



Catherine Murat: The Princess of Tallahassee

Ashley Slone, Dr. Benjamin Gunter, Idy Codington

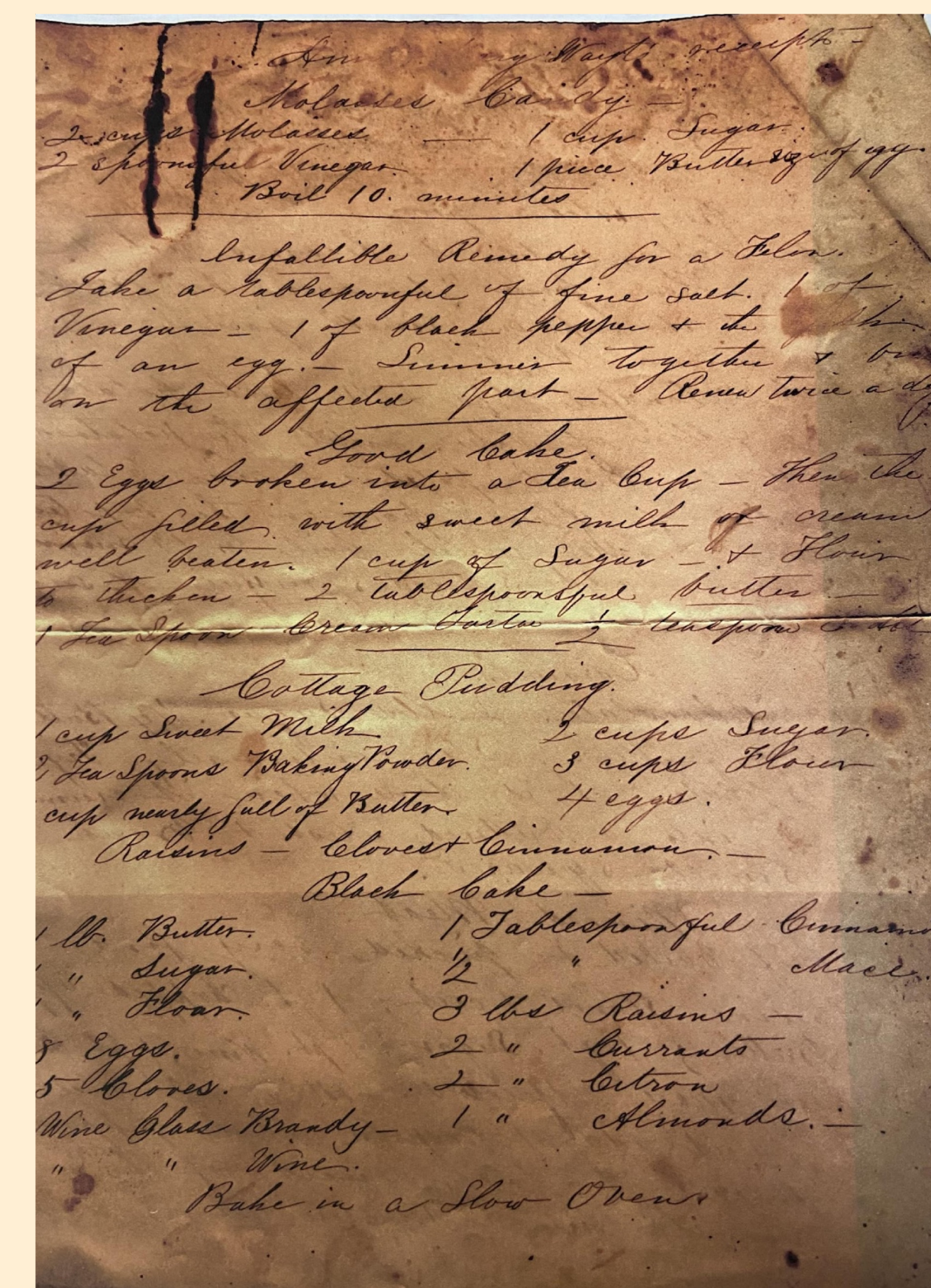
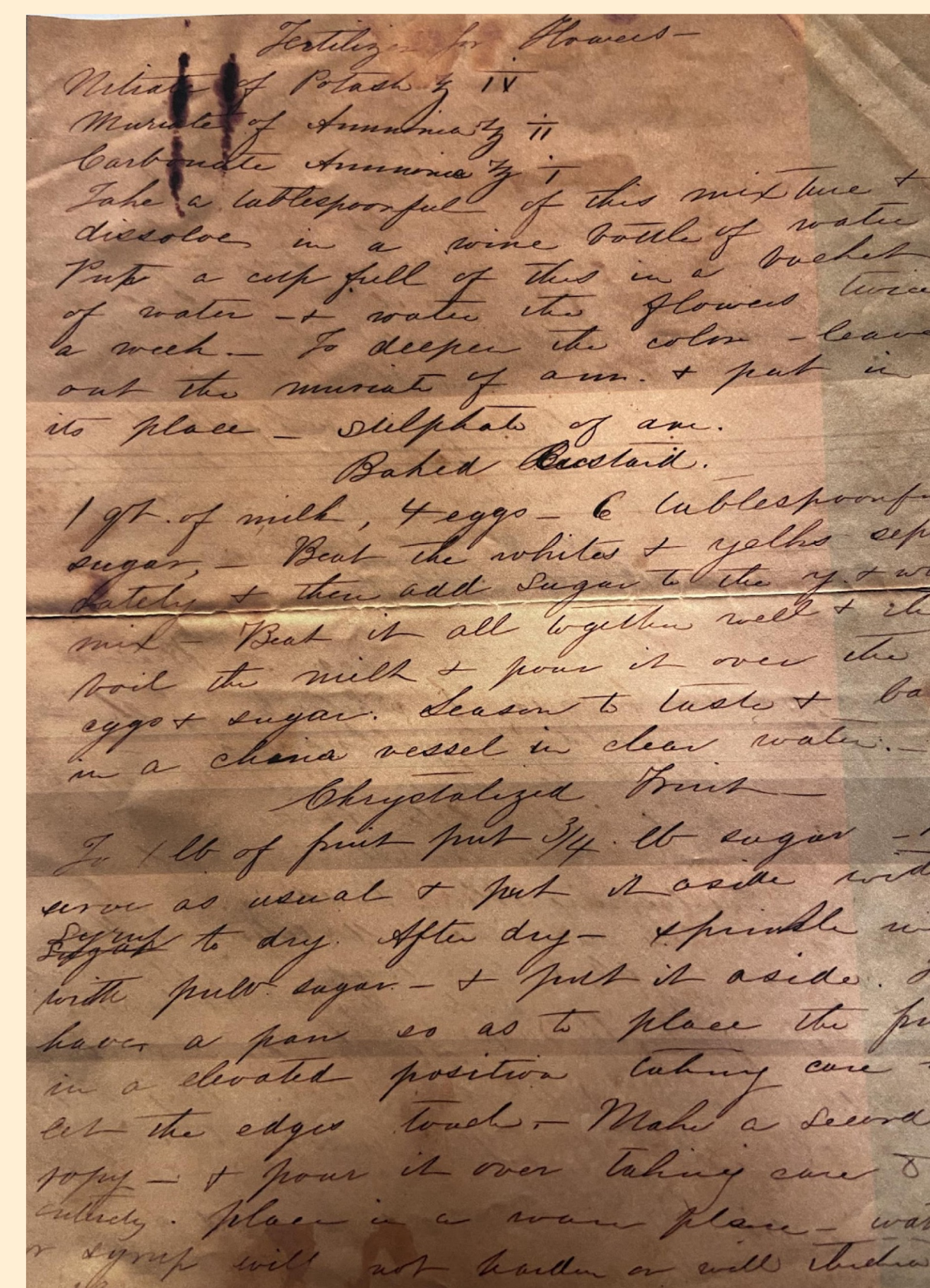
