

How the Hoe Cake (Most Likely) Got Its Name¹

Many American colonial-era historic sites that show hearth cooking, and many books that describe early American food, usually mention the humble hoe cake. Hoe cake is just one among many terms, including corn cake, corn pone, ash cake, Johnny cake, and journey cake for essentially the same thing. Most explanations go on to claim that a hoe cake is so-called because it was baked on the blade of a gardening hoe by slaves in the fields, who furthermore, apparently took the necessary ingredients with them to mix and bake during their mid-day break.

This explanation is so prevalent that questioning it seems absurd. Nevertheless, the evidence for it is actually quite scanty. However, there is enough evidence to demonstrate that a cooking tool called a hoe upon which these cakes were baked, is the source of the name hoe cake.

First, the prevailing opinion as espoused by William Woys Weaver, Jane Carson, and other food historians is the one in use at many historic sites. Weaver uses Elizabeth Lea's 1845 recipe, "A Virginia Hoe Cake," as one piece of evidence because her recipe reads, "[t]hese cakes used to be baked in Virginia on a large iron hoe, from whence they derive their name."² Carson uses both Philip Fithian's recollections of Nomini Hall (1770s) that state "it was 'so called because baked on a Hoe before the fire,'" and J. F. D. Smyth (1780s) who said "it was made of 'Indian corn, ground into meal, kneaded into dough, and baked on a hot, broad, iron hoe.'"³

These references, oddly, are rarely used as evidence for hoe cake etymology. The most common period source, used by Carson, Mitford M. Mathews, Frederick G. Cassidy, and many others is a British soldier's 1770s observation that reads, "Hoe-cake is Indian corn ground into meal, kneaded into a dough, and baked before a fire, but as the negroes bake it on the hoes that they work with, they have the appellation of hoe-cakes."⁴ Once this quote made its way into these books subsequent secondary sources merely refer to Lee and Fithian without actually examining the primary source. Still other articles and books just say that hoe cakes are called that because they were cooked on the hoes used by slaves (or laborers) in the fields without any source to back up that claim.⁵

The idea that slaves cooked on their field hoes is found in many 19th-century and 20th-century books as well (generally without any supporting evidence). M. Schele De Vere wrote that the "negro of former days... would dab the roughly-kneaded cake down upon his hoe, and thus bake it before the fire; the result was a hoe-cake, unsightly to the eye, but palatable enough."⁶ D. R. Hundley, quoting Dr. Hall's *Journal of Health*, wrote, "real hoe-cake, such as the black woman Jinny, my mother's cook, always baked... gets its name from the mode of baking... originally upon a hoe."⁷ And James McDonald wrote that the "hoe cake was placed on

¹ A version of this paper was published in the summer 2008 issue of *Food History News*.

² Weaver, William Woys, *A Quaker Woman's Cookbook: The Domestic Cookery of Elizabeth Ellicott Lea*, Revised Edition, Stackpole Books, 2004, 81.

³ Carson, Jane, *Colonial Virginia Cookery*, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1985, 87.

⁴ Anburey, Thomas, "Travels Through the Interior Parts of America; in a Series of Letters, Vol. II, William Lane, London, 1789, 335. This quote is found exactly the same in the following sources. Carson, 87; Cassidy, Frederick G., chief editor, *Dictionary of American Regional English*, Vol. II, Belknap Press, 1991, 1032; Mathews, Mitford M., editor, *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historic Principles*, University of Chicago, 1951, 813.

⁵ Three such books are: Goldenson, Suzanne and Simpson, Doris, *The Open-Hearth Cookbook*, Stephen Greene Press, Vermont, 1982, 31. McLaughlin, Jack, *Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder*, Henry Holt, New York, 1988, 105. Reiss, Oscar, *Blacks in Colonial America*, McFarland, North Carolina, 1997, 50.

⁶ De Vere, M. Schele, *Americanisms; The English of the New World*, Scribner, New York, 1872, 40.

