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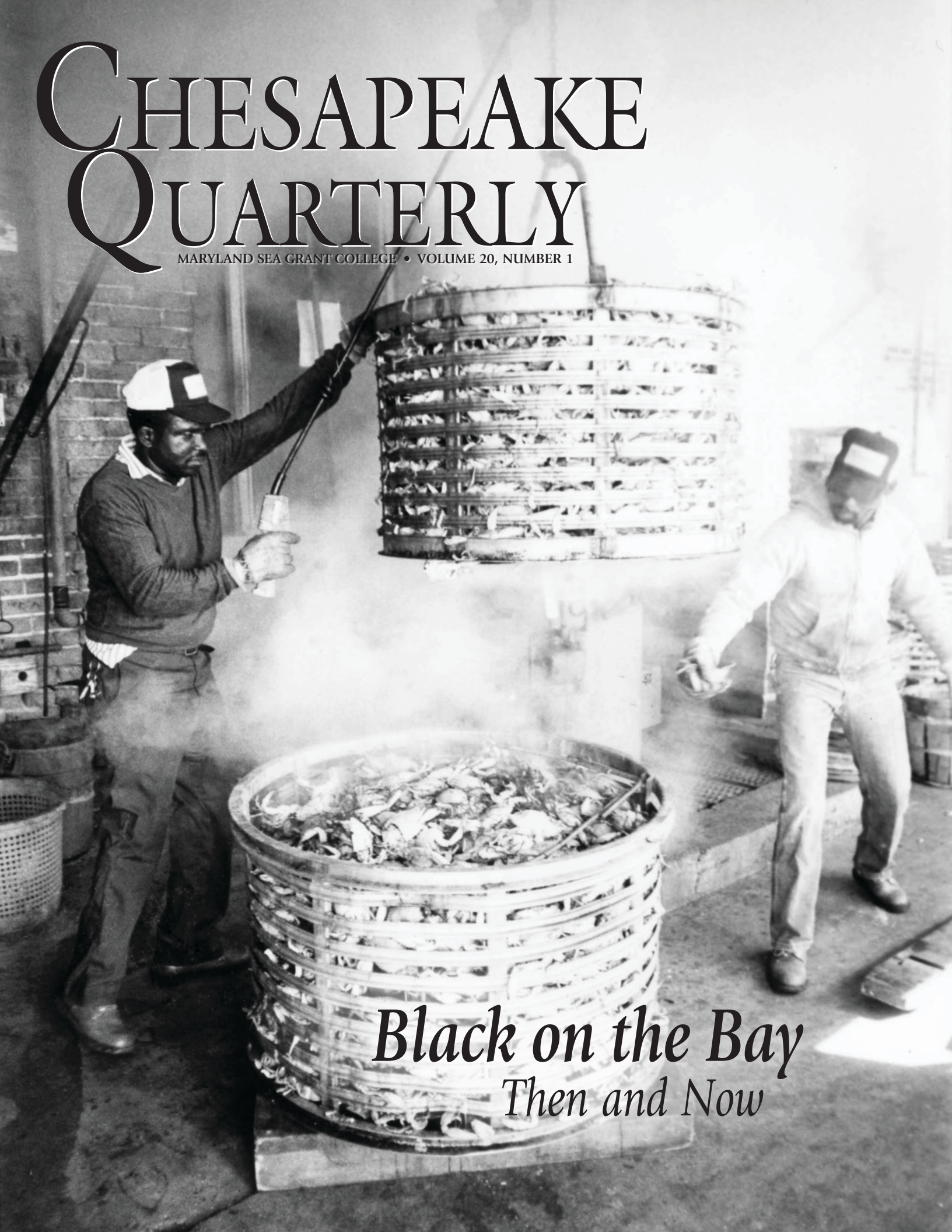

Black on the Bay

Then and Now

contents

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February 2021

Chesapeake Quarterly explores scientific, environmental, and cultural issues relevant to the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed. The magazine is produced and funded by the Maryland Sea Grant College. The college receives support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the state of Maryland.

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Cover: *Men steaming crabs on Maryland's Eastern Shore.* PHOTO, MARYLAND SEA GRANT COLLEGE

Navigating the Chesapeake

Black Marylanders charted their own course

Two watermen knee-deep in catch *on the deck of a workboat, shoveling fish into a basket to be loaded onto the dock at Tilghman Packing Company.* PHOTO, H. ROBINS HOLLYDAY, UNDATED, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE TALBOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

For many Black Marylanders, the Chesapeake Bay has long been a source of sustenance, strength, community, and opportunity. In times of slavery, the ability to collect oysters allowed men and women in bondage to feel a "pinprick of freedom," as author Kate Livie describes it in her book *Chesapeake Oysters: The Bay's Foundation and Future*. On the Chesapeake, wind on their faces and a good distance from often cruel masters, they could taste a life outside of chains—however fleeting.

In this issue, we highlight the contributions of Black watermen and seafood and maritime entrepreneurs, even as we acknowledge the hardships and discrimination they have faced over the decades. We'll describe stories of ambition and resilience in the face of restrictive laws, including a community of Black families who left Maryland's Eastern Shore to carve out a new, free life working the waters off Staten Island, New York.

We'll introduce you to some influential and unforgettable Chesapeake innovators, including Downes Curtis, an artist who made sails for both working watermen and the one percent; Samuel Turner, who started his own seafood company in Bellevue; and Captain George Brown, a master mariner, savvy businessman, and philanthropist who ran a steamship line on the Chesapeake, ferrying Black customers to his own bayside resort where they could enjoy amusements not available to them in Baltimore and Annapolis. You will meet several Black fishing captains who do a robust business out of Kent Narrows, a young entrepreneur trying to bring more minorities into aquaculture, and an Extension specialist dedicated to trying new techniques and equipment for growing oysters.

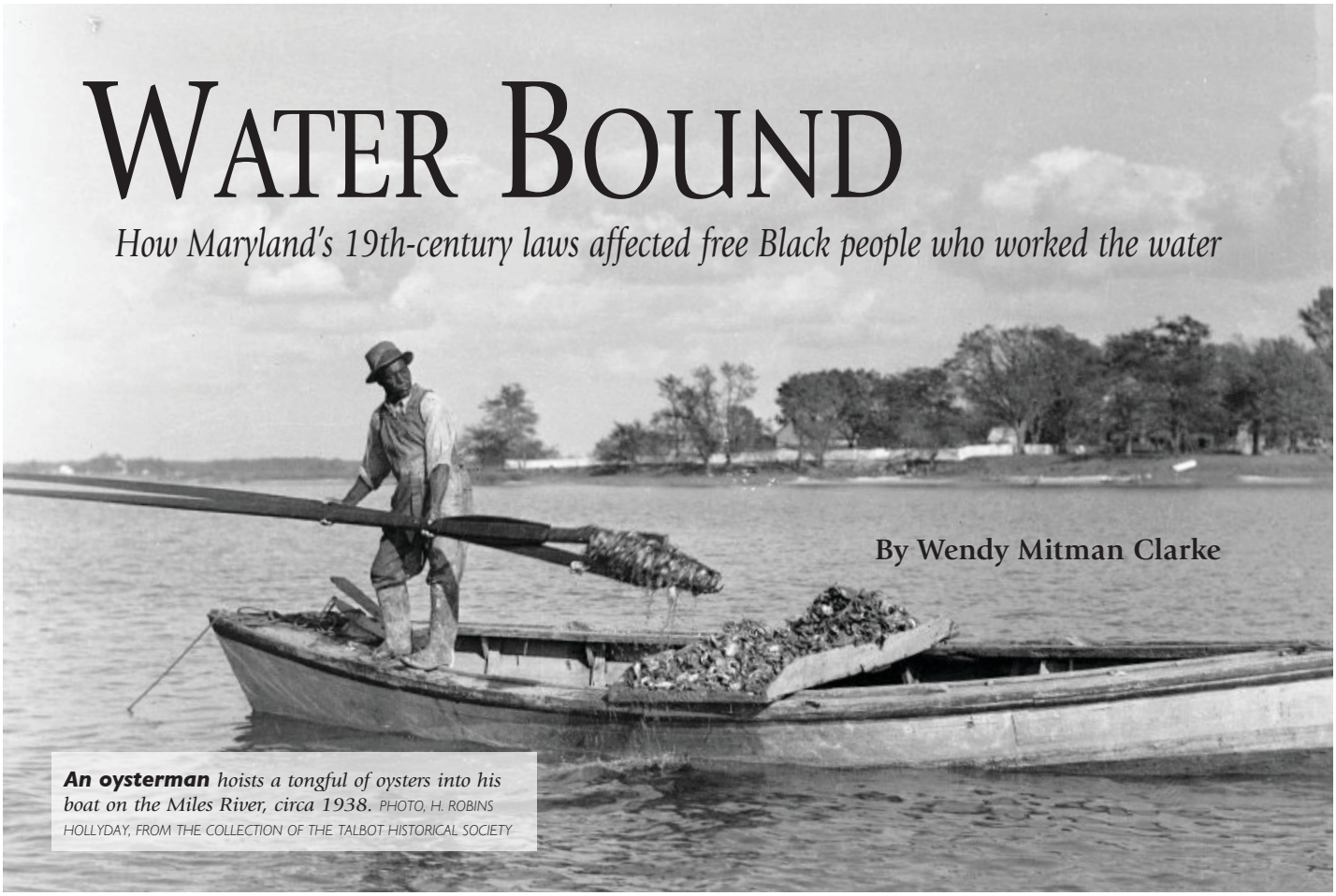
A huge thanks to all of our sources who give us their time, perspective, and expertise when we're reporting, researching, and photographing a story. For this issue, these include historians, watermen, Department of Natural Resources officials, and archivists. We are especially grateful to Vince Leggett, founder of Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation; Jenifer Grindle Dolde, associate curator of collections at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum; Pat Nugent, deputy director of the Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience at Washington College; Creston Long, director of the Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture at Salisbury University; The Mariners' Museum and Park; and Talbot Historical Society. They and others have helped us bring to life fascinating and under-reported stories in our backyard, and ones well worth telling.

