SNAPPING TURTLE TRAPPING ON
THE PATUXENT RIVER

By Richard J. Dolesh

A curious and mostly forgotten commercial fishery of the upper tidal Patuxent River was the annual early summer trapping of snapping turtles. For many decades until the mid-twentieth century, commercial watermen and pastimers set turtle pots and individual stakes with baited fishing hooks along the edges of brackish and freshwater marshes to catch snapping turtles for local sale and shipment to urban markets. In general, the snapping turtles were not widespread nor did many watermen want to go to the trouble to set pots and stakes, but for those who did, there was a fair amount of profit, and what many describe as "mighty good eating" for their effort.

The snapping turtle (Chelydra serpentina) is a living link to the age of dinosaurs. To see a big female slowly trundling across the road near a swamp looking for a suitable place to bury her leather-like eggs is to witness a ritual that is literally millions of years old. It does not stretch the imagination too much to envision a similar snapping turtle among the giant ferns, ancient conifers, and fin-backed reptiles of the late Paleozoic Age. Those same characteristics that served the snapping turtle well then — armor, adaptability, and perfect harmony with the environment — still serve the species well today.

Snapping turtles can grow to very large sizes in certain environments, but on the Patuxent they generally grow no more than twenty-four inches long and weigh no more than thirty-five pounds. The female, which is larger than the male, leaves the water in the late spring to find an upland location to lay up to thirty eggs fairly deep under the soil. The young turtles hatch in about ninety days or actually winter-over within the eggshell until the following spring.

The snapper is a voracious eater and very adaptable to local conditions. Vegetable matter is the primary food source, but the snapper will eat just about anything available, including carrion. Unfortunately, the snapping turtle is also a serious predator of wild ducklings and some of our most valuable game fish. Snappers can be very destructive of important wildlife species.

Snapping turtles are infamous for their vicious bite. Even though they are generally sluggish, they have a long, limber neck and enormously powerful muscles which enable them to strike with incredible speed. The only safe way to pick one up, incidentally, is to grab it by the tail and lift it completely off the ground. To try to grab it any other way is to invite a severe bite. Nearly every waterman who trapped snapping turtles has a story about the nasty disposition of the snapper. Clyde Watson, a lifelong Patuxent River waterman who lives near Magruder's Ferry in Prince George's County, tells of one experience:

I was turtling with my dad one time and I was in the front of the skiff and he was in the back. As we got to the stakes, he would pull them up if they had a turtle and drop them in the boat. My foot was under the seat and when my dad threw a turtle in the boat he bit me before I could move. You know, my foot was as tough as leather then, but he took a bite out of my heel as if it were a spoon of ice cream.

Mr. Watson related the story of another turtle bite, but one with a more humorous result:

I was muskrat trapping at the end of the season one year and I caught a snapping turtle in a deep lead. I guess they travel through them and he got caught in my trap. I got him out of the trap and as I was carrying him through the marsh he caught ahold of my boot and wouldn't let go. I did everything I could to get him off, but I couldn't, and I had to walk all the way out of the marsh and come home with that damn turtle on my boot. When I got home it was just my luck that my friend drove up. He saw my predicament and ran and got his camera. That darned fool wouldn't help me till I posed for a picture.

Lester Rackey of District Heights, who fished from Nottingham, told of the Becks from Rock Hall who potted turtles near Nottingham.

(Continued on Page 6)
FOSSIL FACTS
By Sandy Roberts

Children viewing the fossil collection at the Calvert Marine Museum frequently ask “Where are the shark bones?” The answer is easy. A shark has no “bones,” its skeleton being entirely cartilaginous. The skeleton contains, in varying amounts, a complex mixture of calcium phosphates and carbonates called “apatite.” Apatite gives the flexible cartilage, particularly the vertebrae, the appearance and strength of bone. When a Miocene shark died, those parts of its abbreviated skeleton that contained only small amounts of apatite rapidly decomposed. Vertebrae, with their heavy concentration of the mineral, frequently survived long enough to fossilize.