⁷ Hundley, D. R., *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, Henry Price, New York, 1860, 87.

the back of the cornfield, or tobacco hilling hoe, with the shank of the hoe down, and set before the live coals; [t]his was the negro bachelor's usual mode of cooking bread."⁸

Some food historians use ex-slave narratives as proof that hoe cakes are called that because they were cooked on the back of a hoe. One example sometimes used is Mr. Beverly Jones who said, "Hoecakes was meal mixed with water in a thick batter. Got its name from some of 'em slaplin' it on a hoe an' holdin' it in de fire place till its cooked. Mother ain' done that. She used to cook hoecakes in a big iron pan, two or three at a time."⁹ Another ex-slave, Aunt Susan Kelly said essentially the same thing but said "that her mother first put the loaf on the brick to cool and then placed it in the ashes after it had browned."¹⁰ It is interesting that though these narratives say how the hoe got its name, the narrators do not give any examples of the cakes actually being cooked on a hoe; they are always cooked in a skillet, on a brick or rock, or in/on another cooking implement.

At first glance, all these references seem to suggest strongly that hoe cakes were baked on the blade of a field hoe. Further, some modern interpretation suggests that these quotes bolster the idea that hoe cakes were really only for slaves, servants, and the poor.

There is yet another possibility for hoe cake etymology. This comes from those who focus on the American Indian influence on the European colonists. Reginald and Gladys Laubin wrote that "in Algonkin dialects" ground corn shaped and baked into small, flat, round cakes "was known as *nokeg* and *hokeg*, called by the English 'no cake' and 'hoe cake;' so we [the Laubins] think the so-called 'hoe-cake' had nothing to do with being baked on a hoe but was merely an English corruption of a native word."¹¹ Though this is an interesting take on the hoe cake's history, a lack of other evidence concerning this etymology raises serious doubts about it.

It is dangerous to rely so heavily on only one source. Multiple sources compared side by side are more revealing. Carson used three sources to back her claim that hoe cakes were cooked on the blades of hoes. However, the Fithian and Smyth quotes are not actually as strong as they appear upon closer examination.

The Fithian quote, originally written on Saturday, 15 January 1774, reads, "Sup'd on chocolate, & hoe-Cake, so called because baked on a Hoe before the fire."¹² J. F. D. Smyth wrote that "Hoe-cake is Indian corn, ground into meal, kneaded into dough, and baked on a hot, broad, iron hoe."¹³ And Benjamin Latrobe, after a meal in Norfolk, wrote in March 1796 that, "Hoecake is the Meal of Maize or Indian corn, neaded into dough and baked or toasted before the fire upon a hoe till it is brown. Johnny cake is the same composition baked upon a piece of board."¹⁴ These quotes seem straightforward, but in reality they do not thoroughly describe the hoe. All they do is say that the hoe cake is cooked on a hoe. Smyth's is the most descriptive by

⁸ McDonald, James J., *Life in Old Virginia*, Old Virginia Publishing, Norfolk, 1907, 259.

⁹ As quoted in Shiflet, Lisa R., *West African Food Traditions in Virginia Foodways: A Historical Analysis of Origins and Survivals*, Master's Thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2004, 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Laubin, Reginald and Gladys, *The Indian Tipi: Its Construction and Use*, Second Edition, University of Oklahoma, 1989, 156-7. This is similar to the argument put forth concerning the word history of Johnny cake where Johnny is a bastardized pronunciation of the word journey.

¹² Fithian, Philip Vickers, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*, Hunter D. Farish, ed., University Press of Virginia, Virginia, 1978, 55.

¹³ Smyth, John Ferdinand Dalziel, *A Tour in the United States of America*, Vol. I, London, 1784, 48.

¹⁴ Carter, Edward C., ed., *Virginia Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1795-1798*, Vol. 1, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977, 79.

telling us the hoe is broad and made of iron. Without a thorough description of the hoe, some 21st-century readers might jump to the conclusion that it is similar to the gardening hoe.

At least two authors do not think so. Keith Stavely and Kathleen Fitzgerald write that bread loaves could be baked with a “the use of a hoe or bread peel.”¹⁵ Later, they go on to say that “hoe cake [is] probably derived from the fact that the cakes were baked on flat, hoe-like paddles.”¹⁶ According to them, a hoe is possibly another name for a bread peel. Unfortunately, because they do not cite a source for this explanation, their book can only act as a tantalizing clue about what evidence might exist in colonial and other sources concerning hoes as a type of baking utensil. Fortunately, an oft-quoted letter from Nelly Custis Lewis, a granddaughter of Martha Washington exists that sheds a bit more light on the situation.

