

# **African American and Native American Histories and Heritages of the Deal Island Peninsula and Somerset County**

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May 2017

## *Abstract*

*The history of the Eastern Shore of Maryland consisted of long-standing interactions between Native Americans, African Americans, and Europeans. While historical disputes over resources resulted in centuries of strife for some groups, these resources also launched this region of Maryland into the greater national economy. A broad look into the history of the Eastern Shore can help frame how black Americans experienced life in Somerset County. Today, the Deal Island Peninsula in Somerset County hosts buildings that continue to represent the manifestations of these histories.*

## **The Nanticoke People of the Chesapeake Bay**

Before there were borders drawn by Europeans explorers who divided the East Coast into states, there were hundreds of thousands of Native Americans who inhabited the land. Each of these tribes had thousands of years of their own histories that played out long before the arrival of Europeans. The Nanticoke and Lenni-Lenape tribes were among some of these peoples who were the primary settlers of the Eastern Chesapeake region. The Lenni-Lenape resided along the mid-Atlantic region in what is now New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware (Nanticoke-Lenape.info). The Nanticoke tribe, previously called the Kuskarawaoks, lived closest to what is now Maryland's Eastern Shore and consisted of other groups such as the Choptanks and the Piscataway (Rountree 2007:215). The Pocomoke were also a notable tribe that lived in today's Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester counties (pocomokeindiannation.org). In order to understand the tension that rose from Native communities defending their territory and Europeans looking to colonize it, it is critical to note how they used this land. Nanticoke subsistence strategies were seasonal, centered on foraging, and were not always dependent on static settlements. Much of this foraging took place in varied ecological biomes. The "microenvironments" that spanned Maryland and Delaware included several types of woodlands, freshwater sources, saltwater sources, and tidal marshes (Porter 1979, 326).

In order for the Nanticoke to effectively acquire food from each of these locations, they used a wide range of settlement types, which included a mix of seasonal, permanent, semi-permanent, and transient camps. Having unrestricted access to all parts of their lands, therefore, was central for Nanticoke survival (Porter 1979, 326). This is also reflected in some of Captain John Smith's earliest recorded encounters with the Nanticoke in 1608 when he notes how they

and other Algonquian-speaking chiefdoms made great use of the resources from the rich region they inhabited (Rountree et al. 2007, 200). With the arrival of the Europeans, however, increasing restrictions were placed on their ancestral lands, which in turn limited their mobility and access to key resources. These impacts were exacerbated by “the prolific slaughter of fur-bearing animals and the constant clearing of woodland for agriculture” which resulted in a shortage of natural plant and animal food sources that the Nanticoke traditionally depended on (Porter 1979, 327). Since the Nanticoke were among some of the first indigenous communities to encounter white settlers, they were also some of the first to both persist through colonization as well as resist it. Much of this resistance derived from Native efforts in negotiating with Maryland officials in order to reclaim territory for themselves.

Porter asserts that even though Maryland authorities cautioned settlers to respect the land that was inhabited by Native communities, those warnings were often ignored by colonizers. Trespassing grew into a major concern for the Nanticoke as white settlers continued to force their way onto Native lands (327-29). Maryland archival records from 1883 used in Porter’s work detail an account from a Native man named Mattagund who approached authorities with his complaints in 1666:

*“Let us have no Quarrels for killing Hogs no more than for the Cows Eating the Indian corn. Your hogs & Cattle injure Us You come too near Us to live & Drive Us from place to place. We can fly no farther let us know where to live & how to be secured for the future from the Hogs and Cattle”* (327).

The establishment of land acquisition laws by colonial institutions and other efforts by European settlers to illegally obtain land from indigenous communities both contributed to creating numerous challenges that impacted the well-being of the Nanticoke and other Native groups in the region. In a few select cases, land was acquired through legally purchasing it from Native landowners. The majority of white settlers, however, chose to act as “squatters,” visiting the land and using it as they pleased (Porter 1979, 329). With the case of the Nanticoke, forceful and often violent measures were taken up by settlers to remove them from their lands such as burning down their houses to make their territory seem deserted. By law, once those same lands were deemed abandoned by Maryland officials, “the terms of reservation grants stipulated that the land [be] reverted to Maryland as soon as the Indians ceased to occupy it” (Porter 1979, 329). It is also suggested that many of the Nanticoke never fully abandoned the land in the first place (329). Instead, they may have simply moved camps as traditionally practiced, but it would have further supported the idea of the land being abandoned to settlers (329).

