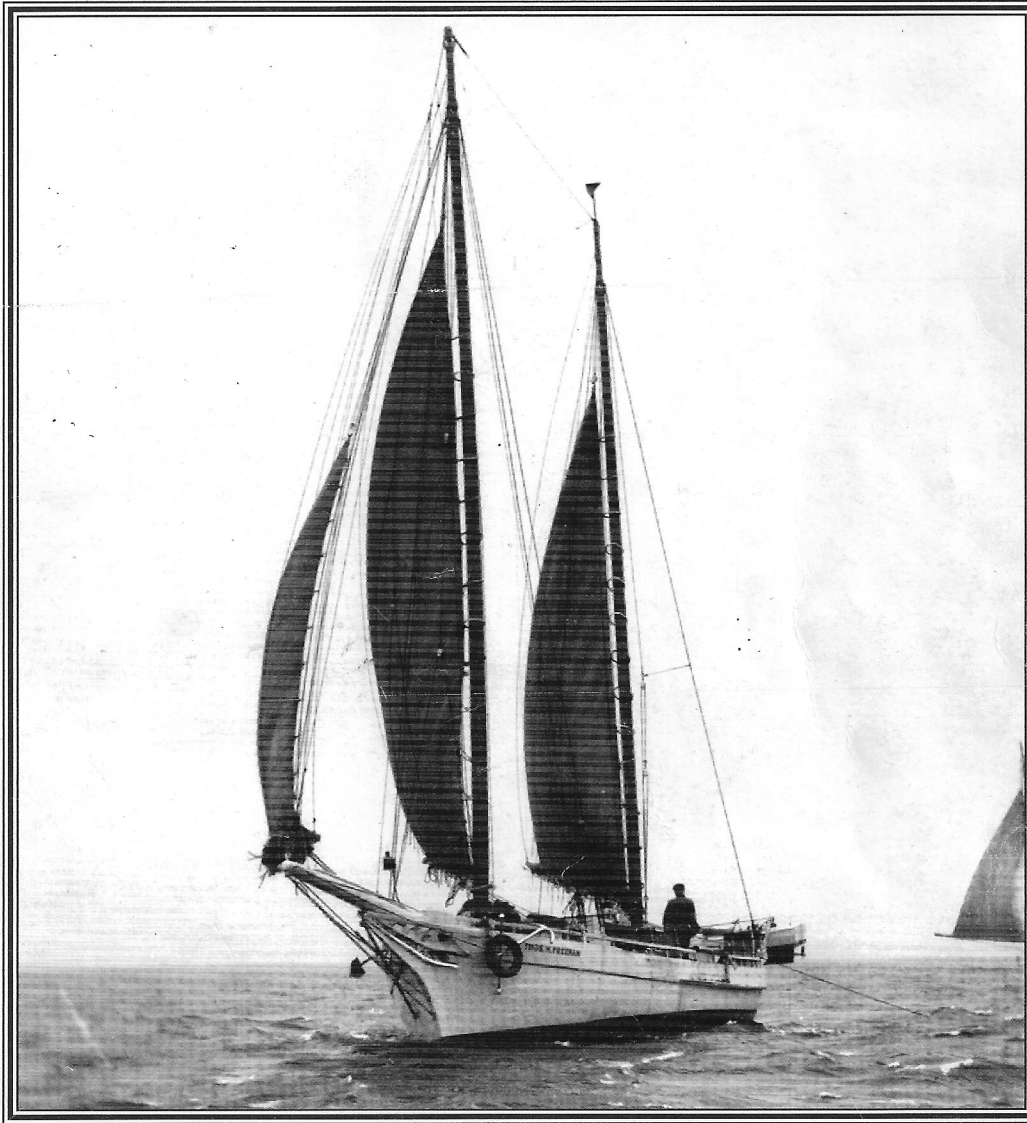


# THE WEATHER GAUGE

Volume XXXVI Number 1

Spring 2000

THE MAGAZINE OF THE CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM



**The Industrious Shipbuilder: Joseph W. Brooks**  
**Tilghman Packing Company**  
**The Ague and "Seasoning"**

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# THE WEATHER GAUGE

CHESAPEAKE BAY MARITIME MUSEUM



In a naval battle between sailing ships, the windward vessel generally had the advantage, known as "the weather gauge." The windward ship could deter-

mine the time and distance of the battle. Renowned bay artist John Moll's depiction of this situation has been part of *The Weather Gauge* since 1965.

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**Cover:** Bugeye Thomas M. Freeman, built by Joseph Brooks in 1889, dredging for oysters.  
CBMM Collection'

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# Tilghman Packing Company and the Transformation of Landscape on Avalon Island

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by Margaret  
Enloe Vivian

**T**he Tilghman-On-Chesapeake development is a striking feature of long, narrow Tilghman Island, which separates the Eastern Shore's Choptank River from the Chesapeake Bay. Pristine contemporary houses and the private yacht club on Avalon Island contrast to the adjoining watermen's village of Tilghman. One might suppose that land development is the first organized industry to come to Tilghman Island. Yet for most of the twentieth century, Avalon Island and the nearby shore on Tilghman were the site of the Tilghman Packing Company, an oyster-shucking-crab-picking-fish-cutting, seafood-smelling business.

