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No Eating in the Archive

There is no eating in the archive.

This is not only a practical admonition, extended to any would-be researcher. It is also a methodological challenge: there is, quite literally, no eating—or at least no food—preserved among the books, letters, newspapers, manuscripts, and other documents that constitute the archival record of the early United States. Although eating is among the most universal of human activities, the traces of the culinary habits of that era are scant. Even cookbooks, that most basic bastion of our contemporary culinary lives, contain only lists of ingredients, as detailed preparation instructions were not typically included until the second half of the nineteenth century. Personal receipt books, as recipe books were known at the time, contain family names and the occasional address, but rarely offer sufficient detail about the lives of those who inscribed the recipes in pen and ink. Documents such as shipping inventories and ledger books suggest certain foodstuffs that might have been consumed, but offer little additional information. Letters from the era provide tantalizing, but often fleeting, mention of meals consumed. Even the novels of the time, which one might assume would serve up a trove of fictive cuisine, rarely discuss food or eating in more than a single line of prose.

How, then, are we to approach the study of eating—of the many and multiple meanings of our appetites and pleasures—in the early United States? How are we to conceive of its archive, where we would otherwise locate the material basis of the stories that we seek to tell? Scholars from across the disciplines have long possessed methods for preserving, compiling, describing, and interpreting the artifacts of everyday life in the new republic. And yet the artifacts associated with eating, which is the most embodied and immediate of everyday experiences, remain perishable in the most literal sense. What's more, the experiences they might record—like the succulent crunch of a Newtown Pippin, the variety of apple that Thomas Jefferson requested be crated and sent to him from

Virginia while he served as minister to France—can at times pose a threat to archival preservation itself.¹

I have spent the past decade thinking about these constraints: about the food that I cannot taste; about an understanding of eating that is far removed from our present food culture; and about the methods that might allow me, along with other scholars and students of early American literature and culture, to recover, and at times reimagine, the experiences of eating embedded in the archive of the nation's founding. In the process, I have been drawn to the conceptual paths by which eating came to matter in that particular temporal moment. By exploring contemporaneous aesthetic philosophies in concert with contemporary interpretive techniques, I have arrived at a view of how eating exposes a range of theories and tensions at play in the early United States. As I argue in the pages to come, eating emerged as form of aesthetic expression over the course of the eighteenth century, and subsequently transformed into a means of expressing both allegiance and resistance to the dominant Enlightenment worldview. Imported from Europe and incorporated into the ideological framework of the United States largely intact, this view authorized certain individuals—namely, the white, property-owning men who served as the nation's prototypical citizens—to derive heightened social and political significance from the sense of taste. At the same time, those excluded from this narrow conception of citizenship recognized in eating an accessible means of demonstrating their own sense of national belonging, as well as additional and, at times, explicitly oppositional aesthetic theories.

But we—as both students and scholars of the nation's founding—cannot fully appreciate the force or depth of this aesthetic mode by relying on the archive as it is currently conceived. We must of course first account for the evidence that is preserved in the archival record, however scattered or scant. But we must then account for the experiences of eating that resist preservation, and therefore remain undisclosed. My own method of accounting for these evidentiary gaps involves interweaving textual artifacts with accounts, both real and fictive, of foods harvested, dishes prepared, and meals consumed. Into these reconstituted narratives, not unlike a reconstituted stock, I infuse the additional aspects of eating that remain bound to the bodies of those who performed the harvesting, preparing, and consuming. In doing so, I reveal how figures ranging from the nation's first presidents to their enslaved cooks employed eating in

order to elaborate—or, alternatively, in order to challenge—received ideas about the nature of sensory experience and subjective judgment. *An Archive of Taste* thus demonstrates how an attention to eating allows us to identify additional actors and agents who were directly involved in establishing the nation's cultural foundation, as well as additional methodological techniques for acknowledging, if not ever fully recovering, the range of experiences that remain conscribed to the past.

A “Most Celebrated” Account of Eating

As an initial example of the application of these techniques, as well as of their impact on our understanding of the nation's cultural foundation, consider what at least one culinary historian describes as the “most celebrated” account of eating of that time. It is not a contemporaneous account, since none are known to exist, but a scene that appears in the final pages of the *Recollections and Private Memoirs of the Life of Washington*, written by Washington's grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, and published in 1860, sixty years after the first president's death (Adrian Miller, *Cabinet*, 39). Washington, we are told, “was remarkably fond of fish,” and, one February morning, “it happened that a single shad was caught in the Delaware” (Custis, 421). Samuel Fraunces, Washington's steward and “a man of talent and considerable taste,” acting on his epicurean impulses, snatched the fish from the fishmonger “with the speed of an osprey” (421). After nearly forty years of experience as an innkeeper, caterer, and chef—including a previous stint as Washington's steward in New York—Fraunces was convinced that his quick action “had secured a delicacy that, above all others, . . . would be agreeable to the palate of his chief” (421).² When the dish was served, however, Washington did not respond as expected: “‘Take it away,’ thundered the chief; ‘take it away, sir; it shall never be said that my table sets such an example of luxury and extravagance.’ Poor Fraunces tremblingly obeyed, and the first shad of the season was removed untouched, to be speedily discussed by the gourmands of the servants’ hall” (422).

