

A Short History of Avalon Island

These photographs capture Avalon Island, which sits just off Tilghman's shore, extends into the Choptank, and is connected to Tilghman by a causeway. Legend has it that the island originated in the 1890s when two brothers, S. Taylor and J. Camper Harrison, began shucking oysters in a small shack atop some pilings off the shore. In just ten years enough shell had been dumped around them to form Avalon Island, and the Tilghman Packing Company, seen in the older photograph (*circa* 1935), was born. Sticklers for historical accuracy might point out that early on the Harrison brothers employed over fifty shuckers, and from the outset were building onto an oyster base already established by others.

In the years when the Tilghman Packing Company was expanding, the Bay around it was offering up harvests of abundance. In the 1890s, 770,000 pounds of sturgeon were annually taken from the Chesapeake. By the 1920s, the annual catch had fallen 90% to an average of 22,000 pounds, and today a sturgeon is rarely seen and the fishery is closed. Annual shad harvests averaged 17.5 million pounds at the beginning of the last century. These dwindled to less than 2 million pounds by the 1970s and in 1980 the Maryland shad harvest fell to a record low of 25,000 pounds leading to a moratorium on shad fishing. Virginia delayed banning shad fishing until after the 1993 spring harvest. A century ago, the Chesapeake Bay was the greatest oyster-producing region in the world providing 20 million bushels of oysters annually. By the 1930s the average annual harvest was down to about 7 million bushels. Recent annual harvests have averaged under 200,000 bushels, less than 1 percent of the catch a hundred years earlier.

In the 1930s, the Tilghman Packing Company sprawled across Avalon Island. It employed over a hundred African-American female crab pickers, who worked in rooms segregated from the white workers. A segregated black community lived in shacks along the causeway. The business served as a seafood depository and wholesaler for local watermen, processing and shipping crabs, clams, oysters and numerous varieties of fish culled from the surrounding waters. The company managed to survive changes of ownership over the next forty-five years. In the 1950's it employed 600 workers in season and one season processed more than 12 million pounds of fish, produced 100,000 gallons of shucked oysters, and shipped untold millions of pounds of hard and softshell crabs abroad. But an eventual decline in seafood harvests, increased environmental regulation, and other economic factors led to its decline.

The plant finally closed in 1975. Later that same year a series of fires consumed many of its structures.

The new Avalon Island, pictured in the recent aerial, has transitioned to become the home of the *Tilghman on Chesapeake Yacht Club and Marina* part of a planned community, and offers boat slips, a pool, and amenities to its community homeowners. Built to be aesthetically pleasing to potential buyers, the causeway has been converted to a tar and gravel road, bordered by a planked pedestrian walkway. The island is bulk-headed or

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rip rapped around its circumference, and latticework skirting is designed to decoratively hide the piling foundation, reinforced to, supposedly, withstand nature's wrath. Avalon Island is a metaphor for many of the small communities bordering Eastern Shore estuaries, reflecting the transition of economic dependence from seafood production or shipbuilding to recreation and tourism.