Dredging up the Past: When Oysters Weren’t Almost History

By Dr. Kent Mountford

(Editor’s Note: This article by Dr. Mountford is one of his series of articles on “Past is Prologue” in the Bay Journal of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, appearing in the December 1997 issue. It has been shortened somewhat. Dr. Mountford is a senior scientist with the Chesapeake Bay Program of the Environmental Protection Agency, a resident of the St. Leonard Creek area of Calvert County, and a previous contributor to the Bugeye Times.)

Oysters’ history in the Chesapeake region is much older than that of humans. The bay’s cliffs and banks reveal the shells of extinct oyster species from the Miocene epoch ten million to fourteen million years ago. [Examples can be seen at CMM.]

When the first people, as bands of hunter-gatherers, began to range across this part of North America between 9,000 and 12,000 years ago, the great Wisconsin Glaciation was just starting to melt away from the land, a process that took thousands of years. This glacial melting eventually contributed enough water to the world’s oceans that they rose — sometimes 3-1/2 feet a century — and began flooding river valleys along the Eastern Seaboard. About 5,000 years ago, the tides had flooded the gorge of the ancestral Susquehanna River deeply enough that the resulting bay had a shape we’d recognize today as the Chesapeake.

Into this bay came the modern species of oyster. Billions of them grew, one upon the other, for thousands of generations until immense beds of them covered unimaginable areas, virtually unharvested, feeding on the plankton brought to them twice daily by the tides of a deepening Chesapeake.

Oysters were such an important part of the hunter-gatherers’ diet that their shells are almost a signature for any Native American dwelling site near salt water. In some places, the oysters at the bottom of the oyster pile — the first harvested — are big, some with thirteen annual growth marks on the valves. The ones on top — those harvested last — were tiny, barely spat thrown into a pot to thicken a winter’s stew. These early people, when gathering, waded only in the shallows, and their scattered living groups were too small to damage the ecosystem. They just moved on half a mile or so [to another oyster bed] and the exhausted sites recovered in a few years.

During what climatologists call the Late Medieval Warm Period, this part of North America was afflicted with prolonged droughts and forest fires. As the human population grew, this environmental stress spawned conflict, and people began to coalesce into villages, which could be palisaded for defense against inland tribes who forayed to the coast for its more abundant food resources.

By A.D. 1500, some historians feel that warfare was endemic, and stored foods became valuable to feed what amounted to standing armies. One resource was the oyster, harvested mostly from March through April, before crop-planting in May. Oyster meats were shucked and dried for later consumption, and were also probably used for trade.

It was onto this scene of spring oyster harvesting that the first English Adventurers of the Virginia Company of London intruded on April 27, 1607. Captain George Percy took a small boat into Lynnhaven Inlet, near Virginia Beach. He wrote of his encounter:

We came to a place where they had made a great fire and had been newly roasting oysters. When they perceived our coming, they fled away to the mountains, and left many of the oysters in

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1998 Waterside Music Series Winds Down

The final "Waterside" fundraising music concerts for 1998 were held in September, October, and November, with music for all audiences. Country artist Kathy Mattea entertained 2,600 guests on the Washington Gas Pavilion on September 5, with a beautiful full moon providing background scenery. Traditionally a pure country musician and singer, Mattea's recent work reflected strong influences from Celtic and traditional folk ballads. Accordingly, her "crossover" audience mixed both country and acoustical music fans. This event raised nearly $13,000 for museum programs and exhibits.

Autumn indoor concerts featured Cathy Ponton King on October 24, and Seldom Scene on November 28. King, a rhythm and blues singer and lead guitarist, has played the Washington, D. C., and Baltimore area clubs for more than a decade. Her music is reminiscent of Bonnie Raitt with New Orleans blues overtones. Seldom Scene, an eminently popular bluegrass group for over twenty-five years, has played here on Thanksgiving weekend to a sell-out crowd. This is a group with a very strong following throughout the Mid-Atlantic states, and can always be counted on to provide impeccable instrumental performances and faultless harmonizing.

Tentatively, the 1999 Waterside Music Series will begin on February 13, 1999, with the Nils Lofgren Duo returning to the Calvert Marine Museum auditorium. Lofgren, a veteran of rock and folk-rock bands such as Crazy Horse, Grin, and Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, provides a wonderful set that features classics of his own composition, contemporary rock, and ballads long familiar to all his fans. Like Seldom Scene's, this concert is expected to sell-out early. Watch the local newspapers and listen to 97.7 The Bay (FM) for sales announcements.

