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## Barbecue as a Historical Looking Glass

Zach Myers

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Dr. Joe Sramek

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John Shelton Reed, a sociologist whose work focuses on the American South and barbecue, once said, “Southern barbecue is the closest thing we have in the U.S. to Europe’s wines or cheese; drive a hundred miles and the barbecue changes.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout its history, barbecue has continually evolved and changed depending on the new influences it encountered. American barbecue is the result of the cultural mixing of Native American, African enslaved, and European settlers as they interacted and intermixed within the Caribbean and the Continental United States, especially the American South. Through this essay, I will use the phenomenon of barbecue as a useful lens through which one can observe and understand the racial dynamics within both the US and the South itself. I will also prove that barbecue can even be seen as a metaphor of the South. Both are derived from multiple ethnic backgrounds, although both have also been historically defined as being created primarily by white, rural men.

The definition of “true” barbecue is something hotly debated across the South. Barbecue in the South can be defined by the wood used to produce the smoke during the barbecuing process, the speed at which the meat is cooked, the meat that is chosen, and/or the style and amount of barbecue sauce the pit master applies while cooking. Ultimately, the true definition of barbecue is vague because there are so many different regional disputes regarding the nature of barbecue. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of the word barbecue derives from the Spanish term “barbacoa,” which comes from the Taino, a native Caribbean tribe, term “barbacòa.” The editors of Oxford go on to debunk the first of many myths surrounding the beginnings of barbecue when they note that “the alleged French *barbe à queue*

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<sup>1</sup> John Shelton Reed, “Barbecue Sociology,” *Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue*, ed. Lolis Eric Elie (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 78.

‘beard to tail,’ is an absurd conjecture suggested merely by the sound of the word.”<sup>2</sup> Since its origin, barbecue has been influenced by the infusion of the multiple different cultural practices that would collide in what would become America and the etymology of the word is only the beginning.

The origins of barbecue are tied to the racial mixing that occurred during the Spanish incursions into the Americas. While the Spanish were certainly not looking for racial integration when they entered the Americas, cultural diffusion persisted. The first mention of barbecue in writing was by the explorer and writer Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo in 1547 when he described how the Native Americans he observed roasted “the flesh on sticks which they place in the ground, like a grating or trivet, over a pit. They call these *barbacoas*, and place fire beneath them.”<sup>3</sup> While this is the very first written observation of the native practice, it was certainly not the last. For one reason or another, the practice of roasting meat on a wooden frame above a fire was not unique to any certain native Caribbean or American people group. Figure 1 is a depiction of Native Americans barbecuing their fish, engraved in 1590 by Theodor de Bry. This same technique was adopted by the Spanish as a new way to prepare pork.

In 1698, Pere Labat, a Dominican monk traveling in French territories throughout the New World, describes the “boucan” of pigs and turtles in his work *Nouveau Voyages aux Isles de l’Amerique*. His descriptions of the grills that the natives used to roast their meat is very similar to the description provided by Oviedo and the image crafted by de Bry.<sup>4</sup> Labat goes on to describe the process of cooking a “boucan pig” as the pig being “laid open on its back, stomach

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<sup>2</sup> “Barbecue,” Oxford English Dictionary. accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15409?rskey=3ZG0sg&result=1&isAdvanced=false#contentWrapper>.

<sup>3</sup> Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, *Natural History of the West Indies*, trans. Sterling A. Stoudemire (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Pere Labat, *Memoirs of Père Labat, 1693-1705*, trans. John Eaden (London: Routledge, 1970), 45.

open, spread as much as possible, and held in this position by forks.” Labat also mentioned the cavity of the hogs as being filled with “lemon juice, salt, and hot chiles.”<sup>5</sup> Though Labat was a French observer in the French West Indies, hogs were not native to the Americas, so they must have been brought over by either French or Spanish explorers. French and Spanish buccaneers assimilated this style of cooking. This process eventually found its way to the Caribbean island of Jamaica, where they added allspice to the process to fashion their own unique style.<sup>6</sup> Bev Carvey, a native Jamaican and descendant of maroons herself, argues that the jerk pork found in Jamaica is a result of the culmination of escaped African maroons arriving in Jamaica with these new techniques, which they most likely learned from being enslaved by the Spanish or from French buccaneers.<sup>7</sup> It was here that barbecue found a similar cultural conglomeration as the one later created within the United States. Native American, African, Spanish, and French culture and activity all influenced the creation of an entirely unique cultural food.

