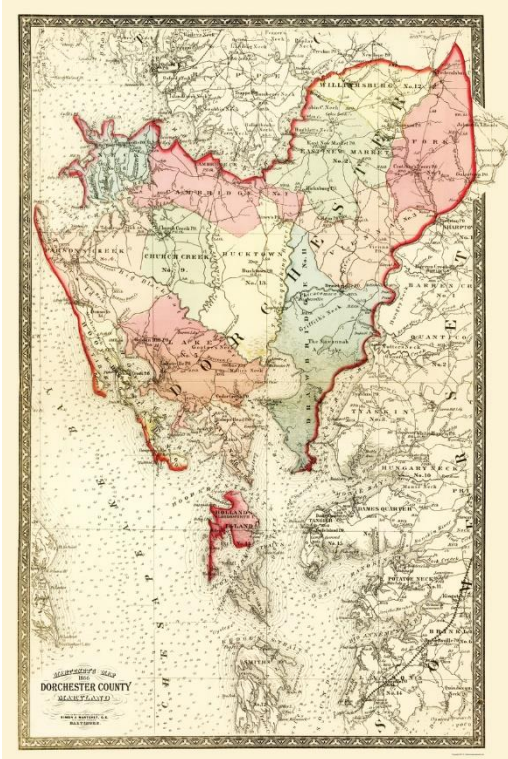


Dorchester County Oyster War Stories

The following stories were discovered in old newspapers during the pandemic lockdown. It took some detective work to put events in the correct sequence and time to understand who the people were that were involved in the oyster wars. These, and other oyster war stories were collected and serialized in Attraction Magazine by Bud Marseilles, senior crewmember on the skipjack Nathan of Dorchester.



Several Oyster war battles 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.

The map from the late 1800's shows Dorchester County and adjacent waters. The Honga river and Bishops Head are in the lower center of the map. The Little Choptank is located as an indentation on the upper left side of the map and the Choptank river runs across the top of the map from left to right.

To better understand the news as it was written 150 years ago, here are some 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 were appointed by the Governor in Annapolis. The captain then recruited and hired local watermen for crew.
- There were many loopholes in the law and many cases were tried by the U S Commissioner rather than the county where the infraction occurred.
- 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 of 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.

Comments have been added to clarify the reports as written in the newspapers of the day. Newspaper reports are quoted in italics.

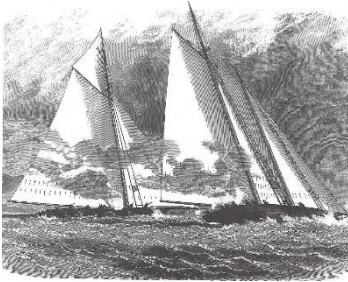
The Battle of the Honga River, February 1884

If you turn left at Gootees marine in southern Dorchester County, you are headed towards Bishops Head and all but forgotten tiny watermen villages of Toddsville, Crapo, Wingate and Crocheron. Today these sleepy villages blend into the surrounding marsh and overlook the quiet waters of the Honga river and Fishing Bay, but 130 years ago, this area was a hotbed of tension and violence all caused by the oyster, and man's quest to become rich during the Chesapeake Bay's "Oyster Gold Rush".

It was a time when the yearly oyster harvest from Dorchester waters alone was over a million bushels of oysters. Oysters were immensely popular and profitable. Local and national newspapers of the day were eager to publish stories of the depredation to local oyster beds caused by oyster pirates and the ensuing violence caused by those fighting over these

bivalves. Here in the words of the day is the story about one incident, the Battle of the Honga river.

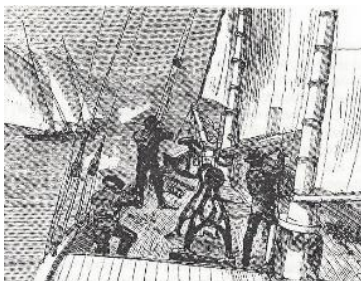
Feb 7, 1884- New York Tribune: *'The state Oyster police sloop **Julia Hamilton**, Capt John Insley commander, had a hot fight with a fleet of oyster pirates working illegal ground in the Honga river yesterday. The pirates mustered 100 men armed with rifles, muskets and pistols. They were all quietly at work when the police sloop bore down on them and called for them to surrender'.*



