

STORIES of New Jersey

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"SALMAGUNDI" and COCKLOFT HALL



Washington Irving

Salmagundi is a rather long and strange word which really has no business in the English language. It pushed its way in several centuries ago from Italy by way of France, where it probably meant pickled meat. The English used it to refer to a mixed dish, like chopped meat with oil, vinegar, peppers and onions. Gradually it came to mean any kind of mixture, of food or otherwise.

Salmagundi crossed the Atlantic Ocean to America along with the rest of the English language, an adopted child, and remained so until it fell into the hands of Washington Irving, the American writer, and his literary friends at Cockloft Hall outside Newark on the Passaic River. Their wit gave the word a new distinction, almost a wholly new association. They couldn't do anything about its strange sound, but they did make it stand for something very gay and joyous, much more joyous than a chopped meat salad.

Of all the young men at Cockloft Hall, young Washington Irving probably had the greatest affection for the old foreign word. In 1807, the decisive year in Salmagundi's career, Irving had just returned from a two-year tour of Europe. He had been sent abroad at the age of 21 by his well-established New York family to improve his health which had been poor since his childhood.

Europe had strengthened Irving's body, fascinated his mind and deepened his natural flair for good living. He brought back with him a special feeling for the unusual and a confirmed love of the past which appealed to fashionable New Yorkers. When Irving and his special friends who made Cockloft Hall their social headquarters decided to write their observations on the society of the day, salmagundi, the strangeword out of the past, was indeed a happy choice for a title for their little paper.