Once a family- and community-centered place of industrial production, today's Avalon Island has been transformed into a seemingly exclusive community with a pastoral setting. This change is part of a national trend toward modern development in rural traditional communities. If, as landscape studies scholar J. B. Jackson says, "the value of history is that it teaches us about the future," then by looking at the transformation of this tiny three-acre island, we open a small window into understanding the bigger question: how can contemporary developments emerge without erasing the culture of existing traditional communities?

Avalon is a man-made oyster shell island located just off Tilghman Island's eastern edge. For most of its existence, the island was dominated by the Tilghman Packing Company (1897-1975) and it has been home to the Tilghman-On-Chesapeake Yacht Club only since about 1990.

## Beginnings

Avalon Island was created inadvertently during the heyday of oystering on the bay. Its birth is

linked to the Baltimore, Chesapeake and Atlantic Railway Company's construction of a steamboat wharf in 1893. This wharf began about halfway down Tilghman Island's length and "extended twelve hundred feet from shore in order to reach deep water. About one hundred yards away and about eight hundred feet from the shore, [Avalon Island] and the Tilghman Packing Company stood."<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, Avalon was primarily a pile of oyster shells next to the B. C. & A.'s steamboat pier. It was common around the bay to see shell piles and seafood packing houses spring up next to steamboat wharves. At these locations, watermen easily delivered their catch to the packing house docks; the packing house processed the seafood and carted the product directly onto the steamboat. Since the object of interest was the oyster itself, the unwanted shell was tossed aside into the shallows and over time became a shell pile. Enormous shell piles, when leveled out, created a landmass such as Avalon Island which, before it was named, was described in a 1934 land deed as a "shell pile property."<sup>2</sup>

Tilghman Packing Company founders, Skinner and Taylor Harrison, are often credited with creating Avalon Island: "Tilghman Packing Company had its start in 1897 [when] two brothers, S. Taylor Harrison and J. Camper Harrison, shucked oysters in a small, candle-lit building resting on top of pilings eight hundred feet off the mainland. . . . In ten years, enough shells had been dumped into the water to form an island, now known as Avalon Island. . . ."<sup>3</sup> Actually the Harrison brothers had forty workers shucking for them so they did not single-handedly build the island. In addition, while they may have created their section of

Avalon Island, its shell construction was well underway before the Harrisons began.

William Sidney Covington, not the Harrisons, appears to have been the first business inhabitant of Avalon Island. Indeed, the earliest records discovered for Avalon date from 1896 and indicate that Covington and the local druggist, William Jackson, were the "owners in common of a Pier, adjoining the wharf of 'the Baltimore, Chesapeake and Atlantic Railway Company' on Tilghman's Island . . . said Pier is improved by a Store House, an Oyster Shucking House and an Artesian Well. . . ." <sup>4</sup> A 1901 plat shows that the Covington properties stood on the south side of the wharf and a large shell pile lay to the north. What came to be known as Avalon Island was created by Sid Covington's operation to the south of the steamboat wharf and later by the Harrisons' Tilghman Packing Company on the northern side.

Covington was Skinner and Camper Harrison's uncle, so the two packing houses at Avalon Island around 1900 were both in the same family. When Covington's operation burned down around 1905, Tilghman Packing became the dominant feature in the landscape. Then, in 1934, S. Taylor and George T. Harrison, Camper's son, purchased the

remaining "shell pile property and lot of ground . . . on the North side of the B. C. & A. Ry. Company's steamboat Wharf." <sup>5</sup>

George T. Harrison was involved with Tilghman Packing for most of his life and served as its president for twenty-seven years. "Captain George" may not have spent much time actually on the water captaining, but as company president, he and the company officers, Vice President Oswald N. Harrison and Secretary-Treasurer Kenneth E. Harrison, certainly led Tilghman Packing to great success by following consumer trends, networking, and keeping a hand in the company's operations and regional politics. From all accounts, George T. Harrison "traded" with other businessmen, politicians, and watermen based on verbal agreements. In fact, Tilghman Packing packed all of the fish for Vita Foods products for many years based on a verbal contract that was renegotiated as needed with a discussion and a handshake. The bond was so strong between George Harrison and Vita president, Mr. Heller, that Harrison named his yacht *Vita* and gave his son the middle name of Heller. To George Harrison, his business associate was a brother who could be trusted to keep his word. There is an



Tilghman Packing Company and related businesses on the oyster shell Avalon Island near the height of its activity.

Photo by H. Robins Hollyday, courtesy Historical Society of Talbot County

expectation in such relationships that “brothers”—whether in fact or not—will not hurt each other. The success of the long-standing agreement between Mr. Harrison and Mr. Heller depended on the trust implicit in this fictive brotherly relationship.

What made Tilghman Packing unique among Eastern Shore seafood-processing plants was its longevity and product diversity. Both factors were heavily influenced by the extended family network of businesses that operated as “brothers”—Tilghman Packing, Tilghman Canning, which opened in 1908, the Avalon Store, and Tilghman Ice and Fuel. In addition, the packing company made investments in a variety of other ventures. It owned or operated a machine shop for inventing and repairing equipment; a large parcel of land called North Tilghman, on the north side of Knapps Narrows; rental slips for watermen; a section of workers’ homes in the nearby town of Sherwood; a fishmeal operation on the south side of Knapps Narrows; and farmlands in the region that supplied vegetables to the cannery.

### Community Involvement

George Harrison and Tilghman Packing were heavily involved in service to the community.

Tilghman Packing participated in Talbot County events such as holiday parades and celebrations in which the floats and costumes were handmade by company employees and their families and show a great sense of pride in the making.