—Rona Kobell

Water Bound

How Maryland's 19th-century laws affected free Black people who worked the water

By Wendy Mitman Clarke



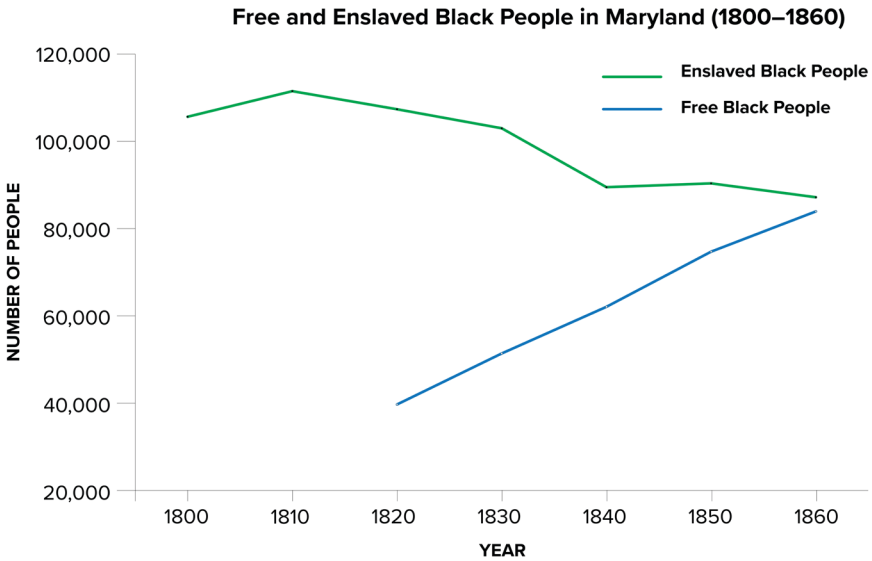
***An oysterman** hoists a tongful of oysters into his boat on the Miles River, circa 1938.* PHOTO, H. ROBINS HOLLYDAY, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE TALBOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Over the years, Black watermen interviewed about their long careers have often said there was no color at sea. While segregation prevailed on the land, things were more equal on the water. Anyone would help anyone else in trouble.

That notion—that working the water historically has offered Maryland's Black population a measure of economic and personal opportunity, if not equality—is at least partly true. On the one hand, watermen living near the Chesapeake Bay were close to tributaries rich in oysters, crabs, and fish, and they didn't need to spend a lot to access the resource.

Many watermen built their own boats, even selling basic skiffs to others, regardless of color. Harvesting shellfish and crabs from these small skiffs or from the shoreline was inexpensive and doable. And anyone could throw a line in the water and fish, whether to put food on the table or to sell the catch. The water seemed to be one of the few integrated workplaces in the segregated south, which included Maryland.

But laws and codes put in place throughout the 1800s to regulate the movement and lives of free African Americans complicates this narrative. As the demographics shifted over the century, with the numbers of enslaved people dwindling in Maryland and



***The graph encompasses data from 1800 to 1860** when census categories clearly delineated free Blacks and enslaved people. This and further data can be found at the Maryland Historical Trust Legacy of Slavery in Maryland project.* SOURCE, THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY IN MARYLAND, MARYLAND STATE ARCHIVES

the numbers of free Black people steadily growing, white-dominated society and lawmakers began to impose restrictions to control a population that they saw as a threat.

As Maryland's rural economy shifted from tobacco planting to grain and cereal crops, landowners needed less enslaved labor and began to either free those they enslaved or sell them south to cotton plantations. Shortly before the Civil War, Baltimore had the largest population of free Black citizens in the country. The Eastern Shore was following suit; between 1790 and 1860, the population grew exponentially. In Kent County alone, 58 percent of Black residents were free by 1860 compared to only 11 percent in 1790, according to Pat Nugent, deputy director of the Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland.

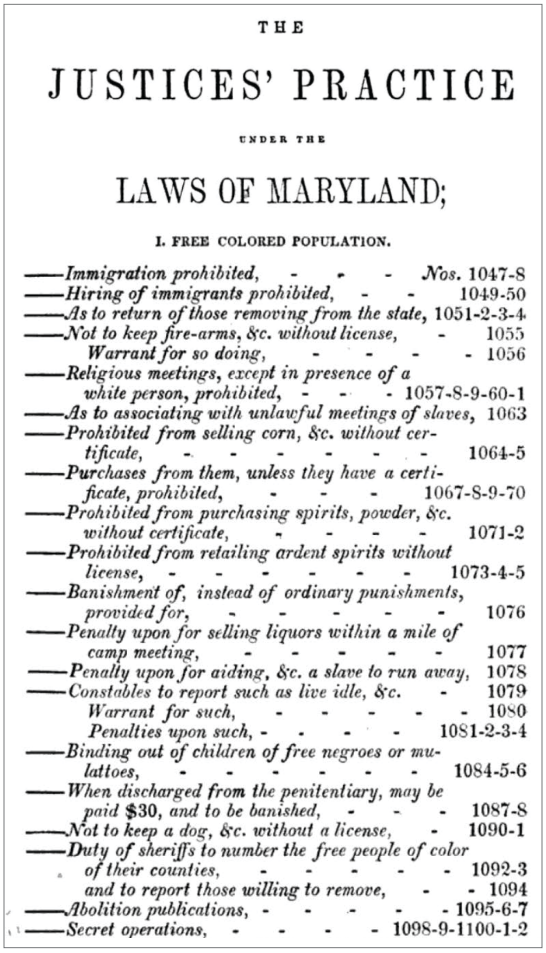
"Across Maryland, white lawmakers began to pass laws to control and intimidate this growing number of free African Americans—to prevent rebellion and derail the Underground Railroad, but also to control and outcompete free Black entrepreneurs, including those who made their living on the water," Nugent said.

Codes, Laws, and Permission Slips

Among the most wide-reaching of these were the State of Maryland's Acts of 1831, Section 323. *The Justices' Practice Under the Laws of Maryland* published in 1841 lays these out in a kind of legal handbook for local and regional officials. In most cases, the only legal way for a free Black person to conduct certain business in their daily lives was to have written permission from a "reputable" white person.

Free Black people could not meet for spiritual purposes unless the congregation was led by "a white licensed or ordained preacher, or some reputable white person or persons of the neighborhood," according to the justices' book. They could not sell corn, wheat, or tobacco without a certificate, signed by a justice of the peace, averring that they were "peaceable and orderly…and of good character." They could not sell bacon, pork, beef, or mutton without a similar certificate stating that the seller "came honestly and *bona fide,* into possession of any such article so offered for sale."

Free Black people were forbidden from leaving the state and then returning without written consent of a white person in a position of authority "or at least three respectable white persons, known to be such by the justices" of the local court. These provisions did not extend "to any free black or mulatto, that may be engaged in navigating any ship, vessel or boat under a white commander."



THE

JUSTICES' PRACTICE

UNDER THE

LAWS OF MARYLAND;

I. FREE COLORED POPULATION.

The Justices' Practice Under the Laws of Maryland *published in 1841. The chapter entitled "Colored Population" included sections on "Free," "Slave," and "Runaway" with rules and laws pertaining to each.*

If Black people returned within six months without such a document, they could be fined and jailed. If they couldn't pay their charges within 20 days, a sheriff and two justices of the peace could "sell such person to serve for a period of time, not exceeding six calendar months." Money earned would pay for commitment charges with any remainder reverting to the court.

Despite this web of restrictions in Maryland, Black entrepreneurs found a way to adapt and overcome, often by working the water or running a business associated with it.

In Chestertown, Thomas Cuff teamed up with Samuel Perkins to run a shad and herring fishery on the Chester River. In 1820, Cuff purchased a lot on Cannon Street, followed by more land along the Chestertown waterfront. A founder in 1828 of the Bethel A.M.E. Church, he eventually subdivided many of his lots and sold them to other Black residents, many of them fellow church members.

Samuel Perkins' son, William, was one of Kent County's most affluent and successful Black entrepreneurs as owner of The Rising Sun Oyster Saloon in Chestertown, which operated from 1856 until the 1890s. An 1863 ad in the *Kent County News* noted that Perkins served "Oysters and Terrapins, & C. in all their various ways and in his usual excellent style, which he flatters himself, after thirty years' experience, cannot be surpassed by any Caterer on the Shore."

A leader in the local Black community, Perkins "became the first African-American Maryland delegate to a National Republican Convention and the Eastern Shore's first African-American Federal grand juror," wrote Davy McCall in *The Key to Old Kent, A Journal of Historical Society of Kent County* (Vol. 7, 2013). "According to the census of 1870, he had a net worth of $10,000, making him one of the Eastern Shore's wealthiest African Americans."

The Levi Rodgers House *on what is now called Water Street in Chestertown, Maryland, as it stands today.* PHOTO, STEPHANIE GOSMAN, KENT COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

However, another local seafood entrepreneur, Levi Rodgers, shows how the laws could quickly destroy a successful Black businessman. An enslaved man whose mother bought his freedom, Rodgers co-founded the Bethel A.M.E. Church with Cuff and others, and he bought property on Cannon Street from Cuff. From the 1840s until 1859, he owned the popular Cape May Oyster Saloon at the corner of Cannon and Front streets and was skipper of several schooners.

But in 1859, he was charged with illegally returning to Maryland without the requisite white, written permission after sailing a shipment of lumber to Philadelphia. He was convicted and ended up losing his business; ultimately, he moved to Delaware.

Rodgers' story was unearthed in Kent County Courthouse records by faculty and students at Washington College as part of Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project—a partnership with the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History seeking to gather and digitize untold stories of the Black experience in the Chesapeake Bay.

Nugent, who is helping lead Chesapeake Heartland, noted that the historical record doesn't necessarily clarify why Rodgers would have been arrested and tried after many years of success.

"That's exactly what made the Black codes so powerful and so malicious," he said. "They allowed for free African Americans to operate a business as long as it served white interests, but the second a white competitor felt threatened by a Black entrepreneur, he or she could pull that lever with catastrophic consequences."

In her *Key to Old Kent* article " 'A Liberal Share of Public Patronage': Chestertown's Antebellum Black Businesses" (Vol. 7, 2013), Lucy Maddox cited Mark Kurlanky's *The Big Oyster* noting that "In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was widely accepted in New York that oyster cellars, like dance halls and many taverns, were run by blacks." The same was true in Chestertown, Maddox said: "Before mid-century, in Chestertown, as in such oyster-eating cities as New York, the selling of oysters had become almost entirely a black enterprise."

That business was booming for seafood entrepreneurs like Perkins and Rodgers didn't sit well with their white competitors. An April 1866 letter in the *Chestertown Transcript* notes that, "Oyster Saloons are usually kept by *'colored citizens,'* whom the destructives and political abolitionists have attempted to place on a footing with the white man…under these circumstances, should not the white race endeavor to encourage their own, and especially in a matter which is so palpably proper, and almost essential, to the continuance of good Hotels?"

