



The Linden Times

A bi-weekly newsletter for the members & friends of the Calvert County Historical Society – August 1, 2020



1,000 year old oyster midden - Chesapeake, MD

The earliest evidence of oyster harvesting in the Chesapeake region were shell deposits called middens: refuse heaps. Oyster, also known as “shell”, middens are some of the oldest and largest piles of intact garbage dating from after the late ice age offering a glimpse into day-to-day diets and human life over time. Ancient deposits of discarded shells like these throughout the Maryland shorelines indicate that Native Americans consumed vast quantities of oysters and other shellfish as early as 2,500 B.C.

The name “Chesapeake” is derived from the Algonquin word "Chesipiok," meaning "Great Shellfish Bay". One of the primary species of shellfish in the Chesapeake Bay is *Crassostrea Virginica*, commonly called Eastern Atlantic or Virginia oysters. The *Crassostrea* is not a pearl-producing oyster, (but when shucking them you may come across a small crab or a mussel inside a fresh oyster). The *Crassostrea* are native not only to the bay but up and down the Eastern Seaboard and in the Gulf of Mexico. Oysters grow faster in warmer water. The Chesapeake Bay oysters are typically larger than those from northern climates — but smaller than oysters from the South.



Early colonial settlers frequently remark on the size and quantity of oysters in the Chesapeake Bay. In 1607 English explorer Captain John Smith sees the Bay and pronounces it good. He said, “Oysters were everywhere. They were a hazard to ships”

In the mid-1600’s colonizing humans begin to take their toll. Oysters were likely harvested using boats, rakes and by wading into shallow water to simply gather them. Around 1700, oyster harvesters began using tongs to retrieve oysters from the water and New England fishermen brought dredging equipment to rapidly harvest oysters from the bay. And in 1820, Maryland banned the use of dredging equipment.

In 1830 Maryland passed legislation allowing only Maryland residents to harvest oysters in local waters. One of the first recorded oyster harvest estimates that 700,000 bushels were harvested in Maryland in 1839, this number doubled over the next two decades. Then oyster production peaked. Estimates range from 14 million to 20 million bushels harvested from the bay each year. Thereafter, the "Oyster Wars" begin [cont. on page 2](#)

cont. from page 1

with "oyster pirates" and legal watermen in Maryland and Virginia fighting over harvesting rights in the Chesapeake Bay. These disputes would not end until the mid-20th century.

Harvests begin to decline in 1800's as oysters are overfished and the shells were not returned to the water to create new attachment sites. In 1950's new diseases emerged in the Chesapeake, further damaging the oyster population. The oyster population dropped again during the 1980's and 1990's due to the bay's polluted, and low-oxygen "dead zones" were identified.



A waterman hand tongs oysters - Calvert Marine Museum

Turning the Tide



1993: The Oyster Roundtable — a group of organizations, institutions, elected officials, businesses and individuals in Maryland — is convened to address concerns about the state's oyster population. The result is an action plan and formation of the Oyster Recovery Partnership.

1999: A combination of drought and disease starting in 1999 leads to another drastic downturn in Maryland's oyster population.

2009: Oyster farming on leased bottom water is legalized in Maryland.

2010: Maryland passes the Oyster Restoration and Aquaculture Development Plan, designating 24 percent of the oyster habitat in the bay as off-limits for harvesting.

2020: From the **Chesapeake Bay Foundation**, December 16, 2019 - The Bay's oyster population is just a fraction of its historic levels. Since colonial times, the Chesapeake has lost more than 98 percent of its oysters. Gone are the days when oyster reefs posed navigational hazards to Chesapeake Bay explorers or watermen pulled 17 million bushels of oysters each year. The first comprehensive assessment of oyster stocks in Maryland waters showed the adult oyster population dropped by half between 1999 and 2018, from 600 million to 300 million. But CBF, along with our coalition of partners in the Chesapeake Oyster Alliance, is working hard to stem their loss and rebuild the extensive reef systems that once stretched throughout the estuary's tidal waters. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation has set an ambitious goal to add 10 billion oysters to the Bay by the end of 2025. And the only way that we'll get to 10 billion is if our federal, state, and local partners have the resources they need to build reefs and plant oysters.

"And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a manner the shapes of all things as they must live together like one being" — *Black Elk, Black Elk Speaks*