Another example of Tilghman Packing giving back to the community and, in this case, nature, was the replanting of oyster bars. Several informants credit George T. Harrison and Tilghman Packing Company as the initiator of a program to renew the bay’s oyster bars, known today as “spatting,” moving young oysters to mature on new or depleted oyster bars.

More publicly, Tilghman Packing was awarded the prestigious “A Award” by the War Food Administration in July 1944.<sup>6</sup> This was “the highest possible recognition from the United States Government for war time food production and for maintaining high and rigid standards of excellence.” In apparently typical fashion, George T. Harrison took little credit for receiving this award but praised the employees. His company announcement concludes “We, therefore, give full credit on this occasion to our employees and to their unselfish and untiring efforts, which have resulted in the recognition accorded.”<sup>7</sup>

Former company workers still take pride in the

Company President George T. Harrison, shown here at right with Production Manager Don Fluharty, was the embodiment of an early twentieth-century entrepreneur. His networking throughout the region led Tilghman Packing to its success.

*Courtesy Don Fluharty*



A Award. It was bestowed at a ceremony with patriotic speeches given by state representatives. The ceremony was modest because Tilghman Packing employees and officers had decided by consensus that the monies for the celebration would be better spent on the erection of "a small addition (a Men's Bible Class Room) at our local church. Such an investment will, for many years to come, warm the hearts of those of our returning soldiers and sailors whose parents, wives, sons, daughters and sweethearts, have made this award possible."<sup>8</sup>

## Seasonal Rounds

Natural cycles governed the workers and work at the Tilghman Packing Company. As the life stages of bay critters changed with each season, so did the type of work that the company performed. In the spring and summer, fish and crab processing took place as long as the harvest was abundant. The crabbing season ended just as oystering began. These seasonal rounds had no particular start or end dates as the creatures being harvested looked to the changes in the water and the weather to indicate what part of their life cycle they should next approach. When the season was "on," day and night crews kept the seafood moving for as many days and hours as necessary.

The types of work performed clearly illustrate the intimate connection with the Chesapeake Bay and its critters and the dynamic relationships between nature and the site, the workers, and the community. No matter what the job at Tilghman Packing, the prevalent sights, smells, sounds, tastes, or touch were of Chesapeake Bay seafood. African-Americans had the most intimate contact with nature's abundance as oyster shuckers, crab pickers and fish cutters. However, everyone, whether black or white, was in close contact with the seafood the plant processed. Charlie Fairbank and other white male workers unloaded and hauled fresh fish for the seafood market. According to Marie Ennells, an African-American woman who picked crabs on and off at Tilghman Packing, white women also picked crabs. Ennells described the crab picking rooms:

The black folks, we worked in here. . . . Then in the next room, . . . there was an opening, and that was all that [separated us] and we talked together and you sang together and everything but of course, the whites were in one room and we were in another, although we were all doing the same thing. . . . Of course [there were white crab pickers]! As many of them as there was of us, probably more. There



was just as many whites in the next room doing the same thing we were doing.

We were friendly and all that. We were just separate and not equal. You all picking crabs. You're doing the same thing, picking the crabs together, laughing and talking together and then when you went to weigh up this meat . . . you poured all the meat in here together. It was silly now. We picked the same meat, the same crabs, the same everything and then when you got ready to weigh them up, they called them [the white women] up first to pour their meat on the table in there and then they called us to pour the meat right in there together. But they had to go first. And this was the same thing even when it come time for you to get paid. They called them, they got their check first. And then we got our little check.<sup>9</sup>

Ennells also recalled that "when we picked, crabs weren't even ten cents a pound. Yes, indeed, you'd work all the week and probably have about \$7. . . . But the cost of living was so much different. You could then buy a loaf of bread for fifteen cents."<sup>10</sup>

While some work rooms and job categories appear to have been segregated by race and gender, the overall job at Tilghman Packing required a team effort to get the job done. By all accounts, tensions were minimal and the majority that did exist were similar to those in any "family."

The theme of "family" or "team" effort bubbled

The Til-Maid, the mermaid "Queen of the Chesapeake," was Tilghman Packing's symbol of civic pride. Here, Harrison family members and friends represent the company's 60th year of operations aboard a handmade float at a holiday parade in Easton circa 1957.

*Courtesy Don Fluharty*

These 126 African-American women and the white crab pickers in an adjacent room did not work quietly as the photograph may suggest. Like one big, although segregated, family, they passed the time by talking and singing hymns together.

Photo by H. Robins Hollyday, courtesy Historical Society of Talbot County

to the surface in interviews with former Tilghman Packing Company employees. When asked what job they did, each person explained their formal role but said that they did a little of everything—whatever was needed. As a family-run operation in a small, rural community, the packing company operated as a business but as a socio-economic unit as well. The survival of such a community depended heavily on its members' contribution of their time, skills, and energy to the maintenance of the "family" unit as a whole.

### Work Environment

Former Tilghman Packing workers explain that they were happy with their jobs and felt they were doing very well by the company. African-American employees had the same dedication to Tilghman Packing and some remarked that today they miss their days shucking oysters or picking crabs. Although the conditions of the crab pickers, oyster shuckers, and fish cutters seem unappealing to the present-day observer, when the catch was high, the work and the money were quite good.

