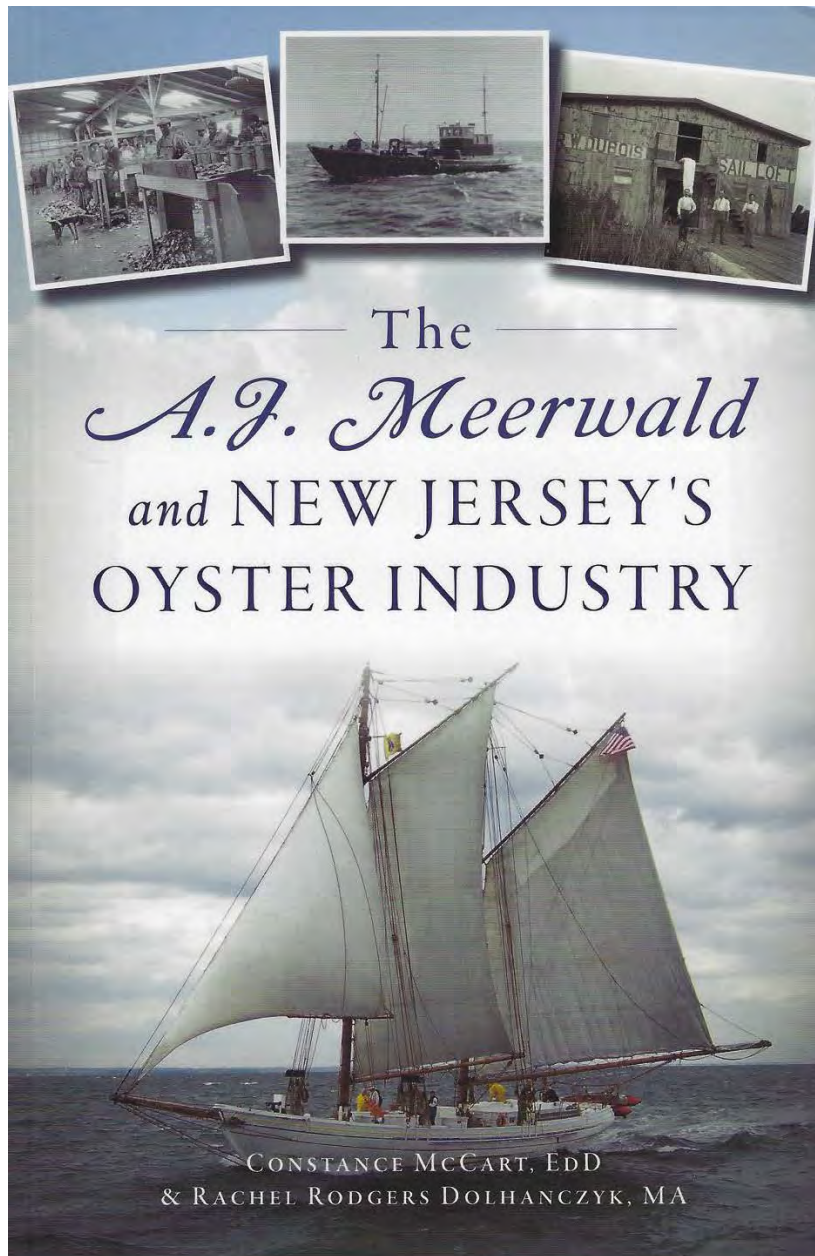


# THE GREAT OUTDOORS



## **A Book Launch**

*Newly released book causes our columnist to reflect on the launching of two Bayshore initiatives and how each has grown and thrived.*

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Sometime between December of 1989 and March of '90, CU Maurice River assembled a work crew to erect an osprey platform near the Mauricetown Causeway Bridge. Prior to the great infestation of phragmites this was likely our most viewed nest (today our members monitor 40-some).

I remember the day as muddy and chilly. Like many of our osprey platform installations, work has to be completed before the mid-March return of migrating osprey.

The entire time we were constructing the nest we could hear the steady drone of water pumps. Aboard the deck of what resembled a sunken or grounded ship, a small number of spectators curiously watched us from time to time. We went about our business of erecting the pole and when we completed the task at hand, we decided to see what they were about.

