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Eating Your Way Through the Mississippi Delta History:

Food as a Reflection of Settlement Patterns and Assimilation

(N.B. : This is preliminary planning for an extended lesson at the middle school level. It represents a rough blueprint, neither polished nor fully developed.)

“While it is true that most foods eaten in the Delta are eaten elsewhere, it is also true that the brand name “Mississippi Delta” can be applied to a unique set of foodways that has grown out of the fusion of ethnic traditions that reflect the Delta’s singular heritage. African slaves and freedmen brought okra, black eyed peas, watermelon and sorghum from Africa. Chinese brought rice, soybeans, and bananas. Indigenous Americans contributed corn, peppers, peanuts, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and squash. Italian and Lebanese brought pasta, and collards greens and Mexicans brought tamales. The Mississippi itself added catfish. All of these ingredients melded together in a recognizable cuisine: cornbread, yams, fried fish and chicken, okra and tomatoes, rice, and banana pudding, along with biscuits, barbecue, slaw, pimento cheese, chicken spaghetti, and sweet tea — a cuisine loved by all Delta citizens regardless of ethnicity, color, age or class.”

(From The Delta Menu:
http://www.deltadirections.org/delta_region/delta_culture/cuisine.html)

i. Foundation:

Prior knowledge from previous forays into culinary history as a medium for understanding culture:

Columbian Exchange (transmission and impact of Old World and New world ingredients)

Acadian to “Cajun: An Odyssey (the transformation of cuisine due to change of climate, environment, & indigenous traditions)

African influence on in Southern Cookery (how 18th-century English

cooking was transformed by the institution of slavery as well as new ingredients)

Survey of American history through the Louisiana Purchase

I. Main ideas:

Factors influencing change and continuity in immigrant/"native" culture

Foodways as a tool/window for understanding history

Cultural diversity & evolution in a geographically delineated region:
the Delta

II. Specific objectives /Vermont Standards

Historical Connections

6.4 Students identify major historical eras and analyze periods of transition in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations world wide, to interpret the influence of the past on the present. This is evident when students:

6.4.d. Identify and sequence patterns of change and compare historical data from Vermont, the U.S. and the world.

Geographical Knowledge

6.7 Students use geographical knowledge and images of various places to understand the present, communicate historical interpretations, develop solutions for problems, and plan for the future. This is evident when students:

6.7.aa. Describe such spatial patterns as population distributions, land use patterns, climate, transportation networks in Vermont, the United States, and the world;

Movements and Settlements

6.8 Students analyze the factors and implications associated with the historical and contemporary movements and settlements of people and groups in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations world wide. This is evident when students:

6.8.aa. Analyze and evaluate the causes and effects, processes and patterns of human movements, both chosen and forced in the community, Vermont, and the world (e.g., impact of transportation, technology);

6.8.bb. Describe the impact of voluntary and involuntary migration on physical and human systems (e.g., Irish potato famine, spread of Islam, Native American displacement, California gold rush; and

6.8.d. Recognize push/pull factors related to migration and settlement. Explain how physical and cultural factors relate to the location of settlements; (e.g. transportation systems, communication networks, government policy, land use, economic and social patterns)

Concepts of Culture

6.13 Students understand the concept of culture, including the cultures of indigenous peoples, in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations world wide. This is evident when students:

6.13.aa. Investigate the factors that make us human in different cultural and social settings (e.g., language, arts, literature); and

6.13.bb. Identify and analyze key ways in which culture is transmitted, (e.g. oral tradition, media, migration, and conquest), and the key forces of cultural change (e.g., technological, economic, political, military).

Enrichment: See Extensions (below).

Remediation:

Modeling: demonstrations & examples to enhance student understanding

Visual cues: words, diagrams & images to re-enforce key ideas

Language: use of essential vocabulary, clear syntax & the restating of important ideas

Groupings: engineered for developing student confidence & engagement and to maximize learning

III. Motivation: “Keep on eating” by Memphis Minnie

<http://www.we7.com/#/track/Keep-On-Eating!trackId=2276651>

Day 1:

Have music playing as students enter the classroom

Listen, sing-along, locate culinary references.

Discussion:

What they might include were they writing a piece of music?

Brainstorm new version?

What things might influence what foods would be mentioned in such a song?

(This would be a review if prior knowledge)

Time (historical events, settlement patterns, technological advances, etc.)

