How the presidents ate their salmon

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THE RIVERS OF THE East Coast of North America once were filled with fish. Alewives, eel, shad, smelt, striped bass, sturgeon, salmon—each had their season of plenty and associated rituals and habits of preparation and eating. These fish, which migrate between coastal rivers and the ocean, sustained Native American populations and contributed to the survival of early European colonies. Today, they persist at a fraction of their former abundance, and several species are considered threatened or endangered. Their history reflects everything humans have done—fishing, logging, damming, and polluting—to diminish the quantity and quality of food provided by coastal rivers.

The overfishing of New England rivers and bays, the Gulf of Maine, and the North Atlantic Ocean continues to be well documented. Less often told (and more often forgotten) are the regional stories of abundance and scarcity: the river-by-river histories of fishing and eating. These stories contribute to the “social memory” of communities. Social (or collective) memory links past experience and long-term processes like fisheries declines with present and future policies. When confronted with change or crisis, communities draw on social memory to identify options for moving forward.

The sensory experience and symbolic importance of food make it a diffuse and powerful locus of memory. Food, then, joins music, literature, theater, and other arts in activating social memories of relationships with nature, and providing space (the table) for reflection.

Much time, energy, and money are being spent to restore America’s rivers, yet their role as a source of food often becomes lost in restoration narratives. Recovering the vernacular customs of catching, cooking, and eating local fish—through stories such as the Presidential Salmon—could benefit restoration efforts by providing local communities with a tangible, sensory connection to place.

For eighty years, recreational salmon anglers on the Penobscot River in Maine upheld the annual tradition of giving the first Atlantic salmon each spring to the President of the United States. A closer examination of how each president’s salmon would have been prepared and eaten reveals that the celebratory eating of salmon happened at the same time as the decimation of salmon populations and their associated food traditions. Thus, through the Presidential Salmon, local anglers maintained cultural traditions of catching and eating salmon, keeping them in the social memory of the region and nation, while at the same time creating a moment that reflected how national policies were affecting local resources.

A Tradition Begins

In 1912, a Norwegian immigrant, house painter, boat builder, and fly fisherman named Karl Anderson decided to send an Atlantic salmon to the President of the United States. Anderson had caught the fish on opening day of the fly-fishing season in the cold waters of the Penobscot River down the street from his home in Bangor, Maine. Every spring, Maine people greeted the returning adult salmon, with their pink and meaty flesh, as a welcome departure from the salt cod and other preserved fish they had been eating all winter and the smaller, bony smelt and river herring of early spring.

Most New England rivers had lost their salmon in a relatively short period of time since the arrival of Europeans due to overfishing, dams, and pollution. The Penobscot experienced these same assaults, but to a lesser degree, and in the nineteenth century it emerged as the Atlantic salmon river of the United States. Commercial fishermen lined the bays and estuaries with nets to trap tens of thousands of salmon for shipment to local and regional markets.

Recreational fishing for salmon (in the form of fly-fishing) in the Penobscot began in the 1880s. At the edge of the great North Woods and head of tide on Maine’s largest river, Bangor became the premier destination for Atlantic salmon angling. The Bangor Salmon Pool was a deep pocket formed between ledges of the river’s east bank and a dam that powered electric lights and streetcars, and provided drinking...
water to city residents. The log cabin headquarters of the Penobscot Salmon Club overlooked the pool, where local blue-collar workers like Karl Anderson rubbed elbows with white-collar executives from out of state. People fished before and after work. Men fished in suits during their lunch break; women set aside their hats and hiked up their skirts to fish. Children gathered on the rocks at the river’s edge to watch.

Many ate their catch or sold it to restaurants or seafood markets. Newspapers reported details of each fish’s weight, price, angler, buyer, and seller. Competition among anglers was stoked by local hotel owners, who wanted bragging rights to serve the season’s first salmon to their guests. The U.S. Commissioner of Fisheries reported that “no fish of its magnitude brings so large a price per pound, and is so universally regarded as a chief delicacy.”

