

# Breakfast with the President

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From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 46: 2 (spring 2007).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

What would you do if someone came to the door of your house and told your parents that the president of the United States was outside, wanting to eat breakfast with your family? That is exactly what happened to Mary Allen.

On the morning of April 20, 1791, while traveling from Greenville to New Bern during a tour of the South, President George Washington stopped his white coach at the Cat Tail Plantation. The plantation (near Pitch Kettle in Craven County, about twenty miles from New Bern) was the home of Colonel and Mrs. John Allen and their family. We are not sure about daughter Mary's age, but we know she was younger than twelve.

Wrongly believing the Allen home to be a public house—a place where a traveler could spend the night and get a meal—the president sent word that he would like a little breakfast. Mrs. Allen, helped by servants and neighbors, rushed to prepare a meal for her distinguished guest and his company.

What would you serve the president—Pop-Tarts, toast, eggs, bacon, sausage, cereal, coffee, orange juice, milk, or some modern breakfast drink? What is your typical breakfast?

A typical breakfast in eastern North Carolina in 1791 could have included ham, sausage, salt fish, salt pork, cold roast venison, fried potatoes, eggs (fried, scrambled, poached, and hard-boiled), jams, jellies, fresh bread, and butter. Beverages may have included hot tea, cider, coffee, and hot chocolate with cream and sugar. Not all families would have had this many different dishes. Most would have had three or four—still a hearty breakfast to prepare for the active day ahead. At that time, people cooked on an open hearth, over a fire or through the use of hot coals.

A little over an hour after the arrival of the president—who may have been touring the property or resting in his carriage—Mrs. Allen rang the bell announcing that breakfast was ready. The president was escorted to the family's dining room, where a variety of foods filled the table. After all of Mrs. Allen's hard work, the president asked for just one hard-boiled egg and some coffee!

Washington recorded in his diary: “[We] went to a Colonel Allen's, supposing it to be a public house; where we were very kindly & well entertained without knowing it was at his expence, until it was too late to rectify the mistake.”

While visiting New Bern, the president spent two nights in the private home of the John Wright Stanly family. Townspeople entertained him at many events in his honor. Washington wrote: “Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> of [April] Dined with the citizens at a public dinner given by them; and went to a

dancing Assembly in the evening; both of which was at what they call the Palace, formally the government house and a good brick building and now hastening to ruins.” The president did not write down what was served at the public dinner. The brick building to which he referred is the original Governor’s Palace. Today at Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens, you can visit the John Wright Stanly House. In the palace kitchen you can see food cooked on the open hearth, just as it was in Washington’s day.

Years later, when friends teased Mrs. Allen about the president’s plain breakfast with her, she reportedly said, “There was glory enough in having General Washington as my guest.”

*\*At the time of this article’s publication, Shirley Fornes Willis served as the domestic skills programs manager at Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens in New Bern.*