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### A Race on the Water

The other day I saw a bumper sticker that read, “A true Eastern Shoreman is like an aryster, he stays right where he’s at.” The turn of the twenty-first century, however, has brought environmental and economic pressures that are leading the demise of an entire culture of watermen. Within the watermen community is a history steeped in struggle, prosperity, and conflict, much of which resides around racial tensions. The harsh conditions the Chesapeake threw at black watermen provide only half the story of their struggle. From Crisfield to Rock Hall, African Americans living along the shore did the only job they knew; oystering. The same saltwater that ran through their white captains’ veins pulsed through their hearts; the Bay was part of their biology, it was their lifeline.

As prevalent as an oyster shell in the lives of black watermen, however, was the omnipresence of racism. Racism was not the trash of a passing workboat that happened to wash ashore; it was engrained into the genetic makeup of whites and blacks alike who resided along the miles of coastline of the Bay, and the scattered plantations that once defined the Shore economy. “Jim Crow” worked the water and walked the docks of every shore town. Racism had roots from the Bay to the oyster packing houses and dominated the lives of every waterman who lived and worked during that era, whether they realized or not.

The methods used to retrieve oysters from the bottom of the Bay are as diverse in history and technique as the delivery and pitch of the Shore language used to describe it. Each waterman had his own style that worked best for him on the water, each one

efficient and to the point. Even the spoken language of watermen was unique as words woven into colorful native tapestries hung over the docks of each port town. But on the water oystermen did not get paid to talk, they manned the sails and “drudge” winches or skillfully plucked oysters from the bars with tongs.

Dredging, or “drudging” to use the local term, was a much faster way to harvest oysters, but did the most destruction to the beds and was consequently the most controversial and still is today. Before the introduction of electricity to boats, dredging was the epitome of manual labor. On the Shore, however, was an abundance of willing men desperate to provide for their family by laboring on the water, the majority of who were black.

Slaves were the first to work symbiotically with the Bay out of sheer necessity. It provided food and escape, with limited economic possibilities at the outset. Instead the forefathers of black oystermen honed their navigation and sailing skills from the 1730s to the Civil War. For slave owners along the Chesapeake, especially the Eastern Shore, owning a seafaring slave was vital. Slaves with navigational ability would be given command of his master’s vessel, entrusted with crops and supplies. Becoming intimately acquainted with the waterways of the Bay, enslaved captains often used their knowledge to obtain their freedom. As African American maritime historian Jeffery Bolster says, “by 1770 it was common to refer to runaway slaves’ considerable experience as watermen.”<sup>1</sup>

Oysters went from pauper necessities to everyday staples in American culture rapidly. And, after the Civil War, they became an economic mainstay accompanied by drastic changes in state policy. Virginians and Northerners illegally poached the beds in Maryland waters and black oystermen had to fight white captains and “foreigners” for

economic security.<sup>2</sup> Violence erupted on the Bay and the lawlessness normally associated with the Wild West ran rampant on the Chesapeake between poverty stricken oystermen, lawmen, and poachers. The *Kent News* reported that the “Chester River is said to be filled with dredgers who are taking off oysters by boatloads,”<sup>3</sup> most of whom worked out of Baltimore with northern employers. Captain Hunter Davidson, the head of the “Oyster Police” for example, began filling courthouses, Chestertown included, with oyster rustlers.<sup>4</sup>

Financial burden for blacks on the Bay was not a new phenomenon by any means. Racism perpetuated the imbalanced socio-economic dynamics prevalent in such an unstable business. The Fourteenth Amendment created even more tensions on the water, and not just on the Chesapeake. A white captain from the Great Lakes felt that “we have to keep [blacks] from white sailors” resulting in uniformly racial crews.<sup>5</sup> Other captains attempted to employ “checkerboard” crews made up of both races in an attempt to incite competition.<sup>6</sup> In Maryland, however, the oyster boats belonged to the white captains looking to generate profit through cheap labor.

Pay was split three ways aboard oyster boats: maintenance, captain, and crew. Thirty-three percent of the total profit was split between the boat hands, usually around four to five depending on the size of the vessel and the method used. During the 1960s Leroy Jones, a black deck hand aboard the “Robert C. Webster” made about 100 dollars a week dredging oysters in the Bay, enough for modest living.<sup>7</sup>

The oyster industry had solidified itself as a major influence in Maryland’s economy. By the 1880s, “Maryland, with its millions of invested capital, and the thousands, aye, the tens of thousands of human beings dependent upon [the oyster

industry]”<sup>8</sup> had an economic juggernaut in its midst accompanied by an increased demand. Black oystermen could see their stock growing.

