

---

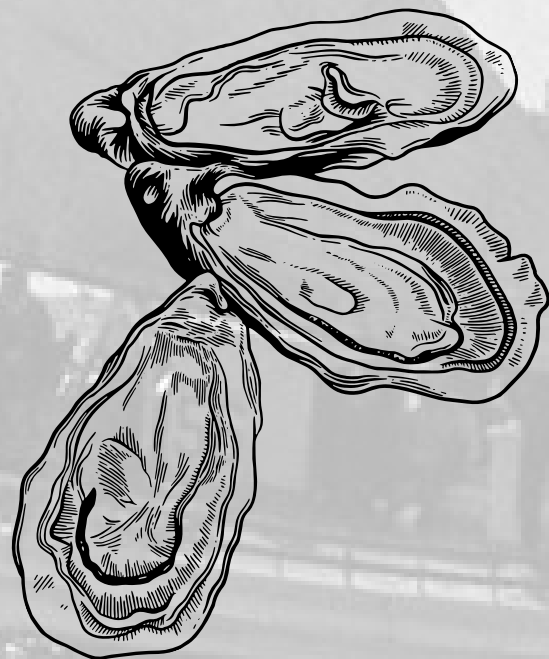
The seafood industry for which the Chesapeake Bay is renowned would not be what it is today without the contributions of generations of African Americans. Today there are other roads to prosperity, but 200 years ago the Bay was one of the best escape routes to freedom and a livelihood.

For hundreds of years, Black Americans have crabbed, fished, and oystered here. Indeed a variety of occupations in the maritime industry in the Bay area have had Black representation for centuries – boat builders, blacksmiths, deckhands, stokers, and firemen.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade itself was supported by skilled native sailors who guided the large European vessels in and out of the treacherous breakers off the west African coast.

The captives who survived the Middle Passage across the Atlantic primarily became unpaid workers on large plantations in Maryland and elsewhere.

When low tobacco prices and worn-out soil caused the collapse of Maryland's agricultural economy in the 1730's, many plantation owners put their enslaved laborers to work on fishing boats.



Some were able to earn money to buy their freedom. A small boat, a pair of oyster tongs and a lot of hard work gave rise to a family's economic freedom for generations into the future.

Black watermen, both free and enslaved, became prominent in the Chesapeake waters. Racially mixed crews were common since ships of trade often hailed from northern, anti-slavery states.



As early as 1796, the federal government issued Seamen's Protection Certificates which defined free Black merchant mariners as "citizens" — America's first Black citizens.

"Black Jacks", as they were known, aided the escape of Frederick Douglass and others enslaved in Maryland. In a vain attempt to stop the escapes, the Maryland General Assembly passed a law in 1836 requiring that all large boats be captained by whites. The law was largely ignored.



**By the 1860s, the Chesapeake Bay became the primary source of oysters in the U.S., and one of the major sources of shad, creating an industry in need of a strong labor force.**

**Following Maryland emancipation (November 1, 1864) oystering was one of the highest paying jobs for Black men**

**Self-employment in oystering, crabbing, fishing, and boat building provided independence and self-sufficiency for Black watermen.**

**Many newly freed Blacks came to the region due to the relatively low start-up costs for profiting off the Bay's bounty as well as the availability of jobs building boats and processing seafood.**

**Since that time, Black men, women and children have comprised the majority of workers in oyster and crab processing houses supplying seafood to the eastern United States and beyond.**