‘The Changing Shape of Election Cake’

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THE CHANGING SHAPE OF ELECTION CAKE
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In the United States today ‘Election Cake’ is cooked and consumed around elections in November. During the 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton it was reported that Election Cake had undergone a revival through the Twitter hashtag #MakeAmericaCakeAgain, a play on Trump’s campaign slogan. The campaign was spearheaded by a group of bakers, food writers and food educators led by historian Maia Surdam and Susannah Gebhart MD of the OWL Bakery, NC, with the intention of raising awareness about US culinary heritage and the place of food in political and social life. Its organisers were keen to point out that Election Cake historically enabled disenfranchised women to participate in civic culture. Accordingly, all proceeds from the #MakeAmericaCakeAgain campaign went to the League of Women Voters, a non-profit organisation working to widen voting access.¹

Essentially a sweet yeast loaf baked for the family, the typical Election Cake recipe of today differs markedly from those of the past. The origin of this dish lies in the late seventeenth century and the election of governors in certain colonies of British America. The centrepiece of these events was an enormous cake, baked directly on the floor of a wood-fired oven and consumed communally.² This article argues that the evolution of Election Cake from communal cake to domestic loaf mirrors transitions in the territories which became the United States. It analyses and reproduces several historic recipes for this dish, chiefly those held at the Winterthur Museum, DE. In the process, regional, ethnic, and political change across four centuries is illuminated.

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The tradition of the Election Cake dates back to the 17th century. Election Cake was preceded by ‘muster cake’ - a naturally leavened cake baked with fruit, spices and alcohol. This cake was baked by colonial women for men mustered for military service by order of the British Crown. Muster cake was a naturally leavened cake; since baking soda or powder was not available at the time, it was leavened with a sourdough culture.³ In 1660, both the Rhode Island and Connecticut colonies were granted permission from the crown to choose their own governors and by 1700 both states had accordingly turned the election of the Governor into a holiday. Naturally, the occasion was marked by the communal consumption of food. But for Puritans in these territories, Election Day also reinforced their ideological outlook. Happily for them, it coincided with the Catholic celebration of Pentecost in the spring, to which they looked askance, and gave them an alternative holiday occasion.

¹ http://www.owlbakery.com/electioncake/
Reflecting these New England roots, Election Cake is sometimes referred to as ‘Hartford Cake’ or ‘Hartford Election Cake’ after the capital of Connecticut. However, as we shall see, Election Cake then was very different to what Election Cake would become.

Early Election Cakes were enormous and they were cooked, served and consumed communally. This reflected the Old World ideal of a community of farmers witnessed in New England, one in which farmers and their families were to live together, with civic life revolving around the village meeting house and the common: land where the militia drilled when animals weren’t grazing on it. In reality, a general muster might bring together an entire county, drawing together disparate individuals and groups of people for a great occasion involving the co-mingling of the sexes and much drinking. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Election Cake, in many circumstances, was a communal foodstuff designed to sober and steady heavy drinkers.

As the eighteenth century arrived, the primacy of Puritan social structure was challenged by political fractiousness, economic change and population increase. Yet earlier traditions persisted longer in some areas. As mentioned, Election Cake is chiefly associated with New England [the current states of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island]. It is no coincidence that that region witnessed much less immigration in the eighteenth century than the Middle Colony, which attracted wave after wave of non-English European settlers. The earliest recipe for Election Cake thus comes from Connecticut, from 1771, just prior to the War of Independence. Moreover, a recipe for ‘Election Cake’ appears in the second edition of the first cookbook published in the United States of America, Amelia Simmons’ American Cookery (1796). It called for:

*Thirty quarts of flour, 10 pound butter, 14 pound sugar, 12 pound raisins, 3 dozen eggs, one pint wine, one quart brandy, 4 ounces cinnamon, 4 ounces fine colander seed, 3 ounces ground allspice; wet flour with milk to the consistence of bread over night, adding one quart yeast; the next morning work the butter and sugar together for half an hour, which will render the cake much lighter and whiter; when it has rise light work in every other ingredient except the plumbs, which work in when going into the oven.*

