

Introduction of Potatoes In North America

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Potato growers who feel that the potato is being unduly abused by economic or agricultural experts and politicians need not feel that their crop is suddenly being singled out for attack. It has been the subject of controversy since the white man first grew it. Even today historians and students of the potato cannot all agree as to its earliest introduction to North America.

It is generally agreed that our cultivated or "Irish" potato originated in South America. It is not native to North America and was not grown in North America previous to its introduction by the early colonists. The so-called "Potato of Virginia" was not even related to the potato but is in the Legume family and is now known as Groundnut (*Apios americana*, Medic.)

The most commonly published account of the "first" introduction of the potato to North America is to the effect that potatoes were first grown in this country at Londonderry, New Hampshire, in 1719 from stock brought from Ireland. As a result, it is said, the name "Irish" potatoes developed. However, this was not the first introduction of potatoes to North America, nor did the name "Irish" potatoes result from this introduction. The growing of potatoes at Londonderry, New Hampshire, in 1719 is not questioned but at best it was merely a later introduction.

The first and best authenticated account of the introduction of the potato to North America shows that potatoes were brought from the Bermudas to Virginia in December, 1621. Furthermore, some of these potatoes were planted, as confirmed by letters sent from Virginia at the time and by later accounts. The account, in part, as cited by Laufer (1938), is of interest:

On the second of December, 1621, Captain Nathaniel Butler, governor of the Bermudas, sent—to the governor of Virginia (Francis Wyatt) two large cedar chests, "wherein were fitted all such kins and sortes of the country plants and fruicts, as Virginia at that time and until then had not, as figgs—potatoes—red pepper—and the like." In the following year, a Virginian barcke took from the Bermudas twenty thousand waight [ten tons] of potatoes at the least.

There is one other account, written in 1624, referring to the above introduction and subsequent growing of potatoes in Virginia.

Reference:

- Laufer, Berthold. 1938. The American Plant Migration—Part I: The Potato. Field Museum of Natural History, 28:1:1-132.

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