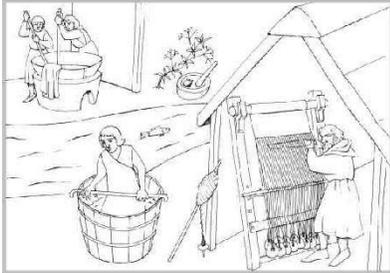


# Cooking 101

## In the 1600s

When our Pilgrim ancestors left England for Holland in 1608, they were eager for changes that would allow them to worship in the manner that they had practiced for fifty years. When they



A fuller made wool more full

arrived in Holland, they were able to worship in the open, but they had to adjust to those changes. Housing and work was scarce and the language was very different. The English immigrant children had to work to help support families. Some of the children worked as a fuller for a wool weaver. The fuller made the wool more full by pressing the wool into tubs of stale urine with their feet so that the fibers would expand with the fluid. This method was also used to “clean” the wool enabling the dye to set into the woven fabrics.

Some children were fortunate enough to work making ribbons, lace or working at bakeries to make pancakes called *pannekoeken*. Dutch homes did not have ovens so bread-baking was done by bakeries in town. Homes had fireplaces which gave warmth, light and a place for cooking hodgepodge, hutsput in Dutch, inexpensive cuts of meats for soups and stews. The young girls most likely shared their newly-acquired baking talents to treat the family to sugary *pannekoeken*. In his book, *Strangers and Pilgrims, Travellers and Sojourners*, Jeremy Bangs describes how a thick wool cloth would hang along the mantel. This cloth may have been used to direct the smoke from the fireplace away from the room and up the chimney. The fireplace was certainly the heart of the home and most likely how the familiar term, *hearth and home* originated.



The Pancake Bakery by Pieter Aertsen

After about ten years in Holland, the English Separatists (our Pilgrim ancestors) began wanting to make another change from the Dutch lifestyle that they had grown to dislike. This next change would involve a very long trip on a cargo ship called the *Mayflower*, where passengers were not allowed to cook. Since most of the 66-day trip over the Atlantic Ocean was terribly rough, most passengers lost their appetite anyway (and more). It was also very dangerous to cook in the old wooden ship, so the only cooking to be done was by the ship’s cook for the ship’s crew.

The *Mayflower* Pilgrims and strangers fed their families foods that they had packed for the voyage. They dined on moldy cheeses, salty meats, dried fish and **ship’s biscuits**. Many hundreds of biscuits were baked, stacked and packed before they sailed. These simple, dry biscuits only consisted of flour and water (think of ornaments you have made)! Actually, if you have sampled one yourself, you realized why the *Mayflower* passengers used them as a snack food. Try baking some this summer to share at your Thanksgiving dinner ... they will keep in a tightly covered container until then.



Ship's biscuits - Internet photo

In December 1620, the Pilgrims declared Plymouth would become their colony and they began to build structures for their families.

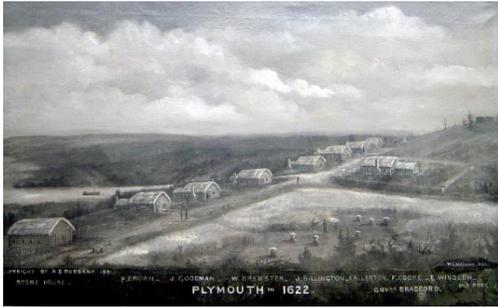


Photo shared by Plimoth Plantation

By the year 1621, households were the center of the family, just as they are today and cooking was one of the most important functions of the home. The very first structures in Plymouth Colony only had a fire pit inside with an opening for the smoke to hopefully escape. When fireplaces were added, they were constructed large enough to take span an entire wall. Sometimes large sections of trees were dragged into the home to fuel the fire, because once the fire was lit, they needed to keep it lit. Cooking was a day-long activity and the coals kept them warm at night.

