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**The Legacy of a Disappearing Industry: A Case Study of the J. H. Miles & Company
Oyster Packers of Norfolk**

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by
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The largest estuary in the United States, the Chesapeake Bay, was once home to a bustling oyster trade during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that fed millions throughout the country and employed thousands in Virginia and Maryland. The oyster fishery was once a prodigious industry in the communities surrounding the Chesapeake Bay and the oysters it produced were lauded as the best in the country. To harvest, shuck, clean, and package oysters for the consumer market, the industry employed thousands of tongers, dredge watermen, shuckers, and packing house workers. In Virginia, the oyster industry employed a large number of emancipated slaves and their descendants, especially women. Today, that industry has disappeared while conservationists and aquaculturists are fighting to bring the Chesapeake Bay's oysters back. This study will explore how J. H. Miles & Company and other oyster growers and packers brought the industry to Norfolk, Virginia around 1900, and the economic and ecological legacy the industry's eventual collapse left behind. To tell the story of the twentieth century oyster industry in Norfolk, however, an overview of the industry's turbulent history during the nineteenth century should be addressed. But first, an introduction to the tasty bivalve that sparked such a momentous history is in order.

A Complicated Bivalve

The oyster has been a stable part of the human diet since the ancient Greeks and Romans. It was an essential food source for the Native Americans who populated the Chesapeake Bay along Virginia's shores long before the settlement of Jamestown. In fact, oyster shell piles, or middens, were discovered and recorded by the English settlers shortly after landing which provided evidence that the bay's oysters were safe to consume.¹ Seventeenth century ship

¹ Kate Livie, *Chesapeake Oysters: The Bay's Foundation and Future* (Charleston, SC: American Palate, 2015), 23.

captains chronicled their complaints of having to navigate through enormous banks of oysters to reach Virginia's shoreline. Buried oyster middens are still discovered by archaeologists today.

The oyster is not only valued as a consumable commodity, but it also serves a very important ecological function. Oysters are filter feeders; they eat by drawing water through their gills and filtering out plankton and microscopic plants, releasing clean water back into the estuary. One oyster can filter nearly 50 gallons of water per day.² Today, it takes more than a year for the current oyster population to filter the entire Chesapeake Bay, and yet at their peak in the nineteenth century, scientists estimate this process took less than six days.³ One can imagine the water clarity of the bay during such a time. Salinity and water temperature determine the health and growth rate of oysters; and the Chesapeake Bay once provided the ideal combination of both suitable for the growth of large, healthy oysters.⁴

The oyster in question for this study is the *Crassostrea Virginica*, or Eastern Oyster, which is native to the Chesapeake Bay.⁵ According to Kate Livie, "oysters are touted as an environmental panacea – creating habitat, supporting the food chain and filtering the Chesapeake's formidable concentrations of sediment and algae."⁶ As sedentary mollusks, oysters lay on their side with shells permanently affixed to any solid surface, and they are remarkably

² Livie, *Chesapeake Oysters*, 58.

³ Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, "Oystering on the Chesapeake," *Oystering on the Chesapeake Teaching Curriculum Units 1-10*, (2018): 45.

⁴ Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007), 19.

⁵ L. Cornwall, S. K. Hargrove, and J. Anderson, "The Implementation of Engineering Tools and Methodology to Identify Solutions to the Declining Oyster Industry in the Chesapeake Bay," *Journal of Management & Engineering Integration* 2, no. 2 (2009): 35.

⁶ Livie, *Chesapeake Oysters*, 13.

fertile.⁷ They release millions of eggs that, once fertilized, attach to any solid surface to form spat (young oysters). Spawning happens when waters reach between 68° and 70°F, typically June through October.⁸ For oystermen, spat may be transplanted to better grounds as seed stock to later be harvested. After two or three years, spat mature into the oysters we see served on the half shell. Oyster beds also form a natural reef habitat supporting other marine life. Their thick shells protect the meat of the oyster throughout its life, and once cleaned can be planted on the bottom to provide homes for new spat or be recycled into agricultural products.

Oyster shells experienced their own industry beginning in the colonial era as a source of lime for agricultural products, like garden lime or chicken feed, and as construction mortar.⁹ Many colonial era roads throughout the Tidewater region were built using crushed oyster shells.¹⁰ No longer were they left in piles or thrown into rubbish heaps, but instead shells turned into a viable commodity to be sold by oystermen. Before oysters made their way into the packing houses, they first had to be retrieved from the bottom of the bay.

Oyster fishing was achieved in one of two ways: by tongers or by dredgers, identified by the gear used to retrieve oysters from their attached beds. Tongers used long, metal-toothed, scissored tongs applied by hand from shallow skiffs along the shoreline.¹¹ Dredgers employed

⁷ William K. Brooks, *The Oyster: A Popular Summary of a Scientific Study (1891)* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 64.

⁸ R. H. Fiedler, *The Story of Oysters*, U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Fisheries. Fishery Circular No. 21 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936), 3.