The letter reveals, Maddox said, "how well-established African American saloon keepers had become in Chestertown by the 1860s and how well they had succeeded in catering to a clientele of blacks and whites, visitors and local people."

A New Life in Staten Island

Oysters and restrictive laws in Maryland also played roles in the wholesale migration of a group of Black families from the Snow Hill area in Worcester County to a new community called Sandy Ground on Staten Island. Founded in 1828, a year after New York abolished slavery, Sandy Ground is known to be the oldest continuously inhabited free Black settlement in the United States. In 1982 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and in 2011 the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated several of its remaining buildings, including the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church, as New York City landmarks.

Creston Long, director of Salisbury University's Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture, analyzed census data for this story along with his research assistant, T. Aaron Horner, and they have uncovered new, more detailed information about the Snow Hill exodus.

They found that several Snow Hill stalwarts, among them the Bishop, Purnell, Hinman, and Robins families, began migrating to Staten Island

Sandy Ground's connection to the Bay *can be seen with the migration of Snow Hill residents in the 1850s to Staten Island. Lemon Creek, which feeds into Prince's Bay on the northern side of Raritan Bay, was home port for many Sandy Ground oystermen. As early as the 1820s, Raritan Bay's oyster fishery began relying on Chesapeake Bay seed oysters, taking oysters from fertile beds in the Chesapeake and planting them in Raritan Bay.* BASE MAPS, ESRI

in the 1850s. "Many members of these families appear to have worked as general laborers, likely in agriculture, while they lived in Maryland," Long said, "but after settling in Staten Island, many turned to the waters surrounding Staten Island as oystermen or in other maritime pursuits."

For instance, Edward Hinman moved to Sandy Ground in his late 20s and worked as a laborer, but by his 40s he was an oysterman. His son, George Hinman, born in the early 1850s, worked with his father. Charles Bishop emigrated with his family and began as a laborer, but soon also became an oysterman. Reverend Minny Purnell moved north in the 1850s and turned to oystering in middle age. Minny likely worked the water alongside his son, William. By the late 1870s, George and Horace Purnell were also living on Staten Island and oystering.

Lemon Creek, which feeds into Prince's Bay on the northern side of Raritan Bay, was home port for many Sandy Ground oystermen. Raritan Bay's oyster fishery had a direct connection to the Chesapeake as early as the 1820s.

According to "A History of the Fisheries of Raritan Bay, New York and New Jersey," by Clyde L. MacKenzie Jr., in the *Marine Fisheries Review* (Vol. 52, No. 4, 1990), the industrial oyster fishery in Raritan Bay lasted from 1825 to 1920.

It was the largest fishery in the bay until around 1915, when pollution hastened its decline, MacKenzie noted. The fishery began relying on Chesapeake Bay seed oysters in 1825, taking oysters from fertile beds in the Chesapeake and planting them in Raritan Bay. (The bay's natural oyster beds were depleted by the early 1800s, MacKenzie said, likely due to overfishing and becoming silted over with sediment runoff from the Colonial era's widespread deforestation for agriculture.)

"A substantial number of schooners and some sloops" moved between the bays, according to MacKenzie. "A typical schooner carried about 3,000 bushels of [seed] oysters, which filled about 4 acres of bay bottom, i.e., 750 bushels an acre. The oysters were left to grow from spring to fall-winter and then marketed." He noted that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, about 50 oystermen worked out of Lemon Creek in Prince's Bay.

Yvonne Taylor, a descendant of one of the earliest Sandy Ground families, grew up living with her grandmother in the Coleman House, now the community's oldest remaining home. A founding member and first president of the Sandy Ground Historical Society, she described in a 2015 oral history how her grandfather came to Sandy Ground "because of so many repressive laws enacted in Maryland at that time." She keeps a picture of his identification card from when he was in the oyster industry.

"Some of them could no longer engage in the trade they had been doing all their lives and they had to look for employment in other areas," she said. "They used to occasionally come up the coast and they used to do the digging of the oysters in the beds in Prince's Bay. So they were aware of the fact that the oyster industry in this area was really quite a thriving industry. So many of them decided that they were going to leave their homes and move north… this is what my grandfather did."

In 1943, the *Staten Island Historian* published a Sandy Ground history by Minna Wilkins, who held a doctorate in psychology from Columbia University and interviewed older residents as a longtime genealogy volunteer with the Staten Island Historical Society. She quoted *The Free Negro in Maryland 1634–1860* by James M. Wright: "From Worcester County it

was reported that Free Negro participation had become an injury to the oyster business…accordingly, in 1852 Negros engaged in the oyster industry were especially restricted."

Wilkins also described the routine arrival in Prince's Bay of Chesapeake Bay schooners loaded with seed oysters. "Many of the sloops owned by white men of Maryland were captained and manned by Negroes, so that there is no doubt that [the] Free Negroes of Snow Hill were somewhat familiar with Staten Island."

The Ground Shifts Again

The influx of the Maryland families and the thriving oyster fishery solidified the fledgling community, which grew over time to a close-knit enclave of 180 families, two churches, and two schools. By the late 1800s, however, human pathogens and shoreside industry were polluting the bay. In the early 1900s, reports of Raritan Bay oysters making people sick damaged the industry. By 1925, MacKenzie wrote, bad press forced a permanent closure.

The oystermen had to find other work, said Sylvia D'Alessandro, a founding member and former president of the Sandy Ground Historical Society and a seventh-generation descendant of Moses Harris, a community founder. The community dissolved slowly and then suffered a severe blow in 1963, when an uncontrolled brushfire destroyed 100 homes on Staten Island, 25 of them in Sandy Ground. Since then, redevelopment of the entire area has changed it completely.

Only about 10 homes remain, and about eight families who descend from the earliest residents. Yet, those who call Sandy Ground home still return to the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church, and every year the historical society holds a neighborhood festival celebrating their history.

"It's a positive story on how the community was able to thrive and attract other settlers out here, and they were independent," D'Alessandro said in a 2017 oral history interview for the New York Preservation Project. "I think it's something Staten Island should be proud of, the fact that they offered a safe place for African Americans as early as 1828…Not many places can say that."

The Rossville A.M.E Mount Zion Church, *shown here (above top) in 1908, was one of two churches that rooted the Sandy Ground community. Today, Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church remains a touchstone for Sandy Ground residents and descendants. Every year the historical society holds a neighborhood festival celebrating their history.* PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE STATE ISLAND ADVANCE

It's also a testament to the resilience and ambition of the Snow Hill natives, as well as that of other free Black Marylanders who drew strength from the water despite the array of obstacles before them, said Nugent, whose forthcoming book, *The Greenlining of Staten Island,* will feature a chapter on Sandy Ground.

"Like so much African American history across our nation, the story of Sandy Ground traces its roots back to the Eastern Shore," Nugent said. "It's a story of systemic oppression and undeniable resilience, of deep local knowledge and migration to new terrain. It's a story that should make all of us look back on this place's history with a deep pride for those who overcame great odds *and* a deep commitment to better understanding how race and racism was forged on these shores."

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Diversity Grows in Aquaculture

By Rona Kobell

When Imani Black entered the aquaculture business, she rarely saw anyone who looked like her. She was often the only Black person—and one of very few women—lifting cages and power-washing shells on the oyster farms where she worked in Maryland and Virginia. Often, she was the only person of color buying her morning coffee or the day's supplies in the small rural towns where most of the farms are based.

Though she grew up on the Eastern Shore in a family with strong maritime roots, Black said she began to feel alone in an industry she'd hoped would be part of her future. "I began really looking inside the spaces that influence me, that influence my everyday, and asking, are my spaces as diverse and inclusive as they could be?" That feeling, she says, only grew after Minneapolis police officers killed George Floyd last summer, spurring worldwide protests for racial justice and equity. At the time, Black was a hatchery technician for Hoopers Island Oyster Company in Maryland's rural Dorchester County, and she spent all of her working hours in an entirely white space. She began asking colleagues, when was the last time you saw a minority in a leadership role in aquaculture?

"They were shocked that I was asking that," Black said. "I don't think people really thought about it until I asked, and when I did, they couldn't give me an answer."

Six months later Black answered her own question. She left Hoopers Island and founded Minorities in Aquaculture, a nonprofit dedicated to encouraging more women and people of color to enter the field. The goal, and the nonprofit's mission, is to create a membership group that fosters networking, connects young graduates with mentors, and talks frankly about overcoming challenges in oyster farming.

The group has more than 50 members. Black has connected with other women of color at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), the Chesapeake Conservancy, and NOAA. It has allowed her to promote both her love of all sciences and her particular passion for aquaculture, which she honed as a summer intern working on oyster farms and as a biology major at Old Dominion University (ODU), where she also played lacrosse. (She has been running the nonprofit while coaching lacrosse in the Baltimore and Annapolis suburbs.)

At Old Dominion, she said, some professors steered her more to a career

Imani Black *started her nonprofit, Minorities in Aquaculture, to encourage more women and people of color to enter a field that has not been diverse in the Chesapeake in recent years.* PHOTO, CAROLINE J. PHILLIPS

in communication or the social sciences, noting that she was "good at talking to people." But Black didn't want that, she said, and kept pushing for a discipline that would get her outside and also keep her physically and mentally strong. After earning her undergraduate degree in biology at ODU, she graduated from the Oyster Aquaculture Training program at Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), where renowned oyster geneticist Stan Allen mentored her. She also worked with a team of women that included Jessica Small, associate director of VIMS' Aquaculture Genetics and Breeding Technology Center. Black said working with a mostly female team at VIMS in the hatchery helped her feel less isolated as a woman in the industry, and it also inspired her to build a support system for those who jumped into aquaculture after her.

"For me, what I love is being on the boat, being on the farm, being in the hatchery, doing the hard work," Black said, noting that starting a nonprofit advocacy organization was "not part of my five-year plan." But, she added, "It's really important for me that this is an extension of my own career aspirations. I am bringing people along on my own journey. If I can't do what I'm asking other people to do, then I don't think it's really authentic."

Oyster farmer Scott Budden *(above top) moves a bottom cage on the Chester River in Kent County. Maurice Anderson (above bottom), of Nanticoke, Maryland, pours oysters raised in a nursery onto his lease in the Nanticoke River.* PHOTO (ABOVE TOP), JAY FLEMING, COURTESY OF SCOTT BUDDEN; (ABOVE BOTTOM) DON WEBSTER

Building Connections, Expanding Access

Black is also starting as a faculty research assistant at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science's Horn Point Laboratory this year and intends to matriculate into the masters graduate program this fall with a focus on aquaculture. While at Horn Point, she will be assisting Matt Gray, an ecophysiologist who studies oyster aquaculture and restoration and how organisms adapt to expected environmental changes, including ocean acidification. It is a homecoming of sorts for the Chestertown native, who attended summer camp at the lab and says her mom likes to remind her how she barely stopped talking during the entire hour-long ride home about all the marine animals she'd studied.

