

Last winter, after many years of a unique and historic maritime heritage, Ocracoke was threatened with permanent closure of the island's last remaining fish house. Encouragingly, about two dozen local fishermen joined together to form the *Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association*.

The Association's goal is to rescue the fish house from private ownership and possible development by purchasing the business and the long-term lease. This would keep the fish house operating in order to supply fresh seafood to the traveling public and Ocracoke's restaurants. It would also help secure the working watermen's traditional way of life.

Donations are being solicited to achieve their goals. \$409,000 must be raised by the summer of 2007. A significant portion of that money is expected to come from grants, but individual and corporate donations are necessary if the fish house, doing business as the *Ocracoke Seafood Company*, is to continue to serve Ocracoke Island . You can click [here](#) to learn how to make a donation now.

Fishing has long been a prominent island occupation. Seafood has been abundant in these waters as long as anyone can remember. In the seventeenth century John Smith recounts, in his *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, his observations of maritime plenty in the Chesapeake Bay . There is no reason to think the Pamlico Sound would have been much different.

"It was frustrating to see the abundance of fish..." he says, "and to be without adequate means of obtaining them. In 1608 Russell and Todkill reported an 'abundance of fish lying so thicke with their heads avoue the water, as for want of nets....we attempted to catch them with a frying pan; but we found it a bad instrument to catch fish with."

Significantly, however, census records from the nineteenth century show that Ocracoke fishermen were often outnumbered by other workers, especially sailors, primarily because fishing has always been an uncertain commercial endeavor.

In spite of the abundance of fish, before the advent of refrigeration and reliable transportation in the mid twentieth century it could be difficult, time-consuming, and expensive to carry seafood to available markets on the mainland. Even Hatteras, Manteo, and Atlantic were a considerable distance. Deliveries to larger cities, like Norfolk , Baltimore , Philadelphia , and New York were generally out of the question.

When large catches were made, local fishermen had the daunting task of packing and shipping them off the island. Although some fish were smoked, most were salted and

packed in wooden kegs with help from the island women. The taste of local mullet was superb....and much in demand across the sound. Eventually a label was designed. "Ocracoke Mullet" it announced, and was pasted to the side of the keg. Unfortunately, rival fishermen to the south began labeling their catches as Ocracoke Mullet. No islander thought Core Sound mullet was anything but inferior in taste, however the pretenders soon cornered the market and Ocracoke fishermen suffered.

Nevertheless, local fish continued to be packed up and put on board the mail boat or the freight boat and delivered to Atlantic , North Carolina . A form of barter developed. Islanders would tag their fish with messages indicating what they wanted in return - kerosene, shoes, canned goods, flour, or other necessities.

No one was getting rich by fishing, but children were being fed and families were clothed and sheltered.

I once asked my father if his father had ever engaged in any form of commercial fishing. "Oh yes," he said, "Papa went out with Uncle Wheeler once." Once, I thought. That is certainly telling. My immediate ancestors were primarily seafaring men, not fishermen. As a teenager my father had spent just a few days fishing in Pamlico Sound with older islanders, and then sailing with their catch to a buyer on Hatteras Island . Shortly thereafter he moved to Philadelphia to work on dredges and tugboats. He never fished commercially again.

Nevertheless, my family enjoyed much of the bounty from the sea. Neighbors and relatives would bring mullet, drum, and other fish by the house. My father, uncles, cousins, nephews and I fished with rod and reel, raked clams, tonged for oysters, giggered for flounder on the reef, and trapped crabs....but all on a small scale, and primarily for personal use.

In 1936, less than a decade after my father moved away from the island, Ocracoke native, R. Stanley Wahab, built the island's first ice plant. This was a major development that had enormous impact on commercial fishing. One local fisherman even refers to the years before 1936 as B.I. (Before Ice).

The other significant changes for commercial fishing were the paving of NC Highway 12 in 1956, as well as the establishment of state-operated ferries at Hatteras Inlet in 1957, and across Pamlico Sound in 1960. Finally, Ocracoke fishermen had generally reliable, if not exactly easy, access to distant markets. Commercial fishing grew and flourished over the next half century.