For many workers there was little separation of work and leisure time. Work provided a social environment. Although the days were often

longer than eight hours, employees were paid for quantity of work, not by the hour. Full-time employees were on duty as needed; migrant workers did their jobs seven days a week, at all hours of the day and night. Everyone's work schedule was established by the waterman's harvest; the harvest depended on the seasonal migration and biology of the creatures themselves.

For the women, talking and singing hymns or church songs helped the time go by. An original poem (see right) is one of the more creative examples of how work, social, and home life intertwined. Written during the workday by several Tilghman Packing crab claw pickers, this poem is about an event in their home town, just eight miles up the road from the packing company. Writing the poem gave these women a fun, creative outlet during a Tilghman Packing workday. The fact that it is signed, "The Colored Claw Workers of Tilghman Packing Co." followed by their names indicates a desire to be recognized for their creativity and perhaps a sense of pride in their race, their work, and their home.

Migrant workers were a vital part of Tilghman Packing. The term "migrant" is somewhat confusing since there were several different ways that employees used the term. Some workers who lived



in communities along the Bay Hundred peninsula were taken to and from work daily by the company's buses, one for the African-American workers and another for the white workers. In a sense, these were "local migrants." Most permanent workers were white and held managerial positions or performed the secondary processing operations.

Next were long-distance migrants whose story is based on general migrant experiences. These African-American workers were brought from other states and lived in Tilghman Packing-owned shanties for the duration of the harvest season. Some stayed on year round and worked at various places, including the cannery on Tilghman where vegetables were preserved and distributed. A few stayed at Tilghman Packing for years, even long enough to raise their children. An African-American crab picker politely said of the long-distance migrants, "They were just rough."<sup>11</sup> Yet a different worker remembers that there were "nice Christian families," too. The permanent workers who were African-American were afforded more respect and job mobility within the company community although they often did the same types of work as the migrants.

This attachment to the Bay Hundred region was prevalent among all Tilghman Packing workers, except for the long-distance migrants. When the Tilghman Packing Company cut back on seasonal piecework, most local migrants took other jobs at different places in the Bay Hundred region but few left the area. Similarly, none of the permanent workers thought of leaving their community—a community which included Tilghman Packing—when the opportunity arose. By the informants' descriptions, the meaning of community included their work environment. A socio-economic order existed in which boundaries between leisure and work, family and employer were blurred. From the perspectives of the employees interviewed, Tilghman Packing Company was a "family," not in the romanticized, traditional sense, but in the very real, day-to-day meaning that it depended on the support of the "family members" for its survival. Conflicts appear to have been resolved directly. While early interviews are bound to paint a rosy picture of an environment without conflict, contemporary relationships in the area support this type of all-inclusive, "family type" community.

The Tilghman Packing Company site was laden with cultural issues with regard to race, gender, permanent and migrant workers, and insider/outsider relationships. During the lifetime of Tilghman Packing Company, the insider/outsider

### THE BOMBARDMENT OF WITTMAN

(Pot Pie)

We were working calm and peaceful  
On the second of July  
When the rumors began to spread  
That bombs are falling in Pot Pie.

It was told to us by our employer,  
Since he's just a jolly guy,  
We just knew that he was kidding,  
So we took it for a lie.

Wittman is not a town in Europe  
Or any other country overseas.  
But it's a very small town in Maryland —  
It's our home town, if you please.

The Jones's were working in their boat house;  
Not a murmur nor a sigh.  
Suddenly a plane flew over, and  
The bombs dropped from the sky.

One fell near the boathouse;  
The other in the field.  
The Jones's had to hit the dirt  
For protection and for shield.

What is so surprising and exciting,  
Such as never happened before;  
Bombs falling in Wittman,  
Talbot County, Eastern Shore.

News reporters, investigators and  
Spectators like you and me  
Will remember July second, 1947,  
That Wittman which made headlines should  
go down in history.

### BY THE COLORED CLAW WORKERS

#### OF TILGHMAN PACKING CO.

MARIE ENNELLS  
AOMA COPPER  
CELESTINE CALDWELL  
EUNICE McNAIR  
LOTTIE PINKNEY

*Courtesy Marie Ennells*

dynamic affected the African-American migrant workers most profoundly, more so than race. This is not to say that race was not an issue at the company. Informants spoke of specific, permanent, African-American employees with fondness and



These crabs are fresh out of the steamer and ready for the picking tables. African-Americans had the most intimate contact with nature's bounty. But no matter your job at Tilghman Packing, the prevalent sights, smells, sounds, tastes, or touch were of Chesapeake Bay seafood.

*Photo by H. Robins Hollyday, courtesy Historical Society of Talbot County*



respect. These workers were “inside” the community because of their dependability, permanence and overall character. Overall, in this environment of real and fictive relationships, certain behaviors were expected of each individual based on gender, race, personal character, and status as workers.

Stories told by informants suggest that it would be incorrect to apply a universal principle of segregation to the Tilghman Packing Company site. Their stories separate the company's workers by their status as permanent or migrant first and foremost, with race running a close second. By inference, black workers are almost synonymously migrant. The permanent workers who were African-American were afforded more respect and job mobility within the Tilghman Packing community although they often did the same types of work as the migrants. A source of economic prosperity in a rural region, people performed whatever tasks were necessary to maintain that prosperity. Tilghman Packing Company was a beehive of both social and economic activity rather than the silent, impersonal work place that the pictures perhaps suggest.

