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The Once & Future King of The Bay

BY ELLEN MOYER NOV. 07, 2019 MIDNIGHT



The year was 1880 and Crisfield, Maryland’s second largest city at the time, was thriving. Thanks to the oyster, Crisfield was a boomtown; raucous, greedy, and vice-ridden with con men, gamblers, and prostitutes. More sailing ships than anywhere in the world—about 600 of them—filled the harbor, eventually bringing to this salt marsh peninsula (known as Somers Cove since its settlement in 1663 by Ben Summers) the title of “Seafood Capital of the World.”

By 1880, the town had been incorporated and named for Senator John Crisfield, who brought a Pennsylvania railroad line to the quiet village in 1866 to move the coveted oyster—15 million bushels—around the globe. To the dismay of the local

citizens, Crisfield was transformed into a major lawless and hardscrabble shipping center.

With a labor shortage, young men and immigrants were kidnapped, shanghaied, and tortured to work the newly designed oyster sailboats, pungies, bugeyes, and skipjacks. Their pay was often a hit of the boat's boom to the call of "man overboard," and they were left behind to sink or swim.

On land, saloons proliferated and staged bare-knuckle boxing matches; no-holds-barred conflicts between Virginians and Smith Islanders. Haymie Bradshaw, a Smith Island Methodist, would fall from grace every oyster season to box as one of the "scrappiest dockside brawlers on the Eastern Shore and the staunchest defender of Smith Island honor."

Meanwhile, the streets were piled high with heaps of oyster shells. Buttons and fertilizer factories joined in business with the growing number of shucking and packing houses. In 1879, *Harper's* magazine described Crisfield with "oysters, oysters everywhere—in barrels, in boxes, in cans, in buckets, in the shell and out." What wasn't recycled was thrown into the salt marsh, creating a whole new landfill—a half-mile extension into Tangier Sound, which is the base of today's downtown Crisfield.



"Engagement in the oyster war on the Chesapeake," from a sketch by F. Cresson Schell that appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, January 9th, 1886.

Boomtowns eventually die and so did Crisfield, but what gave rise to this thriving, new boomtown in the first place? In 1854, the world's largest oyster beds were discovered in Tangier Sound. And so, a culinary delight, which dates back centuries in history, ascended into Maryland and the Chesapeake Bay industry and precipitated 100 years of "Oyster Wars" that eventually decimated the ancient oyster beds to one percent of their original number.

Ancient Context

Oysters are ancient—probably 250 million years old. Their mission? To keep the waters of Earth clean and to support the emerging aquatic marine life. They find a home in brackish, shallow water near the mouths of rivers and creeks where they can feed on micro-plankton. They were, and still are, the original clean water mechanic, individually filtering 50 gallons of water each day. At one point in time, oyster beds could filter the entire Chesapeake Bay in three to four days. Today, it takes a year or longer.

Oysters are filled with protein and are high in vitamin B12, zinc, magnesium, and calcium. Easy to reach along shallow shorelines, ancient oyster middens around the world testify to feasting by native populations.

So popular was the oyster that the Greeks created oyster farms to increase this juicy morsel, which, in the Mediterranean, also produced the pearl, the gem of choice for the wealthy.

The Romans were the first to market oysters, gathering them from oyster beds along the Thames and English Channel and greedily consuming them in lavish parties. They associated the oyster with wealth and even created a coin in their currency worth the value of an oyster. The Roman elite lived in gluttony.



A state police steamer overhauling a pirate boat on Chesapeake Bay, off Swan's Point; from a sketch by Frank Adams published in 1888.

Reportedly, Emperor Vitellius ate 1,000 oysters in one sitting. Perhaps he liked the taste, but the bivalve also was believed to stimulate the libido.

Shift forward to the New World when Henry Hudson sailed into the New York river that would eventually bear his name. The Dutch, like the English and French, were great lovers of oysters—essential to their cuisine and a subject in the still life paintings of master artists.

Hudson's river was a mass of oyster beds—350 square miles of them. As the Dutch settled into New Amsterdam, they feasted on the fish and bivalves from the surrounding waters. Soon, beer gardens, oyster carts, and basement oyster cellars were flourishing in the new city, New York. Oyster cellars were marked by a red balloon, the traditional sign of prostitution—the red-light pubs continuing the ancient link between sex and oysters. In 2007, research identified a rare amino acid found in high concentration in oysters that does indeed stimulate intimate arousal, giving credence to the myth provoked by the Romans.

Despite its pub culture, New York had no restaurant serving fine cuisine until Swiss brothers and wine merchants Giovanni and Pietro Delmonico opened what became the most celebrated French restaurant in America. Delmonico's restaurant brought about a major shift in New York culture. The oyster on the half shell was popularized and featured as the main appetizer.

Unfortunately, all was not well in the oyster grounds of the Hudson. An oyster-loving public employed thousands from the region to rake the oyster beds. Soon, pollution poisoned the beds around Staten Island and Manhattan. In New England, a new way to harvest oysters (other than by hand tongs) called the dredge completed the task of eliminating the 350 square miles of oyster beds from the Hudson estuaries, as well as those throughout Cape Cod.

