

MARYLAND'S RIGHT, TIGHT ISLE S M I T H

One seldom, if ever, in this age of progress would attribute credit to such a commonplace commodity as salt, being the reason for charting a region. Such is true of Smith Island, Maryland.

Smith Island, just about eight (8) miles west of the port of Crisfield, is surrounded by three large bodies of water, namely: the Chesapeake Bay on the west, Kedges Straits on the north and the Tangier Sound on the east.

The story of Smith Island is related greatly to the explorations of the Chesapeake Bay by Capt. John Smith and the actual colonization of the State of Maryland.

In the year 1608 Capt. Smith, one of England's most daring explorers faced a shortage of salt for the colony of Jamestown, Virginia. In the spring of 1608 Capt. Smith readied a small pinnace, manned it with his mapmaker, also Dr. Walter Russell and an adequate crew and decided to explore both sides of the Chesapeake. Smith's hopes were high and he felt certain some region along the Bay would yield salt.

He met several Indians but no tribe could contribute either quantities of salt or give directions to a salt lick location.

The vast island chains intrigued Capt. Smith, especially those along the east coast of the Bay. The Indians said the name Chesapeake meant the "Sea of fishes". These isles later became commercially important to the first permanent colony of Virginia.

Capt. Smith's mapmaker was instructed to name the entire group of islands the "Russell Islands" in honor of the doctor who had accompanied him on several of his expeditions.

Smith's log has this description of the Chesapeake Isles, "These isles which are many in number, but are naught for habitation, falling with high land upon the "main". We found great ponds of fresh water. These low broken isles of woods and marshes are a "myle" or two in "bredth" and ten in length are good for hay in summer and to get fish and "foule" in any season. Two days, because of high winds, we were forced to inhabit the lower reaches of these isles. We

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In less than a day's trip they touched a new shore. An excellent harbor invited them to cast anchor. This area seemed to be within a few sailing hours of other shores. This position encouraged the small group to land and explore the new region.

For days the men covered the new land and found it to be an island about ten by eight miles in size. They were pleased to find the terrain was overgrown by the stately loblolly pine, the willow oak, sweet gums and sassafras. The name Woodlands was given to their new homesite. The soil was light and kind and greatly influenced the settlers that their colony was well chosen.

One might say Smith Island is an old society. It was settled nine years before its parent region of Somerset was named.

This small band of settlers were of English, Cornish and Dutch descent. Their names in 1657 were and still are: Tyler, Bradshaw and Evans chiefly. They were people of character. It took the strongest of men and women to start Maryland's Right, Tight Isle and encourage the growth of three distinct communities as of today. To undertake the idea of a second home must have been of great significance to them. This significance is evident in the way Smith Islanders love their homeland today. To live among them is the only way to appreciate their attitudes toward their island.

The early development of Maryland with all of its problems has never passed over this community lightly. They endured hardships beyond description that faced them during all of our wars. Often ships sought harbor and the atrocities of the warriors were known to those early settlers. Houses were sacked, animals butchered and most of their food supplies carried aboard ship.

There is the grave of an unknown English sailor buried on the grounds of Pitchcroft. These hardships left the little group with the knowledge that they must always lend a hand whenever a neighbor needed one. No greater brotherhood can be found today anywhere in Maryland.

Over a period of a quarter of a century most of the first settlers were forced to find new homesites just across Levin's creek. The Chesapeake Bay's rough waters ravaged their first settlement. The first homesites are easily picked out today by the shrubbery that still grows around them.

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The influence of these ardent itinerants persuaded not only the people on Smith Island but greatly moved Joshua Thomas and he became a staunch believer in the philosophy of the New Society. For years he visited Smith Island as a regular exhorter. He was always on hand during the annual Bush Meeting. One just must read Adam Wallace's "The Parson of the Islands" to appreciate the Parson's influence on these vanishing islands of the Chesapeake Bay.

He proved to the people that the simple new faith was an answer to their religious life. You may not know that this New Society became the Methodist Religion.

The life on Smith Island is modern in many respects. Today each community has electricity, telephones and the best natural water supply east of the Appalachian Mountains. The water supply comes from the Garrett County water table. Several times a year the supply is tested. It has the minimal flourine and chlorine content.

The principal occupation is the catching of the Chesapeake Bay blue crab. Each year it proves to be the lucrative business of the island. The people were the first seafood dealers in Maryland to set up a cooperative type of seafood business. Many crab shanties are to be seen bordering the shoreline. Each business is equipped with electricity, therefore, deep-freezers are used to preserve the catch assuring fresh food to the seafood markets.

The islands form a unique area. The visitor is intriqued when he realizes that a group of 650 citizens are able to live with such apparent ease and freedom from stress.

This group of Isles (The Right Tight Isles of Maryland) is unique. Comparing life in general on these isles to living generally today you will find it to be one of the rare and favored spots where the environment and the people seem to have come to that perfect balance. The "Bay of Fishes" provide an excellent living for the ambitions. Sure they work hard, a traditional life handed down from the early settlers. Who could ask more?

A visitor often looks around and asks how the time is passed away. This small group carry on many civic organizations other than the work of the church. Tylerton, the island anchored off, in addition has a busy community center, where the entire island has the privilege to enjoy the sport of roller skating.

Smith Island contributes its bit to the nation toward somewhere to go and see something different. Each year a camp meeting, a form of modern Bush Meeting is held on the Wilson and Butler campground. This old meeting site is steeped in early Methodist development. Many purveyors of the Methodist religion came to carry on the services more than a hundred years ago.

Smith Island holds a camp meeting each year. The pulpit is filled by outstanding evangelists. The musicians, accompanied by an able choir are very entertaining. Smith Island without a camp meeting may be likened to a "ship without a rudder". The old custom is so deeply rooted in their way of living. They feel that it affords not only a revival to their spiritual living but the renewal of old friendships which keep them in touch with the "main".

Access to Smith Island may be had by three ferry boats which ply between the island and the port of Crisfield. You will enjoy the little over an hour's ride on the Miss Whitelock, the Island Belle and the Island Star. These boats usually leave the Port of Crisfield around noon six days a week. The Island Star is a convenient tourist boat and may be had by appointment.

To all of the many tourists annually, they find nowhere along the Chesapeake a group of people living such a polished, simple life. There are no pangs of hunger or a dread of the intrusion of the criminal. They find courteous, friendly folk, where social life is adequate and the existing fellowship is of the warmest.

We might say: "There is but one view - they grasp the mighty whole and commune unmolested with the home of the soul".