On March 6, huge East Coast favorites Eddie From Ohio have been tapped to give two performances in the CMM auditorium, in order to meet what's expected to be a large demand for tickets. Five close friends who have been singing and performing together since their college days, Eddie From Ohio has six CDs on the independent distribution circuit as well as solo CDs by lead singers Robbie Schaeffer and Julie Murphy Wells. This will be the fifth appearance for the band at CMM, where Waterside has helped them establish a loyal fan base throughout Southern Maryland.

Waterside Music Series continues to bring CMM thousands of dollars each year through the production of contemporary music events. The development department staff want to remind all museum members and Waterside fans to support the corporate sponsors who are generous enough to underwrite many of the music series' costs. These include 97.7 The Bay; Ralph's Dodge; Solomons Landing; Cumberland and Erly, LLC; Woodburn's of Solomons; Bozick Distributors and their Coors products; Holiday Inn Select Solomons; Main Message Center; SMECO; Jones Communications; New Bay Times; Mom's in the Kitchen; and the DM Group.

Welcome to New Board of Governors' Members

Robert Swann and Roxanne Cumberland were formally welcomed to the Calvert Marine Museum Board of Governors at the annual board dinner on December 9. Appointed by the county commissioners, they will replace outgoing board members William B. Glascock II and Karen H. Abrams, who have each served two terms on behalf of the Calvert Marine Museum and the Calvert Marine Museum Society, Inc.

Mr. Swann has enjoyed a long career as Assistant Comptroller for the State of Maryland, and is now State Comptroller, as well as serving as an active community service leader and advocate for many Southern Maryland institutions. Mrs. Cumberland, another lifelong Calvert County resident, has been a career human resource executive and a strong voice for the area's non-profit organizations. Together with the law firm of Cumberland and Erly, she has been particularly supportive of the museum's Bugeye Ball and Waterside Music Series.

Board members continuing to serve include: Donald L. Brown, Susan Fischer, C. Bernard Fowler, J. Matthew Gambrill, Carl M. Loifler, Sherry D. Reid, Margaret W. Reynolds, John A. Simpson Jr., John C. Smith, Dawn Szot, and George C. Tilghman. A county commissioner is an ex officio member, as is CMM's director C. Douglass Alves Jr. Members of the museum's Board of Governors also serve as directors of the Calvert Marine Museum Society, Inc.
BUGEYE BALL BENEFITS WM. B. TENNISON

A record 238 guests enjoyed this year's Bugeye Ball, held at the museum on September 26. The event included dinner under two outdoor canopies, followed by dancing in the museum's exhibit hall lobby and changing exhibits areas. Committee members Don Brown, Celeste Furey, Sandy Leitner, Sherry Reid, Dawn Sotz, Susan Fischer, and Mimi Lacouture combined their design concepts with those of local event planner Eleanor Moore. The results featured gold fabrics, gold and yellow flowers, and twenty-five hand-crafted Tennison models contributed by the Patuxent Small Craft Guild. Thanks to the generous service gifts of Mrs. Moore, Dave Benson of Maryland Country Caterers, a cocktail hour produced by Lighthouse Inn, and the considerable private donations of money and silent raffle goods, the Bugeye Ball was able to dedicate profits of $11,000 to the Wm. B. Tennison Restoration Fund.

Cocktail and dinner hour music were provided by Square Noon, while after-dinner dancing was helped along by the popular Main Street. Guests also enjoyed a silent raffle and won prizes of ticketed raffle items.

SMALL CRAFT COLLECTION UPDATE

During 1998, two boats were added to CMM's small craft collection. In July, Linwood C. Thomas of McFarland, Wisconsin, donated a 1959 Cruis-Along "Vacationer" (hull number 225-59). Built by Cruis-Along Boats of Solomons (formerly M. M. Davis & Son), the twenty-two-foot pleasure craft spent all of its life in the Great Lakes and retains its original seventy-horsepower Gray Marine engine. Mr. Thomas transported the boat himself from Wisconsin to Solomons, where it was unloaded and stored, thanks to Washburn's Boat Yard.

Mr. Thomas donated the boat in memory of his father, Linwood F. Thomas, who worked at Cruis-Along Boats as production superintendent. Mr. Thomas worked there himself in 1957 and 1958. Since CMM already has a 1956 Cruis-Along "Angler" on display in the Maritime Patuxent exhibit, it is the eventual intention to display the "Vacationer," in operating condition, in the boat basin.