The Spanish love for this Native American style of cooking pork can also be seen through their involvement on the North American continent. According to Don Harrison Doyle, a Professor of History at the University of South Carolina, when Hernán Cortés arrived in the lower Mississippi Valley, he encountered the Chickasaw people. In order to create an allegiance with this tribe, Cortez hosted feasts for the chief of the Chickasaw and his people, feeding them their first ever barbecued pork.<sup>8</sup> The Spanish continued to spread the foodways of the Native Americans they encountered, as can be seen through the cultural diffusion of these similar

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica B. Harris, “Caribbean Connection,” *Cornbread Nation* 2, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Bev Carvey, *The Maroon Story: The Authentic and Original History of the Maroons in the History of Jamaica, 1490-1880* (Agouti Press: Jamaica, 1997), 237.

<sup>8</sup> Don Harrison Doyle, *Faulkner's County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 27.

practices throughout time in parts of America where the Spanish had a considerable influence, such as Florida. In Florida and parts of the Carolinas, the barbecue sauce is still made with lemon and lime juice, as well as a heavy amount of hot peppers, just like Pere Labat described in the French Caribbean.<sup>9</sup> These practices originated with the Native American tribes that originally inhabited the Caribbean islands and coastal regions of North America, but they soon spread across the New World thanks to the infatuation of Spanish and French explorers with this new style of cooking.

It was not only the French and Spanish who appropriated the native barbecuing style and spread it across the United States. Once the English arrived in North America, many men began writing on the strange native foodways and some even adopted the practice themselves. In his *Natural History of North-Carolina*, John Brickell, visiting from his native Ireland, observed Native Americans using their *barbacoa* grills for turkey, fish and shellfish.<sup>10</sup> Later, Robert Beverley, born in Virginia in 1673, wrote about how the local tribes in Virginia would either broil their meat by leaving it on burning coals itself or barbecue it by leaving it high above the burning coals to cook slowly.<sup>11</sup> Beverley later wrote about his distaste for the style of cooking, noting that there is “nothing commendable in it, but that it is performed with little trouble.”<sup>12</sup> Beverley was not the only colonial who disapproved of barbecues. In his book, *Travels through the States of North America*, Isaac Weld, another Irish writer, described how English settlers would gather in large groups and roast whole hogs over open flame, though he said that

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass Opie, *Zora Neale Hurston on Florida Food: Recipes, Remedies & Simple Pleasures*, (Charleston: American Palate, a division of The History Press, 2015), 96.

<sup>10</sup> John Brickell, *The Natural History of North-Carolina* (Dublin, 1737), 340, Biodiversity Heritage Library, accessed November 23, 2017, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/61542#page/11/mode/1up>.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Beverley, *History of Virginia in Four Parts* (London, 1705), 138, Documenting the American South, accessed November 23, 2017, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/beverley/beverley.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

barbecues were “an entertainment chiefly confined to the lower ranks, and, like [most] others of the same nature, it generally ends in intoxication.”<sup>13</sup> Similar sentiments existed throughout barbecue’s early history in the continental United States, showing that not everyone was thrilled with barbecue’s rising popularity.

Though originally considered a poor man’s pastime, barbecue became increasingly popular throughout the English world. One of the first published cookbooks, Richard Bradley’s *The Country Housewife and Lady’s Director in the Management of a House, and the Delights and Profits of a Farm* (London, 1732), included a recipe for how to cut, spice, and barbecue a hog. There is a reference in the recipe that notes the barbecuing should take place in “Yard, or Garden with a Covering like a Tent over it.”<sup>14</sup> While the English soon became infatuated with barbecues, they also took root in the colonial south, where enslaved African brought their own cultural adaptations to the New World.