We inquired, "Hey, what are you folks up to?"

With levity intended, they replied, tit for tat, "What are you up to?"

We said we had just installed an osprey nesting platform. They thought our goal was optimistic; after all, NJ had once had 500 pair of osprey and was

probably down to around 25 -50 pair, so they were scarce in those early days of recovery. Likewise, during the heyday of the oyster industry, 590 vessels called the ports of the Maurice River their home in 1903, but there were fewer than 20 in 2020.

We returned to our original inquiry, "What are YOU up to?"

They responded, "We're restoring a 1928 oyster schooner; want to come aboard?"

We looked around at our work crew to see if folks were game and the head-nodding seemed to show interest, so we were soon on tour, with Meghan Wren and Greg Honachefsky our guides. I knew that John Gandy had purchased a schooner with the intention of restoring it, but little else. He purchased it for a dollar, and by my estimation he paid \$500,000 too much. This was clearly going to be expensive if it were ever to happen.

The previous owner, Donnie McDaniels, had bought it for the clamming license that accompanied the craft, recognizing the hull to have outlived its usefulness. But Gandy was enthralled by the old sailing schooners and had a vision of returning the schooner to its former glory and port. Today, I marvel at the

visionaries who led the restoration process.

As we toured there looked to be more water in the hull of that ship than in the river. We tried to be polite and hide our skepticism. I think our smiles likely gave us away. They explained that this forgotten vessel had not always been a motorized craft, but that at one point in its glory it was an oyster schooner, traveling only with the wind. They planned to remove the pilothouse and restore the low-profile entrances to the galley and berths, equip it with masts, and sail it as a floating classroom.

Eddie DiPalma was with our crew and his father had been an oysterman for a number of years. He was familiar with shipbuilding and he shook his head in amazement at the task ahead of them.

We offered our best wishes - "Good luck." And their reply seemed to have a trace of equal uncertainty, "Good luck with the birds." Our mutual skepticism was well-justified.

Ultimately Meghan Wren and John Gandy agreed that a non-profit, then called the Schooner Project, should be established to take the helm in the restoration process. In 1992 they received an Historic Restoration Grant, and the boat was hauled out in 1994

for land-based construction. A professional crew augmented by highly skilled volunteers and greenhorns proceeded to restore the A.J. Meerwald. It was estimated that about 10% of the vessel was extant. After seven years of blood, sweat, and likely some tears, on September 12, 1995 the ship was christened with a bottle of champagne by Wren in front of a crowd of on-lookers.

Recently, I had time once again to reflect on this day and the many years leading up to and following it, as I completed a new story. These were the days when the bivalve was king and Port Norris had more millionaires per square mile than any other town in New Jersey because of the oyster industry. Growing up I remember old timers saying that oystermen lit their cigarettes at taverns with 100-dollar bills and traded in cars when ashtrays were full.

Back then, sails filled the Maurice River Cove and bayfront as they went in search of oysters. The Meerwald's launch in 1995 was followed by thirty-odd years of hard work while the Bayshore Center in Bivalve (BCB) not only restored the ship but the shipping sheds as well, where they established a museum and ventured to keep people educated about the importance of this

mollusk to our region, both yesterday and today.

This history is part of our regional heritage, and in my humble opinion it is important to give generations an understanding of our past, present, and prospective future. The BCB's museum curator Rachael Rodgers Dolhanczayk, along with educator Constance L. McCart, have just written a book - *The A. J. Meerwald and New Jersey's Oyster Industry*. It does a marvelous, detailed, yet succinct job of covering the history of the industry and the restoration of the A.J., including important timelines for both. It is a must read and a super gift.

During its six decades of history the boat had many uses and incarnations. Early days of the A.J., its service in WWII, and its return to oystering are described.

Captains often referred to their ships in human terms. "Well, wooden boats they creak and they groan, do all the same kinds of things as humans do. That's one of the reasons they talk of the boat as being alive," Captain Fenton Anderson told Rita Moonsamy in a 1983 interview.

