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Author's Note

Cornbread is personal. Growing up, I remember standing in my grandma's kitchen watching her whip together the daily batch of cornbread. I would watch as she grabbed one of the blue, faded plastic cups from the cabinet, crumbled a sizable piece of cornbread into the cup, and filled it with milk for my grandpa, who would be sitting in the living room watching TV. At any given point, you could open the microwave and find a pan of cornbread, always on one of her floral dinner plates. Cornbread, for me, is synonymous with my grandparent's house, and these are the same grandparents who taught me how to be Southern.

This was the beginning of my exploration into the concept of cornbread as a marker of Southern identity. In my life, cornbread was Southern and Southern was cornbread. The two were so deeply intertwined that one could not exist without the other. That is why I chose to study this topic. I knew from personal experience that cornbread symbolized my identity as Southern, and as I talked to more people I realized that many other self-proclaimed "Southerners" felt the same way. This thesis began with little more than the question, "why is cornbread Southern?," but developed into a project of tracing both the evolution of cornbread and the development of a distinct Southern identity across centuries.

I hope that everyone who reads this thesis will be able to feel the theme of humanity that beats at the heart of this story. Even if you did not grow up eating cornbread, everyone can connect to the ideas that are associated with it: family, suffering, feasting, subsistence. Humans are protected by, and protective of, their food. Though I try my best to remain impartial, the reality is this territory is personal, and I want to share this story personally.

Ashton Doar

The Cornbread Country

Men of the cornbread country
Waken and dream again,
Of the vales of the old Virginia land
So bright in the dreams of men!
Waken and walk with fancy
Back to the house 'neath the trees,
And the hollyhocks in the garden,
And the gold drone of the bees:
Oh, for the cornbread country,
The Jasmine land I see,
Down there in the dreams of Jackson
Down there with the friends of Lee.

Way to the cornbread country.
Way on the wings of light-
Bear us back, oh memory,
In a golden whirl of flight-
Back to the Shenandoah,
Back to the hills of blue,
Back to the pone and rabbit,
Back to the julep too;
Ah, for the cornbread country,
The yellow water meal,
There in the old Virginia
Where the dreams around us steal.
Yea for the cornbread country.

My soul, my soul is wild
The old Virginia cornbread
We crunched on the lips of child -
A watermill in the hollow
With its slow burrs singing sweet
To the roll of the Rappahannock
That winds at the mountain's feet:
Away to the cornbread country
To the old Virginia lanes,
With the blue sky over the valley
And the river's soft refrains.

Baltimore Sun [1]

[1] *The Bamberg herald. [volume]* (Bamberg, S.C.), 18 Feb. 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063790/1915-02-18/ed-1/seq-2/>

Thesis Summary

Food is integral to the human experience. This thesis aims to track the evolution and solidification of a distinct “Southern” identity through the concrete material of cornbread. By looking at the broad developments of Southern history from the limited perspective of cornbread allows for an analysis of identity that focuses more on the human experience than general historical trends.

Following the chronological development of the American South from the pre-colonial era to the present day, this thesis analyzes the importance of cornbread in relation to historical circumstances. Native Americans, British settlers, early Americans, and self-identifying Southerners all related to the land and to its food in unique ways. Narrowing the scope of this broad topic to the specific point of cornbread allows for an analysis of the continuity and change of people's circumstances and life experience, as well as the ways in which people define themselves by their food.

This thesis attempts to prove that cornbread is representative of Southern identity in both physical evolution and ideological significance. The American South is the result of the people, circumstances, geography, and trials that created a unique sense of identity compared to the rest of the world, and cornbread allows for the ability to trace how Southern came to be before the American South was even relevant to the global picture.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Southern" as an identity is an abstract concept that has very real meaning for those who claim it for themselves. There are no concrete qualifications in regards to what classifies as Southern, and yet people feel the existence and significance of Southern identity all around them. Many scholars have explored the roots and development of Southern identity to clarify this ambiguous concept, citing factors such as geography, race, Northern antagonism, and economics as central factors in solidifying what it means to be Southern.[2]

There is one concrete material, however, that hosts the meaning of Southern more directly and more personally than any other: food. Southerners are known for their food, and there are few foods more iconic to the South than cornbread. Cornbread is unique compared to other Southern classics for its widespread and lasting significance on both the region and the concept of Southern identity. Cornbread existed long before sweet tea was drunk on front porches and chicken was fried in the kitchen, and it is still part of the daily lives of many Southerners.

Cornbread is the daily bread of the South, and this is where it proves to be significant and worthy of study. Bread has been critical in the lives of humanity throughout history. Scholars have identified bread as the marker of civilization, as the techniques required to make bread presuppose many things. Everything from the specialization of labor to skill in baking to the existence of a community to share it with are needed in order for bread to exist. There is much evidence of bread being integral to the human experience. Homer, in his works, used the term "bread-eaters" interchangeably with "men," making it evident that civilized men are those who eat bread. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* the wild man, Enkidu,

[2]Patricia Davis, *Laying Claim : African American Cultural Memory and Southern Identity*. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016); James Cobb, *Away down South : a History of Southern Identity,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

finally becomes civilized when he learns to eat bread.[3] There is something unique about humanity's relation to grain and the process of making bread that solidifies both community and culture. Grain is not only nutritionally significant, but culturally significant in every civilization.

Corn is the grain of North America and cornbread is its civilization-making bread. Using cornbread to trace the evolution and development of Southern identity allows for a uniquely human approach to the study of Southern identity. Focusing on this concrete material gives substance to the tracing of continuity and change over time, from early North American civilization to the establishment of one widely accepted Southern identity. Cornbread's own journey from a traditional Native American staple food into a celebrated Southern classic closely mirrors the abstract formation of a Southern identity. This thesis uses the concrete medium of cornbread to represent and explain the abstract concept of "Southern," aiming to give further light and clarity to the study of Southern identity.

Writing this thesis involved the examination and study of a wide variety of literature. Considering the breadth of this topic, I did not discriminate as to what types of sources I considered. Everything from linguistic surveys to interviews to photographs were analyzed for their importance and relevance to the topic. In order to manage the scope of this project, every source was compiled and thoroughly analyzed in a single spreadsheet so that each source could be appropriately cataloged. Additionally, there is a chronological element to this thesis that I wanted to capture in the documents that I considered. For periods and topics where primary evidence is scarce, I turned to secondary source analyses for aid. For the most part, however, I focused my research on primary sources.

Being an abstract concept, the development and evolution of identity is difficult to analyze, but cornbread provides concrete proof of culture and civilization. Southerness is part

[3] Massimo Montanari and Beth Archer Brombert, "The Aroma of Civilization: Bread," In *Medieval Tastes: Food, Cooking, and the Table*, 54–61. (Columbia University Press, 2012), 54.

of a long tradition of survival and hope, and as it will be discussed throughout this thesis, cornbread represents the foundation of life and identity for all of those who have lived in the American South.

Chapter 2: Cornbread as "Native American"

Cornbread existed in North America long before the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock. North America has a rich tradition of culture as the home of many idegenous people groups. People from vastly different civilizations existed and thrived on North American soil, using the flora and fauna native to the continent to create and sustain their own traditions.

