

Lobster Lore

For years many people have claimed colonial lobster folklore as fact. But what's the real story?

by Marina Santos May 11, 2021

Lobster Tales: An Introduction to the Myth



Devis, Arthur. *Turbot, Lobster, and Sea Shells*. 1772, National Trust, Kedleston Hall and Eastern Museum, Derbyshire.

It's one of New England's most common folktales: the Massachusetts Bay Colony fed indentured servants lobster until they were fed up. As legend has it, they rioted until the colony was forced to sign documents limiting the frequency of serving lobster.

Upon further investigation, however, many cracks in the story begin to appear. While this is the predominant narrative, there are

many versions of this story that vary depending on the storyteller. Some claim that the real story started with a prison riot, or a law enacted to protect indentured servants. Other stories don't mention a riot or law, but claim that

lobster was so abundant and detested that it was considered a “poor man’s meal”, reserved for prisoners, apprentices, and enslaved people. So what parts of this story are true? Or is it all just a bunch of crustacean misinformation?

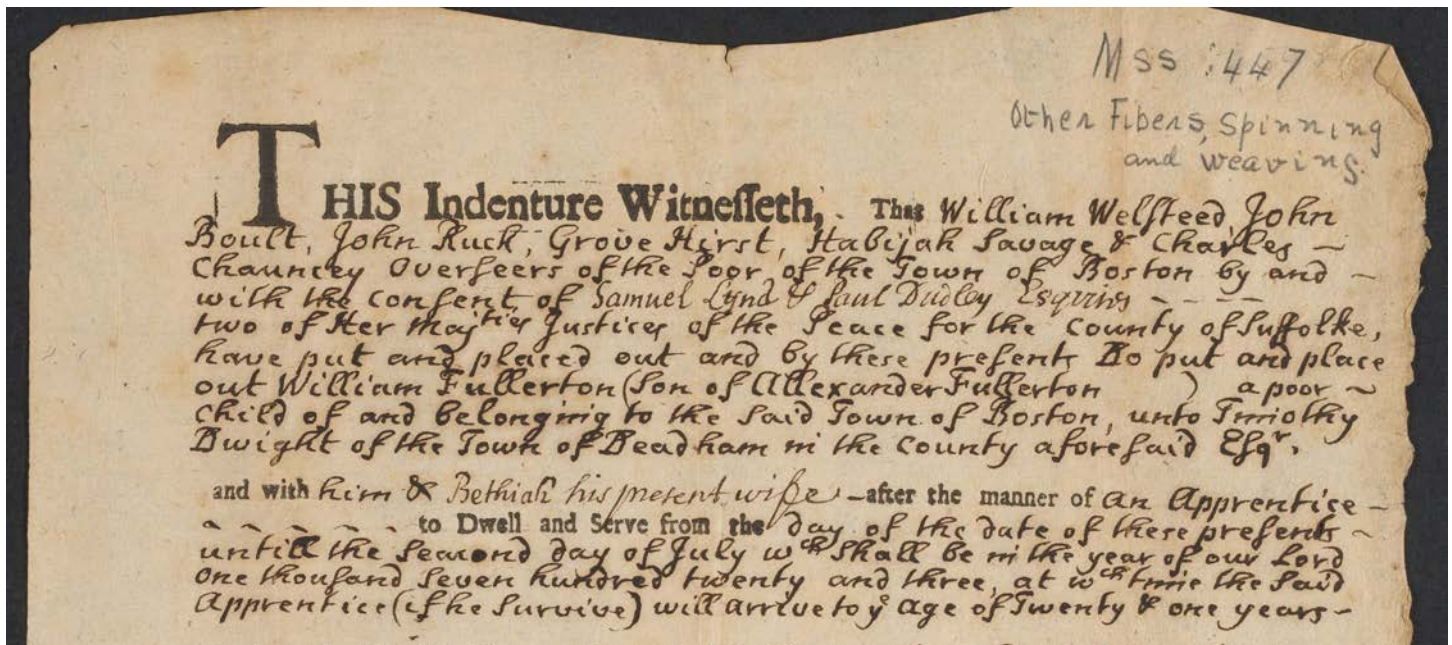


Crustaceans and Incarceration: Disproving the Myth

"Lobster was literally low-class food, eaten only by the poor and institutionalized. Even in the harsh penal environment of early America, some colonies had laws against feeding lobsters to inmates more than once a week because it was thought to be cruel and unusual, like making people eat rats." — "Consider the Lobster" by David Foster Wallace