Washington's emphatic rejection of an otherwise “agreeable” fish demonstrates how food functioned as an emblem of both personal and political values. Just fifteen years after the nation had declared independence, decisions about what to eat and how to eat had already become more than mere reflections of one's dietary preferences; food was employed to

express a very particular culinary ideology, what I term in these pages *republican taste*. This sense of taste courses through many narratives of the nation's founding, even if it is not named as such. It is characterized by a commitment to the virtues of simplicity, temperance, and moderation, which themselves derive from fundamental republican political ideals.³ And this sense of taste, I contend, has a crucial and as-yet-unacknowledged source: the dining table. Indeed, in certain respects, these virtues were first cultivated at the table, and only then transposed to the civic sphere. In response to the "luxury and extravagance" that came to be associated with the British Crown (and, evidently, with a plate of fresh fish) Washington and the other "founders" consistently worked to establish plain living as a core quality of U.S. citizens.⁴ In this particular account, Washington's anger seems to derive from his frustration at Fraunces's failure to recognize how, in Washington's new role as national figurehead, the "example" of tasteful and temperate consumption must always be placed ahead of the immediate gratification of his personal palate.

The full significance of accounts of eating such as these, interspersed throughout the archival record of the nation's founding, comes into focus when situated within the larger discourse of taste and the multiple meanings that the term "taste" contains. These meanings span from the sensory experience of eating, to personal preferences for certain flavors, to more general inclinations toward (or against) certain cultural expressions.⁵ From this conceptual vantage, we can begin to identify how such instances of eating, however anecdotal or otherwise incomplete, help to expose the larger significance of food and eating in establishing a cultural foundation for the United States. At the same time, we must also attend to the sensory and material dimensions of aesthetic taste, and its evolution as a philosophical and political concept, over the course of that era. To do so can help to affirm the importance of considering lived experience and culinary expertise alongside the range of artifacts that traditionally constitute the archive of the early United States—indeed, those that constitute the American archive as a whole.⁶ By attending to that interplay between texts and bodies, and between subjective experience and acculturated response, we come to see the archive of taste in a new light: one that illuminates the intellectual work, as well as the labor, involved in the cultivation, preparation, and consumption of food.

For behind the story of Washington's ill-fated fish, and the other accounts of eating in the early republic that can be surfaced, are the stories of the men and women who labored to produce the edible matter of republican taste. In this case, we are prompted to consider the stories of the "gourmands of the servants' hall," those who ultimately consumed—and, we are led to believe, delighted in devouring—the "delicacy" intended for the commander in chief. What were their experiences as "servants" to the first president of the United States? And how did they contribute, along with Washington, to the image of the republic that he sought to create?

Custis identifies one of these "gourmands" as an enslaved man by the name of Hercules, the "chief cook" at Mount Vernon, who, in the summer of 1790, was summoned to Philadelphia to serve the "masters of the republic" as the president's chef (422, 423). According to Custis, Hercules's culinary skill was so "highly accomplished," and his command over the kitchen so adept, that he "would have been termed in modern parlance, a celebrated *artiste*" (422). Confirmation of his "elegant" cookery comes from several secondhand accounts, as well as from Washington's own hand, disclosing how tightly matters of taste were bound to the culinary knowledge of individual cooks, as well as to the broader institution of slavery (qtd. in Adrian Miller, *Cabinet*, 64).⁷

Washington's personal correspondence also discloses something else: on the morning of February 22, 1797, the date of the president's sixty-fifth birthday, Hercules escaped from Washington's Mount Vernon estate.⁸ In a letter to his nephew, George Lewis, Washington describes his cook's escape as the "most inconvenient thing" ever experienced by himself and his family, for both practical and philosophical reasons (469). As was the case with many of the nation's founders, Washington's ideological commitment to ensuring the liberty and equality of all Americans was directly impeded as he pursued his personal pleasures and tastes. Stated once again: this pursuit depended both practically and philosophically on the enslavement of others.

