

The Abundant Oyster?

By the early twentieth century, Commercial Township was home to one of the largest oyster-harvesting industries in the world. Entire communities were built upon the wealth of Delaware Bay oysters. Over the course of the century, these communities shifted with changes in the industry and its labor force. African Americans, many of whom were recruited from the Chesapeake, gradually immigrated to this area to work as skilled oyster shuckers, schooner crew and captains, and dozens of other jobs in Port Norris, Bivalve, Shellpile, and beyond. In this exhibit, you will hear directly from African Americans and their fellow community members about life, work, and play in an oyster town.

With your help, this exhibit will continue to evolve. We welcome submission of your stories, photographs and artifacts. Please see a member of the staff for details.



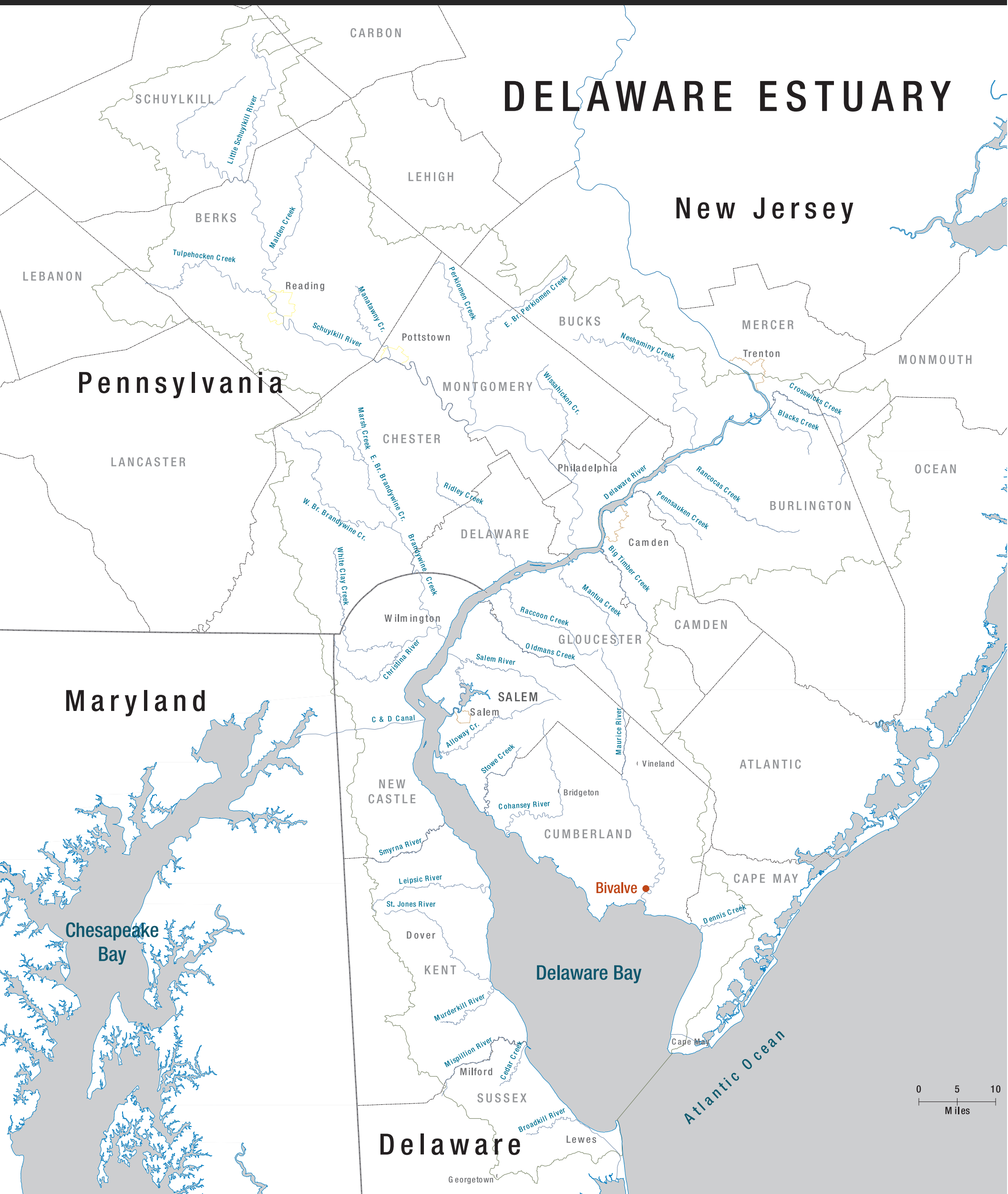
The exhibit *The Abundant Oyster?* was made possible by a grant from New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the New Jersey Council for the Humanities.

Oyster Shuckers. Photo by Harvey W. Porch, courtesy of the Cumberland County Historical Society

Aerial photo
Delaware Bay Museum, source unknown

Migrant Workers from the Chesapeake

People followed the oyster season and industry from the Chesapeake Bay area to Southern New Jersey. As migrant workers, they supplied the needed hands while saving money for their families back home. The migrant workers served as crew members and later families from the Chesapeake settled and worked in the shucking houses.



The black people basically ran the whole industry. A lot of them came from down the Chesapeake Bay area and on the Eastern Shore. Up from Rehoboth and places like that.

—Oral History Interview, **Don Taylor, 2006**

It was a very prosperous time for the oysterman. A lot of colored people came to Port Norris at that time to work on the oyster boats...for it was heavy hard work. They worked hard.

—Oral History Interview, **Doris Reeves, 2005**

Our family came to the area from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. My mother is from St. Michaels. My father is from Crisfield, Maryland. What they use to do is follow the oyster season from the Eastern Shore of Maryland to Southern New Jersey. As the seasons were extended, rather than being migratory they simply stayed in the Southern New Jersey area.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

They all had connections up here and they came, like I say, we didn't necessarily have to hunt for them, they hunted us because that was work for them. They were looking for work. Things were different then. Now you can't find a shucker anywhere. You have to hunt for them.

—Oral History Interview, **Clyde Phillips, 2008**

We hired 13 colored people...our colored people came from Shady Side, which was the name of a town about 10 miles below Annapolis. They come up here during the months of May and June, which was the planting season...