The African-American migrant community was the only such community on Tilghman Island. The blacks “did not go uptown at night,” into the village of Avalon or Tilghman proper. Therefore the African-American migrant workers rarely ventured beyond the physical limits of the Tilghman Packing property. However, long-time residents of Wharf Road remember going down to the causeway where all the children—both black and white—played together. In theory, with housing, a church in the shanty-town, and the Avalon Post Office in the store, all the migrant workers' daily needs could be met on site. As was common practice at such firms, Tilghman Packing pieceworkers, shuckers, fish cutters, and crab pickers, were paid with company tokens redeemable only at the company store.<sup>12</sup> Actually the store was not owned by Tilghman Packing but by John C. Harrison or “Johnny Hot,” another relative of the owners.

### Peak Years

By the 1950s, Tilghman Packing Company was working at peak performance. In 1951 it employed 600 workers in season and had a staggering

amount of equipment at the plant, including breeding machines, filleting machines, the fish scaler, industrial fryers and steamers, a labeling machine, and a \$75,000 quick-freezing unit in addition to stainless steel conveyor belts, tables, and cranes. The company invented and patented both the breeding machine and a mechanism called the "can unscrambler" which took a jumbled pile of cans and turned them into an organized row.

The company was part of an industry which, in 1950, packed about 5 billion pounds of seafood with a retail value of about \$2 billion. At Tilghman Packing,

More than 12,000,000 pounds of fish are processed in an average year in the company's plant. In addition, it produces about 100,000 gallons of shucked oysters, and packs over 500,000 pounds of breaded, frozen oysters; millions of pounds of hard and softshell crabs, crab meat and breaded crab cakes. . . . Millions of pounds of Tilghman products are shipped to foreign countries, but most of the output is sold through distributors to hotels, clubs, food stores, restaurants and other types of outlets.<sup>13</sup>

Although steamboat travel between Tilghman and the western shore stopped with the closing of the wharf in the 1930s, the connection across the bay remained. Tilghman Packing's location was ideal for its economic position as intermediary between the local watermen and the city markets of the western shore. Though the waterways continued to play an important role in bringing seafood to the company, trucks began to carry the company's products away. The company purchased the wharf that connected Avalon and Tilghman Island and kept it open for the community's use.

Tilghman Packing Company rose to prominence as a direct result of mechanization, refrigeration, improved transportation, and the ability to meet consumer demand for fresh seafood. However, the company's continued success also relied heavily on the sense of community and interdependence of its management and workers. It was a social and economic center for Tilghman Island. Therefore, while the company arose in a mechanized era, its continuous support of the community was an important piece of what held it together for over seventy-five years.

## Island Landscape

The Avalon Island landscape changed often during the company's history. The island itself

remained nearly the same in size and shape but the company's facilities were adapted to changing needs. Older buildings had additions and alterations that were done quickly and simply. With its geographically remote location, Tilghman Packing's owners did not worry about regulation. They changed the land according to their needs.

Between the 1940s and the early 1960s the company's site at Avalon included three large processing houses, all constructed of inexpensive, durable materials in a functional, vernacular architectural style. The early structures could, if necessary, be replaced at little cost. The company also appears to have built and renovated its facilities as they saw fit, without applications or permits, since the county planning and zoning office has no records of any construction at the company site on Avalon.

A waterman arriving at Tilghman Packing docked close to the building where his catch was to be processed. Crabs, oysters, and fish bound for the fresh fish markets were all off-loaded at the outer or eastern-most bulkhead. Crabs were taken directly to the steamers. Oysters went to the shucking rooms, and fish such as striped bass, hardheads, or croakers were packed in crates and covered with ice in the early years and later placed in refrigerated trucks that sped them off to fresh fish market customers. Interestingly, George T. Harrison's brother, "Buck" and later, nephew "Toady Buck," operated Tilghman Ice and Fuel, located at the Tilghman Island end of the causeway. This family business provided Tilghman Packing with the ice necessary for packing fresh fish. All fish not bound for the fresh fish market were off-loaded on the opposite side of the company complex at the processing plant where they were processed, canned or sent on to frozen foods.

The structure between the inner and outer buildings saw the most change over time. Until the 1950s this location housed the crab-picking and oyster-shucking processes in a single-story, wooden building. In the 1950s it was replaced by a substantial cinder block building that included a modern processing facility for frozen foods and a kitchen/laboratory that helped to maintain health department codes in the facility.

Two other buildings on Avalon Island were owned and operated by members of the Harrison family. One was a shell mill that ground oyster shell into grist for chicken feed, which was torn down by the 1950s as oyster production declined significantly. The second, the country store, is significant later in the history of Avalon Island. Reconstructed by William Sidney Covington after

a 1904 fire, the store was owned in the 1950s by John "Johnny Hot" Harrison and served many functions in the community. Store manager Ruley Covington recollected,

The store made a lot of money. Work boat crews bought hardware, clothing, tobacco, dry beans, salted codfish, coffee, flour and the like at the store. I handled the business end, and I remember that we sold four or five full barrels of cornbeef, pickled in brine, every week. . . . The store became a business center, and I asked the government to put a post office on the premises. As a boy, I had read about King Arthur and his knights ascending, after death, to an island paradise called Avalon. I always thought it a pretty name, so when the Post Office Department asked me for a name, I came up with Avalon. It operated as a post office until just a couple years ago.<sup>14</sup>

Although various theories have been offered about how Avalon Island was named, Covington is the only person who has claimed responsibility. The Avalon store was renovated several times during the Tilghman Packing era and ultimately was the only building left standing on Avalon Island after fires in 1975.