Despite these impacts, the Nanticoke found ways to negotiate with white settlers for land. In fact, it was by Nanticoke request that they have land set-aside specifically for them. The Maryland Assembly established three reservations in Maryland and Delaware: the Choptank, Chicone, and Broad Creek Reservations (Porter 1979, 327). The Broad Creek Reservation was created by purchasing land in old Somerset County, which later became Sussex County,

Delaware in the 1760s with the establishment of the Transpeninsular Line (Kester-McCabe, 2017). As time progressed, however, the Nanticoke still faced challenges with settlers who continued to encroach on their lands. (Porter 1979).

In response to these pressures, some of the Nanticoke chose to assimilate themselves into non-native societies, intermarrying with whites to have their descendants live on. By the 1740's many Nanticoke emigrated to Pennsylvania and New York (333). This move was prompted by the French who were attempting to unite neighboring tribes together in order to fight against the English. Maryland officials found out about Nanticoke participation in this plot, however, and reprimanded them (229-230). Though the tribe is officially disbanded today, Nanticoke descendants continue to live dispersed around the region as active members of American society.

### **Transitioning Economies of Maryland's Eastern Shore**

As Native American communities were driven from their ancestral lands, European settlers created a space for their families and their slaves. (Clemens 1975) However, by the late 1600's, tobacco, a popular crop in the region, was steadily failing due to the oversaturation of tobacco from European markets (Clemens 1975, 256). Furthermore, not all of the land on the Eastern Shore was suitable for growing tobacco (Russo 2004, 470). Even by lowering their own prices, tobacco was no longer providing a sustainable option for farmers on the Eastern Shore. While few planters abstained from producing the crop entirely, the collective response to this growing concern was to diversify their production with alternative agricultural products (Clemens 1975, 256). Planters began investing in pork, beef, and lumber production, according to records from 1667 (Russo 2004, 472). Grain was another popular alternative crop because "...wheat [demanded] less attention year-round than tobacco" (Russo 2004, 468). Somerset County also played an important role in the expanding colonial economy because it supplied much of the wood needed for building containers that colonial exporters would have used to ship their goods around Atlantic (Russo 2004, 472-73). The manufacturing of barrel staves and other lumber products proved to be quite beneficial for the local economy, especially considering that having close access to the water made transporting lumber easier to manage (Russo 2004, 472-74). Additionally, its close proximity to major navigation routes in the Chesapeake Bay played an important role in connecting geographically isolated areas of Somerset County to trade networks regionally and internationally.

Another important industry for Somerset County was the harvesting and processing of the prolific oyster resources of the Chesapeake Bay, which expanded into a vibrant industry for the region as a result of growing market demands for oyster meat (MacKenzie 1996). According to local lore, the origin of the word "Chesapeake" is derived from the Algonquian word "*Chesepiook*" which means "Great Shellfish Bay," yet again displaying the region's long history of abundance (Maryland State Archives 2016). Maryland's peak oyster production was in the late 1800s, when the region became one of the world's greatest oyster producers (Kennedy and Breisch 1983). Previous to the 1800s, accounts such as one noted by a Swiss explorer Francis Louis Michel in 1701 illustrate just how bountiful the Bay was:

*“The abundance of oysters is incredible. There are whole banks of them so that the ships must avoid them. A sloop, which was to land us at Kingscreek, struck an oyster bed, where we had to wait about two hours for the tide. They surpass those in England by far in size, indeed they are four times as large. I often cut them in two, before I could put them into my mouth.” (2)*

Maryland’s oyster industry employed 20% of Americans working in the overall national fishing industries during the late 1800s (Kennedy and Breisch 1983, 2-3). Many of these employees were African Americans who participated in oyster canning and other fishing manufacturing jobs. One of the largest oyster shucking companies, the MeTompkin Bay Oyster Company, was located south of Deal Island in Crisfield, Maryland. African American women in particular found employment as oyster shuckers in small watermen communities after the Civil War. They provided the manual labor that was needed for the preferred method of crab meat extraction since “... no machine match[ed] the dexterity of the human hand...” (Paolisso 2007, 658). Advancements in technology allowed oyster meat to be shipped to cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Minneapolis, demonstrating how individuals on the Eastern Shore engaged with larger national markets (Smithsonian of American History).