The contributions of African-Americans to barbecue during the era of enslavement can be tied to strongly to their dominance of the kitchen and Southern cuisine during that time. As cooks, enslaved men and women were in charge of preparing almost every meal on the plantation, so the food culture they brought from Africa was heavily influential on the development of Southern cuisine. One area where the influence of African culture on southern barbecue can be seen is through the spices used. While West and Central Africans did not have much of a tradition of barbecuing, Africans still brought their spice practices to the kitchen of

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<sup>13</sup> Isaac Weld, *Travels Through the States of North America, and the Provinces of the Upper and Lower Canada, During the Years of 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London: John Stockdale, Piccadilly, 1799, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 178, Archive.org, accessed October 9, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/travelsthroughst01weld>.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bradley, *The Country Housewife and Lady’s Director in the Management of a House, and the Delights and Profits of a Farm*, (London: D. Browne and T. Woodman, 1732, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.), Archives.org, accessed October 9, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/countryhousewife00brad>.

plantation homes. These spice practices were integrated into the everyday food of both slaves and whites. Soon, these African spices became central to the barbecue traditions around the South.<sup>15</sup> According to Wesley Jones of South Carolina, a former slave, it was his job to baste the meat that was barbecued all night with a sauce made up of “vinegar, black and red pepper, salt, butter, a little sage, coriander, basil, onion, and garlic.”<sup>16</sup> At least two of these ingredients, garlic and red pepper, can be traced back to having African origins.<sup>17</sup> Both of these spices are central to the process of barbecuing, used commonly in the rubs and sauces of barbecuing throughout its history.

Another way in which African-Americans made their impact on barbecue was through their mastery of the kitchen itself. As slaves, African-Americans were consistently expected to perform the dirty work of barbecuing, which included stoking and maintaining the fire throughout the night, applying sauces, and making side dishes. Some enslavers would force their enslaved men to barbecue a hog and their enslaved women to make the desserts for large Christmas meals.<sup>18</sup> Mose Davis of Georgia, another former slave, noted that the largest barbecues were usually thrown on the Fourth of July and Christmas.<sup>19</sup> Forced to cook for their white enslavers, African-Americans were able to effectively alter the entire southern white palate with their cultural adaptations to American dishes. Soon, the line between “slave” and “white”

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 542.

<sup>16</sup> *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*, 1936, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, accessed November 24, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn143/>.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Covey and Dwight Eisinger, *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2009) 41, <http://www.myilibrary.com?ID=253531>.

<sup>18</sup> *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*, to 1937, 1936, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr*, 1936, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn041/>.

foodways would be only discernible by the quality of ingredients. Slaves were given the cheapest, most difficult cuts of meat and vegetables, but they prepared them in the same general ways that they prepared food for whites. African-Americans were celebrated for their ability to rule the barbecue, though the credit for their recipes often went to their white enslaver. Barbecue soon became a sign of celebration for enslaved individuals. Annie Huff of Georgia described barbecues on the plantation from a slave's point of view when she said, "When the work was completed, the guests cooked chitterlings and made barbecue to be served with the usual ginger cake and persimmon beer. They then dressed in their colorful 'Sunday' garments, dyed with maple and dogwood bark, to engage in promenades, cotillions, etc., to the time of a quill instrument."<sup>20</sup> Barbecues continued to be seen as a means of celebration throughout African-American culture after enslavement.

Barbecue was just as important to early white Americans as it was for the men and women forced to prepare it. The figurehead of early America, George Washington, was as fond of these celebrations of red meat as anyone else. Throughout his diary, he mentions the various barbecues he attended throughout Virginia, including one he threw himself in Antioch, Virginia.<sup>21</sup> George Washington was certainly not the only American to write about barbecues, however. John James Audubon, a renowned painter and naturalist, described the picturesque scene of a Fourth of July barbecue in Kentucky in the early nineteenth century when he penned, "As the youth of Kentucky lightly and gaily advanced towards the Barbecue, they resembled a procession of nymphs and disguised divinities... it served to remind every Kentuckian present of

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<sup>20</sup> *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones, 1936, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn042/>.*

<sup>21</sup> Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, *The Diaries of George Washington, Vol. III 1771-75* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976).

the glorious name, the patriotism, the courage, and the virtue, of our immortal Washington.”<sup>22</sup>

Barbecues quickly developed into a staple of Southern culture and were the go-to event for celebrations of all kinds. One of the most intriguing aspect of Southern society before the Civil War in regards to race relations was the lack of separation between white and black life, namely their celebrations. The African-Americans within the South were forced to serve whites on nearly all occasions, especially during their holiday celebrations and festivals. This led to a tradition of barbecues as a means of celebration or holiday in both white and black cultures, though the way these barbecues were held and the foods served diverged over time.