Many staple foods used across the world today are native to North America. Crops such as beans, tomatoes, potatoes, squash, and (most importantly for this discussion) corn have been cultivated in the Americas for centuries. These plants made up the majority of the Native American diet due to their abundance and variety of use, but no crop was quite as staple to the diet and lifestyle of Native Americans as corn.

Corn, or maize, was first domesticated around 10,000 years ago by the Myan and Olmec people living in modern-day southern Mexico.[4] As people migrated across North America, the cultivation of corn spread across the continent. Traveling from its initial cultivation in southern Mexico, corn reached New Mexico by 3500 BC and then traveled across the plains to reach Maine around 700 BC.[5] This rapid spread in the production and use of corn is likely due to many factors including corn's nutritional sufficiency, minimal labor requirement, and efficient productivity compared to other grain crops. Corn is not naturally adaptable to different climates, but was crossbred with other plants to produce varieties of corn that could withstand a wide variety of climates and soil types. Native Americans were so adept at breeding different varieties of corn that by the time Columbus arrived in the

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[4] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "corn." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 4, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/plant/corn-plant.

[5] Allison Burkette,"STAMPED Indian": FINDING HISTORY AND CULTURE IN TERMS FOR AMERICAN 'CORNBREAD'. *American Speech* 1 August 2011; 86 (3): 312–339. doi: https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1215/00031283-1503919, 323.

Caribbean after his voyage in 1492, there were already over 200 varieties of corn in the Americas.[6]

After its domestication, corn became central to the life and sustenance of those living in the Americas- with the word "maize" literally translating to "our life." [7] Three crops made up the majority of the Native American diet: corn, beans, and squash. These crops were of such importance to Native American life that they were given the nickname "the three sisters." Not only were these three often eaten together, but it was believed that planting the three sisters together would increase the crop yield. In fact, there is scientific evidence to back up this technique. Beans convert nitrogen from the atmosphere into a usable form and 'fix' this nitrogen into the soil to be used by other plants. While the beans provide nutrients, the tall corn stalks serve as poles that the beans can climb up, and the wide squash leaves help to protect the soil, keeping it cool and moist. This technique, scientifically known as companion planting, is now widely recognized for its resulting higher yields, distribution of nutrients, and prevention of soil erosion.[8]

Cultivation was not the only area in which Native Americans showed mastery over corn; they also knew how to process it. Corn, despite being rich in nutrients and calories, is not sufficient by itself to sustain an entire diet. Solely relying on corn can cause multiple nutrient-related diseases. One such disease is pellagra, which often occurs in areas of poor nutrition. Caused by a lack of niacin intake, pellagra can result in weakness, pain, and mental confusion. While this would be a massive issue for European colonists later on, this was not an issue among Native American communities. Though similarly dependent on corn for their nutritional support, Native Americans developed a technique called "nixtamalization" that

[6] Kenneth F. Kiple, *A Movable Feast : Ten Millennia of Food Globalization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[7] Mark McWilliams, *The Story Behind the Dish: Classic American Foods : Classic American Foods*, (Westport: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012.)
[8] Lauren Mapp, "Celebrating Indigenous Culture with Haudenosaunee Boiled Cornbread," San Diego Union-Tribune, 11 November 2020, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/lifestyle/food-and-cooking/story/2020-11-11/celebrating-indigenous-culture-with-haudenosaunee-boiled-cornbread

essentially breaks down the chemical bonds of the grain so that its natural niacin can be digested by the body. Native Americans combined cornmeal, water, and lime to form a dough, beginning a process where the lime breaks down the chemical bonds of the corn. With this technique, Native Americans could continue to rely on corn as their main source of caloric intake without fear of pellagra.[9]

Aside from the agricultural benefits of cultivating corn, corn could be processed and used in a wide variety of dishes. While corn was often eaten fresh, or 'green', the more variable and common use of corn was in the form of cornmeal. Cornmeal, or corn flour, was made by drying and roasting raw corn and then grinding the dried corn into meal using mortars and pestles made of rock or wood. Using this grinding method, corn could be ground either fine or coarse depending on the intended use of the meal. Cornmeal was used to make dozens of different dishes, but was most often formed into cakes and breads by combining the meal with some kind of animal fat, water, and salt. These ingredients were combined until the dough reached the desired consistency, and then it would be either cooked over the fire or boiled in water.[10]

Some early forms of cornbread would combine cornmeal with other ingredients such as beans, berries, or maple sap to make an already nutritious and carbohydrate dense meal even more filling. Adding beans to cornbread was common for tribes around New York, like the Oneida and Iriqois. For instance, the Onedia people would heavily process corn into a very fine cornmeal, closer to corn flour. Making corn flour was a laborious process and was done by the women of the village early in the morning to have flour available for their families throughout the day. This flour would be mixed with water to create a dense loaf of bread called the "staff of life." Simple to make and nutritionally dense, Oneida messengers would carry pouches of corn flour around their waist to make this bread along their journey

[9] Kiple, *A Movable Feast,* 110.
[10] Burkette, *"STAMPED Indian,"* 323-324.

between villages. Sometimes beans would be added to give an additional nutritional boost, but the dense bread alone was enough to sustain these long-distance runners.[11]

Just as there are many Native American uses of corn, there are also many names for this crop. Most original manuscripts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries refer to corn as "Indian corn." In the minds of the settlers of North America, corn belonged to the Native Americans who knew how to cultivate and process the corn. This view of corn would change over time, but the name "Indian corn" insinuates the strong ties that settlers associated with corn and North America. Native American words for corn, including *pone, suppone, appone,* and *apan,* were co-opted by early settlers and used in their own bastardized fashion to refer to corn and its products.[12] Even in the twenty-first century, some people still use the terms "Indian meal" in reference to corn meal out of this tradition and association.

Names carry great weight, and the naming trends surrounding cornbread show clearly the importance that corn's Native origins have on its current existence. Although corn in the twenty-first century might look and be used differently than it was in the early days of North America, the roots of corn in Native American tradition have greatly influenced the country's perception of corn. Even the long-standing attitude that corn is unrefined and primitive stems from this association between corn and Native Americans. In *A Mess of Greens,* Elizabeth Engelhardt argues that cornbread symbolized "disease, ignorance, and poverty." [13] The argument can be made, however, that it was not class associations that led to the development of this negative sentiment regarding cornbread, but racism that originated in anti-Indigenous sentiments.

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[11] "The Art of Cornbread," Oneida, Oneida Indian Nation, https://www.oneidaindiannation.com/the-art-of-cornbread/
[12] Burkette, 224.
[13] Elizabeth Engelhardt, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 54.

Even still, there is great pride both within and outside the Native American community for corn's dependence on, and origins in, North America. Corn is central to the narrative of North America. People could not have settled the continent with the same degree of success and abundance without the foundation of corn as a staple grain. Native Americans found themselves bound both physically and culturally to the grain. It was their "staff of life," and people understood the important role that corn played in their diet and livelihood. This intimate connection between the people of North America and corn would translate into the ways in which early English settlers conceived of corn; it did not belong to the land, but to the people of the land.

