

**Providence Institution
for Savings**

Established 1819

A Mutual Savings Bank
where interest is allowed
from day of Deposit to
Day of Withdrawal

MAIN OFFICE
86 South Main Street

OLNEYVILLE BRANCH
1917-21 Westminster Street
Olneyville Square

EMPIRE-ABORN BRANCH
Between Westminster and Washington Sts.

Open all business days and Tuesday evenings
5 to 8:30. Olneyville Branch open
Saturday evenings also.

"The Old Stone Bank"

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

F
79
pg 71
53

R. L. Towles
PR 7 B

52

**A
FORGOTTEN
ART**

R. I. Hist. Soc.



Presented by
"The Old Stone Bank"
Providence, R. I.

February 23, 1931



A Forgotten Art

WITH proper materials and care, a decent jonny-cake can be baked on a coal-stove, though by no means equal to the old-time genuine article, for the simple reason that woodfires in open fireplaces have become, as a general rule, things of the past, and good, careful, painstaking cooks extinct."

Who was it who thus deprecated the passing of a time-honored Rhode Island delicacy—jonny-cake or "journey-cake" as it was called before the Revolution? The person in question was "Shepherd Tom" Hazard, and the quoted statement appears in the latter part of the first of his rambling series of "Jonny-cake" papers, published through the years 1879 and 1880. That was more than fifty years ago, and fifty years are long enough to obliterate a custom in the height of favor, let alone one already in decadence. Yet certainly in various parts of present day Rhode Island what purports to be old-fashioned jonny-cake is still made and served, and in the vicinity of Kingston the old Kenyon mill still grinds the original variety of corn meal absolutely

essential in the preparation of the old-time delicacy. However, it is equally certain that the name "jonny-cake" has been frequently applied to various kinds of corn bread and cake so far different from the genuine article as to confuse many a twentieth century epicure. Even in the day of "Shepherd Tom" the variations in the plain jonny-cake theme were almost endless. Nineteenth century Rhode Island enjoyed plain jonny-cake served in the form of toast, with or without a rich cream as sauce. Then there was "bannock" made of fine Indian meal with the added richness of eggs and milk, suet jonny-cake, pumpkin jonny-cake, huckleberry jonny-cake and so on indefinitely.

But herein we shall be concerned primarily with the original "jonny-cake" described by "Shepherd Tom" Hazard. And, before proceeding further, perhaps it would be appropriate to give at least a slight description of that gentleman. He was of the seventh generation of Hazards in Rhode Island and was born in 1797, in the house of "College Tom," his grandfather, which was then located on the east slope of Tower Hill. Six feet tall, unusually strong, he was a typical Hazard with the additional char-

acteristics of blue eyes and curly, dark brown hair. His schooling, secured at Westtown, Pennsylvania, was very brief, and at the age of fifteen he had returned to Narragansett to begin his long career of sheep raising and wool milling that established him as one of the well-to-do inhabitants of the countryside. He was a Quaker in principle and religion, devoted not only to the care of his flocks of sheep but to the more needy flocks of men and women who were his neighbors and friends. As far as marriage is concerned, he courted and won a great beauty, Frances Minturn by name, with whom he shared sixteen years of unremitting happiness until death took her from him.

All through his life he was a versatile and accomplished writer, but it was not until 1879 that the famous "Jonny-cake" papers began to appear. The first of the whole series of twenty-six was provoked by a brief note referring to white Indian meal in the *Providence Journal* of January 16, 1879. This paper was so well received that he yielded to countless requests to amplify the subject. He headed the papers "First Baking," "Second Baking," "Third Baking," and so on, but they dealt less and less with

culinary art itself and became delightful reminiscences of life and events in Narragansett. Even in the first paper he included several incidents not closely relating to jonny-cakes, the slightest pretext sending him on a winding digression through a whole page or two.

It was his grandfather's colored cook, Phillis, whom "Shepherd Tom" took as the supreme authority in the delicate art of making jonny-cake. Her he places far above any rivals, and it is her he was remembering when he said: "Since the introduction of coal fires, cooking-stoves, common schools, and French and Irish be-devilled cooks, the making and baking of a jonny-cake has become one of the lost arts."