In his letter to Lewis, Washington makes this conflict explicit: "What renders it more disagreeable," he states, referring to Hercules's escape, "is, that I had resolved never to become the Master of another Slave by purchase; but this resolution I fear I must break" (469). Washington's words offer a profound reminder of how any form of cultural expression,

Mount Vernon 13 Nov 1797

Dear Sir,

The cursing of my Cook,
 has been a most inconvenient thing to his
 family, and what readers it is not disagree-
 able is, that I had resolved never to become
 the master of another Slave by purchase,
 but this resolution I fear must break.—
 I have endeavored to hire, black
 or white, but as we get so little.— a few
 days ago, having occasion to write to Mr.
 Bradford Wetherston on other matters, I
 asked if one could be had in Richmond, — he
 says yes, and is his name.—
 Mr. Moshe, late one was informed
 that he had a very excellent Cook, with
 an ability to make a Londoner's or Liqueur
 which a town afforded him too many oppor-
 tunities of indulging, who is now in the
 workshop, and is to be sold.— I shall
 write to the Gentleman who has him, and
 in so far as he has, from your kind
 regards, under this character, wish to buy, or
 hire

Figure 1. This letter, written by George Washington to George Lewis on November 13, 1797, reveals how Washington's desire for tasteful food was practically and philosophically dependent on the enslavement of others. Courtesy of the Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

including but not limited to eating, is inextricably linked to the larger relationships—among individuals, and among individuals and institutions—that give rise to it. In other words, in this single line, penned in Washington's own hand, we glimpse not only the extent to which he relied on Hercules in his daily life, but also the extent to which this daily

reliance involved—indeed, was fundamentally premised upon—that most abhorrent institution in the nation’s history.

This seemingly self-contained episode points to the two major analytical aims of this book. The first is to expose the imbrications of politics and taste, especially as they relate to issues of slavery and race. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins has established, eating functioned as a “trope and technology of racial formation during the first 130 years of the U.S. republic” both before and after slavery (*Indigestion*, 2). In support of this thesis, and against the essentializing claims of the time, I offer an array of new evidence that documents the tastefulness of figures such as Hercules, who were forcibly excluded from the republican project, even as their knowledge and labor directly underwrote it.⁹ The second aim builds on the first, and it is to model how a sustained attention to taste as both formal philosophy and everyday experience allows additional theories of aesthetics, of agency, and of the people who exemplified both, to enter into the stories we tell about the nation’s founding. These stories, often rooted in the lives of the enslaved, enrich our understanding in the present, demonstrating by whom and by what means that cultural foundation was composed.

To achieve this latter aim requires that we come to see the archive of the early United States as a site of embodied philosophical thinking as well as a collection of historically significant artifacts. This more capacious critical stance enables us to consider how meals such as the “first shad of the season,” cooked for the pleasure of the commander in chief, might be interpreted in terms of the theoretical work that they perform.¹⁰ For acts of cooking and eating, in their synthesis of the sensory, the cerebral, and the social, offer what Lauren Berlant, in conversation with Jordan Alexander Stein, has identified as an underexplored set of “practices and registers for theorizing life” (20). Eating, in other words, offers an untrafficked entry point into a better understanding of an individual, a community, or a culture, while also helping to conjure a sense of what our distance from the past will forever occlude from view.¹¹ By focusing on cooking and eating in the early United States—the era that gave rise to many of our current ideas about the human, about race, and about the archives that inscribe such beliefs and structures into history—I show how meaning is inherently mediated by the materials of its conveyance. By offering an account of how taste came to matter as both a sensory experience and a political act, I demonstrate how the embodied cultural

practices thought to be consigned to history might instead advance an expanded conception of the early American archive. In so doing, *An Archive of Taste* advances an expanded conception of the archive itself, one constituted through the body and the senses as much as through the written record, and one that must be reconstituted—and reinterpreted—long after the fact.

An Expanded Archive of Eating

It has long been a basic tenet of food studies scholarship that, as Roland Barthes has averred, “information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found” (24). And for at least as long, it has been the ground truth of early American literary studies, the primary disciplinary field in which I place this work, that information about that era is similarly diffuse.¹² As a locus classicus for the cultural heritage industry in the United States, the nation’s first decades, in particular, often seem overstudied. As evidence of this claim, one need look no further than the regular churn of best-selling biographies of the “founding fathers,” Washington among them. Yet these well-known histories rest on many unknown ones, to which scholars have only (relatively) recently begun to attend. Household inventories, receipt books, shipping logs, and even relatively rich texts such as Washington’s response to Hercules’s escape, remain what Susan Scott Parrish describes as “underdetermined” documents, most often scanned for contextual information, and rarely plumbed for their depths (265).¹³ Yet for scholars of the early United States, and of early America more broadly conceived, these fragments constitute our primary texts; there are rarely others that can provide a narrative frame. Thus, like the archive of eating, the archive of the early United States is an archive of necessity. It is one that, to paraphrase Barthes, consists of any and all documents that can be found. Aside from the handful of texts that, over time, have been elevated to the level of canon—and, in the case of certain records of the nation’s founding, encased in bulletproof glass—this archive is similarly comprised of texts otherwise set to the side.