The region’s traditional Fourth of July meal featured salmon with fresh peas and new potatoes, a triumvirate of foods at the peak of their season that connected people to the land and water. Fannie Farmer’s Boston Cooking-School Cook Book advised home cooks that “Penobscot River Salmon are the best.” Banquet menus listed “Penobscot Salmon, Sauce Hollandaise” as the fish course. “Penobscot Salmon” became the premier and recognizable brand of a fish eaten by people of all socioeconomic backgrounds: the local angler fishing in the early hours before work, the homemaker cooking on her new electric stove, and elite families dining at fancy tables in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

Karl Anderson caught two fish on the chilly afternoon of April 1, 1912, the only successful angler on opening day. One of the salmon, a sixteen-pounder Anderson fought for an hour, went to Campbell Clark, president of the Clark Thread Company in Newark, New Jersey, who frequently paid the highest price for the first fish. Anderson decided the other salmon should go to Washington “to show the city’s honor and respect for the President.” That spring, Bangor delegates to the Republican State Convention had voiced their unanimous support for the re-election of President William Howard Taft.

The next morning, Karl took the fish to Oscar Fickett’s market on Broad Street. Fickett packed the salmon carefully in a crate with straw and ice, and brought it around the corner to Union Station, placing the important package in the express car of the early afternoon train. On to Portland and then Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, the steam engine carrying the Presidential Salmon whistled through the night.

The fish arrived in Washington the next day and likely was received by housekeeper Elizabeth Jaffray and given to Alice Howard, the young cook in the White House kitchen. Never ones for formality, the Tafts always flustered the staff with last-minute changes. Did the cook wonder how to prepare the fish? Did she consider curing it into gravlax, as she might have done in her Swedish homeland? She likely would not have selected such a lengthy process, as Mrs. Taft was insistent that dinner begin on time. In the large State Dining Room, staff were probably already setting the table and lighting the fireplace, throwing flickers of light on the walnut-paneled walls.

The 332-pound president sat down at the great table before an eleven-pound salmon, the best size for eating. Imagine the fish, described as more delicate and less oily than salmon from anywhere else, poached whole, bedecked with curly parsley, and served with an egg sauce.

Outside, pink blossoms dripped from newly planted cherry trees, a gift from Tokyo that would flower each year around the time that salmon fishing began seven hundred miles north in Maine, where a frenzy of dam construction supported by Taft threatened the Penobscot River’s salmon.

Like other sea-run or anadromous fish, salmon spend their adult lives in the ocean but migrate to freshwater to spawn. Historically, tens of thousands of salmon ascended the river each year, swimming the great distance from their winter feeding grounds off the coast of Greenland to the cold, rocky streams where they themselves hatched years before. This strategy of moving from river to sea and back again evolved to protect the developing young from ocean predators, yet give the growing adults access to the sea’s nutritious and plentiful food. In the process, salmon and other migratory fish serve to import valuable marine nutrients and protein into the terrestrial landscape. Dams block this migration and prevent fish from reaching their breeding grounds.

By the turn of the twentieth century, dams had found new purpose as generators of electricity. As Secretary of War under Roosevelt, Taft was in charge of approving new hydroelectric dams, and he opposed the restrictions enforced by his conservationist predecessor and chief forester Gifford Pinchot. Upon gaining the presidency, Taft signed many bills granting perpetual and unlimited franchises for dam construction. In Maine, pulp and paper mills were the dominant industry, and they had a growing need for electricity. Surveyors scouted the state for new hydroelectric locations and built dozens of dams in the Penobscot watershed in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

An Illusion of Plenty

New hydroelectric dams and increasing waste from pulp and paper mills and other industries completed the devastation begun with extensive logging in the headwaters, mill dams on
the falls, and commercial fishing in the estuary. Despite the popularity of salmon fishing and the persistence of “Penobscot Salmon” on menus and recipes, in fact by 1912 Penobscot River salmon were already on the decline. While the previous year’s haul of nine thousand fish was the largest in decades, it would prove but a shallow peak in a long and continuing record of low points.