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Plimoth Plantation photo



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Initially, a green tree limb was used as a **lug pole** and was supported across the fire for heavy metal pots to hang. One of the pots was always filled with hot water and another with soups or stews. Another pot might have been strictly used for puddings. Pilgrim cooks referred to foods eaten with a spoon as spoon meats. In England, some spoon meats had been made with flour in a cloth bag and the name for it was hasty pudding. Since there was no wheat grown in Plymouth, the cooks made a pudding with corn flour because the Wampanoag had taught them to successfully grow corn. Hasty pudding made with cornmeal (this link has an interesting history) was re-named Indian Pudding and it is still enjoyed today.

Families brought heavy cooking pots from England and Holland. A bake kettle was made by placing hot coals from the fire under the kettle and on its lid. They could cook either cook the food quickly or slowly, depending upon how many coals the experienced Pilgrim cook used.

Since the Pilgrims and English colonists had very little experience at hunting, trapping or fishing, they were very frustrated to see so many animals roaming the woods and swimming in the stream. Until they learned the techniques of trapping fish and wild game from the Wampanoag, they traded meats for knives, beads or blankets. Otherwise, the English were forced to eat vegetarian. Their diet consisted of *herbs* (salad herbs) and *roots* (carrots and potatoes). To make the vegetable stews tastier, they would add spices such as pepper, ginger and cinnamon and then color this hodgepodge with juice from beets or flower petals! The ship's biscuits that had sustained the colonists on the *Mayflower*, would be crumbled into soups or stews to thicken the sauces of the spoon meats.

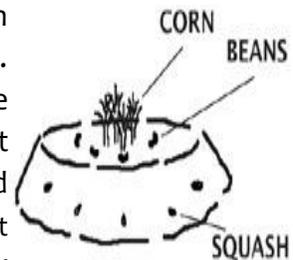


Wampanoag taught the colonists to make and use fish traps made of reeds - photo from the Internet

Having survived a severe drought and near starvation the first year, the Pilgrims slowly began to prosper and the population was growing with each ship that brought family members and newcomers from England. Thanks to the Wampanoag, they were getting better at fishing and hunting. They even learned to enjoy the commonplace lobster, eel, fowl and venison. Wild animals were a source of food to feed a crowd! The gridiron was used to quickly grill sections of meat while a spit was used for larger portions of meat. A spit was fashioned from a metal rod, a pulley and rope to turn the spit. The cook would turn the meat several times which would tighten the rope. When released, the meat would turn itself, therefore cooking the meat on all sides.

When cattle were brought to Plymouth from England, milk was initially accepted as a use for butter or to make cakes and puddings but not for drinking! Beer was the beverage preferred by the family, including the children.

Since there were no stores or shops in Plymouth as there had been in England and Holland, they had to grow and prepare their own vegetables. Vegetable seeds were brought on the *Mayflower* and by other settlers. The Wampanoag taught the colonists to plant their bean and squash seeds at the base of the corn. As the corn grew, the beans climbed and wound around the corn stalks while the squash provided a ground cover of shade that helped the soil retain moisture. This was a very clever thing the Wampanoag did and is still referred to as the Three Sisters Method of gardening. We have since discovered that beans add nitrogen to the soil, a nutrient which the corn depletes as it grows, making this a very beneficial combination.



Hunting and fishing certainly created challenges in preparing the catch of the day. While the Plymouth colonists were planting and weeding their gardens they were thinking about food. They were sharing ideas and recipes for the fresh meat and selecting herbs for flavoring the soup of the day. As family cooks today, we will wander through the store, considering what to prepare and how to prepare it. We also share recipes and even select herbs to flavor our own soups of the day. However, if today's cook cannot think of a proper meal for the night, thoughts turn to a nearby drive-through for a fast food meal to unwrap at home. The Pilgrims' only fast foods would have been berries, nuts, vegetables ... or ship's biscuits.

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