Simmons’ book was published in Hartford, Connecticut, and although very little is known about the author it is assumed that she was a New Englander. The enormity of her Election Cake was certainly in keeping with regional and cultural differences in cooking technology itself. An Election Cake of this size would have had to have been baked in an open hearth: a cultural staple of the Anglo-American home. The sheer size of an early Election Cake recipe like this ensured it was impractical to cook it in the stove, the more efficient but smaller technology favoured by settlers from other northern European territories such as Germany and Scandinavia.

Election Cake, then, was a communal affair in colonial America and, as Simmons’ recipe shows, persisted as a very large cake after American independence. And yet the changes

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6 Amelia Simmons, *American Cooke* (Hartford, CT, 1796).
7 Wolf, *As Various as their Land*, 68.
spurred by independence would lead to the evolution of the cake into a smaller home-baked dish. The thirteen colonies’ victory in the Revolutionary War in 1783 may have provided a more public arena for women to display their abilities, but with independence federal elections were established in November (after the harvest and before the harshest winter weather). This meant that the most important ‘Election Day’ shifted from the spring to the fall.

The transition of the big voting occasion to the fall is perhaps reflected in the earliest recipe for Election Cake held in the Downs collection at the Winterthur Museum. The recipe comes from a newspaper clipping collected by a furniture maker named Francis Joseph Eames who served in the war of 1812 and was resident of Whately, Massachusetts. It dates from around 1808 to 1822, during the presidencies of James Madison and James Monroe.\(^8\)

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Election Cake.—Two pounds of sugar, three-quarters of a pound of butter, one pint of milk made into a sponge, four eggs, two table-spoonfuls of cinnamon, and flour enough to make a dough. Set a sponge the evening before with a pint of milk, a gill of yeast, a little salt, and flour enough to make a thick batter. The next morning stir the butter and sugar together, whisk the eggs and add to it with the sponge and other ingredients, and flour enough to form a dough. Knead it, butter your pan, put in the dough; let it rise. When it is light, bake it.
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Thirty-six eggs have become four. Ten pounds of butter have become three-quarters of a pound. Also, the inclusion of the gill of yeast ensures it is more of a bread than a cake. This was, then, a smaller dish to Simmons’ gargantuan cake. It was clearly meant for home consumption and contained no alcohol.

In the young republic, Election Cake was still being baked but is often conspicuous by its absence from the historical record. In the painter John Lewis Kimmel’s urban street scene of 1815 - depicting Philadelphia on Election Day - the bustle of the early American republic is evident, with voters, lobbyists and spectators gathered at the State House. Amongst the drunken revelry, it is African American street vendors who are apportioning the food and the great Election Cake of yore is nowhere to be seen.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Francis Joseph Eames receipt book, Downs Collection, Winterthur, FOL 179.
In Boston, similarly, Election Day of the 1830s took place on the city Common with ‘hucksters of every kind’ present. According to one observer, revellers would consume everything from tamarinds to oysters and lobsters to ginger beer; Election Cake, however, does not feature in this recollection.  

It is tempting to attribute the lack of Election Cake to the dying out of rural traditions in a modern urban context. Contemporary New England travellers to cities like Philadelphia, for example, were shocked that the woman’s role extended to labour outside the home. Election Cake seemed to fit with the more conservative and community-based social structures of the New England village which were frequently juxtaposed with accounts of city life from this period. However in another account of the time from rural Massachusetts the muster day in Maytime following the death of George Washington in 1799 was recalled as ‘a general frolic’ which ‘drew a motley crowd, vendors of all sorts of wares, mountebanks and lewd women; a promiscuous assemblage bent upon pleasure’. But apart from a public dinner, no mention is made of cake and it is unclear whether Election Cake, if present at all, was served by street vendors or the Governor, both, or neither.