By the 1890s, sail-powered oyster dredge boats known as skipjacks became a central component to the expansion of the Chesapeake’s economy. The rise of the seafood industry meant that watermen on the Eastern Shore could participate in larger markets independently with fishing equipment and boats of their own. At the peak of oystering in the Chesapeake, there were around 2,000 of these vessels. The skipjack was designed with a shallow draft in order to more easily dredge oysters in the shallow waters of the Bay. In addition to its excellent control over the waters, the skipjack also attracted people because it was inexpensive and easy enough to make “...that even house carpenters could construct one” (Oystercatcher.com). Many skipjacks were built in Somerset County and on the Deal Island Peninsula, which is still referred to as “the home of the skipjack” (dealisland.blogspot.com).

Though the price of oysters fluctuated throughout the 20th century, the trend showed a steady yet undeniable rate of decline as a result of two parasites known as Dermo (*Perkinsus marinus*) and MSX (*Haplosporidium nelsoni*). Dermo was first documented in the Chesapeake Bay in 1949, and MSX was later documented in 1959, and both helped to reduce oyster populations to 1% of their historic numbers (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). They continue to pose problems for oyster recovery to this day. The commercial fishery that largely replaced oysters was the harvesting of blue crabs. Today, the blue crab serves as one of Maryland’s most iconic symbols because of the significant role that the harvesting of this crustacean has played for the regional economy (Paolisso 2007). In the 1950’s, the Chesapeake Bay crabbing industry accounted for 80% of national landings, but declined to about 30% by the early 2000’s due to environmental degradation, overfishing, and regulations (Paolisso 2007, 657; Pelton and Goldsborough 2008).

Only a few dozen skipjacks survive today but the vessels continue to be a prized piece of heritage for those living on the Eastern Shore and in the state of Maryland, which also named the

skipjack as its official state boat (Oystercatcher.com). Due to the undertakings of the Maryland Historical Trust, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and others stakeholders, efforts to preserve skipjacks have been underway since 2000. Today, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michael's in Talbot County, Maryland offers a place for skipjacks in need of repair (Oystercatcher.com). Skipjack Heritage, Incorporated (SHI) on the Deal Island Peninsula has also made strides to restore skipjacks as an important part of the local history and heritage (Skipjack Heritage Inc.). Celebrations of this maritime tradition continue today on the Deal Island Peninsula with the annual Labor Day Skipjack Race and Festival held in September (Dealislandchancelionsclub.org).

### **Economic Contributions of African Americans on the Eastern Shore**

How did African Americans contribute to this economic picture? Slavery on the Eastern Shore resulted in producing a slightly different model of slavery from what was commonly used in the Deep South, which involved large plantations and the labor of dozens of slaves. The answer to this question is conflicting depending on which source of evidence is being analyzed. Population figures from 1712 show that Somerset County's population was composed of only 9% enslaved African Americans, the lowest proportion of enslaved African Americans in any Maryland County (Russo 2004, 475). In comparison, counties on the other side of the Chesapeake Bay, such as Calvert County and Prince George's County recorded over 30% of their populations as enslaved in the same year (475). Data here suggest that for one reason or another, not all Eastern Shore planters made use of slave labor. However, documents from estate inventories suggest a different reality. This source of evidence makes it clear that while few estates had over 10 slaves, more estates had fewer than 5 slaves as time went on (476). In other words, it was much more common for *more* families in Somerset County to own a few slaves, rather than a handful of families owning over a dozen (475-77). As presented by Elliot Russo (2004), the data may suggest two things: the majority of slave-owning families who remained in the region depended on having one to five extra farmhands around to assist with day-to-day tasks, and that changes in the economy also resulted in a shift in social standing for black laborers (468). Since tobacco required a system that mimicked a more plantation-styled type of labor, Russo suggests that agricultural shifts from tobacco to less labor-intensive crops such as grain on the Eastern Shore caused African Americans to become associated more as "farmhands" rather than "plantation hands" (468). Information beyond this is difficult to acquire due to the lack of sufficient records that detail what other tasks black laborers were given at the time. Despite this, one matter that is more conclusive is that because the majority of African Americans did not own their own land, they had to work for someone who did, which was most often a white landowner.

