



The Public Historian at Home
Episode 3: Food Storage and Preservation

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFioQu_q5cU

Written and Produced by Nicole Belolan, PhD, Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Rutgers University Camden
nicole.belolan@rutgers.edu | <https://march.rutgers.edu/> | <https://preservation.rutgers.edu/>

A Collaboration with the Rutgers University Alumni Association

Transcript

[Description of opening: The opening depicts a fast-motion video of the host putting food into a root cellar. The words “THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN AT HOME” appear at bottom in all caps in a white sans serif typeface. The video transitions to the Rutgers University-Camden logo onto the screen. The opening is accompanied by upbeat music.]

[Scene 1: Nicole Belolan is depicted leaning against a brick wall with paint splatters. She has long brown hair swept to the side. She is wearing glasses, pear earrings, and a pastel-striped shirt. Nicole Belolan says the following.]

Hi, I’m Nicole Belolan, and I’m the Public Historian in Residence at the [Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities at Rutgers Camden](#). And welcome to The Public Historian at Home.

[Scene 2: Viewers see a photograph of the front of a brick house with wood trim. There is a small subcompact car parked at left.

There are large cedar trees surrounding the house. The movie effect makes the house look like it's in an old silent movie. There are birds signing in the background.]

[Scene 3: This scene takes place in a basement. The host is standing in front of a wooden paneled door with holes at the top. There is a small green window at the viewer's left. The host is wearing a multi-colored plaid shirt, pearl earrings, and glasses. The host says:]

Hi! Welcome to the Public Historian at Home. If you're like us during the COVID-19 crisis, you have been storing a little more food than you usually do. So, today, we're going to be talking a bit about the history of food preservation and storage using our root cellar in our basement as a case study.

[Scene 4: This scene takes place in a basement. The host is standing in front of a wooden paneled door with holes at the top. The host opens the door, revealing the inside of the door (painted white) and wooden shelving holding food. There is a small green window at the viewer's left. The host is wearing a multi-colored plaid shirt, pearl earrings, and glasses. The host says:]

Honestly, I walked past this root cellar a lot before we started using it for what it was originally intended for—food storage. Now, people have been preserving food for...ever. They've been salting it, drying it, canning it, and storing it. Now, before the rise of the availability of refrigeration (widespread electrical refrigeration in the 1930s), people tended to either harvest or buy lots of fresh fruit and vegetables in the summer and spring, and they would keep it for the winter—oftentimes in root cellar spaces like this one [gestures toward inside of root cellar].

[Scene 5: This is a static image of a historic black and white photograph. The photograph depicts the interior of a root cellar. There are six levels of shelving packed with canned goods. The floor includes baskets and barrels of other food. The host says:]

What we have in our root cellar does not compare to the 800 quarts of food that Mrs. Botner in Oregon had in her root cellar. This is a photograph of that root cellar taken by Dorothea Lang during the Great Depression. It's available for you to check out on the Library of Congress website. Look at all of those fruits and vegetables in those cans line up neatly on the shelves. If you take a look on the floor, you can see what seem to be either potatoes or apples in baskets. It looks like she probably had some milk and cheese in there as well. She was incredibly well-stocked in comparison to us.



Dorthea Lang, "Interior of Mrs.Botner's storage cellar," October 1939, Library of Congress, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017773845>.

[Scene 6: This scene takes place in a basement. The host is standing in front of the open root cellar equipped with wooden shelving holding food. There is a small green window at the

viewer's left. The host is wearing a multi-colored plaid shirt, pearl earrings, and glasses. The host says:]

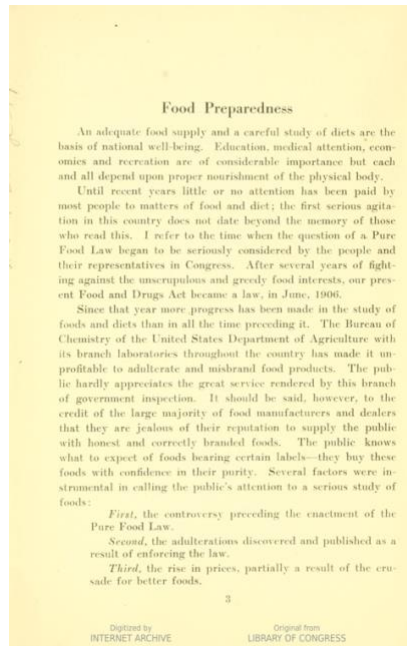
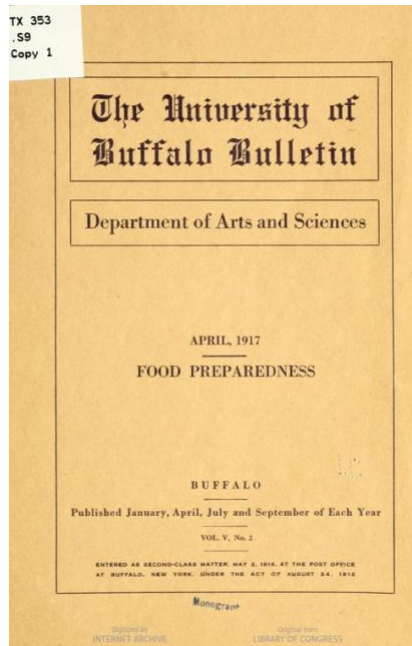
We've been having a lot of things delivered these days and storing it here in the root cellar. [gesturing] Stuff like flour, rice, peanut butter—which I like to eat every morning on toast. This is all in case of emergency. Now, historically, the idea of emergency preparedness and preservation would have been more closely linked to than they are today. To be prepared, you preserved.