In addition, Maine’s salmon exporters faced competition from the developing Pacific salmon fishery, encouraged by initiation of the canning process in California during the Civil War and the spread of the salmon canning industry north to the Columbia River.\textsuperscript{13}

Advances in transportation and refrigeration technology facilitated the spread of fishery products around the world. Ships carrying wheat and lumber brought canned salmon to Europe, establishing a market that encouraged more salmon canneries along the Columbia River, and more in Puget Sound, British Columbia, and Alaska. By 1912, more than eighty plants were operating along the Alaskan coast.\textsuperscript{14} The first cases of canned Pacific salmon arrived in Boston in the mid-1870s, and in 1884 the first railroad car direct from the West Coast rolled into Portland, Maine. Shipments of fresh whole salmon began to arrive the same year. Within a decade, six million pounds of Pacific salmon were being delivered to the East Coast each year.\textsuperscript{15} New England fish processors responded to this competition by selling prepared salt cod, canned chowder, and salmon ready for salad or heating in cream sauce.\textsuperscript{16}

Atlantic salmon remained primarily a fresh product, however, as Maine canneries were busy packing lobster, sardines, clams, and white fish like hake, all of which were much more plentiful in Maine than salmon by the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{17} Its convenience and abundance meant that canned Pacific salmon was received favorably by New Englanders, who were well accustomed to eating seafood (e.g., sardines) out of a can. Dozens of recipes for salmon loaf, salmon salads, and various salmon casseroles appeared in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century community cookbooks.\textsuperscript{18} Commercial fishermen in the Penobscot River continued to provide a supply of fresh salmon, but to a geographically smaller area. By sending a salmon to the president, the recreational fishermen kept alive the Atlantic salmon’s status as both a product of a particular place and the “King of Fish.”

To Each President, A Salmon

While the commercial fishery degraded, the recreational fishery thrived. Anglers continued to catch, sell, and eat Atlantic salmon from the Penobscot River, and to give the first fish of the year to the president, joining other first salmon rituals around the world. From Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest to the Ainu people of Hokkaido, Japan, to western Europe and the United Kingdom, first salmon rituals showed respect and honor to the sea as a source of life.

The Presidential Salmon custom maintained this legacy of seasonal celebration, but it also bestowed honor upon a political leader, echoing the historic status of fresh salmon at the feasts of rulers and kings. The reddish flesh of salmon and its rich flavor meant that the fish was sometimes regarded as “red blooded” and was included on the list of “royal” fish alongside sturgeon and whales.\textsuperscript{19} Extravagance, in the form of rare and exotic foods on the table, was an expression of power, a declaration of the special qualities that set rulers and nobles above the common people.\textsuperscript{20}

The annual presentation of the Presidential Salmon therefore was also a political act. The executive’s consumption of a signature\textsuperscript{21} and rare food – the first fish only happens once each year – linked him to the Penobscot River valley. And therein lies the paradox: the presidential gift that at once kept the salmon eating tradition alive also highlighted its demise. Just as Taft supported dams, which prevented fish from reaching their spawning grounds, nearly every president who received a salmon had implemented natural resource policies that threatened the very existence of the salmon he was about to eat.

In 1939, the Young Business Associates of Bangor paid three dollars a pound for the first fish and shipped it by air to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in time for Easter Dinner at his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia.\textsuperscript{22}

This timing was fortunate, for it meant the salmon would not be cooked by Henrietta Nesbitt, who had been brought to the White House from Hyde Park by the president’s mother. Both women believed in the simplest of American cookery; they abandoned the traditional French cooking produced by the White House kitchen since it was first occupied in favor of “hearty, vitamin-filled dishes” like roast beef and mashed potatoes. Nesbitt maintained that “a proper diet consisted of plain foods plainly prepared.” The food was so bad, Roosevelt built a new kitchen for himself on the third floor in protest.\textsuperscript{23}

Although the 1939 Presidential Salmon was Roosevelt’s seventh, Bangor anglers had faith that the gift would appeal to him more than his predecessors because Roosevelt was an ardent fisherman. He also was something of a gourmet. He loved exotic game, and he especially loved fish. Gifts came in from all over the country: Lake Superior whitefish, Florida rock crabs, New England lobsters. Roosevelt ate kippered herring and salt mackerel for breakfast, and chowder for lunch.\textsuperscript{24}
Perhaps Roosevelt ate the Presidential Salmon according to Nesbitt’s recipe for boiled salmon (doubtful), or maybe he requested the whole fish be planked and roasted (his favorite). He would have savored every bite, for Roosevelt believed salmon to be the king of food fish and he loved tradition. Yet he also felt that American life and traditions had been eroded by the Great Depression. The New Deal was his way of saving what was left, including landscapes and wildlife. Indeed, an undercurrent of environmental concerns lay behind much of his administrative actions. At one point conservation measures accounted for nearly eleven percent of his federal budget. The Civilian Conservation Corps sent young men into the woods, up to the mountaintops, and through the national parks to create spaces for Americans to rediscover their country. The Works Progress Administration employed some eight million people in projects as diverse as sewing, drama, writing, road construction, and fly-casting lessons.