It is obvious how Southerners adored barbecues and used them to celebrate the birth of America, but not everyone was a fan. Colonel Landon Carter of Virginia described the third barbecue of the year in 1772 and noted that he thought barbecues were expensive affairs.<sup>23</sup> William Richardson, visiting rural Virginia from his home city of Charleston, wrote to his wife that he witnessed “one lady devour a whole Hog head except the bones, don’t tell this to any of your squeamish C town ladies for they will not believe you...”<sup>24</sup> Both of these men wrote extensively on the barbecues of the South and found their own flaws. Colonel Carter believed that many of the people attending these barbecues were not paying the upfront fee to cover the amount of food given out. He feared that throwing these affairs too often would result in a large debt on the part of the Virginia elites. Richardson perceived barbecue to be an activity that should be reserved for the poor and not suitable for those with any class or sense. Both of these men stood opposed to the rise of America’s first cultural food creation.

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<sup>22</sup> John James Audubon, *Delinations of American Scenery and Character* (New York: G. A. Baker, 1926), 241-243.

<sup>23</sup> Landon Carter, *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1965), 722, 900.

<sup>24</sup> William Richardson and Emma Richardson, “Letters of William Richardson, 1765-1784,” *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 46 (January 1946): 6-7.

While slavery forced the races into an integration that fostered the development of this new foodway, segregation and Jim Crow laws following emancipation in the South slowly moved barbecues out of this union. On the plantations of the South, African-Americans were still expected to cook for the whites at their barbecues early on, but they were not allowed to interact with the guests. A *Harper's Weekly* article, appearing in print on October 24, 1896, refers to the African-American cooks as “negroes” and “darkies” throughout, reminding us that the racism that has plagued the South for centuries was just as integral a part of barbecue culture. Maude Andrews, the author of this article, goes as far as to refer to these African-American cooks as “darkies, gnawing barbecued bones on the outside, smack[ing] their lips in approbation...” This quote also helps to detail the segregation present at these barbecues. The African American cooks at these barbecues were forced to sit alone, far off from the thralls of white men and women, where they would sing and eat joyously. As they celebrated the delicious feast they had played such a large role in producing, the white men who had very little interaction with these cooks developed vain, assumed opinions about these.<sup>25</sup>

Across the South, newly freed African-Americans chose to throw their own barbecues as a celebration for the Emancipation Proclamation, known today as Juneteenth. Anderson Jones, a former slave, remarked that when they held Emancipation celebrations, whites and blacks from all around would come together for some barbecue.<sup>26</sup> Newly freed African-American men, who would invite both black and white speakers to these barbecues, threw very similar jubiliations during this time. Many of the white speakers defended slavery and white superiority, like J.A. Turner, a local plantation owner, who said in 1866, “your forefathers were savages like the wild Indian when they were brought to this country. Now, you, their descendants are civilized, and

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<sup>25</sup> Maude Andrews, “The Georgia Barbecue,” *Cornbread Nation* 2, 30-33.

<sup>26</sup> Robb Walsh, *Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook* (San Francisco: Chronical Books, 2002), 114-115.

intelligent, and all enjoy Church privileges. Had it not been for slavery you would now be savages in Africa.”<sup>27</sup> The ideas of white superiority and a savior complex that persisted throughout the South only increased as Jim Crow segregation spread throughout southern cities.

Instead of the unequal integration present during slavery, racial dynamics began to be defined by legalized separation. As the South became increasingly urbanized, white barbecue restaurants began to pop up and black barbecue began to be symbolized by the roadside BBQ stands.<sup>28</sup> Old habits proved to die hard across the South, as many of these white barbecue restaurants served white-only customers but had all-black cook staffs. One example of this was Leonard’s Barbecue in Memphis, Tennessee, which did not desegregate until the 1960’s.<sup>29</sup> According to Robert Moss, author of *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution*, “in interview after interview, black barbecue restaurateurs cite that the desire to not have to answer to anyone as a key reason why they went into the business.”<sup>30</sup> Many black employees were frustrated with the fact that despite doing most of the work in these barbecue restaurants, they were insufficiently compensated and disrespected. Bill and Geraldine Long raised money for two years, learning the craft of barbecue, until they could open their own establishment in Atlanta.<sup>31</sup> With the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, these black roadside stands soon began losing business. These men and women barbecued their hogs in the ground, which was not conducive to sanitary inspections.<sup>32</sup> Barbecue stands still existed across the South, but they were often unable to achieve the fame and success that many indoor, restaurant facilities obtained.

