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Past is Prologue / By Dr. Kent Mountford

"Wind SE to SSW, 6 to 20 knots. ...Beat out to James Island, anchored...and put the boat ashore. Rich swam in. Island full of deer, 'coon and birds, hawks, egret, heron, yellow-legs. Black flies terrible... Made sail from anchor at 1500 hours; quite heavy sailing homeward."

— September 1971 log, CEMBA

This section from our yawl's log records my first introduction to James Island, one of the eroding Eastern Shore islands of the Delmarva Peninsula. I have returned many times to learn its history and enjoy the sense of place that comes from experiencing what the Bay might have been like centuries ago.

During a very early period of Native American history 10,000 years ago, this was not an island, but high ground adjacent to a stream that ran west to join the ancestral Susquehanna gorge.

Archeologist Darrin Lowery, is certain there were people on the land at that time. He has found remains of their stone tools on a Choptank oyster bar now submerged by sea level rise, as well as a variety of projectile points around the island's present margins, which suggest that occupation continued up until colonial times.

These Eastern Shore Islands were incompletely depicted on John Smith's 1612 map based on explorations of Chesapeake Bay, because his course up the Western Shore missed the Choptank River.

English colonists named the island for Saint James. Historian Bill Cronin says it was settled by the early 1660s and encompassed 1,350 acres. The island was purchased by the Pattison family, who held onto it for more than 200 years.

Piecing together the vanishing island's history is a story told mainly through maps and memories. The tip of this land is shown as James Pt. on Augustine Herrman's map of 1670. A secondary islet between James and Taylors is found on John Speed's map of 1676 and on Johann Homann's 1719 chart.

James Island appears to have connected and disconnected from the mainland, as erosion along its western face allowed sand to migrate south and create a long neck of land to adjoining Taylors Island. Maps show it was close to connecting in 1689; separated in 1780, 1794 and 1832; had only a rivulet between them in 1838–48; and was firmly joined to Taylors Island in 1868 and 1903.

During my early visits, the channel to Taylors Island was wadable, but in 2002 a motorboat easily crossed what was once dry land.

Since the mid-19th century, James Island has gone from more than 1,300 acres to about 550 acres in the late 1990s.

A map from 1903, when the north end was a mile wide, shows a road running down the west shore with lanes leading to four likely dwellings along the shoreline in a configuration that suggests they might have been farms. There's archaeological evidence for some of this settlement scattered in shallows on the Bay's bottom, and at least one partial foundation with a doorstep stone still survives on the island's marshy west side.

Dr. Ralph Eshelman, a historian, has discovered one site not found on the 1903 map that might have been an oyster shucking house.

Some of the island's former residents are buried in a cemetery on an inland ridge.

Mareen Waterman, who once co-owned the island with fellow sportsmen, told me that he once found an old embalming fluid bottle on the island, along with a blue Bromoseltzer bottle and—to his children's delight—several bottles for "Waterman's Ink." He says

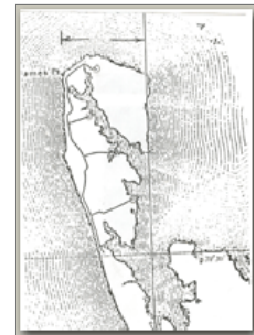
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there was also a small schoolhouse at one time.

Cronin said there was a small store, owned by J.T. Leonard, who was part owner and namesake for a sloop built in 1882 at neighboring Taylors Island by Moses Geoghegan. Long after the store had been claimed by the Bay and its owner by time, the J.T. Leonard went to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels where she was once on exhibit.

Archaeologists have found evidence suggesting habitation periods from 1820-1860 and from 1900-1930, but nothing remains of the village of 20 families and Methodist Church purported to have been there in 1892. These dwellings might have been on the more rapidly eroding west face of the island.

The island returned to forest and was probably logged by the Spicer Lumber Company, which built an access pier into the Bay to ship rough-milled boards, and left behind a huge sawdust pile. They also drilled several hundred feet through the island's basement and opened a more productive aquifer for water. This source was slightly artesian and rose to within a few feet of the surface, where it was drawn with a simple hand pump atop the pipe.

During World War I and as late as 1920, Clemment Henry raised a herd of small oriental elk known as sika deer (*Cervus nippon*). They were valuable, because the wild populations had been almost hunted to extinction for the antlers of the bucks, which when "in velvet," were believed to be an aphrodisiac.

About 1916, he released four or five deer on James Island. They prospered and by 1955 the herd had grown to about 300 animals, a density of more than one deer per acre. The neck or shallow bar to adjoining Taylors Island, allowed them to spread there, and herds of 40 deer were observed swimming across the channel. They were hunted on both James and Taylors islands.

With no natural predators, a large number of sika deer stayed on James Island and these small ungulates began to reduce their available food supply, grazing trees and shrubs as high as possible. They ate virtually anything they could reach, including poison ivy, and stripped the bark of loblolly pines. Many native plants were extirpated by the mid-1950s. Researchers did not perceive that the food supply was threateningly low as much as they noticed that the average size of the deer was decreasing.

In 1958, a die-off of about 161 deer was reported. Van Flyger, from the University of Maryland, collected 147 skulls and published a photo of them arrayed on tarpaulins in Chesapeake Science. About 109 animals on the island survived.

Scientists John Christian, Flyger and Dave Davis studied 18 of the surviving deer and determined that while they were in good nutritional condition, their physiology indicated hyperstimulation from the stress of crowding, and attributed the many deaths to this.

The condition of the sika deer improved, and by the 1970s and '80s, they had again stressed the island vegetation. The browse line could be seen long distances into the forest, a clear sign of overpopulation to wildlife managers. It is still evident in 2003.