"She's exactly the kind of person that we want to have at Horn Point Laboratory," said Michael Roman, the lab's longtime director. Currently the lab has few students or faculty of color, he said, and thus has struggled to help the industry it supports increase its diversity. But Black and her ideas could help change that.

"We are trying to think of innovative ways to build these connections and a farm system to increase the diversity of our students," Roman said. "If we could, that would be wonderful, not only for us, but for the entire field of environmental science."

Black said one of her goals for her nonprofit is to partner with larger organizations, such as CBF and the Choose Clean Water Coalition, and expand opportunities for minorities in this field. That could mean more access to funding for establishing farms, providing assistance getting into graduate school, or connecting with mentors in the field.

She's become a member of CBF's Chesapeake Oyster Alliance and is partnering with the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center on education programs. With the help of the connections established through this networking, she hopes to visit schools in Baltimore City and encourage careers in aquaculture. It may be a challenge, Black said, as some city students may not even be familiar with oysters.

But, more Americans are turning to fish and shellfish as healthy protein alternatives, and this may provide new opportunities. According to NOAA's 2018 Fisheries of the United States Report, the average American ate 16.1 pounds of fish and shellfish, the highest level of consumption reported since 2007.

When Americans eat fish, they often turn to farm-raised seafood. It can take pressure off the oceans, and it's often widely available in stores. Increased demand has helped grow jobs in this sector; Black just wants to make sure more of the new hires look like her.

Maryland natural resources officials want oyster farmers to use their leases, so the general rule is that farmers must plant 25 percent of their lease annually.

Karl Roscher, who runs the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) aquaculture program, said though the DNR doesn't keep demographic data, he knows that some Black oyster farmers hold leases while others work on them. But several oyster farmers acknowledge that the profession is mostly white and mostly

male. Steve Vilnit, who served as Maryland DNR's seafood marketing manager from 2010 until 2015, said he "certainly didn't know of many minorities that had leases" during his tenure there. As vice president of marketing for the distributor Capital Seaboard, Vilnit said the farmers he currently sees bringing oysters to market are overwhelmingly white.

Scott Budden, one of the three owners of Orchard Point Oyster Company in Queen Anne's County, is of Korean descent. He believes he is the only leaseholder who is not white working in the state presently. Gardiner Douglas, a Black oyster shucker who started an oyster delivery business, said "it would be fair to say" that most oyster farmers in Maryland are white.

But, as Vince Leggett and other maritime historians have noted through extensive research, Black Americans' participation in Chesapeake Bay maritime culture is neither a new idea nor is it taking a different approach; the reality is that they have a rich and long history on the water. African Americans captained schooners, dredged for oysters, clammed, crabbed, and made sails for all manner of sailing craft. They were also, at one time, oyster farmers. "Nearly a third" of the men who held leases on the Nanticoke River in the 1970s were Black, according to Don Webster, a regional specialist with University of Maryland Extension who has worked in the field for more than 40 years.

Many of the Black oyster farmers, including Nanticoke stalwarts Dave Wallace and Maurice Anderson, left the business because the pathogens *Haplosporidium nelsoni* and *Perkinsus marinus* led to, respectively, the MSX and Dermo diseases, which devastated regional oyster populations.

Black recently looked into her own ancestry and found that her longtime fascination with the Chesapeake Bay may well be in her genes. Her forebears worked the water in Rock Hall and Cambridge and were part of a deep waterman's culture on the Eastern Shore dating back to the 1800s.

Shannon Hood *tumbles oysters at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science's Horn Point Laboratory.* PHOTO, CHERYL NEMAZIE, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

Women in Aquaculture

Hatcheries have long been welcoming to women—indeed, women manage the hatchery operations at Horn Point, the largest hatchery in Maryland, as well as at Morgan State University's Patuxent Environmental and Aquatic Research Laboratory (PEARL) in Calvert County. Women are also operating most of the private hatcheries in Virginia. But there are not as many women in the field, lifting the cages, setting the oysters, or power-washing the equipment.

Women, too, are part of Minorities in Aquaculture's focus. Black said she always felt strong enough to do the heavy lifting, even as the men around her underestimated her. In some cases, Black had more training than her bosses where she worked, she said.

Shannon Hood knows that feeling, too, as well as that of proving herself over and over again. An agent with Maryland Sea Grant Extension, Hood runs a demonstration oyster farm at Horn Point. When she first decided she wanted to enter the aquaculture profession, she'd call oyster farmers and ask if she could get experience on their farm; they'd often respond offering her work in their nurseries or supporting their marketing efforts.

"It was tough because I was automatically relegated to do the light duty work," Hood said. When she did get a chance to work on farms as part of an internship program, as with True Chesapeake Oyster Company in Southern Maryland and Madhouse Oyster Company on the Eastern Shore, Hood said, "I probably overdid it—trying not to show any weakness. I felt like I had to work really, really hard. What I experienced was this feeling of not wanting to mess it up."

Eventually, Hood realized the heavy cages causing her to throw out her back were unwieldy for all staff to maneuver. She began thinking of innovative ways to make the work less physically stressful for everyone. The demonstration oyster farm makes equipment and tries new growing techniques that help oysters survive longer and reduce the amount of labor required. It ought to bode well for growing Maryland's industry; Virginia, which has had a leased bed system for more than a century, already has the largest oyster aquaculture industry on the East Coast. And it has only been raising the "seedless," sterile oysters that many farmers grow for less than 20 years.

"We have the capacity, we have the people, we can build momentum," Hood said. "I think we've got a shot at turning this into something big."

Black is hoping that as she, Hood, and others help the aquaculture industry grow bigger, they can also make it more diverse.

"In my own experience of being a minority, I've been heavily discouraged many times," Black said. "I felt like it was my responsibility to create a safe space, because it was something I still needed."

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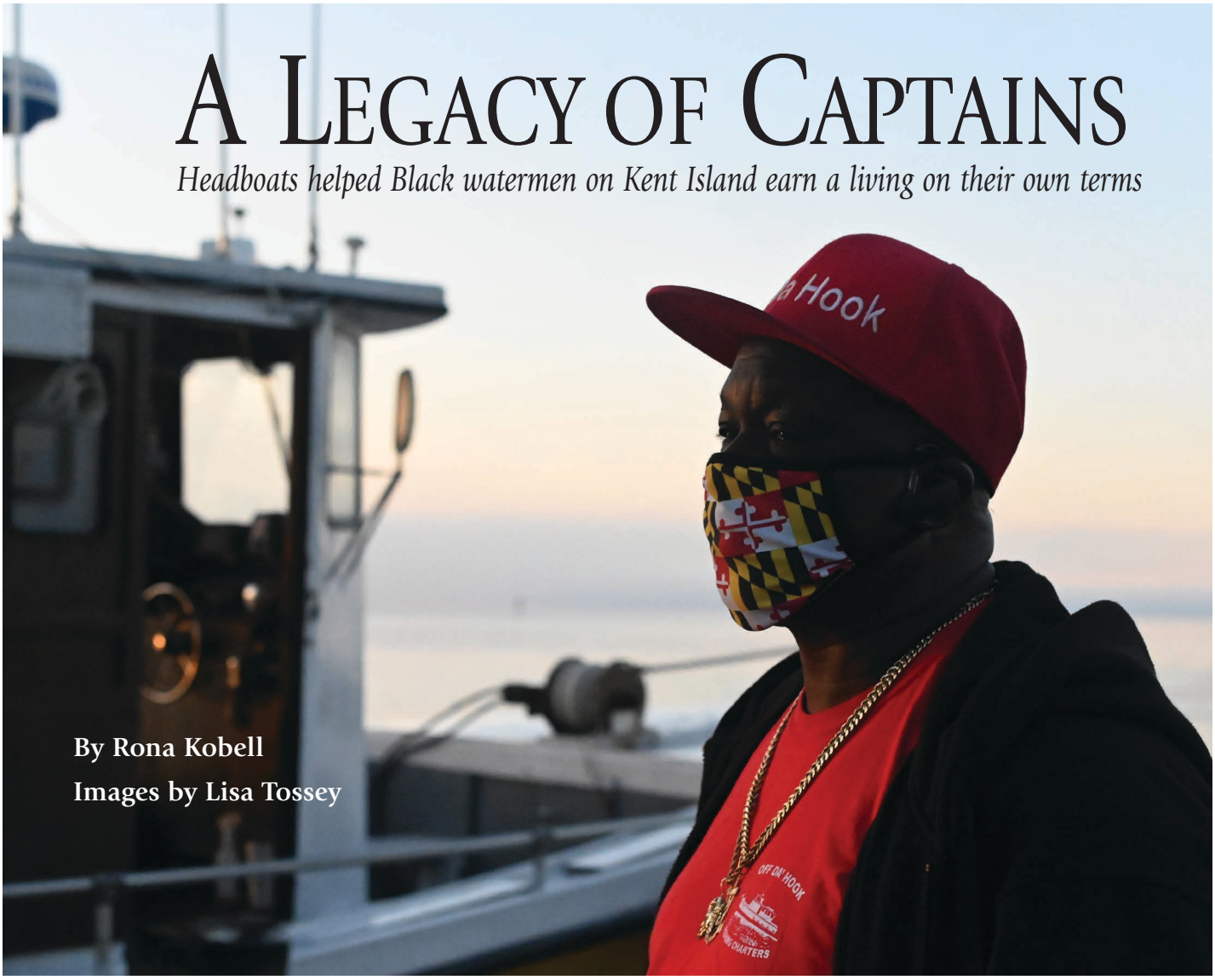
A Legacy of Captains

Headboats helped Black watermen on Kent Island earn a living on their own terms



By Rona Kobell

Images by Lisa Tossey

Lamont Wright Sr. starts his Saturday mornings the same way his father does. He arrives at Kent Narrows under a dark sky and helps to ready his father Montro's boat, the *Shirley B III,* for a day of fishing. They'll be chasing the spot, croaker, and perch that shelter in oyster reefs in the Choptank and Chester rivers as well as the main stem of the Chesapeake Bay.