Many iterations of this story claim that Massachusetts' colonial prisons were prohibited from feeding lobster to prisoners more than a few times a week. However, after inspecting the conditions of county jails during this era, it is clear that this never happened. In 1635, Puritan colonists (who had fled persecution themselves) opened the Boston Gaol, the first jail in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The main purpose was to hold people short-term as they awaited trial, and it

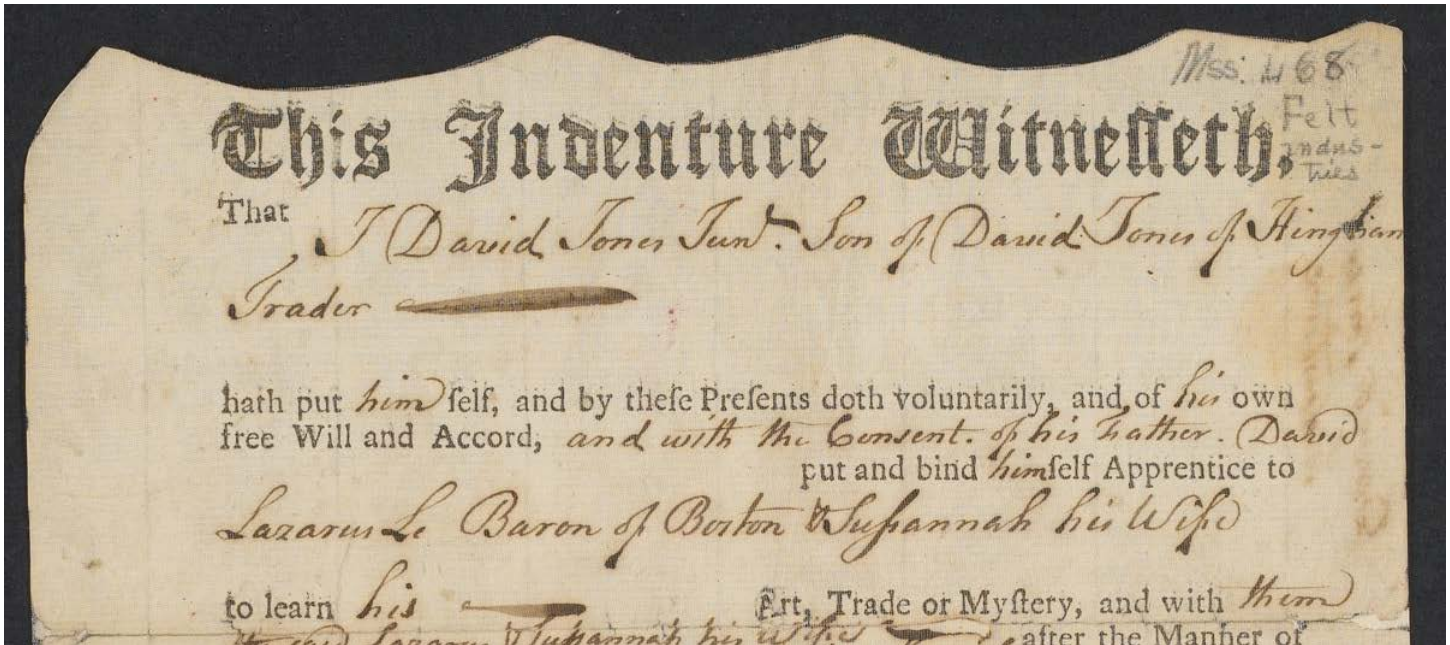
typically housed less than 50 prisoners. Gaols ran on considerably low budgets, so it's possible that the fare included lobster which didn't fetch high prices at the time. Prisoners were expected to pay for their own food, and if they were unable to do so, then they were only afforded bread and water until they could petition for release. Given the short terms of stay, low number of prisoners, and the typical prison fare, it is unlikely that any organized resistance over lobster occurred. In fact, aside from a short riot in the Boston Gaol in 1736, there is little evidence of significant organized riots in Massachusetts' county jails during this time period. Conditions were so bad that inmates frequently petitioned the government for anything from firewood to access to fresh air. However, there is no evidence in any of Massachusetts' state archives to verify the claims that any petition, act, or bill was ever enacted to protect county inmates from eating too much lobster.



Indentured Servitude in Colonial Massachusetts

Jamestown, the first settlement in what was to be the Thirteen Colonies, was established in 1607. Ten years later, the first indentured servants arrived in North America. In exchange for free passage, indentured servants would typically work for four to seven years, after which they would receive freedom

and a parcel of land. The work was grueling and punishments were frequent, but indentured servants were bound by contracts that afforded them legal rights that were not offered to Native Americans and enslaved people. As cheap laborers, they ate scraps, which may have included lobster, depending on their geographic location.