Drawn by a winter goose population of 7,000–10,000 birds in the adjacent Little Choptank River, Waterman and eight other sportsmen formed the James Island Gun Club and bought the island from Louis Goldstein, the late Maryland comptroller, in the 1960s.

They built a cabin about 100 feet inland and drove a point well into the freshwater lens. The logged forest had regrown to where most of the trees were 6–8 inches in diameter by then. Fifteen years ago, the cabin site was 15 feet out in the Bay and their well pipe stood vertically out of the water, the only evidence that they had once been there.

Water on James Island initially came from the accumulation of rainwater in the soil, perched atop an underlying clay layer that kept it from seeping away.

Waterman said the water traveled laterally, and all along the eroding west side of the island, fresh water seeped out where the clay layer and steep bank had been cut by waves.

This freshwater lens was opened and bermed up into a pond of about one acre on the island's west side. It has since eroded away, but in low spots, vernal pools still intersect the soil surface and provide water for raccoons and sika deer.

During the 1960s, visitors had to walk their boats ashore through broad shallow beds of submerged aquatic vegetation, especially in spring. Waterman said beds of what he thought were Eurasian milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum* L.) ran 1,000 feet out from the shore. It was very likely mixed with at least widgeon grass (*Ruppia maritima*), which is present today and possibly eelgrass (*Zostera marina*), which also occurred farther up the Bay than at present.

Local fishermen harvested softshell and peeler-crabs in these beds using what Waterman described as roller nets in the dense grass.

The grass beds have almost completely disappeared today, and scientists suspect nutrients and turbidity are the major causes.

Where grasses significantly prevented erosion on the island's east side, now there are only small remnant beds. A dozen years ago, Waterman said he could run his boat with a 3-foot draft right up to the beach, the shallow area having been swept away to greater depth, probably the result of currents and modern sea level rise.

The remaining parcels of James Island are owned at present by three men.

My friend John Little pulled up in his skiff once, looking to camp in a wild place on the Chesapeake. He met one of the owners who had no objection as long as no damage was done and no trash left behind. Enough flotsam already washes up from careless people up and down the Bay.

In 2001, someone wasn't so cautious and ignited a fire, which burned for weeks across the southernmost part of James, working its way, in that year of drought, through the pine straw on the forest floor.

When I was last at James Island this spring, I saw 31 northern gannets (*Sula bassanus*) in the surrounding waters. These impressive birds, which normally winter on the ocean, have a wingspan of nearly 6 feet, and can plummet from 50–100 feet in the air to catch swimming prey, sometimes diving 50 feet beneath the surface of the water.

In previous decades, their winter grounds were found from Cuba and Mexico to Virginia, but they have been moving up the Chesapeake during our recent progressively milder winters.

Gannets nest farther north, in a small number of rocky colonies. James Island is an undisturbed place where they overwinter or feed.

As more and more people move close to the shore and continue to alter or destroy wild places, there are many bird species that need the insulated habitat islands such as these provide. Meanwhile, these islands are disappearing.

Wildlife managers have latched onto this and created a bandwagon for "island restorations" such as the projects at Hart-Miller and Poplar islands. This philosophy dovetails with the large amounts of money the Port of Baltimore is willing to spend for channel dredging and disposing of the massive volumes of material this activity generates.

I was an early proponent of this approach, and made the first hypothetical drawings of what such a project might look like, with low, offshore breakwaters and frequent access points for water exchange into labyrinthine creeks with upland hummocks. This set of sketches was used for a while to sell the concept; then it became clear that engineers and sediment volume estimators were not satisfied with my low-impact version.

Poplar Island today is a very large facility with massive surrounding riprap walls, and a significant port facility at which large machinery offloads and distributes dredged material over a couple of miles of a high-walled containment. Sections of both upland and marsh habitat are planned and in progress.

Having visited Poplar and nearby Coaches Island, I am not comfortable with the scale to which the project is being built. It seems to be mostly designed to hold huge volumes of sediment.

But given projected dredging needs, not just for Baltimore Harbor and its approaches, but also channels farther up the Bay, the capacity at Poplar Island will soon be reached.

Proposals are being floated at public meetings for making dredged material deposition sites at several eroding Bay islands. First in line among these—though still in the selection stage—is James Island. Serious on-the-water survey work is in progress.

The reason for these continual project expansions, dredge watchdog Dr. John Williams says, is that much of the material for a deposition site is scheduled to come from the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal approach channels. He has argued forcefully and often effectively, to regulatory officials that the actual and likely ship traffic transiting the C&D simply does not merit the high cost of dredging.

If so, one might ask if there's a real need for James Island as a future repository.

I don't think there's anything wrong with stabilizing the eroding faces of some islands to delay their eventual loss to sea level rise. There are projects proposed to help Smith and Tangier Islands, to protect the shore adjacent to threatened communities.

If we can use clean dredged material to do social good in these places, that's not a bad way to give back some taxpayer dollars. But that's different from what's developed at the upper Bay fill projects. They have been less considered in their own right, as undisturbed habitats, elements in the region's overall ecology, and even less as places of beauty and refuges for contemplation.

I guess it's in this latter place that I find myself, anchored in refuge behind one or another island, listening to the deer or birds at work in their forests. There is no more tranquil place for a sailor in a gale, where you hear the rush and pounding of seas against the island's windward shore, and the urgent sound of wind through tall island pine woodlands.

Then there is standing, alone or in company, on some eroding point watching the sea reclaim what it possessed once millions of years ago, or looking at sunlight and birds feeding along the long silent curve of a sandy beach.


There are few places, precious few in the Chesapeake Bay, where one can still do this. I would like to still have that opportunity untrammelled in my remaining time here.


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