Consider the sources that contribute to the account of Hercules that I have just provided: a series of reminiscences by George Washington’s grandson, first published in a Washington, D.C., newspaper and only later collected, expanded, and reprinted as a book; a letter from an otherwise unmemorable single-term congressman describing a dinner with

the president, made accessible to the public only when it was printed in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* in 1884; and another nineteenth-century account, a biography of Martha Washington, authored by a woman, Margaret Conkling, about whom little is known.¹⁴ None of these sources center on Hercules, for neither his life experience nor his cooking was considered a valid subject of scholarship in his own time. But rethinking the archival status of eating allows us to infuse new meaning into these records, and others like them, more than two centuries after the meals that they reference were cleared from the tables on which they were served.

Of course, information about eating can be gleaned from other sources as well. In addition to narratives and letters, relevant information is embedded in recipes and cookbooks, and sometimes *on* them, as food spots and cooking stains often endure longer than ink. Information about eating can also be found in farmers' almanacs and seed catalogs, receipts for purchases and packing lists, as well as in the flavors and histories of the foodstuffs themselves.¹⁵ The taste of a heritage grain, for example, can signal the agricultural environment that gave rise to it, and in some cases point more precisely to the knowledge and labor of those who cultivated it over generations, allowing it to achieve its most flavorful form.¹⁶ The path of a particular foodstuff, like squash or okra, which traveled from Africa to North America via the Caribbean, can also point to the peoples who brought it with them, and who brought it to new life in new locales.¹⁷ The "elegant" presentation of Hercules's fresh-caught shad can indicate the taste preferences of both the people who prepared the dish, and the people who consumed it.¹⁸ Yet these details are insufficient on their own; they function as placeholders for the stories we yearn to hear, but cannot be told without significant scholarly intervention. Their original richness, which today might be documented through a single Instagram shot, an episode of a cooking show, or an entry on a food blog, can only be approximated through the partial accounts that remain.¹⁹

In assembling the accounts that serve as the basis for this book, I also aim to illustrate how the archive of eating is best constituted by a heterogeneous set of documents and sources, and read through a commensurately heterogeneous set of interpretive techniques. These span from more familiar methods of close reading and historical synthesis to more speculative methods for theorizing and even visualizing large amounts of text. I will elaborate on this mixed methodology in the pages to come.

Here, the key point is that I place these methods alongside each other not in spite of their differences, but precisely because of them. This approach is one that, I believe, will allow scholars who seek to study food and eating in the early United States, as in all eras conscribed to the past, to go beyond gathering “information” about their objects of study, as Barthes first proposed, so as to imbue those objects with additional richness and depth.²⁰

This mixture of methods is essential to assembling the archive that I rely upon for evidence of my historical claims, as well as for my theorization of the concept of an expanded archive of eating. This expanded archive is one that must be first constituted by a range of sources “gathered” together and then reconstituted by each scholar through their own critical and creative processes. For the knowledge that is conveyed through this expanded archive is significant both for how it augments our overall understanding of the early United States and for how it offers additional insight into the individual lives of those, such as Hercules, who conceived and executed each dish that is documented therein.

“One man’s meat is another man’s poison,” as the saying goes, and it is hard to disagree: individual tastes and preferences are the result of a complex set of physiological, psychological, and social factors that are often difficult to disentangle, let alone document on the page. Grant Achatz, the pioneering molecular gastronomist and executive chef at Alinea, the Michelin three-star restaurant in Chicago, is not the first to observe that “flavor is memory”; one need only recall the tea-soaked madeleine that begins Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*; or, as a more recent example, the transcendent spoonful of ratatouille in the eponymous Disney/Pixar film that at last restores the jaded food critic’s childhood love of food (qtd. in Max, 91; Proust, 48). One might reference any number of additional examples that cut across literary and popular culture, but the connections between the sense of taste and the stories it evokes are not limited to the imagination alone. A recent brain-imaging study compared the neurological response during the act of eating to what happens when the flavor of that particular food is only recalled: the two experiences are visually indistinguishable (Max, 91).²¹ Physiology, psychology, and evidently neurology, all contribute to our understanding of the imaginative richness of the sense of taste.

The results of this particular brain-imaging study, or of anyone’s personal Proustian madeleine, do not suggest that the sense of taste is wholly cerebral, however. A person’s taste for certain foods and his or her mem-

ories of them are also influenced by social and economic factors, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown: “The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form,” he explains, “corresponds to the opposition—linked to different distances from necessity—between the taste of necessity, which favors the most ‘filling’ and most economic foods, and the taste of liberty—or luxury—which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presentation, serving, eating etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function” (xxix). We truly are what we eat, not only in terms of individual identity, but also in terms of socioeconomic status. Our sense of taste thus reveals and reflects how circumstances outside of our control also shape our sense of who we are. For this reason, as well, it becomes a scholarly imperative to look beyond the standard places we might expect to find information about eating. To elaborate upon Barthes’s opening claim: information about food must indeed be gathered wherever it can be found. But it is only by bringing together this full range of information—as well as the information that resists recovery—that we can get our fullest sense, so to speak, of the matter of taste.

