

Food+ Research Symposium
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Faculty Abstract

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Food and America's Material Origins.

ABSTRACT: The 2013 excavation of cannibalized human remains at the site of Jamestowne Fort in Virginia, where winter hunger killed many colonists during the “Starving Time” of 1609 to 1610, was a dramatic reminder that material scarcity has been an intrinsic part of the American past. The Jamestown discovery joins many other recent prompts to consider food—in its broadest definition, from subsistence cannibalism to modernist cuisine—as part of the academic historian’s remit. This is a significant shift. For a long time, historians preferred to emphasize ideas, agency, and other non-material factors. They feared, however incongruously, that to argue for the place of food in history was, on the “low” end (as with starvation), too materially deterministic or else, on the “high” end (meaning restaurants), too frivolous. Now, however, there is an intriguing rush to examine how America had material as well as ideological origins. This trend is expressed in new work on climate, environment, and natural resources, including food. My contributions include publishing multiple pieces on these topics (most recently a forthcoming co-authored book on Thomas Robert Malthus, the original “Malthusian”), advising dissertations on food and environment, helping two new academic journals in food studies get a start, and teaching food history to undergraduates in the General Education curriculum.