

What mealtime was like for homesteaders on the Western Virginia frontier, as told by food historians Martha and Richard Hartley of Cairo, West Virginia



Thomas Hughes, Indian fighter of Harrison County, made from a verbal description given by Adam Flesher



Erection of a log house, showing cornermen and facilities for lifting logs into position



Pioneers burning dry logs

by Joseph Diss Debar

“Lots of time it wasn’t very much, but if they could plant a crop of corn and get it to harvest then they would stand a chance of having something to eat, plus other things they could grow and hunt and gather,” Martha said.

“If they could clear land enough to plant a crop of corn that was the first and primary food that they tried to do. That food adapted itself to this climate and this growing situation. Then, they would be planting things like pumpkins and squash and beans. They didn’t plant, like, wheat and barley and other grains until they got more land cleared.”

Of course, they would hunt for whatever game there was in the forest, she said. “But they soon learned that having pigs, hogs, who could forage for themselves in the forest was a good source of meat. As soon as they could, they would plant orchards, especially along the river valleys – peaches and apples.”

The settler population at that time was a mix of people in western Virginia, both British and Scotch-Irish as well as Germans and French Huguenots, Protestants who fled France for religious and cultural reasons in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, said Richard.

“They brought food culture customs with them. The British preferred as meat beef, the Scotch-Irish it was pork or mutton. Germans were often one-pot meals often using pork.”

On the other hand, sometimes frontier families made do with what they could find. An account in the Hartley’s book tells of a traveling preacher who started from Parkersburg and went back up into the headwaters of the Elk River.

“He talks about being in the homes of these early settlers and this was 1818,” Richard said. “This preacher talks about being in one of the log homes. And what they provide him is a sumptuous meal of bear meat and cornbread. Maybe they had some cultural preferences, but they had to establish themselves first. So, venison and bear meat was something they could catch in the woods.”

Often, dinner was a one-pot meal.

“So, whatever they had might be put in this stew pot,” Martha said. “They hoped that there would be meat in that pot. They hoped to have a milk cow. They were not eating a lot of beef. Then, they might have all the small game, whatever was available.

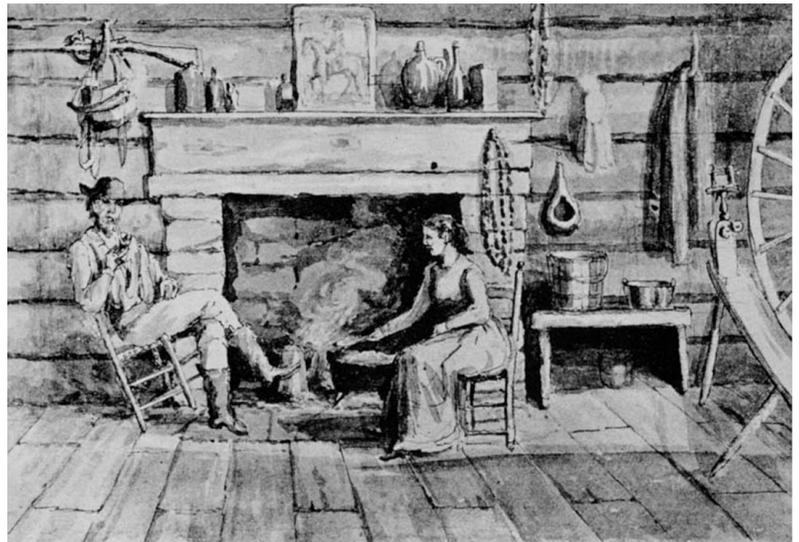
“You have to think, there was no refrigerator to preserve things,” she said.

The reliance on corn meant a lot of corn meal dishes like corn meal mush. On the front of their book you see a picture of a Johnny Cake being cooked upright in a hearth against a stone – an early way of cooking a cornbread, she noted.

“It was cornmeal and water – if you had some bear grease or some hog fat you might put a little of that in it. There were different recipes.”



Historic residence in Monongalia County, probably that of John Evans, a local military and political leader



Pioneer kitchen, used for cooking, eating, living, and sleeping