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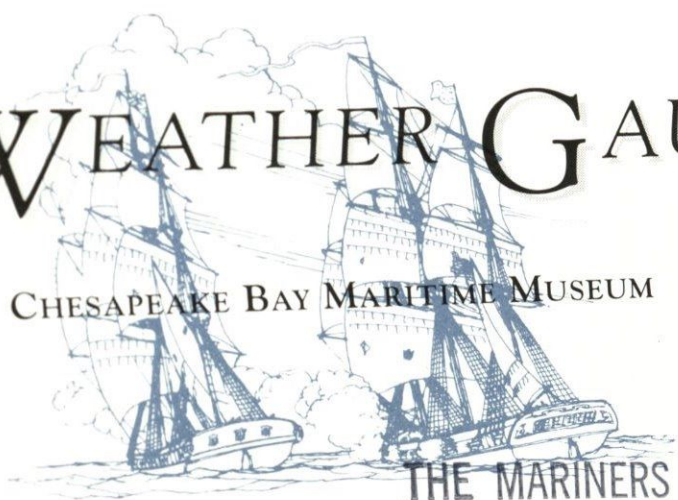
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# THE WEATHER GAUGE

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In a naval battle between sailing ships, the wind-  
ward vessel had the advantage, known as "the weath-  
er gauge." The windward ship showed no area below  
its waterline, while the leeward ship exposed part of

her underbody. A hit scored in that area was poten-  
tially much more damaging. Renowned Bay artist  
John Moll's depiction of this situation has been part of  
*The Weather Gauge* since 1965.

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**On the Cover:**

Unidentified waterman at Tilghman Island, circa 1930, CBMM Collection.

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# Black Oystermen of the Bay Country

By  
LAMONT W.  
HARVEY

**B**etween the Civil War and the Great Depression, blacks in settled land areas of the Chesapeake Bay region — specifically the Eastern Shore and Baltimore City — were the backbone of two major industries. These industries, catching shellfish and canning food, achieved national importance during this period, and employed blacks as laborers on the plantations, oyster shuckers or crab pickers in the packing houses, and watermen on the fishing boats.

Eventually the black community would rise from its dependence upon white employers, especially in St. Michaels, in Talbot County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where blacks would start their own businesses and support the town in times of trouble.

Blacks have been a significant factor throughout Talbot County's history. They originally were imported by European slavers and landowners for labor on the tobacco plantations, replacing the inefficient system of indentured servitude. In 1712 Talbot County had only 492 African slaves, but by 1790 the number had increased to 4,777.<sup>1</sup>

By that time slavery had reached its peak in Maryland. The soil of the farms was so depleted from growing the same crop for so long that the tobacco farms failed or declined. Tobacco was

replaced as a main crop in Talbot County by wheat and strawberries, and slavery began its gradual decline on the large Eastern Shore plantations.

With the demise of the tobacco plantation system, owning slaves became an economic liability, and many Eastern Shore whites were unsure of what to do with their servants and field hands. Many whites freed their slaves in their wills or required them to purchase freedom. As early as 1790 1,076 free blacks resided in Talbot County. This was a little less than one fifth of the total 5,847 black population in the county, but was a higher number of free blacks than in any other political division in Maryland, including Baltimore City (927), Harford County (775), and Kent County (655). The numbers of free blacks, however, stagnated so that by 1850 the free black population in Talbot lagged behind all other Eastern Shore counties.<sup>2</sup>

The creation of a large free black community did not minimize the continuing problem of race relations on the Eastern Shore. Typically, most solutions to the race problem suited whites and rarely took the feelings of blacks into account. As most of the larger landowners thought free blacks threatened the social order of the plantations, they formulated ideas or plans to separate free blacks from the mainstream of Maryland life or



