

Maritime Resources and the Face of South Jersey by Mary Hufford

Water has shaped New Jersey as much as it is possible to shape a state without creating an island or a peninsula. Whether salty, brackish, or fresh, water is everywhere in evidence – molding the state's contours and toponymy, its technology and character. It appears under many guises, as bogs, rivers, swamps, marshes, bays, inlets, cripples, sponges, puddles, spillways, and watersheds. The names for some of these are the sole reminders of the American Indians who first attended to them, names like Metedeconk, Manasquan, Hopatcong, Raritan, and Kittattiny. Other names for water places – Bivalve, Camden, Port Republic, Barnegat Light, Keansburg, Atlantic City, Sandy Hook, Tuckerton, Asbury Park, Whitesbog – reflect more recent waves of settlement and events – the oyster industry, shipbuilding companies, the Coast Guard, Captain Kidd, tourism, legalized gambling, World War I, prohibition and rumrunning, Bruce Springsteen, and the nation's first cultivated blueberries.

While North Jersey's cultural face generally bears the imprint of places in far-flung parts of the globe, much of South Jersey's portrait emerges as part of the people's response to the resources there. Perhaps most basic of all those resources is water. The coastal plains have been compared, in fact, to a giant sponge, through which water circulates freely, surfacing as fresh water in the swamps, as brackish water in the salt marshes (locally called "meadows"), and as salt water in the bays. Residents of the coastal plains circulate with ease among the different settings, harvesting the resources they need, as the seasons and economy permit. Having "worked the cycle" for hundreds of years, South Jerseyans have been named by those resources – as baymen, woodsmen, mudwallopers, clamdiggers, and pineys – and have bequeathed to the state a rich legacy of folk technology and literature.

The tides are omnipresent – the implied backdrop for the maritime traditions displayed at this year's Festival on the National Mall. The tide is present in the chanty "blowing" of the menhaden fishermen from Port Norris and in the glass pitchers blown at Millville; in the duck "stools" (decoys) carved on Barnegat Bay and in the salt hay twisted into rope on Delaware Bay. Its imprint is borne by the Jersey Garvey – that square-bowed, indigenous work boat used by clammers. It is even present, some would say, in the faces of clammers weathered by salt spray flung up during vigorous swells.

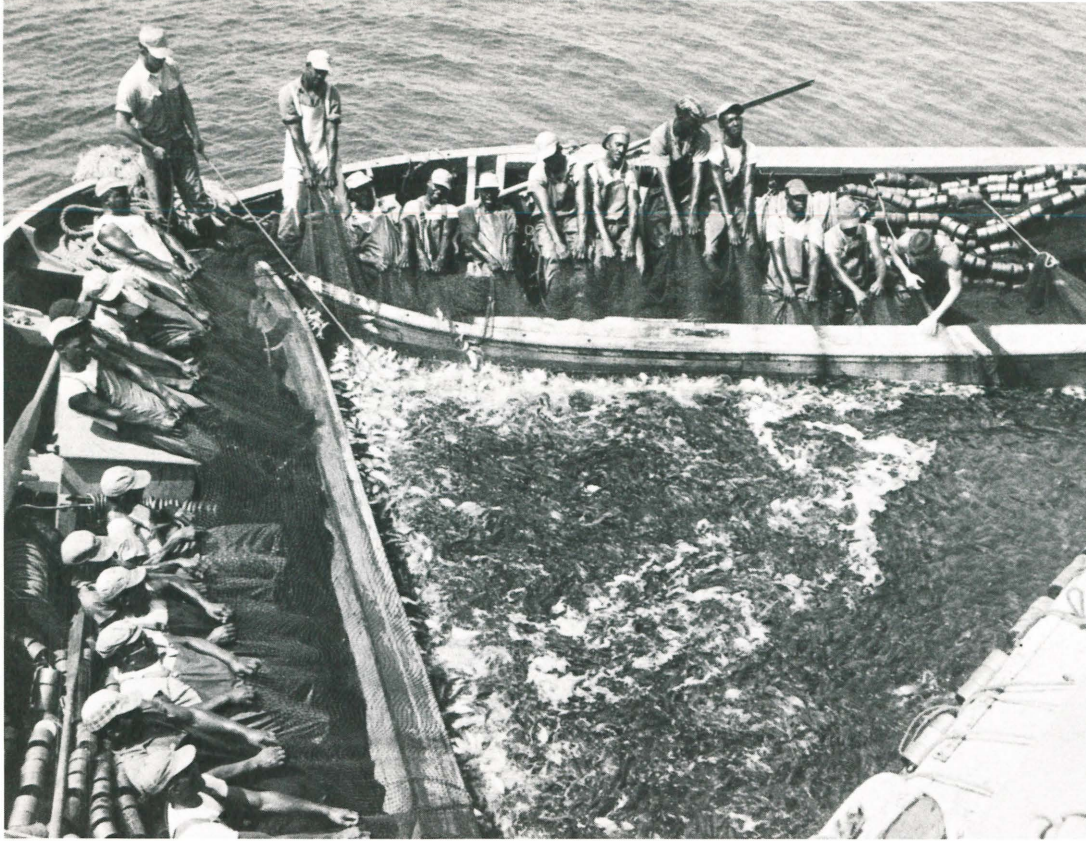
The moon, naturally, must be credited in part. Not the blue moon of Kentucky, or the Ozark moon of Arkansas, but the Jersey moon, of which Clifford Eayre has written:

Rising up from the sea, she is grander to me,
Than a thousand worlds drifting by.
As she floats o'er the bay, she is well on her way
To her throne high in the sky.
Hiding myriads of stars to the tune of guitars,
That's when all true lovers fall –
For the mellow moon of old New Jersey
Is the grandest moon of all.

The moon, exerting its influence on the Atlantic Ocean, assisted in the past with the harvest of menhaden fish. Also known as "mossbunkers," "alewives," and "pogies," they swim in enormous schools all along the Atlantic seaboard. Before hydraulic pumps were introduced in the 1950s to bring fish aboard, the

Shells that once housed oysters now embellish this house in Port Norris, New Jersey, an oyster town on Delaware Bay. Photo by Mary Hufford





Menhaden fishermen haul in their catch off the Atlantic coast, ca. 1955. Photo Courtesy Seacoast Products

harvest was accomplished through the synchronization of men, music, and the sea itself. In the chanties the rhythms of the sea are fused with the rhythms of traditional Afro-American work songs, and the stories of the fishermen themselves. Robert Ames, of Port Norris, recalls the importance of the different rhythms in accomplishing the work:

There's no way in the world that thirty-two men can raise eighty ton of fish, unless they do it in a way that the sea helps them. . . You know what they say? When you're down there holdin' on, they say, "Hold on, boys," say, "Wait a minute," say, "The sea'll give it to you." After awhile, she'll go down on a swell – she'll lighten up.

The chanty leader was of special importance. He led the songs that, as Robert Ames tells it, gave the fishermen the power to raise those tons of fish:

You know what a chanty man is? A chanty man is just someone on the boat that's old and knows how to make rhythms for you – and make you feel good and make the work easier. He don't have to be no captain, he don't have to be no mate – just somebody with a lot of experience that likes to sing.

In the songs, the working men played, invoking justice, for example, on the much resented captain and his mate:

Captain, don't you see? Dark cloud risin' over yonder –
Sign of rain, Lord, Lord, sign of rain.
Captain, don't you know, the whole damn crew is goin' to leave you –
Sign of rain, Lord, Lord, sign of rain.

The products of South Jersey's different waters are intricately connected. Oil from menhaden fish was used to melt Jersey sand – a product of the tide's relentless pounding on granite – to produce the celebrated Jersey gall glass. Sand was used as an insulator in the making of charcoal, another fuel used in the glass houses. Oysters were soaked in cedar water for flavoring, and Jersey Cedar, the swamp's gift to the boatbuilder, drifts through the brackish estuaries in the form of Barnegat sneakboxes and duck decoys.

Much of the material culture found on the coastal plains is unique to New Jersey. While ducks, for example, are found throughout the world, only in New Jersey were they first greeted with Barnegat sneakboxes and decoys. The sneakbox, an ingenious gunning skiff with multiple functions ranging from a sailboat to a stationary duck blind, fits hand-in-glove with the salt marshes of South Jersey. It is small enough that one man can pull it over land, and its spoon-shaped hull enables it to glide through areas marked as land on coastal

The Barnegat Bay Sneakbox is uniquely formed to meet the environmental challenges of South Jersey's bays and estuaries.