*'The crews of the twenty oyster pirate dredge boats laughed derisively, and when Capt Insley threatened to give them his broadside, they responded with a terrific volley of their own which drove the police below deck. The rigging and woodwork of the **Hamilton** was cut to pieces, and several of the crew were wounded'.*



*'The policemen, discovering they had stirred up a hornet's nest were preparing to defend themselves with the 6 pound cannon in their bow, but the pirates boarded and took possession after a sharp contest in which the crew of the police boat fought desperately. As one of the pirates reached the **Hamilton's** hatchway, he received a rifle ball thru the shoulder from the entrenched cabin. Dodging behind a small deckhouse, the boarding party exchanged shots with the crew for half an hour'.*



*'Capt Insley consented to withdraw without further molesting the pirates. The defiant oystermen then returned to their vessels and the **Hamilton** left the creek. Returning to Cambridge, Capt Insley telegraphed his report to Annapolis and was immediately charged with great cowardice in the matter as he immediately deserted and refused to again attack the pirates'. (After all, the pirates only outnumbered him by 20 to one and he was expected to prevail in any encounter with*

the pirates).

'A committee of Dorchester officials held a meeting and drew up an appeal asking for immediate aid from state governor McLane'.

Dorchester County sends a Telegram to Annapolis *'Dredgers in possession of Fishing Bay and Honga river. One hundred armed dredgers at work on forbidden grounds. Oysters ruined. Send steamers at once but put a (good) man in command'.*

Baltimore American Special **Feb 6th, 1884**

*'The governor ordered the police steamer **Leila** to the scene and appointed G H Roberts to command the **Julia Hamilton**. Meanwhile, the pirates continued to work the forbidden ground and any attempt to dislodge them is surely to lead to a serious fight'.*

Oyster police captains were hired, fired, or reassigned according to current political whims in Annapolis. Judgements were made for political expediency rather than to win the oyster war. Eastern Shore courts were heavily biased in favor of the oyster pirates who were often relatives of the judge or jury members.

February 8, 1884- A New York Sun war correspondent reported that Maryland was sending an armed fleet to drive the pirates from the "Hunger" (Honga) river

*'An organized fleet of pirates invaded the Honga River oyster 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 these desperate pirates'.*



*'The governor sent the state oyster police steamer **WM J Hamilton** to Baltimore to 'arm his vessel with rifles, revolvers, and ammunition from the state armory and to equip the oyster sloop **Julia Hamilton** and to protect the oyster beds from predators'.*

*'The old police steamer **Leila** from Annapolis and the sloop **Julia A Hamilton** with her 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 and 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 well-organized 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'.*

Pirates were equipped with better weapons than the oyster police. With bigger boats and larger crews, the oyster police had a difficult time upholding the law and protecting the rich oyster beds for local watermen with their small sloops. If the oyster police used their steamers to enforce the law instead of smaller sail powered sloops, battles would have been won by the oyster police and law and order restored to the oyster beds.

Dorchester tongers from Bishop's Head and Hoopers Island who had been driven off their oyster beds took out their anger and frustration practicing 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** owned by Levin McNamara of Dorchester and they also captured the **Martha E Moore** from Baltimore. The pirate fleet was scattered and the illegal dredge operation by oyster pirates was halted’.



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.

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

Oyster police crews that were captured by pirates were not seriously injured but many were put to work hauling pirate dredges or locked below decks until they could be put ashore at some remote location.

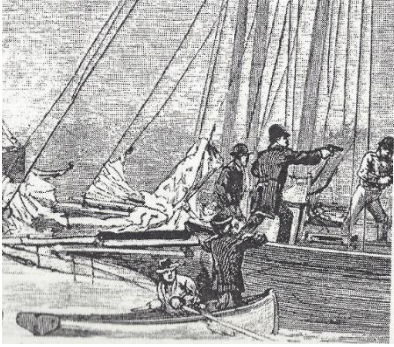
February 11th- ‘The 3 oyster police vessels were off blockading Eastern Bay where they held some 200 piratical craft in the upper waters of the Chester River’.