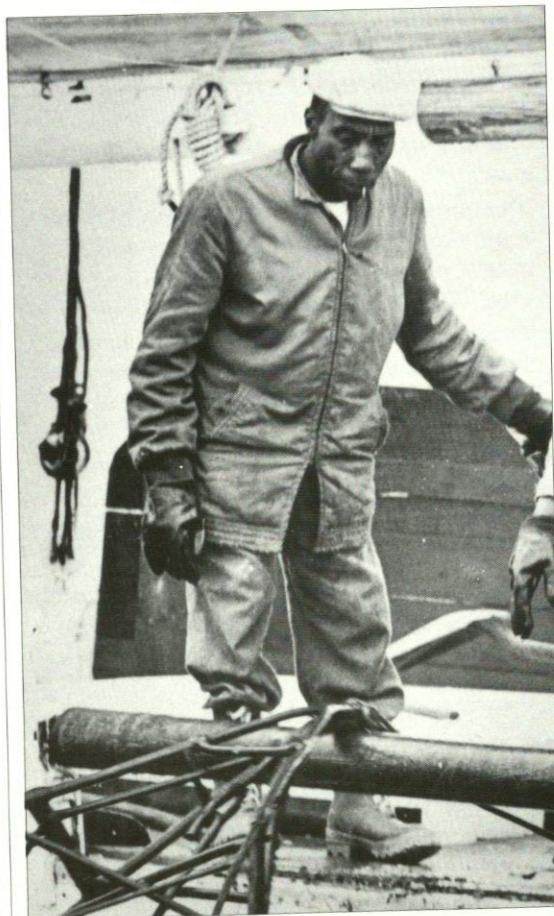
# ...particularly St. Michaels, Maryland

to remove them completely. African repatriation schemes routinely failed.

In the absence of a workable solution to the racial problem, from 1800 to the Civil War white legislators in Maryland passed restrictive laws against free blacks. Blacks were excluded from public schools and from combat roles in military service, and forbidden to testify in legal cases concerning whites. A bill was raised recommending the sale of black businessmen into slavery if they failed to pay their debts. The legislators also went further by passing laws which inhibited free blacks' employment opportunities and limited their ability to travel.

Some of the most important restrictions passed against free blacks on the Eastern Shore were designed to limit their participation in the oystering business. In 1833 a bill was introduced into the state legislature to forbid owners of bay boats or ships to man them with all-black crews. The bill failed, perhaps because of petitions by influential white boat owners or free black oystermen.

In 1836 a bill was enacted that required any vessel big enough to require registration with the state government to be commanded by a white captain over 18 years old. If an owner did not comply with this law the boat could be seized and sold to pay costs, with half of the



Dredging, tonging or canning, blacks have been a major force in the bay seafood industry.

*CBMM Collection*



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*Some of the most important restrictions passed against free blacks on the Eastern Shore were designed to limit their participation in the oystering business...*

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money going to the informer who brought the offense to the court's attention. Blacks who participated in breaking this law ran the risk of being flogged.<sup>3</sup>

There were two stated reasons for the limitations on free blacks sailing or crewing large vessels. The preamble to the act of 1836 expressed the feelings of the legislators by stating that "great inconvenience and injury had resulted from the navigation of vessels entirely by Negroes, by which a clandestine trade was carried on and slaves had found facilities for running away."<sup>4</sup>

In spite of these restrictions there were exceptions—residents of Baltimore City and Anne Arundel County, for example, who along with selected white citizens were allowed to crew their vessels with slaves or hire free blacks exclusively. These exemptions were officially repealed in 1853, but many blacks who had been operating without whites continued to do so, while petitioning the government to change the laws. They worked at their own risk as very few of their petitions ever passed both the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates.<sup>5</sup>

Sailing and oystering still offered black men more freedom and profit than other trades. Free blacks had many laws passed against them that did not apply to sailors. In January 1807 Maryland enacted a policy forbidding free blacks or mulattoes from other states to move into Maryland; the only exceptions were sailors, teamsters, messengers, and freemen in the service of a white non-resident. A free black who stayed in Maryland for more than a two-week period ran the risk of paying a \$10 weekly fine, being sold into servitude to pay court costs, or in extreme

cases being flogged. Officers and policemen who did not vigorously enforce this law also risked receiving a \$10 fine. In addition, anyone employing an out-of-state free black could receive a \$5 daily fine. Many free blacks, in spite of these restrictions, migrated to Maryland to stay.<sup>6</sup>

After the 1831 slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in Virginia, restrictions on all blacks, including freemen and mulattoes, were toughened. Professions other than sailing and oystering were severely restricted and pursuing them could be dangerous. Blacks could not be licensed peddlers, and they were required to have licenses to sell any merchandise, such as wheat, corn, or tobacco; they were forbidden to sell alcoholic beverages in certain counties.<sup>7</sup>

On the eve of the 1860s free blacks could, within certain bounds, obtain a small amount of freedom and success. They could pursue certain professions, such as oystering, as long as they didn't show too many signs of financial independence, such as crewing a boat entirely with blacks. They could occasionally change the restrictive laws passed against them by the state government, and if they stayed within their own community, ignore laws that were not strictly enforced. However, as long as these restrictions existed, the free black community was limited in its chances for economic and cultural growth. It would take the abolition of slavery and the passing of certain laws following the Civil War before blacks could assert their true potential in the community.