### Sold Out of the Family

With many accomplishments in its past and what appeared to be a promising future, it is no surprise that George T. Harrison and the other

officers were able to find buyers for the company when they decided to sell out in the early 1960s. By then, Tilghman Packing's frozen foods department had become a premier producer and supplier of prepared frozen seafood products. Similarly, sales of canned goods continued to increase.

The "short list" of items produced included frozen crab cakes, deviled crab, fish cakes, breaded oysters, breaded shrimp, breaded clams, fried soft shell clams (known as Ipswich clams), as well as canned steamed clams, herring, herring roe, shad and shad roe. The canned and frozen vegetables were primarily spinach, corn, tomatoes, and beans. Even waste products like oyster shell lime and herring scales continued to be used and sold. Pearls seem out of place since Chesapeake oysters do not produce marketable pearls, but Tilghman Packing did. They were made from the by-products of the fish packing operation. They are plastic but coated with the "essence" from herring scales. George Harrison gave these necklaces to managers' wives and other friends of the company as tokens of appreciation.

The sale of Tilghman Packing to a group of investors ended 65 years of Harrison family ownership on Avalon Island. Given the tight kinship relationship that the Harrisons had with the workers and the community, the company's sale on 7 December 1962 marked the beginning of the end for Tilghman Packing even though its doors did not close for good until 1975.<sup>15</sup> The change from ownership by community insiders to ownership by outsiders is perhaps the most influential change in the company's history, since it significantly transformed the relations at the company. Not only did company control leave the Harrison family, it left the community, the state and even the Chesapeake region.

The Harrison family had presided over Tilghman Packing for two generations and George T. Harrison was the embodiment of an early twentieth-century entrepreneur. Born and raised in the quiet watermen's community of Tilghman Island, he began working for the family business at an early age, eventually took over as company president, and led Tilghman Packing to its peak years as the longest-lasting, most diverse seafood processing organization in the region. He was more than just company president. He served as the liaison between Tilghman Packing, Tilghman

The jewelry sets in Tilghman Packing's promotional photographs were made from the by-products of the fish-processing industry. The pearl necklaces and earrings, plastic beads coated with the "essence" of herring scales, were tokens of appreciation that George Harrison gave to employees and friends.

Photo by H. Robins Hollyday, courtesy Historical Society of Talbot County



Island and the region. Harrison was a statesman, politician, negotiator, businessman, entrepreneur, and perhaps most importantly, a Tilghman Islander himself. He was an insider in the community with an intimate knowledge of all aspects of the seasonal cycles in the seafood business. While every successful man has his enemies, by all accounts, George T. Harrison consistently gave back to the community and credited the Tilghman Packing workers with the company's success. Today, there is a plaque in the town park commemorating his service.

Richard "Dick" Knapp was George T. Harrison's successor to the presidency of the company and the transition was not smooth. Knapp and George T. had differences over each man's role in its management. From some accounts Knapp appears to have had little interest in acknowledging Harrison's experience and leadership at the plant. Others describe Knapp as "a very young man" who "knew some but not a whole lot [about the seafood packing business] but he was willing to learn; he was willing to listen."<sup>16</sup>

The arrival of Richard Knapp and his associates represents the injection of a culture from beyond Tilghman. Knapp came from a large urban center with little knowledge about the seafood processing business and little connection to the community other than finances. He developed no kinship ties to the area. The few documents that remain indicate his interest in growth, development, and property acquisition on or around Tilghman—goals that were similar to George T.'s. But he had little or no knowledge about running a seafood-processing operation and only a business connection to the region. Knapp's presence was short-lived and even more quickly forgotten.

George T. Harrison was a community insider who networked his way into the world of market capitalism and mediated between the two. Knapp, on the other hand, was an outsider to the Tilghman community and the seafood-processing business but an insider in the capitalistic world. He faced a double challenge of trying to network his way into the Tilghman community and back out again into one he knew.

When George T. Harrison stepped out of all operations in approximately 1963, Knapp assumed sole leadership of the company. He made a few major changes in terms of products processed and the processes themselves, but the work environment continued as before.

Knapp appears to have managed Tilghman Packing for about six years. In 1964 "Duffy-Mott, Inc. acquired all of the stock of the Tilghman

Packing Company. . . ."<sup>17</sup> (Duffy-Mott, Inc. is perhaps best known today as the manufacturer of Mott's Applesauce.) Knapp and his investors held financial control for less than two years, but Knapp stayed on as president for at least one year after the company's financial assets had been sold to Duffy-Mott. He probably continued as on-site company president until 1968 when a transaction conveyed "the real estate of The Tilghman Packing Company to its sole stockholder, Duffy-Mott, Inc., in completion of the dissolution of The Tilghman Packing Company. . . ."<sup>18</sup> At this time, Avalon Island, and Tilghman Packing along with it, had been entirely transferred to Duffy-Mott.<sup>19</sup> With this transaction, the company became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Duffy-Mott called the Tilghman Packing Division.<sup>20</sup>

### Work in Transition

Tilghman Packing went through a dizzying amount of mechanical and production growth beginning with Richard Knapp's management and continuing into the late sixties. Frozen foods production dominated the 1960s and became the driving force behind other changes. "In 1967, the crab and fish operation, which had long been important segments of the plant's production, had to be eliminated. The increased volume in the frozen division required more and more time, people, and facilities."<sup>21</sup>

However, closing the crab- and fish-processing operations dramatically reduced the number of jobs available for seasonal workers since oyster processing, too, had already been closed for a number of years. In addition, these workers no longer had anywhere to live on Tilghman. The county health department had ordered the workers' shanties at the end of the causeway closed some time in the early 1960s. The company's permanent African-American workers did not live on Tilghman but continued to commute to work from the small villages off the island along Route 33. By the mid-1960s, the long-distance migrant workers had disappeared and only a few faithful, long-time African-American employees remained at the plant.