On 7 January 1821, Lewis wrote to a friend in Philadelphia about George Washington’s fondness for hoe cakes and then described how to cook this “bread business.” Within the letter she wrote, “drop a spoonful at a time on a hoe or griddle (as we say in the south).”¹⁷ This is quite an interesting sentence because it indicates that, at least in Virginia and maybe other parts of the South, the terms ‘hoe’ and ‘griddle’ may be interchangeable. This in turn seems to provide at least one bit of supporting evidence for the claim that there could be a cooking instrument called a hoe. With this in mind, a piece from Edward Eggleston’s collection of short stories and tales detailing eighteenth-century Maryland indicates that there was a baking hoe. While describing a plantation house he wrote “the farther end was the vast, smoke-blackened stone fireplace, with two large rude andirons... a skillet and a gridiron stood against the jamb on one side, a hoe for baking hoe cakes and a little wrought-iron trivet were in order on the other.”¹⁸ Though he did not describe the hoe, Lewis’ letter demonstrates that this hoe is a baking, not a gardening, instrument.

In other regions and times, we see two cookbooks from the early 1900s pair the terms hoe and griddle. Evora Perkins from Massachusetts wrote that a “hoe cake is the [corn] pone mixture baked on a hoe or griddle....”¹⁹ And in Great Britain, S. Beaty-Pownall’s recipe for hoe cake told the reader to “bake on a hot girdle [griddle] or a ‘hoe.’ Serve hot with a piece of butter on each. Old [American] Southern coloured cooks made the cakes on their ‘hoes’ at a wooden fire, whence their name.”²⁰ It is definitely curious to see these terms crop up in a British cookbook.

A question remains though about when the terms ‘hoe’ and ‘griddle’ (or ‘hoe’ and ‘peel’) became interchangeable. This question is important because if a griddle reminded someone of a field hoe blade after hoe cakes received their name, then using this one quote to argue that hoe cakes got their name from being cooked on a baking instrument called a hoe is not a sound argument. Both more and earlier evidence for making this claim needs to be brought forth.

One aspect of the term hoe cake that needs to be answered is when the first known reference to the term occurred. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a W. Logan twice wrote in his 1745 journal that he “breakfasted on Tea and Hoe Cake Bread, which we have done

¹⁵ Stavely, Keith and Fitzgerald, Kathleen, *America’s Founding Food: The Story of New England Cooking*, University of North Carolina Press, United States, 2004, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

¹⁷ Letter between Nelly Custis Lewis and Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 7 January 1821; original letter owned by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. The letter’s provenance was given to the author by Mary Thompson of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association.

¹⁸ Eggleston, Edward, *Duffels*, D. Appleton, New York, 1893, 29.

¹⁹ Perkins, Evora Bucknum, *The Laurel Health Cookery*, Laurel Publishing, Massachusetts, 1911, 454.

²⁰ Beaty-Pownall, S., *The “Queen” Cookery Books: Bread, Cakes, and Biscuits*, Vol. XI, Horace Cox, London, 1904, 61.

in common.”²¹ One should notice that Logan does not describe on what the “Hoe Cake Bread” was baked.

Ten years later, George Fisher, traveling from Williamsburg to Philadelphia, wrote on 12 May 1755, that at Mann’s house for breakfast Mann “baked me [Fisher] what they call an English Hoe Cake, or a Cake made of Wheat Flour, with some good Butter....”²² Traveling a little farther that day, at noon Fisher arrived at R–n’s ordinary and was told that all he could have for lunch was “a piece of broiled rusty Bacon and an Indian Hoe Cake.”²³ Like Logan, Fisher does not mention on what the hoe cakes were cooked. The interesting thing about Fisher’s account is the mention of the *English* Hoe Cake. As he said, it was a wheat-based cake, not one made out of Indian corn. Because Fisher indicated that Mann said why they distinguished the English from the Indian Hoe Cake, it seems that the wheat-based cake is an adaptation of the Indian Hoe Cake. What that specifically means though as far as naming history goes, is a little unclear. But, as for the Logan and Fisher accounts, these seem to be the only two known references to hoe cake before the 1760s.

At this point only travelers’ accounts have been examined for evidence of hoe cakes or a cooking utensil called a hoe. To see if other evidence exists, newspaper advertisements and probate inventories should also be examined. When one looks at the *Virginia Gazette*, two advertisements seem to corroborate the idea that there is a cooking utensil called a hoe. Both advertisements are from December 1771. In these two advertisements, one for John Greenhow’s Store and a separate one by Allan & Turner, the term “bread hoes” appears in the listings of goods for sale.²⁴ However, before using these advertisements as true supporting proof, it should be stated that these could be either a printing error whereby the letter ‘o’ was accidentally replaced by the letter ‘a.’ Also, this could be a regional phonetic spelling of the word ‘broad’ and what is actually for sale are broad hoes for field work. Fortunately, the probate records provide more evidence for cooking utensils called ‘bread hoes.’

