

# Curator's Choice

## Turkey Tales: What Archaeological Turkey Bones Can Tell Us

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An estimated 68 million turkeys are eaten in the last two months of the year in the United States with nearly seventy percent consumed in November (Banks and Wolford 2022). While this level of consumption is largely due to the domestication and industrial-scale raising of turkeys, both the historical record and archaeological evidence suggest that turkey has always been a common food source.

The use of turkey has been identified in archaeological contexts from Mesoamerica dating between 2,800 and 2,100 years ago with evidence for domestication occurring roughly 1,800 years ago. At least two domesticated turkey species, originating from Mesoamerica and southwest North America, were imported to Europe in the early 1500s where additional varieties of the Mesoamerican species were produced and re-introduced to North America (Speller et al. 2010). The use of turkey spread so quickly European colonists were already familiar with the bird when they immigrated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

While it is less clear whether turkey domestication or management occurred in pre-Contact eastern North America, we do know that turkeys were a local wild resource for the inhabitants of the Smith St. Leonard site in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Smiths were a wealthy planter family who lived in Calvert County from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> centuries at various locations within what is now Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum.

As wealthy landowners, meals would have followed particular social guidelines, especially when involving guests outside of the family. Dinners were often several courses with presentations of multiple dishes laid out on the table (Figure 1). Domestic artifacts recovered alongside the turkey remains indicate that whichever meals the turkey was part of occurred towards the end of the family's occupation of the site in the 1740s to 1750s.