⁹ David M. Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery, Chesapeake Bay, USA," *Frontiers in Marine Science* 4, (2017): 2

¹⁰ Fiedler, *The Story of Oysters*, 16.

¹¹ John R. Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay* (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1981), 30.

large metal-toothed frames with large nets attached that were dragged along the bottom mechanically in deeper waters from larger boats known as skipjacks.¹² Dredgers naturally gathered a larger harvest, but in turn caused wider damage as they scraped along the oyster reef beds. Whereas tongers could retrieve oysters with less damage to the reef bed which encouraged future production and harvest. For much of the nineteenth century, dredging was outlawed in Virginia and Maryland because of the damage it caused. According to David Schulte, “legislative protection [had] been provided to tongers throughout the history of the fishery, reserving large areas, typically in rivers and shallower waters, for their exclusive use.”¹³ Although tongers held exclusive rights to certain areas of the Bay for many decades, dredging, as it came in and out of lawful use, could access oysters in deeper waters. When oysters began thinning among tonging grounds, dredging was once again legalized as the only option to access deeper stock. Commercial packing houses typically employed a combination of both methods to retrieve oysters before they were shucked and canned.

Canning emerged as a food preserving method in France as early as 1809.¹⁴ Early oysters were either smoked or pickled for preservation until canning entered the market. Livie describes canning as having “all the benefits of oysters in the half shell, with the added bonus of substantially increased shelf life.”¹⁵ Before canning became a mechanized assembly line, shuckers would remove the oyster meat, wash and pack the oysters into tin cans, all by hand. By the 1880s, canning and sterilization processes improved to increase output from around 3,000

¹² Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay*, 13.

¹³ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 10.

¹⁴ Livie, *Chesapeake Oysters*, 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

cans per day to 20,000 for each packing house.¹⁶ Canning improved at the same time the railroad industry was expanding which allowed oysters to be shipped further inland to be enjoyed by people in western territories, although the bulk went to New England. To understand the endangered oyster industry of the twentieth century, it is essential to backtrack and identify the crises of the nineteenth century that contributed to its steady decline.

A Turbulent Century

The oyster industry of the Chesapeake Bay predates the U.S. Constitution, and yet the tasty bivalve reached its peak as a catalyst for conflict during the late nineteenth century. The oyster industry in Virginia followed a different pattern of economic growth than in New England. Clashes over boundaries and rights with neighboring Maryland lead to a series of “oyster wars.” The oyster wars were fought between territorial tongers and dredgers and between New Englanders and local Chesapeake oystermen, often resulting in armed conflict and bloodshed. The wars grew so violent that each state created its own oyster police, nicknamed “oyster navies,” for a period of time.¹⁷ Conflicts eventually reached the state governments of Virginia and Maryland whose regulatory powers polarized over the combative industry.

Oysters were being pulled from the Chesapeake so quickly and in such large quantities that it was outpacing their reproductive lifecycle. Virginia and Maryland attempted some conservation efforts, such as “closed seasons, gear restrictions, vessel size limits, and local residency requirements,” to curtail overfishing by northern oystermen; but they were rarely enforced so unfettered oyster harvesting continued.¹⁸ Samuel Hanes described the turbulent

¹⁶ Livie, *Chesapeake Oysters*, 67.

¹⁷ Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay*, 37.

¹⁸ Samuel P. Hanes, *The Aquatic Frontier: Oysters and Aquaculture in the Progressive Era* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 2.

industry as, “growing populations, coastal railroad connections, and improved canning methods all expanded demand...as oysters grew to be America’s largest fishery by the late nineteenth century, growing conflicts, localized depletions, and over-harvesting led state governments to form shellfish commissions to manage this contentious fishery.”¹⁹

After the Civil War, Maryland’s oyster industry followed northern patterns of economic growth and created a robust canning industry, while Virginia’s fisheries remained largely that of the colonial era. Prior to the Civil War, northeastern states employed oyster packing businesses, canneries, and aquaculture farms to process oysters for sale and consumption, although most of their seed stock came from the Chesapeake Bay as northeastern seed stock was already depleted. Virginia, however, did not establish its own oyster-packing industry until after 1859, and instead Virginia’s oyster brokers exported most of its oysters for seed and consumption to northern states in support of their ever-expanding oyster markets.²⁰ Chesapeake Bay oysters were in high demand among the wealthy households of New York, Boston, and later Chicago as oysters shifted from an everyday staple to a semi-luxury food.²¹ This demand reached its peak between 1850 and 1880, steadily depleting the wealth of oyster beds in the bay.²² According to David Schulte, “early signs of overexploitation and habitat degradation were evident by the 1850s.”²³ In

¹⁹ Samuel P. Hanes, “Common Property Mapping and the Preservation of Traditional Rights in Chesapeake Bay’s Oyster Fishery, 1892–1914,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 30, no. 3 (2013): 308.

²⁰ Robert S. Bailey, *Virginia Fisheries Laboratory Educational Series, No. 8: Let’s be Oyster Farmers* (Gloucester Point, VA: Virginia Institute of Marine Science, 1958), 10.