As the sun rises, he and Montro greet regulars from the Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, metro regions. After coolers and gear are loaded, the boat will pull away from the dock, and the clients—customers who have become friends—will trade stories about the antics at the last family cookout, or the latest church wedding. Sometimes, the music is Otis Redding; other times, it's sounds of the sitar or the voices of clients speaking Korean, Mandarin, or Hindi.

Lamont Wright Sr., 63, is one of 11 Black headboat captains who work out of a marina next to The Jetty restaurant at Wells Cove in Grasonville, Maryland. These captains target bottom-dwelling fish—smaller species for cooking and eating—as opposed to the trophy rockfish that many Bay anglers chase or the marlin and other offshore species that charter captains and their clients pursue in the Atlantic out of Ocean City, Maryland.

The Kent Island bottom-fishing captains are continuing a tradition that began some 50 years ago, according to Tyrone Meredith, whose father, Eldridge Meredith, started it. The story his father told, Tyrone said, is that a couple from Baltimore, who were headed to Ocean City for some fishing, stopped at his father's nightclub on Kent Island, called the Weeping Willow Inn. Enjoying the ambiance, they asked if he knew anyone who could take them out fishing from Kent Narrows sometime. Eldridge Meredith was a waterman, and said he could take them. The couple returned to Baltimore, told their friends, and the next week Eldridge Meredith got another call, his son said.

Captain Lamont Wright Sr. *stands by his father's boat, the* Shirley B III.

Montro Wright *(above top) readies his boat, the* Shirley B III, *for a morning of fishing. The boat, the third he has owned, is named for his longtime wife, Shirley.* BASE MAP, ESRI

So began a charter fishing business that lasted until Meredith's death at 93 just a few years ago, which the captains say largely catered to a Black clientele from Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia and Southern Maryland. It also sparked interest in the recreational fishing business among his friends and relatives in the Kent Island area, including Lamont Wright's father, Montro. Some of them remain in the business today.

"My father got into it, then my uncle, then my father's best friend and their sons," said Lamont Wright Sr., now retired from a career in Anne Arundel County government. "There's two generations of us now. Our fathers were Black captains, and we became Black captains as well. I strictly fish. I do not do anything else. I'm not going to do anything else."

Many other captains work charter boats that can charge over $900 a day to take a party out for a day of fishing, stopping when the group's members catch their limit. Headboats, in contrast, charge by the person, or head. Parties can reserve the boats in advance and guarantee they will be together—church groups and clubs will often do that—but most of the headboats will charge $60 a person and leave the dock when they're full. That allows customers to make a last-minute decision if the day looks like a good one and show up at the dock at dawn. The headboat captains use GPS coordinates to return to coveted fishing spots and specialized instruments that use sonar waves to locate fish in the water column called "fishfinders" to pick the area where they'll fish.

Looking for Black Captains

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) does not collect demographic information for fishing licenses. But George O'Donnell, customer relations manager for Maryland DNR's Fishing and Boating Services, said that "Queen Anne's County has the largest numbers of Black participation in the fisheries." That includes, he said, oystering, crabbing, and running the Narrows' headboats.

"That's really the story everywhere you go except here – that they've died off," said O'Donnell, a former waterman and Queen Anne's County commissioner. "Today, I don't know of a single Black clammer on the Chesapeake Bay. The bottom line, there's not a lot of Black watermen on the Bay now."

O'Donnell wanted to be sure the captains had a voice in the regulations that controlled their destiny and recruited some of them to serve on state advisory committees overseeing fishery regulation. Their input was especially helpful, he says, when the department wanted to significantly cut limits on spot. After hearing from one Black captain about how such a cut would impact his business, the department scaled it back. He made sure their names were on the Maryland Waterman's Monument the county commissioned in 2003.

"They're wonderful people, and they bring a lot to the table," O'Donnell said. "They have become well-known for doing it, and because they do it, there's more minority participation in recreational fishing."

Several captains interviewed for this story say that the majority of

Tyrone Meredith, *a headboat captain in Kent Narrows, also dredges for oysters in the winter. His father, Eldridge Meredith, is largely credited with starting the tradition of Black headboat captains in the Narrows.* PHOTO, WILL PARSON / CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

their customers historically have been Black, and that they returned time and again because they felt comfortable with Black captains and enjoyed the camaraderie, including friendly banter among the captains on the marine radio. But that began to change in the summer of 2020. After nationwide protests were sparked by the killing of George Floyd in May, many Black-owned businesses began to see more white customers patronize them, including Wright and his father.

Wright says that since the COVID-19 pandemic began, at least 30 percent of his new customers last year were women, many of them white, who had never fished before. Some came back more than once with large groups. Social media helped spread the word, and groups such as book clubs and wine clubs, for instance, began calling, seeking a safe and fun outdoor activity. Being outside on a boat fit that well, Wright said. Both father and son made sure they and their customers work masks, observed social distancing, and frequently sanitized hands.

Captain Tyrone Meredith, who has worked on headboats since he was 6 years old when he had to stand on a crate to reach the controls on his father's boat, noticed the same changes in his charter business.

"My new customers are looking for Black captains to go fishing with right now," he said. One of his boats, the *Island Queen II,* holds 50 people; the other, the *Miss H.B. Goode,* holds 20, which is more typical. Like the Wrights, Meredith didn't pack in the passengers in 2020. He wanted to make sure customers wore masks, kept a six-foot distance, and stayed safe. Even with fewer people by choice, Meredith said, it was one of the best years because of the focus on Black business support, which spread through campaigns on social media. The new customers made up for some that he lost, including church groups, whose mostly elderly members didn't feel safe going out.

The Best That Ever Did It

Tyrone Meredith's cousin, James "Buck" Lynch, said that watching Eldridge Meredith inspired him in 1999 to diversify from crabbing and oystering to also operating his headboat, the *Stephanie III.* With crabbing and oystering, Lynch said, the buyers controlled the prices. But running a headboat meant that he could charge what he wanted, take as many clients as he wanted up to his 24-passenger limit, and control his schedule. With 10 or 12 clients at $60 a head, he can make a good and predictable income. In the winter, he dredges for oysters.

But he acknowledged that it took months to build a clientele and that Eldridge Meredith was "the best that ever did it." Word of mouth in the Black community is strong, Lynch said, and while the Black captains share customers among them, many regulars have their favorite boats.

"I have quite a few that won't go with anyone but me," he said. "If they call and I don't have room, they will go another day."

A Treasure Trove

When filmmaker S. Torriano Berry moved from Los Angeles to Washington, DC, in the 1990s to teach at Howard University, the longtime fisherman sought a regular and reliable fishing spot. One day, he saw a neighbor unloading a cooler of perch and croaker and asked where he'd gone. The neighbor told Berry about the Black captains in Kent Narrows, and Berry decided to take his camera down there as soon as he could.

Berry, who'd fished in the Bahamas, Florida, and throughout California, was elated by what he found in the Narrows: the Merediths, the Wrights, the Butlers, and the Roys, father-son teams employing extended families and committed to excellent fishing experiences for their mostly Black clientele.

"I had been in lots of places with headboats, but I'd never seen Black captains, or even heard of one. So to find a treasure trove of Black captains in one place so close to home was astonishing to me," he said.

Berry would become a regular customer before he retired and returned to his native Iowa a few years ago. He left the captains with a parting gift: *Black Captains of the Chesapeake,* a 50-minute documentary that aired on Maryland Public Television. He dedicated the film to his fisherman father, who died before the film was finished, and to Captain George Roy, who died shortly before it premiered.

"It's a part of history that people need to know about," Berry said. "I went 14 years in Washington without knowing about it. Hopefully, now a lot more people will know, and they won't have to wait that long."

Buck Lynch and Lamont Wright Sr. are hoping the tradition doesn't end with them. Lynch's only child, a daughter, died of ovarian cancer; Wright has 11 children, four of whom are in the water business. Both men have mentored young Black men on Kent Island, hoping to convince them to enter the business. And Meredith takes his 6-year-old grandson, Bryson, out, putting him on a box to see just like his dad did for him, hoping the view will inspire the boy to continue the tradition.

But the barriers are steep. The United States Coast Guard-issued license needed to operate the boat is expensive and requires training. Lamont Wright Sr. is hoping to raise money to sponsor members of the younger generation who want to get their licenses and train them on his boat. His father, too, is willing to give them boat time. They both believe it's crucial for Black clients have a space to fish and feel comfortable, and that Black captains are able to control their own careers.

"This is a tradition," Wright said, "and I don't want it to die."

—kobell@mdsg.umd.edu

Captain Montro Wright *(above top) readies coolers for storing fish on board with his grandson. The* Shirley B III *(above bottom) pulls away from the dock and into the fog after loading up for a day of fishing.*

BELLEVUE

The Turner family defies the odds

By Rona Kobell

About seven miles south of St. Michaels, along winding roads that pass country churches and farmhouses nestled in waving marsh grasses, there is a village known mostly, if it is known at all, as the terminus of the oldest privately operated ferry in the nation. It is Bellevue, in Talbot County, the western destination of the two-stop Oxford-Bellevue Ferry, which has operated since 1683. An official historic marker on site notes that it has run continuously since 1836.

What is not as clear from looking around is the rich history of African American entrepreneurs in Bellevue, though it is well-known among the locals. The Turner family of Bellevue operated a pair of seafood enterprises that thrived for almost 50 years on this rural peninsula of Talbot County, where decades earlier Frederick Douglass had been enslaved near St. Michaels.

It was not the only Black seafood business in the county but one of several; Coulbourne & Jewett Seafood Packing Company would become the largest employer in St. Michaels for several years, and many Black entrepreneurs owned seafood processing plants, captained skipjacks, and ran oyster shucking businesses as well as their own water-related enterprises. The Turners were known for an industrious work ethic as well as innovative practices, such as insisting that crabs be sold by weight and not volume so as not to cheat the buyer with the larger ones filling out the top of the bushel.

"Ever since I was 13 or 14 years old, I got the idea of what working and being involved with business was like. When we got out of school, I automatically knew, without pay, I'd have to go down there," said Alex Green, a Turner descendant who grew up in Bellevue and now owns Harriet Tubman Tours, a historical touring company in Dorchester

Turner & Sons *crabmeat can.* GIFT OF SCOTT RAY, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (1999.15.1)

In 1937, *Aubrey and Samuel "Eddie" Turner bought two acres off Tar Creek in Bellevue, Maryland. The first Turner seafood business was called W.A. Turner & Sons. A can from the time (right bottom) shows this name. In 1966, the Turners opened Bellevue Seafood Company (right top). As late as the 1970s, both businesses employed many local Black residents.* PHOTO (RIGHT TOP), WILLIAM C. KEPNER, UNDATED, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (1231.1); (RIGHT BOTTOM), GIFT OF SCOTT RAY, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (1999.15.1); BASE MAP, ESRI

County. "I do what I do now because of who my grandfather [Otis Turner] was. My grandfather was a storyteller."