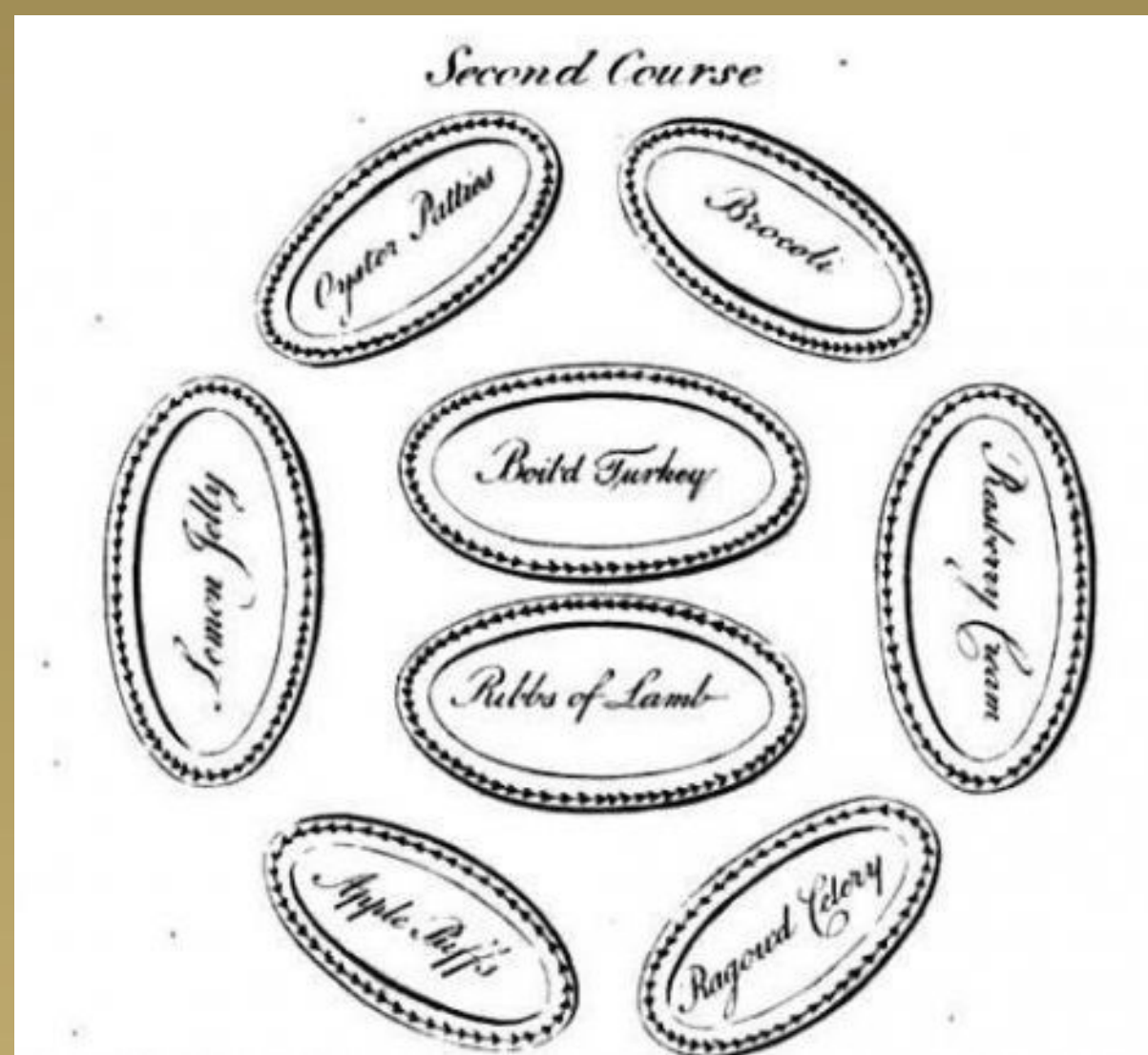


Figure 1. Illustrated example of an 18th century second course. Boiled Turkey is featured as a central dish alongside lamb ribs and other sweet and savory dishes. From, <https://www.manuscriptcookbookssurvey.org/what-exactly-was-the-tudor-and-stuart-banquet/>.

The bird bones pictured here are remains from multiple turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) recovered from a kitchen cellar at the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Smith's St. Leonard site (18CV91). Nearly every skeletal element is accounted for, indicating that the birds were brought to the kitchen area whole rather than being butchered into smaller pieces first (Figure 2). Some of the bones show evidence of slicing, cutting, and possibly even boiling which are visible since these activities leave thin scratches, clean broken edges, and change the surface texture of bones. Analyzing these characteristics can tell archaeologists how foods were used and prepared.