The Philosophical Significance of the Sense of Taste

The complex synthesis of the sensory, the cerebral, and the social that is engaged each time we take a bite of food and then determine whether or not we like it was intuited by countless thinkers, as well as home cooks, long before it was proven by either sociology or neuroscience. But how is it that the descriptor of this synthesis—that is, the sense of taste—has come to serve as the primary metaphor used to describe a much wider range of processes for passing judgment on art and other forms of culture?

For example, we might praise a friend for having “good taste” in food or in fashion; or a newspaper article might credit an internet “taste-maker” with popularizing a new restaurant or nightspot. In these cases, the term “taste” serves as shorthand for the more abstract concept of aesthetic judgment, the ability to assess an object’s artistic or cultural merit according to an unspecified set of subjective standards and objective rules. One might assume that the casual term supplanted the more formal one, as is often the case with philosophical jargon. But that assumption would be incorrect. In fact, the idea of “aesthetic judgment” has a surprisingly short history in relation to the much longer lineage of taste. In the Western philosophical tradition, this lineage can be traced as far

back as the fifteenth century, but, as Carolyn Korsmeyer has documented, “it was in the seventeenth century that the usage” of taste to describe what we now describe as aesthetic judgment began to “spread” (41). And while the notion of aesthetic judgment would soon supplant the metaphor of taste as the primary philosophical model of what is sometimes also described as “evaluative assessment,” there exists a distinct period of time, coincident with the long eighteenth century, during which taste provides “the chief analogy by which the apprehension of the beautiful and of fine artistic qualities and even social style is explicated” (40).

Indeed, the eighteenth century has been called the “Century of Taste,” and those who lived in North America in the late colonial era and into the early republic discussed matters of taste in abundance.²² Edward Cahill has demonstrated how such discussions “permeated [the] literary culture” of the early United States (2). And yet, they, too, employed only the metaphor of the sense of taste in order to do so. The word “aesthetic” as a “rubric for philosophical questions of taste had no currency in English until the nineteenth century,” Cahill states (3). It was not until 1750, when the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten appropriated the word “aesthetic,” which had previously been employed to describe sensation in general, to refer to the study of subjective experience and judgment, that the term acquired anything like its current meaning.²³ It would then take several more decades—well into the nineteenth century—for the word to attain widespread usage in English in any form.²⁴ Cahill dates the first use of the term in the United States to an 1812–13 essay on fine arts published in *The Halcyon Luminary*, a literary magazine (33). And as late as 1849, nearly a century after Baumgarten’s initial formulation, American intellectuals such as Elizabeth Palmer Peabody puzzled over the precise meaning of “this vague, this comprehensive, but undefined word” (1). Instead, U.S. citizens continued to employ the metaphor of the sense of taste—the actual, gustatory sense—through which to formulate and articulate their ideas about how aesthetic judgments were made.

In order to fully understand the social and political valences of this term as it was taken up in the early United States, it is important to consider the developments in the philosophical discourse of taste that had transpired in England and Scotland over the previous century. These developments began in London, in 1711, with the publication of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics of Men*,

Manners, Opinions, Times. Almost immediately engaged by the English cultural critics Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in the pages of their journal, the *Spectator* (ca. 1712), these ideas soon traveled to Scotland through the work of Francis Hutcheson, whose *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) engaged the thinking of that original group in a more formal philosophical register. One generation later, in the early 1750s, the Scottish moral sense philosophers—a group that included David Hume and Henry Home, Lord Kames, among other notables—extended the ideas expressed in those early works into a set of fully formed theories of taste. To these thinkers, the metaphor of taste seemed to offer the most compelling conceptual model of how we process our every encounter with the world: each single experience, aesthetic or otherwise, is first registered through the senses; and then, and only then, is it evaluated by the mind.²⁵

The evaluative nature of this process of passing judgment was important to the moral sense philosophers for two key reasons. First, it pointed to the existence of an innate sense that guided individuals in their subjective judgments; and second, it suggested how that sense could be cultivated and refined.²⁶ Each of the famed philosophers named above identified a close correspondence between the process of cultivating a taste for certain foods and cultivating a taste for various forms of culture. They recognized how, in both contexts, individuals possess an innate sense of their likes and dislikes, and yet they also possess the ability to shape their tastes according to additional external social and cultural standards. These external standards, in turn, can be—and, as Bourdieu would later claim, are in fact—internalized and assimilated back into that internal sense.

