



From the President

by Bill Balascio

In my letter this January, I promised to keep you posted on any new developments. There have been a few. The annual Marshland Dinner is scheduled for May 5th, and will highlight the recently completed statue "The Waterman". The artist Jacquin Smolens will be our guest for the evening, and will display some of his other works. It should be a fun evening as always, so please plan to join us.

The Society will participate with the Division of Parks and Recreation in adding some landscaping finishing touches to the base of the statue. We hope to have a dedication this fall, possibly in conjunction with a member "get-together", which may be a picnic. Phase II of our tree planting project is looking like it will become a reality, thanks to the efforts of John Ringer.

Saving the most important news for last, it appears likely that the Harvey Moore farm will soon be acquired through a cooperative effort of the Delaware Open Space Council and Delaware Wild lands. If all proceeds as planned, it will be maintained as open space and a working farm. Our thanks go out to all who have assisted in this effort.

Parks in Port Penn for 2001

By Mike Miller

Folklife Manager, Division of Parks & Recreation

The year 2001 marks the 50th Anniversary for Delaware State Parks. Starting in 1951 with the acquisition of Trap Pond State Park and Fort Delaware, the Division of Parks and Recreation now includes fourteen parks and related lands for more than 22,000 acres. Be sure to visit all your Parks to learn of the Division's many recreational, cultural, and historical programs.

One special day will mark the start of the 2001 season in Port Penn. "Free to the First State," sponsored by the Delaware Tourism Office, will provide free entry to several state facilities across the state on Saturday, May 12. The Port Penn Interpretive Center was selected as one site for this event. Come by and visit your community museum.

In Port Penn this year, the Interpretive Center will be open Fridays through Sundays, 11 am to 5 pm, and at other times by appointment.



"The Waterman" by Jacquin Smolens

Representative Dick Cathcart is expected to request some funds for the rehabilitation of the Cleaver House this year. While we all know the state budget is tight, a legislative request is a step in the right direction. Good luck to Representative Cathcart and thanks for his help.

Design work for the Stewart and Market parcel should start this summer with landscape architect Eric Sturm. His task will be to design the parcel to include the features desired by the community, including parking, handicap accessibility, and street-scaping. His work should help improve the look and usefulness of this lot central to Port Penn.

Port Penn Area Dates to Remember

Annual Marshland Dinner

Saturday, May 5, 2001

Port Penn Fire Hall

Seatings, 5:00 pm & 7:00 pm

Call (302)834-7525 for information

50th Anniversary of Delaware

Division of Parks & Recreation

"Free for First State" Day

Saturday, May 12, 2001

11:00 am to 3:00 pm

Come to the Port Penn Interpretive Center and celebrate this special day.

Autumn, 2001 Fall Picnic

Liston Range Lighthouse

Bayview Beach

Information Forthcoming

Area Historical Society Quarterly Meetings

Wednesday, July 18, 2001

Wednesday, October 3, 2001

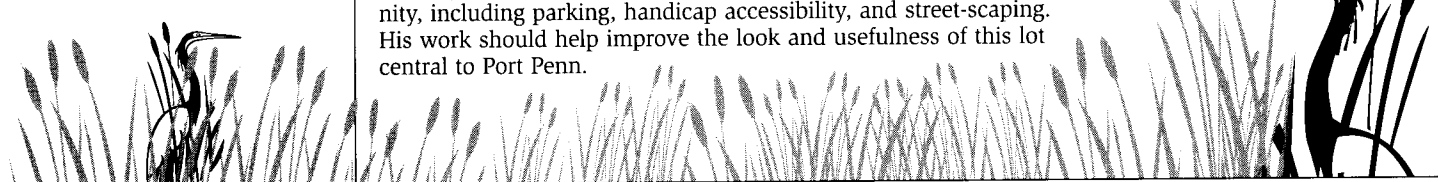
7:00 pm

Port Penn

Presbyterian Church

Open to the public.