The first freed black family to settle on the Eastern Shore was Anthony Johnson and his wife Mary. Descending from the original Johnson family who settled in 1619 in Virginia and gained their freedom, Anthony Johnson lived on a 300-acre plot of land called "Tonies Vineyard" in Somerset County (McConnell 1971, 405). This tract of land was located south of

Wicomico Creek (Rootsweb.com 2010). But not all African American families were as lucky. Those without their own properties were forced to work for others in industries that extracted natural resources from the Bay. Oyster dredging, oyster shucking, and crab harvesting and picking, were some of these manufacturing jobs where blacks found employment (Anderson 1998). Interviews from an article titled *Black Men, Blue Waters* detail the experiences of African Americans living on the Chesapeake. In Bellevue, Maryland, an oysterman named Captain Sam Turner founded the Bellevue Seafood Company with his father in 1939. He spoke about how the color of his skin did not matter on the water: “You hear a lot about discrimination and all that stuff, but you didn’t have none of that on the water” (2). This interracial reliance would have contributed to building cohesive alliances on the water despite segregation and racism continuing on land. Another account from a waterman named Wilson Cannon helps to illustrate the economic and educational reasons why many African Americans found themselves migrating elsewhere. Cannon left the town of Crisfield, which was stated to have twenty-six oyster and crab houses at the time, to find work north of the Deal Island Peninsula in St. Michael’s where the black waterman population was greater (6). Since Crisfield went from “being the biggest seafood [processing] industry in the world...” to having “half the town” being closed down, many had to find employment elsewhere (6). Reverend William Wallace recounts his experience of being in one of only five black families living on Deal Island in the mid-1900s. Even with the tension that followed desegregation, “There was a strong bond between watermen, regardless of race” (7) which further suggests that seafood harvesting on the water provided a place where revenue overcame race. On land, race played a critical role in limiting employment opportunities for African Americans. As jobs became increasingly scarce and the population continued to age, many African American families found themselves migrating away from the Deal Island Peninsula to find better opportunities in surrounding regional cities (Johnson 2016, 120).

## **Historical Race Relations**

After integration following the Civil War, the United States found itself in a social whirlwind that lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) decision that desegregated schools, the counties of the Eastern Shore remained segregated until 1968 (Anderson 1998, 5). Lynchings were not unheard of during this time and the repercussions of famous racially charged incidents set precedent to the cycle of race relations in the region. During the period following Emancipation, the descendants of those who were enslaved and those who benefited from slavery were still living in close but separate proximity to one another. The tension between white and black America manifested themselves in infamous murder cases that were scattered across the state of Maryland. One of these notable cases was the Hill Murder Trial, which is meticulously explained by Kevin G. Hemstock (2015), the author of *“Injustice on the Eastern Shore: Race and the Hill Murder Trial.”* Here, Hemstock analyzes not only the murder trial itself, but also the history of the town of Millington, Kent County where this murder occurred, and the interactions that took place between these segregated populations. Before the story is explained, it is necessary to describe the background of Millington.

