

Power of Place

The Origins of Corn and Turkey

OVERVIEW

Theme Introduction

In this unit, we're exploring "Power of Place." What is the history of the Cincinnati region, and how has it changed over time? How has our natural environment shaped our history? We'll explore these questions and more.

Podcast Short

[The Origins of Corn and Turkey](#) with Bob Genheimer, George Rieveschl Curator of Archaeology, and Tyler Swinney, Manager, NAGPRA and Tribal Liaison at Cincinnati Museum Center

Guiding Questions

As students listen to the podcast, invite them to consider the following questions:

- Where did corn originate? Who first grew it in this area?
- How did domesticating plants and animals change Native Americans' lifestyles?
- How do archaeologists know that plants and animals were domesticated? How do they know where plants and animals originated before coming to Ohio?

Key Vocabulary

- **Domesticate:** To adapt plants or animals for human use.
- **Hybrid:** The offspring of two plants or animals of different species or varieties.



Carbonized corn cobs and kernels from a 16th/17th century context at the Late PreContact Hahn site near Cincinnati. Courtesy of Cincinnati Museum Center.

ACTIVITIES

How Humans Use Corn

Recommended for grades 3-6

In the podcast, we learned about two foods – corn and turkey – that are native to the Americas, and that were first domesticated more than 1000 years ago. Farming had a profound impact on Native Americans' lifestyles. In this activity, students will investigate how corn continues to shape our world today.

Review that corn originated on the North American continent, and that Native Americans domesticated corn hundreds of years before Europeans arrived. Ask students to recall how Native Americans used corn. Then, ask students where they see and use corn today. Make an initial class list. Then, ask students to identify as many uses of corn as they can – possibly by examining product labels in home cabinets, accompanying their caregivers to the grocery store or researching uses online (see links below). Remind students that corn can show up in surprising ways, including syrup form (soft drinks), ethanol (fuel) and starch (plastics). Invite students to share what they find with the class by:

- Discussing their discoveries and adding them to the initial list
- Creating a graphic organizer or poster with different products

Next, lead a class discussion:

- Which uses of corn surprised you?
- How has corn changed from a staple crop more than 1000 years ago to a global commodity?
- Are there other products whose uses have evolved with changes in human innovation and culture?
- When demand for a crop increases, what impact does it have upon people and the environment?

Sites to explore:

- Nebraska Corn Board: <https://nebraskacorn.gov/cornstalk/corn101/ten-products-you-didnt-know-were-made-with-corn/>
- Iowa Corn Growers Association: <https://www.iowacorn.org/consumers/#:~:text=Corn%20grows%204%2C000%2B%20products,soap%20to%20low%2Dcarbon%20bioplastics>

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What's on the Table?

Recommended for grades 5-8

In the podcast, we learned about corn and turkey at meals across time. In this activity, students will compare food connections across three distinct time periods.

First, ask students what food can tell us about how cultures interact and change over time. Prompt them by asking for examples from the podcast. Review how domesticating and eating corn and turkey spread from Native Americans to Europeans as they came into contact. Eventually, knowledge of these new foods spread to Europe and worldwide, illustrating how food can connect people across places, cultures and time.

Invite students to further investigate this idea by exploring food consumption from three different cultures and time periods:

- a pre-contact Native American community
- a 1600s colonial settlement in North America
- a modern American dinner table

Divide students into groups and give each group one of the time periods above to research. Ask students to record what people in their time period and culture might have eaten, including any mention of staples such as corn and turkey. Next, invite students to create a menu or visual representation of a meal from that period. Invite each group to share. Then, lead a class discussion with these prompts:

- What similarities and differences do you notice between the three sets of meals?
- How are food traditions shared between cultures?
- How do we know that Native American traditions shaped early colonial diets? Do those traditions continue to shape modern American diets?

