

## Maple Sirup With An “I”

By Matthew M. Thomas

Readers of vintage United States Department of Agriculture reports, bulletins, and manuals from the early 1900s to the 1970s, often notice and wonder why the word 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?

What about how syrup is spelled in other languages as the source? We know the English language is made up of words from a variety of European languages and that it borrows and modifies all sorts of “foreign” words. French is an important language to consider in this regard, especially considering the history of maple sugar and syrup making in French speaking Québec. In French, the spelling is sirop with 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, also right on the mark. Were immigrants and residents with French or German heritage the source of spelling sirup with an I?

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, increasing in use

in the 1850s to the 1890s. However, it was still used less often than syrup with a Y and even then, in most cases, sirup with an I was used in relation to sorghum or cane syrup in that era and less often in reference to maple syrup. So where did this formal use of sirup with an I come from?

What about how long the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) had been using the spelling of sirup with an I? The Department of Agriculture was created in 1862 and in 1863 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 Alvord’s 1862 report one sees maple sirup with an I, as well as the term maple molasses.

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 the 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 was 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."

Looking closer at the question of the role of the Federal Government, who was responsible for the publishing of federal reports and manuals, and might that be the source of sirup with an I? The Government Printing Office (GPO), the agency responsible for the preparation and printing of official publications of the federal government 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 from that point forward, 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 are instructed to follow "Webster's International Dictionary of the English

Language," first published in 1890, and replaced the famous "Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language," first issued in 1806. Looking at both the 1890 edition of "Webster's International Dictionary" and earlier versions of "Webster's American Dictionary," we see sirup with an I as the preferred spelling, and syrup with a Y as a secondary spelling.

If the GPO did not publish a formal style manual until 1894, what can we assume was the policy or standards they followed for the earlier years between 1861 and 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.

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. 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 shift.

ing to sirup with a Y in the late 1950s.

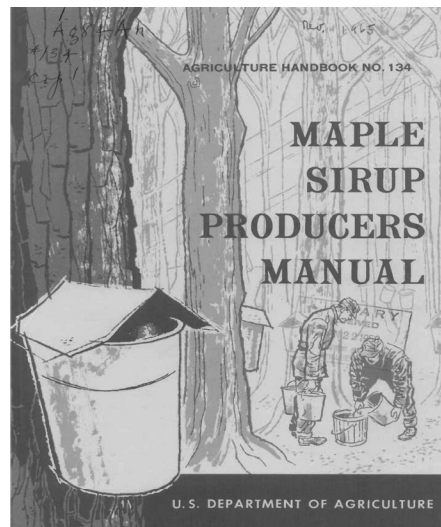
Unlike the federal government, most states never formally adopted the use of sirup with an I, with a couple of exceptions, namely New York and Wisconsin. Publications from the New York College of Agriculture at Cornell University used the sirup with an I from around 1910 through the late 1950s or early 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.

Although sirup with a Y was clearly the English language spelling recognized and used by most in the United States and Canada, sirup with an I was still occasionally in use in a few formal titles and written regulations at the Department of Agriculture. However, in 2015, with the USDA's Agriculture Marketing Service's issuance of new "Standards for the Grades of Maple Syrup," it was formally decided that it had officially discontinued its spelling of maple sirup with an I and announced that their official spelling would now be sirup with a Y.

And that explains the reason behind sirup with an I. From the early 1860s to the late 1950s with a holdover until 2015, it was the official policy of the Government Printing Office and the United States Department of Agriculture to spell sirup with an I, based on the guidance and direction of "Webster's International Dictionary of the

English Language."

Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a maple industry historian. You can read more maple history articles like this on his website, [www.maplesyruphistory.com](http://www.maplesyruphistory.com).



**Example of use of sirup with an "I" in the 1958 USDA Maple Sirup Producers Manual.**