Closing these operations meant many changes were taking place in both the physical and non-physical landscape on Avalon. By 1971 the processing plant had the appearance of an entirely enclosed industrial site rather than the open docks and structures of earlier days. The buildings that had once opened onto the water to accept watermen's harvests were walled in. Although watermen's boats docked along the wharf, the

edges of Avalon Island had been solidly bulkheaded, and the surface of the island had been paved with asphalt. These changes in the landscape suggest that the fresh seafood market for crabs and fish had been almost entirely replaced with the frozen seafood market in which the raw product arrived by truck rather than by boat.

As the sale of frozen food products increased, so did the machinery required for processing. Of the Duffy-Mott acquisition, an article notes that

Throughout our association with Duffy-Mott Company, Tilghman had resources available to enable it to achieve national distribution on existing products as well as the introduction of new items. Surfcakes [another frozen product] was one of the new items. . . . This product was so well accepted that it was necessary to install a new high speed stainless line to maintain adequate production. Today, Surfcakes are found on the school lunch menus throughout the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Another change on the island was found in what had been Johnny Hot's store and the Avalon Post Office.

In order to comply with Federal regulations covering the consumption of food by employees in buildings being utilized for food processing, the old store building was completely renovated. In one side of the building modern restrooms were constructed, while the remaining portion was converted into an employees' cafeteria complete with tables and vending machines.<sup>23</sup>

In 1974 and 1975, changes of another kind took place within the working environment of Tilghman Packing. On Tuesday, 25 March 1975, the headline for *The Star Democrat* newspaper read: "Tilghman Packing to close Friday" in especially large bold print. With this article, the community discovered that Duffy-Mott, Inc. had announced that production would soon cease at its Tilghman Packing Division. Don Fluharty, Tilghman Packing production manager, is quoted in the same article as explaining, "[The closing] was a result of decreasing sales volumes, the erratic economy and changes in consumer buying habits. In the opinion of the parent upper-echelons, the continued potential growth does not warrant further expansion considerations."<sup>24</sup> Keeping up with consumer trends meant investing more money in a division that was not increasing its sales.

More recently, Fluharty identified another factor in the plant's closing. "Meeting new environmental regulations would have made it too costly for the packing plant's new absentee owner to

continue operations."<sup>25</sup> The 1970s brought a heightened awareness of environmental pollution and its hazards, and an increase in environmental regulations.

## The End of Tilghman Packing

"These people are fighting people. This has been a routine of life for years, getting up and coming to work at 7 a.m. What would they do if they sat home and collected unemployment? They'd climb the walls." *Lib Dunleavy*<sup>26</sup>

With little warning, fifty-five of the sixty workers at Tilghman Packing found themselves on the verge of unemployment. The remaining five had a few months reprieve as they remained on the payroll until the final shut-down on 30 June. Most workers were truly surprised, somewhat mystified, and saddened by the announcement. For many of them, Tilghman Packing had taken care of them, and they of it, for as long as forty years.

The same *Star-Democrat* article continues: "Pointing to a calendar on the wall, Bob Cooper, a supervisor with 30 years experience, said, 'The March production calendar was full. Every date was filled in and that was prepared in mid-February.'" The closing appears to have surprised many because production plans were proceeding at full steam with little hint of a slowdown. The article also notes, "According to Donald Fluharty, plant production manager, the payroll for 1974 was \$200,000 and the plant spent \$2 million last year on goods, services and raw material."<sup>27</sup> While the payroll figure of \$200,000 for 150 workers does not seem exorbitant, the figure of \$2 million indicates unduly high overhead costs.

The story of Tilghman Packing's final days does not end with the closing announcement. If, as one Tilghman Packing worker later stated, many "figured it [the plant] would be sold to somebody else and opened up again so we'd all have a job," these hopes were dashed when three fires in the summer of 1975 leveled the company's buildings.<sup>28</sup> The first fire occurred one week before the final 30 June closing date, destroying one of the main masonry, frame, and metal warehouses at the site. The local paper reported an enormous fire: "Four volunteer fire departments responded to the fire alarm with one of the largest collections of fire-fighting equipment ever gathered in the Bay Hundred District."<sup>29</sup> Less than a week later, around the same time in the early evening, a second Tilghman Packing warehouse exploded into flame. Then on Saturday, 9 August, a third and final fire razed the remaining buildings.



In the early twentieth century, watermen were packing company employees, rather than today's independent watermen. Their paychecks were based on the price and amount of their catch. The price of the catch changed daily to keep the watermen's pay on an equal footing with other employees. And, as one old-timer said, "If you didn't get your gas from them, they wouldn't buy your catch from you."

