

## East Falls Past--Catfish and Waffles

*The Fallser*, June 2011, by Wendy Moody

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, no place on the river equaled Falls for fishing. Catfish were taken in abundance by hand-nets. Charles Hagner wrote in *Early History of the Falls of Schuylkill* (1869): “I have seen men, in one scoop of the dip-net, have it so full of catfish as to be unable to lift them in the boat, but were obliged to take them out of it with their hands and other contrivances.”

The catfish became a legend when Mrs. Watkins, proprietor of the Falls Hotel, introduced the “catfish and waffles” supper. It was picked up by other local taverns and became popular with the pleasure-seekers from the city who rode out to Falls in carriages.

In Weygandt’s *Wissahickon Hills*, these meals are richly described:

“*Catfish and waffles*” was a rather modest title for a good deal of a dinner. It began with catfish and ended with coffee, so it was sometimes known as “*catfish and coffee*.”

“*Catfish and waffles*” began with fried catfish and a relish. A steak of beef followed, with fried potatoes, generally a simple form of what we know now as hashed brown. Then came stewed chicken and the waffles, then the coffee. Dessert was served at some places, but not invariably. You more often had “*catfish and waffles*” with a “wink” than with a dessert. I liked beer with mine. Catfish is a rich fish – frying it in butter makes it richer. Good steak has streaks of fat, and there is butter in hashed-browns. Stewed chicken with gravy is rich too, even if the waffles sop up a good deal of the gravy. Coffee is not enough to settle such a dinner. You need a hoppy beer. I know those who liked a sour wine, like a Rhine wine, but it takes too much of it, and it comes high. You wouldn’t want whisky after “*catfish and waffles*.” Beer was the thing to settle it. It would do the trick.”

Not all agreed. In an 1875 poem, the poet holds for wine, and for chicken broiled instead of stewed:

**Far-famed these inns through many a year  
For hospitality and cheer,  
For bill of fare peculiar here  
Catfish, and coffee, beefsteak fine,  
Broiled chicken, waffles, and good wine.**

Catfish and waffles was a prized dish in clubs such as Fort St. Davids at the Falls. Cooking was an art. “The fish are fried in the best butter of the market, to a brown color, and never shapelessly broken by turning; but in regularly laid rows and adhering to each other, and not to the pan, are dexterously tossed in the same compact form, with great ease, after a little practice, to the surprise and admiration of spectators,”

Epicures especially loved the “blue catfish, caught at ebb-tide from the pure spring waters of the Schuylkill.” One should perhaps add that this was written when the tide ran up to the Falls of Schuylkill, there being as yet no dam at Fairmount, and when there were no anthracite mines above Pottsville that ran colliery water into the river.

The catfish atop the cupola of the Falls of Schuylkill Library reminds us of this vivid past.

