

# OYSTERING ON THE CHESAPEAKE



**CHESAPEAKE BAY**



**MARITIME MUSEUM**

# OYSTERING ON THE CHESAPEAKE

**Multidisciplinary Explorations for Grades 4-6**

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**CHESAPEAKE BAY**



**MARITIME**

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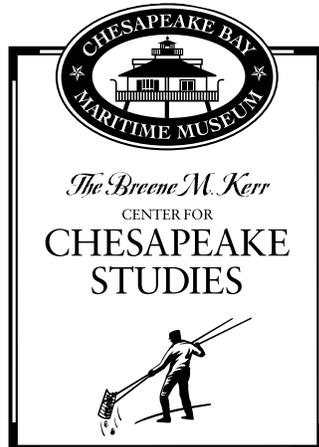
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# Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

P.O. BOX 636 · NAVY POINT · ST. MICHAELS · MARYLAND · 21663-0636 · 410/745-2916

Dear Educator,

The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum has developed these Explorations in conjunction with a new permanent exhibition, *Oystering on the Chesapeake*. Both the exhibition and these activities explore the following themes:

- The Chesapeake Bay was once the greatest oyster factory on earth and oystering has shaped the lives of watermen, their families and communities, and the Bay as a whole.
- The onboard experience of the captains and crews of the Chesapeake's oyster harvesting boats
- The people and processes responsible for bringing the oysters from the Bay to the dinner table
- The story of the Chesapeake oyster fishery is one of great successes and fortunes but also is a story of conflict over resources and resource exploitation.
- The devastation of the oyster fishery is due to many interrelated factors and we are all responsible.

These Explorations are designed to introduce students in grades 4,5, and 6 to the themes covered by the exhibition and can be used in preparation for a museum visit or as a stand-alone classroom resource. Ten separate Explorations examine different topics related to oystering. You may choose to complete the Explorations that best suit your students' needs and abilities. In addition, you can complete them in any order that works best for you. See the next page for a quick overview of the Explorations.

Each Exploration is structured as follows:

## **Overview Page**

Designed to help you present the Exploration to your class, this page is divided into these sections:

- *Overview:* A brief description of the Exploration
- *Skills:* Specific skills your students will sharpen by completing the Exploration
- *You Will Need:* Materials and approximate time needed to complete the Exploration.
- *Teacher's Notes:* Suggestions on how best to proceed through the Exploration.
- *Vocabulary:* Words or usage of words that may be unfamiliar to your students. You may wish to review these words with your students and have them use the new words in a sentence as you begin the Exploration.
- *Additional Resources:* Additional sources of classroom or background materials.

### ***Discover It! Page***

This page begins with a quote from a person in the oyster industry or from literature. You may wish to discuss the quote with your students before they begin the Exploration and help them to determine what the quote tells them about oysters or oystering. The quote is followed by a brief reading section that contains information related to the Exploration topic. We recommend that you make a copy of *Discover It!* for each of your students. Teacher's Notes (described above) will give you suggestions on how to use the reading material for each Exploration.

### ***Explore It! Page***

This is the students' activity page for the Exploration. It begins with a question at the top of the page that your students should be able to answer after completing the activity. The activity is designed in easy-to-follow steps and instructions. The page ends with suggestions for activities to engage your students outside of the classroom and **Bet you didn't know....** - a fun or unusual fact relating to oysters or oystering. We recommend that you make a copy of the ***Explore It!*** page for each of your students.

### **Exploration Cards**

Many of the Explorations include original resources such as primary documents or historic images for the students to use in completing the activity. These have been provided on card-stock pages following the associated Exploration. They can be removed and handed out to student groups or placed at stations around the classroom. In some cases you may want to make copies of the cards for each student, however, please be aware that copies may not clearly show important details in the historic images or documents.

We hope that you will use these Explorations and the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum as a classroom resource. Please let us know how to improve them to make them more effective for you and your students. Enjoy!

Robert Forloney

Director of Education  
Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum  
P.O. Box 636  
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## Oystering on the Chesapeake Explorations: At a Glance

	Art	Creative Writing	Critical Thinking	Decision Making	Economics	Environmental Science	Geography	Informative Writing	Mathematics	Observation	Reading	Reasoning	Social Studies	Teamwork	U.S. History
<b>Exploration 1</b> On Board a Skipjack			●					●		●			●		
<b>Exploration 2</b> Dead Reckoning	●		●				●		●			●	●	●	
<b>Exploration 3</b> Payday!			●	●	●				●		●		●		
<b>Exploration 4</b> From Bay to Table		●	●		●								●	●	
<b>Exploration 5</b> A Day in the Life of an Oyster Packinghouse			●							●	●		●		
<b>Exploration 6</b> Oyster Wars!!			●							●	●	●	●		●
<b>Exploration 7</b> In the Can	●	●								●	●		●	●	
<b>Exploration 8</b> The Mystery of the Disappearing Oyster	●		●			●		●			●		●		
<b>Exploration 9</b> The Oyster Times	●	●					●	●			●		●		●
<b>Exploration 10</b> It's About Time				●							●		●	●	●

# On Board a Skipjack



The skipjack *E.C. Collier* dredging for oysters

## Teacher's Notes

Begin with a discussion of the information contained on the **Discover It!** page. Divide the class into small groups. Give each group a copy of the **Explore It!** page and an Exploration Card.

Remind students that they need to look very closely at each photo and take clear notes. After several minutes have groups exchange photos. Continue until every group has seen each photo.

You may then wish to lead a discussion, photo by photo, about what the students learned about life and work on a skipjack.

or

You may wish to defer this discussion until after the students have completed a quick write-up of their ideas about life and work on a skipjack.

## Additional Resources

Maryland Watermen's Association  
[www.marylandwatermen.com](http://www.marylandwatermen.com)

Oyster Recovery Project –  
Skipjacks of the Chesapeake Bay  
[www.oysterrecovery.org/skipjacks.html](http://www.oysterrecovery.org/skipjacks.html)

Maryland Marine Notes  
[www.mdsg.umd.edu/MarineNotes/](http://www.mdsg.umd.edu/MarineNotes/)

## Overview

Students will be detectives and learn about oystering by examining photographs to discover clues about life on a Chesapeake Bay skipjack.

