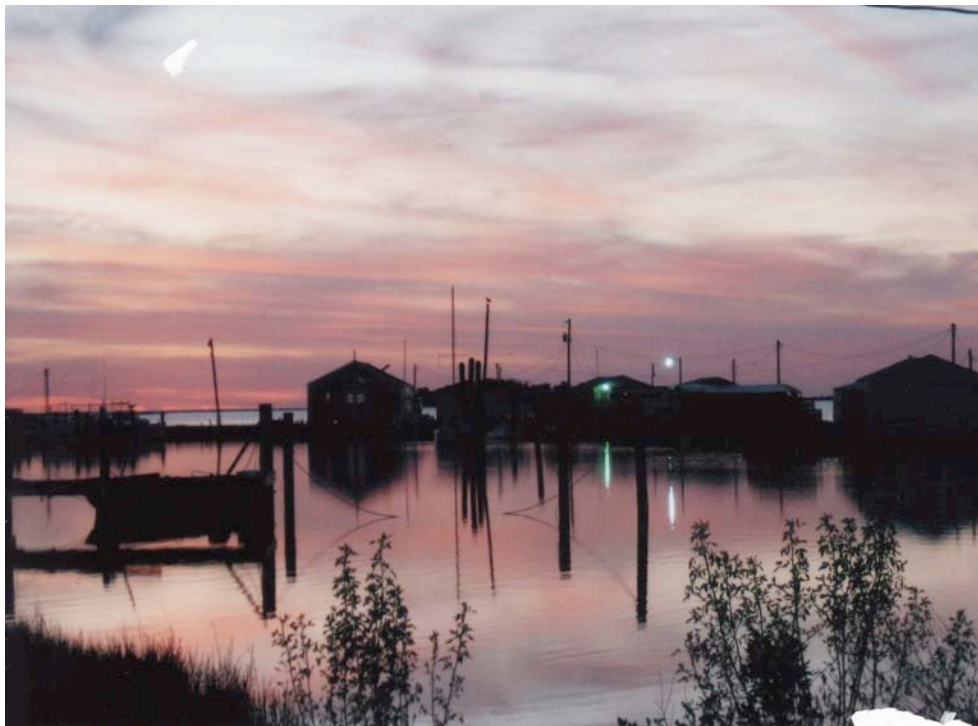


Swallowed by the Bay

The Historical Landscape of Smith Island



Cate McCraw
Environmental History
Professor Bill Cronon
November 24, 2008

“Protect our heritage: do not support the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.” Hanging from the door of a small crab shanty, a hand-painted sign displays this quiet protest of catch restrictions imposed on local watermen. Residents of Smith Island—Maryland’s only remaining inhabited offshore property—have witnessed a downturn in income and the island’s population as the health of the Bay continues to decline. Yet some watermen see CBF’s conservation efforts as an unjust obstacle in the struggle to make ends meet, and they find themselves living in a unique paradox when it comes to the future of environmental conservation. While reproductive rates of crabs and oysters hover around all-time lows, there are few viable occupational alternatives to selling the seafood iconic of Maryland’s eastern shore. Both the isolated culture and economy of Smith Island are deeply connected to working on the water, but exponential increases in erosion, pollution, and overfishing have dramatically altered the landscape and threatened island life since the middle of the twentieth century.

Smith Island is the collective term for Ewell, Rhodes Point, and Tylerton, small fishing communities where generations of the same families have lived since the seventeenth century. Ewell is connected to Rhodes Point by a dusty road wide enough for only one car, but in recent years rising sea levels have made the connection increasingly vulnerable to flooding. Tylerton is a short boat ride away from its neighbors, and Ewell is the more commercial center with a small visitor museum and bed-and-breakfasts for the “foreigners” who visit Smith Island every summer. Such tourism has helped to sustain the local economy, but the majority of Ewell’s landscape remains untouched by the outside world and looks like a postcard from several decades past. Simple white houses line narrow roads from one end of the island to the other,

looking out on the border of wetlands and crumbling docks that was once rich farmland.¹ Many of the crab shanties that must have buzzed with activity during days of more plentiful bushels now sit quiet and dark among wilting telephone wires, decaying row boats resting in a tangle of marsh grass on the shore below. The screened porch of Ruke's, one of the island's small restaurants, does not look sturdy enough to weather many more storms, and the Methodist church appears to be one of the best-maintained buildings. A small graveyard has rows of fading headstones, the majority of which bear the names Evans, Tyler, Marshall, and Smith.