St. Michaels' economy revived and began to prosper in the 1840s as a result of the rise of the seafood industry along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay and the Miles River. St. Michaels fishermen began using the bay's abundant supply of clams, fish, mussels, and most importantly oysters for food and profit. Though it was of only local importance at the time, oystering would soon become a major industry in Maryland and the United States.

Oystering was not a new profession. When the first European settlers arrived in North America they found oysters along the entire Atlantic coast. The oysters were most abundant in three areas: Chesapeake Bay, Cape Cod, and the Long Island Sound. Constant dredging had so depleted the supply in the latter two areas that by 1860 Maryland became the principal supplier to



the nation. Attempts were made as early as 1825 to resupply Northern beds with Chesapeake oysters, but the Northern industries never recovered their former stature. The 1900 *Manufacturers Census* states: "The public beds along the coasts of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware are so far depleted that the supply is very irregular and uncertain and the oyster found is very small."<sup>8</sup> Efforts to replenish Northern oyster beds continued well after the Civil War and encompassed a wide variety of techniques. As late as 1884 *The Report of the Oyster Commission of the State of Maryland* reported that 3,375,500 had been transplanted in 1880 alone.

Northern businessmen did not despair. Many relocated to Maryland and took advantage of the construction of the railroads. One of the businessmen who had the foresight to see the potential of the seafood business in Maryland during the 1860s was John Crisfield, president of the Eastern Shore railroad. He and his partners acquired rights to an area called Somers Cove in Somerset County and built a town which Crisfield named after himself. Seafood packing houses were built and migrant workers were welcomed as laborers and shuckers, and within

a few years after the Civil War Crisfield became an important center of the oystering industry and a major competitor of St. Michaels.<sup>9</sup>

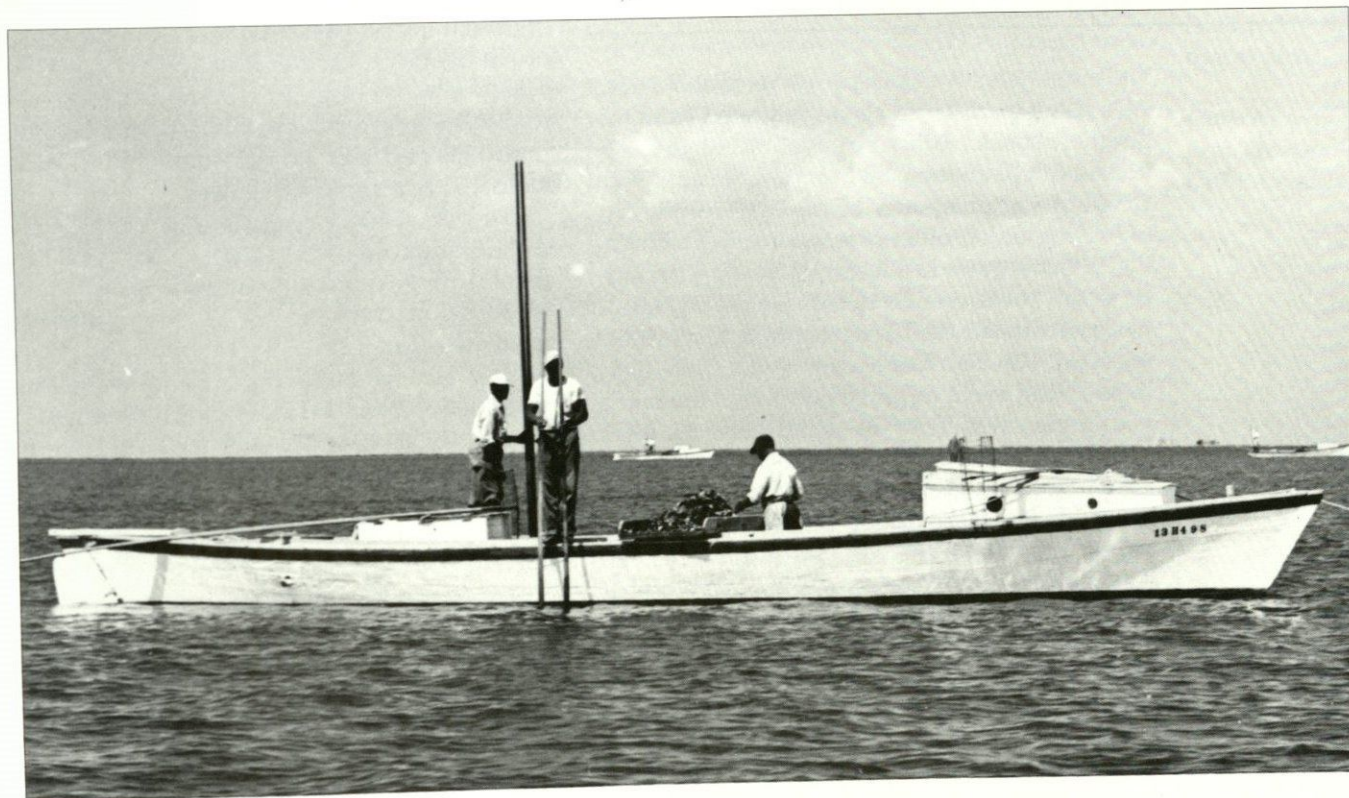
Maryland residents had become alarmed at the influx of workers and dredgers from out of state and had passed a variety of protectionist laws to safeguard the upper bay and reserve it for Maryland residents. None of these measures were systematically enforced until the end of the Civil War, when the seafood industry achieved its zenith on the Eastern Shore.

