

Dorchester County Oyster war stories

Oyster wars were fought in Dorchester county waters during the 1880's. Here are some stories from national newspapers of the day. Since battles often occurred at night, there are few pictures or illustrations from those events, so I have added some contemporary pictures and illustrations to give you a better picture of events.

To better understand the news as it was written 150 years ago, here are some bullet points for background and context.

- *Dredging for oysters in Maryland was outlawed in 1830. After the civil war, a race to harvest oysters began. The Oyster Navy or Oyster Police were formed to protect oysters from overharvest.*

- *Open waters on the Chesapeake Bay were reserved for dredgers, shoreline and rivers were reserved for tongers*



- *Rivers were known as “Forbidden Grounds” to dredgers.*
- *The Oyster Navy had 2 steamers and 12 sloops to patrol 4,000 miles of shoreline and over 230,000 acres of oyster beds*
- *Each county had slightly different oyster laws but oysters were to be harvested only during daylight hours. One or two oyster navy patrol boats were assigned to each county. The captains hired local watermen for crew.*
- *There were many loopholes in the law and many cases were tried by the U S Commissioner rather than a county or the state of Maryland*
- *Captain appointments in the oyster navy were often political. Some captains avoided conflicts with pirates, others were aggressive, were hated by the pirates and lived under threat of death if found by the pirates.*
- *The oyster navy steamers were most effective in capturing pirates but the steamers were often used for political junkets not for patrolling and protecting oysters.*

- *With fixed patrol schedules, pirates simply waited until oyster police left before raiding forbidden grounds*
- *As pirates became more active, armed warfare broke out. The oyster navy was equipped with old civil war surplus single shot Springfield rifles. The pirates had newer Winchester repeating rifles. The superintendent of the*



Oyster Navy limited the ammunition carried on each patrol boat so the crew would not waste shot hunting waterfowl.

- *Maryland petitioned the US Navy for cannon and Gatling (early machine) guns to offset the pirate's advantage in firepower, but ammunition remained limited for the boats of the oyster navy*
- *Oyster Police Sloops were about 45 ft on deck. Schooners were bigger*



boats about 60-70 feet long on deck. Oyster pirates had bigger boats., better rifles and more ammunition than the oyster police



This map shows abundant oyster beds in the southern part of the county around Bishops Head, Bloodsworth and Holland Island

The Battle of the Hunger (Honga) River

February 8, 1884- The New York Sun reported that Maryland was sending an armed fleet to drive pirates from the “Hunger” (Honga) river

An organized fleet of pirates invaded the Honga River beds and began working day and night to strip the beds of all oysters. The sloop **Julia A Hamilton** had been beaten back by the pirates and retreated to Cambridge where the captain resigned his position saying he would not risk his life trying to arrest the pirates.

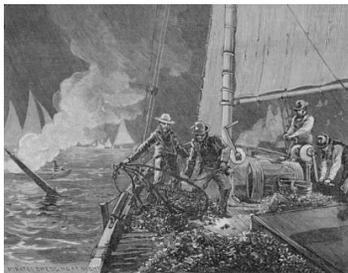


The governor sent the state oyster police steamer **WM J Hamilton** to Baltimore to get guns and ammunition from the state armory.

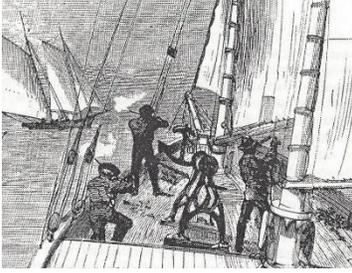
The old police steamer **Leila** from Annapolis and the sloop **Julia A Hamilton** with a new captain and 3 additional crew from Cambridge would join the **Wm**



J Hamilton at the Honga river and the three boats would demand the unconditional surrender of the 30 pirate boats and nearly 200 men.



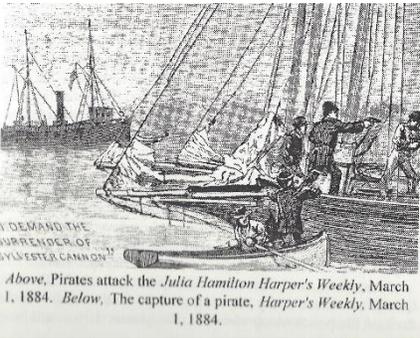
February 9th- The pirates were well organized, burned floating torches to illuminate the beds as they worked all night. More pirate boats joined in and each covered their nameboards so they could not be easily identified. The pirates established a depot at Deal Island where they transshipped oysters to a fleet of pungys that sailed to Baltimore where the prices for oysters were very high. Dorchester tongers from Bishop’s head and Hoopers Island who were driven off their oyster beds practiced their marksmanship by shooting at any pirate that was working within rifle range of the shore



February 10th- The **Julia A Hamilton** arrived first and in a short skirmish was promptly captured by the pirates and towed up Fishing creek. When the steamers **Leila** and **WM J Hamilton** arrived, they captured the **Frank and Mary McNamara** and the **Martha E Moore** owned by Levin McNamara of

Dorchester.