—Storytelling Session: Oystermen Stories, **Joe Lore, 89 years old in 1998**

My father would go all the way down to Cambridge, Maryland and areas around there to get a crew that would come up here and work on the boats when they would go up the Bay.

—Oral History Interview, **Jean Reed Narona, 2005**



Crew unloading oysters – The RICHARD LORE, Berry & Bowden. Photograph, Delaware Bay Museum, source unknown

I'd like to tell you the old crews we got from down there, they had homes, had their schools, they had their gardens, chicken, poultry, pigs; they were nice people. They'd come up here May and June and they'd go home and crab the rest of the season. The off-season for them was May and June.

—Storytelling Session: Oystermen Stories, **John Dubois, 1998**

A lot of them only draw \$2 or \$3 a week. At the end of the season they took all the money home for family.

—Storytelling Session: Oystermen Stories, **Bill Biggs, 1998**

We go to Crisfield in October and then in April we go to Wesson...but the Crisfield comes up to us twice a year. And we'd be doing that for more than 50 years [speaking about church reunions].

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers' Tales, **Georgia Robinson, 2009**

Captains & Crew

During the months of May and June, African American workers from the Chesapeake Bay area were hired to work on oyster schooners. They provided the labor to dredge oysters from the public seed beds and plant them on the privately least harvest beds. The stories below show the roles, opportunities, attitudes and limitations experienced by the workers.



left: Crew member redistributing oyster shells on the LADY RAE. Photograph by Clyde A. Phillips, mid-1940s, Delaware Bay Museum, gift of Clyde A. Phillips



right: Crew of Schooner MARY CAROLYN, 1941. Capt. Boyd M. Robbins (seated), Capt. Normand Robbins (hand on pole), 1st Mate Otis Davis (standing right of Capt. Boyd), man with apron is the cook and man next to the cook is the 2nd mate. Photograph by Joe Lore, 1941, Delaware Bay Museum, gift of Joe Lore

I think wages was \$80 a month for these colored people.

—Storytelling Session: Oystermen Stories, **John Dubois, 1998**

There were some black captains and there were a lot of black mates who were just as qualified as any white man but just couldn't make it. If they were somebody's son they'd have been captain. Dr. Sharp's driver, John Cornish,...he also was captain of the Rosie Lambert which was a little schooner...Elwood McBride...he was a captain. Cecil Upsurh was a boat captain. There were an awful lot of blacks that were capable, but you know how things work...Things change slow.

—Oral History Interview, **Robert Morgan, 2003**

Hard work, very laborious work, sun up to sun down literally ...I had a lot of family members who did tonging ...their catches they would come in and sell to the oyster houses along the river and most of the time they got 6 to 8 bushels...that was pretty good tonging...that was interspersed with working on the large boats, as well.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

When I was 15 went on boat started working...I picked dredges, culled...[I worked on] H. W. SOCKWELL...Years come, I'd run the boat, captain...15 men below deck...Jerry Green, remember him? He was my cook...Shelly Ennals, he was my mate.

—Oral History Interview, **Freddie Smith, 2008**

...a lot of these men aboard the boat probably came from the islands down in the Chesapeake. Dad almost always hired a Chesapeake crew because things were rough down there and anytime things were rough well he would hire them and bring em up and give em work.

—Bay Days: Personal Stories about the Bayshore Area, **Clyde Phillips, 2003**

He [my father] was a typical deckhand, which of course consisted of pulling the dredges in and doing what they call culling the oysters. While separating the oyster from the shells and stacking them...If they were out for an extended period of time they would sell to what was called a buy-boat. That would actually come to their boat in the Maurice River Cove and buy the oysters and they would continue back to working the beds.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

From year to year, they would get berths on different boats, one season they might work for one boat, another season they might work on another boat...sometimes the cooks would stay with the same boat.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

I worked on HERMAN SOCKWELL...I didn't work no wintertime, no sir...I worked up the Bay [in the springtime.]...I worked on LITTLE MATTY and BIG MATTY. The pay was better up here [than the Cheasapeake]. You got paid more...than back home...so we all left home and came up here...from 1939 until now.

—Oral History Interview, **George “Babe” Wallace, 2008**

We went to the Oasis Bar that's where a lot of them hung out...in Baltimore. We got 5 or 6 right from the bar and they came to Jersey with just the clothes they had on at the bar. In other words, they didn't have a jacket, they didn't have anything, oilskins or boots or anything at all. They were half cocked, I guess, when they decided to come along...half of them turned out alright, the other half not so good.

—Storytelling Session: Oystermen Stories, **John Dubois, 1998**

They use to do it when they had sails, they'd stay a week. But when you had power you'd go out every morning and come back every night...when you had sail, no wind, no work.

—Oral History Interview, **Freddie Smith, 2008**

My dad...worked on oyster boats. He was an oysterman...We didn't have a car... So he would leave home at 1:00 in the morning walking to get to the port...that's how important it was for him to get on board so that was a Sunday morning early Monday morning... he would get there and work for the week until they got oyster boats filled and it was always a joyous time when he came home because there was some bounty there.

—Storytelling Session: A Women's Point of View, **Emma Trusty, 2002**

They didn't have enough men around here... it seemed being like a family affair when they'd come back. We didn't have really any trouble until the second World War when they built that bridge across the Chesapeake. Then they went to work over in the shipyards. That's when we went to power in '43.

—Storytelling Session: Oystermen Stories, **John Dubois, 1998**

A Town called Shellpile

Shellpile was a town located in the marsh along the banks of the Maurice River. Shuckers and other workers in the oyster industry lived in row houses under deplorable conditions that lacked proper heat, protection from the elements and plumbing. Over the years, some families were able to purchase their own homes. By the late 1970s, public housing units were constructed and Shellpile became a ghost town.



Shell-pile. Photograph, Delaware Bay Museum, source unknown

right: Children in street. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein, 1938, courtesy of Library of Congress

We weren't allowed to call that Shellpile. That was South Port Norris! Yes, then they went through some kind of transition and we weren't allowed to call it Shellpile and now there is Shellpile again...Shellpile doesn't you know, exist. But it is referred to.

—Oral History Interview, **Beryl Kane, 2008**

Mostly the blacks stayed in South Port Norris [Shellpile] and the Caucasian families lived in Central Port Norris or the town of Port Norris....