This is why the role of indigenous people must be considered in the discussion of how cornbread reflects Southern identity. Native Americans not only brought corn into North America, but rooted the crop in their communities. Corn became personal in ways that other food was not. Cornbread was a marker of cultural and regional identity long before there was any interaction between Native Americans and English settlers. Southern identity would eventually develop into a distinct regional identity, but it would not have developed in the same way without the work that Native Americans did to adopt cornbread into their daily lives.

Chapter 3: Cornbread as "American"

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a significant increase in the number of European settlers arriving in North America. While Spain and France established a few small colonies on the North American coast, it was the English settlements in New England that made the most dramatic impact on the demographics of North America. By 1700, there were around 260,000 British settlers in North America, all located along the Atlantic coast. In less than 70 years, the population of the English colonies grew to almost 2.2 million.[14] This dramatic growth had a profound impact on not only the nature of the American colonies, but on the lives of those already living in America. As the population grew, so did the mouths that needed to be fed.

Corn was critical to the success of European colonists living in North America. These settlers came from a background of wheat and livestock and were sorely unprepared for the hardships of surviving in an unfamiliar land. Starvation and disease were the two most deadly enemies of American settlers. In many cases, Native American people ended up helping these early settlers survive by trading with them for food and teaching them techniques to cultivate North American crops. John Smith, an English soldier and captain of the Jamestown Settlement, wrote of this kindness from the local Powhatans in his diary. Writing in 1608, the year after the English colony of Jamestown was founded in Virginia, Smith described the dire needs of the settlers facing starvation and the efforts of the Native Americans to aid them. In his diary, he wrote that "our provision being now within twentie dayes spent, the Indians brought us great store of both Corne and bread ready made… the Indians thinking us neare famished, with carelesse kindnes, offred us little pieces of bread and small handfuls of beanes or wheat."[15] As evident in John Smith's account, without the aid of Native Americans and the

[14] T.H. Breen & Timothy Hall, *Colonial America in an Atlantic World: A Story of Creative Interaction* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004), 257.
[15] John Smith, *A True Relation by Captain John Smith, 1608.* Journal. Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 37.

exchange of corn, it is unlikely that European colonization would have succeeded in North America.

This tentative alliance between the English settlers and Native Americans did not last long. As Jamestown settlers became eager to expand, the Powhatans started to resent the English that were encroaching on their land. Tensions continued to rise until 1622 when the Powhatan Confederacy mounted a devastating attack on the Jamestown Settlement. Around a quarter of the population was killed and the event became known as the Jamestown Massacre. This event was monumental in the dynamic of English-Indegenous relations in the early North American colonies. It erased the prospect of peace by giving the English a justification for using violence against the Native Americans that inhabited the land they wished to settle.[16]

This began a period known as the "American-Indian Wars," which lasted from the early 1600s until the 1920s. While the English certainly faced hardship and loss in these conflicts, Native American communities were absolutely devastated. Tribes across the country were decimated through battle and disease as colonists moved into their territories. Corn found itself on both sides of the conflict, but its preeminence did not spare it from the violence. Corn was often targeted by colonists in attacks because destroying corn destroyed the Native Americans' hope of survival. Both fields and stores of corn were burned as colonists ravaged Native American communities. This is not mere speculation, but both literature and archeology have preserved evidence of these attacks on corn. "Bridal Torch," a Dutch poem written in 1663, recounts the experience of watching the burning fields of corn,[17] and an archaeological discovery made in 1815 found a charred kernel of corn from one of

[16] Greg O'Brien, "Jamestown: Legacy of the Massacre of 1622," In 1500-1815, edited by John P. Resch, 92-94. Vol. 1 of *Americans at War*, (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005). *Gale eBooks* (accessed April 15, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3427300055/GVRL?u=colu68650&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=561dfc6c.
[17] Frans Blom, "Of wedding and war: Henricus Selyns' 'Bridal torch (1663): analysis, edition, and translation of the Dutch poem," *Studies in Dutch Language and Culture,* no. 2 (2008): 185-200.

these raids, still stinking of acridity.[18] The English settlers knew the importance of corn because the Native Americans taught them. That fateful act of kindness would be turned into savagery, and corn, which was the lifeline of all those who inhabited North America, would be corrupted into an instrument of destruction.

Although the early years of English settlement in North America were tainted by violence and instability, it did mark the pivotal moment when two isolated worlds irreparably collided. With the crossing of worlds, a new one emerged: the colonial world. Early iterations of colonial cornbread capture this exchange. Being used to the taste and texture of wheat bread, it stands to reason that Europeans made an effort to adapt their bread of necessity to fit their bread of home. Taking the Native American bread made from corn and water, Europeans modified this combination to better suit their preferences. American cornmeal was combined with European milk, eggs, and butter to create an entirely unique kind of bread. Since flour was hard, if not impossible, for many colonists to acquire, rye was often added to cornmeal in an attempt to replicate the texture of wheat bread. Molasses was also added on occasion to replicate the nutty sweetness of wheat.[19]

Corn was used in a variety of dishes, from hearty cornbread to more elaborate dishes such as spoonbread and pudding. Almost all of these dishes combine ingredients from both the old and new world. For instance, one colonial recipe for Journey Cakes (similar to Johnny cakes or hoecakes) calls for cornmeal, fine flour, and a few spoonfuls of milk to be combined.[20] Other recipes were more advanced, such as the recipe for "Indian Meal Pudding." Originally published in Boston, Massachusetts, the recipe showcases the incredible

[18] Christine DeLucia, "Corn and Colonization"
[19] McWilliams, *Story Behind the Dish,* 58.
[20] Richard Hooker., ed, "The Recipes." In *A Colonial Plantation Cookbook: The Receipt Book of Harriott Pinckney Horry, 1770*, 135, (University of South Carolina Press, 1984), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvwcjdvf.5.

mixing of Old and New world ingredients, combining American cornmeal and molasses with European milk, flour, and spices.[21]

Originally, European countries - particularly England, Spain, and France - colonized the Americas for the purpose of economic profit. North America was seen as the land of opportunity, and this "New World" was rumored to be ripe with wealth and resources that would aid each country in their quest for riches and renown. Corn was part of the wealth available to be exploited in this new land, and Natives were known to cultivate and use it with efficiency. Strategies for colonization varied depending on the country, but by far the most influential in the development of an American identity were the English. Approaching colonialism through establishing settlements, England sent people to not only extract resources from the New World, but to live in and inhabit it. This strategy required sending large numbers of English citizens across the Atlantic to the colonies in North America, and this happened at an explosive rate. As discussed before, there were 260,000 English settlers in the American colonies in 1700. Seventy years later, in 1770, that number rose to 2,150,000 settlers, far outnumbering the immigrants of any other European country.[22]

European immigrants were not the only people coming to the Americas during the eighteenth century. Millions of African slaves were transported across the Atlantic to work in the American colonies over the course of the century. It is estimated that over 1.5 million African slaves were shipped like cargo to British colonies in the Americas. Most of these enslaved people would live in the island colonies of the Bahamas and Barbados, but around 250,000 would be sold as slaves to the mainland.[23] Being the land where three different worlds collided - Europe, Africa, and North America - America became a melting pot of different cultures, ideologies, and techniques.