## Skills

Critical Thinking, Informative Writing, Observation, Social Studies

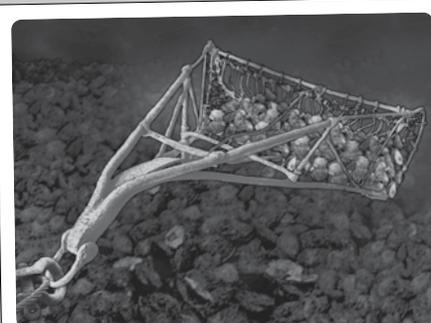
## You Will Need

- 60 minutes
- 4 Exploration Cards
- Students in small groups

## Vocabulary

**Skipjack:** a sailboat used to harvest oysters, also known as a dredgeboat

**Cull:** to sort the undersized oysters from the legal-sized



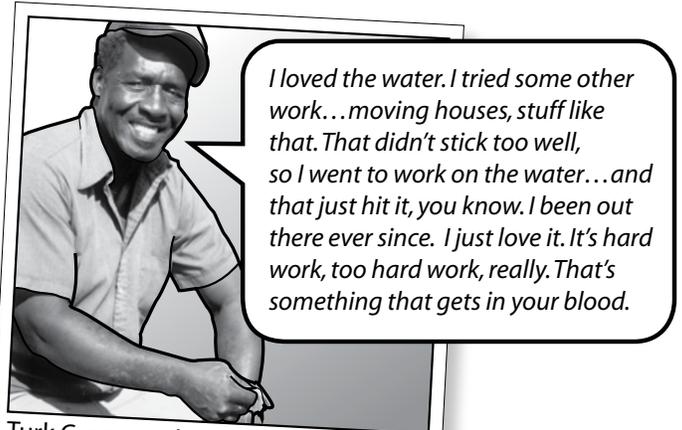
**Dredge:** a large basket-like piece of equipment used to scoop up oysters

**Lick:** a pass with the dredge over an oyster bar

**Harvest:** to remove oysters from the Bay bottom

# Discover It!

**T**he skipjack *E. C. Collier* was built in 1910 and worked the waters of the Chesapeake every winter until 1988. Like all skipjacks, the *E. C. Collier* was a sailing boat and the crew used a dredge to scoop oysters from the Bay's bottom. There were usually a captain and five crew men on board. Each member of the crew had a specific job to do on the skipjack. Working together as a team they were able to harvest oysters quickly and efficiently and never miss a lick.



Turk Cannon, a long-time *E. C. Collier* crew member

## Jobs on board the *E. C. Collier* and other skipjacks include:

**Captain:** The captain steers the boat over the oyster beds and oversees all oystering operations, choosing where and when to dredge and how the crew will work. The captain is in charge of every decision made on the boat.

**Culler:** The culler quickly sorts through the oysters brought on board, separating those large enough to be legally harvested from those that must be returned to the Bay.



The jib man gets some help with his sail.

**Jib Man:** The jib man is responsible for the jib, the sail at the front of the boat. This sail helps turn the boat and move it back and forth over the oyster beds. He may also help bring the dredge on the skipjack.

**Deckhand:** The deckhand helps to lower and raise the dredge, clean the boat, and other jobs as needed.

**Cook:** A good cook can make or break a boat since good cooks attract steady crews. Cooks usually help with the dredging as well as preparing meals and snacks.



Once there were hundreds of oyster dredgeboats working the Bay.

**S**kipjacks are sometimes too far away from their home port to return home every day. The boat's galley – the kitchen – is the social center of the boat. It is where the crew eats, sleeps, plays cards, and goes to get warm.

The *E. C. Collier* retired from oystering in 1988 and is now on exhibit at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Today, skipjacks are the last working sailboats that harvest seafood in America. In 2002 there are 11 skipjacks still harvesting oysters.

# Explore It!

## What is it like to live and work on board a skipjack?

### Activity

Look closely at the Exploration Card.  
Gather the following clues from the photo:

Describe the people and what they are doing, such as:

- How many people are there in the photo?
- Are they young, old, black, white, male, female?
- How are they dressed?
- What is each person doing? Which member of the crew are they?

Describe the scene:

- Where was the photo taken – outside or inside the boat?
- Is it crowded or open, light or dark, clean or dirty?
- What is the weather?
- What is the work like?

After you have looked at all the photos, write a description about what you believe life and work on a skipjack is like.



Did you know that cleaning the boat is part of the job?

### What Else Can I Do?



To learn more about the people who harvest oysters, visit the Maryland Watermen's Association web-site at [www.marylandwatermen.com](http://www.marylandwatermen.com)



Go visit the skipjacks at Dogwood Harbor on Tilghman Island. If the captain and crew are there, ask them questions about harvesting oysters.



Climb on board the *E.C. Collier* at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Ask your teacher for a ticket to bring your family. Give them a tour of the *Oystering on the Chesapeake* exhibit, showing them what you are learning about oystering on the Chesapeake Bay.

**Bet You  
Didn't  
Know....**

Blacks and whites  
worked together on dredge  
boats long before the Civil  
Rights era.

# Exploration Card



# Exploration Card



# Exploration Card



# Exploration Card



# Dead Reckoning



## Vocabulary

**Navigation:** the science of knowing where you are and finding the route to where you want to go

**Port:** the left side of a vessel, facing forward

**Starboard:** the right side of a vessel, facing forward

**Bow:** the forward end of a vessel

**Stern:** the back of a vessel

**Buoy:** an anchored float used to mark safe and unsafe areas for navigation

**Dead reckoning:** determining where you are based on what directions and how far you have traveled from your last known position

**Chart:** (*n.*) a map showing shorelines, water depths, and navigational markers such as bouys and lighthouses (*v.*) to draw a chart or a course on a chart

**Compass rose:** a circle marked with the directions of the compass

## Overview

Students will complete several activities involving map making and course plotting that will introduce them to navigation and dead reckoning.