²¹ Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay*, 7.

²² Bailey, *Let’s Be Oyster Farmers*, 9.

²³ Schulte, “History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery,” 1.

terms of capital growth, Virginia remained far behind her neighbors to the north and yet the state's oyster fishery was quickly disappearing.

By 1878, a surveyor and former member of Maryland's oyster police, Francis Winslow, published his survey of the diminished oyster populations of the Chesapeake Bay, attributing their loss to poor enforcement of Maryland's culling laws and failure to reseed dredged oyster beds.²⁴ In 1891, biologist William K. Brooks published his work, *The Oyster*, to take a stand against the relentless oyster industry. It was part biological text, complete with scientific illustrations, and part ecological treatise on saving the Eastern Oyster. He warned that overfishing would lead to reduced populations and pointed to oysters as an endangered commodity.²⁵ Using capital letters he warned, "THE DEMAND FOR CHESAPEAKE OYSTERS HAS OUTGROWN THE NATURAL SUPPLY."²⁶ He then proposed planting and farming oysters through artificial means. Through Brooks' experiments, the world learned that oysters reproduced externally in open water which was a boon for the industry as oysters could now be artificially farmed and harvested.

Virginia's oyster farming, packing, and canning industry did not fully take off until the turn of the twentieth century. While Baltimore had started its canning empire as early as 1844.²⁷ After the Civil War, most oyster fishing in Virginia was done on state-owned public grounds by independent, licensed oyster tongers.²⁸ Tongers sold their harvest to downtown oyster brokers,

²⁴ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, "Basic Economic Indicators: Oysters, Master Plan Fishery 50 10 21." *United States Bureau of Commercial Fisheries: Division of Economic Research* (2012): 21.

²⁵ Brooks, *The Oyster*, xxxiii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

²⁷ Bailey, *Let's Be Oyster Farmers*, 11.

²⁸ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 1.

who then sold it to northern canneries. The booming seafood industry did not make its way into cities like Norfolk and neighboring Hampton until the 1880s. According to James T. Stensvaag, “at the conclusion of the Civil War, northerners came south and brought Yankee ingenuity, enterprise, and capital...nowhere...was this more evident than in the oyster and crab business.”²⁹

To end Virginia’s lag in the oyster industry, the state amended its constitution to prevent oysters from being exported north to support other markets. In 1895, J. B. Baylor mapped and surveyed the public, natural oyster grounds of Virginia in accordance with the Constitution of Virginia’s Article XI, Section 3.³⁰ Baylor found over 200,000 acres of natural oyster beds within Virginia’s riparian boundaries, with another 450,000 acres of barren bottom open for transplanted oyster cultivation.³¹ The survey was performed to account for potential revenues for the state to jumpstart its own oyster packing industry rather than as an environmental or ecological plan to preserve the already dwindling oyster populations.³² Incidentally, the Baylor Survey was used throughout the twentieth century to differentiate between public oyster grounds and private leaseholds.³³ In 1910, Virginia finally passed its own culling law to limit oyster

²⁹ James T. Stensvaag, *Hampton: From the Sea to the Stars* (Hampton, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 2004), 128.

³⁰ Article XI, Section 3, Natural Oyster Beds, reads: *The natural oyster beds, rocks, and shoals in the waters of the Commonwealth shall not be leased, rented, or sold but shall be held in trust for the benefit of the people of the Commonwealth, subject to such regulations and restriction as the General Assembly may prescribe, but the General Assembly may, from time to time, define and determine such natural beds, rocks, or shoals by surveys or otherwise.*

³¹ J. B. Baylor, *Survey of Oyster Grounds in Virginia: Report of J. B. Baylor to the Governor of Virginia* (Richmond, VA: J. H. O’Bannon, Public Printing Office, 1895): 1-4.

³² U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, “Basic Economic Indicators: Oysters,” 1.

³³ Curtis L. Newcombe and R. Winston Menzel, “Future of the Virginia Oyster Industry,” *The Commonwealth* 12, no. 4 (1945): 4.

catches to three inches in shell length.³⁴ The culling law was Virginia's way of curtailing the overzealous fishing of young oysters in need of maturing.

The local oyster industry in the Hampton Roads region officially began in 1881 with the firm of J. S. Darling & Son in Hampton which remained in business until 1979.³⁵ By 1893, there were around 23 oyster firms operating in and around Norfolk bringing in around 2.5 million bushels per year at a value of \$2 million and employing around 3,500 watermen, shuckers, and packers.³⁶ According to Norfolk's Chamber of Commerce, in 1893 "the whole yield of Chesapeake Bay and tributaries is said to be 8 million bushels...of this quantity Baltimore handles 4 million bushels, Norfolk 2.5 million, and the small towns along the Eastern Shore 1.5 million."³⁷ In 1900, the J. H. Miles & Company oyster packers of Norfolk entered the market when private leasehold fisheries were gaining ground over public fishing grounds.³⁸ The turbulent nineteenth century was over, and a new, more structured oyster industry was emerging in Virginia.