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[21] Fannie Merritt Farmer, *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book,* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1896), 368.
[22] Breen & Hall, *Colonial America in an Atlantic World,* 257.
[23] Alan S. Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 2001), 323-324.

Living completely separate lives from their English overlords, the English settlers of the Americas found themselves alienated financially, politically, and culturally from their homeland. People who once lived comfortably "English" lives found themselves conforming to the land in which they inhabited, and one marker of this transition was the developing preference of English settlers for corn over wheat. This taste for corn was appalling to the English who continued to look down upon corn as unfit for human consumption, but American settlers started to become offended at this distaste for their grain of choice. In response to an Englishman's criticism of corn, founding father Benjamin Franklin replied, "Pray, let me, an American, inform the gentleman, who seems ignorant of the matter, that Indian corn, take it for all in all, is one of the most agreeable and wholesome grains in the world and that Johnny cake or hoe cake, hot from the fire is better than a Yorkshire muffin."[24] This protective attitude over corn represents a marked rift between the American settlers and European English. As this defensiveness over corn reveals, settlers had started to pledge their allegiance to corn rather than wheat, and this choice became part of their identity.

Exchange between the American colonies and the British mainland was central to their relationship, but this would also contribute to the demise of the traditional colonial relationship. Although corn would come to symbolize American patriotism, it was not part of this debate. Corn, unlike other American products such as sugar, rice, and tobacco, was mainly produced by families as a subsistence crop. Most of the corn produced in American colonies was either eaten by the family or used as animal feed, but not even the most advanced farm could be entirely self-sufficient, so this surplus corn was often sold in local markets or bartered among neighbors for household goods.[25] Still, although corn was important to the American market, it was never a key part of the British-American exchange.

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[24] *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* vol. 13, *January 1 through December 31, 1766*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 7–8.
[25] Kulikoff, Allan, "Introduction: From Peasants to Farmers," In *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers*, 1–6, (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Partly due to the British preference for wheat, corn was not one of the main exports from the American colonies. In fact, during times of economic recession, many farmers would switch their crop production from wheat to corn for the sake of subsistence.[26] This may be another reason for the American/British divide over corn. While corn was part of the livelihood and culture of the Americas, it never had that same influence on English soil. The American attitude surrounding corn was protective, as it was part of their own unique way of life.

By 1765, the year that the Stamp Act was introduced, the tensions between the American colonies and their British rulers would reach a breaking point, leading to a final and formal redefinition of what it means to be a citizen of America. No longer were colonists torn between two continents, but for the first time they were not only culturally and ideologically different, but politically distinct from Europe. Although the term "American" had long been used as a term of self-identification, after the American Revolution it became an international marker of identity and loyalty to the new American government. Cornbread falls into the story on the side of the colonists, being intimately tied to the everyday life of America. Cornbread serves as a tangible representation of the emergence of a distinct "American" identity from the traditions of both North America and Europe.

[26] Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers*, 210.

Chapter 4: Cornbread as "Southern"

Similar to how "American" initially became its own unique distinction by people who no longer wanted to identify with the British government, "Southern" would emerge as its own distinction within the American system. Scholars have gone to great lengths to formally define this specific region of tradition and culture in the southern United States, but a concrete definition of an incredibly personal abstract concept is difficult to determine. Southern was not born at the same time as American, but evolved as time went on into becoming its own distinct entity. How then does one trace the evolution of such an abstract concept? Luckily, as Southern was evolving into its own classification, food was evolving with it, and none more so than cornbread. Although cornbread played an important role in the lives and survival of both Native Americans and colonial Americans, it would become central to not only the diets, but the culture and pride of the American South.

"Southern" and Geography

While the South is primarily an ideological, vernacular region, there is a distinctive geographical element to the existence of this personal identity. People who self-identify as Southern are typically born from one of the states in the lower United States, but the use of geography as the marker of "Southern" is not sufficient for a formal definition of Southerness. Scholars and politicians alike have struggled to pinpoint the geographical bounds of Southern identity, but Southerners themselves typically have no issues with defining their own identity and the bounds of this region. Regional identity is always analyzed using three factors: geography, culture, and history.[27] In the case of Southern identity, all three are interrelated, as the geographic region of the Southern United States is

[27] Derek Catsam, "Introduction: Southern Identity: Geography, Culture, and History in the Making of the American South," *The Journal of South African and American Studies,* vol. 9 (2008).

narrowed in scale by a shared history of agrarianism, slavery, and alliance to the Confederacy in the American Civil War. While other factors are shared among Southern states, these three tend to encompass many of the reasons for a distinctive Southern identity.

These factors align with the self-identification tendencies of people from former Confederate states. According to a poll from the University of North Carolina's Howard Odum Center, from the former Confederate states, only Texas and Virginia had a rate of less than 90% of people who self-identified as Southern. Residents of states along the border of this central Southern region self-identified at much lower rates, with Kentucky and Oklahoma identifying at slightly higher rates and West Virginia, Missouri, Delaware, and Washington DC identifying at rates below 45%.[28] While geography clearly plays a large role in defining the bounds of Southern identity, it cannot be the only factor worth considering.

Not every self-proclaimed Southerner is the same, but the core traditions and experiences are often very similar across the geographic region of the American South. One major commonality of the Southern experience is food. Every region and culture has its own food traditions, but there is an incredibly strong tie between Southerners and their food. Everything from fried chicken and collard greens to pork and beans and of course, cornbread grace menus across the world as “Southern” cuisine, but for a region with so much agricultural capacity, why the lack of diversity?

Geography mattered in the production habits of Southern farmers. Unlike the farms of the colonial period, Antebellum farmers changed their production methods from subsistence crops to marketable crops. Farmers located away from markets tended towards subsistence agriculture while farmers located close to markets found that purchasing goods was often easier and cheaper than cultivating these crops themselves. This led to the increasing specialization of American, specifically Southern, agriculture. The plantation system, critical

[28] Catsam, “Southern Identity.”

to the economic productivity of farms along the Atlantic, started to be adopted deeper into the American South. Though the crops produced on these plantations differed, the primary purpose of these farms remained the same: production for commercial sale. This attention to commercial crops meant a decreased attention to food crops. While there were no aspects of the plantation system that prevented the production of food crops, the labor and land resources were preferred to be used on cash crops rather than subsistence plots. Access to local markets was another major factor in the nature of food surplus or shortage in Southern states. Farmers on plantations with close access to markets tended to have more resources to buy their food instead of growing it themselves, but this left farmers who relied on cash crops vulnerable to food shortages.[29]

Still, more often than not, cash crops were cultivated only in addition to subsistence crops. Cash crops were certainly an important part of the Southern plantation system, but it would be a mistake to overlook the cornerstone of the Southern agricultural economy: subsistence agriculture. There has been a tendency in historical analyses of the Antebellum South to interpret the production of cash crops as a blind focus on monocropping for the purpose of exporting these goods, but this interpretation overlooks one crop that was more important to Southern life than economic prosperity - corn. This mistake in historical interpretation is likely due to the fact that corn was not a heavily marketed crop. Unlike cash crops, corn played no integral role in politics or economic policy in the South, but that does not mean that it was insignificant in developing a sense of Southerness.[30]

Climate and geography also affected the kinds of crops cultivated by Southern farmers. Crops such as okra, beans, greens, pork, and corn were the backbone of the Southern diet largely due to their success in the Southern climate. Corn in particular had an extremely

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[29] Sam Bowers Hilliard, "The problems of Subsistence" in *Hog Meat and Hoecake : Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).
[30] Donald Kemmerer, "The Pre-Civil War South's Leading Crop, Corn," *Agricultural History* 23, no. 4 (1949): 236–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740582.

important role in the Southern diet due to its hardiness and efficiency of production. From 1850 to 1860, the United States produced 838,792,840 bushels of corn. Of this number, 7 of the 14 largest corn-producing states would eventually secede to join the Confederacy. It is also worth noting that the South produced significantly more corn than the North, at least during the early years of a distinct regional South. According to the 1860 census, the Southern production of corn was 434,938,063 bushels of corn, which is more than 42,181,590 more bushels than corn the North produced in the North.[31] With this in mind, there is no wonder that corn formed the basis of the Southern American diet.