A fossilized vertebra consists of a hardened disc or centrum. The ends are concave, and the sides contain four large cavities — two located on the top and two on the bottom of the centrum. These cavities once contained soft, cartilaginous processes or appendages. Centra from the tail of the shark, where flexibility was needed for swimming, are relatively narrow, their sides being roughly half that of the diameter. Anterior centra are thicker, with sides being nearly equal to the diameter of the centrum. With a few exceptions, shark vertebrae are classified as being either lamnoid or scyliorhinoid in form. The primitive lamnoid centra are characterized as having paired dorsal and ventral cavities, plus numerous long, narrow slots ringing the sides of the centrum. These openings once held thin slivers of cartilage. The more highly developed scyliorhinoid vertebrae, while similar to the lamnoid, differ in having only the paired dorsal and ventral cavities.

At Calvert Cliffs, while the comparatively fragile lamnoid centra of sand, nurse, thresher, mackerel, mako, white, and whale sharks are relatively rare finds, the more sturdily built scyliorhinoid vertebrae of the snaggletooth, requiem, tiger, lemon, and hammerhead sharks are a fairly common occurrence.

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THE “18TH CENTURY TIDEWATER FAIRE” RETURNS TO CMM

On Saturday, September 23, the Calvert County Bicentennial Commission will present its second “18th Century Tidewater Faire” at the museum, with the focus this year on “The Presidency,” in recognition of the swearing in on April 30, 1789, of George Washington as the first president of the nation under the new constitution. Last year’s “Faire,” a great success that attracted many county residents and visitors, included a second visit of the Maryland Federalist, the miniature boat that was described in the spring 1988 issue of the Bugeye Times. Activities will begin at 10:00 a.m. and will continue throughout the day. Admission will be $2.00 for adults and $1.00 for students up to grade 12, including access to the museum and the Drum Point Lighthouse. There will also be food for sale, as well as goods offered by the Calvert Artists Guild and “colonial” craftsmen. (The Wm. B. Tennison will make its regular trip at 2:00 p.m., weather permitting, with its normal charge.)

As part of the continuing celebration of the 200th anniversary of the adoption of the United States Constitution, the local Bicentennial Commission is encouraging citizens to put themselves in the place of citizens of the eighteenth century by adopting for the day the dress and manners of the period. Two workshops were held in the county this spring to demonstrate the steps necessary to develop a colonial “character,” including appropriate language, clothing, and gestures. Many people participating in the Faire will therefore appear in eighteenth century costume, but such costumes are encouraged whether or not the workshops were attended.

In addition to another visit from the Maryland Federalist, those attending will meet “General George Washington” and Mistress Kathleen Baker, singer and actress from Alexandria. Other events will include the Williamsburg Heritage Dancers, Old Dominion Dancers, South River Sutlers, a colonial magician, appropriate children’s games, a puppet theater, and a Piscataway-Conoy tribal group. This interesting and enjoyable day will appeal to all ages.
SENATOR BARBARA MIKULSKI VISITS CMM

On April 26, United States Senator Barbara A. Mikulski visited Solomons and the museum at the request of State Senator C. Bernard Fowler and the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland. The purpose of the visit was for Senator Mikulski to view at first hand some of the conditions in the Patuxent River and then to announce in a press conference the introduction of Resolution 109 on April 19, 1989, in the United States Senate to designate the Patuxent a national demonstration site for water quality management.

On arriving at the museum, Senator Mikulski boarded the Wm. B. Tennison for a brief trip up the Patuxent, during which she received a report from the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory's scientist Walter Boynton. The press conference which followed was held in front of the new exhibition building and provided an opportunity for remarks by Senators Mikulski and Fowler and for questions from members of the press. Senator Mikulski ended her visit by a brief tour of the new building.