The story of how Bellevue thrived, and how the Turners helped it thrive, could be a book, or at least a graduate school thesis. But even the broad outlines of the story sketch a family so innovative and hard-working that those who knew them still fondly recall their contributions to the industry.

A Rising Tide for Black Entrepreneurs

The Turner's legacy in Bellevue began in 1891, with William Samuel Turner. The man known as "Sam Sr." came to Baltimore from Kentucky and took a job ferrying freight up and down the Chesapeake Bay for the seafood industry, as well as wheat and other farm staples and even bricks and construction materials, eventually working his way up to captain of a schooner. By 1899, he was traveling to Bellevue to serve the Valliant family cannery, which William Valliant, a white businessman, owned. Along with the seafood plant, Valliant owned most of the houses and a company store. Valliant soon offered Turner the job of captaining the company's schooner, the *S.J. Delan*. So, Sam moved to Bellevue and stayed to work for Valliant.

Like Valliant, Sam Sr. was a white man. He married Rachel, a Black woman, and had one child, Aubrey, with her. After Rachel died, he married his second wife, Alma (Moore) Turner, also a Black woman. He had three more sons: William, Otis, and Kermit.

In 1937, Aubrey and his son Samuel "Eddie" Turner bought two acres off Tar Creek in Bellevue for what they said was a chicken operation—an industry beginning to take off on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Eddie Turner had earned the money to buy it from his work at a Civilian Conservation Corps camp. He sent the money home, his son, Edzel Turner, recalled. They had always intended to turn the operation into a seafood plant, Edzel added.

By the early 1940s, the Turner family ran the largest seafood operation in town, and many Black watermen in the village worked for them. To this day, a large percentage of Bellevue's residents are Black homeowners, according to Edzel Turner, though he said the community's demographics are slowly shifting as white residents move to the area.

The first iteration of the Turners' company was called W.A. Turner & Sons, which focused primarily on steaming and packing crabmeat. In 1966, the Turners started a second company, Bellevue Seafood Company, to process clams. It eventually processed oysters also, and finally returned to the family roots with crabmeat.

According to the Maryland Historic Trust—based on an interview with Hayward Turner, another one of Eddie Turner's sons, who has since passed away—their crabmeat was sent to at least 11 major companies on the Shore at that time for distribution. Those included J.M. Clayton Company in Cambridge, United Shellfish in Grasonville, and Bay Food Products in Baltimore.

"The Turners were such great innovators, thinkers, and businessmen that they shifted the market," Alex Green said. "It was a thriving business. It was a big enterprise going on."

These were times when Black entrepreneurs were asserting themselves

in the seafood business. Among them were the Coulbourne & Jewett Seafood Packing Company, which became one of the first in the Chesapeake Bay to sell crabs and crabmeat, as the estuary at that time was mostly known for its oysters.

Founded in 1902 by Frederick S. Jewett, his wife, Henrietta, and their friend, William H.T. Coulbourne, by 1910 the Coulbourne & Jewett Seafood Packing Company became the first company to grade crabmeat according to the classifications we still use today—lump, backfin, special, and claw—with each commanding different prices.

Located on Navy Point in St. Michaels (now home to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum), it was the only Maryland company to pack a million pounds of crabmeat between 1935–40, according to Frederick Jewett's son, Elwood, who worked for his father and took over the company when the elder Jewett retired.

By the 1940s, about 100 people were employed year-round shucking oysters, steaming crabs, and shipping product. Advances in freezing and shipping helped the business grow until the 1960s, when shellfish harvests declined.

The Weather Doesn't Hold

In 1972, Tropical Storm Agnes and the record rainfall that accompanied it led to a drop in Chesapeake Bay salinity. The reduced salinity, combined with high water temperatures, devastated the soft-shell clam fishery and hobbled the oyster industry, as these shellfish were particularly stressed by the changes in environmental conditions. Blue crabs were what they had left, Edzel Turner recalled, but it at times didn't feel like much to hold on to. "We were more or less in survival mode," said Edzel. "It was hard to get enough product to stay in business."

As late as the 1970s, the Turners' two seafood companies employed about 70 people, many of them town residents, according to the Bellevue Village Master Plan prepared by Talbot County.

But eventually, the Turners could no longer hold on as the clam, oyster,

BUSINESSMAN AND BOATBUILDER

To help support the Turners' seafood businesses, Samuel E. "Eddie" Turner (right) turned to his considerable skills as a boatbuilder of the traditional Chesapeake deadrise workboat design. Along with his boats, among them the *William S. Turner* and *William A. Turner* (below), he was also notable for his creative names for some of his vessels. They included *Superman, Ladybird,* and *Jocko Graves*—the latter named after a young Black man who died protecting George Washington.

Russel Dize, a longtime Tilghman Island waterman who knew the Turners well, said that Eddie's boatbuilding talents were well-known. "I think [Eddie] liked to build boats more than he actually liked to fish," Dize said.

PHOTO (ABOVE TOP), WILLIAM C. KEPNER, 2000, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (1070.3); (ABOVE MIDDLE), JOHN E. ALIYETTI, 1977, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (930.5); (ABOVE BOTTOM), JOHN E. ALIYETTI, 1977, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (930.9)

Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Jewett *(left top) of the Colbourne & Jewett Seafood Packing Company. Their plant was founded in 1902 and became one of the first to sell crabs and crabmeat. In 1910, the company became the first company to grade crabmeat according to the classifications we still use today—lump, backfin, special, and claw—with each commanding different prices. The large main structure of the Colbourne & Jewett Seafood Packing Company (left bottom) was located on Navy Point in St. Michaels (the current location of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum).* PHOTO (LEFT TOP), H. ROBINS HOLLYDAY, UNDATED, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE TALBOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY; (LEFT BOTTOM), C.C. HARRIS PHOTOGRAPH, 1966, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE TALBOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

and blue crab fisheries declined. In 1996, W.A. Turner & Sons closed. Two years later, Bellevue Seafood Company shut its doors.

The Turner companies were far from the only seafood processors to go under because of changes beyond their control, among them oyster diseases, natural disasters, the boom-and-bust cycle of crabs, and environmental changes. Today, the Maryland Department of Agriculture lists 20 licensed oyster and crab processors, down from hundreds in their heyday.

A Significant Achievement

Still, nearly five decades in the seafood business was a significant achievement for a Black family, according to Vincent Leggett, historian and founder of Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation. Leggett has spent a large part of the last three decades interviewing Black mariners, watermen, sailmakers, and seafood entrepreneurs. He knew the elder Turners well, and visited the company before it closed for good.

Leggett said that the Turners and the few other Black businesses at the time had to push against a deck often stacked against them. Some, he said, had to give their oysters to white men to sell for them at a higher price because buyers would not purchase from Black men. Other times, the seafood packers would "run out" of ice when it was time for a Black man to pack his oysters, meaning they would spoil and become worthless. For Leggett, the myth of no color on the water didn't hold up the deeper he went into his interviews.

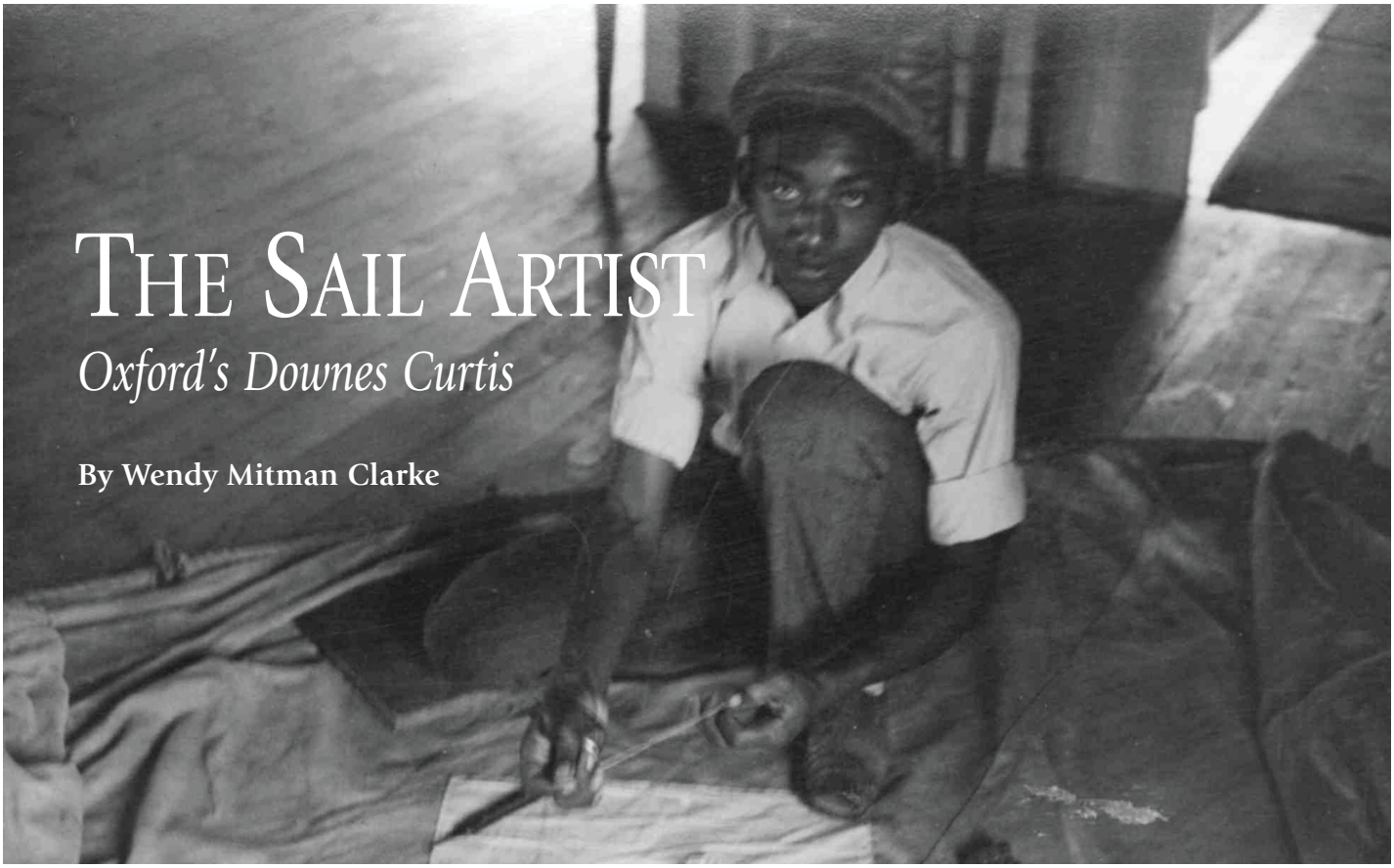
"I've heard the statements about how there's equity and fairness on the water, but I've heard more stories about the disparities on the water. The stories have been romanticized over the years, and in some cases sanitized. If a deeper dig was made, you would probably find more stories where the playing field was not level," Leggett said.