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

There were huge piles of the oyster shells on the side of the road, and, oh, it just smelled horrendous because living in South Vineland we never smelled these smells. And flies and seagulls and it was always hot and smelly. At that time there were still homes that the workers lived along Shellpile Road. They were wood clapboard houses and all the workers lived there. On Sundays they'd all be out, the kids would be playing along side the road. The men would be sitting out talking and throwing dice...It was families, it wasn't just the men that lived there, it was families [in the 1950s].

—Oral History Interview, **Nancy Hardem, 2005**

It was a shame, it was a sin where we had to live in them houses. There were holes... in the wintertime we had to take boxes... and put up inside...I'm telling you how it was. I don't need to tell you the good part, I tell you the bad part...

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers Tales, **Beryl Whittington, 2005**

It was called Berry Row... Two stories high...apartments...the houses were called Berry Row, Miller Berry leased them out...Both sides of the road.

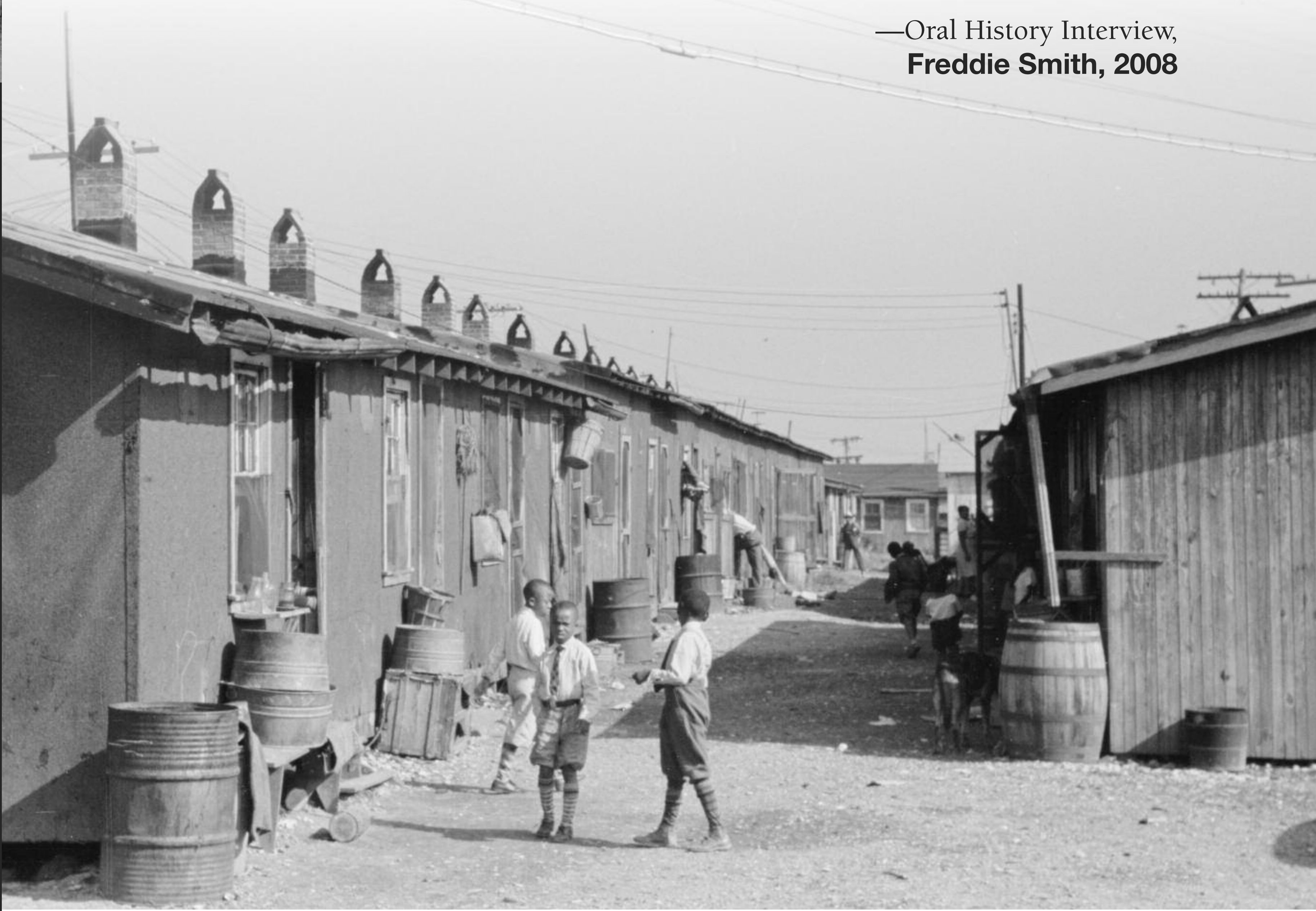
—Oral History Interview, **Olin McConnell, 2008**

Probably in its heyday, I would probably say that there was a community of 2,500 people ...all African American. There was one Caucasian store owned by Ted Reeves, which was a grocery store, it had virtually everything in it.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

[Owned own home] thank God for that. Still living in it today...I built that before I got married. I was going to buy a brand new car. My father said 'hey...I give you property, want you build yourself a house. That's better than buying a brand new car. You buy a brand new car...someone tear it up or steal it from you...build yourself a house, be on the safe side, live in it, get married, you can always rent it out.'

—Oral History Interview, **Freddie Smith, 2008**



Working Conditions and Pay Day

The shucking system and the conditions under which shuckers worked changed significantly over the 20th century. Over time and after the coming of the union, there were changes to working conditions inside the shucking houses including increase in wages and reduction of singing. In the words of these community members, you will see drastic differences in perspective concerning work in the shucking houses.



Oyster Shuckers, Photograph by Harvey W. Porch, courtesy of the Cumberland County Historical Society

I got \$8 a day. With the union I got \$12.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers’ Tales,
Freddie Smith, 2009

I don’t need to tell you the good part, I tell you the bad part...I can’t say nothing too good about none of them because they was slave drivers and I got to say it....