This model of an instinctual sense of taste nevertheless influenced by external factors was embraced by another influential group of thinkers: those who plotted the political structure of the fledgling U.S. government. For in spite of their theoretical belief in the value of representative democracy, these men—Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin chief among them—were deeply concerned about the true capacity of U.S. citizens to make their own political decisions. What if, they worried, the people who had fought to secure their freedom from monarchical rule could not be trusted, in the end, to govern the new democracy? Could they be counted on to vote on behalf of the public good? Could they be expected to behave with benevolence and virtue? In

these regards, the possibility that each person's sense of taste could be refined offered a degree of reassurance; with the proper guidance, even the least "civilized" of the nation's citizenry could perhaps be cultivated so as to perform their civic duties in a morally appropriate manner.²⁷

This view represented no vague aspiration. The founders were quite clear, following the moral sense philosophers, in their belief that the capacity for making tasteful decisions about the arts had a direct and causal relation to the capacity for passing moral judgments.²⁸ For instance, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Kames in 1762, a few months after his *Elements of Criticism* was published: "I am convinc'd of your Position, new as it was to me, that a good Taste in the Arts contributes to the Improvement of Morals" (*Papers*, 10:147).²⁹ This aspect of Scottish Enlightenment thought has long been recognized as foundational to the notion of "civic virtue" that undergirds American democracy; but the idea at the heart of this thinking, which is rooted in the act of eating, has yet to be sufficiently acknowledged or explored.³⁰ By reasserting the connection between good taste and good citizenship—a connection that has always existed, yet has remained overlooked—we can expand our own sense, in the present, of the people who exemplified this tasteful citizenship.

Independent of politics, the good taste of the "founders" has in fact long been established. Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison, along with Washington, are often among the first names invoked in accounts of the emergence of an American cuisine: Franklin for his obsession with turkey (among a multitude of culinary pleasures); Jefferson for his reputation as a great gastronome; and Madison for his legitimate horticultural skill (he was once observed in retirement, at work in his garden, "wearing Pantaloon's patched at the knees") (qtd. in Ketchum, 621).³¹ But a new understanding of eating as equal to the "Arts" that contributed to the cultivation of civic virtue does more than breathe new life into these dusty anecdotes; it expands the basic story we are able to tell about the nation's founding by incorporating the contributions of those directly responsible for preparing and presenting the food that the founders ate. More specifically, it reveals how figures such as Hercules, along with James Hemings, Jefferson's enslaved cook (and Sally Hemings's older brother), whom we will meet in chapter 1, along with many others whose culinary lives and legacies are explored in this book, directly contributed to the cultural foundation of the United States alongside the founders and their abstracted ideals.

Impossibility and Necessity in the Archive of Eating

Hercules worked with twenty-three other men and women in the President's House, eight of whom were, like Hercules, enslaved. But aside from a few biographical details, such as first names, job titles, and (only in some cases) dates of birth and death, little else is known about the nature of the men and women's lives.³² For unlike figures such as Washington, whose contributions are recorded in the nation's most valorized documents, the records of those who labored at their tables, in their kitchens, and in their fields, are far more difficult to assemble—if they exist at all. Theirs is an archive “predicated upon impossibility,” to invoke Saidiya Hartman's description of the records that constitute the archive of slavery as a whole (“Venus,” 2). Hartman characterizes her own efforts to animate this archive as a composite process: “Listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives” (2). Throughout, she remains “intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved” (2–3). As Hartman observes, “redressing the violence” of the archive of slavery is a fundamentally “impossible” task. But in the years since her foundational work, scholars of Atlantic-world slavery have sought to develop new critical methods that can allow us to come closer to, if not to ever fully access, the ghostly lives of the enslaved.³³ Hartman's own method of “critical fabulation,” for example, involves an interweaving of archival information with fictionalized narrative, enabling her to “mime[] the figurative dimensions of history” (“Venus,” 11). More recently, Marisa Fuentes, in her study of the enslaved women of eighteenth-century Barbados, describes a related method of “reading along the bias grain” of archival fragments so as to “create more elasticity” within them, thereby expanding their scholarly significance (78).

Called by these methods, both ethically and intellectually, *An Archive of Taste* in turn calls upon fellow scholars of food studies, and of the early United States, to consider how our work might be similarly enriched by a renewed attention to the gaps in our archives, and, in particular, to the gaps left by unrecorded acts of eating, and the voices of those who, often through the conscripted preparation and presentation of food, made those acts possible. In this book I consider how an assemblage of critical and creative methods, including the interpretive techniques most familiar

to scholars of early American literature and culture, such as close reading and historical synthesis, as well as several more speculative methods, including a version of Fuentes's technique of reading "along the bias grain," might be trained on the fragments that constitute the expanded archive of eating. These speculative methods also include a set of computational techniques for analyzing and visualizing large amounts of text, as I discuss in chapter 5. When employed together, this range of methods works to expand the significance of the archival fragments and the gaps between them—gaps that, in spite of any amount of elasticity, we cannot hope to ever fully close.