WORK OF FOLK ARTIST EXHIBITED

The Changing Exhibit area of the new museum building this summer will feature a number of the brightly colored works of folk artist Earl Cunningham, chiefly shorescapes and riverscapes. Mr. Cunningham (1893-1977), a native of Edgecomb, Maine, was a shy, recluse Easterner who supported himself as a seaman, chicken farmer, and junk dealer. In 1949 he settled in St. Augustine, Florida, and opened an antique shop. His work was discovered there by Floridians Marilyn and Michael Mennello who later collected more than 350 of his works, from which the present exhibit has been developed.

Cunningham's work remains at the forefront of the "historical-fantasy" evolution of twentieth century American folk art, and he is now appreciated for his remarkably colorful palette. His favorite images include early twentieth century schooners and evocative portrayals of Seminole Indian life which he infused with the ingratiating and adventuresome pictorialization of Viking ships.

NEW MUSEUM BUILDING DEDICATED ON MAY 18

After a very wet first half of May, the sun shown brightly on May 18, thus blessing the dedication of the museum's new exhibition building with superb weather. Between three and four hundred county and state officials, museum members and supporters, architect and contractor representatives, and the public were on hand for the mid-afternoon event in front of the new building. Guiding the ceremony was the honorable Louis L. Goldstein, Comptroller of the State of Maryland and county citizen. Mr. Goldstein welcomed the many officials and guests and sketched briefly the planning which had brought the Calvert Marine Museum from its modest beginning in 1970 to the building being dedicated. His opening remarks were followed by musical selections from the Sea Chanters, a singing unit of the United States Navy Band whose members traveled from Washington to participate.

State Senator C. Bernard Fowler, also a county native, commented on the importance of the museum in the county and state, and its role in helping preserve the Chesapeake Bay. His remarks were followed by commendatory greetings from William T. Bowen, president of the Calvert County Board of County Commissioners.

Museum director Ralph E. Eshelman thanked both the county and state officials for their support that brought about the construction of the new building, and outlined briefly the things that still need to be done to complete the exhibits as well as the museum's master development plan. At the end of his remarks a large redwood carving of the museum's logo, mounted to the front side of the building, was unveiled. Museum staff member Richard Roming, wielding a caulker's adz, cut a line which dropped a replica sail covering the logo. The carving of the logo was the work of museum volunteer Richard Walchi.

Also unveiled was a mockup of the bronze plaque that will be mounted inside the building entrance and will recognize the contributions of the state and county officials, museum, architect, and contractor. The four county commissioners present pulled the covering from this mockup, after which the commissioners were presented with a framed photograph of the new building and other museum buildings for permanent display in the commissioners' hearing room in the courthouse. The speakers and commissioners were each presented with autographed copies of the latest museum publication, a workbook for the educational program written and illustrated by Deborah E. Watson. The formal ceremony closed with the traditional cutting of navy and gold ribbons at the entrance by state and county officials.

Those attending the ceremony were invited to refreshments and tours of the building after the close of the formal events. Museum members who have not yet seen the new exhibition building are encouraged to make a trip to Solomons and the museum this summer.
Bugeye Times

Maritime History
Many Hands (and Make Light)

The vast, empty space in the museum was pictured in the spring 1989 Bugeye Times preparation for construction of Maritime Patuxent, the permanent exhibit slated to be built this fall and will feature over four hours of new exhibits. The museum was fortunate to have the assistance of heavy machinery donated by Calvert Well Drilling Company and Baltimore Gas & Electric. The mechanical effort expended to facilitate the move of exhibit artifacts into the gallery space was pictured in the spring 1989 Bugeye Times.

Fabrication of Maritime Patuxent was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and contributions from the museum's boatwright George Surgent (left) and museum staff and volunteers. The museum's Cruis-Along Angler, built in 1956 and a popular exhibit artifact, will also be featured in Maritime Patuxent.

Do you remember the three-log canoe that dominated the maritime hall in the old school house building? That canoe, like everything else in the old museum building, had to be removed for renovation of that building to begin. Museum staff was assisted by personnel and machinery contributed by Calvert Well Drilling Company. A hydraulic crane expertly operated by Gene Riggs reached into the building through one of the large windows and lifted out the 84-year-old log vessel. Here the canoe is shown suspended from the crane on its way to the new building.