The J. H. Miles & Company Oyster Packers

Norfolk, Virginia sits just at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay where the coastal ocean waters meet the calm bay waters of the estuary. Its myriad inlets provided the perfect location to build turn-of-the-century oyster packing houses with easy access to oyster beds in the deeper

³⁴ Minimum Cull Size, *Virginia Statute (2013)*, §28.2-20, 4VAC20-260-30.

³⁵ Stensvaag, *Hampton: From the Sea to the Stars*, 129.

³⁶ Norfolk Chamber of Commerce, *Pictures in Maritime Dixie: Norfolk, VA Port and City* (Norfolk, VA: George E. Engelhardt Publisher, 1893), 109.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 1.

waters of the bay. One such inlet, at the mouth of the Elizabeth River, was home to the Atlantic City ward of Norfolk that housed the city's oyster packing houses beginning in the 1890s. The riverfront industrial ward was annexed by the city in 1890 and was made up of a strip of land running along the New Commercial Docks at Fort Norfolk and stretching from the Norfolk and Western railroad terminus down to Elmwood Cemetery.³⁹

The New Commercial Docks at the Atlantic City ward is where John Henry Miles, Sr., at the age of 60, opened his firm J. H. Miles & Company in 1900. By the age of 17, Miles had become an oyster boat captain and was well-versed in every aspect of the oyster business, from growing seed stock to the packing business.⁴⁰ He partnered with his younger brothers, Benjamin B. Miles and Rufus L. Miles, Sr., who both came from the mercantile business. At the time, there were around twenty sizable oyster packing houses in Norfolk with a few others across the bay in Hampton that were all dependent upon public oyster grounds.⁴¹ In a news story from 1908, R. L. Miles, Sr. claimed that Miles & Co. was the largest oyster packing house in Norfolk among the twenty or so local dealers and averaged 100,000 bushels per year.⁴²

At their peak, Norfolk's oyster packing houses could be identified by the large mounds of oyster shells piled two- and three-stories high and visible across the city. Others in the oyster business of Norfolk included Ballard Fish & Oyster Company, Doyle & Elliot, White &

³⁹ Rogers Dey Whichard, *The History of Lower Tidewater Virginia* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1959), 479.

⁴⁰ J. H. Miles, Jr., "J. H. Miles and Company History," 1944, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "Business of One Connecticut Dealer Does not Equal that of Norfolk Alone – No Connecticut Oysters Sold Here." *The Virginia Citizen* 18, no. 9 (November 27, 1908): 2.

Fleming, J. R. Lawrence, T. W. Cleveland & Bros., H. F. Hemingway & Company Wholesale Oysters, James E. Barnes, Feuerstein & Company, and J. J. Robbins, all located in the Atlantic City ward, although a few of these firms operated as oyster wholesale dealers in downtown Norfolk buying stock directly from local tongers and selling wholesale to out of state buyers.⁴³ Among local firms, Miles & Co. would be the first to plant and cultivate its own seed stock. The other side of their business was selling off discarded oyster shells to manufacturers of chicken feed and agricultural lime, although they reserved some shell for replanting.

Between their startup in 1900 and about 1912, Miles & Co. bought acreage through leaseholds in various locations around the Chesapeake Bay and yielded oyster stock with varying degrees of success. According to R. L. Miles, Sr., “about this time pollution began to make itself known...[they] would have to look elsewhere for planting ground and the state had begun to talk about bay-planting and offering deep water ground in the Chesapeake Bay at the price of \$.25 per acre.”⁴⁴ The company would need to rely on dredging in order to reach deeper, less polluted waters. Planting and harvesting were interrupted for a few years at that point as the First World War’s impact reached Norfolk. Harvests severely declined following the First World War and throughout the 1920s, although the oyster population did experience a brief respite during the war as demand decreased and oystermen were called away to the war effort.⁴⁵

Well into the 1930s, Miles & Co. experienced setbacks with fatalities at oyster beds where previous stock had been healthy; they were always reported as happening for unexplained

⁴³ Norfolk Chamber of Commerce, *Pictures in Maritime Dixie: Norfolk, VA Port and City*, 109-111.

⁴⁴ “Planting Business,” 1944, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁴⁵ Schulte, “History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery,” 6.

reasons. What was likely either pollution or disease causing the mass fatalities was not yet identifiable by the company during the earlier years. Miles & Co. would simply move surviving stock to another region of the bay and carry on building the company's brand name. In 1934, the firm trademarked their famous *Sea-Kist* brand of canned "fresh shucked raw oysters" to be distributed nationwide.⁴⁶ The Norfolk oyster industry peaked in 1937 when Miles & Co. employed over 400 shuckers and shipped forty train carloads of oysters inland as far as Denver, Colorado.⁴⁷ In the 50th anniversary pamphlet for the Oyster Institute of North America, R. L. Miles, Sr. and industry friends, Isaac Ballard and Frank Darling, were credited for creating the Oyster Growers & Dealers Association and saving Virginia's oyster industry during the Great Depression.⁴⁸ The oyster industry in Norfolk had remained a steadfast employer throughout the depression.