Yet the partial disappearance of Election Cake belied its persistence at the local level. Independence might have placed federal elections in the fall, but local elections were still held in the spring. And local government remained important in responding to changing economic and infrastructural needs. Therefore the tradition of the enormous Election Day cake persisted in some areas, accompanying the vote as it always had.

This much is evident from the next recipe in the Downs Collection, a recipe for Election Cake written by Lydia Grofton-Jarvis. Composed in the early 1840s during the Presidency of

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11 Sarah Anne Emory, Reminiscences of a Nonagenarian (Newburyport: Huse and Co., 1879), 57.
John Tyler, little is known about the provenance of Grofton-Jarvis’s notes except that they were transcribed for her by her brother. Her call for rather dainty pinches of ‘cinnamon, nutmeg, a little clove’ could not hide the fact that this was a big cake cooked to a simple recipe: reminiscent of the great election cakes of Old New England.\(^{12}\)

Grofton-Jarvis’s recipe was a simple one, adding to the impression that Election Cake functioned as a useful piece of stodge to soak up the alcohol consumed during the revelry of local Election Days. One only has to think of George Caleb Bingham’s famous painting *The County Election* (1852), depicting a Missouri Election Day in which various figures are slumped drunken, to realise the function of Election Cake as an accompaniment to alcohol.

As the 2016 campaign to revive it has emphasized, Election Cake was also an important means of civic articulation for women. In an era in which male progress was defined by career and public life, female life was linked to domesticity. Cooking and serving food was therefore a way in which women could articulate their patriotism, and cakes named after political figures became more common in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.\(^{13}\) Election Cake was therefore part of this expression of women’s civic participation through food.

And yet, as the nineteenth century progressed, Election Cake was increasingly seen as a quirk of old. As mentioned, Election Day, or 'Lection Day as it was sometimes called, had its

\(^{12}\) Lydia Grofton-Jarvis notebook, Downs Collection, Winterthur, Doc 828.

\(^{13}\) Nancy Siegel, ‘Cooking Up American Politics’, *Gastronomica* Vol. 8, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 53-61
origins in the training or muster days for citizen militias. In some places, Election Day and Election Cake died out with the professionalization and expansion of the U.S. military and the concomitant decline of these events. In other places, the day on which the governor was elected and the day on which the troops mustered differed. In Boston, for example, ‘Artillery Election’ was held on a separate day to so-called ‘Nigger ’Lection’, the day when the new governor was announced and when ‘blacks and blackees are permitted to permitted to perambulate the Mall and Common, to buy gingerbread and beer with the best of folks’. Once again, in Boston of the 1830s, gingerbread, lobsters and waffles are mentioned, but Election Cake is nowhere to be seen.

In the rapidly industrialising United States, Election Cake’s association with the old world ensured it was increasingly seen as old hat. In recipes from the 1830s and 1840s, Election Cake was already being written as something of a heritage recipe. The Massachusetts-based abolitionist and women’s rights activist Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880), whose books were widely read in the 1830s and 40s, referred to it as ‘old-fashioned’ in her 1832 domestic manual. Child’s language reflected the changes affecting this part of the United States at the time. With the transition from agriculture to industry, the old world of old-stock New Englanders was undergoing a profound economic and political transformation.