Barry Hoffman (left) and his colleagues from Baltimore Gas & Electric's Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant delivered the 3000 pound aquascope to the museum's maritime history exhibit space in March. In the past year, BG&E personnel had also contributed their time and expertise to restoring the badly rusted aquascope.

Built in the 1950's, the aquascope was used by marine scientist Gilbert Klingel and a photographer from the National Geographic Society to photograph and study underwater marine life in Chesapeake Bay. The aquascope will be featured in a section of the exhibit Maritime Patuxent devoted to scientific research in the region.

(Photo by Ralph Eshelman)

These photos and captions provide a glimpse of the vast, empty space in the museum, which begs for the display of a full-scale model of a large ship. As mentioned here, Stop by often this fall for new exhibits and displays!
Museum's new exhibition building that is empty no more. In time Patuxent: A River and Its People that 5,500 square feet of space, been moving the largest and heaviest gallery.

provide a glimpse of the human and transport these artifacts safely. The assistance of volunteers from Calvert more Gas & Electric, as well as the from both of these companies.

is funded by a grant from the Naval Historical Center, will help tell the story of maritime activity on the Patuxent River during World War II, when three Navy bases were established near the mouth of the river. Gene Riggs (left), Joe Dodson (right), and others prepared the torpedo for lifting by crane.

Calvert Well Drilling Company came to our rescue once again, this time to move a torpedo and 2900 pound underwater mine into the exhibit space. These objects, on loan from the Naval Historical Center, will help tell the story of maritime activity on the Patuxent River during World War II, when three Navy bases were established near the mouth of the river.

Joseph Gribble (in foreground), president of Calvert Well Drilling Company, directed the operation of lowering the torpedo onto a trailer for transport to the museum. Note the underwater mine already in place on the trailer.
Beck's uncle was a little man who only had two fingers and scars all over his legs. They used anything for bait. They would bring a truck-load of alewives and park it by the landing, and that truck would be covered with flies. 

After they fished their pots, they would ride down the river and I could see them both furiously kicking turtles in the bottom of the boat to avoid getting bit. Beck asked me one time did I want to go with him while he pulled his pots. "Mister," I said, "there ain't enough room in that boat for me and those turtles."

There is a considerable bit of folklore associated with the snapping turtle. Snappers are believed to be able to disguise themselves as logs to fool unwarie ducklings who inadvertently perch on their backs before being gobbled up. The head of a snapping turtle is believed to be able to bite until sundown on the day it is cut off. This bit of lore seems not so far-fetched after hearing Clyde Watson tell this story:

We killed the turtle behind the house back in the days when we kept chickens. You know you put a stick near the turtle's mouth, let him bite it, and then pull the head so you could cut it off. You couldn't kill them otherwise. Anyways, we threw the head out in the back yard and presently the old rooster got around to pecking at that head. All of a sudden the head grabbed him by the bill and wouldn't let go! It was comical to see the rooster hopping around trying to get rid of that turtle's head. Eventually, he did shake it off, but we never forgot that sight.

As far as eating goes, there is broad agreement that snapping turtles were desirable, if not prized, for the table. Perhaps one reason they were not common fare, however, was the difficulty in cleaning them. Snapping turtles were first beheaded, then placed upside-down in a large tub and scalded with boiling water. "You had to spread the legs out so that the water would reach every part of them," as Mr. Watson said, "but once you scalded them properly, the skin peeled off easy-as-you-please. That meat is as white as a chicken, too."

Before cooking, the shell must be detached from the body and the tail removed, but Mrs. Thelma Watson, Clyde's wife, says, "I never bothered with cooking the shell for stew. It was too much trouble, and the meat was stringy. I only put the neck and the tail and the legs into the pot."