[Scene 8: This scene includes two static images of a digitized version of a pamphlet about food preparedness. The first image includes a cover reading *The University of Buffalo Bulletin/Department of Arts and Sciences/April, 1917/FOOD PREPAREDNESS*"; the second includes an interior page with text. The host says:]

Plenty of world crises in history spurred Americans to prepare by stockpiling food and other goods for survival. Our house, which was built in 1916, was around for World War one. Experts during this era, such as Albert P. Sy, who wrote this 1917 bulletin for the University of Buffalo, discussed the importance of food and preparedness. And as you might recall from episode one, I mentioned that during World War I, the US government encouraged Americans to grow their own food. In this page that I'm highlighting from the bulletin, you can see that Sy wrote : "An adequate food supply and a careful study of diets are the basis of national well-being. Education, medical attention, economics, and recreation are of considerable importance but each and all depend upon proper nourishment of the physical body." *That* is where the food came in.



TX 353
.S9
Copy 1



Albert P. Sy, *Food Preparedness*, 4, No. 2 (April 1917), Available through the HathiTrust, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009561382>.

[Scene 9: This scene takes place in a basement. The host is standing in front of the open root cellar equipped with wooden shelving holding food. There is a small green window at the viewer's left. The host is wearing a multi-colored plaid shirt, pearl earrings, and glasses. The host says:]

You needed a place to put all this food though, so that's why we're using the root cellar, and the best root cellars were below ground, cool—and they had ventilation. This root cellar ticks all of those boxes.

[Scene 10: This scene includes one two images of digitized books illustrating different types of underground food storage techniques. The first page includes an illustration of a root cellar built into a hill. The second includes an illustration of an

underground vegetable pit with vent for air circulation. The scene concludes with two screen shots depicting instructions for contemporary best practices in food storage and preservation. The host says:]

If you didn't already have a root cellar in your house, you might have looked to a gardening handbook or a handbook about creating outbuildings like this one. This is a book by Bryan David Halsted. It's called *Barn plans and outbuildings*. It was first published in the late ninetieth century and then again in the early twentieth century. This particular edition is from 1914. The original is in the collections at Cornell University, and it's been digitized and made available for you to read in its entirety through the HathiTrust. We're looking at one of many plans that the author published about root cellars. The particular plan that we're looking at in this illustration is showing you an example of a root cellar that you could build into a hillside.

CHAPTER XIX
ROOT CELLARS AND ROOT HOUSES

The leading features of a good root cellar are: cheapness, nearness to the place where the roots are consumed, dryness, ventilation, and, above all, it should be frost-proof. If a hillside is handy, it can aid much in securing all of these important points. First make an excavation in the hillside, in size according to the desired capacity of the cellar. Erect in this excavation a stout



Fig. 337.—CROSS-SECTION OF A ROOT CELLAR

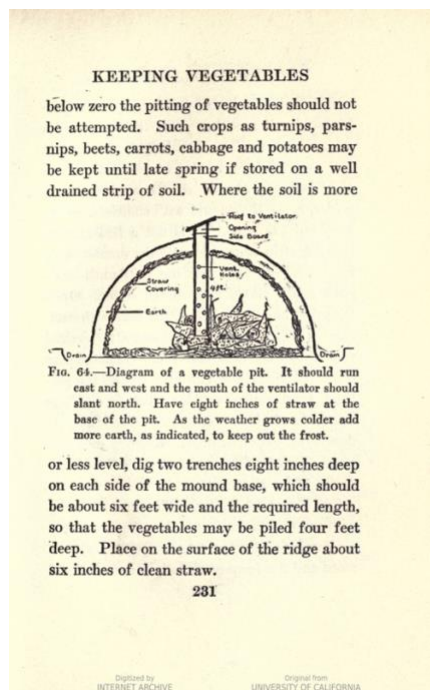
frame of timber and planks, or of logs, which latter are often cheaper. Over this frame construct a strong roof. Throw the earth which has been excavated over the structure until the whole is covered, top and all, to a depth of two feet or more. A door should be provided upon the exposed side or end. This door may be large enough to enter without stooping. Or it may be simply a manhole, which is better than a regular door, so far as protection from frost is concerned, but not so convenient for putting in and taking out roots. Sometimes, when

Digitized by
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Original from
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Bryan David Halsted, *Barn plans and outbuildings* (New York: Orange Judd Company, 1917), available through the HathiTrust, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100629204>.