PLEASE JOIN US.



Stealth makes Wealth: The Market Gunners of Delaware and Their Markets

by Lee Jennings



Lee Jennings, Historian, Division of Parks and Recreation
Lee is holding the "Market Gun", a popular attraction at the Port Penn Interpretive Center.

As darkness settles over the marshes along the shores of the Delaware near Port Penn, on a fall evening in 1910, two friends prepare their equipment for an evenings work. Bob and Carl check the small sneak box before loading up and moving out. Carl carefully places his double-barreled percussion shot gun in the rear of the boat behind his seat. It is already loaded with birdshot. He will not need any additional loads however because Bob will carry the primary weapon in the bow of the boat. "The Headache Gun" is so named because Bob always felt that he needed to take two aspirin after firing it. The gun is hand made, designed for waterfowl harvesting on a commercial scale. The barrel is a five and a half foot long piece of steel pipe. Its three bands secure it to a heavy maple stock, hand carved by an expert decoy carver. The gun's firing mechanism is a simple old style percussion lock similar to the ones their grandfathers fired in the Civil War. At the fore piece of the stock is a steel link to fasten the gun to the boat. In case of a visitation from the game wardens, the gun will go over the side until the coast is clear. This weapon is illegal. If these men are caught with it they can be fined or go jail. For tonight's work the gun is loaded with a quarter pound of gunpowder and a pound of birdshot.

Rowing quietly away from shore the two men easily find their target. A large raft of ducks sits quietly on the water dozing with heads tucked under their wings. The low profile of the sneak box and the silent actions of the men aboard do not attract attention from the birds. As they glide to within a hundred feet of the flock, Carl silently cocks the shotgun. Lying prone in the bow Bob steadies the Headache Gun on its mounting and places a percussion cap on the nipple. The rising moon silhouettes the ducks

perfectly on this calm clear night. Carl balances, raises the shotgun and fires both barrels. The ducks react at once. It is as if a section of the river suddenly decided to rise into the sky. As the flock begins to rise, Bob prepares for the heavy recoil of the market gun and pulls the trigger. The result is similar to a cannon shot. Three feet of flame bellows from the muzzle as hundreds of steel shot fly towards the ducks. The shot spreads out quickly from the wide barrel. Dozens of ducks fall from the sky onto the water. The two men work quickly to pick up their catch. The sound and light show produced by the market gun will surely arouse the game wardens. The men gather the ducks in burlap sacks and head back to shore. Tonight's bag is slightly over 50 birds. They will be taken at first light to the hotels and restaurants in Wilmington to satisfy the palates of the well to do patrons.

The Markets

Scenarios such as these played out nightly in the Delaware and Chesapeake Bay region. The collapse of the peach industry in Port Penn was particularly hard felt by the average worker, some of whom turned to subsistence living either in agriculture or hunting. The Industrial Revolution, slow to start in America became vigorous in the 1890s building wealth and wealthy classes in the country and making cultural changes along the way. The new rich and would be rich congregated now in cities. Luxury hotels and fine restaurants sprang up. The patrons of these glitzy establishments developed a voracious appetite for the products of the wetlands and rivers. These were principally shad, waterfowl and snapping turtle. Once considered food for the less fortunate sort, the gay 90s brought about a new desire for these rustic delights. Served on fine china in elegant surroundings they were accepted as gourmet.

Industrious hunters in Port Penn were glad to oblige, working hard to increase productivity and meet the growing demand. Success stories abounded. A young African American man was skillful and lucky enough to bag a one hundred pound snapping turtle. The prize fetched him nearly two months wages. The restaurateur rolled his investment in the huge turtle into a marketing scheme. He built an aquarium in the front window of his establishment and placed the turtle in it for two weeks. The curious flocked to the window and the restaurant insuring a full house every night of the two weeks as well as a full house on the nights that the turtle was finally mixed with fine sherry and other secret ingredients to become snapping turtle soup. Duck hunters rushed their nightly catch to the restaurants in barrels. The average restaurant demanded and got over one hundred ducks per week. The hunters began to enjoy an unimagined life style as a result of this good fortune.