The cannon and rifles borrowed from the state armory in Baltimore did the trick and only the **McNamarra** put up a short fight before being captured. *The Martha E Moore did not stay out of trouble for long and figures in another story later on.*



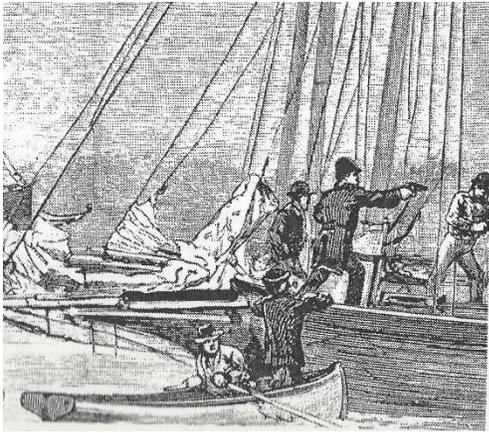
The two oyster police gunboats then headed up Fishing Creek and released the **Julia A Hamilton** and her crew from captivity.

February 11th- The 3 oyster police vessels were off blockading Eastern bay where they held some 200 piratical craft in the upper waters of the Chester River.

This next incident was covered extensively in the news and featured in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine.

The Infamous Cannon Family

February 14th The **Leila** returned to Fishing Creek and captured the dredger **Maud Muller** dredging at night. The captain, Sylvester Cannon escaped capture and hid along the shore watching his boat taken to justice of the peace Robinson at Goose Creek (*in today's Toddville*).



Sylvester's father, H P Cannon had been justice of the peace, but was now self-declared "King of the Oyster Pirates. Newspapers describe H P as a small man, dressed in rustic clothing and armed with 4 loaded revolvers tucked in a wide leather belt.

Having been a one-time magistrate, H P was very familiar with the law. Learning that there was no warrant out for him, H P walked onboard the **Leila** and argued that the oyster police could not impound his son's boat as Sylvester had not been captured on it. The **Maude Muller** was subsequently released. H P Cannon quickly boarded the **Muller** and started to sail as far away from the police as he could get.

Law stated that a boat could be confiscated only if the Captain was onboard when it was captured.

When Sylvester saw his boat sailing away, he was convinced that his boat had been seized. He reportedly started shooting at the police steamer **Leila**. Capt Mitchell, from the oyster police sent some armed crew members ashore to find out who was shooting, but Sylvester escaped. Sylvester then ran to the home of justice Robinson where he broke windows, smashed china and terrorized the women in the family. Sylvester threatening to kill justice Robinson who was still onboard the **Leila**.

Sylvester enlisted help from his three brothers and they started shooting at the Robinson house and at the **Leila**. Thinking that there was a riot ashore, Capt Mitchell sent more armed men ashore, but the pirates, seeing the police approach, escaped into the swamp.

The Cannons were quite the characters. Sylvester had narrowly escaped death, being shot pirating oysters. His brother Alexander, after an argument, stripped one of his crew and placed him on deck during the winter where his frozen corpse was found. Milburn and Charlie, the other brothers, had also been involved in several shooting cases.

H P Cannon said that he became an oyster pirate because "within the past 2 weeks (*Honga River battle*), I have seen \$100,000.00 worth of damage done to

oyster beds in Fishing Bay which might have been prevented but for the cowardice of Capt Insley” (The *Wicomico county oyster police Sloop **Carrie Franklin**, commanded by Capt Insley, was not involved in the Honga river battle*). H P said that he had assisted Insley in a night attack on pirates from Deal Island. When the dredgers started firing at the oyster police and Cannon’s waterborne posse, Insley hove to and let H P absorb all the gunfire. HP said that Capt Insley disappeared and was not seen again.

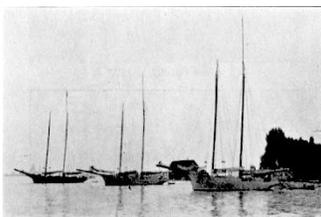
Now there was a bitter feud between justice Robinson and his law and order supporters the Cannons and their oyster pirate friends. Both sides were heavily armed and threatened to shoot each other on sight. Several volleys were exchanged the next night, The Dorchester county sheriff had to summon a special posse to serve writs on the Cannons and they had to stay at Goose Creek (*Toddville*) until tempers cooled off and the threat of violence subsided.

During this turmoil, there were rumors that Capt Insley had arranged to fight a duel with Sylvester Cannon but Cannon never showed up. **Leila** stayed for a few days then had to resume her patrol and try to apprehend more oyster pirates.

