

The History of Spelling Maple Sirup with an "I"

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Readers of vintage United States Department of Agriculture reports, bulletins, and manuals often notice and wonder why the word syrup in maple syrup is spelled as sirup with an I. Where did this version of the spelling come from, how long was it in use, and why was it used in the first place? Was it merely a colloquial variation stemming from people writing spoken words down in ways that phonetically made sense?

Did we get sirup with an I from a language other than English? We know the English language is made up of words from a variety of languages and borrows and modifies all sorts of foreign words. French is an important language to consider in this regard, especially with the history of maple sugar and syrup making in French speaking Québec. In French, the spelling is sirop with an I and an O. That certainly is a contender for getting from sirop to sirup to syrup. Interestingly, the German spelling for syrup is sirup with an I, which is also right on the mark. Were immigrants and residents with French or German heritage the source of spelling sirup with an I?

Looking further back in American history, how popular was spelling sirup with an I in early America? A search of newspaper archives shows sporadic use of spelling sirup with an I throughout the first half of the 1800s, before in-

creasing in use in the 1850s to the 1890s. However, newspapers rarely used sirup with an I, compared to syrup with a Y, and even then, in most cases, sirup with an I was usually only used in reference to sorghum or cane syrup. So where did the formal use of sirup with an I come from?

The most prominent place to find the use of sirup with an I was in the documents of the United States Department of Agriculture. Perhaps we should look there. The Department of Agriculture was created in 1862, and in 1863 it published its first Report of the Commissioner (the Agriculture Department was led by a Commissioner at that time, not yet a Secretary). That first annual report of the Department included a section titled The Manufacture of Maple Sugar authored by C.T. Alvord, of Wilmington, Vermont. Alvord was not an employee of the federal government, but rather a lawyer, progressive farmer, and regular contributor to farming and agricultural journals of the time. In analyzing federal agricultural census data, Alvord's 1862 report spelled maple sirup with an I, specifically stating, "It will be noticed that the proportional increase in the quantity of maple molasses manufactured in 1860 over that of 1850 is much larger than that of maple sugar. I attribute this to the fact that many farmers are making "maple sirup" instead of maple sugar. At present prices it is thought to be more prof-

itable to make sirup than sugar.”

It is curious that in the first instance where Alvord used the words “maple sirup” in the agricultural department report, the term is presented in quotation marks, as if it is a new or unique spelling to be noted, but then then quotation marks are dropped in the rest of the report. Alvord’s use of sirup with an I in the government report is especially interesting, since in other articles he wrote on maple sugaring published in agricultural newspapers from just two years earlier, he always used the spelling of syrup with a Y. Similarly, in 1905 when William F. Fox co-authored the Department of Agriculture Bureau of Forestry Bulletin No. 59 titled, The Maple Sugar Industry, the text of the report exclusively used maple sirup with an I. This is in contrast to Fox spelling syrup with a Y a few years earlier in 1898 in his overview of maple sugaring in the 3rd annual report of the Commissioners of Fisheries, Game and Forests of the State of New York.

The Government Printing Office (GPO) was the agency responsible for the preparation and printing of official publications of the federal government, including the Department of Agriculture. Interestingly, the GPO came into being in 1861, one year before the Department of Agriculture. With the monumental task of being the federal government’s publishing house, it is safe to presume someone at the GPO was making editorial, style, and printing decisions, including deciding to use sirup with an I.

The first official GPO style manual was issued in 1894. In that manual under the heading of orthography, authors were instructed to follow Webster’s International Dictionary, which was an expanded version of the famous Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language first issued in 1806. Following that direction and looking at the 1890 and 1900 editions of Webster’s International Dictionary of the English Language we see that sirup with an I was the preferred spelling, and syrup with a Y as a secondary spelling. In fact, in the 1890 and 1900 versions of Webster’s dictionary, syrup with a Y does not even have its own entry or cross reference to sirup with an I. Looking at earlier versions of Webster’s dictionaries, we see that sirup with an I was identified as the preferred spelling over syrup with a Y as far back as 1828.

Although the GPO did not publish a style manual until 1894, the GPO’s written direction from their 1894 style manual was likely formal codification of standards that had been put in place years before. Moreover, since at the time, Webster’s dictionary was THE go-to and standard reference for American English, it makes sense that from its very beginning of the GPO in 1861, it chose to follow the spelling preferences presented in Webster’s dictionary, namely sirup with an I.

Sirup with an I continued to be presented as the preferred spelling in Webster’s Dictionary through the 1950s, but by 1959 with the release of Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, the primacy had

flipped with syrup with a Y getting the main listing and sirup with an I becoming the secondary spelling with a cross-reference back to syrup with a Y. At one point in the 1920s, the GPO style manual began including a list with the preferred spelling of certain words. As early as 1922 we see sirup with an I included in that list. Sirup with an I continued to appear on that list as late as 1973, despite Webster's dictionary shifting to syrup with a Y in the late 1950s. In 2015, with the USDA's Agriculture Marketing Service's issuance of new Standards for the Grades of Maple Syrup, the Department of Agriculture formally decided that it had officially discontinued its spelling of maple sirup with an I and announced that their official spelling would now be syrup with a Y.

Unlike the federal government, most states never formally adopted the use of sirup with an I, with a couple of exceptions, namely New York and Wisconsin. The New York College of Agriculture at Cornell University used the sirup with an I from around 1910

through the late 1950s or early 1960s. Perhaps Cornell University had adopted similar editorial standards for their publications, defaulting to the conventions in Webster's dictionary. Sirup with an I was also used by the State of Wisconsin Department of Agriculture for a shorter period in the 1950s. And that explains the reason behind the spelling of sirup with an I. From the early 1860s to the late 1950s with a holdover until 2015, it was the official policy of the United States Department of Agriculture and the Government Printing Office to spell sirup with an I, based on the guidance and direction of Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language. What remains to be explained is how, why, or by whom the decision was made in publishing Webster's dictionary that sirup with an I should be the preferred spelling over syrup with a Y.

Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a maple industry historian. You can read more maple history articles like this at his website, www.maplesyruphistory.com

Figure 1

Examples of four covers of USDA maple syrup related publications using the spelling of sirup with an I. Left to right, publication dates of 1910, 1924, 1958, and 1976.

