Chapter 1

Hunger, Accommodation, and Violence in Colonial America

After years of trading with Indians, traveling among them, and having sex with them, Irish fur trader and land speculator George Croghan could assert that hungry Native Americans resembled hungry Europeans. When asked, “Is the Appeal of the Indians for food, greater or less than the Europeans?” he answered, “I have Never observed thire appetites to be Greater than ours, unless after Liveing a Long Time very Scanty or without food . . . particklerly after a Debach of Drinking.” He claimed that Indians ate no more than their European counterparts unless they had gone on a drinking binge—consuming alcohol that British officials had provided as a diplomatic gift, or that unscrupulous traders had supplied to con Indians out of skins or land. Croghan was responding to a set of queries presented by a man named Dr. William Robertson, of Edinburgh, who was writing a multi-volume history of the Americas. Croghan had spent three decades interacting with Illinois and Ohio Valley Delawares, Miamis, Ottawas, Shawnees, and Wyandots as deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs, although he was retired from this position by the time he wrote to Robertson in 1773.1

Other English colonists described Indians whose appetites might have shocked Croghan, depicting them as pitiable, helpless, and hungry. Non-Natives lacked a consensus about Indian hunger because multiple discourses of Native hungrieness existed: that of the hungry and useless civilian; that of the warrior using hunger as a metaphor before proving his military usefulness;
and that of the Native woman whose utility Europeans struggled to understand, because Native women shouldered the responsibility for producing crops and preventing hunger at a time when Europeans believed it inappropriate for women to farm. Between the 1500s and 1700s, two varying approaches toward dealing with food and hunger—accommodating and violent food-related acts—allowed inconsistent ideas about hunger to form, which in turn influenced how Natives and non-Natives exchanged food and destroyed it.²

Before the Revolution, Native Americans and Europeans enjoyed a relatively equal degree of power, but in the realm of hunger prevention, non-Native intervention failed to improve Europeans’ bargaining position. Europeans and Indians gave and received edible items in ways that fit into their other diplomatic interactions. From the decades after the arrival of Columbus to the mid-eighteenth century, food functioned together with the alcohol, furs, trade goods, and wampum that Indians and Europeans imbued with practical and symbolic meanings. These cross-cultural dealings ensured the existence of a type of Native and non-Native diplomacy called forest diplomacy—and thus of peace. Food sharing, like other practices, could work within the framework of a commodity-exchange economy and a gift-exchange economy. The overlap between these two economies permitted creative misunderstandings and cooperation, while also fostering conflict.³

Cooperative food exchange was paralleled by battles over commodities, including the destruction of crops and attacks against domesticated animals. Europeans employed victual warfare against other Europeans during military conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; in North America, Indian warriors, soldiers, and colonial civilians practiced victual warfare. Whereas food diplomacy continued to change during the colonial period, the use of victual warfare remained relatively stable: it was a way for colonists and Indians to fight each other. The participants, however, did shift, because Europeans mostly stopped using victual warfare against each other while continuing to employ it against Indians. The absence of victual imperialism during this period underscores the relative evenness of power among colonists and Indians, and a significant power imbalance that favored enslavers over the enslaved. Mainland colonists did not practice victual warfare against enslaved Africans because they did not need to; they simply controlled access to food. Slaveholders ensured that bondpeople went hungry by restricting consumption and limiting their abilities to use land to grow garden produce.

Discourses of hunger buttressed contradictory ideas about usefulness. In the eighteenth century the Swiss-born military theorist Emer de Vattel described useless mouths when writing about sieges and civilian populations. If
generals hoped to reduce “by famine a strong place of which it is very important to gain possession, the useless mouths are not permitted to come out,” he explained. His definition encompassed civilian women and children and was tied to intertwined ideas about war and famine. By the eve of the American Revolution, some of the men responsible for Indian affairs believed that Native children and women—and some Indian men—were hungry, useless mouths. Other British Indian agents, like George Croghan, assumed that Indian appetites were similar to those of Europeans, while also admitting the necessity of symbolically distributing large quantities of food at key moments to secure useful military assistance from Native allies. Without the knowledge to definitively assess and address Native hunger, and often lacking the know-how to conduct other diplomatic rituals, European negotiators depended on Indians to guide them, and Native power continued to grow.