But not all root cellars had to be separate buildings or spaces within existing buildings. This is a handbook by someone named Hugh Findlay. It's called *Practical Gardening, Vegetables, and Fruits helpful hints for the home garden, common mistakes, and how to avoid them*. This particular example of the guidebook is in the collection at the University of California and is also made available to you through the HathiTrust. I really like this diagram of a vegetable pit. It's very well illustrated. The caption reads that "the vegetable pit should run east and west and the mouth of the ventilator should slant north. It should have eight inches of straw at the base of the pit. As the weather grows colder, add more earth, as indicated, to keep out the frost." I suppose if we ever run out of room in our refrigerator as well as our existing root cellar we could always construct one of these as well.



Hugh Findlay, *Practical gardening, vegetables and fruits, helpful hints for the home garden, common mistakes and how to avoid*

them (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918),
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006584694>.

Americans also stockpiled a lot of food and supplies during the Cold War, which lasted into the late twentieth century and also in the late twentieth century during the back to the land movement. In short, concerns about emergency preparedness and food preservation came up several times over the twentieth century.

If you do decide to pursue a traditional food storage technique like canning, or if you decide to keep your food in a root cellar, do be sure to check out for contemporary recommendations about appropriate temperatures and other environmental concerns through a website like [Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station](#) or [the University of Missouri Extension website](#).

[Scene 11: This scene takes place in a basement. The host is standing in front of the open root cellar equipped with wooden shelving holding food. There is a small green window at the viewer's left. The host is wearing a multi-colored plaid shirt, pearl earrings, and glasses. The host says:]

We have enough food here to last us maybe a week or two. Some people have food on hand that would last them much, much longer. Sometimes they're called "preppers" or "survivalists." Rosa's going in right now to see if there is any cat food in there. [laughs] You can read more about preppers and survivalists in the resources that we've provided associated with this video. We are feeling really lucky right now to have this much food on hand, so we did donate some money to the [Rutgers Camden Chancellor's Emergency Relief Fund](#). Maybe you can find a similar fund to contribute to wherever you're living. In the meantime, it is kind of



cool to be able to preserve the historic function of this space in our house.

Well, let me know if you have any questions about researching your house [email nicole.belolan@rutgers.edu]. And thanks again for watching the Public Historian at Home.

[Description of conclusion: The opening depicts a fast-motion video of the host putting food into a root cellar. The words “THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN AT HOME” appear at bottom in all caps in a white sans serif typeface. The video transitions to the Rutgers University-Camden logo onto the screen. The opening is accompanied by upbeat music.]

Resources

Best Practices

“Food,” Ready.Gov, April 23, 2020, <https://www.ready.gov/food>.

Mike and Nancy Bubel, *Root Cellaring: The Simple No-Processing Way to Store Fruits and Vegetables* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1979).

Barbara Willenberg and Karla Hughes, “Home Storage of Fruits and Vegetables in Root Cellars,” University of Missouri Extension, Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://extension2.missouri.edu/mp562>.

Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, “Home Food Preservation,” Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/food-safety/home-food-preservation/>.

History-Secondary Sources

America’s Test Kitchen, “Prepping for the Worst,” Proof Podcast, Season 3, Episode 2, November 14, 2019, <https://www.americastestkitchen.com/proof/prepping-for-the-worst>.

Emma Grahn, “Keeping your (food) cool: From ice harvesting to electric refrigeration,” April 2019, 2015, National Museum of American History Behring Center, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/ice-harvesting-electric-refrigeration>.

History-Primary Sources

Hugh Findlay, *Practical gardening, vegetables and fruits, helpful hints for the home garden, common mistakes and how to avoid them* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918),
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006584694>.

Bryan David Halsted, *Barn plans and outbuildings* (New York: Orange Judd Company, 1917), available through the HathiTrust,
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100629204>.

Dorthea Lang, "Interior of Mrs. Botner's storage cellar," October 1939, Library of Congress, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017773845>.

Albert P. Sy, *Food Preparedness*, 4, No. 2 (April 1917), Available through the HathiTrust,
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009561382>.

Current Events and Contemporary Connections

Nellie Bowles, "I Used to Make Fun of Silicon Valley Preppers. Then I Became One," *New York Times*, April 24, 2020,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/technology/coronavirus-preppers.html>.

Jason Nark, "Pa. survivalists have been prepping for a disaster scenario like coronavirus. Now, many feel vindicated," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 20, 2020,
<https://www.inquirer.com/health/coronavirus/survival-prepper-bushcraft-firearms-coronavirus-ammunition-20200320.html>.



RUTGERS
UNIVERSITY | CAMDEN

Evan Osnos, “Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich,” *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2017,
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>.

Acknowledgements:

Olivia Errico

Kimberlee Moran

#OldHouseCommunity on Instagram

Tyler Putman

Rutgers Alumni University Alumni Association staff