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers’ Tales, **Beryl Whittington, 2009**

There was heat, but not the kind of heat that they have today. We had them coal stoves, little pot-bellied coal stoves, one or two in the oyster houses...You had to get off your oyster box to get down and get warm.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers’ Tales,
Beryl Whittington, 2009

...it was very interesting to see these people and how fast they could shuck the oysters... The shuckers would get paid according to how many pints or gallons...of oysters they shucked...I always liked watching them and they were such nice people. They were poor people...We would do the payroll and would pay them in cash. They would go to the bank on Fridays and we would actually put cash in the envelopes.

—Oral History Interview,
Jean Reed Narone, 2005

It was piecework. Before the war when they were singing these songs [traditional spirituals], they would rock back and forth... They’d all be singing, I loved it...

—Oral History Interview,
Clyde Phillips, 2008

When my dad was running the shucking house...They would come in and dump it [oysters] into the skimmer...There was a piece of plywood along side the door...and he would write the shucker’s shucking box number. Each one of the boxes had a number. If he didn’t know the shucker well enough he asked for the number...a lot of the skimmers knew the numbers...but he would tally by tally marks and there was no card at that time for the shuckers. But the shucker had a good memory and would watch him skim...the shucker would know the count...the gals in the office would make sure the people got their money.

Oral History Interview,
Clyde Phillips, 2008

Well, when I got up shucking oysters I could shuck up here 20 to 22 gallons a day. Some of them guys could go 35 and 40 gallons almost a day. Some of them could shuck. I had an uncle who could do it. Singing the spirituals and keeping the morale up, keeping going.

Oral History Interview,
Beryl Whittington, 2003

If you didn’t pay the union you didn’t work... if you didn’t pay when you’re suppose to they’d pull you off your box.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers’ Tales,
Margaret Towner, 2009

Fred East had built shucking houses there [Maurice River]...and the black men and women shucked oysters. They were fast at it. There were good. They made good money at it.

Oral History Interview,
Doris Reeves, 2005

For culling 8 pints of oysters...55 cent when I come up here. Now you go by the pound but they still get you...they give you nothing for what you’re doing...When I came to New Jersey it was almost as bad as Crisfield. When I first come to New Jersey... in 1946... I shucked for Bivalve Packing Company, Blue Points, William Sharp...These oyster houses were run by people out of Baltimore, Maryland... then they turned them over to...Robbins Brothers ...Fred East...on the Maurice River side...a lot of people were over there.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers’ Tales,
Beryl Whittington, 2005

I been shucking ever since I was 14...use to be [fast]...I can make \$75 to \$100 every day when I was younger.

—Oral History Interview,
George “Babe” Wallace, 2008

[Started the work day at] 6:00 in the morning. Until oysters was gone. I guess they stopped around 3.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers’ Tales,
Georgia Robinson, 2009

When the colored people first started shucking they got paid so much a gallon...When the skimmer took the oysters from the colored people he’d measure 20 cents for a gallon of them...When the union came here they struck a pot, 10 pints per gallon...they made them shuck 8, 9 can.

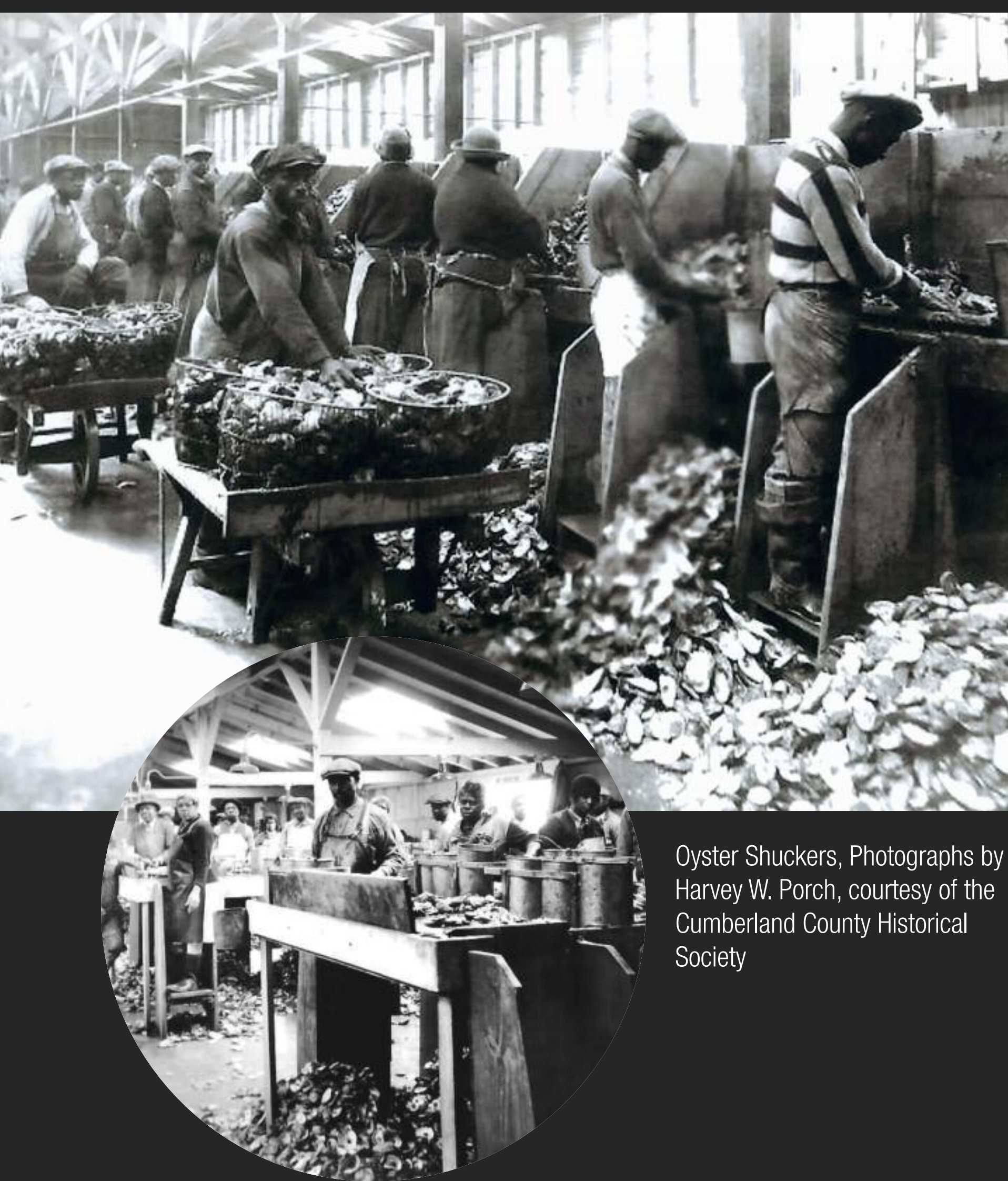
—Storytelling Session: Oystermen Stories,
Joe Lore, 1998

Clyde Phillips formed the union was the only time he got that time cut down to 6 to 2...yes, sir, it was 6 to 6, 5 to 5. If you didn’t work you didn’t have no job.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers’ Tales,
Beryl Whittington, 2009

Shucking Process

The process of shucking oysters demonstrates a historical continuity. While the shucking system and conditions evolved over time, the way to shuck oysters, the skill needed and the tools remained relatively unchanged even in the early 21st century. Methods and tools have been passed from generation to generation.



