

COMMENTARY

Virginia's historic Black watermen communities are endangered

Remnants remain of the once-thriving culture of Black water workers of the Chesapeake Bay, as state agencies and descendants honor their history and communities

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MAY 22, 2023 12:07 AM



Retired waterman James Douglas spent over 30 years harvesting oysters, catching crabs and fishing near his home in Sandy Point, Virginia. (Samantha Willis/Virginia Mercury)

Most days, James Douglas would be on the water by 5:30 in the morning, on the hunt for oysters. He'd push off in his small boat from his family's wharf on the Yeocomico River in Westmoreland County, the birthplace of the nation's first president, George Washington, and, since 1824, of Douglas' family, the Wilsons.

Douglas' family has owned their waterfront property in Virginia's Northern Neck since 1877. This is an astounding feat, considering few Black people were able to purchase land back then, and those that did were sometimes bullied by whites to give up their property or sell it for a pittance.

"Mitchell Wilson number one, he got a white fellow to buy it for him, and he split it up between all of his children and descendants," said Douglas, sweeping his hand toward a ring of homes perched near the riverbank. "Those descendants, my family, are still here now."

Douglas is one of Virginia's last living Black watermen, a culture and profession that was the backbone of the Chesapeake Bay's seafood industry as early as colonial times. These African American men, some enslaved, some free, fished for menhaden, dug for clams, harvested oysters and caught crabs that they sold to white-owned processing facilities, which sold and shipped the brackish water delicacies to restaurants and homes in Maryland, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York and beyond.

But this tradition has over the past few decades been disappearing. The Black watermen culture is fading, Douglas said, largely due to the seafood industry itself shrinking and watermen leaving their small-town birthplaces seeking better economic opportunities in cities like Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Richmond. In early May, Preservation Virginia named "African American Watermen Sites of the Chesapeake Bay" one of the state's most endangered historic spaces.



A crew of Black fishermen haul in a catch of menhaden near Reedville, Va. (Commonwealth Preservation Group)

"The renowned seafood industry of the Chesapeake Bay would not have been possible without the contributions of generations of African Americans," the Virginia Department of Historic Resources wrote in its announcement of the agency's African American Watermen Project in 2021. That effort to survey, study and preserve sites of significance to Black watermen culture spans three states - Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania - under the purview of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, National Park Service Chesapeake Bay and Chesapeake Conservation Partnership. Norfolk-based Commonwealth Preservation Group is leading the Virginia arm of the project and has identified about 80 sites where Black watermen lived, worked and contributed to the cultural fabric of the commonwealth.

"Women were predominantly in the crab picking and oyster shucking houses, while men were on the water," said Kayla Halberg, manager of the project, who co-authored its Multiple Property Documentation form that her group submitted to the National Park Service for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Black women crab pickers at work inside Samuel Coston's Crab Factory, circa 1900. (courtesy Commonwealth Preservation Group)

"These are real people and real communities; we [were able] to go out to their homes and see where they live and talk to them," Halberg said. "What we want to preserve about these communities is their culture - the songs, the tools, the expertise, the lifestyle of the watermen communities. It was a thriving, rich culture that is unfortunately fading away; that's why it's essential to preserve what remains."

Douglas' wife Daisy, a gifted storyteller and retired educator who used to drive an hour and a half each way each day to teach in Richmond City Public Schools, recalled the dangers and the joys of her husband's long career.

"James and those watermen before him, they were extremely strong, with powerful legs that they stood up on all day in the boats while they were hunting oysters. A lot of them ended up on disability because their arms gave out, after they spent years lifting those heavy tongs in and out of the water all day, catching up oysters. Some of them drowned; sometimes they would get lost in a storm. You remember the snowstorm, Jim?" she asked her husband, before describing the time he had come home with a "completely frozen" beard and eyelashes after braving a surprise bout of wintry weather. He didn't leave the water when other oystermen did, he recalled with a sheepish grin, because he had a strong feeling that he was about to find a big oyster bed; he was right.

In the living room of their Sandy Point, Va., home, James and Daisy Douglas recall James' 50-year career as an oysterman, fisherman and crabber. May 17, 2023. (Samantha Willis/Virginia Mercury)

"It was not an easy profession at all, but they took great pride in it, great pride, because they had a certain level of independence working on the water," Daisy continued.

Daisy Douglas holds a photo of oystermen, including Captain Billy Smith and Douglas' husband James Douglas, tonging in the Nominin River. (Samantha Willis/Virginia Mercury)

It is heartening to see the significance of African American water workers recognized. Not only did these people embody Black self-determination, collaboration and entrepreneurship, even when some of them were in bondage, but the Chesapeake Bay's maritime and seafood industries could not have developed or been sustained without these skilled tradesmen and women.

These are the stories that Virginia schoolchildren and citizens should learn. Some might label them "divisive concepts," but actually, they are factual accounts of local African American workers who worked tirelessly to overcome systemic, structural racism that plagued every facet of their lives for the better part of the state's existence. The Black history of these communities is Virginia history and American history that might be lost to time if not for efforts like Halberg's project and the Douglasses' determination to keep their stories alive.

"It was good while it lasted, but it's just about over with now," James Douglas said, looking out over the river to Northumberland County on the other shore. He has lived the entirety of his 85 years here; the water is in his blood, he said. "It's up to us now to tell people about it, to teach it to young people, to keep it going."



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Author bio for Samantha Willis, a 15-year digital, print and broadcast media veteran, is the Virginia Mercury's Editor-in-Chief. Includes social media icons and 'MORE FROM AUTHOR' link.

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