Then, in 1857, the oyster beds were discovered in Tangier Sound off the quiet town of Somers Cove, soon to be Crisfield. The boomtown would become the “Queen City of the Oyster Trade.” And the Chesapeake Bay would become ground zero for the vicious Oyster Wars between legal hand tongers and illegal pirate dredgers.

War on the Chesapeake

Maryland legislators acted as early as 1800 to protect its oyster industry and Maryland oystermen. In 1830, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation authorizing only state residents to harvest oysters in its waters. In an early conservation action, they also outlawed dredging. The General Assembly continued to protect its industry, passing another law in 1865 that required annual permits for oyster harvesting.



Drawing by Schell and Hogan that appeared in Harper's Weekly, March 1st, 1884, under the title "The oyster war in Chesapeake Bay."

After the Civil War, and with depletion of the oyster beds in New York and New England, Maryland's oyster harvesting industry exploded. The Chesapeake Bay supplied almost half of the world's oyster supply. New England oystermen flocked to the Chesapeake Bay, coming in the dead of night to raid Maryland's oyster beds by dredge.

To combat what were called "oyster pirates," in 1868 the state created the Oyster Navy—now considered Maryland's oldest law enforcement agency and the predecessor to the Natural Resources Police—responsible for enforcing the state's oyster harvesting laws. The Oyster Navy was headed by a Naval Academy graduate, Hunter Davidson.

However, greed has no limit, and the state's Navy was outclassed and outspent by the affluent, mostly out-of-state dredgers. Working at night, the speedy dredger boats could outrun the naval boats. Maryland's tongers could make \$500 annually compared to a dredger's \$2,000. The pirates, in their swift boats, came for their "treasure in a shell," illegally poaching the state's valuable natural resource with the equipment that wiped out the oyster beds in the north.

But Chief Davidson would not be outdone. The underfunded Oyster Navy armed their boats with a howitzer cannon, chasing the outlaw dredgers, sinking boats, and placing armed schooners at the mouths of rivers. He soon became a target of the pirating oystermen, who tried to murder him.

Tongers were armed too, and attempted to ambush the dredger outlaws, resulting in more deaths of hardworking residents in the marine business.

Annapolis has another connection to the Oyster Wars through Captain William Burtis, a member of the Oyster Navy, who bought a house on Spa Creek at the end of

Prince George Street. This space, later owned by the Department of Natural Resources, is a history museum in the making to tell the stories of Maryland watermen who worked but failed to preserve our oyster beds.

The 100 years of poaching and murders took its toll, ravaging the Chesapeake Bay. It did not cease until 1962, when President John F. Kennedy signed into law the Potomac River Fisheries Commission bill. That bill had its roots in a 1785 contract that stated new laws concerning shared waters of the Potomac River, including oyster harvesting, had to be agreed upon by both states: Maryland and Virginia. But both rarely agreed. Finally, gun-happy local authorities resulted in the death of a popular Colonial Beach resident on a poaching expedition in 1958, and legislators from Virginia and Maryland, exhausted with the oyster wars, finally said enough is enough.

New Age Battle



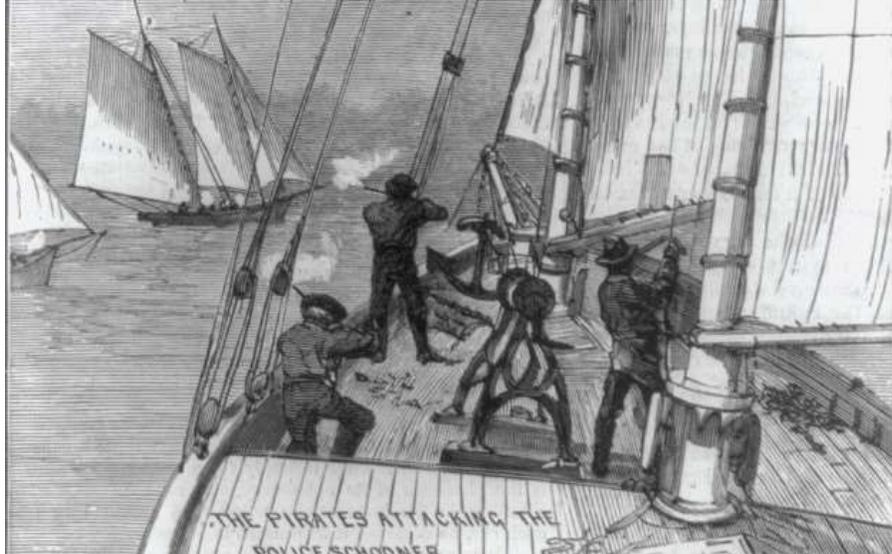
"I demand the surrender of Sylvester Cannon." Sylvester Cannon was an oyster pirate who threatened a judge and was pursued by police during the Chesapeake Oyster Wars. This depiction appeared in the New York Times, February 15, 1884, under the headline "Piratical Oyster Crews; The Desperadoes Very Free in the Use of Their Fire-Arms. The Police Boat and a Magistrate's Residence Showered with Bullets-Bloody Deeds Anticipated."