To understand how this shifting baseline of hunger shaped and was shaped by food-related customs, it is necessary to examine the broader diplomatic efforts of the colonial period. Many English officials based their cooperative approaches on Iroquois protocols, and then copied them when meeting with other Indians. Iroquois practices stemmed from the ideas of Gayaneshagowa, on which the Iroquois League was founded, and Guswenta, which emerged after contact with Europeans. Deganawidah, the Iroquois prophet whose history is chronicled in several conflicting legends, created the Iroquois League on six principles expressed in three terms: peace, righteousness, and civil authority. Together, these comprised Gayaneshagowa, or the Great Law of Peace.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Gayaneshagowa allowed Indians to present a neutral face to the Dutch, French, and English while cultivating non-Native relationships, serving on military campaigns in ways that advanced Indian interests, limiting Iroquois deaths, and replacing dead kin with captives. Even when allied to competing European empires, Iroquois warriors agreed not to attack other Iroquois. Guswenta became an extension of Gayaneshagowa that applied to Europeans with whom the Iroquois wished to deal. Guswenta acknowledged that Natives and non-Natives could maintain friendship and peace by not interfering in each other’s government, religion, or lives. It enabled the Iroquois to teach Europeans to use forest diplomacy to create recognizable but differently interpreted practices—mourning ceremonies, the smoking of peace pipes, the exchange of wampum, the use of metaphors, and the dispensation of alcohol, trade goods, and food goods.

At least since 1645, those whom death left behind had performed a mourning ceremony that metaphorically covered graves, wiped tears from mourners’
eyes, and (usually) prevented the proliferation of violent reprisals. When Europeans met Indians they took part in this condolence ceremony before moving on to the metaphorical brightening of the chain of friendship and a rehashing of past agreements. Only then did participants begin new business. Sometimes during such meetings, as in the region near the Mississippi River, people shared a calumet, or peace pipe. Southeastern Creeks and Cherokees occasionally attached the pipe to a white eagle-tail fan, or “white wing,” which they held while delivering speeches. Speechmaking, and the figurative language and metaphors employed therein, featured prominently at these gatherings. Metaphors helped people communicate at the same time that they opened the door to misunderstandings when interpreted in different ways.7 The Dutch, following Iroquois direction, called themselves “brothers” to the Iroquois in order to nurture kin relationships, while the French governor accepted the title of “Onontio” (“father”). Once the English defeated the Dutch in the Anglo Dutch Wars and took over New Netherland in the 1660s, they too assumed the role of brethren—albeit less convincingly—as they competed with the French for Iroquois trade. “We are all unanimously determined forever hereafter to hold fast the Covenant Chain, & live in peace & friendship with the English,” said Cayugas at a 1770 meeting. The Iroquois famously described their relationship with the British as a silver chain (previously a chain of iron, with the Dutch) which became known as the Covenant Chain.8

Other Indian metaphors abounded. Creeks and Cherokees let Europeans know they had failed at diplomacy by portraying poor relations as crooked or red roads, and sent positive messages by describing amicable feelings as straight, white paths. Cherokees talked of their “nakedness” not because they lacked clothing, but because they sought trade goods to conspicuously consume. Speechmakers described taking up hatchets, passing them on to allies to encourage them to take sides—as the Delaware Captain White Eyes did at a 1776 meeting with the Iroquois—and burying them at the end of conflicts. Stockbridge Mahicans and Iroquois Onondagas talked about bad birds that spread rumors of discord. Edmond Atkin, who became superintendent of Indian Affairs in the southern district, described himself to Catawba Indians as “the King’s Mouth” to indicate his ability to speak for colonists in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia. Atkin positioned British officials as useful mouths who recited speeches to convey authority.9

Wampum made from seashells (which women and children gathered, men fashioned, and women strung) featured heavily during such oratories, from New England to the middle colonies to the southeast. The display of a new wampum belt or string accompanied each idea or section of a speech, and its appearance is often recorded in manuscript documents with the phrase “a
string.” Speakers used the amount of wampum to connote importance—large belts signified crucial messages—and the color to convey peaceful or violent sentiments; black wampum, for instance, suggested death or war. Returning a belt without proffering a new one rejected the speaker’s proposal. In 1768 Sir William Johnson, superintendent of Indian Affairs in the northern region (and Edmond Atkin’s counterpart), worried about the “very dangerous tendency” of “Several Belts” circulating in Indian country.10

Of these many diplomatic practices, the exchange of trade goods was what Europeans struggled the hardest to learn. Trade goods may have served as mnemonic place markers that enabled better recall when memorizing long talks. An Indian’s refusal of goods, like his rejection of wampum, also served a diplomatic purpose: Indians accepted medals as a gesture of allegiance, but returned them to suggest dissatisfaction or severed unions. In South Carolina, trade was so important that a trader marked the start of Cherokee country with the trade depot at Keowee, the first of the Cherokee Lower Towns. Between depots, traders and officials endeavored to protect goods from rain or snow—“a piece of Oil Cloth” sufficed—and drivers were supposed to carry extra “Horse Shoes, Nails, Hammer, and spare Ropes” in the event of accidents. There were many different types of goods, including guns, gunpowder, and assorted weaponry. A 1758 report from Pennsylvania listed Stroud mantles, stockings, knives, shirts, silver truck, wampum, gartering, and vermillion among the items given to Indian warriors as “presents” in return for their military service.11