Human want for food was not the only reason for the South's dependence on corn. Corn was extremely efficient because it produced food for both humans and livestock. One acre of corn could produce over 1,042 pounds of beef, 16,640 pounds of milk, and 1,866 pounds of pork.[32] Corn, therefore, could provide families with more nutrients than it could offer by itself, but its use as livestock feed did not negate corn's importance at the dinner table. Cornmeal functioned as a multiplier of quantity when making bread. Cornbread was the daily bread of Southern families because of both the availability of corn and the substance of the grain. Three pounds of cornmeal could produce seven pounds of cornbread, which means that one acre of corn could produce more than 13,000 pounds of cornbread: more than enough to feed a family.[33]

During the Antebellum period, everyone but the richest of plantation owners had to work for their food. People chose to cultivate the crops that were the most productive and adapted to their climate, and corn, as established before, was incredibly productive and useful for both human and animal consumption. Corn, beans, collards, okra, and turnips thrived in

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[31] William Bradford Reed, *A Northern Plea for Peace: Address of the Hon. William B. Reed, of Pennsylvania ... to the Democratic Central Committee at Philadelphia, Delivered Saturday, March 28, 1863 ; with an Introduction and Appendix,* Pamphlets, (Mackintosh, 1863), p. 47.
[32] Edward Enfield, *Indian Corn; Its Value, Culture, and Uses,* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1866), 289.
[33] Enfield, *Indian Corn*, 290.

the warm, moist Southern climate and therefore, were the crops that made up the bulk of Southern meals. Meat was an important part of the Southern diet, but even meat could not be produced without the cultivation of corn. Considering the geographic bounds of self-identification and the nature of crop production, it stands to reason why corn and cornbread were such central parts of the Southern diet and Southern identity. Dependence on corn for survival created an emotional connection with the grain, and this connection explains the tendency of self-identifying Southerners to feel strongly about their claim to cornbread.

Cornbread and Slavery

It is impossible to talk about the evolution of a Southern identity, and the evolution of cornbread as its representative, without talking about slavery. Although slavery was originally an American practice, by the opening decades of the nineteenth century it had been confined to the South in both practice and influence. Even though slavery was one of the worst evils in the nation's history, it was central in the creation of a unique Southern identity; the South was built on slavery, both literally and figuratively.

African slavery was first introduced to mainland North America in 1619 when the first slave ship arrived at the Jamestown Settlement. While the officials of Jamestown were working to establish a settlement based on principles of freedom, African slaves were being shipped across the Atlantic and forced to labor upon unfamiliar soil.[34] Slavery would expand from Virginia down into the Southern colonies, as the South's fertile farmland required greater amounts of manual labor. By 1860, the slave population in Southern states reached

[34] Paul Musselwhite, Peter Mancall, and James Horn, eds, *Virginia 1619 : Slavery and Freedom in the Making of English America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019) March 11, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

over 3.9 million, which was nearly half of the population of the entire South.[35] With the sheer quantity of slaves living in the Southern states, the influence of African American culture on the rest of the South could not be avoided. An entire separate thesis could be written on the emergence of a distinctive "African American" identity during the years of slavery, but for purposes of this thesis, the focus will remain solely on the influence of African Americans on the development of Southern identity.

Slavery, although incredibly important in the economy and lifestyle of the Antebellum South, was not accessible to many. In fact, most Southerners did not own slaves, and the majority of slaveowners held no more than ten slaves. This is not necessarily due to the ideological aversion of Southerners to slavery, but rather because poverty was deep and widespread among Southerners even in the wealthiest years of the Antebellum period. Still, the poverty of free white Southerners cannot be compared to the bone deep poverty of enslaved people. There is a unique sense of poverty when everything about oneself is forced into submission to another. Even food was placed under submission. While most slaves were allowed small plots of land to grow food for their families, the majority of the slave diet was provided by the slave owner. Provisions were determined by the slave owner, and cornmeal was without question one of the primary staples of the slave diet.

Cornmeal was cheap for slave owners to buy and produce, and it was efficient in providing sustenance. In his book, *My Bondage and My Freedom,* former slave Fredrick Douglass described that the diet of the slaves on his plantation consisted mainly of cornbread and salt pork. This diet is common in many accounts of enslaved peoples, but the forms of cornbread eaten by slaves differed greatly from the elaborate recipes found in Antebellum cookbooks.[36] Most often, cornmeal would be combined with water and pork fat and cooked in

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[35] Jenny Bourne, "Slavery in the United States," EH.net, Economic History Association, 2008. http://eh.net/encyclopedia/slavery-in-the-united-states/.

[36] Harriet A. Jacobs (Harriet Ann), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl : Written by Herself,* Edited by L. Maria Child, (London: Hodson and Son, 1862).

the ashes of the fire. Douglass describes the process of making this "ash cake" in his book, writing that since slaves did not have ovens or pans, they would burn the fire down to ashes and then place a thick mixture of cornmeal and water onto oak leaves and cover it with the ashes.[37] Ash cakes were essential to the diet of slaves, as they were portable and easy to carry onto the fields for work. It also essentially recreated the Native American process of nixamentilization; when the lime-containing ash coated the outside of the cornbread, it released the natural niacin in the corn. This nutrient boost was critical to the survival of slaves, who would likely subcome to diseases like pellegra far sooner without ash cakes and cornbread being a central part of their diet.

Food has been central to African American identity longer than it has been the cornerstone of Southerness. There was power associated with food that originated in the slave system. Slave owners held power over their slaves in their ability to withold and grant access to food. In fact, this was one of their main tools of control. Similarly, food was one avenue that slaves found the power to enact resistance. Slaves would steal food from white families or appropriate white cuisine into their own lifestyles, subtly fighting back against the notion that they were less than human.[38]

It stands to reason that even after the abolition of slavery in 1865, food played an important role in the mindset and identity of African Americans. Being deeply rooted in the power structure of the slave system, these ties between food and power remained long after the antebellum years. Cornbread began as food of necessity for enslaved people, but would become a symbol of agency and power. No matter the legal or societal pressure against African Americans, food was an agent of freedom and expression. Cornbread still holds the memories of families that finally felt the agency of creating recipes for themselves.