Today, the oyster packing houses that lined the bay are gone. McNasby Oyster Company on Second Street and Back Creek in Eastport, Annapolis, was the last of the western shore houses to close. In its heyday, Annapolis had four packing houses around City Dock and the Burtis House. Not long ago, skipjacks, built on the Eastern Shore to maneuver the shallow waters of oyster beds, lined local harbors and were packed as close as stepping stones across waterways. Buy-boats visited City Dock to receive the harvests of the oystermen. These are scenes only available in old photos.

The oyster, king of the Chesapeake Bay, is no more. Crisfield, now a small town of 2,500 residents, is still a seafood capital, but the blue crab is now its harvest. Efforts to bring back the oyster, if for no other reason than to clean our water, are expensive and fragile at best. Controversy surrounds the cause. Some residents say they want to clean up the bay, but then oppose aquaculture efforts to rebuild oyster beds on historic sites.

Aquaculture is not new. The ability to raise oysters artificially dates back to the ancient Greeks. Aristotle noted that fishermen were able to move oysters to more favorable spots to fatten them. Cultivating oysters is an old European concept promoted by Orata, a son of first-century BC Rome and its epicurean excesses. He cultivated oysters in lakes near Naples and reportedly made a fortune selling them. Frenchman Victor Coates pursued oyster culture as the beds of Normandy became bare. In 19th-century Europe, replanting oysters was common place. Mesoamericans, long before the 1800s, regularly worked with spats to grow oysters.

In America, as knowledge of the oyster grew, the ability to raise oysters artificially became sophisticated. In 1825, Chesapeake spats were planted near Staten Island for the first time.

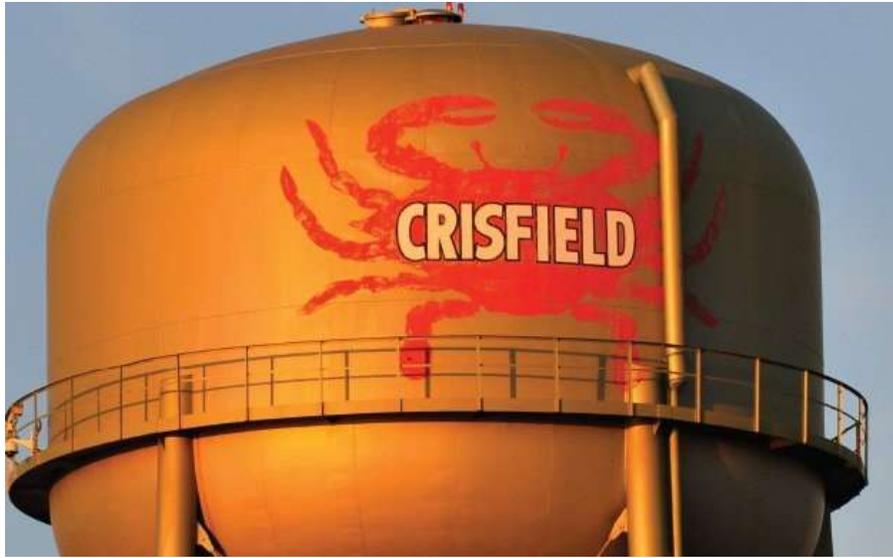


"The pirates attacking the police schooner Julia Hamilton," a drawing by Schell and Hogan that appeared in Harper's Weekly, March 1st, 1884.

But conservation efforts based on the knowledge of the slow-growing oyster in different habitats couldn't survive the steam powered dredge. Maryland legislative action tried to protect the industry and preserve oyster beds for economic purposes but greed succeeded in the 1800s. Today, less than 400,000 bushels are harvested.

Maryland began its official Oyster Recovery program in 1994. Ten years ago, President Barack Obama issued an executive order to develop a comprehensive Chesapeake Bay restoration plan, that includes replenishing 22 oyster habitats by the year 2025. In the 2019 Maryland General Assembly, oyster recovery received hot and active attention.

Time, weather, and climate change, which impact water temperature and salinity, as well as the attitudes of waterfront property owners and the availability of public dollars, will determine if the oyster population will prosper once again.



The Oyster Wars continue—they just have a different face than the century of shoot-em-up naval battles from 1863 to 1962. Today's foes are parasites, pollution, and public perception. Polls show 99 percent of the public want to save the Chesapeake Bay, but some naysayers believe it's an inconvenience.

Maryland's oyster hatchery at Horn Point in Cambridge works hard at creating billions of spat for restoration activities by local groups and educating citizens on the key role oysters play to clean our waters and what we can do to assist. It is a long-term positive project dedicated to enhancing culinary delight, economic vitality, jobs, and clean water in the nation's largest estuary, the Chesapeake Bay.