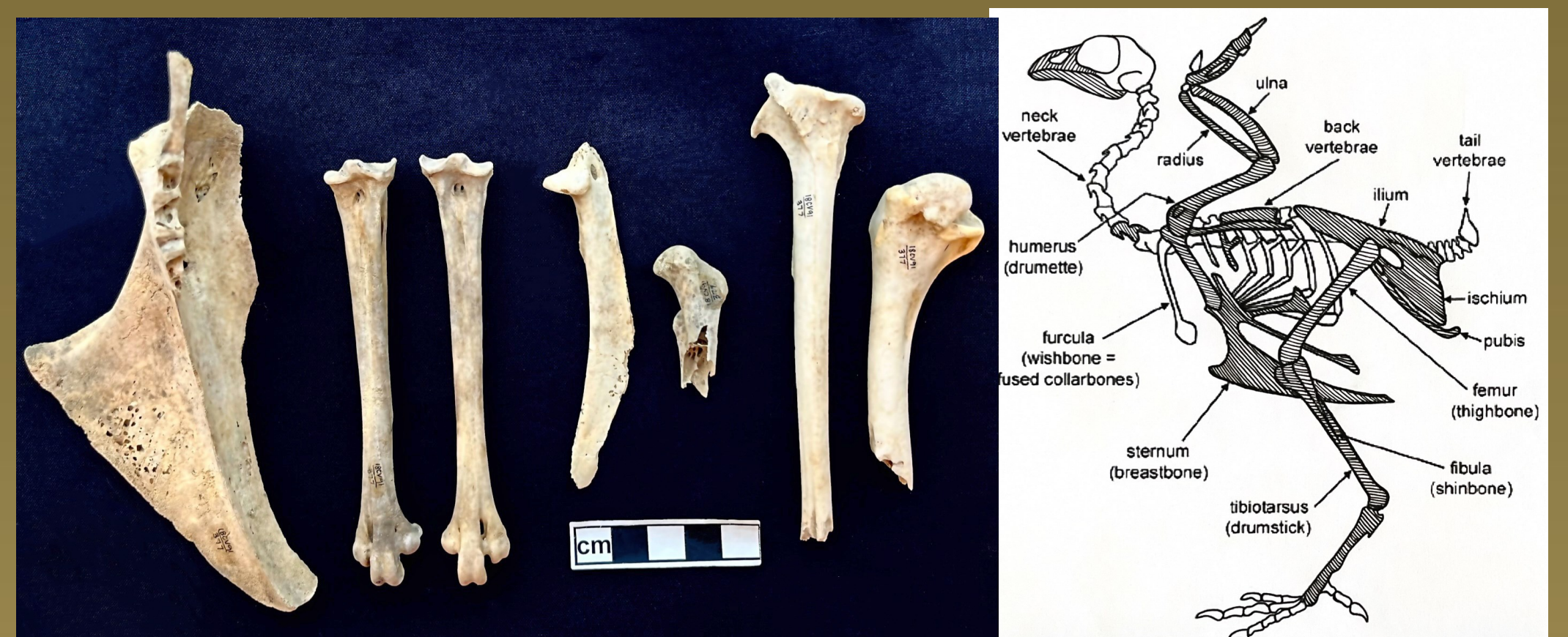


Figure 2. Fragments of turkey bones (left to right, sternum, tarsometatarsus, scapula, coracoid, tibiotarsus, and humerus) from 18CV91 and the skeletal anatomy of a turkey. Hatched areas represent elements identified in the cellar fill. Image adapted from CFAES Ohio State University Extension.

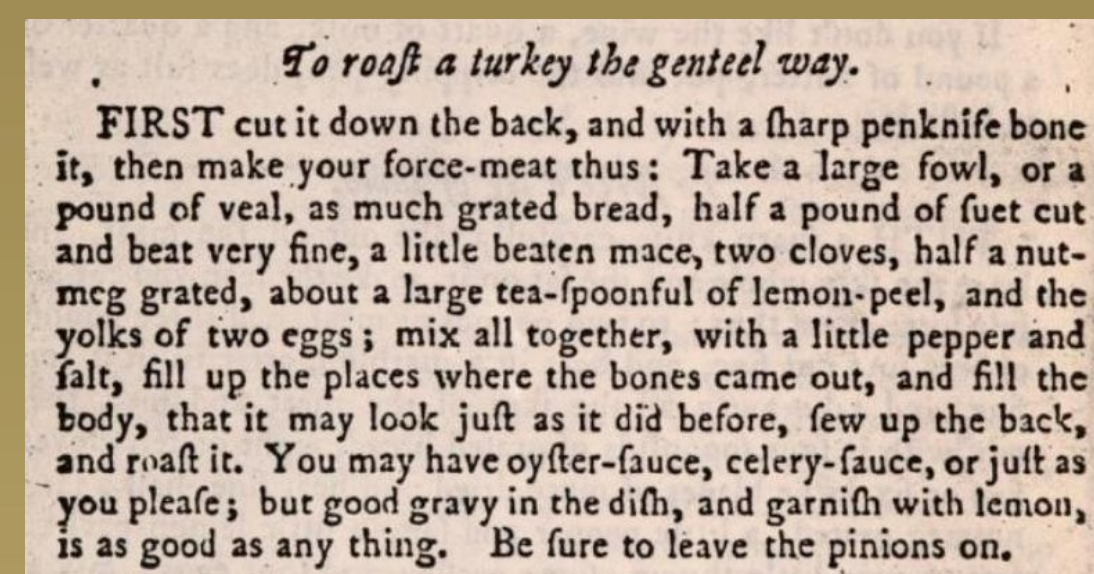


Figure 3. Instructions for roasting a turkey, from Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy*.

While turkey is generally consumed on a less regular basis now, it was not reserved primarily for holidays in the past. Recipe books from the 18<sup>th</sup> century provide instructions on how to choose meats at the market, prepare turkey boiled, roasted, and stewed as well as suggestions for different sauces and garnishes. Perhaps if anyone feels like experimenting with a new recipe this holiday season try Hannah Glasse's recipe for roasting a turkey, "the genteel way," by cutting it down the back, stuffing it with various ingredients, and then roasting it. She goes on to suggest serving it with oyster sauce, celery sauce, or a good gravy – and then garnish it with lemon (Figure 3).

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