If the indentured servants misbehaved, then their contract could be broken or extended. This would put them in a very unfavorable position, and it is unlikely that eating too much lobster would be at the top of their list of grievances. Similar to the prison myth, there is no evidence in the archives of any law, bill, or petition to limit indentured servants' consumption of lobster. Additionally, there is no evidence of any stipulations included in written contracts that limit the frequency of eating lobster, making it very likely that this story is just another piece of lobster lore.



Hook, *Timeline*, and Sinker!



1607

Jamestown — the first permanent English settlement in North America — is founded.

1617

First indentured servants arrive in North America. Massachusetts did not retain large numbers of indentured servants since there was primarily a demand for skilled labor. This makes the possibility of organized resistance even less likely.

1635

Puritans open the Boston Gaol, the first jail in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

1736

The first riot in the Boston Gaol on record takes place over poor living conditions.

1783

Great Britain signs the Treaty of Paris, formally recognizing the United States' independence and ending the colonial period.

1820

Maine becomes a state. Some versions of the lobster lore claim that the riots took place in Maine, not Massachusetts, but given the timeline of the myth Maine would have still been a part of the Commonwealth.



Lousy Lobsters: Historical Representations of Pesky Crustaceans

Although contracts and laws regulating the frequency of lobster consumption are only mythical, colonial lobster consumption was still drastically different from what we see today.

“ You lobster,” “ You bloody-back,” “ You coward” and “ You dastard,” are but some of the expressions proved.— What words more galling? What more cutting and provoking to a soldier? To be reminded of the colour of his garb, by which he was distinguished from the rest of his fellow citizens; to be compared to the most despicable animal, that crawls upon the earth, was touching indeed a tender point, To be stigmatized with having smarted under the lash, at the halbert, to be twitted with so infamous an ignominy; which was either wholly undeserved, or a grievance which should never have been repeated:—I say to call up and awaken sensations of this kind, must sting even to madness. But accouple these words with the suc-



“To be compared to the most despicable animal, that crawls upon the earth, was touching indeed a tender point...”

The previous passage came from a contentious murder trial from Massachusetts in 1770. On multiple pages of the trial’s record there is documentation of inflammatory language

coupled with crude crustacean comparisons. There is also evidence from this period of British soldiers being compared to lobsters, which in this case was used to distinguish provincials from the general population.

next unto the Firmament——an Author's Cock-Lort.

AS soon as thou awakest from thy Night's Sleep, give one mighty Stretch-out. Expand thy Limbs, even as doth a Lobster. Yawn, rub thy Eyes, acknowledge Day-light, and rejoice that thou art alive. Is not Sleep the Image of Death?



"Expand thy Limbs, even as doth a Lobster."