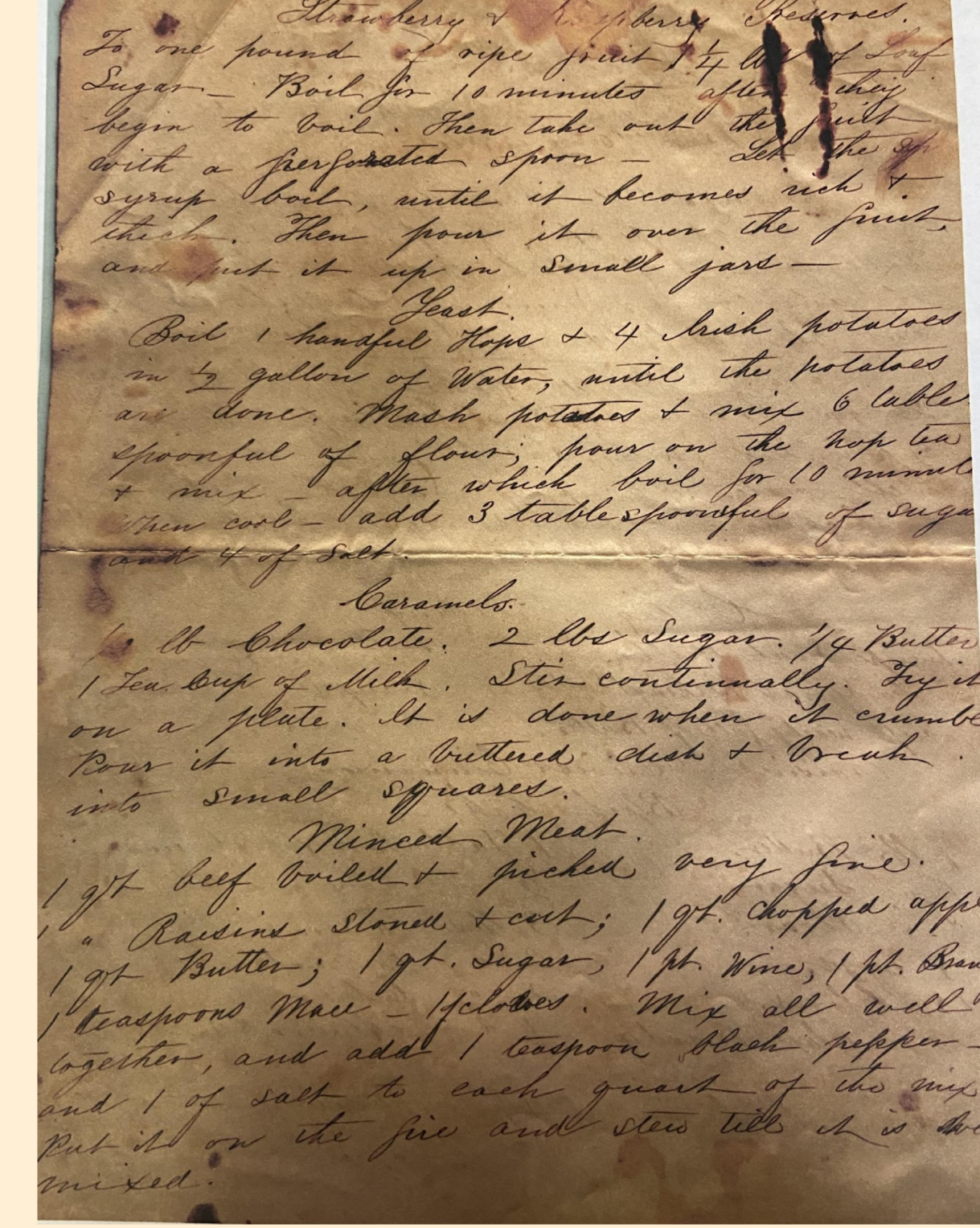
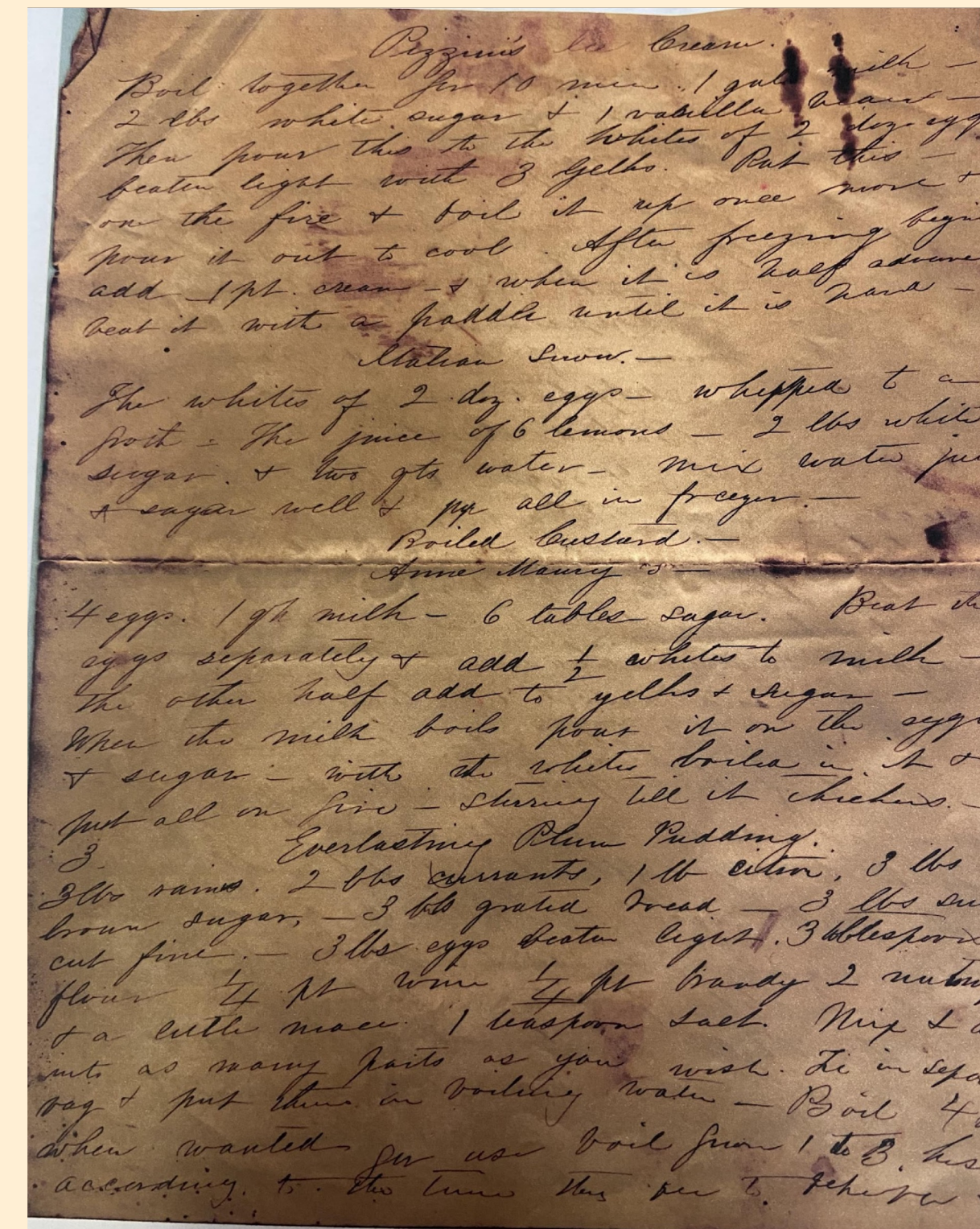