The unanswered questions left by these gaps help to underscore how the archive that enables arguments about the importance of food and eating in the early United States intersects, both materially and conceptually, with the archive that enables arguments about the violence of slavery and its aftermath in the present. Each is an archive of necessity, constituted by an incomplete set of artifacts that can never offer full access to the lived experience of the past. Each is also an archive of necessity in that, in its incompleteness, it cannot but reify the social and political hierarchies of the era in which it was first compiled.³⁴ For this reason, these archives require careful and creative approaches to the information they do contain. Because these archives, however incomplete, are also necessary; they are what enable us to identify—in kitchens and at tables, on plantations and in stores—new forms of cultural expression. And from these forms we can develop new theories of their significance for how we understand ideas about aesthetics, agency, and the human itself.

In the chapters that follow, I draw from these intersecting archives of necessity in order to explore how food came to matter in the early United States. The chapters proceed in roughly chronological order, although each reaches backward to the eighteenth-century origins of the discourse of taste that forms the book's philosophical basis, while also engaging texts through the mid-nineteenth century. Because of this spiraling progression, I have chosen to center each chapter not on a particular period or text, but instead on a particular aspect of eating, one that gains additional theoretical significance when considered in the context of the dominant discourse of taste. I thus explore matters of taste, as well as matters of embodiment, satisfaction, imagination, and absence. In each chapter, I elaborate upon one of these matters in order to challenge the assumptions embedded in the dominant discourse of taste in important

ways. In the process, I also elaborate a set of methods for drawing knowledge from incomplete archives, disclosing additional information about the food culture of the early United States.

To these intertwined theoretical and methodological ends, the first chapter, “Taste,” is set at the table, specifically the dinner table of Thomas Jefferson as it was apportioned by his enslaved chef, James Hemings. The chapter explores how Jefferson employed the table as a literal and figurative platform for his republican political ideology. I demonstrate how, as I have begun to explore, in the late colonial era and into the early republic America’s cultural and political leaders—Jefferson among them—identified a causal relation between the cultivation of the American palate and the cultivation of a democratic citizenry. But because these men relied upon their enslaved chefs and servants to enact their vision, what they encouraged was not a furthering of their enforced hierarchy of racial difference, as they so strongly desired, but, instead, a performance of republican citizenship that was made possible as much through the lived experience and culinary expertise of figures such as Hemings as by any political expression of the founders’ sense of taste. Chapter 1 thus carries an argument about the archive of the early United States, as well as about the politics of that archive. To this latter end, I employ mediated documents such as the emancipation agreement requested by Hemings, but signed only by Jefferson and his white *maitre d’hôtel*, and the firsthand account of Paul Jennings, the federal pension office clerk who was once enslaved by James Madison and served as his valet. Jennings’s account, which was recorded by a white amanuensis “almost in his own language,” enables me to confirm who was directly responsible for the production of republican taste (iii).

Chapter 2, “Appetite,” centers on two great gourmands: the French food writer Alexandre Balthazar Grimod de la Reynière and the American polymath Benjamin Franklin. These men help to show how an attention to the eating body confirms the functional limits of both the sense of taste and its aesthetic and political applications. Franklin serves as my primary example of the contradictory ideological uses of the discourse of taste. But Franklin, unlike Jefferson or Madison, remains more aware of his failures to subject his appetite to reason, even as he still cannot connect those personal failures to his more profound failure to take a strong political stance against slavery. This lack of connection is not coincidental, I contend. Rather, it confirms the limits of a political philosophy that

rests on an unstable human base. To supplement my argument about the limits of the sense of taste as a guiding political force, I turn from Franklin to Grimod, the flamboyant French epicure, and then to an additional figure, Phillis Wheatley, the enslaved African American poet. I argue that their literary works, produced in full knowledge of how their bodies—marked by disability in the case of Grimod and race in the case of Wheatley—were excluded from the dominant Enlightenment project, offer stronger indictments of the sense of taste than do Franklin’s satirical musings. I also show how they issue critiques of the narrowness of what I term the *tasteful subject*. This is a subject who exemplifies good taste to the highest degree. By directly engaging with the irrepressible force of appetite, as it alternately compels and conscripts, Grimod and Wheatley help to reconfigure the idea of this tasteful subject, with broader implications for the Enlightenment subject more generally conceived.

