

7-12-2017

## Food in the Gilded Age: What Ordinary Americans Ate

Sarah Kantor

*Kennesaw State University*, [skantor1@kennesaw.edu](mailto:skantor1@kennesaw.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kantor, Sarah (2017) "Food in the Gilded Age: What Ordinary Americans Ate," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 65 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol65/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Southeastern Librarian by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

paternalism and segregation were the best ways to keep the peace. Separate accommodations sadly became the rallying cry of the white women--and black women along with them. \*(see below)

Yet, by the summer of 1920 when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote, the tables would turn as Brooks points out black women's right to vote meant no longer were segregation and paternalism appealing to these women. Brooks reminds us that women could go to the polls and vote for a candidate whom they believed would eliminate or greatly alter the Jim Crow laws.

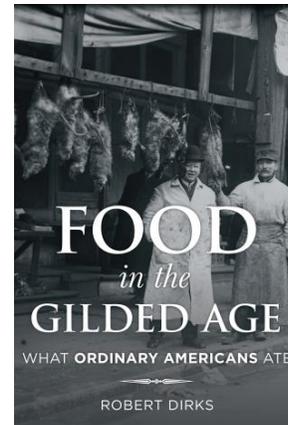
Brooks gives many examples of the women and men who struggled through the years of 1910 to 1930 to understand Jim Crow laws and to reject "separatism" and lack of social voice in Virginia. With interviews and archival sources, Brooks recounts the struggles in the State of Virginia for the progressive social goals that were first hoped might be achieved.

A good resource for academic libraries, women's studies faculty and students and archival collections on Jim Crow laws. I recommend this 213 page text with its 20 black and white illustrations and portraits, Notes 215 to 247, Bibliography 247 to 263 and Index 263 to 271.

\*FYI: In Virginia, the South, and some northern states, *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)*, both confirmed the status quo and gave impetus to even more rigid segregation laws. Blacks had to sit at the back of streetcars or stand if there were not enough seats for whites. They were made to sit at separate sections of theaters, libraries, and train stations. They could not use water fountains, bathrooms, beaches or swimming pools used by whites. They could only order takeout food from restaurants that served whites. They attended separate, usually ramshackle schools. Social life and everything from sports teams to funeral parlors were segregated. [www.virginiahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.virginiahistoricalsociety.org)

Carol Walker Jordan  
University of North Carolina Greensboro

**Food in the Gilded Age: What Ordinary Americans Ate.** Robert Dirks. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. ISBN 978-1-4422-4513-6 (hardcover), 978-1-4422-4514-3 (ebook). 209 pages. \$38.00 (hardcover), \$37.99 (ebook).



The Gilded Age is best known for the deep divide between the rich and the poor, a time when the rich became richer and conspicuous consumption reached new peaks. Interest in the era has grown in recent years, much of it centered on the era's heiresses and their social lives. Less attention is given to the rest of the country, particularly the millions of people living in poverty. Poor and working-class people, unlike industrialists, did not leave a lasting legacy, and are often remembered only through the works of Jacob Riis, Upton Sinclair, and other muckrakers.

In *Food in the Gilded Age*, Dirks mostly ignores the upper-classes to focus on the poor, both immigrant and native-born, and the rising middle classes, studying their lives through the food they ate. By using studies conducted by chemists for the USDA's Office of Experiment Stations, Dirks gives us an intriguing meta-analysis of what items were eaten, and how often. Dirks and his predecessors in the OES are less concerned with how a food was eaten, leaving that to the culinary historians, but focuses on the frequency with which food items were consumed by different groups across the country. Modern readers are able to get a better sense of the seasonality of food (chapter 4), as well as the limited food options for all classes.

