

## A Short History of Commercial Fishing in the Chesapeake Region

### By Jim Casey

Most coastal residents and visitors to the Chesapeake, who observe commercial fishing activities on the bay and its rivers, assume this has been a common activity since the first colonists landed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, commercial fishing in the Chesapeake region, notable for its long and somewhat colorful history, didn't actually begin for more than a century after the first colonists had arrived.

The availability of cheap, fertile land was more important to the early landless colonists and the necessity for a steady source of food and income independent of supply ships on the treacherous two month Atlantic crossing, proved vital to survival.

Still, early colonists did engage in fishing both for sport and subsistence. The Maryland Charter of 1632, granted to Lord Baltimore by Charles I, of England, guaranteed "Fishings of every kind of Fish as well as Whales, Sturgeons and other royal Fish in the Sea, Bays, Straits, or Rivers, within the premises" and "the Liberty of Fishing for Sea-Fish as well in the Sea, Bays, Straits and navigable rivers" of the Province aforesaid. Household inventories from 900 southern Maryland homes of the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries indicated that the most common fishing equipment used was nothing more than a simple hook and line. So at least during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and to a much lesser extent during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, seafood comprised a substantial part of the local diet. Archaeological records indicate that the hook-and-line bottom fishing yielded a variety of fish: black and red drum, sheepshead, striped bass, white perch, gar, catfish and sturgeon. Oysters and blue crabs were also consumed.

As the agrarian pursuits stabilized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a steady Atlantic and West Indies trade and the need to feed a burgeoning population brought about the early commercial fishing efforts. From humble beginnings in 1634 with about 150 colonists, the population of the Maryland colony had grown to 34,000 by 1700 and to 100,000 by 1740, with most living within walking distance of the Bay and its tributaries.

While the hook-and-line remained the most common form of fishing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some wealthy landowners began to employ haul seines. Among those using this method was George Washington, who by 1760 was using haul seines at his Mt. Vernon plantation. Here, as at other plantations around the Bay, shad and herring were taken by the seines with shad held for personal consumption and local sale and herring used to feed his slaves and for sale to the West Indies to feed those held on the sugar plantations. Herring, in particular, were preserved by salting and the quality and quantity of salt available to even the wealthiest colonists limited this fishery. The vagaries of the fishery, lack of quality salt and good nets and sale prices aggravated Washington and other wealthy plantation owners who operated commercial seine fisheries.

Through the mid- and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, commercial fishing rapidly expanded. Annual landings of 48 million pounds of shad and 2.6 million bushels of oysters were reported or estimated. In 1890, over 36 million pounds of finfish, exclusive of menhaden were caught as estimated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, landings were dropping rapidly. Even in colonial times, many recognized that some fishing practices needed regulation. Chesapeake fishery laws had been passed as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1670, Virginia prohibited the obstruction of migrating fish and in 1760, the Maryland Assembly passed a bill to "prevent any making or repairing of any fish dams and pots on the River Susquehanna". But it wasn't until 1941 that limits were placed on the amount of licensed commercial fishing gear that could be used. Prior to this time, laws and regulations regulated seasons, size limits, the gear used and hatchery operation - none of which stopped the decline of the bay's fishery resources.

Although some commercial catch data was collected during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, those records are sporadic for some species and have little documentation or quality assurance. In 1929, Maryland began an annual program to collect commercial catch and effort statistics for fish and shellfish. Some efforts began even earlier and were particularly extensive. For oysters, the 1912 Yates Survey, a six year survey to delineate the legal boundaries of oyster bars, was an attempt to halt the sharply declining harvests over the previous twenty years. Between 1916 and 1929, new regulations restricting gear and cull size were instituted along with oyster taxes and seed and shell planting.

By 1880, regulations were also applied to blue crabs. Prior to 1873, the demand for crabs was confined to local residents living close by the bay. With refrigerated rail shipping beginning in 1873, the consumer demand for soft crabs yielded high profits. By 1878, canning of crabmeat was begun along with successful marketing, especially in the northern states. In 1917 Maryland prohibited the harvest of sponge crabs followed by Virginia in 1926. The latter state later reversed itself in 1932, permitting their harvest. The Great Depression, Prohibition, hurricanes and World War II caused substantial declines in markets and harvest of both oysters and crabs. In 1936, the crab pot was introduced into Virginia and into Maryland by 1939. For the previous 60 years, the trotline had been the principal gear but within 20 years, the crab pot became the dominant crabbing gear within both Virginia and Maryland.

During the 1950s, recreational crabbing was first recognized as substantial and increasing. Later estimates held that recreational catch could equal as much as 40% of the commercial catch. Other finfish were also sought by commercial fishermen. In 1910, the harvest of menhaden for fish oil, fishmeal and fertilizer began. The increased use of nets and resulting commercial regulations on striped bass began during the 1920s with gear restrictions and size limits. With the post-war use of nylon nets, catches increased substantially. Supporting this, a statement from the 1928 Bulletin of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries indicated that while the productive Georges Bank produced about three tons of fish per square mile, the Chesapeake Bay produced about 11 tons of fish per square mile. Later estimates suggest that this latter figure was conservative.

Some minor fisheries also offered considerable employment to local watermen. Although the fishery for diamondback terrapin began declining after World War I, it continued until the 1940s. In the early 1920s, prime terrapin would sell for as much as \$127 per dozen. Markets also existed for the hard clams from Pocomoke Sound near Crisfield and soft clams, particularly from the areas around Eastern Bay. The harvest of seaweed, primarily eelgrass, *Zostera marina*, was also important as it was used to pack soft crabs for shipping.

With the beginning of World War II, military demands for personnel and war materiel reduced the fishing effort on the Chesapeake. Following the war, many of the new products and equipment produced during the war effort would be employed in the fishing industry. The harvest also increased substantially. Within 5 years, crab harvest increased 10 million pounds annually. Within 2 years, catfish harvest more than doubled and in only a year, menhaden, American shad and striped bass harvests increased substantially.

During the same post-war era, the increase in leisure time, good roads and dependable vehicles, improved fishing tackle and boats resulted in a tremendous increase in recreational fishing effort, creating the first conflicts with commercial fishing interests. Striped bass, summer flounder, bluefish, spot and croaker and blue crabs were preferred by salt-water sportsmen and commercial fishermen alike.

Since the 1950s, major changes have taken place in several important fisheries. Oyster resources declined substantially from the combined effects of disease, harvest and weather conditions; striped bass populations declined to such a low point that a 5-year harvest moratorium was instituted, resulting in a significant resurgence of the species with a stringent harvest quota system; fish kills became commonplace; in spite of natural disasters, the blue crab boom continues but concern over increasing harvest pressures by both commercial and recreational interests results in harvest restrictions and a moratorium on new commercial licenses.

Today, local, state and interstate efforts are working to manage these and other shared natural resources of the mid-Atlantic region, guaranteeing reasonable access to user groups and stability for the affected resources for current and future generations.

## References

- University of Maryland. 1953. The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland. Board of Natural Resources, Dept. of Res. & Ed., Chesapeake Biological Lab. Educational Series No. 30
- NOAA. 1985. Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey, Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, 1985. Current Fishery Statistics No. 8327.
- U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service. 2001. National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. USDI. FHW/01- NAT
- Genovese, P., M. Tarnoski, M. Homer and C. Lewis. 1999. Maryland Fisheries Information System, A Final Report Submitted to the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee. MD Dept. of Natural Resources, Fisheries Service, Annapolis, MD.