It was stated that white residential life in 1890's Millington was reminiscent of the Victorian Age. The most affluent of residents lived much like old Southern societies did further from the Mason Dixon line. Black communities were living very differently, seeing as they were still enduring the repercussions of slavery. Despite Emancipation granting African Americans the right to vote in 1863, many still could not because they were not landowners. But a handful did find a way. A fisherman who lived nearby in Chestertown named Isaac Anderson was one such example. Anderson sold 4 sq./ft. pieces of land he inherited from his father to forty-four other black men, granting them each the eligibility to vote. Others heard about this matter through *The New York Herald* and other local newspapers and were outraged by this devious use of the law. Aside from the common hostilities felt between whites and blacks and instances of violence like the burning of a black Millington schoolhouse in 1865, newspapers played their part in continuing to incite and spread racial hatred in several ways. These papers warned against the threat of integration to white Americans and used racial language to inflate these socio-cultural divides. Typically, these publications referred to African Americans using common racial terminology such as "darkies" as well as informalizing black names (ex. Deborah becomes Debbie, James to Jimmy). To further set blacks apart from whites, newspapers would refer to them as "boy" or "girl" regardless of their age. Finally, black vernacular was transcribed with the clear intention of differentiating between white and black English.

A summary of the Hill Murder Trial is as follows:

It all began on Christmas Eve 1891 when a payment dispute erupted between two African American brothers named John and Joseph Potts and a white man named Edward Jones. Jones had come to collect the rest of the money he was owed after completing work for which he claimed he had not been paid in full. The Potts brothers asserted, however, that they made an agreement with Jones to pay the sum in installments. Later that day, as a result of this earlier payment misunderstanding, the Potts brothers and some friends, including a man named Thomas Campbell, entered into a physical dispute with some white men at McWhorter's Saloon. During the brawl, Campbell was struck over the head with an object, presumably by a white man, and continued to be attacked while the rest of his group fled the saloon. When the scene became visible again, it was clear that Campbell was dead. The doctor who diagnosed his cause of death was a young white doctor named Dr. James Heighe Hill. It was Hill's diagnosis that became problematic because he said that Campbell died from heart disease and not from being hit over the head. No one was charged, and the local black community felt insulted by the diagnosis because they knew how he really died. One day after the incident, Dr. Hill was out late at night on a call. While passing a group of black men, he was viciously attacked then sent back in his carriage in a disturbing manner. The horse made its way back to his neighborhood where and his wife, Arrelee Hill, found him bloodied and barely alive. Once Dr. Hill was pronounced dead, the white community in Millington was set ablaze with a newfound gusto for justice.

Detectives traced back the culprits to the group of men who they suspected had committed this crime. In total, sixteen black men were arrested, but nine men were eventually

accused. Their names were Fletcher Williams, Charles Brooks, Moses Brown, Frisby Comegys, Charles Sumner Emory, Henry Hurtt, Joshua Baynard, Lewis Benson, and John Potts. Their ages were quite young but also contested and unclear. At the time, it was believed the oldest of the men was in his late twenties or early thirties, while the youngest convicted boy was thought to be thirteen or fourteen years old. It was later understood that the two youngest boys were probably sixteen and seventeen years old. The Hill Trial had turned into a popular ordeal amongst the Millington population and beyond. The day of the sentencing, the courtroom was packed with spectators and cameramen looking to cash in on the story. The verdict was in: all except John Potts were found guilty of murder in the first degree. All eight of the black men, including the younger boys, were to be hanged. Prominent black leaders tried to distance themselves from the culprits by denouncing the crime and demanding that justice be brought against the perpetrators. But there were two different means of “justice” during this time. Some saw the sentencing of time in jail legally through the court system as fair while others preferred the more immediate alternative of a visit from “Judge Lynch.” The verdict, presumably, was what Millington expected, though there was questioning on if the youngest boys should have received the same sentence as the adults. Hemstock notes that the very youngest of the prisoners asked when they could go home, showing how the weight of the sentencing did not translate to his young mind.