As is clear from the fact that Indians received “presents” for military contributions, the trade diplomacy that was part of forest diplomacy could function in a gift-exchange economy or a commodity-exchange economy—which at times blurred together and created disagreements about Indians’ usefulness. In a gift-exchange economy, participants are repeatedly allied, interdependent, and of similar rank. Gifts are passed down, and participants cannot reject a gift. Although something is expected in return, the exchange symbolizes “something for nothing.” In a commodity-exchange economy, people are temporarily allied, independent, and of different rank. Goods are individually owned and kept. The giving of goods precedes the acquisition of material wealth: it is a “something-for-something” trade.12

Early European colonists viewed trade as commercial, and so disliked the Indian practice of using trade to seal alliances in a gift-exchange economy. British, Dutch, and French fur traders encouraged Indians’ participation in a commodity-exchange economy by taking their furs in return for cash or goods. In this second system, trade goods became a type of payment.13 When Indians came to William Johnson asking to be “pitied”—to be given goods to
strengthen their alliance with the British without expecting reciprocity—Johnson distributed goods and then petitioned Natives for military aid; he insisted on a tradeoff. Sometimes officials withheld goods from southern Indians until after a military engagement, underscoring the use of goods as compensation. During the 1760s a group of Cherokees and Catawbas learned that they would receive “large Presents” only after a particular “Campaign as a Reward for your good Services, and a signal Mark” of King George III’s friendship. Despite Europeans’ efforts, Native Americans retained power in these relationships. Iroquois Indians used the market for furs to play Europeans off of each other, thus managing to procure premium trade goods. Sometimes, they even demanded bespoke items.¹⁴

Natives and non-Natives also acted as if trade diplomacy operated within gift-exchange economies. During the early colonial period Europeans found themselves obligated to reciprocate gifts that Natives offered because—as the seventeenth-century Indian leader Wahunsenacawh (also known as Powhatan) reminded colonist Captain John Smith—Indians maintained a strong hold on desirous commodities, from edible corn to valuable copper, and better control over potentially hostile indigenous populations. Trade-good exchanges allowed power to flow through goods, but more importantly through the kin networks and personal connections that gift exchange created. Upon receipt of some goods Native Americans forged relationships—redistributing gifts to other Indians as marks of esteem, prestige, and evidence of their own political authority. The Dutch grumbled but took part in a gift-exchange economy by giving trade goods as material necessities to maintain commerce; the French gave gifts with more enthusiasm because their regulated fur trade meant Indians received lower prices for their furs and needed additional incentives to sell to Frenchmen. In 1755, one man wrote to William Johnson and said that because “the frenchman had given a great gift to the Indians,” he found himself “ashamed” and asked Johnson for “somewhat more presents.” The English presented gifts to compete with the French. The overlap between these two economies resulted in balanced power dynamics.¹⁵

At the heart of these negotiations, misunderstood exchange economies, and diplomatic relationships was Sir William Johnson. Johnson, who was of Irish descent, moved to the colonies as a young man, and by 1756 had become superintendent of Indian Affairs for the northern colonies. Mohawk members of the Iroquois called him Warraghiyagey, or “he who does much business.” He ate Indians’ food, adopted Iroquois dress, lived with his Mohawk common-law wife, Molly Brant, and learned about Indian diplomacy. Johnson Hall (built in 1763), in New York’s Mohawk Valley, sat between New York City and the Mohawks’ territory. He entertained Indians there but also traveled often
to conferences, where, working closely with Deputy Superintendent George Croghan, he habitually spent £1,000 on different types of gifts to establish and maintain alliances. His union with Brant and willingness to study and practice forest diplomacy allowed Johnson to strengthen kinship networks, thus forming and maintaining British alliances with Indians. His distributions of trade goods became crucial to British diplomatic efforts.16

Europeans, with Indian guidance, learned how to cooperate during the colonial era, but they remained ignorant in several respects. In 1758, one captain stationed in Pennsylvania described a cache of trade goods for the Indians as evidence of “the strongest Tye we can possibly have upon them.”17 The goods did not form the ties; the practices of distribution did. Non-Natives puzzled over the overlap between commodity- and gift-exchange economies, and they failed to grasp the full significance of trade-good etiquette. Indians proved their usefulness to Europeans who wished to ally with and employ them on military campaigns, but in a sense Europeans who were compelled to work within a gift-exchange economy did not have the clout to comment on Indians’ utility. The officials who practiced diplomacy lacked the power to treat Indians as useless, because they needed them to fight their enemies.