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

The Infamous Cannon Family

Dorchester County had at least two famous Cannon families. Patty Cannon from Reliance, on the border of Dorchester County, Delaware and Caroline County was a notorious “escaped slave catcher”. She ran a hotel and was also accused of robbery and murder. She escaped capture by crossing into Delaware or Caroline County when Dorchester County police were after her. This story is about the Cannons of Bishops Head.

February 14th ‘The Baltimore Sun says that Capt Mitchell, commanding the **Leila** and acting as commodore of the Maryland oyster police squadron operating in Fishing Bay, proceeded to the Honga river Monday afternoon to capture Sylvester Cannon, said to be one of the leaders of the recent raids on the tonging grounds. On entering Fox Creek (near today’s Crapo), police found three sloops (**Maude Muller**, **Silver Spray**, unknown), belonging to the Cannon Brothers lying close together. These men are sons of R P Cannon who is popularly credited with being the master spirit in the recent raid against the oyster police sloop **Julia Hamilton**.



February 14th The New York Times continued the story. *‘The **Leila** returned to Fishing Creek and captured the puny **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, R P Cannon had been justice of the peace, but was now self-declared “King of the Oyster Pirates. Newspapers describe R P as a small man, dressed in rustic clothing and armed with 4 loaded revolvers tucked in a wide leather belt’.

*‘Having been at one-time the local magistrate, R P was very familiar with the law. Learning that there was no warrant out for him, R 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. (Baltimore Sun adds detail) Some violent words were passed, and it was thought that another battle was imminent. The trouble blew over however without any actual fighting and the **Leila** dropped down river to an anchorage at Norman’s cove (across from Goose creek on lower Bishops Head) where she remained with the **Julia Hamilton** and **Maude Muller** near at hand’.*

Maryland law stated that the captain had to be captured with his crew before the boat could be impounded. If the Captain escaped or was not onboard, police could not impound the boat. The crew could be jailed until a bond was paid. The **Maude Muller** was subsequently released. R P Cannon quickly boarded the **Muller** and set sail to get as far away from the police as he could as quickly as possible.

*‘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** at the time’.*

*‘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 even more armed men ashore, but the pirates, seeing the police approach, escaped into the marsh’.*

‘The Cannons were quite the characters. Sylvester had narrowly escaped death, after 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 while pirating oysters.’

*'R 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." R P said that he had assisted Insley on the **Julia Hamilton** 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 R P absorb all the gunfire. RP said that Capt Insley disappeared and was not seen again'.*

'Now there was also 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 was called upon to summon a special posse to serve writs on the Cannons and the posse had to stay at Goose Creek (Toddville) and patrol the Bishop's Head area 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'.*

Rob Cannon, RP Cannon's great-great-grandson told me that his great grandfather R P Cannon sued the New York newspapers for libel on several occasions as they made him out to be ornerier than was his actual demeanor.

A Brush with the Oyster Police

March 28, 1887 - Evening Capitol, Annapolis Md: 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. Her captain and crew remained oyster pirates throughout the oyster boom days. Pirates were seldom captures and brought to court. Convictions were rare and fines small in comparison to the rewards of illegal oyster harvests. Commandant Plowman was a farmer from Harford County who was appointed for his political connections and had no knowledge of warfare, sail powered boat, the law, or oysters.

Moving up the Dorchester County shoreline, we come to the scene of the next battle that occurred at the mouth of the Choptank River. All oysters in rivers were reserved for Dorchester or Talbot County tongers and were prohibited to dredgers.

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 puny 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 crossfire, 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.

The next battle takes place on the Little Choptank River in rich oyster beds reserved for Dorchester County tongers

Battle of the Little Choptank

Evening Star Nov 27, 1888

New York Sun Dec 8, 1888

New York Times Nov 28, 1888

*‘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,*

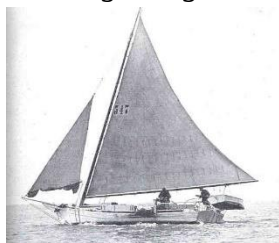
but without any further effect than wasting ammunition on both sides. The police fired upward of 300 rounds, and then had to retreat because they had no more powder and bullets, while to all appearances the enemy was as well off as at the beginning’.

