Question: Account for the difficulties experienced in New South Wales during the reign of Governor Phillip.
This essay will limit its investigation to the foundational difficulties which beset early colonists in New South Wales from 1788-1792. In doing so, it will highlight how continuous food shortages challenged settlers’ efforts to establish a functioning English settlement in one of the most “desert, wild, and solitary” terrains “that the imagination can form any idea of”. The essay will begin, firstly, by delineating the importance of human health in the establishment and maintenance of early colonies. Secondly, it will determine why food shortages occurred in New South Wales under the governance of Arthur Phillip and illustrate why subsequent phases of malnutrition and disease among the new settlers frequently initiated, or significantly contributed to, the difficulties experienced by the infant colony. Thirdly, the essay will assess how fears of – and/or actual – lack of food influenced the development of some difficulties, such as the effective production of an enduring local food supply, the maintenance of social order, and the establishment of adequate relations with the natives.

Prior to the departure of the First Fleet bound to Australia from “the Mother Bank” near Portsmouth, England in May 1787, the question of food and medical supplies – and the means by which each could be managed during and after the voyage – were primary concerns of Governor Arthur Phillip, the man to whom the survival of the new settlement had been entrusted. The Governor’s early focus on public health was partly informed by contemporary realisations that the economic viability of new colonies depended, to a large extent, on settlers’ morale and physical

robustness in an alien environment. This translated, in practice, to the maintenance of proper nutrition and healthful environments – where possible – among would-be settlers. In accordance with Phillip’s vision, during the course of the First Fleet’s voyage to Botany Bay the Governor commanded that the ships stop thrice – in Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro and the Cape of Good Hope – to purchase seeds, livestock and

a fresh supply of water and vegetables...[since it] was adviseable [sic]...to give the people such advantages and refreshments, for the sake of health, as...[such] place[s] would readily supply...In this, and every port, the crews, soldiers, and convicts, were indulged with fresh meat, fruit, vegetables, and every thing which could conduce to preserve them from the complaints formerly inevitable in long voyages. Upon his arrival to New South Wales in January 1788, Phillips was obliged to move the planned location of the settlement elsewhere, by reason of the fact that the “openness of this bay, and the dampness of the soil...[would ensure that] the people would probably be rendered unhealthy”. He subsequently transferred the settlement to Port Jackson, where – despite his efforts to preserve public health – an outbreak of scurvy laid low a significant proportion of colonists by May 1788.

The early outbreak of scurvy in the new colony severely diminished the numbers of men capable of engaging in much-needed manual labour – in farming and in building – a problem compounded by convicts’ visible disinterest in exerting

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[4] Arthur Phillip, ‘Chapter III, June 1789’ in *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay: With an Account of the Establishment of the Colonies of Port Jackson and Norfolk Island, compiled from Authentic Papers...*(London, 1789), University of Sydney Library (http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/view?docId=ozlit/xml-main-texts/phivoya.xml) (19 March 2014), par. 18. There were, also, a number of medical efforts made to safeguard First Fleet settlers’ health, such as the surgeon John White’s proactive attempts to reduce infection by “whitewashing with quick lime the parts of the ships where the convicts were confined...[to prevent] unwholesome dampness” and Phillip’s own command that ships be kept “healthy and airy”. See White, ‘March 1787’, par. 9; Daniel Southwell, quoted in Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia*, p. 104.


themselves.\footnote{Clark, A History of Australia, p. 115.} The number of infected settlers continued to grow despite authorities’ efforts to halt the progress of the disease – seeds planted in the hospital vegetable garden “soon after withered away”, while “the advantage of fish or other fresh provisions could but rarely be procured; nor were esculent vegetables often obtained in sufficient plenty to produce any material alleviation of the complaint”.\footnote{White, ‘January 1788’, par. 123; Phillip, ‘Chapter VIII, January 1788’, par. 59.} A lack of available and motivated labour, combined with settlers’ unfamiliarity with the soil and climate of New South Wales, resulted in the failure of the colony’s first crop in September 1788 – a setback after which Phillip was forced to send one of his two remaining ships, the \textit{Sirius}, to Cape Cod for vital, though scanty, supplies.\footnote{Clark, A History of Australia, p. 118; Jan Kociumbas, The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 2: Possessions, 1770-1860 (Melbourne, 2004), p. 21.} The disruption caused by the scurvy outbreak was further compounded by the loss of the colony’s entire herd of surviving cattle, “consisting of five cows and a bull”, Watkin Tench estimated, which during June were lost in the bush “either from not being properly secured, or from the negligence of those appointed to take care of them”.\footnote{Turbet, First Frontier, p. 32; Tench, ‘Chapter XIV’ in A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay, par. 111.} The cattle’s loss was indicative of a larger problem arising from “the habitual indolence of the convicts” which, under the increasing strain of food shortages, was becoming more apparent with each passing week.\footnote{Phillip, ‘Chapter VIII, January 1788’, par. 57.}