Many have said that Smith Island is a place untouched by time, but the contours of the land tell a very different story. Old-fashioned buildings, a peaceful quiet, and the unusually thick native accent—traced back to forms of Old English spoken by original settlers—could easily lead one to believe that life on Smith Island is safe and unchanging. The fact that most people walk, bike, or use small golf carts rather than cars may emphasize the island's small size, and learning that teenagers have a forty-minute boat ride to the nearest mainland high school may suggest a surreal state of isolation for the twenty-first century. On the surface Smith Island could be described as picturesque or even quaint, but walking through the quiet community and along its battered shorelines, it appears that a troubled nature is closing in on the island's future. Neighboring Holland's Island lost the majority of its residents in 1914 due to high tides, Watts Island was abandoned in 1931, and Jones Island is now completely submerged.² The Smith Island life—a life originally built in harmony with nature—now seems in equal danger of being swallowed by the Bay.

¹ Frances W. Dize, *Smith Island, Chesapeake Bay*. (Tidewater Publishers: Centreville, 1990), 28.

² Dize, 4.

Smith Island is located twelve miles off the coast of Maryland, and Jennings Evans, lifelong resident and unofficial historian of the island, says that approximately 230 people remain in Ewell, Tylerton, and Rhode's Point combined. Falling from over 800 residents at the turn of the twentieth century, the population has dwindled as working the water has become less profitable.³ Captain John Smith chartered the territory in 1608, and members of the Jamestown colony sent a small group of twenty men to mine salt (an essential meat preservative) on the island in 1614. The community turned to agriculture in the 1700s, and settlers from Virginia enjoyed rich soil and space to graze cattle and sheep before erosion began transforming cropland into marsh.⁴ Erosion has worn away the island's shores for centuries, but Evans says the current rate of land loss has reached approximately ten feet each year. A combination of rising sea levels and sediment flow has washed mass quantities of large particles into the Bay, limiting available living space but also stifling underwater grass populations that serve as secluded homes and nurseries for treasured species like the blue crab.

Jessie Marsh, a Smith Island native and CBF's senior manager for island education programs, was born in 1963 and says that he has witnessed significant changes in the island's landscape over the course of his lifetime. People have had to reconstruct or raise their houses because of changes in sea level, and four graveyards have been washed away. He remembers playing on baseball fields as a child, but two have vanished in the rising tide. "Both of those have been taken over by the marsh now," he says. "I watched them disappear. I mean, you can still see the scoreboard poles, but you would never guess that anyone ever played baseball out there."

³ Evans, Jennings. Interview by author. Madison, Wisconsin, 18 November 2008.

⁴ Badger, Curtis J., and Rick Kellam. *The Barrier Islands: A Photographic History of Life on Hogg, Cobb, Smith, Cedar, Parramore, Metompkin, and Assateague*.

The Bay is erasing essential clues to the island's past, and the older generation—true Smith Islanders who have watched both environmental and social transformations—are simultaneously passing away.⁵

Areas that once boasted thriving crab populations have suffered as a result of real estate development and construction projects along the Bay's shores, a trend CBF and other advocacy groups have attempted to stop by lobbying for legal protection of wetlands, forests, and other coastal habitats essential to limiting erosion. "We're having an influx of people from other states," Jennings says, "and they all want choice property. The Chester River used to have the biggest crabs you'd ever see in your life, but that became a place where people wanted to settle and the first thing you know the crabs started leaving." With the building of vacation homes and luxury estates on expensive waterfront property, bulldozers have polluted coastal waters with sand and sediment and increased phosphorous and nitrogen content to near-toxic levels. "There's going to be a time when there won't be any watermen here—I can see that coming now," Evans says. "I'd say the youngest of them are about twenty, but most [island youth] go and get their education now. Working on the water is a rough business—you have to put in long hours and there's no benefits."⁶ Marsh was a waterman before working for CBF, and says half of the Bay's watermen have left their boats for other professions in just the last five years.⁷

Islanders have survived floods, high winds, and "freeze-overs"—winter days when the Bay was completely frozen and families were stranded until the ice melted—but the decline in

⁵ Marsh, Jessie. Interview by author. Madison, Wisconsin, 19 November 2008.