## Skills

Art, Critical Thinking, Geography, Mathematics, Reasoning, Social Studies, Teamwork

## You Will Need

- 60 - 90 minutes, depending on the number of activities done
- Compass
- Ruler
- Exploration Card
- Students working individually and in pairs

## Teacher's Notes

You may wish to begin with *Discover It!* and by reviewing with your students the concepts of cardinal and intermediate directions and degrees.

**Activity 1: Navigation** may be done by each student **or** you may select one student to walk out the course while the others observe.

**Activity 4: Plotting Your Course** may initially be a challenge for some students. It is recommended that you plot the first position along with your students so that they have an example to follow.

## Additional Resources

Charles F. Chapman, *Piloting, Seamanship, and Small Boat Handling* (New York: Hearst Books, 1979), pp. 387 and 339

# Discover It!

*I remember nearly every spot I ever dredged on that bay bottom. Sometimes the few of us left that remembers, we still talk it over. Every spot had a name – Snake Rip, Great Rock, Chinese Muds, Hollaga Snooze, Terrapin Sand, Daddie Dare, –where most of them came from, I don't know who could tell you, but I know them just the same as looking in a book.*

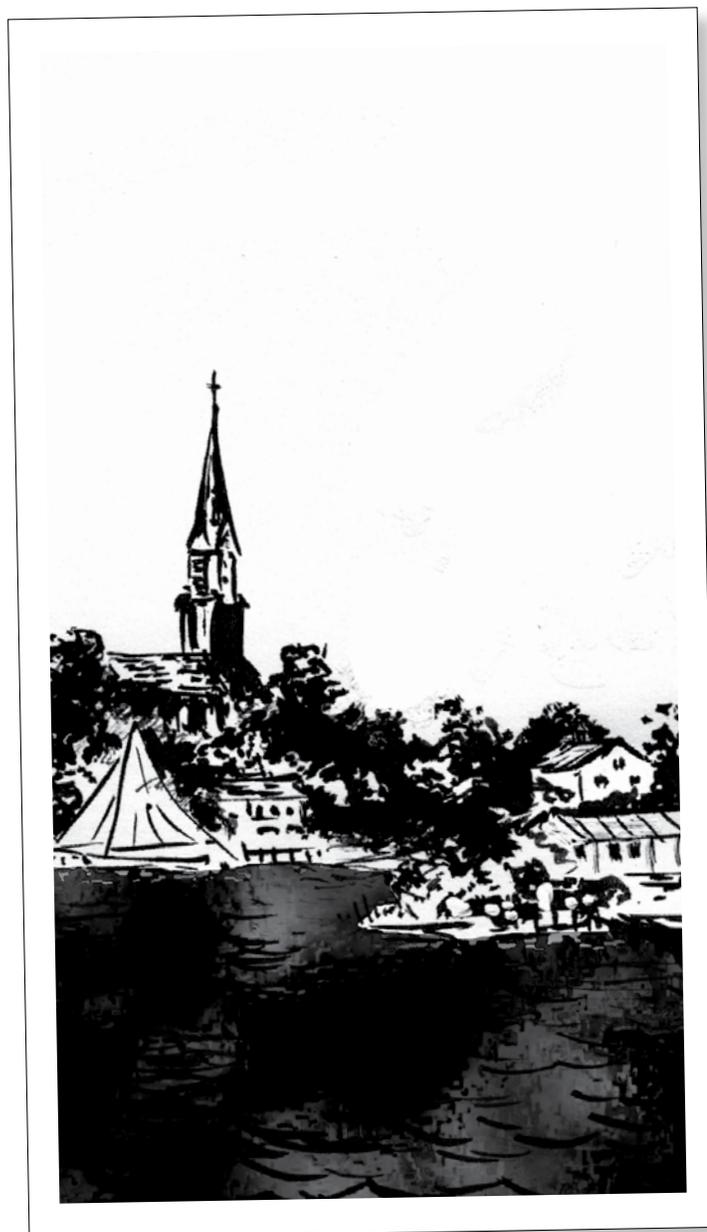
Daniel Harrison, Smith Island waterman quoted by Tom Horton in *An Island Out of Time*

**H**ow do you find your way from one place to another? Chances are you use landmarks and familiar street names to find your way, or you may use a map or ask directions. These are all types of navigation.

Navigation is the science of safely moving from one place to another. One technique of navigation that is used frequently by watermen is dead reckoning. Dead reckoning also relies on visual landmarks to locate where you are.

As an example, a waterman may know that when he sees a certain church steeple off his port bow he is within the area of a particular oyster bed. Or when he passes buoy 10 he is near the entrance of a harbor.

Navigation is easier to understand by doing it, rather than reading about it. Try the activities in this Exploration to better understand what this navigation business is all about!



# Explore It!

## How does a waterman know how to get from oyster bar to oyster bar?

### Activity 1

#### Classroom Navigation

For this activity you will need a compass and a large open area.

- a. Select a starting point.
- b. From start, walk 10 steps North
- c. Now take 15 steps Northeast
- d. Next walk West for 20 steps
- e. Walk South for 15 steps
- f. Finally walk Southeast for 10 steps