New Deal planners designed the landscape of a new age with a sense of urgency. Engineers, architects, and laborers sculpted progress into the Golden Gate Bridge, the Blue Ridge Parkway, Hoover Dam, Bonneville Dam, and the ambitious and unprecedented planning of the Tennessee Valley Authority, including hydroelectric dams on nine major lakes. Many of these massive infrastructure projects had the unintended consequence of destroying the very places and customs Roosevelt wanted Americans to be proud of.

In Maine, the Works Progress Administration built new fish passage facilities at existing dams and built new dams in the Penobscot River. Roosevelt likely believed in the wisdom of his engineers to ensure the survival of the King of Fish. Technology, in the form of fish passageways and trapping and trucking fish around dams, would prevent harming nature in a way that affected future generations of Americans. Unfortunately, the dams and poorly designed fishways built as part of the New Deal further impeded salmon migration.

Roosevelt’s successor, Harry S. Truman, received his Presidential Salmon while preoccupied with creating a modern nation of prosperity amid escalating conflict in Korea. In April 1947, Maine fishing guide Charley Miller offered to cook President Truman’s salmon with peas, potatoes, hot johnny cake, hot ginger bread with whipped cream, and “good coffee.” Instead, Maine’s Republican congressman Frank Fellows presented the eight-pound fish to President Truman a few days later in Washington.

Truman was neither picky nor greedy about food. He learned in the army to eat what was put before him and like it, although the Trumans eventually replaced Roosevelt-era fixtures Henrietta Nesbitt in favor of someone who better knew their tastes for farmhouse cooking.

Truman negotiated fishing treaties with other North Atlantic nations, yet domestically he supported dams and water supply planning that viewed rivers as blank slates to be developed, floods in need of control, conduits to dilute and carry away pollution. Rivers were worth only the service they could provide to people, and food was no longer a service people needed from rivers. With diesel engines, bottom trawls, and freezing technology, fishing had moved out onto the high seas.

With many countries devastated and starved by World War II, Truman advocated for conserving resources as sound economic and democratic policy. In the first televised speech from the White House, he encouraged Americans to avoid meat on Tuesdays, eat no chicken or eggs on Wednesday, and save a slice of bread every day. Canned fish, an industry that reached its peak as troop rations during the war years, became regular table fare in such dishes as canned salmon bake, tuna noodle casserole, and sardine sandwiches. For the first time, canned tuna sales topped those of canned salmon, making tuna America’s most popular fish.

Even those who wanted to eat an Atlantic salmon would have had a hard time finding one. As President Truman was accepting the first fish of 1947, Penobscot River fishermen harvested a mere forty fish from their weirs, forcing the state to shut down the commercial fishery and raising the price of fresh salmon. Rachel Carson, writing at the time for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, advised housewives to substitute fillets of wolf fish, an abundant and “underutilized” species, for “expensive fresh salmon.” Fannie Farmer’s cookbook no longer called out Penobscot salmon as the best. There were no salmon recipes in the Maine Development Commission’s recipe contest booklet published in 1945. Banquet chefs seeking whole fish turned to West Coast rivers and their plentiful runs of coho and sockeye salmon.

Beginning in 1947, the only way to eat a Penobscot River salmon was to catch it yourself or know someone who was an angler. The salmon clubs took on greater importance as keepers of salmon culture and memory. Even they struggled, as fewer and fewer Atlantic salmon returned to the Penobscot each year. In addition to dams, the water was overloaded with pollution from paper mills and cities and towns along the river. It took two months for an angler to land the Presidential Salmon of 1954.