Place (location, climate, natural resources, physical geography, etc.)

Culture (beliefs. agricultural practices, technology, aesthetics)

Questioning:

“To go along with your study of the evolution of American music, specifically, the blues, we are going to be looking at the culinary traditions of the Mississippi Delta. Who knows where that is? Any ideas? Clues from the name?” (Students will know about/locate the Mississippi River and the state of Mississippi.) “What about delta?” (They will know the Greek letter delta, and perhaps have a sense of the geographic term) After some ideas, have someone look delta up. As they zero in, show them a physical map of Mississippi and ask, given the meaning of delta, what area would be an

alluvial plain. Explain that, given the regions distinctive location and characteristics, it developed a distinctive culture which not only gave birth to the blues, but also a unique cuisine that reflects its setting over time. Perhaps close with a K>W>L brainstorm.

IV. Study/Learning

Day 2: Recipe Sorts:

Model categorizing recipes by origin through the analysis of ingredients, technique and presentation w/student input through questioning

Student Recipe Sort :

In table groups students will sort collection of Delta recipes with the objective of figuring out the cultural groups who settled in the area. Report out on conclusions drawn with supporting evidence. To make the point of the danger of interpreting partial evidence, not all groups will have recipes reflecting all major groups. Include tamales as sort of the red herring

Day 3: Introduce the task, which is to find out more about the experience /influence of one of the cultural groups of the Mississippi Delta and present this information to the class. Divide Class into groups, assigning each a cultural group: Planter, African-American, Chinese, Italian, Jewish (German/Russian).

Each student group will be responsible for the following related to their cultural group:

Timeline of Settlement

Map/graphs representing change in distribution/population over time

Information concerning the motivation for settlement and place/role within social/economic structure

Supporting images (photos,, etc.) with full labels & citations.

A Delta dish (to share) that reflects the influence of this group and is analyzed using a Venn diagram

Extensions:

Find a blues song w/lyrics that mentions your group or a food representative of your group to play for our culminating event and create a biographical snapshot of the artist.

Write/ perform/teach to class alternative lyrics to “Keep on Eating” to reflect the experience/cuisine of your group (based on “Write a blues poem” in Delta Foodways: a Fun Food Facts Workbook/ Lee Aylward and Luther Brown) .

Compare/contrast the experience of your group to that of one of

the groups that settled you region (chart, Venn, maps, graphs and/or essay).

Procedure:

1. Group should divide tasks
2. Individuals do group-specific background reading, taking notes relevant to assignment.

Settlement:

<http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/299/mississippis-territorial-years-1798-1817>

African-American:

<http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/45/a-contested-presence-free-blacks-in-antebellum-mississippi-18201860>

Southern Italian <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/88/italians-in-mississippi>

Chinese

<http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/86/mississippi-chinese-an-ethnic-people-in-a-biracial-society>

German Jewish <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/90/jews-in-mississippi>

3. Students should plan/research/begin tasks.

Day 4 & 5: continue to work on tasks and bring them to completion.

V. Culmination:

Day 6:

Display of work and summary presentations during class

Delta lunch w/ music during lunch/recess

VI. Assessment:

Students will be assessed individually and as a group on the accuracy and completeness of content, clarity and graphic neatness of presentation

VII. Materials & Sources (in addition to those included above):

assignments sheet, including specific expectations & timeline for

completion, and assessment rubric (to be developed)
a recipe archive (to be developed)
a photo archive (to be developed)

Boykin, Deborah. "At Home in the Delta."

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/Festival1997/athomein.htm>

Ferris, Marcie Cohen. "Feeding the Jewish Soul in the Delta Diaspora" in
Southern Cultures (v.10, no. 3, Fall , 2004, pp. 52-85)

Matza Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South (UNC Press,
2005)

Best of Bayou Cuisine (Quail Ridge Press).

Starr, Kathy. Soul of Southern Cooking (New South Books, 1989)

Tamales: http://www.tamaletail.com/recipe_howto.shtml

Catfish:

<http://www.saveur.com/article/Our-Favorite-Foods/Pride-of-the-Delta>

General: <http://uwf.edu/tprewitt/sofood/past.htm>

http://www.keyingredients.org/minor_pages/004_classroom.asp

<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>

Chinese: <http://www.e-cookbooks.net/articles/delta.htm>