Purpose:

As Tallahassee's Bicentennial approaches, Theater with a Mission will celebrate the anniversary of the founding of Tallahassee by bringing the people and culture of 1820's Tallahassee to life through theater. The dramatization of territorial Tallahassee would be incomplete without one of its most prominent socialites: Princess Catherine Murat. Primary research into the life of Catherine will aid in creating a more accurate dramatization of her role in Tallahassee's early social life.

Background:

Among early Tallahassee's most prominent citizens was Princess Catherine Murat, better known as Kate, the leading socialite in Tallahassee widely known for hosting balls and dinners. Catherine was born in Virginia in 1803 before moving with her family to Tallahassee around 1825. Considered American royalty by being the grandniece of President George Washington and French royalty by being a princess of France as a result of her marriage to Prince Achille Murat in 1826 (son of Caroline Bonaparte and nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte), Catherine led quite a dualistic lifestyle as a princess living in frontier Florida, as seen in her frontier style home with bare walls yet furnished with the finest French furniture straight from Paris. While 1820's Tallahassee was a somewhat underdeveloped and unlawful place, Catherine's balls, dinners, and parties demonstrate the tastes of "Princess Kate." Outside of Tallahassee, Achille and Catherine often travelled to France where Emperor Louis Napoleon affectionately granted "Cousin Kate" a place in the French court and even monthly payments after the death of her husband. It was under these circumstances that royal influences clashed with early, wild Tallahassee, creating a unique life for Catherine Murat.



Images are of recipes from the Tallahassee Museum that were written by Catherine Murat sometime in the early 19th century.

Methods:

After going through an orientation phase in which I acquainted myself with the history of the founding of Tallahassee, I made the decision to focus my subsequent research on Catherine Murat. During this process of specialization, I combed through several databases and visited several museums to create an annotated bibliography of primary sources related to Catherine Murat's life in early Tallahassee. Upon discovery of some of her handwritten recipes, which were hard to read as a result of the age of the documents, the recipes were transcribed and analyzed within an early 19th century historical context.

Results and Discussion:

Transcribing and analyzing these recipes reveal what kinds of foods were available and eaten by people in early 19th century Tallahassee and foods Catherine would have potentially served at her parties. The transcription revealed recipes such as strawberry and raspberry preserves, yeast, caramels, crystallized fruit, and plum pudding. The recipes are composed of mostly traditional Southern foods such as minced meat and cottage pudding, which reveal Kate's Virginian roots while a recipe for plant fertilizer shows her role as a gardener and, later in her life, a plantation owner. Creating exact recreations of these recipes using the same methods seen in these documents could reveal more to historians about 19th century cooking and how diet contributed to their lifestyles and health. Further research on Southern cooking, specifically in territorial Florida, can contribute to a deeper understanding of lifestyles in the early 19th century.



Portrait of Catherine Murat c. 1870.

References:

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- Painted portrait of Princess Catherine Willis Gray Murat* - Tallahassee, Florida, 1870 (circa). State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory. Accessed 10 Mar. 2023. <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/24860>