

# John M. Duncan

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## A Virginia Barbecue

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*Barbecue* is an Anglo adaptation of *barbacoa*, a word the Spanish borrowed from the Arawak to describe the outdoor cooking they encountered among Native Americans in the New World. Smoky pit cooking had become ritualized—although by no means standardized—by the time the publisher and bookseller John M. Duncan (1795<sup>?</sup>–1825) traveled from his native Glasgow to America in 1818. Invited to join Bushrod Washington (a favorite nephew of George, and owner of Mount Vernon) for an afternoon barbecue, Duncan discovered a cotillion-like “rural fête.” What Duncan assumed was a local practice that was in fact spreading all over the new nation. By the middle of the 19th century, no settled portion of the United States would lack for its own characteristic paean to the carnivorous appetite *en plein air*. Debates about the best meat (pork for the South, beef for Texans), the proper smoke (cool or hot), the best sauce (thick and tomatoey in the Mexican manner or vinegar-steeped with hot peppers in the manner of the Atlantic seaboard), and the appropriate accompaniments were already beginning to rage. And they continue, mostly among men. Barbecue is a guy thing, a throwback to the spit-roasted woolly mammoth perhaps. It tends to be written about today (and debated in endless detail) like a sporting event, which in fact it has become: thousands of tiny local competitions are rapidly giving way to several major barbecue leagues, with their own playoffs, world series—and six-figure purses.



After having spent an hour or two at Mount Vernon, Judge Washington politely invited us to accompany him to a Barbecue, which was to take place in the afternoon close by the road to Alexandria. The very term was new to me; but when explained to mean a kind of rural fête which is common in Virginia it was not difficult to persuade us to accept the invitation.

The spot selected for this rural festivity was a very suitable one. In a fine wood of oaks by the road side we found a whole colony of black servants, who had made a lodgement since we passed it in the morning, and the blue smoke which was issuing here and there from among the branches, readily suggested that there was cooking going forward.

Alighting from my horse and tying it under the shadow of a branching tree I proceeded to explore the recesses of the wood. At the bottom of a pretty steep slope a copious spring of pure water bubbled up through the ground, and in the little glen through which it was stealing, black men, women and children, were busied with various processes of sylvan cookery. One was preparing a fowl for the spit, another feeding a crackling fire which curled up round a large pot, others were broiling pigs, lamb, and venison, over little square pits filled with the red embers of hickory wood. From this last process the entertainment takes its name. The meat to be *barbecued* is split open and pierced with two long slender rods, upon which it is suspended across the mouth of the pits, and turned from side to side till it is thoroughly broiled. The hickory tree gives, it is said, a much stronger heat than coals, and when completely kindled is almost without smoke.

Leaving the busy negroes at their tasks—a scene by the way which suggested a tolerable idea of an encampment of Indians preparing for a feast after the toils of the chase—I made my way to the outskirts of the wood, where I found a rural banqueting-hall and ball room. This was an extensive platform raised a few feet above the ground, and shaded by a closely interwoven canopy of branches. At one side was a rude table and benches of most hospitable dimensions, at the other a spacious dancing floor; flanking the long dining table, a smaller one groaned under numerous earthen vessels filled with various kinds of liquors, to be speedily converted, by a reasonable addition of the limpid current from the glen judiciously qualified by other ingredients, into tubfulls of generous toddy.

A few of the party had reached the barbecue ground before us, and it was not long ere we mustered altogether about thirty ladies and somewhere about an hundred gentlemen. A preliminary cotillon or two occupied the young and amused the older, while the smoking viands were placed upon the board, and presently Washington's March was the animating signal for conducting the ladies to the table. Seating their fair charge at one side, their partners lost no time in occupying the other, and as there was still some vacant space, those who happened to be nearest were pressed in to occupy it. Among others the invitation was extended to me, and though I observed that several declined it, I was too little acquainted with the tactics of a barbecue, and somewhat too well inclined to eat, to be very unrelenting in my

refusal. I soon however discovered my false move. Few except those who wish to dance choose the first course; watchfulness to anticipate the wants of the ladies, prevent those who sit down with them from accomplishing much themselves, the dance is speedily resumed, and even those who like myself do not intend to mingle in it regard the rising of the ladies as a signal to vacate their seats. A new levy succeeds, of those who see more charms in a dinner than a quadrille, and many who excused themselves from the first requisition needed no particular solicitation to obey the second. The signal for rising did not seem on this occasion to excite much notice; and some prolonged their sitting till they had an opportunity of bestowing on the third levy, the pleasure of their company. Some experiments began now to be made upon the virtues of the toddy, and it was not long ere the capacious lakes began to be effectually drained off. Let me not be misunderstood however; I saw not the slightest approach to intemperance. Jollity and good humour were not wanting, but there was nothing which trenched upon sobriety either in speech or behaviour. There might be others present besides Judge Washington who had seats on the bench, but the judicial dignity was no way compromised by any part of the proceedings.

While local politics and other matters engrossed the conversation at table, others less inclined to the sedentary position stationed themselves round the dancers. The cotillon was the favourite figure, and the platform was just large enough to admit of two at a time. There “music rose with its voluptuous swell,” and exercise flushed the cheek, and enjoyment brightened the eye of the fair Virginians.

But the sun drove on in its diurnal career; and as my poor steed had fasted since early in the morning, I thought it time to take leave of the entertainment and make the best of my way to Alexandria. I left them about five o'clock, and learned that very shortly after, the assembly broke up.