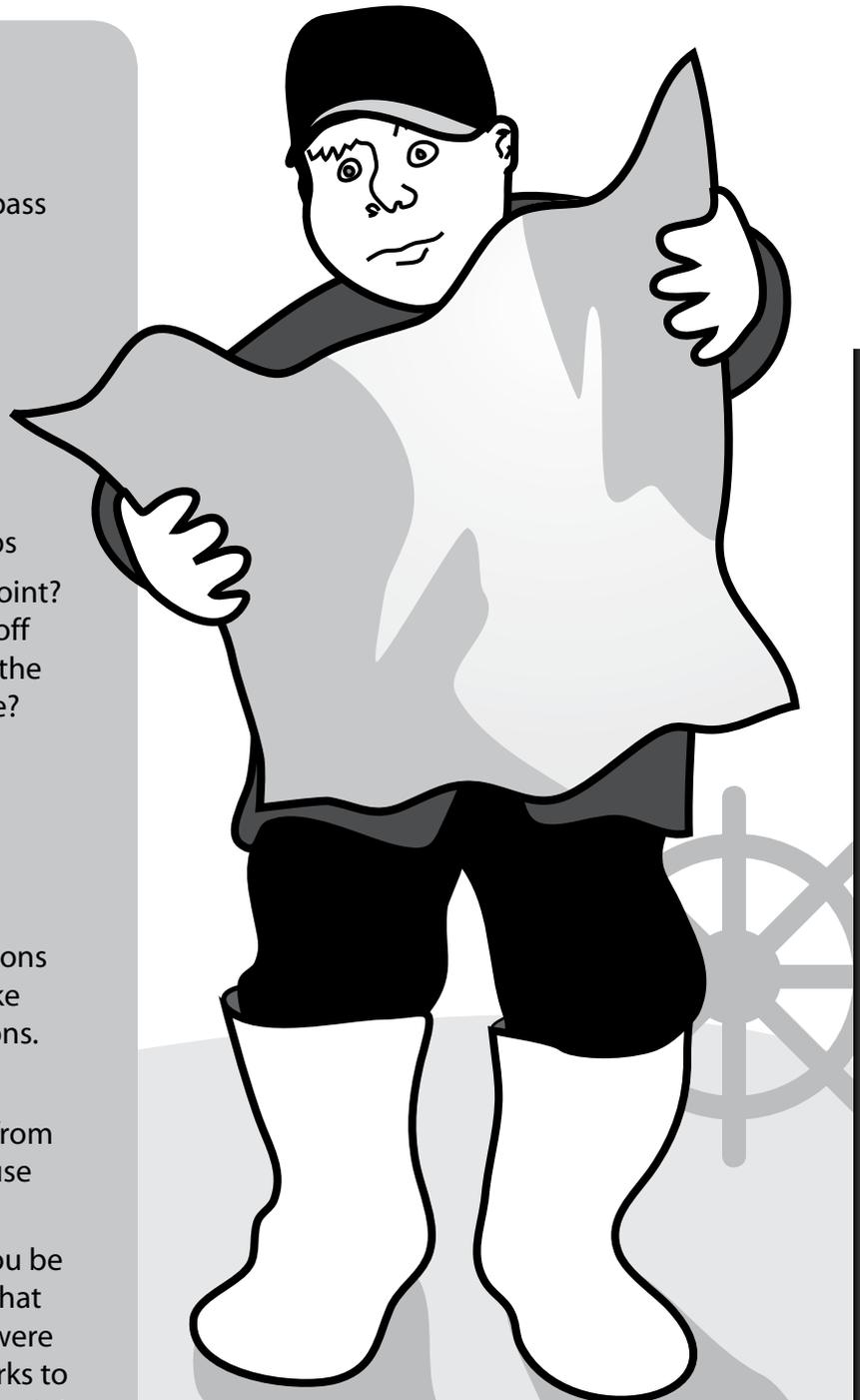
Did you start and stop at the same point? What might have caused you to get off course? What might happen out on the Bay that would take a boat off course?

### Activity 2

#### Draw a Map

- a. Find a partner
- b. Have your partner tell you directions from school to his/her house. Take notes as you listen to the directions.
- c. Switch roles and repeat.
- d. Draw a map showing directions from your school to your partner's house using your notes.

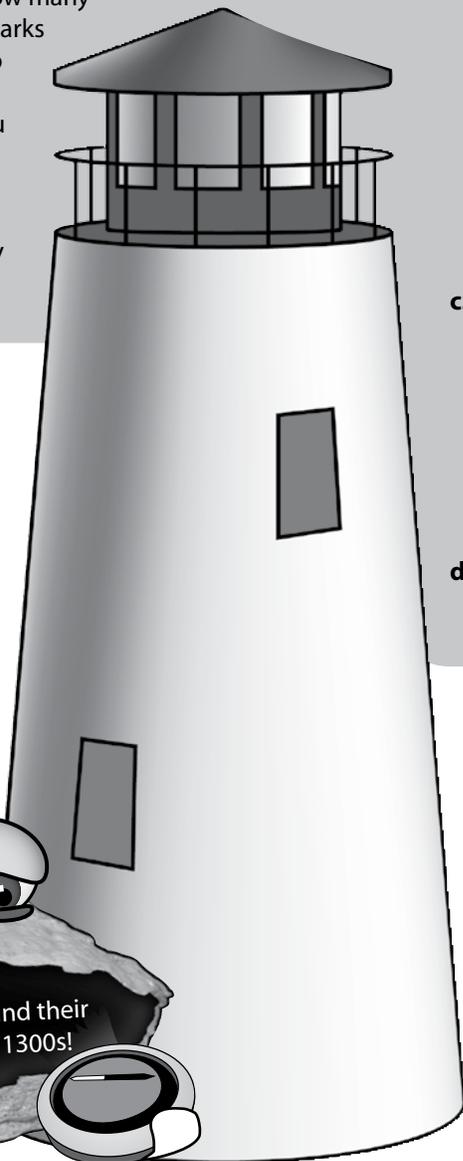
How detailed is your map? Would you be able to find your partner's house? What would the map be like if the streets were not named or there were no landmarks to guide you? What landmarks or signs might a waterman find on his chart?



### Activity 3 Sight by Sight

- You will need the *Dead Reckoning* Exploration Card and a partner to complete this activity.
- Select one of the oyster bars on the map. Without telling your partner which oyster bar you have chosen, use landmarks to identify the location of the oyster bar. Example: You are over this oyster bar when you see the lighthouse at your bow. You see buoy 1 at your stern and buoy 2 on your port side.
- Have your partner guess which oyster bar you have located.
- Switch roles and repeat.

How did the landmarks help you locate the oyster bars? How many different landmarks did you need to find an oyster bar? Would you be able to find an oyster bar using only one landmark? Why or why not?



Sailors have used compasses to find their direction since the 1300s!