Many turtles had eggs which were also eaten, usually boiled separately in salt water and eaten like hard-boiled eggs, or just cracked and added to soup. Mrs. Watson commented that if you boil turtle in a regular pot it will boil over as quick as a wink. One day I left a pot boiling and it boiled over. It was just like glue all over the stove. I will never forget that day. I'm not a cussing woman, but I said I'm never cooking another damn turtle.

Clyde Watson ruefully said, "I thought my turtle eating days were over." Mrs. Watson said she never did boil another turtle after that, but now I cook it in the pressure cooker for about twenty minutes. I save the liquor and make soup with onions, celery, and any other vegetables I have on hand — just like vegetable soup. I take the legs, tail, and neck out of the pressure cooker and dip them in pancake flour, salt, and pepper and then just brown them lightly. Mr. Watson said, "They are some mighty good eating — as tender as fried chicken."

Although information is sketchy, and comes mostly from oral sources, the snapping turtle fishery of the Patuxent seems to have developed in the late 1800s, peaked in the 1950s, and virtually disappeared by 1970. Clyde Watson started turtilng with his father, and he knows that his grandfather regularly caught turtles since at least 1900. In the 1920s and 1930s they received as much as twenty cents a pound and "that wasn't bad in those days." He said they put them in boxes built like the old fish box (about three feet square and a foot high, with a rope handle on each side). He remembers seeing twenty-five or thirty boxes piled on the shore, each having up to 200 pounds of turtles in them.

The steamboat was running twice a week then, and we shipped almost all we caught to Baltimore. The Armingers and us were the only ones doing it then. I don't know that we ever caught a whole lot after the steamboat stopped running. We just didn't have a way to get rid of them.

Lester Rackey said:

I saw the Becks (of Rock Hall) catch a ton of snapping turtles in one day, and that was the most I ever saw. I expect they would catch about ten tons in the season on an average. They sold them for the market to go to Philadelphia. Snapping turtles were caught in two ways. They were trapped in large hoop-net traps, sometimes referred to as "turtle pots," which were similar to fyke nets. They were also caught with a large, baited fishing hook tied to a stake stuck in the mud along the marsh edge.

Henry Richardson of Naylor, who fished and trapped from Nottingham, set both pots and stakes for turtles. He said that turtle pots "were generally three to five rings long and about four feet in diameter." Sometimes the pots had two "leaders" about eight to ten feet long, but usually they did not, and looked very much like a fyke net tied with heavier cord. Early pots were made from oak splits with hand-tied netting. Hoops and netting were usually tarred for longer life. Like fyke nets, pots had a double funnel to prevent turtles from getting out.

Pots were staked out in water shallow enough so that the turtles would not drown at high tide. They were baited with any fish that were handy, but
usually alewives and herring were the preferred bait. Harry Messick of Benedict said, “Any old fish would do. Even carp was good.”

Snapping turtles were also caught on baited fish hooks tied to stakes driven in the mud in shallow water along the marsh edge. Phil Watson, son of Clyde Watson, said:

Turtle trapping was a lot of fun. For one thing, you could tell a long way off whether you had caught a turtle. As you came up the river you could see that the line on each stake would be stretched taut if you had one.

You used a sassafras sapling for a stake. I don’t know why sassafras other than it was tough and wouldn’t break. It was just the way we did it.

You didn’t need too heavy a line — chalk line size was all you needed because you had to be able to thread it through the eye of a fish hook. We generally used a number two hook.

Turtle trapping peaked in the 1950s and catches sharply declined after then. Harry Messick says he still trapped some in the 1960s and early 70s when he took them to Baltimore and to a packing plant near Williamsburg, Virginia, to sell for fifty cents a pound.

Most of the watermen who trapped snapping turtles from the Patuxent believe that over-trapping in the 1950s depleted their numbers so much that it just wasn’t worth it to set traps and stakes after that time. Today, snapping turtles may be returning to former numbers, but it is unlikely that a viable commercial fishery for them will ever return to the river. The snappers may be back, but the watermen are not.