On a smaller scale, the museum was fortunate to be given a Jacoby Flyaway M racing hydroplane, built by the Fred Jacoby Boat Works of North Bergen, New Jersey, around 1949. The beautifully made mahogany-and-canvas, twelve-foot hydroplane competed in the Midget Class races on the Chesapeake. It was donated by Mark Hughes of Lusby, whose father, Carl L. Hughes, raced the boat. Accompanying the hydroplane is Carl Hughes's racing helmet and life vest and a Martin 60 outboard racing engine. It is intended to add the boat and equipment to the maritime exhibit.

During 1998 there was considerable progress in the rebuilding of the 1936 Broomes Island draketail workboat: the framing and planking of the stern was completed; new frames and deck beams installed; sampson post, king plank, and new deck fitted; and the interior and exterior painted. A start has also been made on the rub-rail and toe-rail.

Since 1991, CMM boatwright Jack Krolak has supervised the rebuilding of the Broomes Island draketail and all other restoration work on the small craft collection. Unfortunately, Jack left the museum in November to join his family in Asheville, North Carolina. Museum staff and Patuxent Small Craft Guild volunteers would like to take this opportunity to thank Jack for sharing with us his expertise and commitment to the cause of our small craft heritage, and wish him all the best in his new life in North Carolina. (Richard Dodds)
The annual celebration of the Patuxent River Ai is a very active role, attracts visitors for an interest and many traditional activities. This event, Curator of paleontology, Dr. Stephen Godfrey, helps a young visitor with the identification of a fossil to assist paleontology volunteers at PRAD. CMM photo by Bob Hall

Young boatbuilders try their hands at completing boat models from materials provided by CMM's Patuxent Small Craft Guild. CMM photo by Bob Hall

Other research organizations interested in the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay, such as the Academy of Natural Sciences Estuarine Research Center of St. Leonard, also have exhibits at PRAD. CMM photo by Bob Hall

Visitors inspect a model displayed in CMM's Woodworking Shop. CMM photo by Bob Hall

An exhibit by Dick Day of antique gasoline engines captivates a PRAD visitor. CMM photo by Bob Hall
APPRECIATION DAYS

Scent River on October 10-11 saw an event, in which the museum takes new and former resting weekend.

Reenactors on the replica of one of Commodore Joshua Barney’s gunboats of 1814 fire a shot to demonstrate gunnery from the period of the War of 1812.

CMM photo by Bob Hal

Other Fall Events

At a program on September 18, the museum presented a Solomons history program jointly with the Calvert County Historical Society to a standing-room only audience in CMM’s auditorium. Here, maritime history curator Richard Dodds (at lectern) describes slides while local residents Mrs. Mildred DeBoy and Mr. Jack Northam look on and comment on the scenes of former days. These two long-time residents were joined by Mrs. Doris Woodburn Johnson and Mr. Charles Elliott. CMM photo by Rob Hurry

CMM's education department honored its volunteers at a picnic at Scientists' Cliffs in October. Other departments also honored their volunteers. CMM photo by Bob Hal
Dredging up the Past

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the fire. We ate some of the oysters which were very large and delicate in taste...

John Smith, Percy’s shipmate, later led the struggling colony at Jamestown during the difficult, starving time in 1609-1610. The colony’s misery was helped along by the Native Americans, who were unwilling to trade their limited corn reserves with these smelly, violent men who were taking over their hunting grounds. So Smith sent parties of his men out along the shores of the James River to gather oysters and keep themselves alive.

So it happened that neither we nor [the Native Americans] had anything to eat but what the country afforded naturally. Yet of eighty who lived upon oysters in June and July, with a pint of corn a week for a man lying under trees, and one hundred twenty for the most part living upon sturgeon, which are dried till we pounded it to powder for meal, yet in ten weeks but seven died.

About 1610, William Strachey became secretary of the colony at Jamestown and writes:

Oysters there be in whole banks and beds, and those of the best I have seen some thirteen inches long. The savages used to boil oysters and mussels together and with the broth they make a good spoon meat, thickened with flour of their wheat [actually corn] and it is a great thrift and husbandry with them to hang the oysters upon strings ... and dried in the smoke, thereby preserve them all the year.