### Activity 4 Plotting Your Course

- You will need the *Dead Reckoning* Exploration Card and a ruler to complete this activity.
- At 12:00 you took sightings with your bearing compass on two landmarks. You were 90 degrees from the school and 315 degrees from buoy 1.
  - Take your ruler and place it along the 90 degree angle of the compass rose. Without changing the angle of your ruler, pull it down until it lines up with the dot at the bottom of the school.
  - Draw a line along the ruler across the page.
  - Now take the ruler back up to the 315 degree angle.
  - Again, without changing the angle of the ruler, pull the ruler down to the bottom of buoy 1 and draw a line along the ruler.
  - Where the two lines cross is your position in the water at 12:00.
  - Draw a circle at that point and label it 12:00.
- Repeat this procedure for these other sightings to plot your course over time:
  - 1:00** - 45° to church, 135° to school
  - 2:00** - 0° to Buoy 3, 90° to Buoy 2
  - 3:00** - 135° to lighthouse, 225° to Buoy 3
- Use the scale to determine how far you have traveled between each point.

### What Else Can I Do?

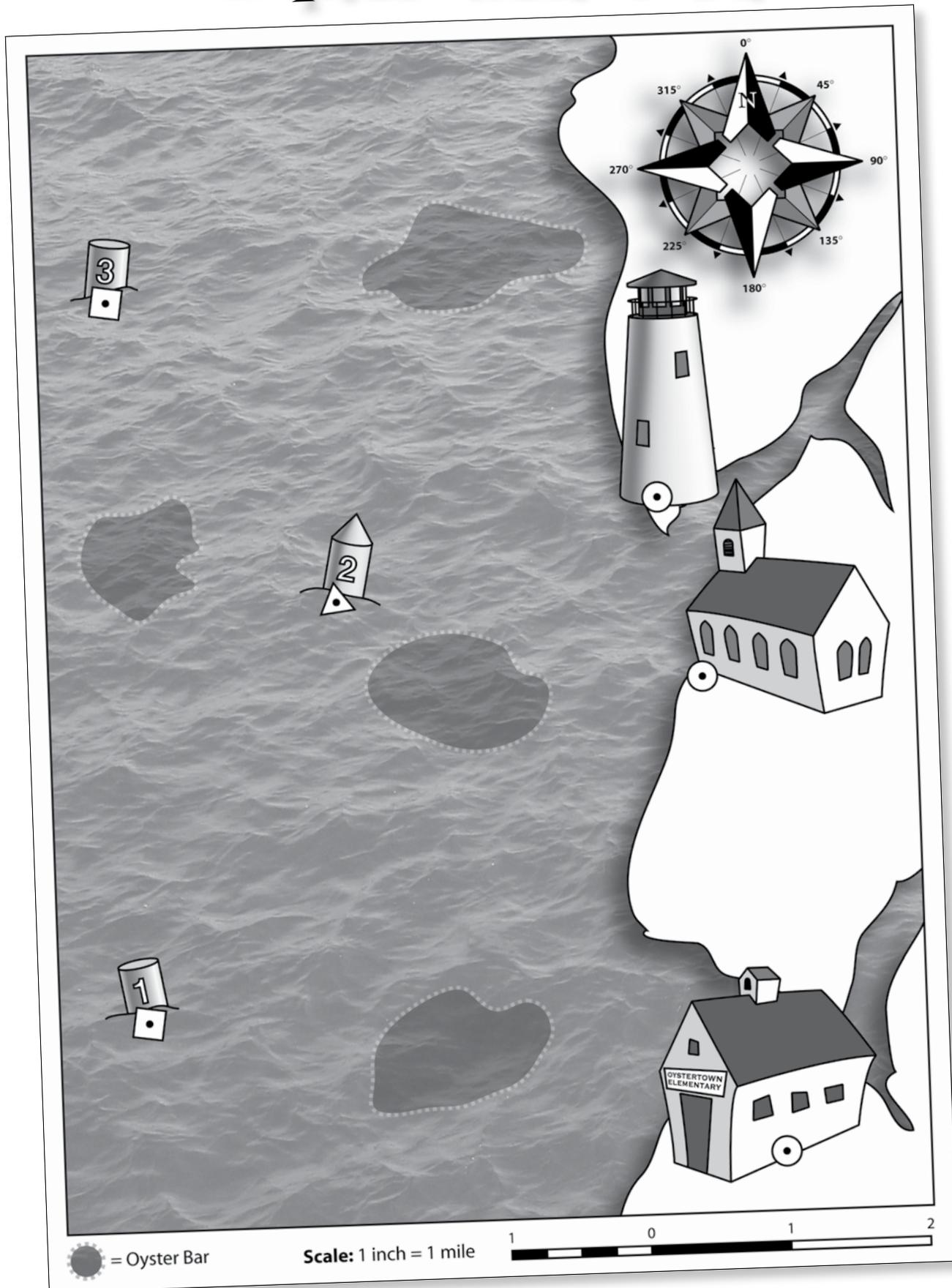


Make your own compass! You will need a pin or needle, candle, magnet, and a small glass bowl with water. Rub the needle in one direction along the magnet. After the needle has been rubbed along the magnet, rub it gently along the candle so that it is covered with wax. Now gently place the needle in the bowl of water. The needle will point north!



Use the Internet or an encyclopedia to research why a compass points north.

# Exploration Card



# Payday!



Crew member using oyster shells to count the number of bushels of oysters being sold

## Vocabulary

**Profits:** the money made by a captain and crew after they have sold their oysters and paid their bills



**Pay:** to give money for work done

**Dredger:** a boat, such as a skipjack, that dredges for oysters

## Overview

Students will learn how skipjack crews are paid.

## Skills

Critical Thinking, Decision Making, Economics, Mathematics, Reading, Social Studies

## You Will Need

- 90 minutes
- Paper
- Crayons or colored markers
- Students working independently with a classroom discussion at end of activity

## Teacher's Notes

You may wish to begin with a brief classroom discussion about how people are paid for work. Elicit ideas from students on how people are paid and what makes some jobs higher paying than others.

Review with students how to construct and interpret pie charts. Have crayons or colored markers available so students can color in the chart sections.

After the students individually complete the pie charts, lead them in a classroom discussion of the results.