The growth of the seafood industry helped revive the St. Michaels shipbuilding industry and the town's fortunes likewise improved. Two men, E. W. Willey and Robert Lambdin, are given credit for pioneering this rebirth by constructing smaller, flat-bottomed bay boats used for the purpose of oystering, rather than the ocean-going traders of the previous generation.

The town's population had been growing. By 1840 there were 499 residents, which was only a small increase over 277 in 1805; but in the next 10 years the population doubled, to 858 in 1850. A significant number of the inhabitants of the town and district were of African-American descent.

**Oyster tongers at work, probably near Knapps Narrows.**

*Photo by  
Fred Thomas;  
CBMM Collection*





During the Civil War St. Michaels experienced a renaissance in both business and social life. There were several reasons for this rebirth. The first was the town's pro-Union stance during the Civil War. As many of the pro-Southern residents moved to Virginia to join the Confederate army the devastation that the war caused in other Southern towns did not happen in St. Michaels. Second, the economy no longer depended upon slave labor or the agricultural output of the surrounding district; it now depended upon the amount of oysters dredged from the Chesapeake Bay. During the Civil War St. Michaels was able to support three shipyards all specializing in Chesapeake Bay boats. Soon the local oystering and seafood industries would grow from regional into national significance.

With the end of the Civil War many of the repressive laws restricting the free movement

where the average man earned \$500 a year this was no small amount.<sup>10</sup>

The population of the town of St. Michaels grew continuously through the post-Civil War period to reach its 19th-century peak at 1,471 in 1880.<sup>11</sup> The majority of people in the town pursued careers in fields related to the oystering industry. The 1880 census lists a total of 234 different families or households in the town of St. Michaels, 185 of them white and 49 black. Roughly half of all the households in the town, 83 white and 24 black, reported at least one person associated with sailing, shucking, or oystering. Many had more than one person involved in the business. Neighborhoods in the town were divided into black and white, with the largest concentration of blacks living in the northwest section of town near Fremont and Talbot streets. There was, however, some mixing on certain streets.

The census does not present a complete picture, because it lists only St. Michaels residents and not migrant laborers or workers. The statistics measuring the number of bushels unloaded at the docks of St. Michaels' principal competitors such as Baltimore, Crisfield, Cambridge, Annapolis, Deal Island, Oxford, and Tilghman Island present a more complete picture of the town's status as an oystering center. Oystermen and migrant workers often moved from town to town depending on the working conditions and pay, so the number of bushels fluctuated in a similar manner.