Between 1941 and 1943, Miles & Co. experienced another labor shortage due to the Second World War, writing to customers, "today we have only women and old men shucking oysters and over half the stalls are empty...when your order doesn't arrive or if only about 25% of it arrives and late at that, please understand that we cannot help it and dislike it more than you do."⁴⁹ In April 1945, R. L. Miles, Jr. wrote to customers,

⁴⁶ United States Trademark Certificate, October 3, 1934, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁴⁷ "Those Were the Days" *The Virginian-Pilot*, date unknown, clipping, Box 6, Folder 5, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055. Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁴⁸ "Founders: Oyster Growers and Dealers Association, 1908 Anniversary," pamphlet, 1958, Box 15, Folder 1, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015. MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁴⁹ J. H. Miles & Company to customers, September 7, 1943, Box 15, Folder 3, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

Due to conditions brought about by the War we have been unable to furnish you with adequate supplies for the last several seasons but the season now closing has marked an all-time low in our production. The draft and local war industries have practically stripped the plant of able-bodied men. Soldiers benefit checks and the unheard-of prices paid for domestic servants have made great inroads on the women shuckers. As a result we are hard put to stay in business at all. War news from the European front is most encouraging and if this War should end in the very near future there is a strong possibility that the situation will show marked improvement by next season.⁵⁰

By 1944, only two packing houses remained in Norfolk, Ballard Fish & Oyster Company and J. H. Miles & Company, as oyster stock began to dwindle, and smaller operations struggled to compete with larger firms' prices. Oyster packing houses began closing their doors in the Atlantic City ward leaving much of the industrial site empty and many oyster workers without employment. The same held true for packing houses elsewhere along the Chesapeake Bay. Larger firms like the Keeling-Easter Company sold out in 1945, with a majority of shares going to Miles & Co. and 5/13ths going to Ballard.⁵¹ Others simply sold their equipment and supplies to other firms and regeared for the fin-fish market. When J. H. Miles, Jr. wrote his company history in March 1944, he reflected,

So many years ago we saw the handwriting on the wall and started in the planting business to grow and cultivate shucking stock sufficient to take care of our requirements and if it had not been for looking ahead and spreading out the planting business into Chesapeake Bay no doubt we would have been forced out with the others.⁵²

According to their early marketing materials, Miles & Co. controlled 8,000 acres of oyster beds “to catch, shuck and ship fine-flavored, salty oysters the same day.”⁵³ The 8,000 acres of oyster

⁵⁰ J. H. Miles & Company to customers, April 19, 1945, Box 15, Folder 3, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁵¹ Minutes of Meeting of Stockholders of Keeling-Easter Company, Inc., December 14, 1945, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁵² J. H. Miles, Jr., “J. H. Miles and Company History,” 1944, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁵³ “The Story of Miles’ Famous Chesapeake Bay Oysters,” 1930, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

grounds were separated into seven locations spread throughout the Chesapeake Bay – stretching from Norfolk’s eastern coast at the Cape Henry Lighthouse, northwest into Mobjack Bay, and further into the James River near Jamestown.⁵⁴ Incidentally, that number would later grow to 20,000 acres.

Miles & Co. continued to raise spat and cultivate their own oyster beds to prevent overfishing and ensure fresh stock that could be shucked the same day and sent to market. Farmed oysters took two to three years to mature before reaching culling-size. Each season, the production goal was around 3,000 bushels a day among their small fleet of skipjack boats.⁵⁵ In a local news article published in 1950, J. H. Miles & Company was touted as having “the country’s most modern oyster-packing facility in operation,” which described a fully mechanized process in which the shucker was the only human hands to touch the oyster.⁵⁶ The system moved oysters along a conveyor belt directly from the boat into the packing house, onto the shucking table, and directly into shuckers’ hands. The conveyor belt system replaced the use of wheelbarrows and cut the unloading, shucking, and packing process in half.⁵⁷ In 1959, the company experienced a setback involving the loss of eighty-five acres of oyster grounds near Craney Island to the State of Virginia for the building of a deep-water anchorage of what would

⁵⁴ “The Story of Miles’ Famous Chesapeake Bay Oysters,” 1930, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Charles Rodeffer, “No Hands – Almost – Touch Oysters in Newest Packing Method,” *The Virginian-Pilot*, (September 24, 1950): 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

become the Monitor-Merrimac Memorial Bridge Tunnel.⁵⁸ Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Miles & Co. experienced several years of limited production or seasonal closures in which the packing house would shut down due to heavy losses of planted oysters. Form letters were mailed to customers notifying them of limited stock or seasonal closures, always signed with a hope for a better season the following year.⁵⁹