The Market Guns

A market gun was a one of a kind, hand made firearm. Watermen, skilled in a wide variety of mechanical pursuits, were able to combine talents to make these rather simple pieces. Ranging in length from five feet to seven feet and weighing up to eighty pounds these guns were often just as hazardous to the shooter as they were to the waterfowl. Imprecise powder measure or hidden flaws in the metal of the barrel could and did cause explosions with catastrophic results. The weight of the gun and the sizable recoil required that it be mounted on the bow of the boat on a firing stand. Fired at the wrong angle the shot could cause a boat to tip over. The single greatest hazard that the market gun posed was ownership. The amassed firepower and the ability to cripple entire flocks of birds caused them to be outlawed. Game wardens searched the marsh for the owners. The muzzle flash and report brought immediate response from law enforcement. Seasoned market gunners kept a sacrificial small

arm called a "Willie Gun" (named for the imaginary owner who was conveniently somewhere else at the time) handy to turn over to the wardens. The real gun was usually tethered to a hook just under the bow of the boat, underwater and out of sight during the inspection. The Great Depression and changes in taste as well as vigilant law enforcement doomed the Market Gun and the Market Gunners. Over harvesting of waterfowl on such a massive scale ultimately rendered this method of hunting impractical. It was abandoned prior the beginning of the Second World War.

The "Headache Gun" is currently a popular attraction at the Port Penn Interpretive Center. Two years ago volunteer David Caron painstakingly removed a non-original coat of gray paint. The paint removal revealed a handsome hand hewn maple stock. Caron also restored the lock or firing mechanism to functional order. This rare piece weighs in at over 50 pounds. It is used in public programs to tell the story of Market Gunners of Port Penn. Other examples of this type of craftsmanship can be found throughout the region in waterman's museums at St. Michaels, Maryland, Yorktown, Virginia and Tuckerton, New Jersey.

The market gunners are long gone now. The guns are museum pieces carefully conserved. They have become part of the folklore as "Outlaws". Viewed through the prism of history they were quintessentially American individual entrepreneurs who developed skills and technologies to meet the needs of the market and create a bit of comfort for themselves along the way.

Note: The author humbly acknowledges the work of Bob Beck in the creation of this article. The oral history that Bob recorded with Greg Jenkins, then manager of the Delaware Folklife Program, produced the tales upon which this article is based. The characters in the story, "Bob" and "Carl" are fictitious. Bob and the members past and present of the Port Penn Area Historical Society have contributed a unique and vital haven for the study of the history and culture of Port Penn and its wetlands.

The "Waterman's Weekend" programs presented at the floating cabin and muskrat skinning shack near the Port Penn Interpretive Center were a result of a unique collaboration. The combined interviews of Bob Beck, and other waterman were reviewed by Lee Jennings and Dave Caron, a long time volunteer and contributor to the Port Penn living history efforts. Financing for the project was provided by DNREC penalty fund monies. We were fortunate to have the strong support of Michael Miller, manager of the Delaware Folklife project and Jim O'Neill manager of the Cultural and Recreational Services Section in procuring funds for this experiment. The final product was intended to be portable. If believable, charismatic characters could be devised, the program could be employed as an outreach to schools or civic organizations, as well as an orientation to the Port Penn Interpretive Center. During the first year, the program combined with a boat building seminar conducted by Greg Decowski, resulted in a far higher visitation to the center than in any of the previous years under the Division of Parks and Recreation. More than 300 school children saw the program that year as well as almost 700 public participants.

In March of the following year, David Caron passed away. The program required two high energy personalities so unfortunately it was discontinued. Lee still presents a modified version of the living history for school groups each year at the center. He is hopeful that a new partner may be found to reunite "Bob" and "Carl".