Food and drink played a role in these practices, but it is challenging to analyze consumable items and their role in diplomacy for two reasons. First, because eighteenth-century Britons did not always recognize the significance of food exchange, sometimes even conflating trade goods and food goods. Second, because some of the foodstuffs that people exchanged were more valuable than others. In 1766 an observer assumed that Onondagas viewed “Rum, pipes and Tobacco as provisions” and had to “have them also.” British records of Indian presents included butter, cattle, corn, flour, hams, Madeira, peas, pork, rice, rum, sheep, sugar, and tea—but they also included inedible blankets, garnering, knives, thread, and needles. Corn was central to Iroquois, Cherokee, and Creek diets and highly prized in religious rituals, but sometimes Indians wanted non-Native commodities they could not produce themselves—such as alcohol. Alcohol has an extensive, separate historiography; it destroyed Indian communities, but it also fit into Indian practices, such as dreaming. Other elevated foodstuffs included the dogs consumed in ceremonial feasts and the human flesh of Iroquois enemies. Game animals conferred prestige, but so too did the nuts and berries women gathered.18 Food gifts also made for tricky prestige items because once consumed, they created the sort of “present” that no one wanted to reuse.

Attitudes toward meat—such as beef, pork, and mutton from domesticated animals—varied. By the mid-eighteenth century, some Creeks, Oneidas, and
Mohawks began raising cattle, hogs, and horses. To a smaller extent, Senecas also raised cattle, chickens, hogs, horses, and a few pigs. The fact that many Oneidas were Christian may have made them more amenable to cattle because Christian Indians lived in sedentary, agricultural settlements, where it was easier to store manure. It should, however, be acknowledged that much of non-Christian Native agriculture was also sedentary, and because farming in these communities required no plows, avoided soil disturbance, and preserved organic matter, it did not need manure for crops to thrive. Sometimes animals preceded colonists’ imperial expansion (so Indians maimed them), sometimes they were status symbols for Indians interested in new forms of property ownership (so they accumulated them for redistribution), and only sometimes were they meat or manure sources.  

The starting point of European knowledge about what, how, and why Native Americans ate—and consequently, when they hungered—was informed by other diplomatic practices. People incorporated food diplomacy into forest diplomacy and the principles of Guswenta, and food diplomacy functioned within both a commodity- and gift-exchange economy. Sir William Johnson learned to distribute provisions at treaties, to visitors at Johnson Hall, at Indian feasts, to warriors going on expeditions, and as aid to villages when war caused disruption. Those familiar with Indian etiquette knew “that no public officer” could “avoid feeding them.” As soon as a treaty was scheduled, people began writing to Johnson to inquire about “the Quantity of Provisions” he required. On the treaty’s first day people made condolence speeches, performed greeting ceremonies, and smoked the calumet. Colonial negotiators distributed small glasses of wine or punch, and the Iroquois provided important Anglo-American newcomers with Indian names. Attendees then ate supper and went to bed, rather than beginning discussions. The next day the treaty began, and often lasted weeks; non-Native officials fed attendees for the duration. Afterwards, Indians got back on the road with “Provisions to carry them home.”  

Building on other metaphors at treaties, Indians employed food language. When they called themselves “naked,” they also said they were “starving.” The “one dish and one spoon” (sometimes “eating out of one dish” or “eating out of the same dish”) metaphor described alliances of fairly equal power from the Great Lakes to the Carolinas to New England. The common-dish trope changed upon contact with Europeans. Before 1701, the phrase signified war: enemies boiled each other in kettles. Afterward, the metaphor shifted to a peacetime one that symbolized the goal and foundation of cooperation. Eating out of one dish meant being bound together in a symbiotic relationship of usefulness that included kinship ties, wartime alliances, and willingness to
share hunting territory. When the one dish was empty, everyone went hungry by mutual agreement.\textsuperscript{21}

Metaphorical speechmaking helped to solidify treaty agreements, and treaties could end conflict or encourage Indians to join with British and French allies against their European enemies. In 1757 a captured French marine revealed that the French provided “as much feasting as the Indians please at going out, & on their Return,” guns, clothing, and “as much provisions as they please, or can Eat.” This generosity was significant; according to the Frenchman, their own provisions were “Scarce in general,” bordering on the “very Scarce.”\textsuperscript{22} French readiness to provide for indispensable Native allies—even when the French themselves hungered—was part of the one-dish alliance. British officials, including Johnson, feared that these Indians’ appetites would disrupt British military operations by pushing their allies toward the French.

Although there were similarities between food and trade diplomacy, there were also times when food diplomacy seemed different. Trade goods and furs tended to flow in one direction; Europeans gave goods to Indians, and Indians gave them to other Indians, but Natives rarely offered trade goods to Europeans. Furs likewise followed a one-way route from Indian towns to European markets. Natives and non-Natives both produced food, which again undermined accusations of Indians’ uselessness. Permanent and intensive pre-Columbian indigenous cropping systems in North America created large crop yields. Natives received food, but their agricultural abilities also enabled them to grow and gather crops, such as the wild rice they distributed to Europeans—who were not good at growing it themselves. Indians could shoot game and supply themselves and non-Natives with venison, as Powhatans did in seventeenth-century Virginia, as Creeks did in mid-eighteenth-century Georgia, and as the Iroquois did when they came to stay in British forts.\textsuperscript{23} Whereas they seldom offered trade goods, Native Americans could source food as payment and as a gift, thus decreasing the symbolic bargaining power of the commestibles that Europeans produced. Eminent Indians may have looked to the British for presents of food more than some of their brethren, but these presents indicated their status of strategic usefulness, not need.