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[37] Frederick Douglass, 1818-1895, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, (New York : Penguin Books, 2003).
[38] Julia Medhurst, "Cooking up Southern Black Identity in Chef's Table's 'Mashama Bailey,'" in *Southern Communication Journal* 85, no. 4, September 2020, 219–30, doi:10.1080/1041794X.2020.1801822.

Cornbread and the Civil War

As discussed before, an important part of regional identity is shared experience. If there is any experience that has unified Southerners more than anything it is the shared experience of hardship and suffering. For slaves, suffering began with their arrival on American soil, but for many white Southerners, the hardest era of their lives began during the American Civil War.

No American war has been more destructive or devastating than the American Civil War. More Americans died in this bloody war between countrymen than in every other American war combined. The majority of these casualties were from the Confederate side, with Confederate casualties outnumbering Union casualties three to one. The loss of life was devastating in the South, with one out of every five men meeting their end during the war from either battle or disease.[39] Families had to grieve the loss of fathers and brothers and husbands as they themselves were struggling to survive the harsh conditions of the war. Material resources were extremely scarce during the Civil War and many families struggled to get by. This struggle primarily fell on the women who were left behind while their husbands, typically the primary breadwinners of the family, went off to fight in the war. One woman even wrote to the governor of North Carolina about the dangers of starvation facing her community, warning both of the likelihood of starvation and the societal danger of living among a starving population.[40]

Southerners, feeling the increasing danger of starvation, turned their attention to subsistence agriculture. This is where the South found its footing. Initially, Northern generals were not prepared for the ability of the South to provide for itself. Attorney General of

[39] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering : Death and the American Civil War.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

[40] "Mrs. Love", Letter from Mrs. Love to Zebulon Baird Vance, March 31, 1864, *Civil War Era NC*, accessed March 9, 2022, https://cwnc.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/items/show/727.

Pennsylvania, William Bradford Reed, wrote of the South during the Civil War that, "it has been a mistake to suppose that the Confederate States were dependent on the North or West for food… no country has such self sustaining power."[41] Clearly, the North was not prepared for the agricultural capabilities of the American South, and much of this self-sufficiency is due to the production of corn. Earlier in his pamphlet, Reed writes that although the South does not produce much wheat, their corn production vastly outnumbered the corn production of the North.

Corn production was critical to the survival of the South, especially considering that blockades and sieges were two of the primary tactics employed by the Union army to win the war. The North began the war with a technological advantage over the South, having more factories to outfit soldiers with weapons, clothing, and supplies and far more extensive transportation systems. In order to maintain this advantage, the North was careful to block any access the South might have to trading partners. Southern cotton found itself the primary target of this attack. The Northern blockade of Southern seaports successfully kept the South from being economically self-sufficient during the war. The blockade crippled the South by preventing the Confederacy from importing important materials such as iron, but it also blocked their ability to export goods. Without the income from cotton, many farmers found themselves economically devastated.[42]

Although the South surprised the North in its agricultural resilience, this did not negate the devastating effects of siege and blockade on the health and livelihood of Southerners. Few examples of suffering match the tragedy that befell Vicksburg, Mississippi under Union siege. Dora Miller captured the horrors of life under siege in her diary, describing the slow torture of watching the lives of people dwindle down from prosperity to

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[41] Reed, *Northern Plea for Peace,* 50.
[42] Jerry Staub, "The Development of Union Strategy," ehistory, the Ohio State University, 2022, https://ehistory.osu.edu/articles/development-union-strategy#:~:text=Based%20on%20this%20strategic%20environment,the%20capital%20of%20the%20Confederacy.

abject poverty. Literally living in holes underground to escape the shelling of the city, the people of Vicksburg were completely vulnerable to slow starvation. People begged for food of any kind, and as prices for food shot up, people were forced to rely on the little they had stored for themselves. It is times like this that cornbread became essential to survival. After everything else had been depleted, cornmeal remained. Citizens of Vicksburg relied on cornbread morning, noon, and night to withstand the harrowing siege. Cornmeal was either baked into cakes or boiled into gruel and served alongside mule meat, which was the only meat available. Though the common diet became painfully monotonous, people allied with the cornbread that kept them alive.[43] Eventually Vicksburg would surrender to the Union army, but only after over two months of systematic starvation. It is no wonder that the generation of the Civil War never outlived the legacy of this suffering and the habits that it produced.

Just as people form bonds with those who share their trauma, they also bond with the things that represent comfort in their trauma. For many people, cornbread exemplified life and sustenance. Cornbread has often been the cornerstone of hard times, being plentiful and nutritionally dense. This was an internationally recognized triumph of corn, and despite the popular notion that corn was better suited for animals than humans, people eventually gave credit to the grain for its suitability to hardship. One Irishman, Alexander Throm, wrote home about the merits of corn and cornbread, suggesting the cultivation of corn as an aid during the Irish Potato Famine of 1846. While describing the many merits and methods of cooking cornmeal, Throm wrote that, "It is believed in America that the Indian Corn, even used in this one single manner, does more, as food for man, than all the wheat that is grown in the country."[44]

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[43] Dora Miller, *A Woman's Diary of the Siege of Vicksburg,* Diary, For Old Times Sake, 1997, http://www.natchezbelle.org/oldtime/diary.htm.
[44] Alexander Throm, *Memorandum in Regard to the Use of Indian Corn as an Article of Food,* (Dublin: National Parliament, 1846), 5.

This international recognition of corn stemmed from the American affinity for the grain, but this affinity was especially strong in the South. Beginning with the Civil War and the necessity to depend on cornbread for survival, many Southerners forged deep rooted alliances with the bread that reached beyond simple preference for the grain. Cornbread became symbolic of the hardship they had faced under Union siege and attack, and this hardship would be perpetuated for years to come during the Reconstruction period. Trauma bonds people together, and this generation of the Civil War was bonded over shared suffering. This bond stretched across every divide, including race. While the racial divide between black and white people remained essential to the social hierarchy of the South, the shared experience of suffering through Reconstruction united both black and white people with their identity as Southern.

This was the moment that a distinctive "South" was truly and finally born, and along with that came the division of where cornbread belonged in the country. Originally belonging to America as a whole, the Civil War marked a period where cornbread became more essential to Southern life than Northern life. The Civil War was the absolute lowest of life for many people living in the South. Even though white families used to feast on cornbread while their slaves survived on ash cakes, eventually both would end up eating the same cornbread under the same circumstances. While cornbread was a sore reminder of their situation during times of trial, the emotional connection people forged with cornbread during the Civil War set Southerners apart from the rest of the country.

North vs South

Around the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century, corn production for human consumption was dying off in Northern and Western states. These states increasingly produced corn solely for animal feed. This was not the case in the South. In fact, the South increased its corn production as it increased other cash crop efforts. Virtually every farmer produced corn in proportion to the needs of the family, and even farmers who focused their production on cash cropping did not abandon corn production for the sake of sustenance.[45]

As discussed before, the Civil War was the most divisive moment in American history between the North and the South. Although tensions were high before the outbreak of the war, the war only solidified the attitude that there was an inherent difference between Northerners and Southerners. After winning the war, the North divided over opinions regarding how to manage the former "rebels." Despite President Lincoln's attempts to keep the peace between countrymen, ultimately the plan for Reconstruction would fall to a congress who strongly believed in sentencing harsh consequences for the South.