By the late 1950s, soup manufacturers like the Joseph Campbell Company began buying up large quantities of oysters and clams for their canned and frozen soups and stews.⁶⁰ In a letter to a company investor in April 1962, Miles & Co. lamented, “the oyster business has gone down to nothing and, as of now, I don’t see anything bright for the future...the losses this year have been exceedingly high and, again, I see nothing on the horizon that is hopeful.”⁶¹ Later that year, Miles & Co. began corresponding with Campbell’s to invite their representatives to tour the packing house. After a few years of negotiations, in April 1967, a deal was struck for Miles & Co. to experiment with steam shucking clams in place of the dwindling oysters, fully funded and outfitted by Campbell’s company.⁶² Unlike oysters, offshore clams were in great abundance and retrieved from the bay in a similar fashion. At that point, Miles & Co. converted “its hand-shucking oyster plant into a clam processing plant...and began mechanically shucking

⁵⁸ Special Permit for the Use of Under Water Lands Within 1000-Foot Right of Way of the Hampton Roads Crossing Project, October 6, 1959, Box 9, Folder 11, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁵⁹ J. H. Miles & Company to Mildred E. Burgett, October 5, 1960, Box 7, Folder 5, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁶⁰ Bailey, *Let’s Be Oyster Farmers*, 11.

⁶¹ J. H. Miles & Company to Octavia Holloway, April 16, 1962, Box 7, Folder 5, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁶² Purchase Order, Joseph Campbell Company, April 24, 1967, Box 7, Folder 1, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

clams...the development of this process, with the assistance of Campbell's engineering department, reduced employment by 70% and increased throughput over 100%.”⁶³ Basically, Campbell's helped Miles & Co. trade the labor-intensive hand shucking process for a less-costly steam shucking process. Unfortunately for the company's workers, the new process greatly reduced the need for a large shucking staff. By 1971, the pivot to offshore surf clams and quahogs on behalf of the Joseph Campbell Company was successful, and Miles & Co. was no longer in the oyster business.⁶⁴ By the 1980s, 90% of the company's clam production, or about 75 million clams per year, was going to Campbell's.⁶⁵

While all but two oyster firms in Norfolk had shut down, and thus contributed to the collapsed industry throughout the Chesapeake Bay region, Miles & Co. survived by remaining flexible to new business ventures. Although the shift to a new commodity had saved the company, what remained of the diverse workforce of the oyster industry, including the workers of Miles & Co., was in dire straits.

A Diverse Industry

Prior to the Civil War, enslaved Africans made up a large portion of tongers and oystermen in Virginia – a factor that would contribute to the industry's postbellum diversity.⁶⁶ Aside from sharecropping, canning houses were one of only a few employment options open to

⁶³ “J. H. Miles & Company, Inc. History,” 1990, Box 6, Folder 5, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁶⁴ Inter-Department Correspondence, April 2, 1971, Box 7, Folder 1, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁶⁵ Lawrence Maddry, “Clams Come out of their Shells” *The Virginian-Pilot*, clipping, date unknown, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁶⁶ Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay*, 25.

African American men and women. While the packing houses of Baltimore and New England had been populated with European immigrants, many Virginia packing houses employed emancipated slaves and their descendants as tongers, dredgers, and shuckers. According to Livie, in many ways, “the Chesapeake’s slaves became the first commercial watermen.”⁶⁷ As dredging increased, however, the number of tongers on the Chesapeake Bay decreased. The Virginia Commission of Fisheries reported having over 12,000 tongers in 1907, but that number decreased to only 2,640 by 1940.⁶⁸

Regardless of race, black oystermen were usually paid the same and worked on boats and in packing houses with their white counterparts, although they were not typically allowed to be boat captains. Whereas oyster shuckers were largely African American women. Because of the cold, wet, dirty work of oyster shucking in the packing houses that took place during the winter harvesting season, the job typically fell to women. They worked quickly as they were paid by the gallon of oysters shucked. During the wartime labor shortage of 1942, Miles & Co. advertised for shuckers offering \$.50 per eight pints of shucked oysters.⁶⁹ Mark Kurlansky wrote, “no modern invention has proved as efficient as a good shucker with an oyster knife.”⁷⁰ Wielding a small knife, a seasoned shucker could shuck between 500 and 750 oysters in an hour.⁷¹ An expert stabber could shuck an oyster to leave a perfect plump oyster on the half shell, free of grit and

⁶⁷ Livie, *Chesapeake Oysters*, 49.

⁶⁸ Newcombe and Menzel, “Future of the Virginia Oyster Industry,” 3.

⁶⁹ J. H. Miles & Company, “Oyster Shuckers Wanted,” *The Suffolk News-Herald* 20, no. 169 (October 7, 1942): 7.

⁷⁰ Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell*, 184.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

ready to eat.⁷² For the period in which Miles & Co. was in the oyster business, their success depended upon having good shuckers.