As people exchanged, discussed, and learned about food goods, they defined the power relationships that underscored Native abilities to deal with hunger. Seventeenth-century Pilgrims, for example, shared their first harvest with Wampanoag Indians at the much-mythologized first Thanksgiving, but the Indian chief Massasoit’s return gift of five freshly killed deer undermined Governor William Bradford’s authority. Massasoit, by giving the venison to each of the colony’s leading members, made it impossible for Bradford to distribute them himself, which reminded English colonists that they needed Indian
allies to feed themselves. Indians remained self-sufficient during other times of real scarcity. After Jacques-René de Brisay, Marquis de Denonville’s 1687 attack against the Iroquois, in which the French burned Seneca villages and claimed to have destroyed 1.2 million bushels of stored and standing corn, the Senecas dispersed. Warriors moved into the woods while civilian Mohawks went to live with Oneidas, and Senecas with Cayugas and Onondagas. During a significant famine in 1741 and 1742, Senecas skipped European meetings at Montreal and Pennsylvania, where food supplies would have been plentiful. These dominant Indians did not need food goods from Europeans.

In the eighteenth century, Britons became better informed about giving food and food-related gifts but remained unable to gain the upper hand in power struggles, because Indians continued to feed themselves. “Women of the Six Nations . . . provide our Warriors with Provisions when they go abroad,” even when warriors fought alongside Europeans, Johnson learned. Officials intermittently gave symbolic gifts of food to women, children, and significant chiefs. In 1774 one major reported feeding Native women and children near Detroit: “the Custom is to give them a Brick of Bread, and [a] Dram.” Important Native leaders and their families received “a few Rations of Provisions.” Nearby inhabitants thought it was “an exceeding good sign,” to see the Indians “bring in Meat. & stay about the Fort in Winter,” where they consumed some British offerings. Native Americans obtained meat for their stay, and women continued to produce crops for tribal consumption. Even Indian requests for British gift-giving were couched in the language of utility. A 1761 speech by a Six Nations Indian named Otchinneyawessahawe, delivered by the White Mingo, described Otchinneyawessahawe’s loss of all his “powder & Lead,” along “with a quantity of goods” when his “Cannoe split.” He asked for “a little powder and Lead,” without which he worried the Indians “must starve.” Otchinneyawessahawe asked not for more goods, but for ammunition to hunt game meat. His request suggests that Native petitioners sometimes had to remind non-Native officials of their ability to be useful to themselves.

Diplomatic food exchange nurtured the development of contrasting ideas about Native hunger and usefulness. Indians told Europeans they were hungry or starving even when they were not, because guests were supposed to exaggerate need so that hosts did not appear proud. Thus when Mohawks “complained much of the want of provisions,” Johnson recorded providing them with powder, not foodstuffs, and when Oneidas and Tuscaroras came to see him “in a Starving Condition” because their crops had failed, he did not feed them immediately but gave them cash to purchase provisions. Yet British officials also had to ensure that provisions satisfied Native expectations.
Eighteenth-century officials concluded that at treaties, Indians could and did eat twice as much per day as colonists—and some men refused to make calculations because they said Indians “eat more than ten of our Men.” Swiss-British official Colonel Henry Bouquet complained about the cost of provisions they distributed, at the same time calling Indians “Idle People.”

In 1765, after the British had defeated the French in the Seven Years’ War, at great cost and with significant violence between Natives and non-Natives, Sir William Johnson described British abilities to address Native hunger. He complained, “all the Bull feasts ever given at Albany would not now draw down Ten Indians.” Johnson’s statement could be read in three ways: he might have been suggesting that British offerings were too stingy; he may have thought that these Indians were not hungry; or he may have known how well these Indians could provision themselves. On the one hand, British officials, including Johnson, sometimes witnessed Indians’ enormous appetites. On the other hand, sometimes even hungry Indians refused to do what the British wanted them to do—in this case, to come to William Johnson ready to fight for the British.