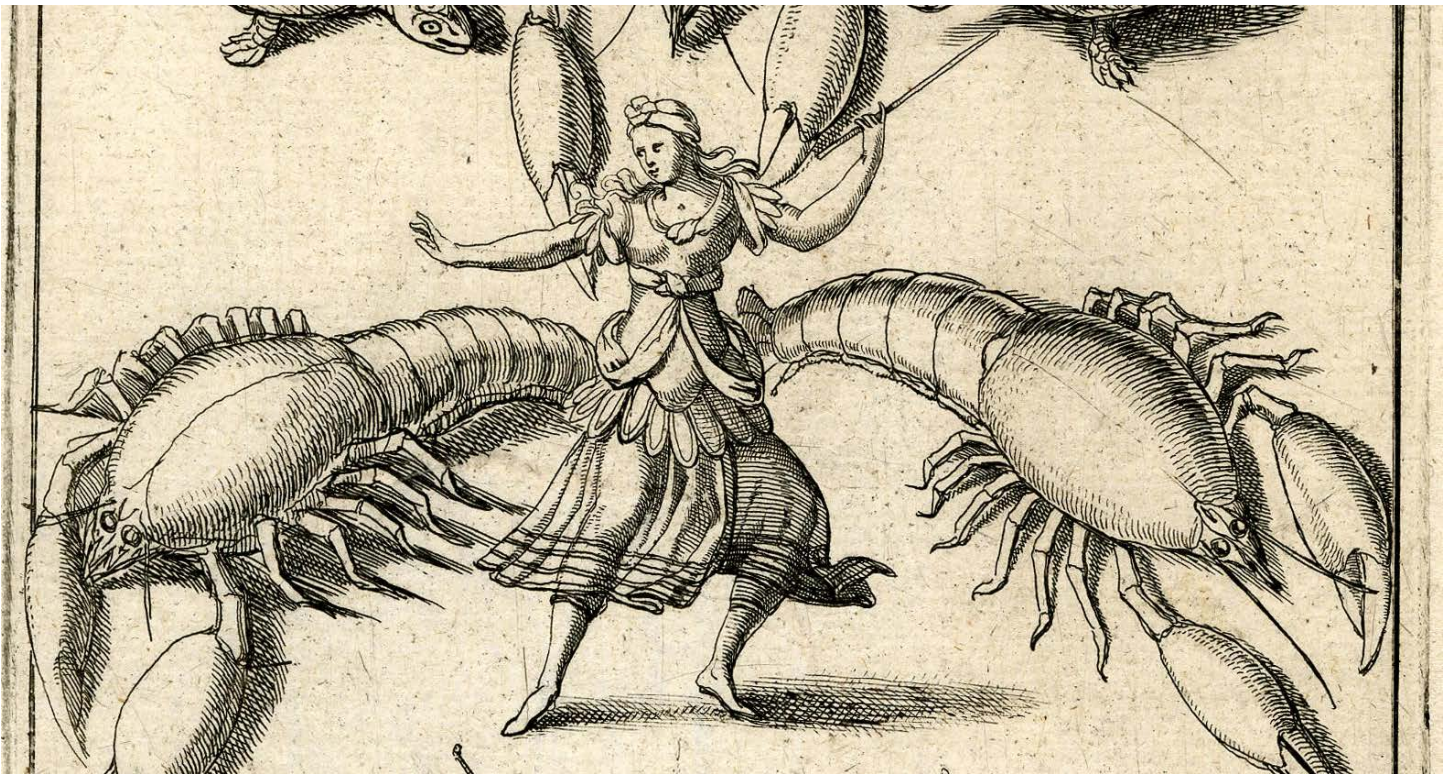
During the colonial period, lobsters were synonymous with laziness and cowardice. When threatened, lobsters may use their tails to swim backward to safety. By depicting Napoleon heading into battle on a lobster, the cartoonist suggests that Napoleon is a coward.

young, preached at Harpers hill yet,
To Cambridge over Bunker, Winter
& Prospect Hill. Supped at, the-
and, upon **Lobster** &c. Lodged at Sprague



In 1651 Governor William Bradford described the destitute

conditions of the earliest colonial households: “The best dish they could present their friends with was a lobster... [without] anything else but a cup of fair spring water.” By the time Bostonian bookseller Benjamin Guild “supped upon Lobster” in 1776, lobster was held in slightly higher regard. Although it seemed like a benign experience, there is no documentation of him returning for more.



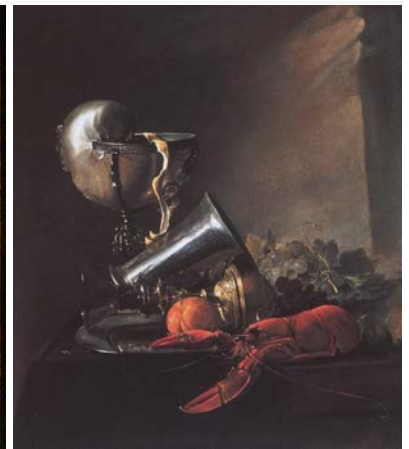
No Longer the Poor Man's Meal: Lobster as a Luxury



Given the abundance of lobster and its past “poor man’s meal” status, it is possible coastal indentured servants often ate lobster. However, no modern-day historian has found any evidence whatsoever of documentation preventing its overconsumption. Food historian Sandy Oliver researched this story

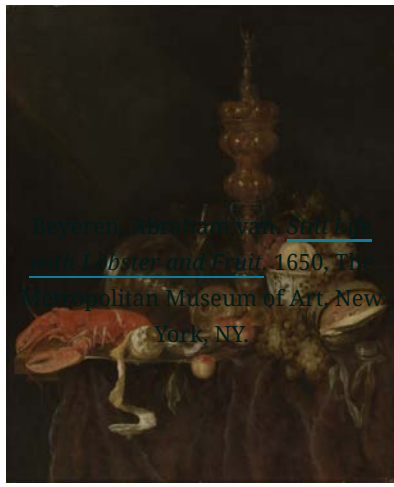
Verendael, Nicolaes van. *Still Life with a Lobster*. 1678, The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield.

extensively and came to many significant conclusions regarding its veracity and popularity. Part of the problem is the story is "substantiated only by reference to an alleged expert who 'has it on good authority'" and thus a "lack of primary evidence is the main reason to doubt this story." In Elisabeth Townsend's *Lobster: A Global History*, food historian Kathleen Curtin cites the same lack of evidence to verify the folklore: "It never happened. [There is] not a shred of documentation." Why is a story that cannot be substantiated with any ordinances, laws, or personal accounts so ingrained in our cultural heritage? Oliver writes that "the [riot] stories appear when ... lobster is becoming historically scarce, when the author wants to recall a distant, more abundant past." Today, the price of lobster is prohibitive, giving it a luxury status. Maybe what's so appealing about the story is how much it contradicts the perception of lobster we are so familiar with nowadays.