Beaten Biscuits: A Delmarva Favorite

by Wayne Wilberding

Biscuits are a variety of quickbread popular in different forms throughout the United States. They are made from a combination of flour, shortening, leavening and milk or water. This simple dough is generally rolled out and cut into small rounds, baked and served hot. Food preferences and ingredients in various sections of the country often determine what type of biscuit is preferred. People in the North enjoy tall, tender flaky biscuits; people from the South like biscuits with a soft tender crumb.

The original biscuit was a flat cake that was put back in the oven after being removed from its tin, hence the French name "bis" (twice) "cuit" (cooked). This very hard, dry biscuit was the staple for sailors and soldiers for centuries. During the time of Louis XIV, soldiers' biscuits were known as "stone bread."

"Animalized" biscuits were introduced later. They were thought to be very nutritious because they used meat juices as the liquid. In the 19th century, travelers' biscuits were hard cakes that kept well wrapped in a kind of tin foil.

Feathery, light biscuits, now popular throughout the United States, originated in Southern plantation kitchens. Rolled biscuits were a staple at most meals, but beaten biscuits became another Southern favorite. Beaten biscuits are thinner and crispier than baking powder biscuits.

Beaten biscuits have been the pride and the traditional biscuits of the Delmarva Peninsula for well over 250 years. They are likely to have been around since the early days of the colonies. The Beaten Biscuit Press of Nashville Tennessee says, "The beaten biscuit is what your average grunt in the War Between the States ate with his salt pork. It takes a lot of work to make a batch of beaten biscuits. They're hard. They're dry. Frankly, they're out of favor. But nobody will ever confuse a beaten biscuit for white bread."

They are properly named, as in the past, beating the dough with a hammer or flat of an ax until it blistered (about 25 to 30 minutes) made these. This process beats air into the dough and it is made light. Today, you could use the food processor or a biscuit brake (usually nothing more than a converted washing wringer) to make the dough "snap" and "blister".

After the dough is rolled out and cut into biscuits they were pricked with a fork or other pointed tool. In the early days specific designs in the pricking identified the baker. This was important because many transactions were on the barter system. They were then baked, and each biscuit sliced in half to receive a paper-thin slice of incredible salt cured country ham.

Maryland and the Eastern Shore including Delaware are as equally famous for beaten biscuits as the rest of the South. You will find many versions of the beaten biscuits from Kentucky to the Deep South. Any number of eating establishments famous for beaten biscuits can be found, especially in the areas where the marshlands abound and hunting, trapping, and fishing are long-standing traditions.

(Recipes on the following page.)



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P.O. Box 120
Port Penn, Delaware 19731

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Membership Categories Individual \$10.00 Joint (Husband and Wife) \$15.00 Family \$20.00 Life \$200.00

I/We would like to volunteer help with Port Penn Activities.

The Port Penn Area Historical Society Newsletter is interested in your comments and ideas. Please write or call.
Please return this form with your remittance to the above address. For information call: (302) 762-6472.

The following recipes are some traditional ones found after some research. They have been tried with some success but we are still working on finding that exact time of the perfect blister to ensure the perfect beaten biscuit.

Maryland Beaten Biscuits

by John Barth

From *The Floating Opera*

© 1956, Avon Books

"May I recommend three Maryland beaten biscuits, with water, for your breakfast? They are hard as a haul-seiner's conscience and dry as a dredger's tongue, and they sit for hours in your morning stomach like ballast on a tender ship's keel. They cost little, are easily and crumblessly carried in your pockets, and if forgotten and gone stale, are neither harder nor less palatable than when fresh. What's more, eaten first thing in the morning and followed by a cigar, they put a crabberman's thirst on you, such that all the water in a deep neap tide can't quench and none, I think, denies the charms of water on the bowels of morning? Beaten biscuits, friend: beaten with the back of an axe on a sawn stump behind the cookhouse; you really need a slave system, I suppose, to produce the best beaten biscuits, but there is a colored lady down by the creek, next door to the dredge builder's...If, like a condemned man, I had been offered my choice from man's cuisine for this my final earthly breakfast, I'd have chosen no more than what I had."