Russell Dize, a longtime Tilghman Island waterman who is white, worked with many Black captains when he had a seafood processing business. He knew the Turners well. Much has changed, he said, in the years since their seafood businesses closed. And a lot of it not for the better, as the fisheries of the Chesapeake have struggled and so many of his friends, Black and white, have had to leave the business.

"We've lost most of our Black watermen; we don't have that many in Talbot County now," said Dize, now 79. "It's a way of life, gone."

—kobell@mdsg.umd.edu

Chesapeake Quarterly writer Wendy Mitman Clarke contributed to this story.



The Sail Artist

Oxford's Downes Curtis

By Wendy Mitman Clarke

Maryland's deep maritime heritage is inextricably linked to the stories and experiences of Black people on the Chesapeake Bay. As an enslaved boy, Frederick Douglass began to learn to read and write while spending time in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard in Baltimore, where he watched shipwrights mark each piece of timber with a letter indicating its location in the ship's construction. Later, he worked as a caulker for Fells Point shipbuilder William Gardner, and he used those skills to get a foot in the door on the wharves in New Bedford, Massachusetts, when he fled Maryland and slavery in 1838.

It's likely that free and enslaved Black Marylanders worked in the lofts supporting the fleets of sail-powered vessels that dominated Bay commerce until well into the early 20th century. But one of the only full-time, independent Black sailmakers in the state through the 1900s, and certainly the most enduring, was Downes Curtis of Oxford, Maryland.

He and his younger brother, Albert, learned the craft from Dave Pritchett, an English sailmaker who had come to the Eastern Shore town on the Tred Avon River. When Pritchett died in 1936, Downes and Albert continued the work of the sail loft.

"We cut canvas sails for log canoes and oyster-dredging boats, you know, skipjacks and bugeyes," Curtis told Jack Sherwood in *Maryland's Vanishing Lives*. "If they didn't get sails from us, they got them from Mr. Brown in Deal Island. Mr. Brown is gone. Only us is left who do it the old-timey way."

According to Sherwood, the brothers also cut sails for their oysterman father, Raphael, as well as for recreational yachtsmen who brought their boats to one of Oxford's many boatyards.

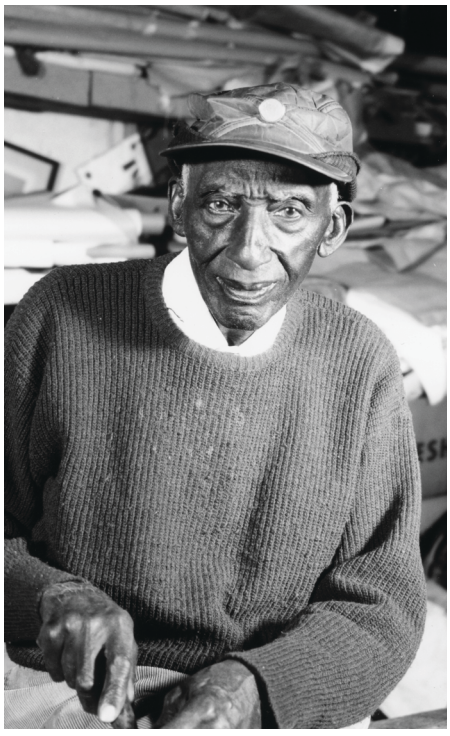
A 2001 story in the *Easton Star-Democrat* noted that the brothers made sails for the likes of Errol Flynn, James Cagney, Walter Cronkite, and the Kennedy family, among others.

The loft building itself was once a school for African American children up to grade eight, Agnes Washington, Curtis' sister, told the Easton newspaper. "All nine Curtis children attended classes at the schoolhouse where our mother had been a teacher," she said. Today, the loft building is a private residence. The owner told a local news crew she still finds hooks and nails from when the Curtis brothers stretched sails across the floor.

Downes Curtis *(above top) in his early twenties. The loft building (above bottom) where Curtis and his brother, Albert, worked. The building was once a school for African American children.* PHOTO (ABOUT TOP), H. ROBINS HOLLYDAY, 1930–1935, COLLECTION OF THE TALBOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY; (ABOVE BOTTOM) RICHARD DODDS, 1986, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (668.32)

Locally, Curtis became best known for his craftsmanship in building sails for traditional log canoes. Once used for commercial fishing and oystering, low-slung log canoes now are used only for racing on the Chesapeake, with the fleet based on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Like other commercial boats of the time, speed to market was of the essence, and log canoes—their open hulls loaded with oysters for ballast—carried clouds of sail to propel them. Today, the clouds of sail remain, but the ballast is human–crews who hike out on boards called prys to keep the over-canvassed, tender boats from capsizing.

Curtis became a renowned log canoe sailmaker and cut sails for some of the most competitive and historic boats in the fleet. His skills were such that they were noted by historians who sought to place the log canoe *Island Blossom* on the National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1892 in Tilghman Island, *Island Blossom* is now owned by Judge John North of St. Michaels, and the Maryland Historical Trust's National Register Properties listing notes that, "The sails were cut by Downes Curtis of Oxford."



Downes Curtis *and his younger brother, Albert, (top left) working in the sail loft. Curtis was known for his sails for Chesapeake log canoes like* Island Blossom, *shown here in the background (top right). The straight stitch sewing machine (above) used by Downes Curtis; a portrait of Curtis in 1996 (right).* PHOTO (TOP LEFT), H. ROBINS HOLLYDAY, UNDATED, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE TALBOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY; (TOP RIGHT) UNDATED, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (36.3); (ABOVE) DAVID W. HARP, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (1997.1.117); (RIGHT), JOHN W. CANE, 1996, CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM COLLECTION (945.44)

Curtis continued to make sails in his loft until his death in 1996 at age 85. In 2015, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum (CBMM) launched an exhibition featuring his tools and sailmaker's bench. The museum's magazine, *The Weather Gauge,* noted in a 1997 story that Curtis "stands out as an African-American maritime artisan on the Chesapeake Bay."

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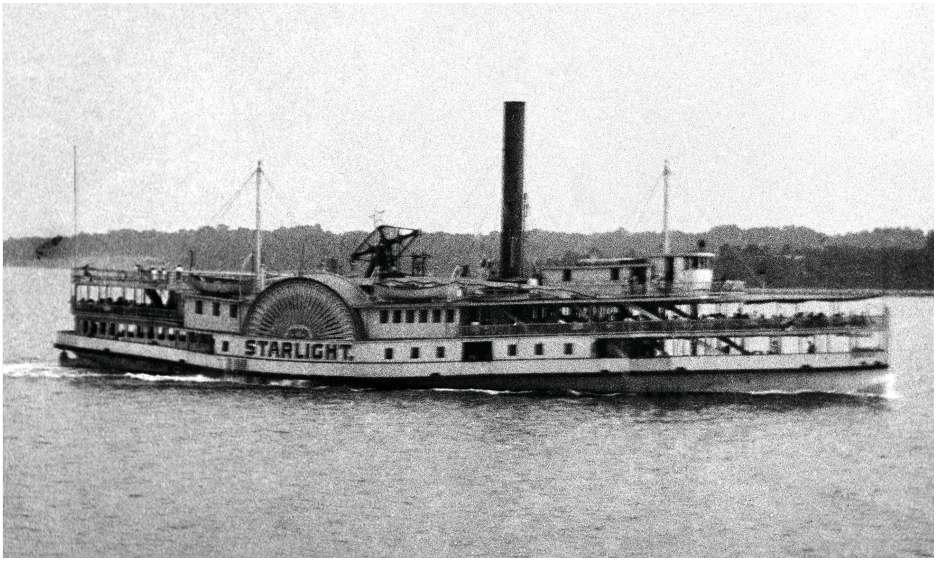
Chesapeake Quarterly Editor Rona Kobell contributed to this story.



Baltimore's Captain

George W. Brown

By Wendy Mitman Clarke

The year was 1914, and the story in the *Afro-American,* Baltimore, newspaper was breathless with anticipation. Opening day at Brown's Grove on Rock Creek near the mouth of the Patapsco River was set for May 7, and 2,000 people were expected to board the steamer *Starlight* for an afternoon of amusements.

"Captain George Brown who is the captain of the *Starlight* as well as owner and manager of Brown's Grove has been busy all the winter getting things in shape at the grove, so that those who take the trip Sunday afternoon will find a resort different in many respects from the one which greeted them last year," the newspaper enthused. "Probably the most interesting new feature will be the miniature railway which has been completed and will traverse the entire grove. A new carousel has also been installed."

Bayside resorts and the accompanying steamboats to ferry their patrons over and back for a day or more of fun were common in the late 1800s through the mid-20th century. The popular beaches at Betterton, Tolchester, and even Kent Island's Love Point were prized among Baltimoreans who longed to escape the city's summer heat.

But during the post-Reconstruction era of Jim Crow, Black people weren't welcome at those resorts. Although some steamboats would carry Black passengers, segregation was the rule onboard. As late as 1952, when Sandy Point State Park opened as the first state park in Maryland that permitted African Americans, the bathhouses remained segregated. In Annapolis, Black entrepreneurs opened Highland, Carr's, and Sparrow's beaches from the 1890s to early 1930s to serve an African American clientele with money to spend but nowhere that would welcome them to do so. They threw parties, hosted concerts, and provided top-notch entertainment. And in Baltimore, an ambitious and savvy young man who arrived from North Carolina in November 1896 "without one cent in the pockets of his seer-sucker suit" would go them one step further.

