**Evaluating the Feeding America Cookbook Collection**

**Introduction**

First published online in 2003, the Feeding America Historic Cookbook Project compiles 76 volumes from Michigan State University’s (MSU) archives into an online surrogate for researchers. The project spans over three centuries, from a cookbook from 1798 all the way to 1922 as the last piece in the series. According to the introductory essay by Jan Longone, the “careful and informed selection” of the volumes allows researchers to investigate any facet of America’s culinary history. Indeed, their collection hinges on this idea. The Feeding America project is not meant to be an exhaustive list of MSU’s 7,000 volume collection, but rather a representative group that points to the many connections between food, culture, and politics throughout American history. Even as Longone herself acknowledges 76 to be an “arbitrary” number, she details several areas in which this collection conveys a cohesive narrative. With the transformation from British-adapted recipes using imported ingredients to consistently indigenous ingredients authored on the continent, the books trace the evolution of Colonial America. So too do several volumes shed light on the experience of enslaved Americans. Although it did not contain Black recipes, the first cookbook written by a Black person was published in 1827 and detailed the responsibilities of servants alongside its recipes. Longone stresses this connection further: the major themes of mid-20th century recipes, like “economy and frugality, management and organization, a preoccupation with baking,” and others still persist in modern cooking.

The broad connections drawn by Longone are complemented in the editorial comments on the topics list. The curators put together a compendium of different subject headings attached to each listing through metadata, stressing that each book almost always corresponds to more than one topic. They have occasionally chosen to gloss some of the categories, explaining topics like “Charity and Church Cookbooks” or “Great Ladies of American Cooking.” Several other editorial pieces help embellish this attention to historical detail on the project’s pathfinder. Two such guides attempt to reconstruct outdated equipment and terminology for the uninitiated researcher by providing a glossary of cooking terms and a utensil image archive. The latter resource was compiled using MSU’s own Museum collection. These both serve to broaden access to these resources and highlight easy references as necessary by scholars using the service. Lastly, they explain their own project history. Founded in 2001 with primary funding from an IMLS National Leadership Grant. They clarify that the [current site](https://d.lib.msu.edu/fa/history) is a migration of the original published project (itself archived by the [Library of Congress here](https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0003784/)). They list the members of the original 2001-2003 team and their roles—all exclusively affiliated with MSU’s Special Collections or Library team—but stress that given the time elapsed, any inquiries about out-of-date knowledge should be forwarded to the current MSU digital repository staff as it has not been updated since.

There are also many technical specifications that outline the exact process of digitization and explain the way the metadata was catalogued for display. A [dedicated page](https://d.lib.msu.edu/fa/digitization) for their digitization process details the two methods used for file generation. Books were scanned either facedown or faceup depending on the condition of their spine, while the text transcription was made by a program that included a separate file for paragraphs, page breaks, font styles, and a special character menu. These were done twice and cross-referenced using a specialized file comparison program. Of particular research value, however, is their [page on text encoding](https://d.lib.msu.edu/fa/text-encoding). In it, they explain their interpretation of the texts. They took care to preserve old-fashioned spelling with each alternate version being encoded in a separate file with related terms. So too have italics and bold been noted in their transcription. They explain further their removal of line breaks and treatment of ambiguous hyphens. Interestingly, they note that all blank pages of the books have been removed. All of this comes together in the final surrogate that is easily searchable by category, as mentioned above, but also by copyright status, publication date, and language. More metadata than page numbers and author demographics are rare, although each entry does have item-specific “introductory essays” from the original 2001 project. These emphasize the value of each book to researchers and attempt to pitch their use. Some have more recent physical glosses by Longone which comment on the physical condition of the book used, though this is rare.

**Discussion**

The Feeding America pathfinder is well accessible for digital research thanks to these many details. The website is intuitive, clearly organized, and has its resources linked from the home page for ease of access. Researchers looking to engage with these cookbooks—whatever their exact aim—will be able to work through the material well. Because the dataset is itself quite small, it would not be tremendous work to look through each book and thus create a more thorough search. So too can they download the full text in raw or .pdf format to work outside of the digital surrogate and adapt it to their code. Yet historians looking to find specific volumes of cookbooks, or rather to manipulate aggregate data about American cookbooks writ large, will have a hard time with the project. There is little way to engage with trends and differences over time, as the majority of MSU’s 7,000 volume collection remains undigitized. Indeed, [the link given on the project website](https://lib.msu.edu/spc/collections/food/) to look outside the Feeding America project has gone defunct. This means there is little way to expand upon the data provided.

The natural response to this shortcoming is merely to say that Feeding America has digitized the most emblematic and paradigmatic volumes in the collection. However, this too creates conundrums. On the one hand, the digitization project ends around 1922 and provides little to no reference material to sources on Prohibition or World War I, despite being roughly concurrent with the end date. Again, the introductory essay bids the reader to turn to the “many books available on this period in the MSU collection,” yet they remain inaccessible both for lack of digitization and for online catalogue access. At its heart, however, the issue with the dataset is a simple selection bias. The curators are clearly extremely knowledgeable, but the project only works with the materials to be found in MSU’s collection. Furthermore, this is compounded when choosing volumes: any researcher has innate biases. With a small team, too, this becomes all the more apparent. Thus, in terms of coincidental browsing—serendipitous encounters—the Feeding America project is an excellent digital surrogate. Without any motivated searching, researchers will almost certainly be satisfied, especially with the myriad suggested texts and readings appended to the site for further discussion of the topics.