An examination of pre-Revolutionary food diplomacy, bound up in the policy of forest and trade diplomacy, thus reveals several conflicting baselines of Indian hunger: hungry, contributing Indians; self-sufficient, nonhungry ones; and Natives in need of food aid from other Indians after a European attack. These conflicting ideas stretched back at least to descriptions of Indians in the 1600s. Rather than offering a definitive assessment of pre-Revolutionary Indian hunger, it is more productive to conclude that before the 1770s there were two prevailing European perceptions of it. One strand of European thought found Indians not as hungry as they described themselves. The other strand of thought believed that Indian hunger was greater than European hunger, and that Indians possessed excessive appetites. At times people married the concept of nonhungry Indians with useful ones, and hungry Indians with useless mouths, but during other moments unpredictable ideas about usefulness emerged. These incompatible perceptions continued to exist in the mid-1770s, when men like George Croghan worked to convince their peers that the portrayal of self-sufficient, less ravenous Indians was the more accurate one. But how people used food to foster cooperation is only one half of the story of non-Natives’ interactions with Indians.

Food-related behavior also resulted in conflict. Victual warfare was the counter to food diplomacy, and it originated in the so-called Old World, not the Americas. In Europe, armies burned villages and crops and withheld food—or prevented it from reaching other people—to cause hunger. Similar tactics
characterized New World victual warfare when colonists arrived, but people also stole grain, introduced destructive domesticated animals, stole or maimed those animals, and in some cases even poisoned each other. In the New World, in contrast to the Old, not all practices related to victual warfare were designed to create hunger; sometimes they just helped aggressors to assert power.

Victual warfare was part of early modern European military tactics. During the mid-sixteenth-century English subjugation of the Irish in Munster, the English leveled charges of paganism and critiqued Irish customs, habits, and agricultural practices, which laid the groundwork to declare Ireland’s people barbarians and their laws invalid. The Englishman Sir Humphrey Gilbert had his men kill noncombatants because their agricultural labor fed the Irish and kept them from famine. War in seventeenth-century Ireland was less consistent in its use of victual warfare; some campaigns included indiscriminate violence, and some were characterized by more commonly accepted laws of war. When Thomas Cromwell and his Parliamentarian troops arrived in Ireland in 1649, he adopted a twofold approach of denouncing the Irish while reassuring them that the army would behave; he discouraged pillaging by hanging disobedient soldiers, and he tried to make the army pay for the goods it took from local populations. At the siege of Drogheda, his soldiers killed civilian inhabitants. In 1651, Governor Colonel John Hewson encouraged the English to target the countryside, to destroy crops, and to kill livestock in the districts of Tipperary, Wicklow, and Wexford, because these actions kept the Irish enemy from obtaining supplies. They made famine conditions worse and encouraged the spread of disease, including the plague.

In the New World, a hodgepodge of early modern writers influenced colonists’ evolving understanding of war, but Hugo Grotius and Emer de Vattel stand out from the rest for the extent to which colonists read them. Dutchman Hugo Grotius’s most famous work, The Law of War and Peace, was published in Latin in 1625 and translated into English in 1654. His evaluation of war as just or unjust was tied to *jus ad bellum* (just cause, or why war is waged), and *jus in bellum* (just conduct, or how it is waged). Drawing on the laws of nature and nations, Grotius insisted that warfare abided by a set number of principles. A century later, Emer de Vattel’s The Law of Nations appeared in French in 1758 and in English in 1760. Vattel challenged and elaborated on Grotius’s understanding of property transfer and the treatment of noncombatants.

The writings of Grotius and Vattel informed the ways that armies targeted foodstuffs, and such strategies shifted over time and space. In sixteenth-century England, people destroyed crops to control the countryside and undermine an enemy’s ability to fight, but without intending to starve the local popula-
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Grotius sanctioned destruction of noncombatants’ property if such actions were necessary to sustain the troops. By the 1640s, when the English garrisoned Dublin and cut off supplies to every town within a twelve-mile radius, a change had occurred: military strategy was designed not only to force submission and dependence but also to exterminate “savage” Irish noncombatants through starvation. By the late seventeenth century, however, deliberate starvation of noncombatants fell out of practice in Western Europe. Provisions, according to Vattel, belonged to the realm of peace (gunpowder and soldiers’ clothing, by contrast, belonged to the realm of war). Even so, he declared it lawful for the army to take provisions from an unjust enemy, and to destroy what the army could not carry away, while at the same time calling for moderation “according to the exigency of the case.”

Thus, at first, early Englishmen targeted crops to force submission but not starvation, then targeted crops to engender starvation and eradication of Irish noncombatants, and then continued to attack crops, but without intending to kill civilians.

Despite early modern efforts to regularize methods of waging war, strange contradictions emerged about fighting Native Americans. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that although Hugo Grotius established separate rules for Christian warfare and non-Christian warfare, he nowhere explained which set of laws applied when a Christian nation fought a non-Christian one. Vattel condoned a “law of retaliation” against “a savage nation” that observed no rules and gave no quarter. He even suggested that because Native Americans hunted, they possessed no right to land, and, invoking John Locke, he concluded that another nation was morally obligated to take their land from them. Few people in the colonies cared that Indians actually did grow crops, offer quarter, and take captives, or that some Indians—Stockbridges, Moravian Delawares, Oneidas—were Christian. Europeans thought Indian torture was shocking and their treatment of dead bodies despicable. They asserted that Indians were a different type of enemy; by transposing concepts of savagery onto Native Americans, they justified attacks against them. Targeting Native noncombatants to starve them became an integral component of colonial strategies.