## Additional Resources

Maryland Assessment Consortium, *Skipjack Adventure*, Teacher Booklet, Volume 9 (Annapolis, MD: Maryland Department of Education, 1998) pp. 603-634

Margaret Meacham, *Oyster Moon* (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1996)

*Written for children 9 – 12 years old, this book is set on Maryland's Eastern Shore in the late 1800s and is a fictionalized account of a true incident on board a dredgeboat.*

# Discover It!



*Romantic? That it were, a'sleepin on a shelf with your face about six inches below a leaky deck; wakin' up of a cold mornin' with your hair froze by the frost of your breath to the side of the planks....Like sleepin' in a coffin.*

Smith Island dredgeboat crewman as quoted by Tom Horton in *An Island Out of Time*

**S**o you think your work at school is hard? Imagine that you work harvesting oysters. Oystering is cold, wet, hard work. Oystermen are up before dawn and spend most of the day working outside in the winter. They are chilled by the freezing Bay water running off the dredges. Handling cold, wet oysters on the culling board leaves fingers and hands freezing and stiff.

As difficult an occupation as oystering is today, it was even more difficult and unpleasant during the oyster boom of the late 1800s.

Some dredgers left port for weeks or months at a time. Crews often lived in crowded and harsh conditions. Because the work was so difficult, dredgeboat captains often had difficulty keeping their crews. Some Baltimore captains would fill the ranks of their crew by attracting recent immigrants to sign on with the promise of good food and good pay.

Although each skipjack owner could decide how he wanted to pay his crew, there were regional traditions of taking a share for the boat and dividing the rest between the captain and crew.



**B**lack and white men worked side by side on the skipjacks. While very few African American men were able to captain their own vessels, the wages black men made as crew allowed many of them to buy their own houses and hold positions of leadership in their communities. At the time, oystering was one of the highest paying jobs open to black men.

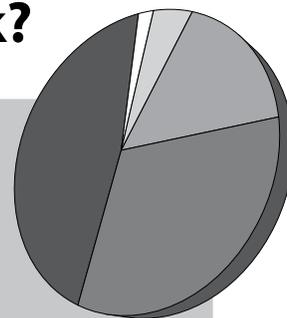
*....out on the Bay if you were the best at your trade it didn't matter whether you were black or white, old or young. Race was never a big deal on the water, but once you came back to land, that was another matter.*

Earl White, waterman

# Explore It!

## How were profits divided on a skipjack?

**Draw a pie chart for each of the skipjack pay plans described below:**



### Plan 1:

How Captain Pete Switzer from Tilghman Island paid the five crew members of the *Hilda M. Willing*

The captain took 50% to pay himself and get back the money he spent on repairs, equipment, and supplies like food. The crew split the other half.

### Plan 2:

How Captain Delmas Benton from Deal Island pays the six crew members of the *Fanny L. Daugherty*

The boat gets 30 cents to the dollar. The other 70 cents is split up evenly among the seven men.

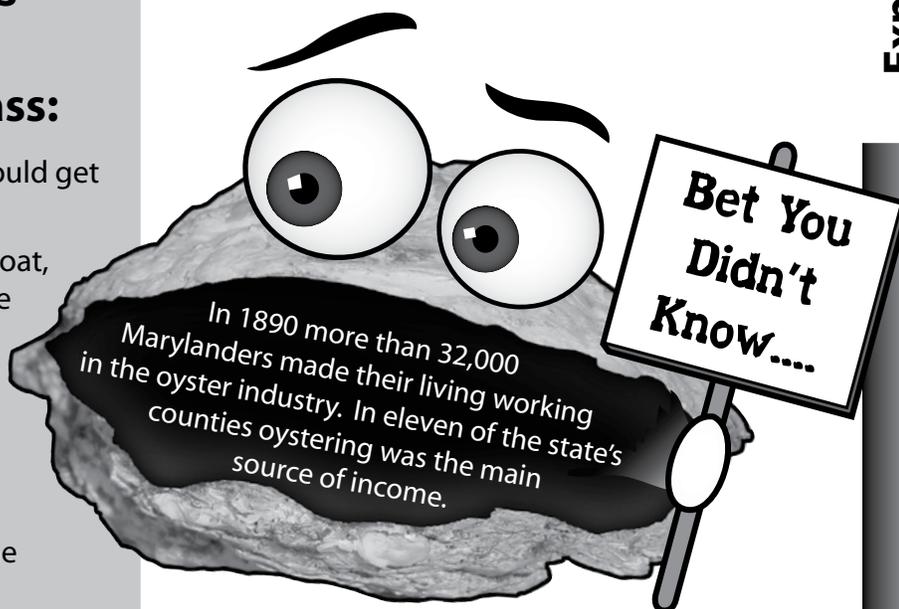
### Plan 3:

How Captain Wade Murphy of Tilghman Island pays the crew of the *Rebecca T. Ruark*

The boat takes 1/3rd. Then the captain and five crew divide the rest equally.

**Using your pie charts as a guide, discuss these questions with your class:**

- As a crewman, which pay plan would get you the biggest piece of the pie?
- As a captain who owns his own boat, which pay plan would get you the biggest piece of the pie?
- For each pay plan, what could happen to result in a crewman getting a bigger piece of the profit?
- Which pay plan do you think is the best? Why?
- Which would you choose – to work on a skipjack with fewer crew **or** to work on a skipjack with more crew? Why? What are the benefits of each?



### What Else Can I Do?



Explore other Bay occupations at [www.marylandwatermen.com](http://www.marylandwatermen.com)

# From Bay to Table



## Overview

Students will determine the capital, natural, and human resources needed to bring the oyster from the Bay to the consumer. They will prepare a short skit illustrating this process.

## Skills

Creative Writing, Critical Thinking, Economics, Social Studies, Teamwork

## You Will Need

- 120 minutes – may be divided into several sessions
- Paper
- Pen or pencil
- Students working in small groups

## Teacher's Notes

You may wish to begin by reviewing with students the concepts of capital, human, and natural resources. Then brainstorm with the students a list of the human resources that are needed to bring an oyster from the Bay to the dinner table. Have the students read **Discover It!** and then complete the table (found in **Explore It!**) of the natural, capital, and human resources used by a skipjack captain, packinghouse owner, and seafood restaurant owner.

Divide the class into small groups of 4-5 students. Have students write and present a short skit that follows the oyster from the Bay to the table. Their cast of characters should include (at minimum) a skipjack captain, packinghouse owner, and a seafood restaurant owner.