A Brush with the Oyster Police

(Evidently, it wasn’t a big deal when you docked your bullet ridden dredge boat back in Baltimore)

March 28, 1887 - The oyster schooner **Martha E Moore**, Capt Gibbons, arrived in Canton Hollow, Baltimore, yesterday morning having marks of the skill of sharpshooters who watch over oyster interests from the decks of the state men-of-war.



The **Moore**’s sails, masts, lower hull, to the water line and decks showed that she had received a shower of shot. Capt Gibbons good right arm had been pierced by a bullet as was the right shoulder of Erastus Leese, one of the deck hands, hailing from York County, Penn. Both men were sent to the Marine hospital on Huntington Ave. Their wounds were not serious.

Capt Gibbons lives with his family in Fells Point at the corner of Alicianna and Register streets. He says he was attacked by one of the oyster police sloops

between 10 and 11 o'clock Saturday evening. He showed his heels to the state boat from which came a volley of bullets. In the chase the **Moore** outsailed the Oyster navy patrol boat **Mary Compton**, captained by Deputy Commander J H Wilson.

In conversation with Oyster Navy Commandant Plowman this afternoon, the newspaper reported that Plowman said he had not been apprised of the shooting but he presumed he would be in due time; but he had no doubt that the **Moore** had been committing some depredation on the oyster bars and that the Capt of the state oyster police sloop would follow up.

*The **Martha Moore** is the same boat that was captured previously at the battle of the Honga River.*

Poor working conditions for watermen ca 1880

Baltimore's almshouse says that the institution is besieged every winter by oyster-men who have been disabled in the service. They come in frostbitten, wounded, and suffering from a disease known as oyster poisoning.

Three have been admitted this early in the present season. One of these being Frank Klimith, a German who shipped from New York. He was to get \$13 dollars a month. He says he worked two days more than a month, and that his pay was withheld on the ground that the money had been expended in bringing him from New York to Baltimore. Frank cannot remember the name of his boat or his Captain.

Herr Ginther, another German who shipped from New York, remembers that his Captain's name was John, and the number of the boat 172.



Ginther says he got almost nothing for seven weeks' work. The balance of the \$21 due him having been expended, according to Capt. John in transportation and the purchase of an oilskin coat that cost \$3.50. He says it was hard to work 11 hours a day and sleeping with two other men on planks in the forward hold without any covering. Ginther's hands are poisoned.



John Lee of Baltimore worked on an oyster boat for 20 days and then had to give up because one of his hands became inflamed and poisoned. His Captain gave him \$5.00 and put him on shore, where he had to walk twenty miles to the nearest railway station.

The Dorchester County sheriff told of destitute young men wandering into Cambridge after being dropped off dredge boats out in the neck district with little or no money. The Sheriff said he gave the men shelter and a hot meal at the jail so they could regain a little strength before sending them onwards to Baltimore or New York

MISTREATMENT OF CREW Dec 8, 1888

U S commissioner Bond (*in charge of maritime law on the Chesapeake*) has issued warrants for the captains of a number of dredging vessels, on the charge of maltreating their employees. The Commissioner assured the representatives of the German Aid Society that the brutal captains, if captured, would receive the punishment they deserved. The commissioner released on \$1,000 bail to await the action of the Grand Jury, Captain Gabriel P. Johnson, colored, of the oyster schooner **Minnie Estelle**. Johnson was charged with maltreating Thomas Glynn, a hand on the vessel.

Because so many German immigrants were abused, the German Aid Society eventually chartered a steamer to check on the welfare of all German immigrants and they provided financial aid for immigrants left destitute on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Maritime slavery on the Chesapeake Bay was finally abolished in 1912.

Of the men shipped from New York this season, John Steiner, German, had probably the worst experience. He arrived in New York a year ago, last July and had been employed as a porter by the Arion society. He presented a pitiable appearance when summoned before the Commission. His clothing was scant and ragged. One foot was badly swollen, and his general appearance indicated rough

treatment. Unable to speak English, he could not give the full names of the people on the boat with him. Through an interpreter he said he had been hired in New York by a Baltimore agent to go dredging, being offered \$12 a month and comfortable board.

On Monday, Oct 3rd, he shipped at Baltimore on the pungy **Beachman**, commanded by Captain "Tom" Beachman. This vessel worked with several other vessels belonging to the same owners. (*Some Baltimore packing houses owned fleets of oyster dredge boats, unscrupulous and often criminal captains drove crews to hard work night and day*)

The crew was fed the usual fare, (high calorie basic food, beans, fat back meat, coffee) but no bedding was furnished them. They were offered small gray blankets at \$10 apiece. The forepeak, in which they were lodged, leaked badly. Three weeks after shipping out, the captain seized Steiner from behind, threw him violently to the deck and kicked him with his heavy boots on the left side and thigh. The only provocation was that the captain told him in English to do something he did not understand. Steiner was also badly hurt by falling on the hatch. He was then transferred to another pungy in command of "Captain John," who treated him more humanely.