This short article illustrates one of the handicaps placed on the oyster police. Commandant Plowman restricted the number of guns and amount of ammunition placed on oyster police boats. He was afraid of overspending his ammunition budget and that the police might waste ammunition hunting wildfowl to supplement their rations. Ironically, state law encouraged dredgers to hunt waterfowl to supplement their rations while dredging which let them legally equip their boats with as many guns and as much ammunition as they wanted.

THE AFFAIR OF THE LITTLE CHOPTANK

This next part of the 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 hunts. It was also published in a Sunday edition of the Salt Lake Utah newspaper within three weeks of the battle.

*‘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’.*

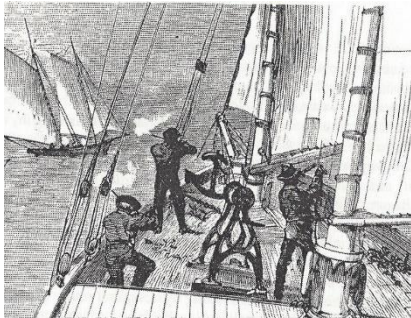
‘The bullets pierced the sails of the police sloop, splintered the woodwork a bit, and scratched the water harmlessly all about. It seemed to Capt. Marshall that he was over matched, as indeed he was, and he retired to make better preparations. The pirates laid aside their rifles and resumed dredging’.



*‘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 local 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 frenz'y.

*'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 next part of the story illustrates the incompetence or indifference that Annapolis paid to the pleas of Dorchester County residents who wanted relief from the oyster pirates stealing Little Choptank Oysters and keeping local watermen (tongers) off their own beds.

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’.

*‘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 tongs 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 police steamers had gone aground’.

*‘Finally, the **McLane** under Capt Howard left Baltimore for the Little Choptank River. As the **McLane** was steaming down the bay hundreds of boats were passed going to the oyster rocks and sailing up the bay from them. Many boats were heavily loaded. The **McLane** rendezvoused with the steamer **Gov Thomas** which had been patrolling the Chester River and had recently been armed with a naval cannon from the state patrol boat **Eva Baughman**’.*



*‘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 Lloyds 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'.

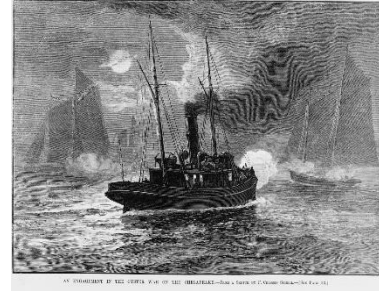


*'And all this time, when the emergency demanded prompt energetic action, where were the police steamers? The **Thomas** was cruising along the east shore, attending to business, but out of reach of the commander, who has established no system whereby he may keep up some form of communication with his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

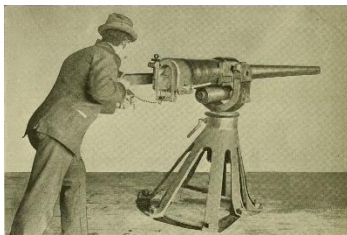
'When Commander Plowman was questioned about this incident; he replied : "Yes, I know about the Little Choptank matter, but I didn't think It was so serious!"

*'Nine days after the capture of the **Groome**, on Thanksgiving Day, both the steamers **Thomas** and the **McLane** appeared in the Little Choptank. The steamer **Gov Thomas** anchored at the*

mouth of the Little Choptank, while the *McLane* proceeded on to Cambridge where Mr Billings Steele waited with new arms lent by the Lloyd guards for the men on the sloop **E H Groome** whose guns had been taken by pirates when captured on the 21st. The **McLane** returned to the Little Choptank and delivered the arms to Capt Ben L Keene new commander of the **Groome**. No boats were at work on the scene of the late trouble. It was apparent that the dredgers were on the lookout for the state steamers, as a large number of them were at work near the mouth of the river . From there, they could easily slip over the bar into the forbidden grounds in the event of the steamers not making their appearance industriously and innocently scraping the fruitless bottom of the main bay (where it was legal for them to dredge)’.



‘An ironic feature of the situation 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 at the Little Choptank’.



‘Spurred by the merciless gibes of the public, the officials in charge of the oyster 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. No matter where the pirates go, the steamers will follow. A vigorous and careful watch will be kept by the officers and men of the oyster navy, who seem determined to put an end to the violations at any risk. The feel confident of their ability to do so’.

END