Sketch by Anthony Hillman Photo by Mary Hufford



maps. Its draft is so shallow that it could, as the saying goes, "follow a mule as it sweats up a dusty road." Its accessories include ice-hoods, for both "porridge" (slushy) and "pane" (hard) ice, and its hinged oarlocks and removable decoy rack promote the absence of profile so essential when it comes to fooling ducks, Jersey style.

The Barnegat decoy, renowned for its dugout construction, is linked in tradition with the sneakbox. Duck stools in South Jersey, it is claimed, were hollowed out in order that several dozen could be carried on a sneakbox without overburdening it. While few men continue to make the classic sneakboxes and decoys, the artifacts have become emblems of a regional way of life – appearing on T-shirts, as miniatures in gift shops, and in local business establishments as decoration.

When a South Jerseyan is not trapping for "marsh rabbits" (muskrats) in the meadows, or working the bay for clams, crabs, or oysters, he might turn inland to the fresh waters to supplement his income. There he can assist with the cranberry harvest, or gather a variety of plants to supply to the florist industry, or trap with fyke nets for "snappers." The snapping turtle, that strange primordial beast that God made last, is featured as often in stories as it is in soups.

Owen Carney, of Port Norris, feeding salt hay into his rope-twisting machine. The rope is used by foundries in the making of cast-iron.

Photo by Mary Hufford



"Every kind of meat there is," reports Chatsworth's Johnny Broome, can be found in a snapping turtle.

You know why that is, don't you? Because when God made the world and he made all the animals, he had a bunch of parts left over. So he threw all those together and made the snapping turtle.

One trapper in South Jersey used to elicit gasps from his neighbors by kissing live snappers on their noses.

While clams rank as one of New Jersey's most prolific maritime resources, New Jersey's overall portrait is far more enhanced by the clamdigger himself. The old-time clamdigger – a figure extant in people's memories since before the turn of the century – is often portrayed as an invincible, solitary, usually irascible but always beloved character. He is commonly seen working the bay with scratch rake and tongs from his garvey. While his life may be governed by the caprices of the tides, the weather, the economy, government policy, and the clams themselves, there is one thing it seems he can control: his self-portrait. Merce Ridgway, a Waretown clamdigger, celebrates his lot to the tune of "Frankie and Johnny."

Now, some people think a clamdigger,

He's got it mighty fine –

Ridin' along in his old work boat

In the good old summertime.

It's a beautiful day,

Out on Barnegat Bay.

Now, if you should chance to go closer,

You'd see that he's wrinkled and lined,

From the rain and the snow,

The wind that blows,

But he don't seem to mind

Yeah, he's sure got it fine –

He goes all the time.

In Tuckerton (nicknamed "Clamtown"), in Mazzarelli's Tavern, hangs perhaps one of the most moving portraits. The subject of the painting is a patron of the tavern, Jeff Allen, a man who lays claim to the title of "old-time clamdigger." The painter, Win Salmons, also a bayman, explained that Jimmy Mazzarelli had commissioned him to paint Jeff's portrait because he thought so much of him. Noting local responses to the painting, Salmons explained:

The little smile he has is typical of his character and many people along the shore and the beach came over to see the painting, and when they saw, they said, "Why, that's Jeff!" When Jeff came in to see it, he had a red hat on, and he saw it, and he smiled and walked over and he hung his hat on the painting and left it there for weeks!

There may be other places in the world with salt marshes, moons, clamdiggers and Jeffs, perhaps even with the same names. But the face of South Jersey differs, as its features are chronicled in the stories, songs, artifacts, recipes and portraits that ensure that this place is the only one of its kind.

Mary Hufford is the Folklife Specialist for the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Her work includes the Folk-Artists-in-the-Schools Program in New Jersey and regional studies. She is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Folklore and Folklife Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Suggested reading

Frye, John. *The Men All Singing*. Norfolk, Virginia: Donning, 1978.

Guthorn, Peter. *The Sea Bright Skiff and Other Jersey Shore Boats*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971.

Weygant, Cornelius. *Down Jersey: Folks and Their Jobs, Pine Barrens, Salt Marshes and Sea Islands*. New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1940.



Jeff Allen an old-time clamdigger from Tuckerton, as Win Salmons portrayed him. Photo by Rick Kolinchik