Food was still not easy to come by in 1623, and a Virginian named Arundel wrote to his friend Mr. Caning in London: “The most evident hope from altogether starving is oysters ...” After almost seven decades of colonization, Thomas Glover wrote in 1676 about the Elizabeth River: “Here are such plenty of oysters as they may load ships with them. At the mouth of the Elizabeth River, when it is low water, they appear in rocks a foot above the water.”

Another chronicler wrote:

The abundance of oysters is incredible. There are whole banks of them so that the ships must avoid them. A sloop, which was to land us a Kingscreek struck an oyster bed, where we had to wait about two hours for the tide.

At first I thought that this, one of a couple of references to being grounded on reefs, was anecdotal, and didn’t make too much of it. But I later ran across a chart of the James River, published by the Dutch, which shows about seventeen “reefs” rising above the surface along the channels. None is there today.

These reefs, says Dr. Bill Hargis of the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences, were important to the success of oysters because they kept these filter-feeding shellfish up in the water column within easy access of the maximum amount of plankton, their only food. The reefs also offered the oyster spat a billion places to strike. The

... in pre-Colonial times, oysters were so abundant that they had the capacity to filter the bay’s volume in a few days; at present, oysters would take about a year to repeat the job.

But with the end of the Colonial period, and the dawn of the 1800s, would come the unreasonable abuses of the Chesapeake oysters: 2,000 skipjacks and other boats dredging the bay floor; countless men tonging the creeks; a dozen railroad cars loaded with oysters — fresh and preserved — leaving Baltimore daily, bound for the West, as far as California’s goldfields! Later, in this century, came the diseases dermo and MSX, which doubly decimated a struggling population.

Dr. Roger Newell at Maryland’s Horn Point Research Laboratory calculated a few years ago that in pre-Colonial times, oysters were so abundant that they had the capacity to filter the bay’s volume in a few days; at present, oysters would take about a year to repeat the job. Also, the water then had fewer nutrients, and the massive beds of aquatic grasses probably left the oysters with a smaller crop of plankton to work on.

As mentioned in the fall issue, the museum has reprinted I Remember: Recollections of “Pepper” Langley — Growing Up in Solomons, a joint effort of “Pepper” and Melvin Conant, who brought together the recollections from taped interviews into book form. First published in 1990, the 115-page book has been out of print for two years. The new printing has a few minor corrections and a new appendix listing “Pepper’s” articles in The Solomons Islander. Copies are available in the Museum Store for $9.95 (plus tax).
Hello Members!

I want to take this opportunity to say a quick hello to all the members and let you in on my plans for the next few months.

I was lucky enough to have moved into a position that has been well organized and cared for by its previous occupant (we all know her fondly as Sybol), and I look forward to continuing that tradition. I have set several goals for myself for the upcoming months, many of which are behind-the-scenes events such as installing new membership software and streamlining the membership renewal process, which I hope will make the computer do the work it's supposed to do. But other goals will be much more visible to you, the CMM member, such as new membership materials, durable membership cards, and for those of you who help out with the bulk mailings, laser labels instead of the old dot matrix labels which are often so messy and difficult to organize. Over the next few months, I also plan to tie together some member faces with all the names I see in my database, and I look forward to meeting you at any/all of our upcoming member events!

I've learned a great deal since hopping aboard in September, but realize I've still got a way to go. I would like to hear from you if you have any suggestions about improving your membership process and making it as enjoyable as possible, so please feel free to give me a call ... what better time?

Thanks for believing in the Calvert Marine Museum. Your membership supports a very worthy cause!

See You Soon,

Vanessa Gill

Year-End Appeal

Members were mailed the 1998 Year-End Appeal packets at the end of November. This year's fundraising goal was set at $15,000, money which will be used toward operational costs for projects that continue to improve and expand the museum's mission throughout our communities.

Many people believe that the museum is funded entirely by the Calvert County government; the reality is that only 66 percent of the museum's funding comes from public funds. The remainder must be raised by the Calvert Marine Museum Society. Additionally, special projects, such as adding the touch tank, renovating the Wm. B. Tennison, and building the Patuxent Small Craft Center, require funds to match any grants or bonds we receive. That's where the importance of having caring and supportive members comes into play. Within the first few days of the 1998 Year-End Appeal drive we received gifts totaling over $2,200, that is 15 percent of our goal already! Thank You!

Museum growth in programs, exhibits, and collections, such as the wooden vessels cared for at the Patuxent Small Craft Center, require substantial support through your donations. We appreciate the contributions received from our museum "community" over the past years and look forward to continuing the uniquely close relationships with members that ensure the Calvert Marine Museum's success in meeting the mission goals of "preservation and education."