The black watermen lead a rough-and-tumble lifestyle, a “live for the moment” mentality, for their lives were subject to fluctuations. In the opinion of Thomas Weeks, an industrial statistician for the Maryland government, “the oyster dredgers of Maryland are the most ill-conditioned body of labor....It is poor and beggarly, exposed to cold and hardship without restraint or protection of law.”<sup>9</sup>

Time spent on terra firma and the dock was money lost, and in the winter the Bay and the rivers would often freeze solid.<sup>10</sup> For the poorest watermen- the black oystermen- each day off the water was devastating to their already unstable financial situation. Depending on the harvest as much as the weather much of a black waterman’s life was out of his hands. They were, however, connected to the oyster bars by more than a paycheck, rather by a sense of belonging and history; familial and cultural.

Communal support was vital to the black waterman and when a black sailor drowned the neighborhood grieved. More times than not, it was an African American who was the victim by either fair or foul play. John Wennersten, who documented oyster conflicts on the Bay wrote that, “deaths on the Chesapeake were seldom investigated...and local judges rarely prosecuted ship captains, no matter how heinous their crimes on the Chesapeake.”<sup>11</sup> If a black hand died on the water a definite account of what occurred would be taken to the grave by the captain.

The close quarters with which watermen worked led to antagonisms between class and race. Frustrations would inevitably build, leading to fatal occurrences. Racial

mutinies were not unheard of on the water and when they did occur they were well documented by the local white-run newspapers.

On June 16, 1893 Captain J. Frank Cooper was murdered on his punga, the “James V. Daiger,” by Arthur Courtney and Henry Taylor, his two African American mates. Feeling cheated out of money and having their personal items locked in the Captain’s chest to prevent their escape, the two deck hands murdered the captain.<sup>12</sup> This was not the first instance of racially motivated murders. A few years prior to Captain Cooper’s murder, one Captain Johnson and his white mate were also killed at the hands of an enraged “colored crew.”<sup>13</sup>

Common amongst Kent County watermen was the use of shanties from late nineteenth through the twentieth century. Close relationships were formed between bunkmates and other arks.<sup>14</sup> These living situations more than likely prevented any black watermen from rooming with a white companion on these floating homes. Without that close contact for extended periods of time the chance of racial outbursts of violence was greatly reduced, but not necessarily eliminated.

The majority of Kent County’s racially inspired conflicts happened on land, especially during the Civil Rights movement. Chestertown, for example, was “segregated to its very roots” and was not unique in that sense.<sup>15</sup> The older generation was content with their situation, while the young were stuck between history and tradition, and the chance for a better life by moving elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> The NAACP had little impact on county politics and tensions erupted when freedom riders attempted to demonstrate against a local restaurant. A quasi race riot ensued and three “local Negroes” were arrested and charged for their part in the demonstration.<sup>17</sup>

The years following integration in Kent County were still laced with racism, as old habits die hard. Captain Charles Crouch, a 52 year old white waterman from Rock Hall, was a young man during the Civil Rights Movement, learning the ways of the water. And though he was not racist, “most of the watermen’s that way,” he says “not all, but most.” In all the years that he captained his boat he heard of few instances of racism on the water off Rock Hall. Apparently there “wasn’t many colored people who worked on the water up [in Kent County] - a couple on the Bay and three or four on the [Chester] river” but most were “from Kent Island.” He had one black “fella” who worked with him, “crabbin for probably seven or eight years,” but very few owned their own boats.<sup>18</sup>

Though Captain Crouch lived in a county and town heavily influenced by race, he claims that there were virtually no instances of it dominating the watermen industry. In comparison to local politics, the account, though it may be accurate, might still be tainted by an engrained bias. Just as discrimination was an everyday occurrence to blacks in Kent County, falling under the “that’s just the way it was” syndrome, Captain Crouch may not have realized that what he was witnessing was actually racially biased.

The poverty witnessed during the late 1800s reverberated through the years as few blacks were financially stable enough to afford their own work boat. This continued their dependence on the wealthier white watermen for employment and amplified the necessity of a small town where “everybody knows everybody in winter.” If the hometown was larger, connections would have been rarer.<sup>19</sup>

Further south on the Shore, the experiences are polar opposites. In Talbot County “the growth of the black community was often hampered by racism and fear of competition.”<sup>20</sup> Even though the black community had trouble expanding, it had already

established a formidable size. By 1930, there were 5,956 blacks living in Talbot County, approximately 32.1 percent of the total population.<sup>21</sup> Many of those men and women worked either on the water or held positions related to the Bay.

