

# You Don't Know Jack-O'-Lantern

## A History of Fall's Favorite Gourd

There is nothing more synonymous with fall than the pumpkin. They adorn porches, storefronts are lined with overflowing pumpkin bins, festivals across the country celebrate them and you can find just about anything flavored with pumpkin spice.

But how did one humble squash become the quintessential harbinger of fall?

Pumpkins are believed to have originated more than 7,500 years ago in Central America. But those first pumpkins had very little resemblance to the bright orange gourds we know today. They were small, bitter and incredibly hard. Despite these factors, they were among the first crops grown for human consumption in North America.

In the early days of America, pumpkins had one of their first “glow-ups.” In 1670, Hannah Wooley published a recipe in her book, *Gentlewoman's Companion* of a pumpkin pie, layered with apples and herbs. Later in the 17th Century, enterprising cooks transformed the pumpkin again by adding sugar - a stylish transformation that eventually gave way to the pumpkin pie we know today. One of the first modern pumpkin pie recipes was published in 1796 in Amelia Simmon's *American Cookery*.

This fall crop has a long history of sustaining life in the Americas during the colder months and inspiring centuries of culinary innovation. Yet how did the pumpkin come to be carved for front-porch decor with fun and spooky faces?

For that history, we have to cross the Atlantic into early European Celtic culture. For thousands of years, early Celtic cultures carved faces into beets, potatoes and turnips during harvest festivals, believing it would ward off restless souls. A practical purpose also evolved from the tradition: hollowing out carved root vegetables and adding a flame made lanterns for additional light. These makeshift lanterns were significantly cheaper than their traditional metal counterparts and are considered to be the first examples of “jack-o'-lanterns.”

Why is it called a jack-o'-lantern? This term originates from 17th Century England where it was common to call a man whose name you didn't know “Jack.” Night watchmen, for example, became known as the “Jack-of-the-Lantern” or jack-o'-lantern. The terms began to be associated with the carved turnips of the time by way of the urban legend of “Stingy Jack,” a trickster who was doomed to wander the Earth with an ember of coal he used for an eternal light.

Immigrants from Europe brought the tradition to the Americas. They found that pumpkins, a native fruit, were perfect for making glowing jack-o'-lanterns. This tradition began rooting itself into the literary and oral history of America as well. Washington Irving's 1820 short story, “Sleepy Hollow,” wove the pumpkin into the very fabric of American culture, featuring a headless horseman hurling pumpkins at never-seen-again Ichabod Crane. The first published image of a jack-o'-lantern appeared in an 1867 issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

And the rest, as it is said, is history.

