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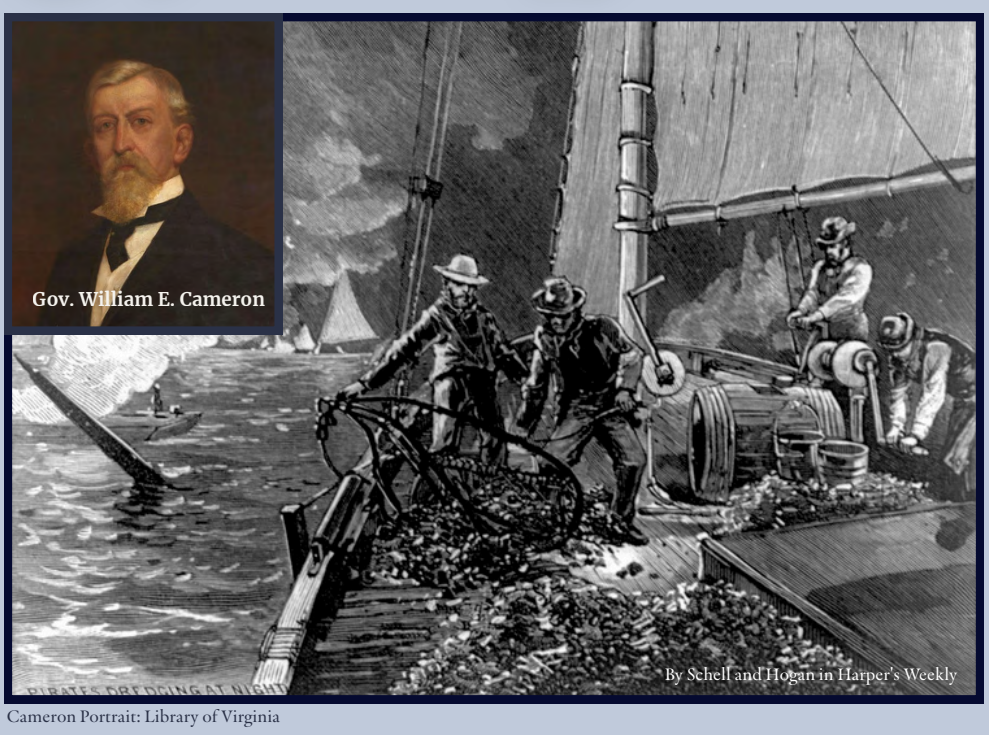
NORTHERN NECK HISTORY CULTURE HAPPENINGS

Oyster Wars: Perils of Answering the Call for Law & Order

Gov. William E. Cameron


By Schell and Hogan in Harper's Weekly

Cameron Portrait: Library of Virginia

Once a staple of the poor, oysters were a hot commodity after the Civil War, creating a boom in the Chesapeake Bay region.

Before the war, Virginia oystermen were mostly "negroes working for their masters" and "a very rough class of whites," says an 1887 federal fisheries report. Afterward, the industry drew a range of new players—men "reduced from wealth to poverty," independent Black watermen, and enterprising businessmen backed by capital and investors.

Strong prices, growing demand, and the Bay's rich oyster beds unleashed greed, lawlessness, and violence. The Oyster Wars erupted and played out for nearly a century, until one death too many helped bring the saga to a close.

Regulation vs. Enforcement

Whether it was watermen versus watermen or watermen versus authorities, dredging was a common spark for conflict. Scraping up oysters en masse was obviously attractive to businessmen equipped to do it, but unchecked, it carried the risk of overharvesting and depleting the oyster beds.

Despite regularly sparring with one another, Virginia and Maryland both tried to regulate the industry. At various points, they both banned dredging and deployed oyster forces. But both states were also plagued by a lack of resources —and sometimes the will—for effective enforcement.

Oyster pirates often better armed, with better boats, and able to outmaneuver authorities, continued their illegal dredging and bloody battles with authorities and with each other.

Governor's Raids

Enforcement was often political, ineffective, and sometimes downright embarrassing. Virginia Governor William E. Cameron checked the boxes on all three.

Deciding to personally combat oyster pirating, on February 17, 1882, Cameron launched a covert mission, leaving Norfolk with two vessels carrying militia, cannons, and "an abundance of small arms," explained *The Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*.

At the mouth of the Rappahannock River, Cameron's forces encountered seven suspected oyster-dredging vessels, and ultimately captured them. The raid was initially deemed a success.

Forty-six dredgers were prosecuted and received one-year sentences. But these violators were largely Virginians, not Marylanders. Cameron came under pressure and reduced the sentences of all the captains but one who was granted clemency due to health. He pardoned all crew except a man who set a fire in jail.

The seized boats were auctioned but the owners bought them back. Then the Virginia Supreme Court ruled the owners weren't fairly represented and were entitled to refunds.

Within a year, Cameron was informed over 50 vessels were dredging in the Chesapeake. In February 1883, he attempted another raid, noted *Virginia Magazine.*

Most boats were reportedly tipped off and in Maryland waters before the governor arrived. When he finally found eight schooners off the coast of Northumberland, one of his vessels ran aground, and seven boats got away.

Cameron managed to capture one vessel but its captain and mate had escaped. A Northumberland grand jury later refused to indict the seven crewmen left aboard.

Then came the episode that turned the governor's second raid into a punchline.

When his forces came upon the *Dancing Molly*, the men were ashore. Only the captain's wife and two daughters were aboard, and they set sail to escape. Despite being chased and the shots fired, the women outran the governor, and onlookers in Virginia "gave three cheers," the *Daily Dispatch* reported.

in addition to facing bad press and controversy, Cameron was mocked. *Lynchburg Advance*'s poet laureate did so in verse, and the Norfolk Academy of Music staged a comic opera caricaturing the governor.

Fatal Enforcement

Clashes continued into the mid-20th century, giving Maryland authorities runway to go ultimately go too far.

On the night of April 7, 1959, Berkeley Muse, a beloved Colonial Beach businessman, joined two friends for oyster dredging in the Potomac. According to *The Oyster Wars of the Chesapeake Bay*, the chief inspector of the Tidewater Fisheries Commission had arranged a stakeout. As the fog lifted in the early morning hours, the three men encountered Maryland authorities, who chased them and opened fire.

One man was shot in the leg, but Muse was hit in the chest and killed. Colonial Beach was reportedly in shock, and the public seemed to have little tolerance left for men being gunned down over oysters.

Muse's death was the prompt for major changes in Maryland's fisheries enforcement and is considered the catalyst for bringing the Oyster Wars to a close.

The end of this violent era came on December 5, 1962, when President John F. Kennedy signed the bill creating the Potomac River Fisheries Commission, a joint system for managing the river's fisheries.

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September Muster NNK

September 18
Celebrate Watermen !!

September 5 : History Hour

Catch a lecture at the James Monroe Birthplace & Boyhood Home on the evolution of English and Scottish flags and changes during Monroe's presidency. Starts at 1:30. Plan extra time to explore the birthplace.
Address: 4460 James Monroe Hwy, Colonial Beach.

September 19-20:
Stratford Hall Wine & Oyster Festival

Enjoy Virginia wines paired with coastal oysters. Plus, distilleries, food trucks, artisan booths, family fun, and car shows.

Photo: Stratford Hall

Saturday: 10 - 6 p.m.
Sunday: 11- 4 p.m.

Tickets: stratfordhall.org/wineandoysterfestival