The continued migration of out-of-state workers and competitors caused Maryland legislators to begin enforcing the protectionist laws passed before the war. The laws set aside protected areas in Eastern Bay to prevent overharvesting or "plundering" by out-of-state oystermen; oystermen had to apply for a license and register their boats with the local governments. The Cull Law was established, which levied a tax to pay for eight oyster inspectors for Maryland. A 10-cents per bushel oyster tax was levied to pay expenses.<sup>12</sup>

The oystering industry, though it grew rapidly at the end of the war, would have remained of only local importance without the development of food preserving and canning. The main reason for this was the swiftness with which oysters and other shellfish spoiled when exposed to the air. Businesses could pack them in

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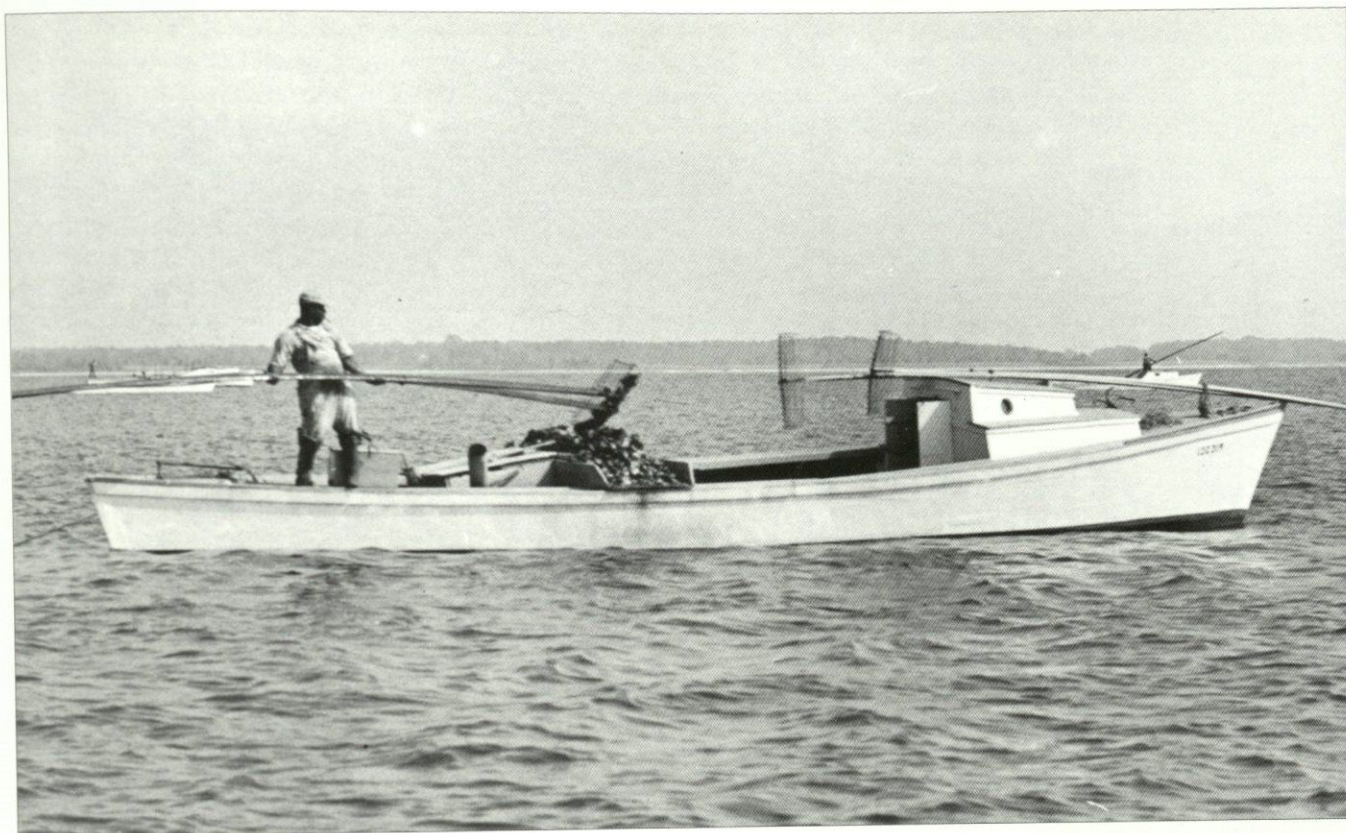
### *...Sailing and oystering still offered black men more freedom and profit than other trades.*

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and employment of black people were abolished. As a result many freed slaves migrated from the Southern states, mainly Virginia and North Carolina, or left plantations in Maryland to enjoy the freedom and prosperity of the oyster industry. Oystering, unlike other professions such as farming, which required a substantial amount of capital to buy tools, offered decent wages at a minimal cost to the worker. The only thing that oystering required was a knowledge of the trade, perhaps a boat, and a minimal number of tools; if a young man was lucky he could go work for a captain who already owned his own equipment.