About 6 weeks ago two young men, an American and a German, jumped overboard at night from no.627, "on account of cruel treatment". The two boats, no. 624 and 627 were lashed together at the time about 300 ft from shore. Sterner said that he was sitting with the German the night before. The cook, a relative of the Captain, look hold of the German in Steiner's presence and held him against the hot stove plpe. About 2 a. m. the crew were aroused by the cries from the captain that the men had jumped overboard. The yawl of No.624 was lowered to follow the fugitives, but the boat returned in a short time and reported that the American was drowned, and that there was no trace of the German.

It was a clear, pleasant night, and the crew in the yawl say they saw the man drown within a few feet of the boat. The German could be heard at first calling to the American. No effort was made to find the bodies and no report was made to authorities. A few days afterward the crew of another pungy found the body of the American, with his shoes in a bundle of clothes tied to his back. The men were not allowed to land at any time.

A week ago last Sunday four men attempted to escape in the yawl of No. 624. There was a severe storm at the time, and the boat was carried away from the men. The four were called on deck the next morning and the captains of the 3 vessels working together had the hands of each man tied together with a rope and after taking a turn around the thumbs, the end was carried to the fore boom peak and the men raised off their feet. The skin was torn from their hands.

Dredge boats owned by packing houses often worked together. Replacement crew, arms and food were delivered directly to where the boats were dredging. The Captains were well paid for the volume of oysters harvested.



When these boats were compelled to go close to shore on account of bad weather, the men were shut in the forepeak. They were nearly suffocated on one occasion as the stovepipe was out of order.

There was \$26 due Steiner in wages, but on his arrival in the city on Wednesday he received but \$2 and a bill charging him \$10 in agent fees, \$3 for boots, \$2.25 for an oil cloth suit, \$1 for trousers, 20 cents for two pair of stockings, besides other items. The articles, as a rule, being worthless.

The average factory worker of the time could earn about \$500 a year, working 6 days a week, 52 weeks a year. The average farm worker earned much less. A dredge boat Captain could clear over \$2,500 in a single season after paying boat expenses. Crew who worked with fair and honest captains could earn \$500 in a single season. Local farmers complained that they lost too much labor to the oyster industry. Oyster shuckers and other packing house workers were well paid for the time. They were paid by the volume of oysters shucked or packed and could make enough to live on for the rest of the year by working during the Oyster harvest season (October through April).



Steiner said the numbers of the vessels were not put up until Oct 18th, but they began dredging Oct 1st. There was no night dredging and they always got out of the way of the police boats. The captains of these vessels are included in warrants issued by the commissioner. The German Society will redouble its efforts to have the treasury

department dispatch a revenue cutter as soon as possible to stop the slave trade of the Chesapeake Bay pirates.

Note: it was difficult for the abused crew member to get justice. Even if the abusers were apprehended and charged with specific crimes, few victims had the funds to stay in town until the trial. Without witnesses, charges were summarily dismissed, and the guilty captains were set free.

New-York tribune. December 08, 1888,

Battle of the CHOPTANK RIVER at COOKS POINT

Baltimore, Dec. 7.

Another battle has been fought by the police and the oyster pirates, and as usual, the police were routed. The Choptank river oyster police sloop **Eliza Hayward**, Captain Thomas F. Bridges, commander. was defeated yesterday afternoon in a battle with dredgers off Cook's Point, in the Choptank river, and beat a retreat to Oxford, where she now lies, with forty one rifle-ball holes through mainsail and Jib, a large number in the hull and deck-work, and her rigging damaged.



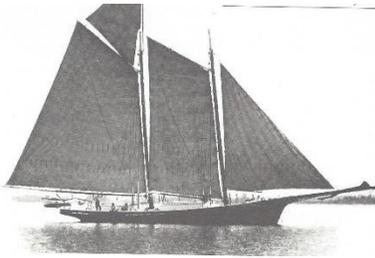
Captain Bridges thus tells the story of the fight: " I left the Third Haven River (Tred Avon) yesterday morning for Harris Creek, where I made an arrest. Coming back out we saw a fleet of 14 illicit dredgers at work at Cook's point, which, being in the Choptank, is forbidden ground to them. Several times before, we had seen dredgers off these grounds, one time driving a fleet of twenty-one out into the bay. I

changed the course of the **Hayward** toward the dredgers, expecting to drive them off, and hoping to capture one of them if possible. When about a half mile off, one of them, a large pungy of forty or fifty tons, opened fire on us, but the balls fell short. She advanced toward us, firing all the time, one other dredgers following her lead, but not firing.