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<sup>27</sup> Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 100.

<sup>28</sup> Robb Walsh, “Texas Barbecue in Black and White,” *Cornbread Nation* 2, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Moss, *Barbecue*, 151.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Walsh, “Texas Barbecue,” 58.

Because of the racial divide present in these barbecue restaurants, the history of the development of barbecue began to become murky. With white men owning the vast majority of barbecue restaurants, they were the ones who received the national acclaim and fame. Therefore, the idea that barbecue was a conglomeration of Native American, African-American, and European settler food culture did not make sense to those who viewed it as a whites-only venture. One of the strangest myths to develop around the creation of Texas barbecue was the idea that “in the early days, a cattle owner, a Mr. Bernarby Quinn, used a branding iron with his initials B.Q., with a straight line under the B. He also served the best steaks for a hundred miles around. Thus the Bar-B-Q is synonymous with excellent cook-out foods.”<sup>33</sup> Some accepted the fact that there was a notion of barbecue before white men dominated it, but still applied their ideals of white superiority to the history. In 1940, the Texas Writers Project stated that barbecue did develop in a simple form before, but “wherever it came from, and whatever in the beginning may have been its recipes and customs, the barbecue fell into friendly hands when it met the pioneers who were settling in the Southwest.”<sup>34</sup> Because of this revisionist history, many whites began to feel like they rightfully owned barbecue and fought against any form of reintegration.

Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, there are multiple lesser-known legal battles that stemmed from barbecue restaurants and their refusal to integrate. One of these legal battles is titled *Katzenbach v. McClung*, which involved the owner of Ollie’s Barbecue in Birmingham, Alabama, suing to avoid integrating his establishment. While the majority of Ollie’s employees were African-American, they still only served black patrons through take-out. The owner of Ollie’s believed that if the restaurant began serving black customers, they would lose white

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<sup>33</sup> Walsh, “Texas Barbecue,” 53.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

business. After Ollie's lost their case in the Supreme Court, the restaurant finally obliged and chose to integrate.<sup>35</sup> In South Carolina, Maurice Bessinger refused to integrate his restaurants until he lost the case of *Newman v. Piggy Park Enterprises*. Even after he was forced to integrate, Bessinger distributed religious pamphlets justifying slavery through the Bible and chose to fly a Confederate flag over his restaurant instead of an American one.<sup>36</sup> In Atlanta, Lester Maddox refused to serve African-Americans in his restaurant, choosing instead to chase them away with pick handles. He ultimately closed his restaurant to avoid desegregating.<sup>37</sup> Barbecue often reflects the climate of the South, so there is little surprise in the fact that Southerners fought back against perceived slights through their barbecue. Ollie McClung Sr. still defends his decision to sue for the right to remain segregated.<sup>38</sup> This shows how deeply rooted these racial divides dwell.

In today's South and today's America, these racial lines still exist, but barbecue is slowly being reclaimed as a multiracial collaboration and not something enhanced by some innate mystical Anglo-Saxon ability. Organizations like the Southern Foodways Alliance, who "insists that any SFA program about barbecue in the American South must be multiracial," are fighting against these archaic ideals.<sup>39</sup> In 1980, Texas officially marked Juneteenth as a state holiday, adding legitimacy to the African-American celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>40</sup> There are moves being made to redefine barbecue as a symbol of an interracial connection,

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Yeager, "Forced to Seat Blacks, Ala. Restaurant Complied with History," National Public Radio, accessed November 26, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2014/12/13/370470745/forced-to-seat-blacks-ala-restaurant-complied-with-history>.

<sup>36</sup> Walsh, "Texas Barbecue," 51.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Auchmuty, "Politics and Pork," *Cornbread Nation* 2, 70.