Because many Europeans assumed that Indians were barbarous, military officials and colonists normalized victual warfare in North America. The French invaded Iroquoia on four separate occasions before 1700 to burn homes, crops, and food stores. Five English expeditions out of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1610 resulted in burned villages, pilfered crops, and dead Algonquians—including the children of a Pasahegh werowance, whom the English shot. During the Pequot War, Englishmen accomplished huge destructions of Native corn.
These methods of violence eventually became linked with results so effective that both Natives and non-Natives began to use them. Colonists and Indians alike targeted crops and animals during King Philip’s War in the 1670s. The Cherokee War of 1759–1761 pitted Carolinians against Cherokees. A 1761 attack destroyed fifteen towns and approximately fourteen hundred acres of corn. In Virginia, Governor Lord Dunmore led a 1774 expedition against the Shawnees of the upper Muskingum River, burning cabins and cornfields along the way. Crop destruction and animal theft practiced for the explicit purpose of attacking noncombatant populations, engendering hunger, and asserting dominance had long characterized strategies of violence by the 1770s.

Domesticated animals also became potent food-related targets of violence. Animals, or “creatures of empire,” came to symbolize colonists’ incursions onto Indians’ lands at the same time that they became desirable commodities to own, and sometimes eat. Indians from the Chesapeake to the Mohawk Valley thus ate cattle, pigs, sheep, and sometimes horses, but they also stole, maimed, or destroyed them. During periods of war it became common for Indians to target a farm, capture as many people and animals as possible, kill the rest, and set fire to crops and farm buildings before moving on to the next farm. During times of peace, British military officials complained that Shawnees in Pennsylvania stole horses. In the 1720s, Delawares in the mid-Atlantic criticized the Germans whose cattle destroyed Native cornfields. They may even have retaliated; during the Seven Years’ War, Dutch and German farmers charged Indian warriors with killing their livestock. Indian farmers reported British soldiers who let army cattle wander through their fields. Alabama Creeks killed cattle.

This range of activities suggests that official warfare and unpredictable outbreaks of violence sometimes blurred together, especially by the mid-eighteenth century, when North America witnessed a rise in Indian-hating. Colonists’ warfare consisted of three different approaches: they practiced ex-tirpative war making, created specialized units to fight Native Americans, and rewarded scalp taking to motivate private expeditions. Colonial soldiers as well as Indian warriors could and did disobey orders. They sometimes went too far in their destruction of crops, maiming of animals, and execution of noncombatants. The impermanence of colonial military entities, along with colonists’ land hunger, meant that former soldiers could transition easily into hunting Indians and taking their scalps for profit. Victual warfare allowed British and American soldiers to attack colonial farms and fields to appropriate grain and moveable meat supplies. It condoned the behavior of Indians employed by Americans and Britons for the same reasons. For decades, victual warfare also justified the actions of colonists who lived beyond the control of
military authority, and the activities of Native warriors who sometimes ignored the political and peacemaking arms of Native governments.

Years of victual warfare prompted changes in Indian husbandry. Although women tended to take responsibility for growing crops, after the Seven Years’ War even some Native men, such as the Oneidas, could be found working on their farms. Some women ceased planting corn, beans, and squash in small mounds, while men took up plowing. Mohawks, surrounded on all sides of their territory by colonists, started fencing cornfields to prevent damage from cattle. Violence between Indians and colonists interfered with Indians’ hunting and planting. Native men would not go out to hunt when they feared attacks on their villages. Indian raids against colonists’ towns resulted in similar effects: colonists grew wary when planting, and protective of the domesticated animals that belonged to them. Iroquois Indians in the 1760s broke into gardens and threatened to take everything that had been planted until they were paid for the land on which the garden had been built. Conflicts over crops existed before the Revolution, but the increasing value that Indians placed on diminishing farmland made the situation more volatile.

In 1761, during the Cherokee War, future lieutenant-governor of Florida John Moultrie described burning houses and “destroying fine fields gardens [and] orchards” belonging to Cherokee Indians. He also, in the same breath, confessed to “making free” with a “Cherokee Squawh,” raising questions about an unnamed Native woman’s lack of consent during this invasion. Crop and animal destruction became more than mere military actions; they became institutionalized forms of violence that created hunger, readjusted power dynamics, and granted future politicians the license to abuse authority. These behaviors were not yet victual imperialism, which was largely absent from colonial North America. Colonial governments and the individuals living in those colonies encroached on Native land, but during this period non-Natives failed to consistently interfere with Native food sovereignty.