Chapter 3, “Satisfaction,” takes as its point of departure Malinda Russell’s *A Domestic Cookbook* (1866), discovered only in the past decade and now recognized as the earliest known cookbook written by an African American cook of any gender. The introduction to that volume weaves together information about Russell’s culinary training with an account of an armed robbery that she experienced en route to Liberia many years before. Connecting Russell’s cookbook to its culinary antecedents—Amelia Simmons’s *American Cookery* (1796) and Mary Randolph’s *The Virginia House-Wife* (1824)—I consider how cookbooks can be read as narratives, narratives can be read as cookbooks, and how both can be read as aesthetic theory. I argue that before the word “aesthetic” achieved widespread use, any attempt to make sense of taste entailed the adoption of a speculative philosophical mode. I employ the term “speculation” in its basic sense: exploratory and provisional, enabling a capacious understanding of what theory entails. By proposing a speculative approach to the theory of taste, I demonstrate how a range of generic modes, including cookbooks, might be understood for the theoretical work that they perform. Through these works, I elaborate an alternative theory of aesthetics that, in focusing on the satisfaction of others rather than the gratification of personal taste, exposes the practical limits of republican taste. This theory opens up additional possibilities for expressing personal agency that reside in the economic rather than the political sphere. While this sense of satisfaction closely tracks the emergence of liberal capitalism

and the role that black citizens would play in it, it also points to an additional revolutionary register, one at that point fully imagined but not yet achieved.

In chapter 4, “Imagination,” I analyze several more demonstrably literary works written as the pressure to abolish slavery continued to mount. More specifically, I compare the works of Harriet Jacobs, the author and formerly enslaved woman, and of Lydia Maria Child, the author, abolitionist, and editor of Jacobs’s work. Jacobs’s characterization, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), of the man who enslaves her as an “epicure,” sets the stage for the comparison with Child, who, in addition to her antislavery fiction, nonfiction writing, and editorial work, also wrote a best-selling cookbook. Child’s explicit endorsement of the interdependence of eating and aesthetics, and her belief in how both of these informed political opinion, prompt a closer consideration of the imagined space of nineteenth-century social reform (Jacobs, 12). From this perspective, Jacobs’s *Incidents* acquires as-yet-unacknowledged significance for its exploration of the limits of both taste and fiction. In markedly different ways, Jacobs and Child reimagine past events and envision possible futures. By considering the range of registers through which eating operates for each writer—as sensory experience, as embodied aesthetics, and as social act—I show how we can see the hopeful futures imagined in abolitionist fiction, even as we acknowledge the potential worlds that, because of diminished social or political agency, dispossession, or enslavement, remained out of reach, regardless of the defiance with which they were imagined.

The final chapter, “Absence,” returns to the story of James Hemings, first explored in chapter 1, in order to show how a set of computational methods—in particular, social network analysis and data visualization—offer additional possibilities for addressing the absences in the intersecting archives of slavery and of eating. I also describe how the demands of these archives pose productive challenges to the archive of the United States overall. A contrast between a set of data visualizations of Hemings’s archival trace with Jefferson’s own charts and tables demonstrates how we must tread carefully when continuing to employ interpretive methods rooted in Enlightenment philosophy. For the underlying premise of the dominant discourse of taste—that what can be sensed can always be known—does not account for the experiences that, either by nature or by intent, resist knowing altogether. In this chapter, the connections that are

forged between past and present are intended to prompt readers to consider the ways in which matters of taste can cross multiple disciplinary registers and temporal zones.

The Epilogue reinforces the central role of enslaved cooks in producing republican taste by considering a final archival fragment associated with Hercules, whose “first shad of the season” began this Introduction. More specifically, I consider the portrait that graces the cover of this book and that, until recently, was believed to be of Hercules.³⁵ I explore how, in contrast to formal philosophies enshrined in print, vernacular expressions of taste continue to resist preservation and circulation. This remains true even with the advent of digital techniques, and here I refer not only to more sophisticated techniques of computational analysis employed in chapter 5, but also more basic methods of online research. After a discussion of how the portrait of Hercules entered the contemporary imagination via digitization and then, as a result of its deauthentication, disappeared from the digital archive in which it was housed, I consider a second portrait that has recently captivated the public imagination: *Scipio Moorhead, Portrait of Himself, 1776*, painted by Kerry James Marshall in 2007. (Scipio Moorhead was the enslaved black artist who is credited with creating the frontispiece for Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, discussed in chapter 2.) I posit Marshall’s portrait as a visual analogue of Hartman’s aforementioned method of critical fabulation, as well as of the methods that I discuss and demonstrate throughout this book.

Indeed, the issue of gaps in the archive—in the archive of eating, in the archive of slavery, and in other archives of necessity—is one that persists into the present, even as increasing amounts of archival material are being digitized and made available online. Marshall’s fabulated portrait, Russell’s tantalizing cookbook, Grimod’s performative dinners, and Hemings’s artful cookery, among the other acts of cooking and eating that are explored in this book, join Hercules’s fresh fish in revealing the richness of the archive of eating, as well as the range of methods that are required to coax flavor from the fragments that the archive contains. These methods might be visual as much as textual, created with an artist’s brush as much as keyboard or a line of code. And it is together that they are able to elicit knowledge about the persons, communities, and cultures that would otherwise recede from view.