We kept on our course, but withholding our fire, as we did not have much ammunition and did not want to waste any of it. We had drifted off somewhat to the leeward, and seeing that the plan of battle of the dredgers was to wind us, with

their cross fire, surround and sink us-, I put the Hayward about, got to windward and kept there, out maneuvering them.

This enabled me to save my vessel. We began firing when within about 400 yards, and the boats kept approaching each other until they were not more than 50 yards apart. We had only three guns that could fight, and two of these were so worn that when fired the empty shell had to be shoved out of the chambers with a ramrod. This made for slow work for so hot a fight.



The enemy's fire was terrific and incessant, their guns being repeating rifles, of which 2 were always loaded. In the battle we never saw a man on the attacking vessel, they were all under cover. The wheel and the sheets were operated by rigs run into the cabin, and the repeating rifles seemed to be fired from port holes made through the trunk of the cabin.

I kept our men under cover as much as possible. Mate Bridges and myself worked one mainsheet. In doing this we were exposed, and a rifle ball passed right through mate Bridges whiskers. None of our men showed any fear, though they had never been under fire before, and the balls were whistling apparently within a few inches of their heads.

I think our assailant's first job was to cut down our rigging and render us helpless. Had our Jib stay not been wire he would have succeeded, as we could constantly hear the balls pinging against the metal stay. The **Hayward** worked well but there were fourteen against one, every one of them twice the tonnage of the **Hayward** and some larger than that, and they could eventually have taken or sunk the **Hayward**. Seeing that our ammunition was getting low and that we had made an impression upon the enemy, my mate and I had a consultation and determined that having made the best fight we could, our duty to the State now was to retreat.

So, we reluctantly turned the **Hayward** toward the Talbot side of the river. The dredger pursued us and kept up his fire, but seeing he was not gaining on us, he turned back."



The oyster pirates were equipped with better weapons and had more ammunition than the Oyster Police. Commander Plowman (Commandant of the oyster navy) had not yet armed the oyster

police vessels with the cannon loaned to the State authorities by the United States Government nor had he given his crews more ammunition.



A Skirmish on the Little Choptank

A moonlight battle was fought on the 14th of February last year (1887) in the Little Choptank river, an inlet in the southwestern part of Dorchester county. Toward evening of that day, a fleet of thirty dredges entered the river and anchored. They were seen by Capt. John Marshall of the



police boat (*sloop*) **E. B. Groome**. Suspecting that they meant to dredge for oysters after nightfall, he slipped in behind Ragged Point and waited. Sure enough, when the moon had risen, the sound of clanking chains was heard, an indication that the pirates were casting their dredges and working the windlasses. The **Groome** made for them quietly, but this time the enemy did not try to run. The dredgers refused to surrender, and returned the shots of the **Groome** very noisily, but without any further effect than wasting ammunition on both sides. The police fired upward of 300 rounds, and then had to retreat because they had no more powder and bullets, while to all appearances the enemy was as well off as at the beginning.

This battle lasted an hour, it is like many that have occurred in the oyster war. Commander Plowman, until the recent loss of the **Groome**, (*see next story for details*) limited the supply of ammunition to the police boats to 600 rounds, on the ground that if we were more liberal, the men would be prompted to waste their powder shooting the ducks and geese with which the bay and its tributaries abound.

THE AFFAIR OF THE LITTLE CHOPTANK

This next story was printed as a headline or feature article in many of the country's newspapers. Along with extensive publication in the big eastern newspapers, it was referenced in the Bismarck Dakota Territory weekly newspaper alongside a report of one of the last big buffalo hunt and it was also published in a Sunday edition of the Salt Lake Utah newspaper within three weeks of the battle.

It is clear enough that the (*Maryland Oyster Police*) navy is at a disadvantage when it comes to

coping with an organized, well-equipped enemy of many times greater numbers. On the other hand it is plain that if the police boats had been as efficient, each in his own way as a New York policeman is in his resistance to arrest would have been continued to individual cases, and would not have developed into what Gov. Jackson has styled "open rebellion." The dredgers do not scorn the law so much, for its terms and penalties are precise and severe enough, as they despise the means for enforcing it. The climax of their lawlessness was reached four days ago in the affair of the Little Choptank. Then the extent of their organization was manifested, and this word was passed around among the pirate craft:

"Shoot to kill!"

The police sloop **E. R. Groome** was detailed for service in the Little Choptank. She engaged invading dredgers in several small skirmishes during the first half of November, and succeeded generally in dispersing the enemy, for the fleet of pirates was small. Nevertheless, they returned after every fight and kept the police busy. On Wednesday, the 21st, about a hundred sail entered the river and went to work. The **Groome**, with about 300 rounds of ammunition on board, went out to attack them. Capt John Marshall was in command, and with him were the regular crew: Mate Chas. B. Cator, Frank Navy, Sam Jarrott, Chas. Hubbard, and Geo. Biggins. Before the **Groome** was within range of the enemy she opened fire. A demonstration of this kind has been known to set the pirate fleet flying, but on this occasion the enemy methodically hauled up their dredges, disposed of things about the decks in an orderly fashion, and when the **Groome** was near enough to hit, *the oyster pirates* fired back.