## Additional Resources

The National Marine Fisheries Service tracks the economic value of oysters over time. This information can be found on their website at [www.nmfs.noaa.gov](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov)

## Vocabulary

**Capital resources:** goods made by people and used to produce other goods and services

**Consumers:** people who buy and use goods and services

**Natural resources:** the natural wealth of a place, including land, forests, mineral deposits, water, plants and animals

**Price:** the value of a resource, good, or service stated in money terms

**Product:** a good or service made with resources



**Human resources:** people doing physical or mental work to produce goods or services

# Discover It!

*Nobody tires of oysters. Raw, roasted, scalded, stewed, fried, broiled, escalloped, in patés, in fritters, in soups, oysters are found on every table, sometimes at every meal, and yet no entertainment is complete without them.*

Scribner's Magazine, 1877



Crew member using oyster shells to count the number of bushels of oysters being sold

**H**ave you ever wondered how the food you eat got to your dinner table? It involves a whole lot more than just your mom or dad putting your plate of food in front of you! Let's take the oyster as an example.

Harvesting the oyster is just the first step in the process of getting the oyster to the consumer. In the past, watermen could sell their harvest to the buyboat captains that followed the skipjacks. Today, they sell directly to packers or local seafood restaurants. Packers then have the oysters shucked and canned or put on ice to be shipped fresh. Restaurants and larger markets purchase the oysters directly from the packer. The consumer then buys the oysters from the market or goes to a restaurant where the chef has prepared a fine oyster dinner.

What are the costs to bring an oyster from the Bay to your table? The waterman must consider the selling price of a bushel of oysters and balance it with boat maintenance, payroll, food, fuel, and any outstanding boat loan. The packer must consider the cost of oysters, payroll, processing costs, advertisement, and shipping when setting his selling price. Markets and restaurants must look at the cost of the oysters, payroll, advertisement, and rent before setting a price on the menu. Each of these costs is factored into every step of the process of bringing the oyster to you. By the time the oyster reaches your table, the cost per gallon of oysters will have increased considerably from the waterman's selling price.



**House of Oysters**

**Soups & Salads**

- Oyster Soup
- Oyster Stew
- Bisque of Oysters
- Oyster Caesar Salad

**Appetizers**

- Pigs in a Blanket
- Oyster Sausages
- Pickled Oysters
- Pan Baked Oyster Tarts
- Broiled Oysters on Toast
- Oyster Fritters

**Sides**

- Oyster Sauce
- Oyster Catsup
- Oyster Cocktail

**Entrees**

- Spicy Baked Oysters
- Chafing Dish Roast
- Beefsteak and Oyster Pie
- Oysters a la Newburg
- Curried Oysters
- Keebobbed Oysters
- Oysters en Coquille
- Fancy Roasted Oysters
- Baked Oysters Potpourri
- Spindled Oysters
- Sauteed Oysters
- Fried Oysters Supreme
- Oysters a la Ancienne
- Oyster Barbecue
- Baltimore Roast
- Deviled Oysters
- Oysters in Cream
- Oyster Omelet
- Steamed Oysters
- Bacon and Oysters
- Oysters in Batter
- Oyster Croquettes

# Explore It!

## What are the resources needed to bring an oyster from the Bay to your table?

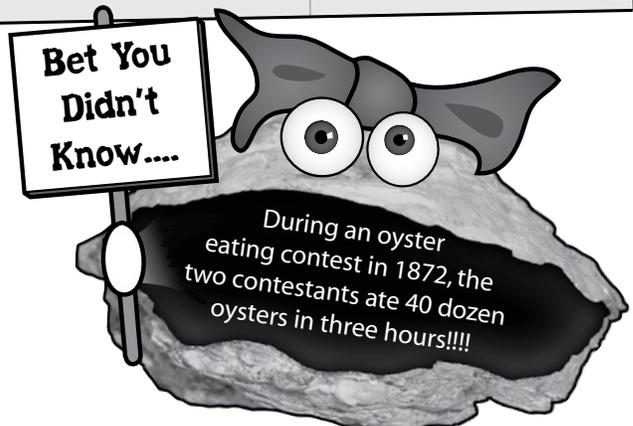
### Activity

- Fill in the table below by listing the natural, capital, and human resources needed by a skipjack captain, packinghouse owner, and seafood restaurant owner to bring oysters to market.
- In a small group, write and present a short skit that shows the process of getting the oyster from the Bay to the table. Your cast of characters for your skit should include, at least, a skipjack captain, packinghouse owner, and a seafood restaurant owner.

	Natural Resources	Capital Resources	Human Resources
<b>Skipjack Owner</b>  <b>John Larrimore</b> <i>E. C. Collier</i>			
<b>Packinghouse Owner</b>  <b>Samuel E. Turner, Sr.</b> <i>W. A. Turner &amp; Sons</i>			
<b>Restaurant Owner</b>  <b>Bill Jones</b> <i>The Crab Claw Restaurant</i>			

### What Else Can I Do?

-  Are oysters a part of your hometown's economy? Take a look at the Yellow Pages of your local phone book. How many seafood restaurants are listed? Are there any seafood markets? How many? How many local supermarkets have a seafood section? What other businesses could be related to oystering? Look them up!



# A Day in the Life of an Oyster Packinghouse

## Overview

Students will learn about life in an oyster packinghouse by reading excerpts from oral histories of oyster industry workers and examining photographs of packinghouses.

## Skills

Creative Writing, Observation, Reading, Social Studies

## You Will Need

- 90 minutes
- Students working individually or in small groups



## Vocabulary

**Floor Men:** the men who unload oysters from the boats, bring oysters to the shuckers, and remove the empty shells

**Oral history:** spoken history; memories and/or experiences of events shared verbally

**Packinghouse:** a place where food, such as oysters, is prepared for sale

**Shucker:** a person who removes the oyster from its shell

**Manager:** the person in control of a business from day to day

## Teacher's Notes

You may wish to begin by having students read **Discover It!**. Students may read and answer the questions about the oral history quotes either individually or in small groups. Discuss together as a class what the students learned from reading the quotes. Then have students prepare a journal entry as an oyster packinghouse worker. The entry should include at minimum a description of the work environment and what they did during the work day. You may wish to have the students read their entries aloud to the class or post the entries on a bulletin board.