The execution date moved several times. By a show of grace, Governor Frank Brown later commuted the sentences of the four youngest boys, Benson, Baynard, Emory, and Hurtt to life in prison in order to “protect the fair name of Maryland” because the boys were “not sufficiently intelligent enough to know what was going on” (Hemstock 2015, 143). The execution was finally set for January 12, 1893, and when the day arrived, hotels were packed—the spectacle of their execution was to be documented by the media and watched by a leering crowd. Before the four young men were marched out, Samuel Hill, the father or the slain doctor asked each to clear their conscience. Williams, Brooks, Brown and Comegys each stated that they were innocent and did not know who killed his son. At 12:38 pm, the men were noosed and the lever pulled. All but Williams suffered long, excruciating deaths that spanned several minutes. It was reported that the crowd chanted the whole way through the execution, their bodies left to be observed for twenty minutes after each finally died. The Hill Murder Trial was stated to be the most expensive trial in the county at the time, but certainly was not the final instance where white Americans demanded vigilante justice against African Americans. Though the instances mentioned here were negative, this is no indication of how entire communities felt at the time. History shows that white opinions on slavery were not always monolithic. Groups like the Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Poor Negroes and Others Unlawfully Held in Bondage helped bring attention to the issue of slavery to the forefront (McConnell 1971).

But Kent County is not alone for historical incidents of lynchings. In the town of Princess Anne in Somerset County, another significant lynching led to another contribution to the growing Civil Rights Movement. In 1933, an elderly white woman named Mary Denston accused a 22-year-old African American man named George Armwood of attacking her



(Maryland Historical Society 2012). Once Armwood was arrested and charged with felonious assault, the alleged assailant was sent to Baltimore for his own protection. That protection soon disappeared once he was sent back to Princess Anne shortly thereafter. On October 18 of that same year, George Armwood was dragged from his cell where he encountered a mob of over a thousand white residents. After being dragged through the streets, beaten, stabbed, and one of his ears cut off, the mob hung Armwood on a nearby tree. His corpse was then paraded through the town where it was doused with gasoline and set on fire near the courthouse. This gruesome event did not happen unexpectedly or as an accidental result of high tensions. Armwood's murder was a deliberate display of racial hatred and vigilante justice. According to an article from the Maryland Historical Society, the event was even advertised throughout the state, spreading as far as Washington D.C. and northern Virginia, giving people enough notice to attend (Maryland Historical Society 2012). Members of the Princess Anne Fire Department were reported to have sounded their alarms in order to signal the start of the mob. This celebration over the lynching of George Armwood caught the attention of two young African American brothers named Clarence and Parren Mitchell, who would later become notable civil rights activists. Clarence Mitchell was appointed the labor secretary for the NAACP and became an influential lobbyist for pushing civil rights legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Parren Mitchell also centered his career on bettering the lives of African Americans. In 1950 he became the University of Maryland's first black graduate student after suing to gain admission (Maryland Historical Society 2012). Twenty years later, Parren Mitchell became the first African American to be elected to Congress from the State of Maryland where he continued to advocate for civil rights. Though the murder of George Armwood was the last recorded lynching in Maryland, it and many others still established lasting effects for the tumultuous race relations of the region.

### **The Deal Island Peninsula**

By illustrating historical events on a regional scale, it can offer insight as to how smaller communities fit into this picture, such as the communities on the Deal Island Peninsula. The string of low-lying islands that make up the Peninsula are located west of Princess Anne along the Tangier Sound. They are home to the small fishing and farming communities of Oriole, Dames Quarter, Chance, Deal Island, and Wenona. The Peninsula's namesake of Deal Island was formerly known as "Devil's Island." John Smith's 1600s exploration of the Chesapeake Bay mentions Devil's Island as being a hideout for pirates. This was the name it boasted before being changed to the less sinister name of "Deal Island" (Somerset County, MD 1955, 90). The Deal Island Peninsula also hosted camp meetings where local and regional Methodists would visit from Southern Maryland, Baltimore, and Virginia (Baltimore Sun). The history of African Americans living on the Deal Island Peninsula manifests in buildings and locations that still survive to this day.