Maine’s congressional delegation formally presented the fish on a huge silver platter to President Eisenhower. Wearing a broad grin, Ike talked about Maine and fishing.
“You know, the only time I’ve ever caught a salmon was in Canada,” he told the lawmakers while movie and still photographers crowded around. “By golly, this is a nice-sized one.” “Should be good eating, too,” remarked Maine Senator Frederick Payne.37 The President agreed. He liked fish. Broiled fillet of trout was one of his favorite meals.38 He also liked to go fishing. He told the delegation he had never been to Maine and explained the kind of fishing trip he’d like to make. He never got the chance. He never received another Penobscot salmon. Salmon numbers dropped so low that state officials closed the recreational fishery. The salmon pool emptied, ending competition for the first fish and the glory for delivering it to the president.

The anglers continued to meet at the Penobscot Salmon Club, and to advocate for restoration of the river. There were still former commercial fishermen around who remembered how to tend a salmon weir. And the region’s native Wabanaki people held salmon somewhere deep in their genetic memory. But for everyone else, knowledge of the bounty that once filled their backyard river faded. “Salmon” was a chunk of protein made in a factory and sealed in tin.39 The destruction of native stocks of foods such as salmon seriously undermined the regional cuisine of New England, but greater changes came as a result of commercialization, a major debilitating influence.40 Commercial exchange stripped foods from the myriad associations that tied them in unique fashion to their cultures of origin.41 The popularity of fish in cans,42 with generic labels that vaguely suggested the product’s distant or exotic origin, contributed to the separation of people, place, and food.

But the separation was not complete.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, several political currents confluence to bring about the return of salmon to the Penobscot River. For one, Maine’s salmon finally had powerful advocates in federal government. Lyndon Johnson’s Secretary of Interior Stuart Udall encouraged fisheries managers in their efforts to make the Penobscot River “a model in overcoming the man-made socio-economic problems that affect fisheries.”43 The Anadromous Fish Conservation Act funded new fishways at the Penobscot River dams, and Maine’s fisheries managers hoped the restoration would create a mecca for sport fishermen, and maybe even bring about the return of commercial fishing.44

Meanwhile, the century-old hatchery program intensified. Instead of being landed by fly fishermen and sent to the President of the United States, the first fish to return were netted at the dams and stripped of their eggs for transport to the hatchery. The young fish were then put back in the river and soon left for several years in the relatively cleaner ocean. This human intervention acted as a kind of life support, sustaining the Penobscot’s salmon run while other aspects of the restoration were completed.

Finally, the October 1972 amendments to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, ushered to realization by Maine Senator Ed Muskie and supported by an American public who believed the environment was in crisis, and who demanded that the federal government punish politically powerful polluters, finally provided the funding and enforcement teeth that proved crucial to cleaning up the Penobscot. As a start, the newly created Environmental Protection Agency gave Penobscot River cities and towns $14 million to construct secondary waste treatment plants. Great Northern Paper Company spent $36 million to recover and treat wastewater. Local, state, and federal actions combined to reduce pollution by eighty percent, leading the EPA to declare the Penobscot River “a water quality success story.”45 Nixon never received a Presidential Salmon, but he may have done more to increase the salmon’s chance for survival than any other president.

By the mid-1970s, water quality improved to the point that salmon could make it on their own upriver to spawn. With new fishways and cleaner water, for the first time in over a hundred years, 250 miles of Penobscot tributaries were open to spawning salmon.46

And they came back: 138 fish in 1970; 337 in 1972; 587 in 1974. Then a spring flood washed out a chunk of the aging dam above the Bangor Salmon Pool, providing salmon free passage above head of tide. The recreational fishery resumed, and once again the first fish of the year was front-page news. For the first time in decades, membership of the Penobscot Salmon Club swelled as fishermen from across the country paid dues for their chance to fish for Atlantic salmon in American waters. In 1978, anglers hooked twenty-four fish in one day, the most in a long time. Salmon rolled, twisted, tossed, jumped, swirled, their tails scissoring the surface at high tide. At times the fishing was chaos, unbelievable except to those who were there to see it.47

So many people fished and wanted to fish that the historic Penobscot Salmon Club didn’t have room for them all. Tired of waiting in line to fish among the white-collar members of the Penobscot club, a group of blue-collar locals founded the Veazie Salmon Club in 1978. The Eddington Salmon Club incorporated a few years later.