The Lobster Lore Lowdown

From mythical stories about walking lobsters through the Palais Royal, to 6-foot lobsters at the first Thanksgiving, lobster tales abound all around the world.



Beyeren, Abraham van. [Still Life with Lobster and Fruit](#). 1650. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

These crustaceans maintain a special place in New England's cultural heritage, and there is a certain appeal to the exaggerated abundance of [the riot myth](#) in particular. Upon closer inspection, however, the myth doesn't withstand the scrutiny of time; no

tion of any variation of the lobster lore. And there's no question that a major aspect of this story's allure comes from how starkly it contrasts with how we view lobsters today. Nowadays people consider lobster primarily as fodder for the wealthy. Dishes like ['Lobzilla'](#) and the ['Zillion Dollar Lobster Frittata'](#) have completely erased any former "poor man's meal" status. Meanwhile, manifestations of climate change like the [1999 die-off in Long Island Sound](#) and [accelerated warming in the Gulf of Maine](#) have produced concerns about a dwindling population [not predicted to improve in the coming years](#). In the meantime, [NOAA's American Lobster Initiative](#) is working hard to develop understanding of the American lobster and the industry surrounding it. There is much to be learned from it as we confront these modern-day challenges. As American novelist [Jonathan Safran Foer](#) writes, "Stories about food are stories about us — our history and our values." In many ways, this lobster lore exemplifies New England: its natural abundance, its arc bending towards justice, and the resilience of its people.



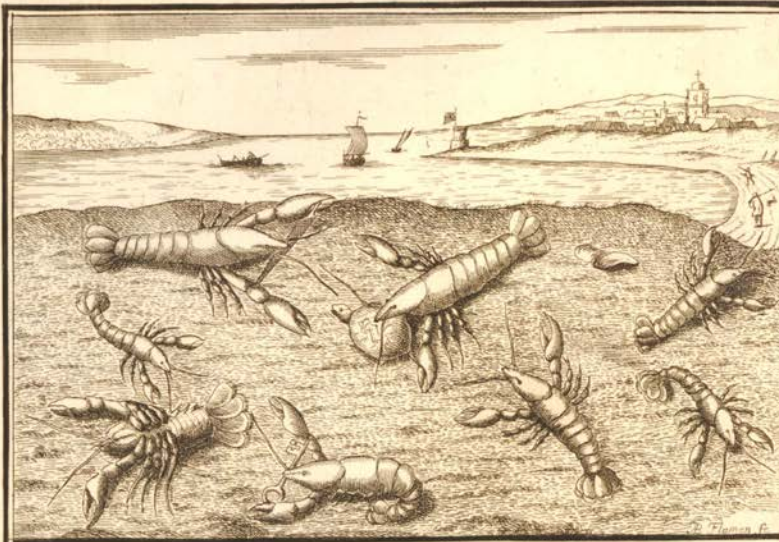
Sea You Soon: Keep Exploring with Sea Grant!

The lobster industry and lobster consumption have changed so much since the colonial days! Depictions from the colonial time period are almost unrecognizable through the modern lens. And there is so much more to the lobster industry than the hyper-abundance that the lobster lore propagates or the aloof but alluring luxury status by which we regard lobsters today. If crustaceans are your fixation, or if you're just looking for some marine education, check out more of Sea Grant's work at the link below:



Lichtenstein, Roy. *Still Life with Lobster*. 1972, The Estate of Roy Lichtenstein, New York, NY.

[Learn more about Sea Grant!](#)



(NAM VOS MUTASTIS & ILLAS) Ovid.

Look Here and View the Actors in this Isle
 Observe their Shapes and at their Humors Smile
 Behold their tricks, take notice of their Air
 See how they move, mind with how Little care
 They do proceed, to anger, tho' in Lent
 Eager to break, what fain they wou'd have bent
 Revengefull Creatures! Cease to pinch with Claws
 Save, when you're sure, ye can produce your Laws

Flamen, Albert. (Nam Vos Mutastis & Illas) Ovid. 1709, The British Museum, London.