But Ocracoke watermen were more than just fishermen. They raked and sold clams, set wire crab pots and sent wooden boxes full of tasty blue crabs to distant markets. After World War II, watermen dragged for shrimp. Larger vessels worked our waters for both fish and shrimp. Small scale oystermen even today motor to Pamlico Sound beds where they bring up the salty mollusks with long-handled tongs and cull them on site. For a time, even eels were harvested, along with flounder, destined for transport to Asian markets.

Traditionally, when most of the large schools of fish left our waters for the winter months, islanders turned to hunting. At the turn of the twentieth century great flocks of geese, brant, swans, and a myriad assortment of ducks migrated down the Outer Banks.

The following account was published in a coastal newspaper in 1887: "Messers Dan Williams and Ben Neal while patrolling the beach at Ocracoke during a stormy night last week were compelled to lie down to escape injury from a tremendous flock of geese making their way down the Banks. In the meantime Mr. Williams, while lying flat on his back, caught four of the geese alive. This story seems almost incredible, but it is nevertheless true."

Blinds dotted the shallow waters of the sound. Sink boxes were weighted down with iron decoys and camouflaged with reeds and grasses. Nearby, scores of hand-carved wooden decoys bobbed on the waves, beckoning unsuspecting birds as hunters waited, shotguns at the ready.

Years ago hunting camps were established "down below" on the sound side of the banks between Ocracoke village and Hatteras Inlet. These included the Quawk Hammock Camp, the Green Island Club, and numerous other smaller, personal hunting camps.

In the early twentieth century market hunting burgeoned as demand increased. Batteries of weapons were employed to dispatch dozens of birds at one firing. For shipment, geese and ducks were packed in small diameter stovepipes. They in turn were slid into larger stovepipes, and the space between them was packed with ice. Dwindling numbers of birds and negative public sentiment, however, eventually led to legislation outlawing market hunting.

By the latter half of the twentieth century paved roads and reliable ferry service not only allowed watermen increased commerce with Morehead City, Hatteras, Norfolk, and beyond, but encouraged tourists to visit Ocracoke as well. Ocracoke had long been a vacation destination for North Carolina hunters and sports fishermen. The island was especially popular with governors, legislators, and other well-connected tar heels in the

1920s through the 1940s. But the general public hardly knew Ocracoke existed. That changed in the mid 1970s. Tourism had blossomed and was fast becoming the island's main economy.

By then commercial fishermen were sometimes competing with sport fishermen. Other islanders, capitalizing on the increased tourism, expanded visitor-focused enterprises started by their fathers and grandfathers. Guides placed advertisements to entice hunters in the fall. Boat captains offered to take anglers to favorite fishing spots starting in the spring, and into the fall.

Luring tourists is a time-honored endeavor of islanders. Old post cards and photographs from the late 1800s to the 1930s show guides and their clients displaying as many as two and three dozen channel bass hanging from railings and the sides of out buildings. Many weighed fifty pounds and more.

A vintage advertising brochure put out by Stanley Wahab pictures U.S. senator Joe T. Robinson along with this quotation: "I have been fishing all my life but have never seen the equal to the salt water angling this section of the Carolina coast has to offer. Truthfully I can say that I enjoyed very much indeed my visit to Ocracoke. I hope to come back and am already planning to come down to your island goose and duck shooting when the season opens...."

Entrepreneur Wahab invited sportsmen to join his "Ocracoke Island Hunting & Fishing Club" and even employed doggerel to bring guests to his establishment:

"Hi Ho for the sun  
And the rod and the gun,  
The rollicking sea-life  
Of good wholesome fun!

Hi Ho for the sea  
And the fish aplentee -  
The channel bass bite  
And they leap with wild glee!

Hi Ho for the yawl  
The bat and the ball  
The sports and amusements  
Beloved of all!

Hi Ho for dawn stealing  
O'er vistas appealing  
And hitting long trails  
With that grand, glorious feeling!

Hi Ho for gay dancing  
And spry horses prancing  
And bright, happy mermaids  
They're most, most entrancing!

Hi Ho and ahoy  
To the duck and decoy -  
To unfurling the sail  
And to rounding the buoy!

Hi Ho and let's go!  
Where? You surely must know -  
It's Ocracoke Island  
Near Old Pamlico!"