This division between the North and the South extended far beyond geographical differences, but was rooted in ideological, social, and economic differences. The differences that split the country are many, but few cultural debates have been more heated and long-lasting than the debate over cornbread. Even in the 21st century, the debate over cornbread remains a hot topic of conversation. Using cornbread as an investigative tool, this culturally significant bread can reveal not only the petty arguments, but the deeply rooted divides between the North and South of the United States.

Once the bread of America, cornbread has become the symbol of two opposing camps, and the main point of contention is sugar. Southern cornbread is traditionally either

[45] Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake,* 122.

unsweetened or barely sweetened, whereas Northern cornbread tends to function more like a cake made of corn, with a greater quantity of flour and sugar in the recipe. "The New England Cookbook," published in Rhode Island, lists many recipes for cornmeal breads, but every single recipe is titled some variation of "corn cake." Even the more traditional forms of cornbread use the word "cake," from "hoe cakes" to "Southern corn cake." All of the recipes include sugar, and most include ingredients such as milk and eggs.[46] Compare this to a recipe published in "Dishes and Beverages of the Old South" that gives an extensive recipe for "Plain Corn Bread: (The Best)" that includes nothing other than white cornmeal and water, with the important qualification that cornbread has to be eaten with fresh butter.[47] Other Southern recipes include more ingredients than this one, but these two examples serve to highlight the split between Northern and Southern cornbread.

Tensions over sugar in cornbread have simmered for over a century, and this tension has not always remained in the private sphere. There is at least one account of the argument about sugar in cornbread that made it onto the floor of the House of Congress. In 1909, Georgia Representative William Adamson taunted the Northern members of the House of Representatives about the "ignorance of Northern people in regards to making cornbread" and suggested that schools should be established in the north to teach their people how to make proper cornbread, not the sugar and baking soda "stuff they mix up, bake, and call cornbread."[48] This humorous account is just one example of this long-lasting battle over cornbread and identity, but this story proves that differences over cornmeal were personal to not only the poor, but the powerful.

Besides the obvious difference in ingredients, the key difference between Northern and Southern cornbread lies in the labels of these recipes. To people from the North,

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[46] Mary Goold, *The New England Cook Book,* (Newport, The Milne Printery, 1909), 19.
[47] Martha Williams, *Dishes & Beverages of the Old South,* (New York: McBride, Nast, & Company, 1913), 34.
[48] *The Birmingham age-herald,* 1906.

cornmeal is used to make cakes; to people from the South, it is used to make bread. Bread holds enormous ideological weight, and it is not by accident that Southerners identify cornbread as bread rather than cake. For Southerners, cornbread was eaten practically every day, at least once a day, in one form or another. Virtually every family has their own recipe and methods for preparing cornbread based on their circumstances and rhythms of life. Northern cornbread, however, was a luxury item, not their daily bread. Wheat was far more common and accessible in the North than in the South, so Northern bread consisted mainly of wheat flour, leaving cornmeal to be used in supplemental ways. Using "cake" to describe breads made with cornmeal exemplifies this ideological difference between the North and South in regards to the necessity of cornbread. Cake is delicious but frivolous, while bread is mundane but necessary.

This divide over cornbread represents a larger divide between these two regions: luxury in the North and poverty in the South. Although this is not all-encompassingly true, there is weight to this distinction. Especially in the period following the Civil War, the South was economically devastated while the North was flourishing in its manufacturing capacity. This gap never fully closed, and even in the 21st century, six of the ten poorest states in the United States (ranked by GDP per capita) are former Confederate states.[49] Unsurprisingly, bitterness began to grow among Southerners towards their countrymen in the North. It seemed unfair that they should labor under harsh agricultural work while Northern cities thrived economically in their trading and manufacturing industries. Cornbread, although an important figure of the argument, is not the real issue of debate between the North and South, but represents much larger systematic inequalities between the two regions that still remain to this day.

[49] "Richest States 2022," World Population Review, 2022, https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/richest-states-in-usa.

Family, Heritage, and Hospitality

Southern identity is rooted in the past. The word "Heritage" is often used to describe the deep experiential and personal connections that people have, and cultivate, towards their past. This connection with heritage forms early on as children are socialized to be part of their own distinct community, and much of this socialization occurs at home. Family life is integral to Southern culture, with many maxims and traditions being centered around one's role within and relationship to the family. As discussed before, identity is most basically rooted in the mechanisms of survival, and family, more than any other institution, is necessary for survival. Human beings cannot survive infanthood without other human beings to care for them, and in that direct dependence lies the beginnings of an intimate connection with family.

Feeding one's family has historically been the primary drive of every head of house since the beginning of time, and that has certainly been the case for Southern families. Since the South is historically a predominantly agricultural region, families were tightly connected to their homes because they needed to be at least largely self-sufficient in order to survive. The more children, the more mouths to feed, but also the more hands to labor with. Corn, as discussed before, became the saving grace of the South due to its productivity and efficiency to cultivate, allowing families to feed themselves for relatively little work. Cornbread, in a similar way, became linked to everyday family life in Southern homes as it not only made the corn crop stretch further, but offered more variety in methods of preparation. It could also be adapted to fit economic circumstance, as it could be simple enough to make in the middle of doing other household chores, but it could also be experimented with to create fun, delicate breads and puddings.[50] Therefore, cornbread became the common link in familial experience

[50] Engelhardt, A Mess of Greens.

regardless of race or class, and this is vital to the formation of a distinct, overarching Southern identity.

Cornbread is a family tradition. As with much of Southern history, the impartation of heritage is generational. In most cases, children are socialized into Southerners by their families. Families to whom Southern heritage is important tend to raise children who also strongly identify with their Southern heritage.[51] In this transaction, traditions and ideologies and customs are passed down from generation to generation, and food is often the beginning of this transaction.

When asked to describe their regional customs and culture, food tends to be one of the first things mentioned by Southerners, with cornbread being one of the most representative foods on the list.[52] It is common for families to pass down their own distinct cornbread recipe from generation to generation, and somehow, everyone's grandmother makes the best cornbread. This is partially an exaggeration, but there is truth in the claim. Traditionally, women are the homemakers of Southern households and the task of providing food for the family falls on them. Recipes, therefore, are more often than not passed down through generations of women. This method of impartation is rarely formal but occurs in informal settings such as living rooms and kitchens. Southern women tend to describe their culinary education in this way, by standing in the kitchen watching their grandma make cornbread without ever using measuring cups; every amount was simply "enough."[53] The only way to transfer the knowledge of making the bread is from person to person and from kitchen to kitchen, and this makes the process of learning how to make cornbread even more personal.

This generational tradition of cornbread is not only important for the passing down of methodology, but the passing down of morality. Hospitality is one of the central tenets of

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[51] Ashley Blaise Thompson, "Southern Identity: the Meaning, Practice, and Importance of a Regional Identity," (Vanderbilt University, 2007), 100.
[52] Thompson, Southern Identity, 72.
[53] Ronni Lundy, "The Tao of Cornbread," in Savory Memories, (The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 63.