Hunter Davidson, captain of the Oyster Police created after the Civil War, offered a contemporary estimate of the costs during the 1869-70 season. He figured the average cost of a vessel at \$800, with about \$1,100 in expenses; \$100 for wear and tear on the boat; \$700 for the crew; \$300 for food and fuel. He went on to note that an average captain of an oystering vessel, who caught 11,200 bushels, could at 35 cents each, earn \$3,920 annually, which was a profit of \$2,000. In a day





crates or barrels surrounded by ice, but this was a very inefficient method of preserving. The development of food-canning businesses solved this problem and added the final ingredient to the success of the seafood industry, which would eventually provide a significant number of jobs for large numbers of former slaves and freemen.

Tin, which was needed for canning foods, was initially used for coating steel and iron for roofing purposes. Prior to the Civil War it was imported from Great Britain to Philadelphia. In the late 1850s and during the Civil War American companies began manufacturing their own tin for use in dishes, packing, wash bins, and other household items.

The canning, tin, and food-packing industries all grew together and were fueled by the industrial revolution in Maryland. Machines built by Northern factories helped to improve shucking methods. Originally the shucker opened oysters by sticking a knife between the two shells and ripping them apart. Louis McMurray of Baltimore initiated the scalding of oysters in 1858 to make the shells come apart more easily. In 1860 steaming replaced this

method, and in 1862 Henry Evans developed a device in which oysters would be placed in an iron car and wheeled directly off the dock into a steamer and from there taken to workers who would shuck them, wash them, and place them in cans to be sealed and sterilized by heat. Used primarily in Baltimore, this method cost canneries an estimated 29 cents per can, compared to the average price of 55 cents elsewhere. In 1883 the process was again sped up by the introduction of machines to make the cans themselves. The final ingredient came when Baltimore received its first tin plants in 1892, providing in-state metal for local canneries.<sup>13</sup>

The oyster and canning industries in Maryland soon became the leading suppliers to the nation. In 1890 half of the reported establishments devoted to oyster packing were located in Maryland. By 1900 the number in Maryland had doubled; though Maryland no longer operated 50 percent of the national total, the number was still greater than that of any other state.

Maryland canneries diversified around the turn of the century and many of them began packing crabs, fruits, and vegetables, especially

**Another tongful  
is added to the  
day's catch.**

*Photo by  
Fred Thomas;  
CBMM Collection*





Oyster shells piled outside the Coulborne & Jewett plant, Navy Point, St. Michaels, circa 1950.

*CBMM Collection*

tomatoes. This diversification was especially convenient for Eastern Shore canneries as the oystering season was in winter, starting around October and ending in May, and the growing season for fruits and vegetables was in the summer months. This allowed establishments to work in both areas and to operate year-round.

In 1910 more than half the family breadwinners in St. Michaels were devoted to oystering or a related field such as shucking, packing, crab-picking, or shipbuilding. Blacks, who made up almost one-third of the town's population (1,022 whites and 495 blacks), were indispensable to the industry's success. Of the total 294 people who

were employed in an oystering-related field, 137 were black.

These figures initially do not appear large, but when children, housewives, retirees, and the unemployed are eliminated, the number of household breadwinners working in oystering becomes more impressive. Of the 387 households or families in the town (260 white, 127 black), 172 had a principal breadwinner or household head who earned a living in an oystering-related trade. The percentage of black involvement was higher than that of whites — 102 white households were dependent upon oystering, and 70 black households were.



The jobs in related fields differed between the two races according to tradition and training. Whites often were listed as carpenters, caulkers, captains, and canning-house managers, while blacks primarily were shuckers and crab pickers. But men of both races worked, often side by side, as oystermen or sailors on the bay. Though many black women worked in the industry as crab pickers and oyster shuckers, no white women are listed as working with them. In fact, there are no whites listed as either crab pickers or oyster shuckers, and no white women employed in an oyster-related field.