And what of accommodation and violence with respect to enslaved peoples? People of African descent, like Native Americans, also produced and consumed food, but during the colonial period on the North American mainland, enslaved peoples’ labor to produce foodstuffs did not grant them much power. In addition to growing cash crops such as tobacco, enslaved Africans plowed fields, grew rice, cooked their masters’ dinners, and hawked food. The marketplace was a venue where whites sold black bodies, but it was also a place where black men and women sold produce. When possible, enslaved people grew such produce on their private película, then sold it at market to whites and free blacks. Bondpeople planted vegetable gardens, raised chickens for meat and eggs, and
supplemented their diets with hunting and fishing. Although differences in foodways existed between the Lowcountry and the Chesapeake—Lowcountry slaves ate less maize and meat from domesticated animals, grew more vegetables, foraged more frequently, and were likelier to incorporate African influences—enslaved labor in both of these regions produced some of the food that made it to masters’ tables. Lowcountry slaves’ fishing activities cornered the market. In many instances southern slave hucksters’ prices for dairy, meat, and perishable goods rose higher than those set by whites because slaves had more customers.  

Despite these contributions to the food system, food diplomacy was not applicable to enslaved and free black colonists, who lacked sufficient leverage in their interactions with slaveholders. Although bondpeople claimed power by stealing food and refusing to eat, the entrenched nature of slavery made it all too easy for enslavers to enact greater violence by controlling black mouths, which they did by force-feeding people and withholding food. Slaveholders did curtail enslaved peoples’ access to food, but there was little land, save for enslaved garden plots, to take away from them—which made victual imperialism similarly irrelevant. The fact that mainland slaveholders did not need to practice victual warfare, the fact that enslaved peoples in North America were not yet victual warriors themselves, and the fact that victual imperialism was not yet effective—none of these conditions should undermine the utility of these analytical terms. To the contrary, the emergence of these practices among black migrants in the late eighteenth century becomes all the more striking as commentary on the ways that hunger creation and prevention changed during the Revolutionary War. Before the late eighteenth century, enslaved people suffered from hunger—but they also embraced and ignored it.  

Before the War for Independence, food diplomacy does not stand out for its notable successes, but confusion over the best way to practice it within the constraints of forest diplomacy—which resulted from differences between commodity- and gift-exchange economies—exposed several strands of European perceptions of Indian hunger. Europeans described starving Indians, they wrote about hungry Native allies, and they talked of those with insignificant appetites. According to Englishmen, starving Indians required provisions when victual warfare and crop failures interfered with Indians’ food supply—but those Englishmen also called Indians starving when they hosted them at treaties, because that is how Indians described their own needs. The non-Native observers who said Indians had normal or insignificant appetites depicted Indians who, during times of famine, avoided dependency on Europeans and ignored their own hunger, who were unexcited by promises of feasts, and who seemed likelier to refuse food. At least in the 1750s, 1760s, and 1770s, these
last ideas about hunger seemed to prevail among those who worked most closely with Native Americans.

George Croghan’s own observations about Indians emphasized that Indians remained self-sufficient—they were useful to themselves while appearing useful and useless to Europeans. Even before Croghan’s 1773 claim about Native Americans’ reasonable appetites, he witnessed Indians repeatedly prove that they did not feel compelled to accept British provisions for survival. In times of very extreme weather, many Indians chose to stay in their villages rather than make the journey to British forts for presents. “The Expence of Indians this Winter has been but trifling,” Croghan wrote to Henry Bouquet in 1762. “It will be so every Winter as they will be a hunting.” Bouquet probably welcomed the news that he could avoid giving more provisions to Indians. In 1765 Croghan likewise informed William Johnson that he had not found himself saddled with the task of feeding Indians at Fort Pitt because the harsh weather had curtailed Indians’ mobility. As a result of “So Sevair a Winter and Spring att this plese Since I have been acquainted with this Country,” he said, “butt fewe Indians” had arrived. During the summer they became more demanding, he conceded, but only because they had little else to do “but travel about.” When Indians did not “go to Warr” they went “Visiting their friends,” and while on their move they arrived at English forts with “Expectations.”

The knowledgeable Croghan suggested that food exchange did not form the crux of British policy in North America. Yet it is telling that he failed to convince his Edinburgh correspondent, Dr. Robertson, of his claims about Native appetites. Robertson accepted Croghan’s assessment only partially in his history, writing, “The strength and vigour of savages are at some seasons impaired by what they suffer from a scarcity of food; at others they are afflicted with disorders arising from indigestion and a superfluity of gross aliment.” At times the doctor thought Indians’ health deteriorated due to a lack of food, and at other times he critiqued them for overeating. Robertson, like other observers, remained ambivalent in his assessment of Native hunger. These conflicting British, Indian, and American notions of hunger, and thus of food diplomacy and victual warfare, would transform in the coming decades as the war got underway.