The reduction of male settlers’ rations in response to the severe diminishment of the colony’s food supplies by November 1789 strengthened a number of existing difficulties within the colony.\footnote{Atkinson, The Europeans in Australia, p. 104; Clark, A History of Australia, p. 120.} One of these was the theft of food by convicts, marines and free-settlers alike which, despite being punished severely, continued to
occur on a regular basis throughout the hungry years. Tench reported that in March 1789, six marines, “the flower of our battalion...were hanged... for having at various times robbed the public stores of flour, meat, spirits, tobacco, and many other articles.” Persistent attempts to instil in convicts a “work or starve” ethos were ineffectual for the most part, while experiments in which unusually enthusiastic convicts such as James Ruse – who had prior experience of farming – were assigned their own land to grow food on were of limited success due, most likely, to as of yet unfamiliar conditions and soil types. Food and drink shortages also impacted on public morale, particularly after March 1790, when the authorities were forced to temporarily reduce settlers’ liquor ration. Diminishing food supplies played an important role in shaping setters’ relations with the natives, who soon enough experienced the spectre of famine themselves when their own fish and wild vegetable food sources declined shortly after the colonists’ arrival.

From the beginning of the settlement’s establishment, colonists’ relations with native Aboriginal tribes were frequently defined and redefined as food supplies fluctuated, with the Europeans’ first reported confrontation with the Eora occurring in response to one group’s orchestrated attempt to seize of valuable garden tools from a settled vegetable patch. As indigenous food sources continued to be compromised in the early years of the English occupation of New South Wales, a number of significant confrontations took place that might otherwise have not

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17 Turbet, *First frontier*, p. 32.
occurred. Phillip reports one such incident in July 1788, during a period of particular hardship, when

about twenty of them, armed with spears, came down to the spot where our men were fishing, and without any previous attempt to obtain their purpose by fair means, violently seized the greatest part of the fish which was in the seine...a much greater number stood at a small distance with their spears poised, ready to have thrown them if any resistance had been made...the [English] cockswain...suffered them to take away what they chose, and they parted on good terms.\textsuperscript{19}

The Governor subsequently declared the occurrence as “the only instance in which these people have attempted any unprovoked act of violence”, adding that in “this they probably were driven by necessity”.\textsuperscript{20} In their refusal to respond to this attack with further aggression, Phillip and his officials evidenced a comprehension of the threat that natives posed to the survival of the early colony. In early 1790, they were exceeding careful to conceal the extent of the settlement’s food shortage from their native captive, Bennelong, who they feared would communicate their increasing vulnerability to his comrades.\textsuperscript{21}

By the time of the Second Fleet’s arrival in June 1790, an earlier supply ship, the \textit{Guardian}, had hit an iceberg during her voyage from England and the \textit{Sirius} – sent a second time for supplies – had been wrecked off the coast of Sydney.\textsuperscript{22} These incidents, and the food crises they initiated, further lowered settlers’ morale in addition to weakening their constitutions – to the extent that their hours of compulsory labour had to be shortened.\textsuperscript{23} John Hunter commented that

the want of [supplies]...threw the settlement back so much, that it will require a length of time to put it in the situation it would have been in, had the

\textsuperscript{18} Phillip, ‘Chapter XIV, July 1788 to October 1788’, par. 132-133.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., par. 133.
\textsuperscript{21} Turbet, \textit{First frontier}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{22} Kociumbas, \textit{The Oxford History of Australia}, pp 21-22.
\textsuperscript{23} Clark, \textit{A History of Australia}, p. 121.
Guardian arrived before Governor Phillip was obliged to send away the Sirius, to give up labour, and to destroy the greatest part of the live stock.24 The arrival of the Lady Juliana and Justinian, the first ships of the Second Fleet, helped ease the settlement’s food shortages – if only in the short term.25 The arrival of the Third Fleet the following year placed further strains on the colony’s resources, since its ships deposited a large number of very sick convicts into New South Wales but hardly contributed to existing supplies of food, medicine or livestock.26 Towards the end of 1791, however, Tench reported that efforts to produce native food sources were beginning to pay off, since though the “vegetables in general are but mean...the stalks of maize, with which they are interspersed, appear green and flourishing...”27 This was a positive step forward for the colony which, though still subject to periods of privation, could at last be considered a viable colonial base.28

In the early days of Arthur Phillip’s reign, food crises – and their threat to human health – obstructed a number of colonial objectives. In compromising the physical abilities and morale of the colony’s population, food shortages accounted for the intensification – and, sometimes, creation – of the difficulties experienced in the early days of European settlement in New South Wales. These difficulties included the initiation of local food production, the maintenance of convict labour for building and farming, and the establishment of adequate relations with the natives. Gradual acclimatization to their new environment and an increased labour force was, in the end, what largely contributed to colonists’ overcoming of such

25 Kociumbas, The Oxford History of Australia, p. 22
27 Tench, ‘Chapter XIV’ in A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson, par. 142.
difficulties, with the result that when Major Grose arrived in 1792 to assume the Governorship, he “found to his great comfort and his astonishment that there was...[not] the scarcity that had been represented to him”.29

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