*Food in the Gilded Age* differs from other studies of the era with each chapter focusing on different regions and ethnic groups across the country, nearly all of them poor. Dirks studies the dietaries of Mexican Americans in New Mexico, African Americans across the country, European immigrants in the Midwest and Chinese immigrants in California, and the Scotch-Irish in Appalachia. Whenever possible, he compares different economic classes within ethnic groups, as in chapter 2 when he contrasts African Americans living in Alabama on tenant farms, in Northeastern metropolitan areas, and attending college in

Pennsylvania. This chapter, more than perhaps any other, shows Dirks's expertise in nutritional history; Dirks has spent much of his career studying the eating habits of African Americans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

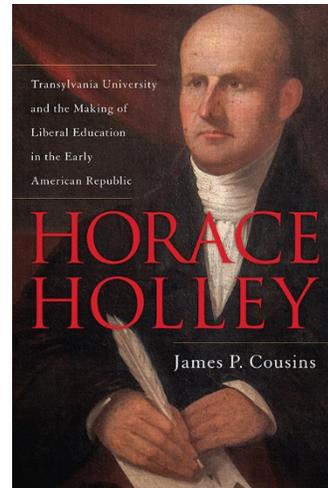
More than simply cataloging the eating habits of the different groups and regions studied, Dirks invites comparisons between the food consumption of the nineteenth century and the modern day. Chapter 2 focuses on the dietaries of poor and middle-class Appalachians, with particular attention paid to the impoverished populations of eastern Tennessee and northeast Georgia. Dirks juxtaposes the backwoods diets with those of people living in small cities, as well as with students attending the Universities of Tennessee and Georgia. This comparison translates to the modern day nutrition transitions occurring in China and other developing countries. Chapter 6 also allows contrasts Gilded Age priorities with the present, by examining dietaries from colleges across the country. Although most dietaries tracking the food consumed by institutions, rather than families, focuses on groups of single men (such as the Chinese and French Canadian laborers also studied in the chapter), Dirks is able to include significant data from women's colleges. This section is the only one in the book where Dirks examines why certain foods were chosen, beyond accessibility and cost. This is the only time that middle class eating habits are studied in depth, providing contrast to the poor and working-class diets profiled throughout the rest of the book.

Despite the title, *Food in the Gilded Age* extends into the Progressive Era; the majority of the OES studies date from the late 1890-1910. Dirks mostly ignores the Progressive Era and how reforms like the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 affected the food consumption. By limiting his book to a meta-analysis of government and university studies, however, we can see that people in general were aware of concerns about food purity and freshness by the foods they chose to buy.

*Food in the Gilded Age* is a welcome addition to the trend of food-based microhistories. Unlike so many others in the genre, Dirks's book focuses on the people eating the food, rather than the food being eaten, without veering into creative nonfiction. He helps to fill in the image of the poor and working class in late nineteenth century American, and even includes recipes for the foods eaten by the populations in each chapter, ranging from soups to roast possum. It is an excellent addition to any academic American history collection, where both readers across disciplines will find it a quick and interesting read.

*Sarah Kantor*  
Kennesaw State University

**Horace Holley: Transylvania University and the Making of Liberal Education in the Early American Republic.** James P. Cousins. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016. ISBN 978-0-8131-6857-9 (cloth); 978-0-8131-6859-3 (epub). 322 p. \$50.



In the Introduction to James P. Cousins' biography of Horace Holley, the stage is set for an emotional re-enactment of the visit of General Marquis de Lafayette to Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, on May 17, 1825.

Presiding at the event was President Horace Holley, a beloved and highly regarded academician whose speech on that day exhibited a love of history, tradition, and intellectual fervor. Compared "to rhetoric one might expect of Pericles" (p. 1). Holley addressed General Lafayette, "Your presence is making impressions upon the ardent and ingenuous minds of the young men around you, which they will never forget. They and their children will dwell upon the recollection as a most interesting era, and will, should duty call, shed the last drop of their blood, defending the cause for which Washington and Lafayette hazarded all they held dear: wealth, freedom, life, and fame" (p.1).

The research collected by Cousins paints rich pictures of the life of a college president in the emerging, traditional small town of Lexington, Kentucky. The stories of his family and friends, particularly his wife, Mary, reflect two sides of the challenges and successes throughout Holley's academic life. While he brought fame and fortune to Transylvania University, he became the focal point of criticism from traditional legislators and others who did not believe in his "liberal education" focus for the university. Traditionally educated in the Northeast at Williams College and Yale University, Holley was steeped in their classical curricula and a firm believer in the training of citizens for public life.