



## **Program Bulletin: Food and Dining Culture at Michilimackinac**

### **Program Overview**

This program will explain the food systems of a French Canadian merchant's household at Michilimackinac during the 1770s. The program includes the history of the fort, how food was procured, who cooked, as well as the actual food that may have been eaten based on documents and archaeological evidence.

### **Food Basics**

When the fort was established around 1715, most food, aside from a few items like fish and corn, was shipped in from other places, including continental Europe. Food thus existed as part of the larger global business and trade market. Flour for bread, dried peas, and salted meats regularly made the journey by boat to Michilimackinac from distant depots. As more Europeans settled at Michilimackinac, some of the civilians, largely fur traders, developed small backyard gardens and some small-scale fields outside the fort. They brought chickens, sheep, and hogs, and produced some food locally, while continuing to rely heavily on imported products. Luxury goods like chocolate, wine, sugar, and dried fruits made their way in the canoes to Michilimackinac along with the more standard food items. Once the British took control in 1761, this trend continued, largely unchanged, aside from the easier access to products from England and its colonies.

### **Food Culture**

Most people sat down to a large meal with multiple courses at lunch and smaller meals at breakfast and in the evening. Much of the work that went into preparing meals was the responsibility of the wife or mother of the household. She may have given direction to or worked with the assistance of children, a paid servant, or an enslaved domestic worker. Especially in a middle class or upper middle-class household, it is likely that the woman or man of the house was not the one preparing meals alone.

All of the French-identifying residents and travelers at Michilimackinac were at least nominally Catholic. According to the church calendar, there were over 130 days per year during which observant Catholics were to abstain from meat. On these meatless days the faithful consumed protein in the form of fish, eggs, cheese and legumes. They also had access to anything that could travel by canoe. Pantry items regularly were shipped in with the occasional fresh produce, especially items like onions, that could travel a week or two without spoiling. Bread, baked either in the home or in a communal oven, was ubiquitous, and everyone consumed large amounts of bread on a daily basis.

Many plates and forks have been excavated at Michilimackinac since archaeological excavations of the site began in 1959. This evidence reminds us that the historic residents were regularly eating foods that were not soups or stews. While those items were occasionally served, they were by no means the only things prepared for the merchants of Michilimackinac. A variety of savory pies, omelets, roast pigeon, or boiled fish were regularly consumed throughout the community.

## Food Preparation

There have been no separate kitchens found at Michilimackinac. Most food preparation was done in the home fireplace. Large-scale baking of the ever-present bread could have been done in ovens located outside the fort walls. Households typically baked once every week and made enough to last until the next baking day. Each adult usually consumed 0.5 to 2 pounds of bread a day. Bread could be eaten on its own or used as an ingredient.

The fireplace and hearth allowed many things to be cooked at the same time. Items that needed slow and low heat were tucked into a corner and covered in ash to prevent burning, while foods that needed a boil or high heat could be placed on a crane over the fire or directly on top of a pile of coals. Without modern temperature gauges, cooks relied on acquired skills and experience to use the fireplace. For the most part, anything that can be cooked in a modern kitchen could be cooked in a well-equipped Michilimackinac fireplace.