In 1906, after operating one year with a chartered, 200-passsenger steamboat called the *J.W. Newbill,* Capt. George W. Brown partnered with Walter R. Langley in 1907 to charter a 450-passenger steamboat; they bought it outright a year later and renamed it *Starlight.* A 1960 story in the *Afro-American* states that "In three years, Captain Brown had paid off all the mortgages on his boat and purchased a 45-acre tract on Rock Creek in Anne Arundel County."

"He's visionary, because that type of entertainment and maritime work coming together is really not available to that community," said Philip J. Merrill, CEO and founder of Nanny Jack & Company, and a historian and archivist who has studied Brown as part of his Old West Baltimore historical project. "If you look at it from an economic standpoint, he's creating economic opportunities for the Black community" by hiring dozens of Black employees to operate his steamboats and work at Brown's Grove, a point made repeatedly in news stories and letters to the editor of the time.

"The entire crew of the Steamer Starlight, which is one of the largest excursion steamers on the Chesapeake Bay, is composed of colored men," noted another *Afro-American* story. "Most of the officers and mechanics who operate the boat have been trained by Captain Brown, and it was through his efforts that colored men were allowed licenses to do this grade of work. Such an opportunity could never have been obtained by colored men on white boats. All told there are about 50 employees receiving salaries that reach as high as $150 monthly."

Brown also made a shrewd choice in landing Langley as his partner early on, Merrill said. "The Langley family were produce-dealers, and Langley was a strong Black surname in Baltimore. He aligned himself with a business partner who had some local clout and respect." Being a successful, well-connected

***The steamer* Starlight** *in 1915.* PHOTO, COURTESY OF THE MARINERS' MUSEUM AND PARK

Black businessman in Baltimore wasn't unique, Merrill said, "but the field that [Brown] is in is extremely unique at the time. He was a pioneer."

Over 30 years, Brown would become one of Baltimore's most prominent and beloved Black business leaders, whose every move—from his penchant for top-of-the-line automobiles and high-speed driving to his second marriage to a socialite well-known in Washington, DC, circles—made news. He made it to the top of Baltimore's business and social circles, becoming a board member of the YMCA, a trustee of the prominent Cosmopolitan Community Church, and a member of the Masons. Yet, he never lost his touch with his roots.

"He was a friend of sinners and Christians, clergymen and dance promoters, the upper crust and the lower," wrote Ida Peters in a June 13, 1981 remembrance. "Baltimoreans loved him and trusted him. His excursion boat and the grove at the end were a rendezvous from the summer heat. From 1906 to 1935, more than 3.5 million people traveled on his steamers."

In a letter to the *Afro-American* editor dated July 27, 1929, Linwood G. Koger urged local clubs, churches, and service organizations to patronize Brown's Grove and Capt. Brown's steamboats. Without it, Koger said, Black Baltimoreans would have no place to go for summer recreation.

"It provides the only recreation on the Bay for the poorer people of our group who have not automobiles to go to other watering places and can raise but fifty cents to refresh themselves. Effort is made to keep the entire business clean and respectable. It is as safe as any other boat owned by any people … we are fortunate to have some place to recreate ourselves around Baltimore. If Captain Brown's boat and grove are discontinued we shall not have any place to go and land for recreation, and we, only, shall be culpable. What shall we do about it?"

Brown's story as much as his success made him a captivating figure. According to articles written about him over the years, he began working at 8 years old in a machine shop in Little Washington, North Carolina. Over time, his skills and ambition led him to the position of foreman over several white employees. "Prejudice reared its ugly head, and threatening letters poured in upon him with the sinister advice to leave town," according to a March 16, 1929, story in the *Afro-American*. He held out two more years before giving his savings to his mother and heading to Baltimore in 1896, basically penniless. "He helped unload the boat that brought him and got 50 cents. That insured him a night's lodging."

Capt. George W. Brown, *dressed in white at the far right, is gathered with several prominent Baltimoreans, including educator and school principal John N. Cotton, seated in front; directly behind him, Milton Q. Dorsey, an educator and president of the Monumental Democratic Club, the African American Democratic Club of Baltimore; and in the far left, back row, James A.B. Callis, an educator, YMCA president, and president of the Colored High School (Baltimore) Alumni Association.* PHOTO, EARLY G. LANE'S STUDIO, MID 1920S, COURTESY OF PHILIP J. MERRILL, NANNY JACK & CO ARCHIVES.

By the spring of 1906, he was working for a laundry business when he was sent to pick up some equipment to ship to Baltimore. "There were two coaches to the train—one for white passengers, the other for baggage, animals, and Negroes," the 1929 *Afro-American* article said. "As George Brown rode in that coach, with a bird dog for company, he suddenly decided to devote the rest of his life and energies to some form of transportation for Negroes. A railroad was out of the question; a boat was the other alternative."

"He immediately resigned his job, chartered a steamer for $25 a day, leased a grove on Bare Creek, and started in the excursion business," the 1929 article continued. "This began an enterprise which is Baltimore's pride and a monument to the outstanding characteristics of this unusual man."

Over the years, Brown would charter and own a succession of steamers. A 1927 story announcing his marriage to Clara V. Hare from Holland, Virginia, noted that he began with "the Steamer 'J.W. Newbill' valued at $1,500 and capable of carrying 200 passengers. Then came the Steamer 'Starlight,' three times rebuilt to carry 550 passengers and valued at $24,000. Last year he brought out the new Steamer 'Favorite' worth $75,000 and carrying 1,500 passengers."

In 1928, he suffered a terrible loss when the $75,000 steamer *South*

continue on p. 24

Meet the Extension Specialist

Shannon Hood

Eastern Shore native helps lay groundwork for more oyster farms

Growing up on Kent Island in the Chesapeake Bay, Shannon Hood hoped her career would focus on the ecology of the outdoor environment as well as the culture of the seafood industry all around her.

She started working toward that goal at St. Mary's College of Maryland, then transferred to California State University, Long Beach, where she earned a degree in environmental science and spent several years working in coastal restoration. That was followed by an outdoor adventure building a school in Madagascar. Then came the biggest change: a desk job working on science and policy with the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) in Washington, DC.

"Although I loved my work and colleagues at EDF, it was a total culture shock," Hood said of her three years of indoor work in the District. "I was trying to figure out how I could combine my love of the outdoors with my interest in biology. So, I decided I wanted to start an oyster farm, and I called around to ask about how I could go through the leasing process to get one."

Oyster farms had grown in Maryland since 2009, when state law changed and aquaculture became legal in every county—including some where it had been restricted for more than a century. Hood eventually found herself on the phone in 2015 with Stephanie Alexander, who worked in the hatchery at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science Horn Point Laboratory. She told Hood about a summer internship program that provides hands-on experience, teaching interns how to raise oysters in a hatchery, set them on shells or pieces of shells, and help them to grow. Hood jumped on it. Her boss in Washington held her job, just in case, but Hood never went back.

Five years later, Hood has an oyster farm of sorts—a demonstration facility at Horn Point that helps oyster farmers try out new gear and techniques and helps fill research gaps in hopes of growing the state's oyster industry. She's a Maryland Sea Grant Extension specialist, part of a team that helps oyster farmers run their operations more effectively. It's helpful to have a demonstration farm, Hood said, so farmers don't have to absorb that risk themselves and lose money.

Because oysters filter the water and oyster farms create employment opportunities, they have become an important addition to the landscape in waterfront communities. The Sea Grant Extension team helps oyster farms get loans, overcome production challenges, and find seafood safety training.

Beyond her Sea Grant colleagues, Shannon works closely with oyster growers and hatcheries, including Stephanie Alexander, the hatchery manager at Horn Point for more than two decades, who told Hood about that internship that brought her back to the Eastern Shore.

"We can finish each other's sentences sometimes," said Alexander.

That connection is especially helpful given the often chaotic and fast-paced nature of industry challenges. But even when work is quiet, Hood is busy. She's working on her PhD in University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science's Marine and Estuarine Environmental Sciences graduate program.

"There are farms that started a decade ago, and their needs are really different from the ones starting now. The forward-looking, experimental side of oyster farming is really interesting to me," Hood said.

She's still hoping that one of the people farming oysters will be Shannon Hood.

"It's tough to think about starting one within the next 10 years," she said, "but yes, I would still really like to do it one day."

—Rona Kobell

***Maryland Sea Grant Extension's Shannon Hood inspects** adjustable longline baskets that she and her crew have restocked with tumbled and graded oysters to be deployed back in the water for more growth.* PHOTO, CHERYL NEMAZIE / UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

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Captain, from p. 22

Shore—his most ambitious ship to date at 200 feet long and able to carry 2,500 passengers—foundered in a gale of 65-mile-an-hour winds off Atlantic City while under tow to Baltimore. Three of his crew hand-picked to deliver the steamer drowned.

"Although the loss of the *South Shore* will necessitate the cancellization [sic] of all excursions to Brown's Grove this year, he will not give up, but will start plans to obtain a new boat for next season, Captain Brown declared in an interview Tuesday," stated a May 5, 1928, story in the *Afro-American*.

Brown died in November of 1935. Brown's Grove was later sold to a white businessman; there's no trace of it on Rock Creek today. In a remembrance dated December 14, 1935, the *Afro-American* said Brown's passing "removes from Eastern business circles one of its most colorful figures. He had a happy faculty of making friends…energetic, capable, courageous, thrifty, and equipped with a marvelous physical body, he improved his boats and his grove, and kept them in such condition that they could be patronized freely by all classes and all races. At his death he was the only steamboat captain in the East with his own boat and excursion resort."

—wclarke@mdsg.umd.edu

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AUGUST—MOONLIGHTS
30—Star of Bethlehem A. M. E. Church and Bethlehem Baptist Church of Mt. Winans.

SEPTEMBER—DAYS
1—G. U. O. Nazarites.
2—Y. M. C. A.
8—Eastern M. E. Church.
10—Old Folks Excursion.
12—Gas and Electric Co.

SEPTEMBER—MOONLIGHTS
6—Ladies Home Missionary Society.
9—Epworth League and Ushers of St. Matthew's M. E. Church.

In this 1929 advertisement *from the* Afro-American, *Baltimore, newspaper, for his new steamer* Avalon, *Brown marketed his business as "The only steamer and the only park in the State of Maryland run exclusively for Colored People and by Colored People." Brown purchased the 190-foot* Avalon *in 1929. Built in 1888, she was one of several steamboats he renamed, often upgraded, and put into service carrying customers to Brown's Grove and other Bay destinations."Both the grove and the steamer that takes them there are owned by a colored man—George W. Brown. Moreover, it is CAPTAIN George W. Brown, and Baltimore is proud of the fact," said a March 16, 1929, story in the* Afro-American.