Sites to explore:

Native American:

- National Indian Council on Aging: <https://www.nicoa.org/elder-resources/indigenous-foods/>
- Oregon Department of Education: <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/NativeAmericanEducation/Documents/Traditional-foods-slideshow.pdf>
- Ponca Tribe of Nebraska: <https://www.poncatribene.gov/services/health-services/diabetes-program/native-foods/>

Colonial:

- New Netherland Institute: <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/education/for-students/fun-re/what-was-new-netherland/what-did-they-eat>
- Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation Museums: <https://www.jyfmuseums.org/events/programs-activities/foods-feasts-of-colonial-virginia/colonial-recipes>
- Peckham, Ann, 1771, *The Complete English Cook*, Courtesy of NIH: <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/bookviewer?PID=nlm:nlmuid-2721897R-bk>

Modern:

- Economic Research Service, USDA: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-availability-and-consumption>
- Agricultural Research Service, USDA: https://www.ars.usda.gov/ARSUserFiles/80400530/pdf/2123/Food_Category_List_2021-2023.pdf
- Smithsonian National Museum of American History: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/food/online/new-and-improved>

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How Corn Changed Daily Life

Recommended for grades 6-10

In the podcast, we learned how domesticating plants, including corn, impacted Native Americans' lifestyles. In this activity, students will explore aspects of Ohio Valley Native American life before and after plant domestication to understand how food sources impact ways of life.

Lead a group discussion with students using the following prompts:

- When did Native Americans begin to heavily use corn in this region? (about 1000 years ago, though it was present earlier)
- What types of plants did Ohio Valley Native Americans domesticate before corn? (plants such as knotweed, maygrass and sunflowers)
- Before they grew these plants, how did Native Americans acquire their food?
- How did changing their food source impact Native American life?

Invite students to compare and contrast Ohio Valley Native American food sources, technology and daily life from three different time periods. Hand out the chart on page 5 and share links to potential sources. Allow time for students to complete the chart, then regroup for a class discussion:

- How did food sources impact Native American life in the Ohio Valley?
- Between hunting, fishing, gathering and farming, which food source would be most reliable? Most storable?
- How and why did Native lifestyles change when they began domesticating and farming their own food?
- What developments became possible when groups no longer had to be nomadic? Consider tools, housing, traditions and family structure.
- How did growing food change peoples' relationship with the land?
- Native Americans bred plants selectively to increase yield. How has farming continued to evolve to the modern day? How have these changes affected modern society?

Optional extension: In small groups, invite students to create "day in the life" representations of someone living during each time period. They could write a series of journal entries or comic strips to show how domesticating corn supported more permanent settlements, technologies and food traditions.

Links for research:

- National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/ohio-s-prehistoric-past.htm>
- Case Western Reserve University: <https://case.edu/ech/articles/p/prehistoric-inhabitants>
- Ohio Public Library Information Network: <https://www.point.oplin.org/people>

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Time Period	Cultural Group	Food Sources	Movement (Nomadic or Settled) and Housing	Tools/Technology
8000 to 6000 BCE	Early Archaic			
800 to 1 BCE	Adena/ Early Woodland			
900 to 1550 CE	Ft. Ancient/ Late Pre-Contact			

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STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

- **OH Geography 3.5:** Daily life is influenced by the agriculture, industry and natural resources in different communities.
- **OH Geography 4.12:** People have modified the environment since Precontact times. There are both positive and negative consequences for modifying the environment in Ohio and the US.
- **OH History 5.2:** Early Indian civilizations (Maya, Inca, Aztec, Mississippian) existed in the Western Hemisphere prior to the arrival of Europeans. These civilizations had developed unique governments, social structures, religions, technologies, and agricultural practices.
- **OH Geography 5.8:** American Indians developed unique cultures with many different ways of life. American Indian tribes and nations can be classified into cultural groups based on geographic and cultural similarities.
- **KY 5.G.MM.1:** Analyze how cultural, economic and environmental factors encouraged and restricted the movement of people, ideas and goods to and within the United States.
- **KY 6.E.ST.2:** Examine how new knowledge, technology and specialization increase productivity.
- **KY 7.G.HI.2:** Examine ways in which one culture can both positively and negatively influence another through cultural diffusion, trade relationships, expansion and exploration.