## Dames Quarter Rosenwald School

One of these important structures was the Rosenwald School in Dames Quarter. Beginning in the early 1910's, Booker T. Washington and a philanthropist named Julius Rosenwald collaborated to bring African American children living in the segregated South better schooling. The establishment of these schools was a joint effort. With the help of Rosenwald's donated funds, local black communities also contributed money from their own pockets towards building these small but suitable schoolhouses. The funding that was accumulated by black communities was so significant, in fact, records show that they exceeded what Rosenwald himself donated: African Americans gave over \$4.7 million and Rosenwald donated over \$4.3 million (Hoffschwelle 2012, 1). Julius Rosenwald's reasoning behind this particular method of raising funds was because "... he was a strong proponent of using matching grants to foster community support" (Aaronson and Mazumder 2011, 11). This grant-matching program not only illustrated the extreme generosity of Julius Rosenwald, but also the sacrifices that other African Americans were willing to make to improve their own communities with what little they had. By 1932, there were 4,977 schools, 217 teachers' homes and 163 shop buildings spanning 15 states (Hoffschwelle 2012, 1). The reach of the Rosenwald schools was so expansive that one out of five rural schools was a Rosenwald School, with a third of black students attending them at the time (Hoffschwelle 2012, 1).

Located on Riley Roberts Road in Dames Quarter, the Dames Quarter School is the only Rosenwald School still remaining in Somerset County, though it has been abandoned for decades. The school's budget year was set for 1929-1930 and had a two-teacher type plan. The breakdown of the budget shows that blacks, listed as "negroes," paid \$200, the public paid \$2,500, and Rosenwald paid \$500, equaling a grand total of \$3,200 that was used to build the school (Fisk Database). In addition to the Dames Quarter School, six other Rosenwald schools were established throughout Somerset County between 1921-1930, including a second one in an unknown location in Chance (fig. 1).



*The Rosenwald School on Riley Roberts Road in Dames Quarter in 2017. Photo Credit: Liz Van Dolah*

While the Dames Quarter School still stands, the structure itself is in poor condition. Other than the classroom-type and budget information, there are very few written records that offer any additional accounts of those impacted by the schools in Dames Quarter or Chance. Sources from other Rosenwald schools, however, can give valuable insight on the impacts that they had on rural African American students and their respective communities.

The structures of the schoolhouses themselves, for example, “...were constructed based on modern designs that provided adequate lighting, ventilation and sanitation. Classrooms were required to be fully equipped with books, chairs, desks, blackboards and other materials to ensure an adequate learning environment” (Aaronson and Mazumder 2011, 3). The curriculum for these students followed a “Tuskegee-styled industrial curriculum” which taught basic literacy and math skills and focused on trades and agriculture for boys while girls learned home

Figure 1: List of Rosenwald Schools in Somerset County between 1921-1930

School Name	Budget Year	Plan Type	Funding Sources
Chance School	1929-1930	Two-Teacher	Blacks: \$100 Rosenwald: \$500 Public: \$2,550
Crisfield School	1921-1922	Five-teacher	Public: \$3,800 Rosenwald: \$1,400
Dames Quarter School	1929-1930	Two-teacher	Blacks: \$200 Public: \$2,500 Rosenwald: \$500
Greenwood School	1921-1922	Five-teacher	Public: \$3,800 Rosenwald: \$1,400
Kingston School	1926-1927	Two-teacher	Blacks: \$300 Rosenwald: \$700 Public: \$2,250
Marumsco School	1927-1928	One-Teacher	Blacks: \$200 Rosenwald: \$200 Public: \$1,950
Venton School	1929-1930	One-Teacher	Blacks: \$200 Rosenwald: \$200 Public: 1,600

economics (Hoffschwelle 2012, 2). It is safe to say that Rosenwald schools greatly benefited rural African American children, including those living on the Peninsula who otherwise would not have had better opportunities to receive conventional schooling and education at the time.