Back in February, Volunteer Coordinator Layne Bergin decided to submit a nomination for the 1989 Governor’s Volunteer Award for Maryland. Rather than choosing one individual, all six of our 2,500-hour volunteers — Sandy Roberts, Dorothy Ordwein, Linda McGilvery, Clara Dixon, “Pepper” Langley, and Paul Berry — were nominated as a group. The award entry highlighted the contributions and varied talents of each of these six volunteers and showed how their efforts have helped the Calvert Marine Museum to grow into a nationally recognized and respected institution.

In April, a letter came from the office of the Governor. We won! Out of 120 entries, the CMM volunteers were one of fifteen winners, honored for the category of the environment. Limited to only two award-winners plus the nominator, Layne along with “Pepper” Langley and Paul Berry accepted the award at a ceremony and reception at the Governor’s Mansion on April 18.

Because of the contributions of all of our volunteers — represented by our 2,500-hour volunteers — the plaque was inscribed to the “Calvert Marine Museum Volunteer Staff, for outstanding service to the citizens of Maryland.”

Congratulations to all of our award winners!

Left to right: George McGowan, Chairman of Governor’s Committee; CMM Volunteers Paul Berry and “Pepper” Langley; Governor William Donald Schaefer

Richard Dolesh is Chief of Interpretation and Conservation for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission in Prince George’s County. He is a long-time friend of the museum. His article on “Hunting Ortolans on the Patuxent River” appeared in the Winter 1980 issue of the Bugeye Times.
VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT
Paul Kraft, Carver

May we give honor to a special volunteer with the Calvert Marine Museum? We all see volunteers in a different way according to what each one does, and I for one feel that they are all special people, giving their time to enhance the lives of others.

In this event, I am speaking of a good friend of mine and a great volunteer with the museum-sponsored Southern Maryland Shipcarvers’ Guild. His name is Mr. Paul Kraft of The Willows in Calvert County.

Paul joined as a carver in the year 1978 and has been with us ever since. Paul has volunteered for Patuxent River Appreciation Days and any exhibits or displays that we have had. He also has spent numerous hours building cabinets and tables to be used around the museum. This work has been done in his own shop at home and very few have ever known about it or even seen what he has done. Paul is a very good carver with very beautiful work to his credit. He is also a specialist in tool sharpening, honing of tools, and has taught these skills to the carvers, as well as other tricks of the trade. He never misses a carving class and volunteers his time whenever he can. He has been a member of the Calvert Marine Museum ever since we have had membership. Paul is a great member, volunteer, and a good friend to all who know him.

Questions about the volunteer program, positions, and benefits are welcome and may be directed to Layne Bergin, Volunteer/Events Coordinator.

“HOMEPORT” PICNIC CONTEST

When CMM members respond to their invitations to the Members’ Picnic on August 6, they will automatically be entered in our “Homeport” picnic contest. A gourmet picnic supper for two — from chilled soup to luscious dessert — is the prize. The winner will be chosen at random from the RSVP list and notified on August 3. On arrival at the picnic, supper will be waiting. Sign up and try your luck!

SOUTHERN MARYLAND SHIPCARVERS’ GUILD

The guild completed its season with a “graduation” on Saturday, June 17. Certificates were presented which included new guild ratings based on carvings finished by members during the year. The following received certificates: Marge Shrieves, Prince Frederick; Hazel Wright, Dares Beach; John Schercinger, Huntington; Lottie Daniels; Lusby; John DeMouy, Chesapeake Beach; Dick Walchli, California; Paul Kraft, Chesapeake Beach; Charles Archer, Lexington Park; Joe Fowler, Waldorf; and Ellie Mowbray, California.

Guild classes will resume after Labor Day. Don’t forget to come join us in September. The Southern Maryland Shipcarvers’ Guild is sponsored by CMM and meets in the museum’s woodshop, instructed by “Pepper” Langley and his son, Jimmy.

(“Pepper” Langley)