A relatively cursory examination of Southern inventories and wills turns up more than half a dozen instances of items called ‘bread hoes.’²⁵ One such inventory from North Carolina is John Clardy’s November 1855 inventory that includes “2 skillets, 1 tea kettle, 1 frying pan, 3 pr hooks, 1 bread hoe, 2 pots racks, 2 tin sugar dishes....”²⁶ Another, from Virginia, is Susan Collet’s January 1753 inventory that lists, “2 Trivets 2/6, A Coffee Pot 4/, A Grid Iron Bread hoe 5/ - - - 0..11..6.”²⁷ If a cursory examination finds a handful of these items, it is likely that a more in-depth study would find more examples of something called a ‘bread hoe.’

Bear in mind that transcribed probate might contain orthographical errors where ‘broad’ was misread as ‘bread.’ Additionally, the original inventory might read ‘bread,’ per the phonetic spelling discussed above. And finally, another challenge could be raised by saying that ‘bread hoes’ might be gardening tools listed with other iron items for accounting simplicity. All of the above critiques are valid, and may be true for some of the inventories. However, the above inventories were chosen because the term ‘bread hoe’ only is grouped with kitchen implements.

²¹ *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, 773.

²² Fisher, George, “Narrative of George Fisher (Continued),” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. XVII, No. 3, January 1909, 166.

²³ *Ibid*, 167.

²⁴ *Virginia Gazette*, 12 December 1771, 3; 19 December, 3.

²⁵ Probate research for this report did not look at probate records north of Maryland.

²⁶ LDS film #0,018,987, 22-3.

²⁷ York County Wills & Inventories 20, 1745-1759, 282-3.

Other ironware is listed elsewhere in the inventory; and sometimes, there is a separate line that mentions narrow and broad hoes.

A good example of this is James Warner's 1673 Maryland inventory that states, "an old skillet, a chafen dish, a hoe plate all at 25 [lbs. of tobacco]." ²⁸ Though this is not a 'bread hoe' it is a hoe (or hoe plate) listed with the kitchen items. At first, someone may say that it is just a hoe listed with the iron implements. The curious thing about this inventory though is that two lines earlier "4 broad hoes, 3 narrow hoes, 1 axe all at..." is listed. ²⁹ This definitely raises a question as to what this hoe or hoe plate is.

If one is still not convinced that the above representative inventories list a cooking, not a gardening, implement then the next two examples from Virginia are definitely unambiguous. The first, from 1770, is Robert Tucker's and it lists, "1 Spice Mortar 2/ [&] 1 baking hoe 3/9 - - - 0.5.9." ³⁰ The second, from 1803, is Peter Dyes' and it lists, "one scillet and baking hoe - - - 00.06.0." ³¹ Both of these inventories list a 'baking hoe' with kitchen implements. The name seems to speak for itself as a cooking implement.

At this point all of the above evidence should strongly suggest that there was a cooking implement called a hoe. As for what this baking hoe looked like, there is very little information on that particular aspect. The best accounting is Smyth's which only tells us the hoe is broad and made of iron. A potential clue is found in Randle Holme's *Academy of Armory* from the 1680s.

In Book III, Holme has a listing of baker's tools that includes peels. He wrote:

"In this quarter is two Instruments used by the Bakers, the one is termed an Iron Cake Peel, or a Cake or Bisket Peel; they are usually made of Iron Plate with a Socket fixed to it, for a Staff to be put in, to thrust it into the Oven: Of these they generally have two sorts, the one long, and the other short, as the two Figures in this square doth manifest: Some term them Pioneers Spades sans Handles." ³²

Though the term hoe does not appear in the description, the term plate does which could be help explain the item in James Warner inventory. Also, Holme wrote that these peels already had another term, pioneer's spades sans handles. As the image below shows, they definitely look like hoe blades.



The image on the left is a detail of the image on the right that shows baker's tools.

²⁸ Maryland Inventories and Accounts, Liber I, 1673, 169.