Society Snapshot


ENGLAND'S MARITIME HISTORY TRIP WITH LORD ADDISON

In the spring of 1999, museum members will have an opportunity to visit some of the highlights of southern England's seagoing past and present, from early Elizabethan explorers to the modern Royal Navy. This ten-day trip is offered by Lord Addison Travel, Ltd., a tour company that specializes in couriered, small-group itineraries in Great Britain. (Similar Lord Addison trips have been offered in the past to CMM members.)

Beginning on May 13, 1999, and returning on May 22, this trip will visit London, Portsmouth, towns on the Isle of Wight and the Channel coast, Plymouth, Bristol, Cardiff, and return to London. For further details as to the specific itinerary, costs, and possible extensions, call Leslie Scher Brown on 410-326-2042. There is an added benefit from participation by museum members: a small portion of the cost is returned as a contribution to CMM. Enjoy a wonderful trip and benefit the museum at the same time!
VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT —
PALEONTOLOGY VOLUNTEERS AT CMM

By Jim Marsh, Paleontology Liaison to the Volunteer Council

Welcome to the world of the paleontology volunteer. To quote from the masthead on the Prep Lab News! (edited and published by Mike Ellwood): “We bring good things (back) to life.”

Tucked in one corner of the TREASURE FROM THE CLIFFS gallery is where you’ll find us — in the largest waterless fishbowl in the museum. When our window is open, you may see someone:

• using an assortment of dental picks and brushes to remove “prehistoric” earth from a fossilized bone. (Could this be an extinct whale ulna?)

Or perhaps someone:

• teasing shells from marine sediments that date from the Miocene epoch. (What kind of gastropods do we have here?)

Or maybe someone:

• hunched over, looking at a small piece of sandy dirt through a microscope, with an eyedropper of fluid, a very fine pick, and a small brush at hand. (Are these Foraminifera, single-celled animals that lived in the warmer Miocene ocean about fifteen million years ago?)

Or it could be someone:

• working on big pieces of fossilized bone that are resting in what appears to be a sandbox. (Sand nicely supports heavy pieces being bonded together.)

Or:

• the lab may be empty, with the volunteer at the exhibit drawers assisting a visitor with an identification. (The volunteer is usually the one wearing the apron and a nametag.)

Rarely are two tasks identical, and the list goes on and on: — the jigsaw puzzle of broken specimens to assemble (and most specimens are broken) — the bonding together of the puzzle — the hardening of bone and shell to be done — the use of mechanical cleaning equipment — and . . .

To lighten things up a bit, throw in a walk on the beach to collect specimens, and an occasional Saturday morning training session.

Our mission is to help our Department of Paleontology extend its presence over the acquisition, cleaning, identification, and preservation of fossil material, and to educate by sharing these processes as much as possible with museum visitors. As daunting as that may sound, it hasn’t yet proven so. I can say this in spite of the facts that every shift in the prep lab seems to present a new learning opportunity and that “sharing the process” can stretch a one-hour task into three or four. But that’s ok. Assistance is usually as close as the reference shelf or the phone, and our visitors are genuinely interested and appreciative of our time.

Although a few of our volunteers came with a fossil-collecting hobby already in place, most of us started with little or no paleontology background. Nevertheless, we possessed the key ingredient: a curiosity piqued by the thought of helping to preserve the record of organisms that lived millions of years ago.

We are fortunate to number among our volunteers some members of the CMM Fossil Club. These are folks “hooked on fossils” who are active collectors and represent many years of experience. They are our primary sources of fossils for the prep lab; they enhance our museum exhibits with selections from their personal collections; they serve as a training resource; and they provide us with a newsletter. We owe them our thanks and gratitude for their invaluable support.

We do have openings for some more good people. If you or anyone you know would like to share in this interesting experience, our volunteer coordinator, Leslie Scher Brown, or curator of paleontology, Dr. Stephen Godfrey, would be pleased to hear from you on 410-326-2042.

CMM STAFF NEWS

Mrs. Patti Sopp joined the museum staff in November as business manager, replacing Cassie Garcia in that position. Patti comes to CMM from the Maryland Higher Education Commission, where she was a finance analyst. Prior to working at the commission, Patti was the budget manager for operations at Cornell University. A native of upstate New York, Patti has resided in Hollywood in St. Mary’s County for the past year and a half with her husband Scott. Her office is in the Administration Building.