

The History of the Oyster

The oyster is one of the oldest creatures in the bivalve salt water family. An oyster is one of the bivalve aquatic mollusks that have a compressed body enclosed within a hinged, 2 sided (valved) body. Other bivalve mollusks include clams, mussels, and scallops. From the time of ancient civilizations to the current inhabitants of the Chesapeake Bay region, the oyster has been a food delicacy, a natural filtering mechanism for local bodies of water and a waterman's means of providing for his family thru the harvesting and selling of oysters.

Oyster farming was practiced by the ancient Romans as early as the 1st century BC using the release and bagging method to cultivate the oyster. The Japanese used bamboo and stones to harvest oysters, the ancient Greeks voted with oysters, and the Australians used every part of the oyster, including making tools with them. In medieval times oysters were enjoyed by the royalty and aristocrats in Europe.

Just as oysters were a delicacy for the European elite, the mollusk was an easily accessible food source for Captain John Smith and the explorers to the new world. In 1608, when Captain John Smith sailed up the Chesapeake Bay from Jamestown, Virginia, on a voyage of exploration and mapping of the Chesapeake Bay; George Percy of his crew wrote that "Oysters lay on the ground as thick as stones." The name "Chesapeake" is an Algonquin Indian word that some interpret as "Great Shellfish Bay"—a reference to the oysters that made up large parts of the Native American diet. Oysters in the Bay were

good for more than just a tasty meal, though, as their filter-feeding was a major factor in keeping the waters of the Chesapeake clear and healthy. Some estimates suggest that, in 1608, every drop of water in the Bay was filtered weekly by oysters - a process that now takes years.

The climax of oystering on the Chesapeake Bay was in the 1880's with over 20 million bushels harvested each year according to the Chesapeake Bay Program. Due to the high number of oysters being harvested, costs declined and soon oysters were cheaper than beef. The 1880's new v-shaped hull design of the deadrise paired with the motor engine availability in the 1920's created a powerful workboat for the waterman of the Chesapeake Bay.

The forefather of the deadrise was the Skipjack, a sail propelled workboat used for dredging oysters. The oystermen needed a steady and balanced workboat for oystering with tongs, dredging, and getting into creeks. The deadrise was the perfect boat for the job; with many being built right here in Mathews and Deltaville. Many deadrises were designed using the "Rack of Eye" method which involves designing a boat without plans. When I see a deadrise workboat traveling local waterways such as the East River, it reminds me of the bravery, skills and legacy of our local boat builders and the waterman who oyster and fish these waters.

Even though oysters have been harvested for hundreds of years on the Chesapeake Bay; no significant decline had been documented until the last 150 years. The Virginia Oyster Shell Recycling Program on Gwynn's Island is making a significant impact on

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oyster populations in the local rivers including the Piankatank River that feeds into the Chesapeake Bay. Todd Janeski, head of the program, recently shared the process of growing oysters with ABC Eight News. The process takes less than twenty days and is relatively simple and yields high numbers of oysters for reseeding. The program has reseeded over 40 million oysters to date and will replenish the local waters with 20 million this year. Programs like VOSRP are a key step to increasing the oyster populations for generations to come.

Even with the decline in oyster yields, the Chesapeake Bay continues to be the number one oyster producing body of water in the U.S., with over three hundred thousand bushels of oysters harvested from the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia for the past several years, according to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. As a coastal community we have the ability to support the oyster replenishing efforts and to preserve the oystering lifestyle for the next generation. May we, the Mathews Community, never forget that our roots are firmly planted in the bounty of the Chesapeake Bay. It provides much pleasure, profit and sustenance to us all; whether we are waterman, sailors or just spectators of the beauty of the bay.