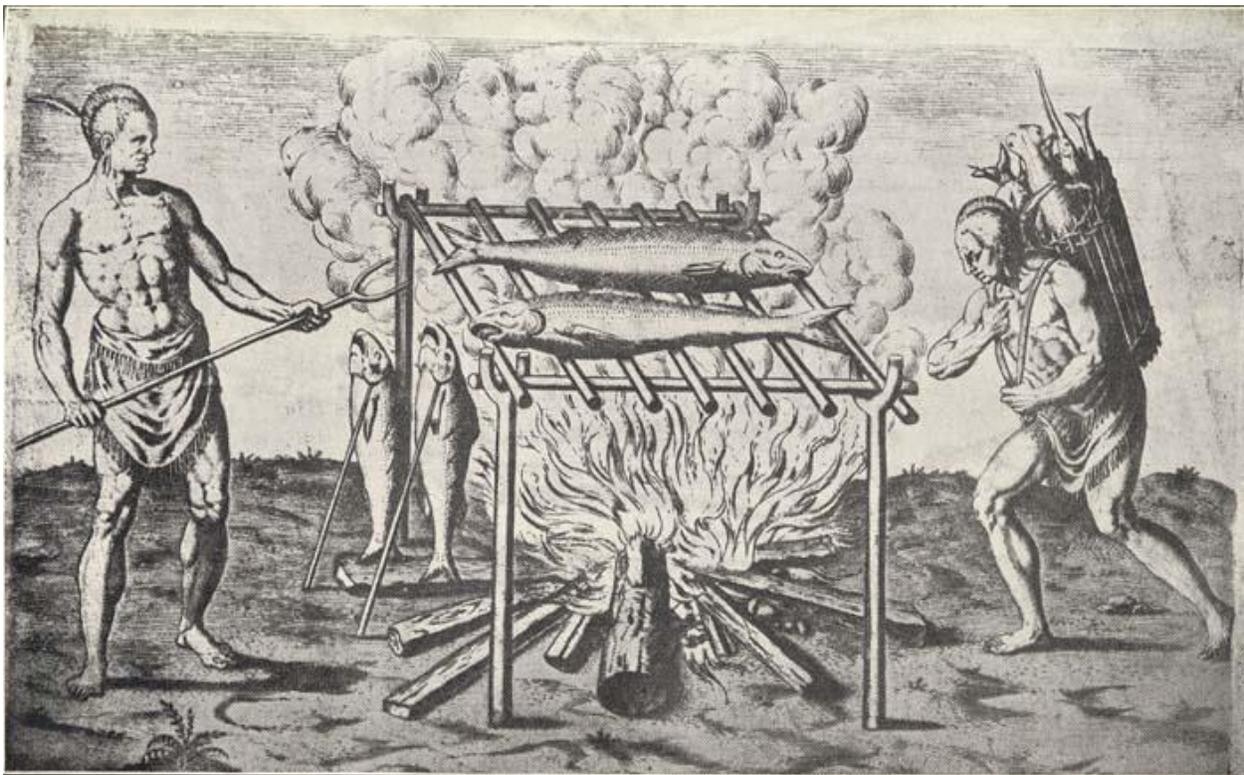
<sup>38</sup> Yeager, "Forced to Seat Blacks."

<sup>39</sup> Walsh, "Texas Barbecue," 53.

<sup>40</sup> Moss, *Barbecue*, 99.

something that exists within the past of many cultures and therefore unites us. For these moves to prove productive, however, the true history of barbecue has to be accepted and acknowledged.

If we as a society are not able to acknowledge the contributions of African enslaved and Native American peoples to our culture, then we will forever face the color line. There is no true history of America, the history of barbecue included, that can be told without discussing the ramifications of centuries of enslavement. Acceptance of the inherent differences that alienate barbecue opinions may bring together those who love their craft, because their passions are very similar. They receive an adrenaline rush from mixing spices to create rubs and sauce, from meticulously smoking and basting their meat of choice, and from being able to devour a delectable piece of barbecue that they know was their own creation. A very similar argument can be made for the reconciliation possible through the history of barbecue. If Southerners and Americans as a whole were able to develop an understanding and acceptance of the partnership of ethnic cultures throughout southern history, then this may allow for some of the wounds to heal. This would take a deep dive into the horrors and repercussions of slavery, but we may just come out with a deeper understanding of how our history has formed America, the South, and the awe-inspiring dish of barbecue. By culture we are separate, but with culture we can unite. And for that I am thankful.



“Figure 1. De Bry, Thomas “Native Americans barbecuing fish in North Carolina” (Moss, *Barbecue: An American Institution*, 9).