## Additional Resources

Paula J. Johnson, ed., *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River* (Charlottesville, VA: Calvert Marine Museum and University Press of Virginia, 1988)

Maryland with Pride website – Life in the Canneries  
[www.intandem.com/NewPrideSite/MD/MD\\_Home.html](http://www.intandem.com/NewPrideSite/MD/MD_Home.html)

# Discover It!

*Four-year-old Mary, who shucks two pots of oysters a day....tends the baby when not working. The boss said that next year Mary will work steady as the rest of them. The mother is the fastest shucker in the place. Earns \$1.50 a day. Works part of the time with her sick baby in her arms. Father works on the dock.*

Photographer Lewis Hine, 1911

**W**orking in an oyster packinghouse is difficult, cold, and sloppy work.

Because it is a dirty job, most of the workers for the past 150 years have been poor immigrants, African Americans, women, and children.

Work at an oyster packinghouse involves a wide range of jobs performed by different groups of workers. In most packinghouses the jobs include manager, floor men, and shuckers.

The manager is the person in control of the packinghouse and oversees all other workers. Because of his greater responsibilities, the manager is the highest paid worker in the packinghouse. Next in line are the floor men who unload oysters from the boats, bring oysters to the shuckers, and remove the empty shells. The lowest paid job in the packinghouse is that of shucker.



Oyster shuckers stand with piles of oysters in front of them, opening the shells with a sharp knife, and placing the shucked oysters in a gallon bucket. The working day at an oyster packinghouse is often long, beginning in the early morning.

Winter is oyster shucking time so the shucking rooms are cold and wet. Shuckers' hands often become numb from handling the cold oysters and the cuts from the knives and sharp shells are painful. In many old photographs you can see shuckers standing in narrow, wooden stalls to keep them off the cold wet floor and the piles of discarded shells.

Because the shuckers are paid by the number of gallons they shuck, they try to work as fast as they can. They also may strike up a friendship with a floor man in hopes he will bring them the round oysters from the pile. The round oysters generally have larger, fatter meat inside, so the shuckers can fill their gallon buckets more quickly.

# Explore It!

## What was it like to work in an oyster packinghouse?

### Activity

Look closely at the Exploration Card.

What does the photo tell you about work in an oyster packinghouse?

Read the oral histories of people who work in the oyster industry.

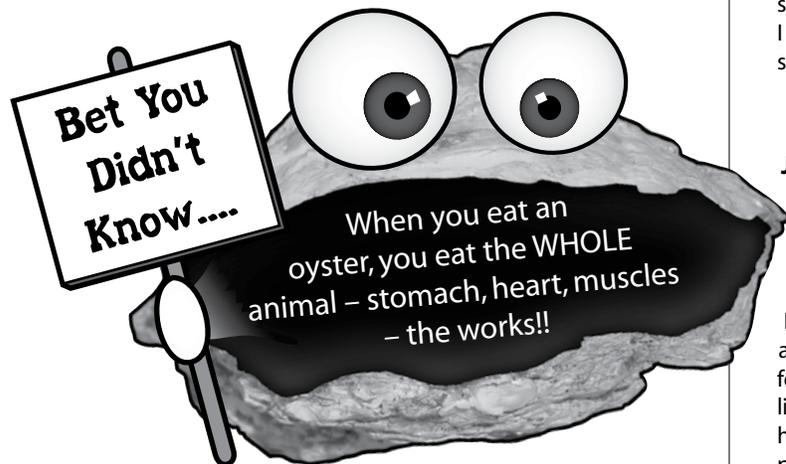
What do their stories tell you about their lives? What is work life like for this person? What are the conditions?

Imagine that you work in an oyster packinghouse. Write a journal entry as a shucker or floor man.

### What Else Can I Do?



Do you know someone in your family or neighborhood who has worked in the oyster industry or some other job connected to the Bay? Ask them if they would be willing to talk to you about their experiences. Share what you learn with your class.



### Conroy Butler remembers:

I started in 1952. I worked 24 years on and off. It's not the easiest job, but it puts bread on the table. I enjoy shucking, it's a bunch of people talking, singing and it makes the day go faster. There were times when fast shuckers would get together to race to see who would have the most oysters at the end of the day. It's good to stand beside a fast shucker because that would make you shuck faster.



### Mrs. Bertha Curtis talks about shucking oysters:

A lot of people think themselves above shucking oysters, but I just love to make money! I'd make \$12 - \$15 a week, but I didn't shuck steady. I'd go in and shuck oysters so we could have money for Christmas. It was cold in the shucking room and the water! ...It was miserable. High tides came up into the oyster house lots of times.



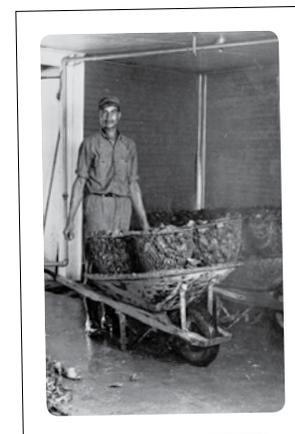
### Ruth Mackall Smith recalls:

I was 19 when I first started working. Several people showed me how to shuck. I have stabbed myself a few times, but that was the only way you would learn. I got up between 4 - 4:30 a.m. and would get to work at 6:00. Upon arrival I would get two buckets and put my things on and get to work. The shucker had to buy their apron and knives and you have to get used to standing all day. I was plenty cold! I worked until 3 or 4 p.m. ...I've shucked as high as 22 gallons a day.



### Joe Buck worked as a floor man:

I didn't miss a week of work in 45 years. I was working on the floor, carrying oysters to the shuckers and keeping the shell pile straight. I have heisted oysters until my arms almost dropped off - didn't have no feeling in them. The shell pile looked like a mountain...and all done by hand. Iron wheelbarrows, yes sir, I've pushed a many one of them. I don't see how we did all that work. But everybody was happy. They did it.



# Exploration Card



# Exploration Card



# Exploration Card