The building of ships and prep work such as half models and floor sketches

are discussed. The Delaware Bay oyster schooner's shallow draft and wide beam are especially designed for our local waters and the task of harvesting oysters. Since these bivalves live in shallower depths, piling them onboard takes a wide craft.

People's age-old love of oysters is also described in the volume. Oysters are especially nutritious and have been prepared in endless ways. In their heyday, between the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early twenties, menus would include such fare as oysters on the half shell, followed by oyster patties, turkey with oyster stuffing, Oysters Rockefeller, and broiled oysters and rolls. There were all manner of implements like silver oyster forks and fancy Haviland Limoges porcelain oyster plates with individual cells to accommodate each shucked oyster.

The book is also filled with interesting facts about the oyster and the industries surrounding it. Oysters filter up to fifty gallons of water each day, thus playing a critical role in the health of the bay. They are sessile; they do not dig or move like clams, but remain fixed and immobile. Their shells have been utilized for centuries as money, roadway material, utensils, decorations, a component in glass, chicken feed, and mulch. They were also prized by

our predecessors, and half-buried oyster shell middens show us where Lenape encampments once stood.

Aspects of the industry's oyster lease grounds, harvest methods, and the many ancillary enterprises that supported the oyster business are part of the text. Trains were used to deliver oysters to restaurants all over the east coast. The advent of canning led to the shucking of oysters and huge piles of shells. Thus sprang up the riverfront villages of Shellpile and Bivalve.

For many years oysters could only be taken under sail, but during and after the war motorized crafts were permitted. The evolution of the industry as each of these modifications took place changed the face of the business landscape and the health of the harvest.

Prior to the spread of the disease MSX in the late 1950s, millions of bushels of oysters were harvested each year from 50K acres of oyster beds. By 1957 the disease had decreased the harvest to 10,000 bushels. In recent times the harvest has rebounded to around 100,000 bushels annually.





*The portion of waterfront known as shellpile. Shells were used to reseed the oyster beds providing a hard surface for oyster where larvae can attach. Photo: Library of Congress Rothstein 1938*

With shucking came the shuckers. The Afro-American contribution to the industry is both colorful and poignant. The sharp, rhythmic sounds of many workers opening the shells to release the meat inside are described by those who worked there. From the ramshackle housing to the joys of a child growing up in this environment, it all comes to life in the words of people who lived along the waterfront - part of a heritage that is explored in this book.

(Please scroll down)



*Afro-Americans were integral to the oyster business especially with the advent of shucking and canning. Workers were paid by the pint. The most gallons shucked in a day was thirty-five. Photo: Harvey Porch, courtesy of Cumberland County Historic Society. Photo: CU Maurice River collection.*



*Homes of oyster packinghouse workers, Shellpile, New Jersey. Photo: Library of Congress Rothstein 1938*

My thoughts return to my first encounter with the A.J. – in retrospect this was a memorable day. Two organizations, both now well-established in the community, were then in their non-profit infancy. The Schooner Project, known today as the Bayshore Center in Bivalve, and Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River, and its Tributaries, Inc. *aka* CU Maurice River met. Each had their own lofty ideas of what they could accomplish. These two organizations continue to have many intersections in their missions, which shine a light on our natural and cultural history. We are using different tools but exploring the same region.

Today, osprey exceed 650 pair; of the oyster schooners only a handful are left. But because of the visionaries of the Bayshore Center in Bivalve, one magnificent vessel does grace the Maurice River. In 1998 the NJ Legislature declared the AJ Meerwald New Jersey's Official Tall Ship.

*The J. Morton Galetto served on the Board of the Bayshore Center at Bivalve for a decade or more. She was involved in many partnerships between the Center and CU Maurice River.*



*Today the A.J. Meerald is used as a floating classroom. In 1998 the NJ Legislature declared it New Jersey's Official Tall Ship. CU Maurice River collection.*

*(please scroll for side bar and information on how to obtain the book)*



To buy the book, book a sail or learn more about the oyster industry visit the Bayshore Center In Bivalve's website.

<https://www.bayshorecenter.org>

Further check out their museum at 2800 High Street, Port Norris, NJ. It's a great way to spend a morning or afternoon. Reopens for the season on April 8, 2022.