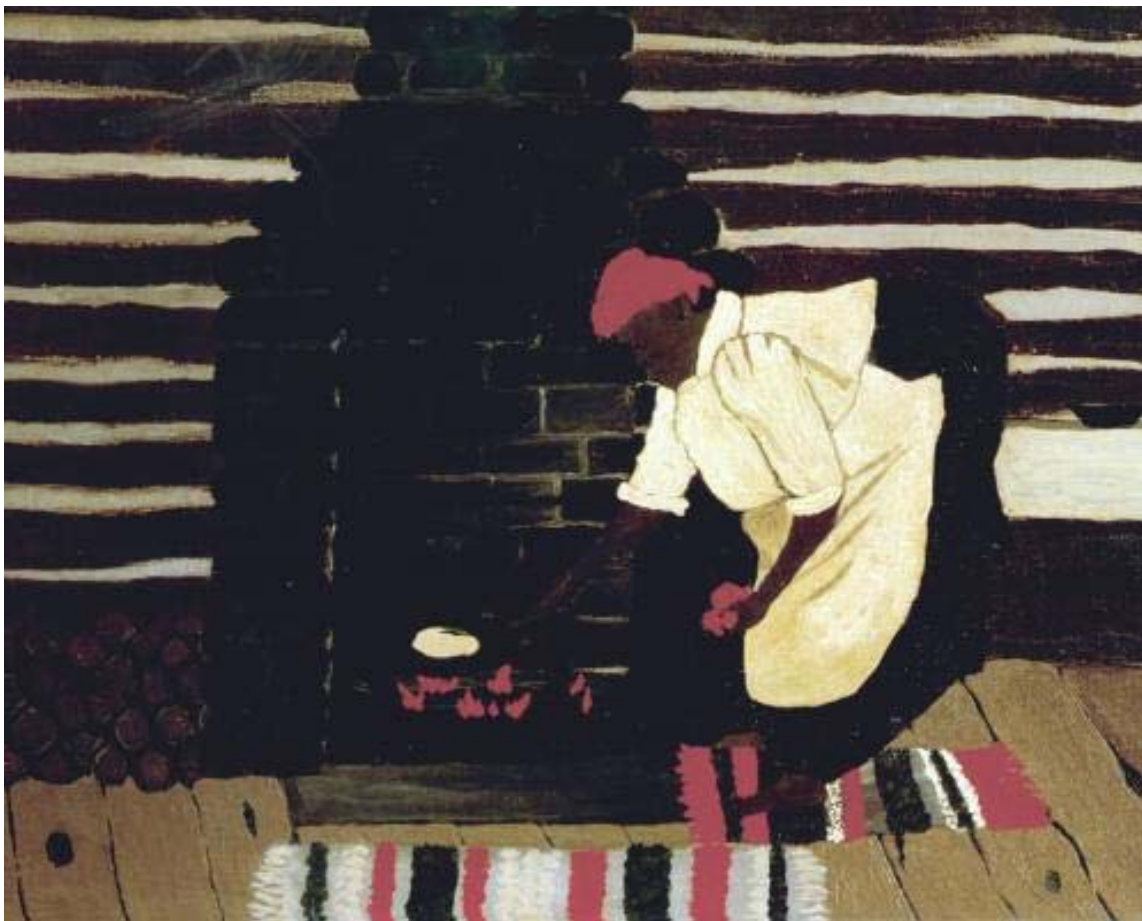
²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Norfolk County Appraisements, No. 1, 1755-1783, 119.

³¹ Norfolk County Appraisements, No. 3, 1803, 118.

³² Alcock, N. W. and Cox, Nancy, *Randle Holme's Academy of Armory*, digital media on CD-ROM, British Library, 2000, Book III, Chapter 7, Section 9. A 1780s peel in the collections of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, accession number #1885.05.01, can be examined through the Memorial Hall Museum website: <http://www.memorialhall.mass.edu>, May 2008.

When we combine pictorial and documentary evidence, the case for a hoe as cooking implement becomes even stronger. The Nelly Lewis quote and the *'Queen' Cookery Books* both report that in the southern colonies a griddle could also be called a hoe. Though they probably mean a round, hanging implement, other sources tie peels with the term hoe. From a naming standpoint, the term hoe used for a cooking implement as early as the 1670s strongly suggests that when colonists baked a mixture of Indian corn (or wheat) and liquid on a peel or griddle, this food item became known as a hoe cake. The name stuck even when a hoe cake was cooked in a skillet or pan, as shown the painting below.



Horace Pippin, *The Hoe Cake*, 1946.