*Photo by H. Robins Hollyday, courtesy Historical Society of Talbot County*

The causes for the three fires were never officially determined but many Tilghman residents attribute them to arson. The second fire is the only one for which there is any causal explanation—several 55-gallon tanks of fly spray and floor cleaner were found at the fire's center. The fire marshall who investigated, Vernon Dulin, said the fires' origins remain a mystery. Dulin's conclusion was much the same as his statements to the newspaper in 1975 that "arson cases 'are more difficult to prove than most.' Clues to the crime are frequently destroyed in the blaze."<sup>30</sup> According to Dulin's notes, the property owner, Duffy-Mott, stood to collect a sizeable insurance settlement from the losses. In March 1976, Duffy-Mott, Inc. sold Avalon Island and its facilities on Tilghman to Holmes Creek Seafood, Inc. which in turn sold to the development corporation that was to become Tilghman-On-Chesapeake.

Through all of its owners, Avalon remained an oyster shell island with an elevation only nine feet above the water. Its surface was bleak and devoid of any grasses, shrubs or trees. Although most of it was bulkheaded, its size had diminished over the years as the bay eroded the shoreline. A 1987 newspaper article described it this way: "From Tilghman's Shore, Avalon Island looks small and

abandoned. 'No trespassing' signs guard the neglected causeway that leads to the island's deserted restaurant awash in graffiti and two or three rundown shacks."<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the U.S. people who can afford to do so are moving into small rural communities seeking better living—spectacular views, peace and quiet, low crime, and above all else, perhaps, authenticity and connection in their lives. These "residential tourists" bring with them beliefs and values that are usually very different than those of the more traditional communities they seek out. Developments like Tilghman-On-Chesapeake are built to be enclaves of modern values in a traditional landscape. What is so threatening to traditional communities like Tilghman is the fact that newcomers are usually not fully aware of the ways in which their presence can slowly and surreptitiously erase the traditional, authentic place they came to enjoy.

Perhaps the only way for a constructive unity of past and present to occur is by establishing the kinds of brotherly relationships that George Harrison created. What is critical to these kinship relations is trust; what is critical to trust is mutual understanding and appreciation. Unfortunately,

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## Tilghman Packing Company *from page 23*

such relationships are usually years in the making and time is not something developers or planners have or are willing to set aside. Therefore, the primary hope for establishing this type of trusting bond lies in the hands of the individual residential tourist. People who have developed strong relationships with the "locals," who have mediated between the old and the new successfully, are in a position to consciously create the new community.

Change is coming to Tilghman Island and in fact the Avalon landscape of the Tilghman-On-Chesapeake Yacht Club, marina and development shows that it is already here to stay. It may take years, even decades, but if traditional and modern communities do not actively participate in their future, the former will probably be the one to be erased.

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### Notes:

1. "Tilghman Packing Company Celebrates 75th Anniversary," *Mott Off the Press*, Tilghman Packing Company Newsletter, (Tilghman, Md.: Duffy-Mott-Tilghman Packing Division, vol. 3, no. 1, March 1972): 6.
2. Deed between Harriet P. Covington and Frazier W. Covington, et al., and S. Taylor Harrison and George T. Harrison, Co-Partners Trading as Tilghman Packing Co., 25 September 1934.
3. "Making the Most of Chesapeake Seafood Merchandising," *Seafood Merchandising*, (October 1960): 2.
4. Deed from William J. Jackson, Susie L, his wife, William S. Covington, Mary J. his wife to Samuel R. Valliant, 22 May 1896.
5. Deed between Covington and Harrison, 25 September 1934.
6. "'A' Award Ceremonies of the Tilghman Packing Company" booklet, July 1944, "To Our Employees."
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.* "Letter from George T. Harrison to Mr. Lee Marshall, Director, War Food Administration."
9. Marie Ennells, taped interview by author.
10. *Ibid.*
11. May Boulden, taped interview by author, Apr. 1997
12. R. Lee Burton, *Canneries of the Eastern Shore* (Centreville, Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1986), 153.
13. "The Tale of Tilghman Island," reprinted from *Esso Oilways* (August 1951): 1-3.
14. Covington, "I Remember . . . Oystering in the 1890's," *The Sun Magazine*.
15. *Mott Off the Press*, vol. 3, no. 3, (October 1972), 1.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Confirmatory Deed, 1 April 1987, Cadbury Schweppes.
18. Schweppes deed.
19. Many informants related that Tilghman Packing was sold or transferred to the American Brands Company before Duffy-Mott. However no county documents support this information. What I believe occurred was that Duffy-Mott, Inc. was bought out by American Brands in the 1970s. American Brands in turn was bought out by Cadbury-Schweppes sometime after Tilghman Packing closed.
20. For purposes of clarity, I will continue using the name Tilghman Packing, although the company was dissolved.
21. *Mott Off the Press*, 7.
22. *Ibid.*, 1, 7.
23. *Ibid.*, 7.
24. "Tilghman Packing to Close Friday," *The Star Democrat*, no. 146 (25 March 1975), 1.
25. Jennifer L. Latham, "Closing an end of an era," *Bay Hundred Report* (August 1997), 10.
26. Lib Dunleavy, quoted in Dell Smulowitz, "Seafood workers surprised, hurt by closedown," *The Star Democrat*, no. 147 (26 March 1975), 1.
27. *Ibid.*
28. "Tilghman fire still under investigation," *The Star Democrat*, no. 251 (15 August 1975), 1.
29. Mary Swaine, "Firefighters quell Tilghman Blaze," *The Star Democrat*, no. 211 (23 June 1975), 1.
30. "Tilghman fire still under investigation," *The Star Democrat* (15 August 1975).
31. Meredith Goad, "Avalon Island: Proposed development sparking debate," *The Star Democrat*, (15 October 1987), 1.

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