Downes Curtis, for example, lived in Oxford and had to be bussed out of his hometown to an all black school, passing the white school on his way, as a child. He too feels that “that’s the way it was in those days...and no one gave it a thought.”<sup>22</sup> He worked as a sailmaker to pay off debts and was offered a job to continue, not out of kindness he feels, but because his employer “felt a black fellow would hang around for awhile, wouldn’t go off on him as a competitor.”<sup>23</sup> His white boss played on the stereotypes and tendencies of the black population to limit Curtis’s opportunities.

Accompanying the oyster season, the packing houses were open throughout the winter into early spring. As an advertisement in the *Kent News* highlighted, they “give employment to many worthy but needy women...and employment is thus afforded to the poor and helpless female,” the majority of whom were black.<sup>24</sup> Depending on the harvest, oyster packers were at the mercy of the dredgers and tongers. More oysters meant longer work days and greater revenue, but the opposite was always a fear. Fortunate for those packers in Kent County, so they say, “The Chester River oysters are unsurpassed for richness and flavor by those of any other water.”<sup>25</sup> They were in great demand by the oyster loving public, and packers were basically guaranteed a job during the winter months.

During the twentieth century, oyster packing houses became a major industry on the Shore, especially in Talbot County. Workers for Tilghman Packing consisted of an overwhelming majority of African American women. Segregation was not an issue in the

institutions as there was nothing to integrate, being that all the employees were black. The packing houses “provided a social environment” for the women as they invented original songs or sung traditional hymns.<sup>26</sup> A poem entitled “The Bombardment of Wittman,” written “by the Colored Claw Workers of Tilghman Packing Co.” and signed by five oyster shuckers, recounts an occurrence that happened in their home town of Wittman. Their recognition and credit for their work exhibits a feeling of pride in the situation and their ability to make the most out of it.<sup>27</sup>

Though not segregated by race, the packing houses discriminated by social order. Those black workers from the immediate vicinity were more highly regarded as permanent workers than their migrant counterparts. The foreigner/native matrix heavily influenced intra-company politics and led to an inequity between those who had familial roots compared to those who were seasonal inhabitants.<sup>28</sup>

The bigotry imposed on the African American workers was reciprocated to an extent. Instead of lashing back on their white employers they absorbed the anti-black mentality and applied it to their own situation. Looking for a scapegoat other than themselves, the black workers (as well as the white employers) released their frustrations on those people considered “outsiders.”

For the seasonal migrant workers who followed the money, they solved housing issues by living in shacks on company grounds. Just big enough to sleep with little movement, the shanties were inhabited from September through April of each year.<sup>29</sup> For the nomads of Tilghman Packing Company, the shanty communities were alive with activity as the black workers rarely ventured into the white-dominated town.<sup>30</sup> The shanty boroughs encouraged segregation but helped ease stress with communal involvement.

During the first half of the twentieth century Rock Hall emerged as the oyster epicenter in Kent County. Alvin Johnson, born in 1932 in Rock Hall, grew up at the height of “Jim Crow” problems in the county. As a boy he recollects having rocks thrown at him by the white boys his age as he walked down the street. As he grew older he followed his peers and worked for the oyster houses in Rock Hall. Paid not by an hourly wage, Mr. Johnson received sixty-five cents a gallon for removing the oyster meat from the shell, which was better than the “two dollars and a half per week” he received working on a chicken farm. He would “sometimes work until twelve [o’clock] at night and be back out there at five o’clock in the morning.” When he arrived to work there would be a “line [of] oysters down the middle of the house” roughly four feet high waiting to be shucked. With “only two potbellied stoves in the house” escape from the bitter cold of the winter months was futile.<sup>31</sup> Only work and day dreams provided a shelter from the cold.

The oyster houses in Rock Hall were “always segregated.” For lunch they had “to go in the cubbyhole” to retrieve their food, always separate from any white workers. This account is in stark contrast to the one given by Captain Crouch who worked and lived during roughly the same period. Though separated by twenty years, by the time Captain Crouch came of age Mr. Johnson would have been in the packing houses experiencing racism in the workplace in full fury.

As described by Lewis Mac Williams Kirby, who reported on the state of the Maryland oyster industry in 1938, “shuckers being composed largely of colored people, one is reminded of the cotton fields of the South because of the music they produce while

working.”<sup>32</sup> To place shucking on the level of sharecropping is a testament to the living and working conditions these black women were forced to endure.

The oyster boom hit Kent County during Mr. Johnson’s childhood. In 1933 there were 443 licensed tongers and nine licensed oyster packing houses Kent County, with \$1,887.27 in taxes stemming from the oyster inspections alone.<sup>33</sup> The state was generating a substantial amount of money from oysters but for the black workers like Mr. Johnson and his neighbors, racial tensions prevented him from earning more than sixty-five cents per gallon and increasing his status in society.