The bullets pierced the sails of the police sloop, splintered the woodwork a bit, and scratched the water harmlessly all about. It seemed to Capt. Marshall that he was over matched, as indeed he was, and he retired to make better preparations. The pirates laid aside their rifles and resumed dredging.

This tentative encounter was watched by a good many anxious tongers on shore, most of whom dared not go out for fear of being driven off or shot by the dredgers. They were naturally deeply



enraged to see the big bay vessels tearing up the oysters reserved by law for themselves, and the Government in a retreat. Some them, led by Capt. Goodman Bramble volunteered to go out on the **Groome** and help drive the pirates away. Capt Marshall hailed this offer with satisfaction. He lives in the neighborhood, and he had arranged to spend that particular day and several following in removing his household goods to a new dwelling.

Capt Bramble could take charge of the **Groome** temporarily, and thus give Capt Marshall ample time to look after his household affairs. So it happened that shortly after noon the **Groome** attacked the pirates again, Capt. Bramble commanding her and the crew reinforced by a few tongers and landsmen. *(from Taylors Island or the neck district)*

As the **Groome** went down the Little Choptank river the second time, the pirates opened fire first. The police waited until within 200 yards of the enemy, and then banged away right martially with their cannon and rifles, Nobody knows where the cannon balls went, but the rifle shots made it uncomfortable for the crews on the boats, nearest the **Groome** and for a few minutes it looked as if the police were actually going to set the whole pirate fleet on the retreat. Some of the dredgers were scooting about trying to get behind the **Groome**, and others trying to get out of immediate range, all of which tended to weaken the resolution of such Captains as preferred flight to arrest.

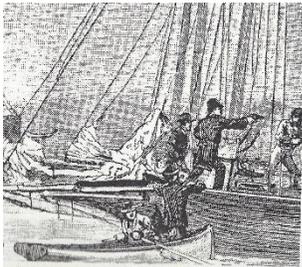
But about that time John Castis, seaman aboard the **Thomas B. Schawl**, Capt. Hitchins, fell mortally wounded. It was thought that he was dead, and Capt. Hitchins placed his flag at half-mast. From that moment there was no doubt as to the Issue of the fight. The pirates made desperate efforts to surround the **Groome**, but she evaded them and kept up an incessant firing, during which two other men are known to have been wounded, until every cartridge had been used.

The oyster police operated under strict "rules of engagement" where they were told to fire to disable the pirate boats and to avoid injuring the crew, but the pirates had no rules or constraints. Some families had members on both sides of the law. Captured oyster police crew members were roughed up but were not usually killed or severely injured. Oyster police captains were in more peril if captured and several pirate crews actually attacked police boats seeking to kill the captain in retribution of injury or the death of an oyster pirate.

The **Groome** retreated and affected her escape by sailing across a bar over which the deep draught dredgers could not pass. The **Schawl** and one other vessel, in attempting to follow **Groome** ran aground on the bar. The **Groome** went to Slaughter Creek and tied up at Taylor's Bridge to repair damages and wait for ammunition. Capt Bramble went home to supper, leaving Mate Cator in charge. He and his crew were at supper in the cabin, about 8 o'clock, when they were startled by the sound of men climbing aboard from the water side. The police hurried to the deck to find themselves confronted with rifles and pistols. The number of the boarders was variously reported from seven to-fifteen.

All were Captains of pirate craft and among them these men, all from Baltimore, were recognized: John Burns, George Hitchins, Sam Cox, and Sam Bussell. It is grimly entertaining to hear the tongers in the neighborhood talk about those men, especially Sam Cox. What they say will hardly bear printing.

Laws were so loose and skewed in favor of the pirates that known oyster pirates remained free to keep on working without fear of arrest. Oyster pirates killed in battle were sometimes hailed as heroes or victims and the oyster police were harshly criticized for the “murder” of “innocent” men illegally harvesting oysters.



Sam Cox and his companions had the police entirely at their mercy. Not a round of ammunition was on board except what was contained in the pirates' weapons. Surrender was inevitable, but it was entirely informal. The boarders demanded savagely that Capt. Marshall be produced. They said they intended to kill him in return for the death of Castis. They were not satisfied that Marshall was not aboard until they had searched the sloop.

“Who commanded the **Groome** this afternoon?” they asked. Cator explained the part that Bramble had taken in the battle. “Then, we’ll kill Bramble the first time he shows his head on the bay,” said one of the pirates.