Oyster Shuckers, Photographs by Harvey W. Porch, courtesy of the Cumberland County Historical Society

If you didn't make those oysters right you didn't have no job... they wouldn't let you leave unless you dumped the pile of oysters there...you had to stand there and pick every one of them. It was up to you, if you wanted a job you had to do it right.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers' Tales, 2009

We had room for about 75 shuckers, I think, 80 shuckers. Room was never full but it was close to being full.

—Oral History Interview, **Clyde Phillips, 2008**

When you would go into the shucking houses there would be a staccato type noise of the breaking and opening of the oysters. And most of the shuckers had a rhythm. It was a host of different sounds and motion, as well. It was so interesting to see their work...In those days, most of the way the money was made was by the gallon and they would sort the oyster as they shucked them...four grades of oysters.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

They had large oysters as big as my hand. Big oysters at that time. You had a stool and a block of wood and you stabbed the oysters. You had a piece of iron and you cracked oysters and shucked them. That's how we got into them. There's some people who were breakers. They had a block and they would break. But we were stabbers. When we made \$50 we were almost rich... They had different sizes see we had the large ones, medium ones and the smaller ones. They went in different buckets.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers' Tales, **Georgia Robinson, 2009**

They would bring the oysters around to us... they would have six baskets...as they come through they would tap your box and we'd get down. Once you got down, then they would take the basket and fill the oysters up on the box. Then they would do the next person the same way. After you shucked the oysters, the shells went down the side of the box, then they had another person that came through with a wheelbarrow that scooped the shells up and put in the wheelbarrow. And took them out doors and dumped them out. That's the reason they call Shellpile, Shellpile. You'd always see a pile of oyster shells.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers' Tales, **Margaret Towner, 2009**

Some of the companies had trolley lines [motorized track] that run through the house...the oysters came in over head and they would dump the buckets...right on shuckers benches. Port Norris Oyster Company did that when Morgan was in charge.

—Oral History Interview, **Clyde Phillips, 2008**

You yourself take it to the skimmer. When I started they were paying by the gallon...they would give it back to you and they'd call that a bluff. But now they take everything you put in and you get paid by the pound. They'd write them on a card...that card is for you to keep account like he writes on a big card and that goes into the office.

—Storytelling Session: Shuckers' Tales, **Anna Mae Young, 2009**

One of the greatest things was the pre-war shucking houses...I loved it. I remember going down to the big house, Port Norris Oyster Company...down Shellpile...This was pre-war because they would be singing the spirituals. There is a process of shucking where they would lean forward...and grab an oyster off the pile in front of them on the bench with their right hand...Then they came back and as they came back to the edge of the table or the bench there would be a block of wood with a vertical piece of metal in it, maybe an inch or inch and a half wide, that they would lay...the thin end of the oyster on it...they would hit it just to break the bill off...Just enough to get the blade in and they would hardly miss a beat doing that. They'd still be in motion going backwards and they would lean way back and as they came off of that block, they would put the knife inside of the oyster and slice on the bottom shell and cut that adductor muscle off the shell. Then they would drop that at their feet, have that thing turned over so fast you couldn't tell it. Cut the other side off and throw that shell over their shoulder or maybe or down at their feet at the opposite side. It was usually on the opposite side they would swing to their prominent hand and drop that first shell and drop the other one on the way back down on the other side of them. They would also have that oyster now caught between the blade of the knife and their index finger and then they would throw it in one of the pots and there would be four pots on their shucking station. All the way back would be counts, extra select, select and standards. They would look at the oyster and say, "Well, that's a standard," they'd throw it in this pot...

—Oral History Interview, **Clyde Phillips, 2008**

Community and People

The stories below, as told by African Americans and whites, use key words of honesty and respect. Friendships between the races, activities, baseball and nicknames all added to the sense of community.

It wasn't that way around here...Everyone got along. People were honest...my dad never locked anything up ...never had to worry about it.

—Storytelling Session: Shell Fishing, **Steve Errickson, 2005**

I grew up, played ball with black people, I partied with them. I've been in all their speakeasies. I've been to ball games with them, played with them on a team one year. We never had any racial problems here that I can remember. I was told that once the NAACP came down here and tried to recruit and they run them out. So we've never, never. Some white people never associated with them.

—Oral History Interview,
Don Taylor, 2006

I can remember when I first went to Port Norris when I was in first/second grade there. My best friend was Lizzy Smith and we used to share our lollypop going back and forth to school. And I went up to her house and played, she lived on up the street, she had younger brothers and sisters...they were twins and I thought that was fascinating.

—Oral History Interview,
Beryl Kane, 2008

Shellpile had a team too. It was called Goldblatt Giants. Matter of fact, I played for them one year. A lot of the shuckers were on the team...Paul Milbourne his son [Larry Milbourne], played for the Yankees.

The ball diamond up here is named after him. He had a World Series ring with the Yankees.

—Oral History Interview,
Don Taylor, 2006

It was a nice time because even though it was a rough environment, the community did stick together, everyone knew everyone, the community helped raise you as a child and there was respect for the other people. No delinquency as I recall it, ever, there were no race problems...we went of school with Caucasian people. We played together and that's the way it was from the '40's, '50's and '60's when I grew up...It was really kind of a Utopian Society that I grew up in...It was kind of a melting pot that worked for the good of an industry, which was the oyster.