Southern identity. Homes were places where guests were to be welcomed with kindness and generosity, and food was a central part of this practice of hospitality. Whenever guests arrived at the home, it was expected that food and drink would be offered with an open hand. Even in colonial times this was the case, and food was always prepared and ready to entertain whatever guests arrived at the house.[54] These guests did not have to be formal visitors, but anyone who entered the home was considered a guest and entitled to the same level of hospitality.

Being easy and quick to make, cornbread would often be the dish served when guests arrived hungry. One woman, Selma Evans, described in an interview how she would make fried cornbread every time men came over to work on her house. She would set the cornbread on the windowsill and the men would rush to line up in her living room to be served her special cornbread.[55] My own family has a similar tradition of cornbread and hospitality. People are always coming in and out of my grandparents' house, and my grandmother will never let someone leave her house without being offered food. Whether or not the person agrees, she will open the microwave and take out the plate of cornbread that was made that day and offer it to them. No matter the circumstance, food is part of the ritual of Southern hospitality, and by virtue of being cheap and plentiful, it is not uncommon for cornbread to be part of this ritual as well.

The value of Southern hospitality emerged from another vital part of Southern culture and identity: the church. For many Southerners, the church is their primary source of community outside of the family. Every Sunday morning, people from across the South gather in churches to practice their faith together, but the practice of Christian faith is not limited to reading scripture and singing. Fellowship is a central part of the church, and food is

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[54] Cynthia A Kierner, "Hospitality, Sociability, and Gender in the Southern Colonies," *The Journal of Southern History* 62, no. 3 (1996), 449-480.
[55] Selma Evans and Zachary Evans, Interview with Hannah Collier, *X.1. Rural South: Individual Biographies,* University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015.

typically at the center stage of these gatherings. Whether it be under the revival tent or spread out for a picnic, food is part of the practice of community and fellowship among Christians in the South.[56] This is unsurprising not only because people always like to eat, but because the church is structured as an extension of family. Christians take it literally when Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."[57] Considering the importance of food in the everyday lives of family, it is no wonder that food has become such a central part of church life.

Family, hospitality, and faith are all intricately intertwined in the South. At the core of it all is the desire for life, even in the face of scarcity. Family is secure even in turmoil, hospitality can be practiced with nothing more than a pan of cornbread, and faith is made strong in weakness. Southern is an identity that transcends every barrier and is united by shared experience and ideology. Men and women, black and white, young and old all claim this identity for themselves. Cornbread itself has adopted the same qualities that define Southerness and therefore, has become synonymous with Southern culture. Cornbread reflects the development of a distinctive Southern sense of self, and that sense of identity is what makes this bread so personally important.

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[56] James Hudnut-Beumler, "I WAS HUNGRY, AND YOU GAVE ME SOMETHING TO EAT: Hospitality, Scarcity, and Fear in Southern Christianity," In *Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table: Contemporary Christianities in the American South*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 15-41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469640389_hudnut-beumler.4

[57] Matthew 12:49-50 [New International Version]

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Food changes as people change. Cornbread's identity crisis throughout the past few centuries reflects the history of a people figuring out their own identity. History is not made without human action, and the study of cornbread is the study of humanity's behavior. Where there are people, there is bread. Bread is synonymous with survival, with family, with nutrition, with the earth; people cannot live without these vital necessities, and bread meets these major human needs. This is the importance of cornbread. Certainly there are other foods that are representative of Southern culture and identity, but nothing captures the bare essence of humanity and survival like cornbread.

The story of cornbread is the story of human agency and identity. From the beginning, corn was spread across the continent by human beings. Indengous peoples from South America brought the grain into North America as they migrated, increasing both the resilience of the grain and their dependence on it. Corn's success as a staple grain because of its nutritional sufficiency, minimal labor requirement, and efficient productivity would continue long after Europeans arrived on the continent. Dependence on a food leads to identification with that food, and as European settlers arrived and observed the ways in which Native Americans cultivated, processed, and consumed corn, they named the grain "Indian corn." Corn was known by its people and its people were known by corn. It was this intimate connection between Native Americans and their corn that laid the foundation of corn as part of Southern identity.

As English settlers flocked to North America, cornbread became critical to their survival on the new continent. Cornbread initially bridged the gap between Native Americans and English settlers, but it ended up being a source of destruction for the Native Americans in the end. Taking the grain and skills given to them, settlers made cornbread their own by combining Native American techniques with their own ingredients. At this moment in

history, a new bread was created: neither European nor North American. As America continued to grow and expand in diversity, cornbread served as a common experience that marked America as distinct from Europe. American settlers became increasingly protective of the bread, and soon it would represent the emergence of a new national identity.

Sectional divides soon began to take shape, however, and the American South emerged as a distinctive entity from the American North. Geographic factors such as climate and access to interstate markets affected the solidification of a distinct Southern identity, and corn was at the center of this geographical identity. Families across the South depended on corn daily for bread and animal feed, and through this dependence emerged a sense of identity.

Although corn was not one of the main market crops produced by the Southern states, it did play a monumental role in the backbone of the Southern economy: slavery. Slave diets consisted primarily of cornbread, as cornmeal was cheap and efficient for slaveowners to provide. Food was power in the Antebellum slave system, and while it was used by slave owners to control their slaves, it was also an avenue by which slaves managed to excersise their own power. This solidified a connection between cornbread and African Americaness, but it was during the Reconstruction years following the civil war that cornbread became deracialized and a single, unifying Southern identity emerged.

Sectionalism came to a head at the start of the Civil War. The South united as a distinct entity from the North not only because of differences in ideology, but because of the shared experience of tragedy and hardship. Hunger and grief and poverty struck the South like a death knell, and people in their time of desperation found cornbread to be a source of stability and comfort. This was a truth that slaves already knew, as cornbread had been their key to survival for the many long years of enslavement. The Civil War brought the entire

American South down to necessity, and by the end of the war both free and freedmen alike found that cornbread was their bread of necessity.

Even beyond national events, cornbread is intertwined with necessity. Family is linked to survival from infanthood into adulthood, but in practically every way, this survival connects back to food. Tragedy, hardship, pain, and divergence are the foundations of the postwar South, but these aches were overtime stoked into culture. Opposition to the North created unity in the South, and people found that shared hardship brought them together. One of these traditions of hardship was eating cornbread, and so cornbread became a central, distinct part of Southern identity. Being part of Southern identity, it found its way into practically every Southern practice, from family to church to hospitality. Now, cornbread is known across the world as a pillar of Southern cuisine, and Southern is known as its own distinct and unique identity.

Identity is personal and abstract, making it impossible to fully catalog in academia. Food, however, is a powerful tool that can be used to analyze human attitudes, actions, and systems. Cornbread can be analyzed, and under the surface lies the story of a people that became united under opposition and hardship. Cornbread is practical, fundamental, and abundant. It can make much out of little and provide sustenance in the most dire of circumstances. This is the story of cornbread, and it is also the story of the South. The American South is the “cornbread country,” and its countrymen belong to their land just as much as it belongs to them.

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