After that, all the men except mate Cator were ordered below, and when they were huddled into the cabin, with a man holding a repeating rifle on guard. They were told that as soon as the sloop could be sailed out into the river every of them would be bound in turn to the mast and shot. There was not the slightest doubt in the minds of the crew that this threat would be executed, and some of them fell to praying in a frenzy.

Meantime the sails (on the **Groome**) had been raised and the lines let go. Cator was stationed forward and a man on each side of him held a pistol to his head. He was told to pilot the craft down the creek and across the bar, and at the first intimation that he had run her aground they would shoot. Cator made no error on that trip. When well in the middle of Little Choptank, the men in the cabin were ordered on deck. With Cator, there were eight of them, three being volunteers from the afternoon fight. They were all put into a little boat, which nearly swamped under the load, and cut adrift.

As the **Groome** faded quickly away in the darkness they heard the pirates declaring that they were going to attack the steamer **McLane** and capture her too. Cator and his companions were in



a predicament where it was almost certain that the use of the oars would capsize their boat, and where staying still was evidently more dangerous. By dint of careful, slow work, they came within a few hundred yards of land about midnight, when something caused the boat to careen a little more than usual and two, men jumped overboard. They thought the boat was capsizing, but their involuntary

sacrifice righted her and the others got to the shore without further difficulty. The men overboard were good swimmers and escaped with nothing worse than a cold ducking.

Next morning the **Groome** was seen anchored not far from the place where Cator was set adrift. No vessels of the pirate fleet were in sight save the two that had grounded on Holland Bar. Local tongers went out to the **Groome** and towed her in. She could not be sailed, for the pirates had disabled her before they left her. Her sails were cut into shreds. and her rigging slashed at every point where a cut would work injury. All supplies had been taken from the cabin and kitchen, the cannon was gone, and most of the small arms. A handful of the latter was left, probably by oversight. Whether the cannon was thrown into the bay or taken to the dock of a (*pirate*) dredger is not known, but it is pretty certain that none of the small arms was wasted.

THE PIRATES RULE THE ROOST

All through Thursday and Friday the crews of the stranded dredgers worked to get the boats free from the bar. They failed until Saturday morning. Meantime the tongers on shore waited



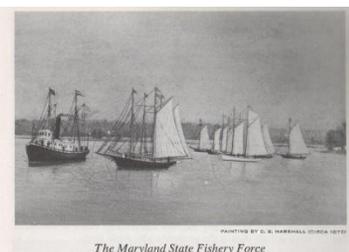
impatiently for relief in the shape of added police boats or assistance from *Dorchester County* sheriff Mace. The loss of the **Groome** was reported by telegraph (*to Annapolis*) soon after it occurred, and the assistance of a police steamer was asked for by Capt. Marshall. He came into Cambridge to dispatch a detailed report, and the people of Taylor's Island and James Island, near which the fight occurred, expected that he would return with the Sheriff and a posse to arrest the men on board the grounded dredgers.

Sheriff Mace publicly expressed his readiness to undertake the matter if he was requested to, but no demand for his services was made (*by the state*), and eventually the pirates took their boats away without interference. *Crimes committed on the water were handled by state authorities, not by the local law officials unless specifically requested.*

And all this time such others of the pirate fleet as had not secured a jig, returned to the Little Choptank and resumed work. (*A "jig" was a term used to indicate a full load of oysters*)

About fifty sail (*of oyster pirates*) worked there on Friday and Saturday, and one swift schooner cruised about the mouth of the (*Little Choptank*) river to give warning by signal of the approach of a police steamer. This sentry boat was provided with oysters by contributions from those at work pro rata, according to their tonnage. It looked as if the entire Maryland navy had been defeated for the Captain and crew of the **Groome** were demoralized, the boat disabled and without arms. No word came from Commander Plowman, and no rescuing steamer hove in sight.

The pirates were rapidly getting all the oysters available for the living of the tongers when the great storm of Sunday, the 25th set in. For two days the weather prevented any oystermen from working, and it led the people here (*in Cambridge*) and at Little Choptank, twenty miles away, to suppose that one or both of the police steamers had gone aground.



Mr. Billings Steele, secretary to Commander Plowman arrived here (from Annapolis) on the morning of the 27th. He had instructions to await the arrival of the police steamer **McLane** and to engage a new crew for the **Groome**. The plan of this campaign as mapped out for him included the retention of the **McLane** in the vicinity of the Little Choptank supporting the **Groome** for several days. The **McLane** was to bring new supplies of arms and ammunition. As time went by, Mr. Steele became anxious about the situation. No steamer appeared, Commander Plowman had no means of communicating with either of them, the storm blow itself away, (*damaging telegraph lines*) and the pirates returned to the forbidden grounds.