—Oral History Interview,
Lionel Hickman, 2005

We always knew him as Buster Walker, Bus Walker we always called him, but I don't know his real first name. And that's another interesting tip. Everyone had nicknames so we as children...knew most of the people by their nicknames more so than their actual names ...There's another fella...his name is George Washington. He would often work as a cook aboard the boats.

—Oral History Interview,
Lionel Hickman, 2005



Street Scene, Photograph Delaware Bay Museum, gift of Richard Smith

right: Tate Hober Store, Shellpile, NJ. Photograph, courtesy McConnell Collection

below right: Photograph by Arthur Rothstein, 1938, courtesy of Library of Congress



A Playground

Children in Bivalve, Shellpile and Port Norris had nature's playground at their fingertips. Various games, swimming, exploring the marshes, riding the rails and jumping ditches were some of their activities. The stories below truly show that the playground, minus adults, was limited only to one's imagination and sense of adventure.



above: Photograph by Arthur Rothstein, 1938, courtesy of Library of Congress

We were content being around Port Norris, being with our friends and doing things. It was just a fun experience growing up in Port Norris.

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

We were poor, but we didn't know it. We didn't have anything ...we had everything we needed. We didn't have everything we wanted, but we had everything we needed...We were just happy people.

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

[In the summertime] we did baseball, pick-up basketball...ball games...I didn't care for fishing. We picked beans, some picked tomatoes ...I didn't do it constantly, but it was always available.

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

We would often ride the train rails from Port Norris to Port Elizabeth and back. Of course, that was without paying a fee because we would steal rides on it... our parents didn't know we were doing that.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

Another thing we did was swim because the Maurice River was there...we also played on the salt marshes. One of the big pastimes was jumping the big lead ditches that the salt marsh farmers [dug]...They would flood them at certain times and dry them off for other times.

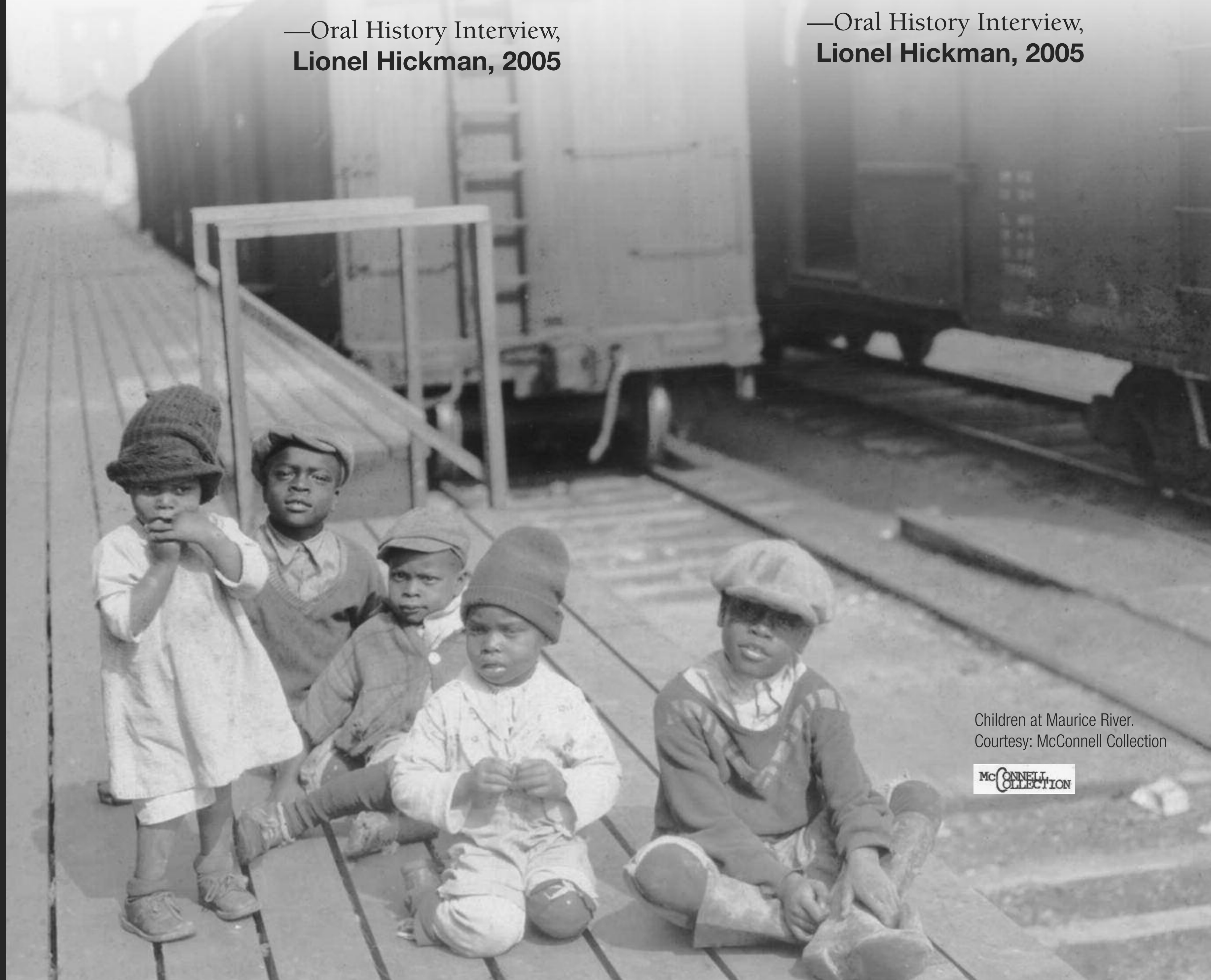
—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

There was the largest oyster house that was in South Port Norris, it was called the Big House. The original house burned around 1958. Tremendous fire; gutted the building. It was rebuilt. It was still called the Big House, but it was nowhere in size to what it was. I can remember parts of the concrete slab, we use to roller skate on because it was never rebuilt.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

The river use to be linked by what were called floats. They were actually huge, wooden poles that had boards across them that were used to float oysters...some were so close that you could jump from float to float and go almost the whole length of the river from Bivalve all the way up to where Matts Landing is now... if you missed a jump you would end up under a float. I remember...several young men dying. They would either hit their heads or get caught in the tide and get under the floats... always had slick moss on them....Swimming was what we did most. We would dive off the pilings... the masts of the boats...most of the oyster houses had covered docks and we would get on top of the roofs of the covered docks and run and make a dive into the river. Hoping to clear the docks...which, again, was not a safe thing to do.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**