These tensions are captured in the work of another Massachusetts author, Lucy Larcom (1824-1893). In her 1889 memoir A New England Girlhood, the poet recalled growing up in the town of Beverly on the Massachusetts coast, detailing the persistence of old New England ways, with the community tied to the Congregational meeting house. ‘Great baking’ was done, Larcom tells us, in a large brick oven. ‘The shutting up of the great fireplaces and the introduction of stoves marks an era’ she lamented, signifying ‘the abdication of shaggy Romance and the enthronement of elegant Commonplace’. Larcom’s early life mirrored the broader social change. In 1835, when she was aged 11, her father’s death forced her to move and take up work in a textile mill. Larcom therefore writes of Election Cake in rose-tinted tones, associating it not only with ruralism but also the civic virtue of early republicanism:

“We were rather a young nation at this time … our republicanism was fresh and wide-awake. The edge of George Washington’s little hatchet had not yet been worn down to its latter-day dullness … We had great training days when drum and fife took our ears by storm; when the militia and the Light Infantry mustered through the streets to the Common …”

Election Cake was part of this mustering tradition:

“Old Election, ‘Lection Day as we called it, a lost holiday now, was a general training day, and it came at our most delightful season, the last of May. Lilacs and tulips were in bloom … my mother always made 'Election Cake for us on that day. It was nothing but a kind of sweetened bread with a shine of egg-and-molasses on top; but we thought it delicious.”

15 Lydia Maria Child, The American Frugal Housewife (1832), cited in Deb Friedman and Jack Larkin, Old Sturbridge Village Cookbook: Authentic Early American Recipes for the Modern Kitchen (Guilford, Connecticut: Globe Pequot), 160.
16 Lucy Larcom, A New England Girlhood (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1973), 23.
Larcom’s lamentations struck a cultural chord with those who felt that the values of American simplicity were threatened by the consumer revolution. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the American press was littered by grumpy commentary from ‘plain farmers’ who valued unfussy self-sufficiency over what they perceived as decadence. The grudging tone of these amateur philosophers reflected the fact that the United States was undergoing a political and economic evolution which would transform notions of civilised living. However in most places the shutting up of the great fireplace - which Larcom saw as emblematic of the degeneration of American simplicity - had already happened well before her birth in 1824.

Accordingly the next two recipes from the Downs collection, from the middle and latter stages of the nineteenth century respectfully, record Election Cake as a small oven-baked loaf. The recipe of H.N. Pilsbury (of Dedham, Massaschusettes) was written 1847, under the presidency of James K. Polk, elected in 1845 and voted out in 1849. Once again, it was a smaller recipe aimed at the individual households rather than the collective gathering.  

Similarly the next recipe in the collection, the collective work of the Fiske family of Beverley, Massachusetts, and from the mid to late 19th century, called merely for a pint of milk, a pound of raisins, one yeast cake half a pound and a pint of sugar and molasses (as well as seasoning). The use of yeast cake, rather than fresh yeast, reflected advances in convenience food and the march of consumerism. It also spoke to the fact that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Election Cake had become a small sweet loaf rather than a cake.

And yet Election Cake was still being spoken of and consumed in line with older customs. Correspondence from the time of the Civil War between members of the North family (manufacturers from Hartford County, Connecticut) contain reference to the cake most associated with that locale. The letter below from Fidelia North (1833-1874), the middle daughter of the family, was composed in April 1863. Although undated, the letter certainly dates from this time because records show that Fidelia gave birth to a baby in that month; in

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18 Fiske family recipe book, Downs Collection, Winterthur, Doc 723.
her letter she refers to her infant now weighing twelve pounds, going on to mention that the woman hired to help her cook and clean while she nursed her new-born had just left. Significantly, Fidelia North writes home in the hope that some Election Cake has been saved for her. This again attests to the persistence of the Election Cake tradition around springtime elections in New England: there had been state election in Connecticut earlier in the month.¹⁹

At around the same time a cousin of Fidelia’s named Rox wrote to Augusta North, Fidelia’s sister, about how she had left her Election Cake to rise while writing her letter.²⁰

Alice Morse Earle’s recollections of the customs of New England, published in 1893, noted that Election Day was still marked by New Englanders but with less revelry. In days gone by, she claimed, ‘the entire week partook of the flavor of a holiday’, a time “to meet, to smoke, to carouse, and swagger and dishonour God”. She described Election Cake as ‘a sort of rusk rich with fruit and wine’ no longer common but ‘still made in some families that I know’.²¹