### **John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church**

Located on Ballard Street, the John Wesley M.E. Church was founded in 1889 and stands as the only remaining black church originally established on Deal Island. Other historically black churches in the area include Macedonia United Methodist Church in Dames Quarter, Saint Charles United Methodist Church in Chance, and Saint James M.E. Church in Oriole, which is now abandoned. The Saint James Church was incorporated in 1879 and was mostly comprised of freed slaves and watermen communities (African American Registry 2013). The John Wesley M.E. Church was named after John Wesley—the man central to the development of Methodist practices. He believed that “Methodism presented an alternative to the spiritual lethargy that [he] perceived in the Anglican Church” (Fincham 2016). Furthermore, Methodism also confirms that God “...provides not only salvation, but all other human spiritual and physical needs as well” (Fincham 2016). Its emphasis on upholding spirituality for every individuals makes it clear why this sect of Christianity was particularly attractive to black communities living on the Eastern Shore and in the Deal Island Peninsula area. More broadly speaking, Methodist heritage in the area has played an important role in helping to sustain a watermen and farming way of life through a strong reliance on faith and trust in God (Van Dolah 2017).

A Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Form filled out in 1986 by an architectural historian named Paul Touart on the John Wesley M.E. Church lends insight as to



*The interior of the John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church before renovation work commenced in 2016.  
Photo Credit: Liz Van Dolah*

how the building facade was designed. It states that like many of the surrounding churches, it used Late Victorian design and incorporated Gothic revival into its architecture, along with a three-level tower and the various types of windows it featured. A marble datestone reads: “*John Wesley M.E. Church, built 1889, rebuilt 1914, Reverend Theo Johnson, Pastor.*”

Aside from the new design, the church also features an above ground cemetery that is built to survive the marshy ground on which it rests. Lastly, the form features a quote from an 1877

atlas that designated the building as a “colored church and school” (Touart 1986). The church was a popular place for the black community but it remains unclear how many documents exist

today that detail its day-to-day use. What records do indicate, however, is that a popular African American pastor named Frost Pollitt visited a church on Deal Island in the mid-1800s (frostpollitt.org). Land record transactions from 1845 and 1850 first list Pollitt as living in Princess Anne and later moving to Nutters District in Worcester County, MD from 1860 to 1870. The preacher is mentioned to have served as an “itinerate” pastor, meaning that he often travelled to other churches in the region. Frost Pollitt is documented to have preached in Delaware, Virginia, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and other smaller towns like Deal Island, though it cannot be specified which church in particular he visited (frostpollitt.org).

Today, the John Wesley M.E. church is in desperate need of structural repair and environmental buffering. Damage from the elements has slowly impacted the integrity of the building. Restoration efforts are currently underway by the John Wesley Methodist Church Renovation Project to repair the structure and replace the windows, with the intention of using it as a “heritage-focused cultural and interpretive center” (Maryland Historical Trust 2015).

### **Henry’s Beach**

From 1952-1982, Henry’s Beach in Dames Quarter was established as a popular community resort space for African Americans of the region. Owned by Lorraine Henry and her husband George, it once served as one of the few beaches that blacks were allowed to visit because of segregation. Henry’s Beach also offered more than just sunbathing and swimming. It provided a space for fishing, crabbing, as well as a restaurant. Henry’s Beach even served as a place for entertainers of the time to perform for black audiences. One of the largest final attractions to this beach resort was its baseball field. Fields like these allowed black baseball players to practice freely in front of fellow African Americans and away from racist crowds (Mouery 2009, 14-17). Though sports around the 20th century were mostly segregated, baseball varied depending on if an individual played amateur or professional baseball. The 1867 decision from a group called the National Association of Baseball Players that believed “that only whites could uphold the ‘gentlemanly character’ of amateur baseball” (Baughman, et al. 2001). Professional baseball, on the other hand, allowed black players on their teams because they valued great players regardless of the color of their skin. Though baseball and other sports were desegregated by the time Henry’s Beach was established, it still offered a place where African American baseball teams on every level could play and their fans could enjoy the sport.

The Deal Island Peninsula is a prime example of local economies and histories contributing to the greater narrative of the history of the United States. Fluctuations in land use stirred much of the historical development of the Eastern Shore and the counties found within it. Whether it is land disputes between Native communities and European settlers, or the segregated spaces experienced by black and white Americans, the unifying theme that contributed to all of this was the rich abundance of resources that came from the Chesapeake region. Having access to both land and sea sources was critical for all who lived here. The changing environments and shifting economies helped to develop the historical resilience that the people of the Eastern Shore continue to display.

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