Children at Maurice River.
Courtesy: McConnell Collection

McCONNELL
COLLECTION

Making Ends Meet

Not everyone worked the water or in the shucking houses, but most jobs were intertwined with the oyster industry. Employment of house workers, chauffeurs and masons relied on the success of the wealthy oystermen. Some people moved on completely by becoming teachers, superintendents, doctors, lawyers and professional baseball players.



above: Tom Tripp, well to-do businessman in Port Norris who owned a restaurant and was well known for mixing herbs and curing diseases that doctors couldnot. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein, 1938, courtesy of Library of Congress



above right: Dr. Earle Stuart and Dr. Leonard Scott, May 12, 1944. They operated a clinic for African American patients in the Port Norris Firehouse. Courtesy: McConnell Collection

Most of my friends all came from similar backgrounds. My parents weren't professional people, there were very few professional people, African American, in Port Norris area at that time....They were hard working people who had goals for their children. My parents instilled in me to go on and be somebody. I'm thankful to them to this day for what they instilled in me.

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

My stepfather held down two jobs. He worked at night at a nursing home. He would come home in the morning and go to work in the clam house. They made soup.

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

My dad was in the mason business. A guy who worked for him, his name was Pacer that was his nickname, his real name was George Stanley from Cambridge, Maryland. He use to eat dinner with us every Sunday...he'd be all dressed up coming from Church and he ate with us every Sunday ay our house at our dinnertable. My dad taught a couple of the Black people to be masons.

—Oral History Interview, **Doris Reeves, 2005**

Many of the families would have a colored woman or man in the house to help. The three doctors in Port Norris, each of them had chauffeurs. Many of my girlfriends' families had a colored woman in the house to wash, iron, do the cooking, whatever needed to be done. We had a colored man. We had Steve Curvey. He had a cot down in the basement. My grandmother would fix a plate of food for him to eat out in the shed. He never ate with us.

—Oral History Interview, **Beryl Kane, 2008**

I worked out in the salt hay fields from the end of April through June...I got \$4 a day.

—Oral History Interview, **Freddie Smith, 2008**

Fred Tarlton [father-in-law]...he was the first one who caught eels in the Maurice River. He designed his own pots, own floats and for years he had the market cornered. He was called the Eel Man...again making a living from the water.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

Some of them integrated here, most of our blacks moved to Millville after they tore down Shellpile and Bivalve...Some of them made it pretty good. We've had two lawyers from our school. At least two doctors that I know went to school here.

—Oral History Interview, **Don Taylor, 2006**

...I realized at an early age what I wanted to do in life. I always wanted to be a teacher. I was inspired by one of my teachers...at Port Norris in 8th grade, her name was Mrs. Newcomb...she inspired me to go on and be an educated person...A lot of people have given me a lot of accolades for going to college...I was always a hometown kid, wasn't one of those city boys. I enjoyed the quietness of the country, Port Norris

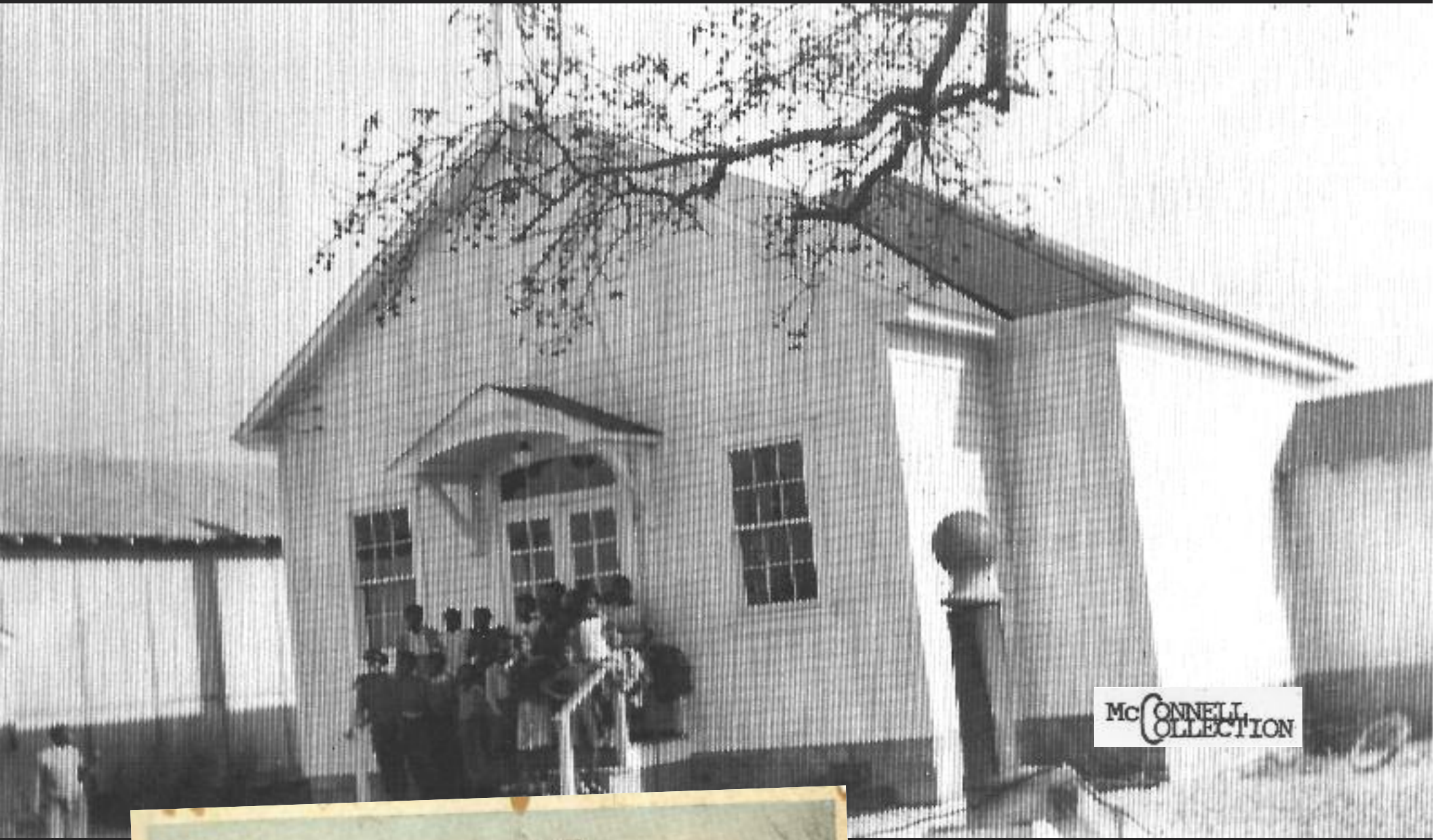
—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