"Few things are stable in this world. Your morning stomach, reader, ballasted with three Maryland beaten biscuits, will be stable."

Beaten Biscuits

This is an easy method as opposed to the old Southern method of beating and beating and beating for a long period of time.

- 2 C. unbleached white flour
- 1 tsp. salt
- 4 T. lard or vegetable shortening, chilled
- 4 T. butter, chilled
- 1/4 C. milk
- 1/4 C. ice water

Mix flour with salt. Cut lard and butter into small pieces and work into flour, as if making pastry. Mix milk and ice water together. Pour mixture into flour mixture and beat until mixture forms a ball. Continue to "beat" the dough 2 minutes in a food processor or 5 minutes with a mixer.

Roll out dough 1/8-inch thick on a lightly floured surface and cut out circles with a 1 1/2 inch biscuit cutter or the lip of a small glass. Place the rounds on ungreased cookie sheets, prick on top with fork tines, and bake at 350°F until they just begin to brown on the edges—15 to 20 minutes. Makes 36 biscuits.

Maryland Beaten Biscuits

From *The Floating Opera*

© 1956, Avon Books

The oldest and most famous biscuit recipe of the Chesapeake Bay region originated on the plantations of southern Maryland. The traditional preparation can be termed, at the very least, a culinary cardiovascular-aerobic exercise.

Its execution is best described by Joanne Pritchett, who's great-great grandmother was a cook on a St. Mary's plantation: "Honey, every time I know I'm gonna make these here biscuits, I get myself good and mad. Normally I think about my sister-in-law, Darlene, who ran off with my husband right after Granny Pritchett's funeral. That was years ago, but it still galls me into making some of the tenderest biscuits around."

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 3/4 to 2 cups water
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/2 tablespoons lard or vegetable shortening

"It's very simple. I just sift the flour and salt together in a bowl. Some people, nowadays, like to use Crisco or something like that. But I believe in lard. It gives it that certain taste.

"So then, I cuts the lard into the flour with the tips of my fingers, working it real quick. During this step I make believe I'm putting out Darlene's eyes.

"Then, little by little, I pour in the cold water, until I get a good stiff dough. Put it on a real solid table with flour. Now if your table is weak, honey, the legs'll fall right off. I've seen it happen!

"Depending on my mood, I use an axe or a big ole mallet. I make a ball out of the dough to look like Darlene's head and, baby, I let her have it. Use the flat side of the axe or mallet, and beat the hell out of the dough till it blisters good. Takes about half an hour, but honey, it makes 'em tender as butter.

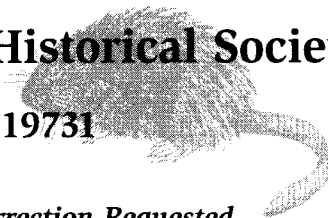
"Form the dough into balls, the size of little eggs, and flatten 'em a bit on the board. Put a few pokes in the center with a fork, then bake in a hot 425°F oven for about 20 to 25 minutes. Serve hot and put some liniment on your arm, or it'll be acting up the next day." Makes about three dozen biscuits.

Chef Wayne Wilberding began his career in Culinary Arts 45 years ago. He has worked in all facets of the industry in the Midwest, Eastern and Southern States and Canada. He moved to Delaware in 1971 and was a restaurateur and chief for the next 19 years and for the last 11 years, has been the Chief Instructor at Hodgson Vo-Tech High School. Wayne was very interested in the traditional food served at the Port Penn Marshland Dinner and starting last year, his students became actively involved. Prior to the dinner, they learned how to bone shad and render a snapping turtle for market. They will again volunteer their help at the Marshland Dinner this year.

Port Penn Area Historical Society

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Address Correction Requested