The twenty-first century has its own version of Bay related racial tensions, this time tugging at the crab industry. As reported by the Washington Post, the crab processing industry on Hooper Island in Dorchester County, “[has] come to rely on immigrant labor.” According to the owners of the individual plants on the island, “U.S. workers simply won't do the painful, low-paying job of picking meat out of steamed crabs.”<sup>34</sup> Hispanic migrant workers are following the money, working the seasonal jobs, a carbon copy their black predecessors. Though not deluged in racism, it does continue to defining boundaries in yet another Chesapeake Bay connected vocation.

“Arsters” for the black communities on Maryland’s Eastern Shore are more than a dinner staple. They have an intertwined history full of racially inspired narratives and personal horror stories. Black watermen were at the mercy of Mother Nature and their white captains and employers. Racism encompassed their lives subconsciously and materially from the Civil War to the integration movement of the 1960s and ‘70s. Gravestones marking the burial sites of drowned African American oystermen and scars

from oyster shells dating from the packing houses serve as physical reminders of when the color of one's skin determined his place on the water.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Jeffery Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 24-25.

<sup>2</sup> "Oyster Laws," *Kent News*, Jan. 14, 1865

<sup>3</sup> "The Oyster Question," *Kent News*, Feb. 6, 1869.

<sup>4</sup> "The Oyster Law to be Tested," *Kent News*, Feb. 13, 1869.

<sup>5</sup> Bolster, 218

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

<sup>7</sup> "Deal's Island Tragedy" from *Thomas Ewell's Scrapbook of the Oyster Conflict*, MDHS; "Maryland's Sunken Treasure: The Almighty Oyster" from *The Trailways Magazine*, Jan.-Feb 1962, pg 5. The crew of the "Robert C. Webster" consisted of a white captain, Eldon Willing, white first mate Edward Willing, and a black crew of Mitchell Becket, Ed Anderson, Leroy Jones, and Clarence Carr.

<sup>8</sup> R.H. Edmunds, "Maryland's Oyster Interest: Our Absurd Protection Laws," *Kent News*, Feb. 21, 1880.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph j. Robinson, "Life Aboard the Oyster Dredgers---1880," *Baltimore Sunday Sun*, April 1952.

<sup>10</sup> "Close of Navigation," *Kent News*, Jan. 7, 1865.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay*. (Centreville: Tidewater Publishers, 1981), 58.

<sup>12</sup> Ewell, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Ewell, 52.

<sup>14</sup> Marty King, "Shanty Boats of Kent County, Maryland," *The Weather Gauge* Vol. XXXII No. 1 Spring 1996, pg. 24-29.

<sup>15</sup> Paul S. Cowan, "A Report on Integration in a Maryland Town," *The Harvard Crimson*, May 23, 1963.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, May 23, 1963.

<sup>17</sup> "Arrest Three Here in Race Demonstration," *Kent News*, Feb 7, 1962.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Crouch, interview with the author, April 17, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Lamont W. Harvey, "Black Oystermen of the Bay Country...particularly St. Michaels, Maryland," *The Weather Gauge*, Vol. XXX No. 1, Spring 1994, pg 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Hank Jr., "Downes Curtis, Sailmaker," *The Weather Gauge*, Vol. XXXIII No. 2, Fall 1997, pg 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> "Oyster Packing," *Kent News*, Nov. 26, 1864

<sup>25</sup> "Oyster Packing," *Kent News*, March 4, 1865

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Enloe Vivian, "Tilghman Packing Company & The transformation of Landscape of Avalon Island," *The Weather Gauge* Vol. XXXVI No. 1 Spring 2000, pg 16

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 17-18.

<sup>29</sup> "Amelia Brown Tilghman," *Lift Every Voice*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Vivian, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Alvin Johnson by the author, April 20, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis Mac Williams Kirby, "Oyster Industry in Maryland" Feb. 2, 1938.

<sup>33</sup> "Tables Showing Kinds of Licenses Issued by Tidewater Counties," *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Conservation Department of the State of Maryland* (Baltimore, Md.: 1933), 124. ;Oyster Inspection Tax Collections at Various Points in the State," *Fifth Annual Report of the Conservation Department of the State of Maryland, 1927* (Baltimore, Md.).

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<sup>34</sup> David A. Fahrethold, “On the Hill, Isle's Livelihood Crawls Along: Bay Residents Anxiously Track Bill on Crabbing Labor,” *The Washington Post*, 2 May 2005, sec B.