Anglers who were once again catching fish, or catching fish the way their parents had before them, tapped into collective memory to revive traditions of preparing and eating salmon. As one angler from the period recalled, “Most salmon
were baked in the oven, especially for the Fourth of July. Mom would bake her salmon in a brown paper bag. She always made an egg sauce to spread over the salmon. Any leftover fish would be made into salmon salad. My stepfather would smoke most of the salmon that he caught.48

With cleaner water, the state ramped up stocking efforts, and the salmon seemed to respond, with nearly one thousand fish returning to the river. In 1981, the Presidential Salmon tradition was revived to honor Ronald Reagan.49

Nancy Reagan had introduced the White House to nouvelle cuisine: small, colorful, perfect arrangements of julienne vegetables, salmon mousse, Grand Marnier soufflé.50 President Reagan’s tastes ran to meatloaf and macaroni and cheese. Unless there was a formal occasion, he and Nancy ate dinner together from folding tables in front of the television, which perhaps is where Chef Frank Ruta served them a meal of dilled Penobscot salmon.51

The resurgence of the Atlantic salmon fishery was brief. A few months after Reagan received his first salmon, a Massachusetts company proposed to rebuild the Bangor Dam to generate electricity, (re)igniting a controversy over Atlantic salmon, dams, and power in the Penobscot River that would last for more than two decades.

Hydroelectricity gained renewed appeal during the energy crisis of the 1970s. The federal government responded with the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act, which stimulated interest in small-scale hydropower production. President Reagan favored these kinds of market-based approaches to natural resource management. He revoked almost all of Carter’s executive orders relating to environmental and natural resources policies. The Reagan Administration’s legislative and administrative presidency strategies were instrumental in the loss of key technical, scientific, and seasoned administrative personnel in environmental agencies, the reduction of monitoring activity and scientific research, the reduction of enforcement actions, an ineffectual implementation of the Superfund program, and blockage of acid rain legislation, support for pork-barrel water projects, accelerated timber harvesting on public lands, and a downgrading of energy conservation programs and alternative energy options. Rivers were once again available to be abused for profit. Hungry for tax breaks, financier-speculators from around the world began to peruse the still relatively undeveloped Penobscot River watershed for sites such as Bangor, where still-existing or former dams could economically produce significant amounts of electricity.52

The salmon anglers, who had tasted life with a healthy river again, did not want to witness construction of a new dam. They mobilized to protest multiple dam proposals in the 1980s. And they kept fishing and delivering the annual salmon gift to the White House.

The Last Presidential Salmon

In 1992, George H. W. Bush grasped the tail of a nine-pound Penobscot River salmon before the popping flashbulbs of media photographers. Bush didn’t much care for seafood, much less where it came from. Although he fished from his boat off the coast of Maine and took salmon fishing vacations in Canada, he usually threw back his catch or gave it to Secret Service agents before going inside to chow down on beef jerky, nachos, chili, or barbecued ribs.53

In his 1988 campaign, Bush had promised to amend for the Reagan Administration’s crimes against nature and to be the Environmental President. While he advanced policies to reduce acid rain and improve water quality, Bush advocated a National Energy Strategy that included more hydroelectric development, made easier to license by reducing the ability of federal wildlife officials to intervene in the process. At the same time, his administration was taking steps to weaken the Endangered Species Act.

Just one week before receiving the salmon, Bush had waived protections for the Northern spotted owl to allow logging in the Pacific Northwest, saying, “It’s time to put people ahead of owls.” People before owls, people before fish.

Bush’s disdain for the Endangered Species Act aside, federal officials went ahead and proposed to list Atlantic salmon as endangered later that year, and all fishing came to a halt.

Meanwhile, the new farm-raised salmon from Norway and Chile began flooding markets, driving prices down. Salmon consumption more than doubled. Farmed Atlantic salmon increased to sixty percent of world supply. Today, more of the salmon eaten in America and abroad comes from farms than from the wild.54

With the last Presidential Salmon and the rise of aquacultured fish, Americans lost a connection to Atlantic salmon and to place. Like TV dinners and canned spaghetti, salmon became devoid of ethnic labels or regional distinctiveness.55 As Paul Greenberg wrote of his native Connecticut River watershed, “Today...there is no direct experience or memory of local wild salmon as food. The fish live in the minds of my fellow northeasterners as faceless orange slabs of supermarket product flown in from far away.”56

This is not to say that people don’t have other ways of connecting to salmon or place. The Endangered Species Act listing of Maine’s Atlantic salmon in 1999 led to the formation of local watershed councils, watershed management plans,
and community-based habitat restoration projects. Scientists started calling attention to the salmon as part of a larger ecology linking ocean and inland environments, and as a result other sea-run fish such as sturgeon and alewives have joined the ghosts of salmon to haunt the region’s collective memory. The salmon clubs remain engaged with educating local youth about Atlantic salmon ecology, and they support restoration of the river in the hopes that they—or their children—may one day fish again.