The whole county was getting exasperated by the delay, and the indignation at the state of things made its way all along both shores. Mr. Steele's martial temper was sorely tried. He fought under Moseby (CSA) during the rebellion, and it went against the grain with him to see the enemy defying him and the law without taking any measures to attack them. But he had learned to obey orders under Moseby, and it was not until Wednesday that he took the matter somewhat into his own hands. He informed his commander how matters stood, asked for and received instructions to borrow arms and ammunition at once, and refit the **Groome** with new rigging, officers, and crew. Capt. Marshall's commission had but thirty days to run, and there was little doubt that he would resign.

Before he went down to get Marshall's resignation (*on Taylors Island*), Mr. Steele arranged to borrow arms and ammunition of the Lord Guards, (*a local Cambridge based militia group*) and found a man willing to assume command of the **Groome** in Capt Ben L. Keene.

When Mr. Steele stopped in front of Capt Marshall's house on Taylor's Island he was informed that the Captain was in the field, and he sent a small boy to tell the Captain to come up. Capt Marshall returned word that if the gentleman wanted to see him, the gentleman might come down to the field. Mr. Steele smiled and went down. Marshall explained that he had received so many threats from the pirates that he suspected that this was a trick to get possession of him.

"Oh yes, I'll resign" he said: "it's what I've been wanting to do. I've had enough of being Captain on a ship. I think I'd rather stick to farming." So the commission was turned over to Capt Keene, and he set about securing a crew, not an easy task in view of the general fear that the pirates had aroused.

And all this time, when the emergency demanded prompt energetic action, where were the police steamers? The **Thomas** was cruising along the east shore, attending to business, but out of reach of the commander, who has established no system whereby he may keep up some form of

communication with his fleet, except as a boat returns to Annapolis to bring a captive or to secure supplies. The **McLane** as off on a junket somewhere up the Potomac. State Comptroller Victor Baughman was aboard and with him were J. W. Brady and R Goldsborough Keene. This party had been planning the expedition for some time and Friday, the 23rd, was the day fixed upon for departure.

It really doesn't matter whether, these gentlemen undertook a secret mission in behalf of the oyster navy, as the Comptroller said when his tardy return compelled some apology for the detention of the **McLane**, or whether they went down to the excellent (bird) shooting that abounds near the mouth of the Coan River. As people who know, but don't like to be quoted say: the important fact is that the mission, if such it was, could have been done at another time just as well as then, and they do say that it was performed in full last September. Yet Commander Plowman knew on Friday morning that the sloop **E. H. Groome** had been captured and dismantled by pirates and her crew demoralized ; and, knowing this, he permitted the **McLane** to make her trip to the Potomac and Coan river.

Comment is unnecessary, but when Commander Plowman was questioned about this incident; he replied : "Yes, I know about the Little Choptank matter, but I didn't think It was so serious!" Nine days after the capture of the **Groome**, that is, on Thanksgiving Day, both the steamers **Thomas** and the **McLane** appeared In the Little Choptank. The pirates had seen the signal of their sentry and were out of the way. Industriously *and innocently* scraping the fruitless bottom of the main bay (*where it was legal for them to dredge*).

You had to be caught in the act dredging on forbidden grounds and captured with unculled oysters on deck and the captain onboard to be arrested and have the boat detained.

The steamer **McLane** finally came to Cambridge and took Mr Steele to the scene of action, while the steamer **Thomas** returned to Baltimore. An ironic feature of the situation thus left is the fact that Capt. Thomas B. Howard of the **McLane** is universally looked upon as the best man in the oyster navy, He is noted for his courage, for a disposition that spoils for a fight and the pirates actually respect him. if they do not fear him. Unfortunately Capt Howard's skills and the capabilities of the **McLane** were not well used.

Spurred by the merciless gibes of the public, the officials in charge of the navy may take some action that will wipe out the ridiculous stain upon the State's oyster police. They have already asked Secretary Whitney (*of the US Navy*) for the loan of some serviceable weapons.

The dredgers, well informed of what is going on, may hold off from belligerent action for a time and in any event they are likely to take their business elsewhere than in the Little Choptank: but they "must have oysters": though the season is yet young, and when the navy presumes to overcome the pirates it will face over 800 dredgers cruising over the Chesapeake, a large proportion of which are included in a piratical organization, armed desperados, and doubly

determined not to be captured because of the long array of lawless deeds credited to them in the past.

End Notes

During self-isolation and the Covid-19 lockdown, I kept some of my sanity by traveling back in time to the 1880's. These articles were taken from digitized and scanned copies of the original news articles that were found in various on-line sources. Many articles were simply the retelling of stories published earlier. I tried to find and use the earliest mention of the oyster war battles in this research.

The Covid -19 pandemic and closure of local libraries limited access to other resources so the story of oyster pirates in Dorchester County waters is still incomplete.

Bud Marseilles,

Dorchester Skipjack Committee

November 2020

