

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# You Say Potato, I Say Yam

By Jessica B. Harris

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ON Oct. 3, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared the final Thursday of November to be a national holiday of Thanksgiving. That came just over a year after Lincoln made another more historic proclamation, one that directly concerned my family and their future: the Emancipation Proclamation, which had freed the enslaved in any territory “in rebellion.”

These two proclamations are visually conjoined in a stereograph made about the same time that is familiar to students of the American South. Taken by Henry P. Moore, it shows African-Americans at work on a plantation on Edisto Island, off South Carolina. They are captured in attitudes of deep concentration, posed with hoes in hands or seated around a large basket, preparing to plant. They are described as new freemen or escaped slaves □ and the tubers that they are planting are alternately labeled sweet potatoes or yams.

The image is a potent one. The men and women work intently, unsmilingly and with none of the joyful conviviality that characterizes the popular plantation images of the period □ it’s as if, though they have been freed from bondage, they can foresee the decades of sharecropping and disenfranchisement that will follow. The people depicted would have had much to be thankful for in 1863, but they were also doing the menial agricultural work that has been the lot of people of color in this country for centuries.

For the culinarily astute, however, the photo reaches back even further into the African-American past, because the crop being readied was and still is emblematic of African-American foodways.

A photo taken by Henry P. Moore. It shows African-Americans at work on a plantation on Edisto Island, off South Carolina.

Courtesy New York University Libraries



Sweet potatoes are New World tubers that were adopted by enslaved Africans on the American continent. They could be grown in the temperate climates; they could be stored in mounds and used as needed to supplement meager rations. When cooked in the ashes of a dying fire, they were a sweet treat at the end of a bone-tiring day of toil. Most important, sweet potatoes were taken to the hearts and stomachs of Africans and their descendants in the United States because they recalled the true yam of Africa.

The yam, a large hairy tuber that bears no botanical relationship to the sweet potato, grows mainly in tropical and subtropical climates and is of primary importance to many West African societies. From Ghana to Nigeria, yam festivals celebrate the desire for a bounteous harvest and the continuity of life. In languages of the West African coast, including Wolof in Senegal and Umbundu in Angola, the tuber is so popular that some variant of the word “yam” simply means “to eat.”

Slavers transporting captives from those areas on the Middle Passage provisioned themselves with yams sufficient for the voyages. But once ashore in more temperate America, the slaves found that the African tuber was unavailable, and thus substituted it with the sweet potato □ leading to centuries of botanical and gastronomic confusion. (More recently, though, true yams imported from the tropics have become available in ethnic markets in this country.)

Today Thanksgiving thrives as a beloved national feast celebrated by Americans of all ethnic origins and religions. It has expanded with the country beyond the traditional foods like turkey and corn and pumpkins that remind us of the Pilgrims’ feast and the generosity of the American Indians. On many African-American tables, next to the dressed bird, there will be a sweet potato dish, be it a casserole, a pone, a pie or the classic candied sweet potatoes topped with marshmallows.

We may call the starring ingredient sweet potatoes or, erroneously, yams, but no matter their appellation they are a culinary reminder of our national history and deserving of a place at the Thanksgiving feast.

Nearly 150 years after Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation, the United States has a first family that is a direct reflection of the Emancipation Proclamation that preceded the national holiday. It seems fitting, at our various communal tables, to muse on Lincoln's two proclamations, to consider just how far we have come and to remember all that for which we should be thankful. I hope that at the White House they are serving sweet potato pie for Thanksgiving.