One such example of the persistence of the older larger Election Cake comes in a scrapbook in the Downs Collection complete with recipes dating from the 1873-1920 period. The exact

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¹⁹ Fidelia North to family (undated), Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur, North family papers 39/791a.
²⁰ Rox to Augusta North (undated), Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur, North family papers 39/791b.
date is uncertain but since the newspaper cutting is mounted in a Mark Twain Patent scrapbook it must be after 1873 – the year when the renowned author received the patent – and is probably early twentieth century. Among the ingredients what stands out is the substantial amount of alcohol: ‘half a pint of brandy; one gill of sherry or madeira wine’.  

The inclusion of madeira wine was nod to the favourite tipple of the upper classes in the eighteenth century, further underlining the status of Election Cake as a heritage dish or ‘a very old and excellent receipt’ as the newspaper excerpt called it.  

Although its decline set in long before, by 1900 the great Election Cake had certainly lost its original appeal as a communal cake eaten on Election Day and had transitioned into a heritage recipe.

By the later twentieth century, Election Cake was firmly associated with heritage foodstuffs. The American Heritage Cookbook published in 1964, during Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency, recorded that Election Cake was ‘one of the first foods to be identified with American politics’. It included a medium-sized potato in the recipe, along with a modest half cup of sherry. In these later recipes, Election Cake resembled a small sweet dessert rather than a loaf and the instruction to finish by frosting the cake features prominently. Reflecting the dish’s New England origins, Fannie Farmer’s Boston Cooking School Book of 1896 (1951 edition) recommended covering Election Cake with ‘Portsmouth Frosting’. In 1961 the Congressional Club of Washington DC - composed of the wives and daughters of members of Congress, Cabinet and the Supreme Court - brought out the sixth edition of its Cook Book. It featured a foreword by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy reminding the American woman of her ‘obligation to the members of her family and the nation to see that their health and physical well-being are maintained by attractive, properly prepared meals’. In the ‘Cakes’ section was a recipe for Election Day Cake contributed by the wife of the republican Senator for Kansas Andrew F. Schoeppel; it served twenty and called for frosting on top. Election Cake, then, was still at the heart of American politics by the 1960s, but in a very different way to its original function.

As these sources show, Election Cake transitioned in size and appearance over four centuries. In summary, it changed from a large cake of the here-and-now to a small loaf or sweet cake of yesteryear, from an object of New England civic culture to something of a national curio. This was due to a number of factors:

22 Mark Twain patent scrapbook, Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur, Doc 1646.
The renewed influxes of non-English immigrant groups to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in groups keeping their own holiday customs and their own recipes, and continuing to adhere to their own religious feast days, some of which clashed with Election Day. As an ‘American cuisine’ evolved in the twentieth century, the habit of one ethnic group looking askance at another’s food did eventually give way to a broader acculturation. Election Cake, though, never emerged as an example of the forging of a hybrid ‘American’ cuisine and remained firmly embedded in old English of New England and their folkways. At the same time, post-independence changes in electoral dates and political customs eroded the Old New England occasion around which consumption of this ritual cake was based, in turn spawning new traditions associated with ’Lection Day. Simultaneous changes in cooking technology – the by-product of urbanisation, industrialisation and the consumer revolution – ensured that the gigantic cake was no longer technically feasible. And finally, and most significantly, Election Cake’s changing shape reflected profound changes in the democratic process. Elections, previously a male and martial rite of passage founded upon civic voluntarism, had - by the twentieth century - become more bureaucratic and professional. The voting process, too, was eventually to open up to all races, sexes and classes. Consequently, the preparation and consumption of Election Cake accompanying a civic act became less common as it became the preserve of heritage cookbooks.

All of which makes Election Cake’s 2016 revival as an object celebrating civic culture all the more compelling.

_Bryce Evans, Fall 2016_

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