The main reasons for the prosperity of St. Michaels' oyster industry in 1910, especially for the black community, were the seafood packing plants that operated at the area called Navy Point — today the location of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. In 1900 there were two oyster-packing houses, owned by J. E. Watkins and George Caulk, a saw mill owned by Miers R. Richards, and the Dodson Supply Company, which at times packed oysters. The F. H. Burrows Oyster & Crab House also was established on the Long Wharf area across the harbor by the early 1900s.

The most important development for blacks in the oystering industry occurred in this period: A black-owned seafood company was formed, which after initial successes, grew into the largest business in town.

The business was started in 1902 by three black men named William H. T. Coulbourne, Frederick S. Jewett, and Charles Downs. Until this time the town's business life had always been controlled by white families such as the Hambletons, Dawsons, Harrisons, Haddaways, Harringtons, and Dodsons. Blacks had only been allowed to be servants or farm laborers, or workers at Harrison's tomato-canning house, or oystermen.

Coulbourne and Jewett, who came from farming families in Hopewell, near Crisfield, had worked as shuckers at John L. Blades' oyster house during the winter months in the late 19th century. According to Jewett's son, Frederick Jewett migrated to St. Michaels by boat for seven winters to work for Blades. In 1902 the three pioneers took out loans, pooled their money and purchased equipment to start an oystering company. Charles Downs sold his interest to Coulbourne and Jewett in 1903. At first only

black oystermen dealt with Coulbourne and Jewett, but as the business expanded white oystermen joined the Coulbourne and Jewett fleet.<sup>14</sup> The business became so successful that in 1908 the owners decided to expand.

They found M. R. Richards eager to sell his land. Richards, a native of Delaware, had owned a saw, grist and planing mill and a major section of Navy Point for some time, but by the 1900s he was in his sixties, and had settled in New York for retirement.

The property was purchased from Richards by Coulbourne and Jewett for "one dollar and other valuable consideration." The valuable consideration, according to the *Talbot Banner*, was that the company provide a local industry for St. Michaels.<sup>15</sup>

The company expanded with the growing demand throughout North America for the delicacy of shellfish, and a new factory was needed. In 1917 a new building was constructed on Navy Point. The company began purchasing one-pound snap cans from the Steel and Tin Products Company in Baltimore, and packed oysters during the winter and crabmeat in summer. These cans allowed easy opening for inspection and were convenient for shipping. The primary method of shipping used by Coulbourne and Jewett was the Baltimore, Chesapeake & Atlantic Railway; though they later shipped by truck or the Claiborne-Annapolis ferry as well; and they were the only packers at the time to ship oysters by the carload.<sup>16</sup>

The company continued to grow throughout the '20s and would soon become the largest single employer in St. Michaels history. In 1921 Coulbourne had accumulated enough wealth to purchase Jewett's share of the house originally owned by Miers Richards for \$600, and he moved in to observe the management of the packing factory more closely.<sup>17</sup> That same year the company proved strong enough to survive a major crisis, when after a complaint by Edward M. Plitt the Chicago Health Department declared 21 carloads of oysters, each containing 1,800 gallons, unfit for public consumption. With the support of the local Citizens Bank, which had along with the rest of the town become financially dependent upon Coulbourne and Jewett, the company fought, won, and survived a three-year legal battle to settle the matter.

The company survived the Great Depres-



## Black flight from Talbot County, 1890-1930

Year	White population	Black population	Percentage W/B
1890	12,248	7,488	62.1/37.9
1900	12,875	7,467	63.3/36.7
1910	12,841	6,774	65.4/34.6
1920	12,138	6,168	66.3/33.7
1930	12,627	5,956	67.9/32.1

Source: *A Statistical Analysis of the Population of Maryland*.  
(Maryland Development Bureau of the Baltimore Association of Commerce. Baltimore: 1931.)

sion of the 1930s admirably. Between 1935 and 1940 they packed roughly a million pounds of crab meat per year; and though oysters were becoming scarce in the bay, the commodity's value rose and offset any major loss. In the 1940s both Coulbourne and Jewett retired comfortably and left a thriving business to Elwood Jewett.<sup>18</sup>

When Elwood inherited the business it was the largest black-owned packing house in the state, with an average of 100 employees per year (more than any crab packer before World War II), a warehouse in Philadelphia, and business contacts as far away as the Midwest and Canada. By this time, however, the primacy of Maryland's seafood industry was in jeopardy. As early as 1934, although ice clogged Eastern Bay for a good part of the oystering season, the number of oysters was on the decline.