The oyster industry, including Miles & Co., employed nearly an equal number of African Americans as it did whites. In fact, in the early twentieth century, Virginia's oystermen made up some of the highest paid jobs for African American men.⁷³ During WWII, higher wartime wages drew men away from oystering and African American women away to higher-paying domestic service positions. Miles & Co. sometimes struggled to maintain its workforce. On that premise, shuckers engaged in a strike in 1947 for an increase from \$.25 per gallon to \$.35 per gallon of shucked oysters, which ultimately caused Miles & Co. to raise the price per gallon for oysters to meet wage demands.⁷⁴ In 1973, employees of Miles & Co., mostly African American women, again picketed and went on strike with demands for better pay, improved working conditions, and equal treatment.⁷⁵ In this sense, women shuckers helped bring the Civil Rights movement to Norfolk's oyster industry. The 1973 strike lasted for five months and ended with improved contracts for women. Not only did Miles & Co. struggle to maintain its fishery business in an unprecedented industry collapse, but clearly it too was susceptible to the social movements of the mid-twentieth century. While the oyster populations of the Chesapeake Bay were increasingly exploited for well over a century to support the thriving industry that employed thousands of

⁷² Sara Wood, "Cut it Clean: Oyster Shuckers in Eastern Virginia." *Southern Cultures* 24, no. 1 (2018): 138.

⁷³ Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, "Oystering on the Chesapeake," 17.

⁷⁴ J. H. Miles & Company to customers, telegram, November 13, 1947, Box 15, Folder 3, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁷⁵ "Workers on Strike at Norfolk Seafood Plant." *New Journal and Guide*, March 24, 1973.

oyster watermen, shuckers, and packing house workers in Virginia, environmental factors soon introduced a new threat to the valuable commodity.

A Commodity in Trouble

R. L. Miles, Jr. once reflected, “you can rest assured that there is nothing definite and certain about oyster planting.”⁷⁶ Decades of disease in the twentieth century soon compounded the dwindling Eastern Oyster fishery. According to a local newspaper, an unknown malady struck Chesapeake oysters in 1930, killing a half a million bushels of oysters for companies like Miles & Co. and J. S. Darling & Son.⁷⁷ Disease again visited the oyster beds of the Chesapeake Bay beginning in the 1940s. A parasitic fungus, *Perkinsus marinus* also known as Dermo, infected around 30% of oysters in some areas and nearly 90% in others.⁷⁸ The 48th Joint Annual Convention of the Oyster Growers and Dealers and National Shellfisheries in August 1956 found that oyster spat were gradually migrating into northern waters due to the Chesapeake Bay’s warming temperatures – warming temperatures also contributed to disease spread.⁷⁹ Between 1950 and 1960, a total of three diseases struck the oyster population, Dermo, *Minchinia Costalis* or SSO, and *Haplosporidium nelsoni* or MSX, and associations like the Citizens Program for the Chesapeake Bay published literature to warn fisheries.⁸⁰ Despite warnings, private leaseholds in

⁷⁶ “Planting Business,” 1944, Box 6, Folder 4, J. H. Miles & Company Records, 1900-2015, MSS 2015-055, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁷⁷ “Seek Causes of Oyster Disease,” *The Suffolk News-Herald*, 8, no. 16 (April 9, 1930): 1.

⁷⁸ Schulte, “History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery,” 6.

⁷⁹ Thurlow C. Nelson, “Science Tackles Oyster Problems,” 48th Joint Annual Convention of the Oyster Growers and Dealers and National Shellfisheries Convention, *Fishing Gazette* (1956): 5.

⁸⁰ “Citizen Report: Oyster Diseases in Chesapeake Bay,” 1979, Box 17, Folder 5, Virginia Ephemera Collection, 1890-2015, MSS 0000-VEC, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

Virginia waters of the bay reached 52,000 hectares of oyster grounds in 1960.⁸¹ On May 11, 1961, newspapers published the closure of J. H. Miles & Company due to “oyster blight,” which temporarily laid off the company's 550 workers.⁸² MSX continued to plague the bay between 1964 and 1980, which caused massive oyster mortality rates.⁸³ The year 1972 saw Congress passing the Clean Water Act and watershed groups created for conservation and restoration projects up and down the Atlantic.⁸⁴

That same year, oyster numbers were further tested with Hurricane Agnes which dumped record amounts of fresh water into the bay’s watershed, adversely impacting the oysters’ preferred salinity.⁸⁵ The change in salinity increased the oysters’ susceptibility to disease and harvests dropped by 50% that year. The aftermath of the hurricane caused Virginia’s fishery commissions to encourage the dredging of oyster spat as the industry decided it was best to harvest all the oysters rather than leave the seeds to disease. Later hurricanes, like Eloise (1975), Floyd (1999), and Irene (2011) created similar catastrophes.⁸⁶ In 1983, the first multi-state environmental partnership, the Chesapeake Bay Program, was created to restore the living resources of the bay.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 4.

⁸² “Oyster Blight Major Problem,” *The Lebanon News* 80, (May 11, 1961): 3.

⁸³ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 7.

⁸⁴ Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, “Oystering on the Chesapeake,” 51.

⁸⁵ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 7.

⁸⁶ Livie, *Chesapeake Oysters*, 123.

⁸⁷ Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, “Oystering on the Chesapeake,” 51.