Like the true mistress of her art that she was, Phillis was obdurate in choosing jonny-cake materials, stubbornly insisting upon white Narragansett corn, ground at what was then Hammond's Mill on Pettaquamscutt Pond. The reason for her selection of this among half a score of other mills was that Hammond's meal was "soft-feeling and flat" while the product of the other mills was "harsh-feeling and round."

"Shepherd Tom" explained the reason for her preference by discussing the vari-

ance in millstones and millers. To his belief Narragansett granite made the best millstones, but there were differences in the grain of the granite itself. The finely grained stones, when adjusted just right, turned out soft, flat meal of exactly the right consistency. As far as millers were concerned some were as much the artist as Phillis herself. As the first grain fed through the hopper and was ground into meal, the white-coated miller would test a pinch of it between his thumb and forefinger, expertly judging its grade. If not perfectly to his fancy, he would re-adjust the heavy millstones until they were cutting the grain into fine slivers without rolling it over and over and grinding the body out of it. Milling was a slow process in those days. One miller, Benny Rodman by name, would fill his hopper with a bushel of grain, adjust the mill stones, then walk two miles to Tower Hill to court the widow Brown for an hour and still be back in time to refill his hopper.

Jonny-cake meal at that time sold for something like seventy cents a bushel. And at that time too, the family meal chest was a stock item among other pieces of household furniture. Members of families would take empty bags to the mills, or to other places

of distribution like the Ferry Wharf in Newport, have them filled, and then carry the meal home to fill their chests.

Phillis would go to the Hazard chest and scoop out enough of the soft meal for a batch of jonny-cake. Then she would bolt it through her very finest sieve, reserving the first teacupful that fell through for powdering fish before they were fried. After that she only bolted one-half of the meal left in the sieve, saving the rest for making what was called Rhineinjun bread—similar to what is now called rye bread.

The next process Phillis undertook was to scald the meal with boiling water and then knead it thoroughly in a wooden tray, pausing occasionally to add a bit of milk or water to bring it to the right consistency. She then would place the cake three-quarters of an inch thick on a special jonny-cake board, dressing the surface of the cake with plenty of thick sweet cream to prevent it from blistering while cooking.

A word about the jonny-cake board is highly necessary. It was always of red oak and was always taken from the head of a flour barrel where it had been serving as the middle section. No good cook would ever have dreamed of using another kind of

board. The flour barrel variety was indispensable. In fact most old-time colored cooks insisted that flour barrels were made first of all to supply jonny-cake boards. That they had the capacity for holding flour was only to be classed as a secondary consideration.

The jonny-cake on the board was next placed before an open fire of green hardwood, also an indispensable requisite in the baking of the genuine article. To support the board and hold it in a vertical position with the jonny-cake facing the fire Phillis always used an old-fashioned flat iron. After the top and main portion of the cake had cooked sufficiently in this position, she shifted the iron, slanting the board so that the sides could receive the heat. Finally with a sharp knife she separated the cake from the board, turned it over, re-dressed it on the bottom with more rich cream and again exposed it to the fire until done. In the cooking of the cake, the flat iron as well as the board was considered essential as a part of a good cook's equipment, but as "Shepherd Tom" remarks: "After a time it was discovered that the flatiron, first invented as a jonny-cake holder, was a convenient thing to iron clothes with, and has

since been used for that purpose very extensively."

Housewives who have been urged to revive the custom of jonny-cake making may compare the method described by "Shepherd Tom" with recipes which may or may not be found in modern cook books. Then, despite the disparaging remarks made by "Shepherd Tom" concerning coal stoves (and what remarks he might well have made if he had known modern gas, oil and electric stoves), they may attempt to duplicate Phillis' masterpieces. As for the result, if they can only do half as well, we shall probably be satisfied. At least not being "Shepherd Tom's," we shall be unable to make discouraging comparisons.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent

upon request

ADDRESS

"THE OLD STONE BANK"

86 South Main Street

Providence



THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank," is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

THE OLD STONE BANK