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Oysters of Delaware Bay

I imagine the first person to eat an oyster was indeed a brave individual. Native Americans were among the first to rely on the American or Eastern oyster for food. European settlers significantly increased the consumption of these bivalves, so much so that in 1719 New Jersey regulated the Delaware Bay harvest.

In 1876 the advent of rail lines further developed the oyster industry. Over 90 railcars per week hauled burlap bags full of oysters to metropolitan areas, making oysters America's number one fishery. Philadelphia street vendors sold oysters like pretzels and hot dogs are peddled today. At the turn of the 20th century, there were more millionaires per capita in Port Norris than any town in New Jersey, and reputedly oystermen smoked hundred dollar bills to celebrate a good catch. Pasteurization allowed shucked oysters to be shipped in cans. Bivalve, Port Norris, Shellpile, and the now non-existent Maurice River Town were all dependent upon the oyster industry.

More than 500 registered schooners dredged oysters during the height of the fishery. Four thousand people worked in commercial oystering in Cumberland County and a larger workforce was involved in processing, shipping, shipbuilding, and other oyster-dependent industries.

Post World War II, state regulators permitted harvesting oysters by motorized craft. Oystermen transformed schooners, removed the sailing gear, and added pilothouses to the decks. In 1957 the oyster industry was devastated by the advent of MSX, a protozoan parasite. In three years, the bay-wide harvest plummeted from 711,000 bushels to a mere 49,000. Since that time the industry has fluctuated. Yet, Delaware Bay's Maurice River Cove oysters remain a highly prized delicacy.