A Solution Too Late

Although J. H. Miles & Company's practice of growing oysters from spat and replenishing oyster beds kept the company afloat for many decades, overfishing, disease, and other environmental hazards continued to diminish the species. To put it in perspective, at the industry's peak in 1884, twenty million bushels were pulled from the Chesapeake Bay (100 oysters to a bushel); those numbers dwindled to eight million bushels in 1893, three and a half million bushels in 1910, less than two million bushels in 1964, to 442,000 bushels in 1987, with steadily declining numbers for the years in between.⁸⁸ According to Schulte, "today, this system of planting and growing young oysters on shelled leased ground is still extensively used, though more modern aquaculture practices are being rapidly adopted by leaseholders with significant success."⁸⁹

Oysters are now raised in controlled laboratories and hatcheries by scientists in organizations like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.⁹⁰ For the past few decades, oyster culturists have been implementing "put-and-take fishery subsidies," shell-planting programs, seed hatcheries, and designating sanctuary reefs as measures to restore the Chesapeake Bay's Eastern Oyster.⁹¹ The lack of oysters in the bay today has left dark and murky depths with less light reaching the bottom for plant growth. Their absence is a serious ecological problem.

⁸⁸ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, "Basic Economic Indicators: Oysters," 22; Virginia Marine Resources Commission, "Revised Second Draft: Chesapeake Bay Alosid Management Plan," June 2, 1989, Box 17, Folder 5, Virginia Ephemera Collection, 1890-2015, MSS 0000-VEC, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, VA.

⁸⁹ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 5.

⁹⁰ Anthony Wilbon, Mark Bundy, and Kelton Clark, "Entrepreneurship in the Chesapeake Bay Oyster Industry," *International Journal of Case Studies in Management* 9, no. 2 (2011): 2.

⁹¹ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 13-15.

What is significant about the oyster depletion of the booming postbellum years and during Virginia and Maryland's oyster wars, is its foretelling of the oyster industry's complete collapse a century later. By the time Virginia's oyster market had caught up to its northern neighbors and the state's oyster laws were firmly in place, the Eastern Oyster was already a dwindling commodity. Overfishing coupled with warming waters, pollution, and disease outbreaks destroyed the oyster populations of the Chesapeake Bay. J. H. Miles & Company entered at a pivotal point in the oyster industry. Based on his many years of experience, J. H. Miles, Sr. must have had faith that the oyster populations would recover despite published warnings by industry advocates like Winslow and Brooks. It would take a half century of struggle before Miles & Co. would see a savior in the form of soup manufacturing that prevented the company from sharing the fate of its Atlantic City ward neighbors, even though its newly mechanized process put many shuckers and oystermen out of work. African American oyster workers were especially hit hard by the disappearing industry.

The Atlantic City ward eventually emptied of all oyster businesses aside from Miles & Co., which remained at the northwest corner of the neighborhood off Southampton Avenue. Many of the small homes in the ward that had once housed shuckers, oystermen, and their families were vacant and in disrepair. During the 1960s, the city of Norfolk reclaimed and redeveloped the industrial site under the Atlantic City Redevelopment Project to clear the site of empty dwellings and packing houses.⁹² The site now houses the Chrysler Museum and Eastern Virginia Medical School. As of 2015, no trace of the bustling oyster industry remained there.

⁹² Notice of Public Hearing, December 14, 1956, Box 36, Folder 3, Norfolk Ephemera Collection, 1682-2016, MSS 0000-NEC, Sargeant Memorial Collection, Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, Virginia.

After their 115-year legacy in Norfolk, the multigenerational family business, J. H. Miles & Company, closed its doors on December 31, 2015.⁹³ The last CEO, Jack Miles, reminisced about the company's well-timed relationship with Campbell's Soup in the 1960s, saying, "that was, I say, an extremely pivotal point."⁹⁴ It was clearly the saving grace for Norfolk's last oyster packing house; it kept the family business afloat well into the twenty-first century. Ironically, the final closure of the company was not due to a depleted oyster industry but rather to a pair of reluctant Miles descendants who were unwilling to inherit the family business.⁹⁵

According to Schulte, "today, the remaining oyster habitat in Virginia waters in the bay is in generally poor condition and stocks are low...the fishery is defined as collapsed."⁹⁶ Oysters are now less than 2% of what they were during the peak of the industry prior to 1870.⁹⁷ There are virtually no remaining naturally occurring oyster reefs in the Chesapeake Bay. As they are a primary contributor to the bay's natural filtration system, evidence of the collapsed industry "not only [had] social and economic impact, but a very important environmental one as well."⁹⁸ It is now up to environmentalists and aquaculturists to replenish and reboot the oyster population of the bay. The future of the oyster is less about resuscitating an industry and more about returning the Chesapeake Bay's natural filtration system.

⁹³ Kimberly Pierceall, "Digging Into a Norfolk Oyster Company's 115-year Legacy," *The Virginian-Pilot*, (February 27, 2016): 1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Schulte, "History of the Virginia Oyster Fishery," 13.

⁹⁷ Cornwall et al, "The Implementation of Engineering Tools and Methodology," 36.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

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