There were several reasons for the decline of the seafood industry in St. Michaels and the Chesapeake Bay. First, the oyster beds had been over-dredged. The state's conservation law of 1865, enacted and enforced to prevent dredging by powerboats, was not enough to prevent the destruction of Maryland's oysters.<sup>19</sup> Oyster piracy and pollution took their toll. Many seafood-industry participants, especially black oystermen,

left the Eastern Shore for the better opportunities in the large industrial cities.

In many ways the social and economic structure of Talbot County society had not changed since the Civil War. White aristocrats, who owned most of the land before the war, continued to do so afterwards. Networking or cooperation among black businessmen could spark retaliation. Frederick Douglass' son Lewis, who visited St. Michaels in 1865, during a short-lived attempt to set up a school for blacks in Ferry Neck, attended a meeting of black businessmen that was violently dispersed by a white mob. Douglass wrote his father that St. Michaels was "one of the worst places in the South" for race relations.<sup>20</sup>

The growth of the black community was often hampered by racism and fear of competition. There was an unwritten law in the county that whites should not sell their farmland to blacks. Frederick Douglass' son also wrote in 1865 that "The white people will do everything they can to keep blacks from buying land. Large tracts of woods that the whites will neither use nor sell to the blacks lie idle and wasting.... The whites think to control the labor by not selling the land to blacks. The highest price paid a farm hand here is fifteen dollars a month. A large



number of men make from 18 to 20 dollars a week oystering. They have surplus money and can't use it to any advantage around here; and they do not want to move away."<sup>21</sup>

Social stagnation, when combined with education-related problems such as a short semester, the unacceptable physical condition of the classrooms, second-hand books, and inferior funding, would eventually cause blacks to leave the Eastern Shore and the oyster industry to seek better opportunity and a more liberal atmosphere.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps if whites on the Eastern Shore had offered more opportunity to the black community in the areas of business or education the community as a whole would have benefited. Many of those who left could have used their talents and money to develop new local businesses after the oyster beds were exhausted in the Chesapeake. Today there are no major businesses in the town making products for export to the rest of the country, and the seafood industry, which is represented by a few small oystering boats and restaurants, is a mere shadow of its former self. The two major industries, real estate and tourism, concentrate on out-of-towners, and still, most of the successful inhabitants tend to move away in the pursuit of careers they can't develop at home.

1 Charles B. Clark, *The Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1950), p. 961.

2 Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985), p. 13.

3 Jeffrey R. Brackett, *The Negro in Maryland: A Study of the Institution of Slavery* (New York: The Negro University Press, 1969), pp. 206-208.

4 Ibid, p. 207.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid, p. 176.

7 Ibid, pp. 206-211. Somerset, Worcester, and Anne Arundel are the counties referred to in the text.

8 *Census Reports, Volume IX, Twelfth Census of the United States, Part III, Special Reports on Selected Industries* (Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1902), p. 512.

9 John R. Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay* (Centreville, Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1981), pp. 16-17.

10 Ibid, pp. 38-39.

11 Clark, pp. 985-986.

12 *Oyster Packers Reports 1885-1886* (Maryland State Archives, no. 7807-56, 1885-1886).

13 *Census Reports*, p. 512 for steaming methods, p. 117 for tin industry.

14 "Jewett Recalls With Pride Years as St. Michaels Businessman," *The Talbot Banner*, 14 September 1973.

15 *Talbot County Land Records* (no. 150, folio 483, 8 January 1908).

16 "Jewett Recalls With Pride Years as St. Michaels Businessman," *The Talbot Banner*.

17 *Talbot County Land Records* (no. 190, folio 368, 28 September 1921).

18 "Jewett Recalls With Pride Years as St. Michaels Businessman," *The Talbot Banner*.

19 "The Skipjacks of the Chesapeake Bay," *Travel* (October 1975), pp. 30-33.

20 Dickson J. Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 164-165.

21 Ibid, pp. 247-248.

22 *Annual Report of the State Board of Education, 1905-6* (Baltimore: The Sun Job Printing Office, 1906) pp. 342-345. In the early 1900s Talbot colored schools were open an average of 7.5 months per year, whereas white schools were open an average of 10 months per year. Most colored schools were only open three terms as compared to the usual four of white schools.

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For further reading, see "Black Pioneers of Seafood Packing" by Richard S. Dodds, in *The Weather Gauge*, Volume XXII, Number 1.