⁶ Evans: Interview by author.

⁷ Marsh: Interview by author.

blue crab and oyster populations is arguably the largest ecological threat to island life in recent memory. The importance of these species is evident even to a tourist in Ewell, and one can't help but assume the islanders can only stay as long as the Bay's seafood can survive. Oyster tongs and rusting crab pots sit in several backyards, fishing boats rock back and forth by the central dock. Open windows bring the sound of engines starting at four in the morning, and several boats gently tug their way back to the receding shore in late afternoon. What was once an agricultural island became a community of watermen because of intruding wetlands, the creation of a national wildlife refuge claimed eight more miles of the island by 1960, and the modern fishing community may disappear because the Bay itself is failing. CBF's annual State of the Bay report marks trends in major health indicators, and the blue crabs received the grade of "C"—or "fair"—in 2007. The oyster population was evaluated as an "F"—or "critical"—and many say there is almost no hope for a full recovery.⁸ Oyster populations have been declining since the 1890s, but a particularly rapid downward trend began in the 1950s and accelerated further in the 1980s.⁹

Marsh says this overfishing is as much a factor in falling resources as erosion, and pollution continues to climb as construction and human population rise throughout the watershed. But it is difficult and perhaps unreasonable to expect watermen to look at the big picture when it comes to limiting their catch. Better jobs are found only on the mainland, and switching professions usually means moving families to Crisfield on Maryland's eastern shore.

⁸ *2007 State of the Bay Report*. (Chesapeake Bay Foundation, 2007).

⁹ Tom Horton, *Turning the Tide: Saving the Chesapeake Bay*. (Washington: Island Press, 2003), 166-169.

The state prison in Somerset County has hired several young men from the island, but some are still determined to stay and make a living in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers.¹⁰

Reflecting on such bleak environmental forecasts, Garret Hardin proposed the theory known as “Tragedy of the Commons” in 1968. Hardin argued that people exhaust natural resources because they act out of self-interest rather than a long-term concern for nature, and that there is an underlying tendency to rationalize resource exploitation with the idea that “If I don’t take it, someone else will.”¹¹ With no reliable alternative to crabbing or dredging for oysters, however, catching enough to make a profit is necessary for Smith Island watermen rather than self-indulgent or short-sighted. Long-term needs are blurred when it comes to economic vulnerability and environmental sustainability, and while the fall in working watermen could theoretically help restore the Bay’s equilibrium, it is also bringing the era of Smith Island to a close. The anti-CBF sign on the crab shanty—a shanty that looks as though it has not been used for several years—highlights a dismal undercurrent of irony in island life.

There is no local police force on Smith Island, no state bureaucracy, and no immediate government supervision. All major decisions have been made at the church in the center of Ewell, but aside from this strong religious presence, nature is quite literally the dominant governing force on the island. Lifestyle is determined by the health of the Bay, and income is determined by the abundance of its species. Evans says he thinks the older generation will stay on the island until the last possible day—it is a culture known for its strong work ethic and determination to beat the odds—but Marsh says the odds are growing greater every year.

¹⁰ Marsh: Interview by author.

¹¹ Hardin, Garrett. “Tragedy of the Commons.” Science 162 (1968): 1243-1248.

Scientists have predicted a three-foot increase in sea level within the next hundred years, and he thinks even six inches would seriously jeopardize the community. Hopeful as residents and watermen may be, when it comes to a standoff between islanders and nature, they know nature will ultimately prevail. “We’re facing the end. The Smith Island we all know is all but gone now,” Marsh says. “It’s just a matter of time—they’re down for the count.”¹²

¹² Marsh: Interview by author.