Another early advertising pamphlet extols Ocracoke for its boats, dance hall, movies, swimming, and "beautiful modern cottages and apartments," as well as "the Fightinest Fish you ever Tackled." One proclaims, "Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and come to Wahab Village on the Isle of Ocracoke for a Glorious Vacation!" "Unenjoyment Problem Solved!" it shouts. Fishing and hunting were clearly the main draws, but already islanders were beginning to understand that Ocracoke had even more to offer a wider clientele.

While tourism was expanding, encouragement came to commercial fishermen in 1975 when Johnny Griffin and Bill Cowper leased a small section of waterfront property on the Creek (Silver Lake) and opened one of the first modern fish houses on Ocracoke Island. Before long a growing number of local young men were fishing full time and selling to the "South Point Seafood Company."

Griffin and Cowper eventually sold the fish house to Murray Fulcher. By the mid-1980s the fish house had become a thriving enterprise. Some accounts suggest that "millions of tons of crabs and fish" were handled at South Point in those years. According to the *Virginian-Pilot*, in its heyday (the 1970s and 1980s) "as much as 50,000 pounds a day of shellfish, sea mullets, ocean flounder, trout, spot or croaker would go through the fish house."

Nowadays imported seafood competes with local catches, and often undersells them. While once more than three dozen islanders were setting crab pots, today only a handful of crabbers are carrying on the tradition, and retiring watermen are often not being replaced by younger fishermen.

The expansion of tourism and escalating land prices have also had a dramatic effect. Last year the fish house closed its doors and suspended operations. An island tradition and livelihood for a number of residents seemed to be coming to an end.

That's when the Ocracoke Foundation stepped in. A non-profit organization, the Foundation is the brainchild of Robin Payne. Robin has worked tirelessly with the watermen and other supporters to raise the funds (\$409,000) necessary for the OWWA to purchase the fish house, secure the long-term lease, and buy other necessary equipment.

Today, the Association has about thirty members, some full time, others part time watermen. The youngest member is Morty Gaskill, now twelve, who has had a commercial fishing license since he was nine years old. He also has a shellfish endorsement and fishes from one of two boats he owns. Motry, whose father, James Barrie Gaskill, is also a member of the Association, is the latest in a long line of islanders who have made their livings from the sea.

The Association has until June 1, 2007 to make the payment for the structure. Without the Ocracoke Seafood Company, with its fully equipped facility (winch, conveyer belt, ice machine, coolers, and trucks), island watermen are forced to transport their catches to Hatteras Island, or beyond, an inconvenient and costly trip by ferry.

In addition to wholesale marketing of island fish, Ocracoke Seafood Company has opened its doors for retail sales during the tourist season. Be sure to stop by their store right on the harbor. You can purchase an assortment of fish (flounder, Spanish mackerel, trout, sheepshead, and others), as well as shrimp, clams, other local seafood, and ice.

While there you might be rewarded by seeing the hustle and bustle of a working Outer Banks waterfront. Seasoned old salts (along with younger salts), bedecked in white rubber boots, surrounded by baskets and boxes of fish, are often busily engaged in unloading an incoming boat, sorting, weighing, and packing the catch, and transferring it to a waiting truck.

By purchasing your seafood right here on Ocracoke you will be helping to preserve a long-time island tradition. And by making a monetary contribution, you will be taking one more

step to help ensure that working watermen continue to be an integral part of Ocracoke Island life.

**To contribute to the non-profit Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association stop in the *Ocracoke Seafood Company* on Silver Lake, or mail your tax-deductible donation to Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, c/o The Ocracoke Foundation, PO Box 1165 , Ocracoke , NC 27960.**

**You can also visit their web site at [www.ocracokewatermen.org](http://www.ocracokewatermen.org). There you can learn more about the association and make a donation on-line.**

John Smith, *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, ed. By E. Arber and A.G. Bradley, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910), xxxiv - xxxv, as cited in *Geographical History of the Carolina Banks, Technical Report No. 8, Part A*, by Gary S. Dunbar, Supervised and Edited by Fred Kniffen, Coastal Studies Institute, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge 3, Louisiana, October 15, 1956, footnote number 80, page 35. ( This is "The first part of the eighth in a series of reports obtained under Project No. N7 onr 35608, Task Order no. NR 388 002 of the Office of Naval Research, Copy No. 118," housed in the library of the Ocracoke Preservation Society Museum , Ocracoke , NC 27960 .)

"The Weekly Record" Beaufort , NC , Thursday, February 10, 1887: