

Black watermen were backbone of oystering

[Second in Series of 4] Compiled by the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum staff. Reprinted in part from the museum's journal, *The Weather Gauge*, Spring 1994.]

Making a living in the Chesapeake region has been anything but easy for black Americans.

Hampered by legislated racial restrictions until the late 1800s, they were forbidden from pursuing most lines of work, but one that was open to them was oystering. And given that chance, they would form the backbone of what was to become a nationally influential market.

In 1712, Talbot County had only 492 African slaves, but less than 90 years later the number increased to nearly 5,000. Having reached its peak, slavery began to decline gradually on large Eastern Shore plantations long depleted by crop after crop of labor intensive tobacco farming. Owning slaves became an economic liability.

Unsure of what to do with their servants and field hands, many Eastern Shore whites either freed their slaves in their wills or required them to purchase their freedom. As early as 1790, 1,076 free blacks resided in Talbot County, more than anywhere else in Maryland including Baltimore City.

But the creation of a large free black community did not ameliorate the continuing problem of race relations on the Eastern Shore. From 1800 to the Civil War, white legislators in Maryland continued to pass restrictive laws against free blacks, excluding them from public schools and military combat roles as well as forbidding them 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. Legislators went even further by passing laws which limited free blacks' employment opportunities and their ability to travel.

But 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 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 money going to the informer who brought the offense to the court's attention. Blacks who conspired in breaking this law ran the risk of being flogged.

There were two reasons for the limitations. The preamble to the act of 1836 expressed the feelings of the legislators. "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," a portion read.

Still, sailing and oystering offered black men more freedom and profit than most other trades. Free blacks had many laws passed against them that did not apply to other sailors. In January 1807, Maryland enacted a policy forbidding free blacks or mulattos (first generation offspring of a Negro and a white) from other states to move into Maryland. The only exceptions were sailors, teamsters, messengers and freemen in the service of a white non-resident.

After the 183, slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in Virginia, restrictions on all blacks, including freemen and mulattos, were toughened. Professions other than sailing and oystering were severely restricted and pursuing them could be dangerous. Blacks were prohibited from becoming licensed peddlers and licenses were required to sell any merchandise. But they were permitted a small amount of freedom and success on the water oystering, as long as they didn't show too many signs of financial independence such as crewing a boat entirely with blacks.

Oystering was not a new profession, but it did play a large part in helping to revive St. Michaels' lagging economy in the 1840s. In

fact, by 1860, with northern beds depleted, Maryland became the principal supplier of oysters to the nation.

With the end of the Civil War, many of the repressive laws restricting the free movement and employment of black people were abolished. As a result, many freed slaves migrated from the southern states to enjoy the freedom and prosperity of the oyster industry.

Unlike other professions such as farming, oystering offered decent wages at a minimal cost to the worker, requiring little more than a knowledge of the trade, perhaps a boat, and some tools. If a young man was lucky, he could go work for a captain who already owned his own equipment and begin making a living. And that is exactly what many blacks did.

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, were indispensable to the industry's success. Of the 294 people employed in an oystering-related field, 137 were black.

Over time, however, oyster beds were overharvested, diseases decimated the bivalve, and the seafood industry began to slowly decline in St. Michaels and the rest of the Chesapeake Bay. With it went economic prosperity and independence for many in the seafood industry. As a result, black oystermen especially left the Eastern Shore for better opportunities in the large industrial cities.

To learn more about the lives of black watermen, visit the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Admission for school children is free throughout the month of February, and the museum is open Friday through Sunday and President's Day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Also, you won't want to miss Instructor Patrick May of Coppin State University, Friday, Feb. 28 at 10:30 a.m. in the Museum's Van Lennep Auditorium when he lectures on, "Neither Slave Nor Free — Pre-Civil War Blacks in Baltimore." For additional information, call 410-745-2916.

Trivia Question

Kids, how's your knowledge of African-American history? If you think you know the answer to the following trivia question, send your name, address, and telephone number along with the answer to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Trivia ?, P.O. Box 636, St. Michaels, Md. 21663. A different question will appear each week. From all of the correct responses we will choose one lucky winner to receive a family membership to the museum along with a copy of *Many Thousand Gone: African-Americans from Slavery to Freedom*.

Question: Who was the first African-American honored on a U.S. postage stamp?



Photo courtesy CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM

A black waterman dredges for oysters. After the Civil War, black watermen formed the backbone of what was to become a nationally influential market.