One of my best friends, Paul Milbourne [6th grade teacher, who retired with Mr. Ballard] ...he went to the Brown School. Larry Milbourne who went to the Major Leagues. He played with the Major League for 10-15 years. He played with the Yankees, he played for the Phillies, he played for Houston. His father, who just died a couple of years ago, was instrumental, he was a Little League coach, Babe Ruth coach and he always professed that one of his sons would be a Major League ball player.

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

School and Education

Local schools consisted of the Brown School located in Shellpile, the Port Norris Brick School and Port Norris High School. The Brown School was segregated by geography, but the Port Norris schools were integrated. After the Port Norris High School closed in the late 1940s, students attended Millville High School.



top: Brown School, Photograph, courtesy McConnell Collection

above: New High School, Port Norris, Postcard, Delaware Bay Museum, gift of Bill Biggs.

above right: Port Norris School, 7th grade, ca. 1946.1st row, left to right: Eileen Washburn, Doris Berry, Lizzie Smith, Nealia Beachamp and Nita Phillips. 2nd row: Amelia Riggins, Beryl Schubert, Anna Jane Rowley, _____ Matthews, Betsy Ann McDaniels and Janice Randolph. Photograph, Delaware Bay Museum, ca. 1946, gift of Beryl Schubert Kane

In South Port Norris [Shellpile], there was a school, which they called the Brown School. That was a totally African American school... by me being from another section of Port Norris I went to what they called Port Norris Brick School...I never went to the Brown School. It was for students who lived in South Port Norris...the African American kids who lived in South Port Norris. If you lived in that area and you weren't African American, you went to the Brick School.

. —Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

Use to be a little Brown School there [Shellpile] ...that went from Kindergarten to the 7th grade. The Kindergarten School building is now part of a restaurant...You can see it if you go all the way down by the Port Norris Marina.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

Up to 4th grade that's as far as I went. My mother told me I either had to get a job or go to school. Like a crazy fool, I took the job...instead of going to school and getting some learning. I wanted to go to work. I like money.

—Oral History Interview, **George “Babe” Wallace, 2008**

I think they had two rooms. They had two magnificent teachers. One teacher who will be forever remembered was the name of Jean Lewis...She was part of the system for 43 years...She had a sister-in-law, Hattie Lewis...and another teacher who went...and came back home, Mary Cornish Carmichael. The three of those women ran what was called the Brown School. All three were African American.

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

From 4th grade all the way to 8th grade, I was elected President of my class. At that time it was 60-65% African American student body, after which over the has turned around now... Towns like South Port Norris [Shellpile], Bivalve...Berrytown, to which over the years were heavily populated by African American, [until] they got housing for these people in Millville...

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

The little schoolhouse...was pretty much where the black kids went to school. We had black kids at our school [Port Norris]...but because the little school was right there, the kids that were here in Shellpile [went to school there] pretty much because of the closeness.

—Oral History Interview, **Jean Reed Narona, 2005**

Weekends

The towns of Bivalve, Shellpile and Port Norris were thriving places with many “things to do.” A host of weekend activities including the Church, speakeasies, dances, movies and drinking were at the disposal of the oyster workers. Friday night until Sunday was time for fun.



above: Photograph by Arthur Rothstein, 1938, courtesy of Library of Congress

right: Ariel view of Shellpile. Photograph Delaware Bay Museum, 1971, gift of Richard Smith



The Church was a very important part of my life. We went to John Wesley United Methodist Church, which is still standing. I grew up in that Church, taught Sunday School... [Church] was one of the leading agencies where you went...you go to Sunday School, you're going to go to Church that's it, no questions, no ifs ands or buts, you're going and that's the way it was for most of my friends at that time. Church is instilled in us and I'm thankful today for that, too. Most of us went to the Methodist Church, a few went to the Baptist Church, Shiloh Baptist Church...

—Oral History Interview, **Barry Ballard, 2009**

With the ability to make so much money with either in the oyster house or on the oyster boats ...there were speakeasies and drinking matches and fights and card games and gambling....There were actual killings that was not out of the norm to hear that someone died that weekend from an altercation or fight over a card game, some gambling adventure...Sunday was a big drive to get yourself together because they knew the oyster boats would be going out early Monday morning....It was always kind of exciting to us...there was always music floating through the air, always activity...very ruckus sounds that I grew up with that I still hear in my head.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**

I didn't want to go to jail, so I'd stay away from those kind of places.

—Oral History Interview, **Freddie Smith, 2008**

No, I did not [stay away from those places] ...oh, I was there!

—Oral History Interview, **George “Babe” Wallace, 2008**

I'd use to go down to Shellpile and look at the movies...then the tide come in while we were in the movies, you'd see rats then come running through the building, But back then movies, I think were 11 cent, 28 cent. I'd go there and I'd get to the door, I'd stoop down like I was a little kid, pay 11 cent and go in.

—Oral History Interview, **Freddie Smith, 2008**

There was so much activity on that little, probably one square mile that nobody wanted to leave, there was no reason to leave. They had all the activity. Most of the time the police didn't bother anyone there. That was serviced by the State Police barracks...unless something really, really bad happened, they didn't bother anyone. Port Norris had a sheriff...Bill Riffin...he knew all of these men because his family was in the oyster industry. Often times if they got in trouble, he was instrumental in getting them out of jail so they could get back to their jobs...All that kind of intrigue went on, politicking went on, all that was kind of the flavor, kind of the naughty, nice type flavor, what I grew up in.

—Oral History Interview, **Lionel Hickman, 2005**