Hope Is the Thing with Scales

Today, like a flash of silver in the current, there is a glimmer of promise on the Penobscot. The Penobscot River Restoration Project is a collaboration among the Penobscot Indian Nation, seven conservation groups, hydropower companies, and state and federal agencies to restore salmon and other species of sea-run fish by removing two dams and bypassing a third, all while maintaining energy production. The project is among the largest and most prominent river restoration efforts across the U.S.

The restoration project recognizes that in order for the Penobscot River to once again be a source of food, the ecosystem first needs to be repaired. But this does not mean that food and associated cultural traditions such as the Presidential Salmon should be forced to the background. Food could be a powerful way of generating support and engaging new and different communities in watershed restoration. In Hokkaido, Japan, the Ainu Museum began producing dried salmon to preserve the custom as a traditional aspect of native Ainu culture. Visitors to the museum who saw the salmon on display expressed an interest in actually eating it. The museum began producing more salmon, and sales of the product helped support the organization. Similarly, the Downeast Salmon Federation in Columbia Falls, Maine, hosts an annual Smelt Fry that serves as a fundraiser and community celebration.
The challenge for Atlantic salmon restoration advocates is how to incorporate food aspects in an era of scarcity, when there simply aren’t enough Atlantic salmon in the Penobscot to support a harvest. Perhaps the next most promising option is to share stories and memories of salmon as food, from Native American fishing sites and practices to the twentieth-century Presidential Salmon tradition. The Penobscot River may one day again be full of fish, and someday, those fish might even be food.

NOTES
7. See, for example, the April 1884 banquet menu for the Champlain Society at Harvard University (Champlain Society archives, Mount Desert Island Historical Society, Mount Desert, ME).
11. Sandra L. Oliver, e-mail message to the author, 3 December 2010.
17. “At no time has the packing of salmon been of any importance on the U.S. Atlantic Coast.” Jarvis, “Curing and Canning,” 185.
21. Sidney W. Mintz, Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). “Signature foods stand for something more than themselves. Their distinctive character related at one time to cooking methods and ingredients typical of certain locales, and perhaps only obtainable there. Such foods stand intimately linked to the local economy” (95).
23. Seale, President’s House, 955.
25. Seale, President’s House, 955.
28. Roosevelt to Harold L. Ickes, 17 June 1935, in Edgar B. Nixon, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Conservation, 1913–1935 (Hyde Park, NY: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, 1977), 383. In his speech at the completion of the Bonneville Dam in September 1937, the president affirmed that his conception of liberty “did not permit an individual citizen or a group of citizens to commit acts of depredation against nature that would harm their neighbors, and especially harm to future generations of Americans” (135).
39. Almost all Alaskan salmon in U.S. markets in the mid-twentieth century was canned. Japan started buying frozen Alaskan salmon in the 1970s; any fish that wasn’t canned went straight to Japan (Gunnar Knapp, telephone interview with the author, 12 February 2012).
41. Donna R. Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 34.
42. Most of the salmon recipes in the 1975 All Maine Seafood Cookbook (Rockland, ME: Courier-Gazette) are based on canned fish.
49. The Presidential Salmon tradition was revived briefly in 1964; however, that year’s fish (for President Lyndon Johnson) came from the Narraguagus River, not the Penobscot.


52. With the Water Resources Development Act of 1977, Congress authorized a study of hydropower expansion in the New England region, at both existing and undeveloped sites. “Potential for Hydropower Development at Existing Dams in New England” was released in January 1980. Within a year, applications involving more than two hundred sites were submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.


54. Roughly one percent of farm-raised Atlantic salmon are grown in Maine waters, east of the Penobscot River, and only a fraction of those are processed in Maine.

55. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 150.

