The Eastern oyster (Latin name *Crassostrea virginicus*) was one of many varieties of seafood eaten by Native Americans in the Mid-Atlantic region. Its tough, sharp shells were often used for tools, and huge middens (ancient refuse mounds) of them are found in many coastal areas. Nanticoke Indians from Delaware were skilled at making wampum (beads used for commerce) from the shells.

Colonial settlers in the Chesapeake Bay region considered oysters a “hardship” food (something to eat when nothing else was available), since they were one of the few fresh foods to be found throughout the coldest months of the year. Oysters became more popular in the cities of the region, and by the end of the 18th century, oysters were sold in taverns, fancy restaurants, and even by street vendors in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York.

On the Great South Bay of Long Island, businessmen like Dutch immigrant Jacob Ockers, “The Oyster King,” grew rich by marketing oysters at New York City’s Fulton Fish Market and exporting thousands of barrels to Europe. But by the late 1930s, overfishing, pollution, and a devastating hurricane had killed what was left of the Long Island oyster industry.

Oystering in the Delaware and Chesapeake bays became even more important than in Long Island. Shipping oysters by rail to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and further away brought prosperity to towns like Port Norris, New Jersey, and Crisfield, Maryland. The fleet of oyster schooners (like the restored A.J. Meerwald) on the Delaware Bay near Port Norris, New Jersey once numbered more than 500. An estimated 4,000 people fished the Delaware Bay for oysters, and many more people were involved in the preparing and shipping the oysters, and building oyster ships. In the year 1880, 2.4 million bushels of oysters were harvested.

In the Chesapeake Bay, before the early 1800s, “tonging” was the most common method of harvesting oysters. Tongers stood on the side of a small boat with long-handled scissors-like tongs which had a metal basket at the end, scooping heavy loads of oysters off their reefs. By the 1810s, dredging was introduced to the Chesapeake Bay by oyster fishermen from New Englander. Dredging required a much larger boat, like a schooner or a skipjack, and a bigger crew.

As dredging became more widely allowed by law, a dangerous but interesting chapter in the history of Maryland and Virginia started, called the “Oyster Wars.” Tongers fought with dredgers, and the crews of schooners and other large dredging boats from Maryland battled with those from Virginia. Guns ranging from carbine rifles to cannons became standard equipment aboard oyster boats, and Maryland needed to start an “Oyster Navy” (which became the present-day Marine Police) to try to keep the peace.
The mid-1950s, things were looking grim for oysters in the Chesapeake Bay. Adding to problems of over-fishing, two oyster diseases (called MSX and Dermo) were discovered, which have killed up to 90 percent of the oysters in the Bay. Fishing for blue crabs became the main occupation for many of Maryland’s Chesapeake Bay watermen. But in recent years, the blue crab harvest in Maryland has also declined greatly. To meet the demand for popular regional dishes like crab cakes, crab meat sold and eaten in Maryland is now likely to come from North Carolina or as far away as Asia.

Asia also has a connection with the effort to restore oysters to the Chesapeake Bay. A new Asian strain of oyster (Latin name *Crassostrea ariakensis*), has proven in scientific tests to be disease resistant, fast growing, and similar in taste to the native oyster. Many scientists, environmentalists, and watermen are not sure that introducing this new species is a good idea, but experiments are underway to see if this new type of oyster can safely be introduced into the Bay.

Meanwhile, the oyster is so important to Maryland’s history that the annual National Oyster Shucking Competition still takes place in the state each October in Leonardstown, located in St. Mary’s County. Oyster shucking (opening oysters to remove the meat from inside the shell) takes a great deal of skill, and used to be a major occupation in Mid-Atlantic coastal communities. The Leonardsville contest was in its 38th year in 2004. Shuckers come from as far away as Texas, Louisiana and Massachusetts to compete with Mid-Atlantic champs for a trip to the World Championships in Ireland.

Will these shuckers be using the new Asian oyster some day soon?

Read more about Oysters on the Water Ways: Mid-Atlantic Maritime Communities site in these sections:

Port of Call – Crisfield, MD

Port of Call – Bivalve, NJ

Port of Call – Freeport, Long Island, NY

From Water to Table


Visit the National Oyster Shucking Contest at: [http://www.usoysterfest.com/shuckstext.html](http://www.usoysterfest.com/shuckstext.html)