production of such sauces was made easier by the introduction of the stew stove in France, a technology the English embraced to satisfy their French and French-trained chefs. Large stew stoves could contain a dozen wells, allowing for slow cooking, rapid cooking, or keeping preparations warm over low heat.

The range originated in the 16th century as a raised, iron fire-basket used for roasting, a form that had, by the early-18th century, evolved into a series of horizontal wrought iron bars mounted between vertical iron posts set into the fireplace. Throughout the 18th century, modifications and improvements were made as the roasting range was put to multiple uses. At century's end, it had grown to enormous size and was provided with cast-iron face-plates, ovens and wrought-iron back-boilers to produce both hot water and steam for the kitchen. Though the addition of ovens was an advancement, their capacity was relatively small and because they were placed to the right or left of the fire, they provided uneven heat.

In 1805, Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, published the results of his years of experimentation with designs for cooking apparatus. A Massachusetts native, knighted by George III and made a Count of the Holy Roman Empire by Carl Theodore, Rumford published a total of 64 papers and essays, a number of those on the nature of heat and light still considered seminal works. His 1805 treatise included plans for stew stoves and an innovative roaster far superior to the roasting range. His roaster was a compact unit consisting of a sheet iron drum above a small firebox with ashpit, all set into the masonry mass of the fireplace chimney. This arrangement distributed heat around the roaster, resulting in

more even cooking. Rumford provided his roasters with a moisture-venting tube and blowpipes, signature innovations that created a dry-heat condition which aided browning. Two blowpipes ran under the roaster and through the fire. One end of each pipe opened into the room, where it was stoppered; the other end opened at the bottom rear of the roaster. To brown meat, one stoked the fire, opened the vent and removed the stopper, causing a rush of super-heated air to pass through the oven. The roaster could also serve as a small, fine bake oven. Rumford's roasters became popular alternatives to the roasting range at the start of the 19th century.

The Rumford roaster was, however, soon eclipsed by the next evolution of the roasting range, the closed-fire cooking range. English advances in the manufacture of cast iron enabled the first practical version to be introduced in 1802. This cooking range, set into the fireplace, established the tripartite form of side-by-side oven-firebox-boiler. From a central fire grate, the hot air and flames passed underneath the hotplate that spanned the top of the range, then circulated around the oven, underneath the ash pit, past the bottom and sides of the boiler, and up the chimney. This arrangement provided almost everything the cook required in one relatively simple, compact, and convenient unit. The door to the firebox could be opened at the front for roasting, the oven provided even heat for baking, there was a constant source of hot water from the boiler, and pans could boil and stew upon the hotplate. Early cooking ranges were costly, but their price dropped rapidly so that by the time the first known cooking range was installed at Hampton National Historic Site in 1852, the cookstove—as it came to be called—had made its way into kitchens throughout America, giving cooks everywhere the option of preparing fine and delicate sauces.

Note

- * A similar structure known as a boiler or set kettle can be confused with a stew stove. It, too, was of masonry construction, but contained large, semi-permanent kettles made of iron or copper. The boiler was commonly found in the laundry and brew house.

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Photos by the author.