Oysters for All:
A History of Ecology, Labor, Culture, and the Atlantic Oyster

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Introduction

How did oysters go from a cheap and popular food eaten on street corners in the nineteenth century to an expensive luxury item today, eaten primarily in upscale restaurants? Who was involved in the oyster industry, and how did oysters connect people, environment, and culture? In this research paper, I will focus on the history of the oyster industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth century coastal U.S., exploring the cultural and environmental significance of the oyster and its role within coastal American social ecology. I will specifically explore how oystering provided sustenance to black and working-class coastal communities before the industry's intensive commercialization, and the loss of livelihood and ecological connection caused by this shift. Oysters were a staple food for the working class, and when their accessibility declined with the depletion of environmental health as industrial oystering in the Northeast became prevalent, a vital resource was lost. Fluctuation in the accessibility of oysters and the industrialization of oystering as a trade affected the livelihood of the poor on America's Eastern shores, and as the nineteenth century saw the perpetuation of hierarchies of labor and race, the changing oyster industry reflected this.

Oysters connected people and environment, and their commoditization affected coastal ecosystems on biological and social levels. Tracing changes in the ecological conditions of oysters, practices of cultivation and harvest, class and race dynamics of the labor force, and the culture of consumption, this paper explores the oyster industry's critical yet under-analyzed role in nineteenth century American social and environmental history. The following analysis relies on archival and published sources, especially focusing on New York and Maryland's oyster cultures, two sites which were central to the nineteenth century oyster industry and tell compelling stories about the economic and cultural elements of the oyster trade.

Section I: Ecology

Oysters have been critical to the sustenance of waterfront life in America for centuries. Before the nineteenth century, they grew abundantly in the wild, and were important parts of the ecosystem which supported the environment and humans. Oysters were a resource that was always available and easily harvested for subsistence before the advent of the oyster industry. What were the ecological conditions of oysters before and during the nineteenth century, and how did people on the coasts make use of them?

The oyster *Crassostrea virginica* has been the primary oyster grown along the eastern shores of the Atlantic for thousands of years, and is native to the American Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. Some important ecological features of the *Virginica* oyster made it a subsistence crop for people living by the water who could easily gather the abundant species. In the intertidal zones and estuaries of brackish water along the East coast, oysters could reach maturity within three years, a trait that contributed to their frequent consumption and casual harvest[1]. Water's salinity, temperature, the structures they grow on, and other biological elements affect the characteristics of the oyster. People later intervened in these natural processes through

[1]Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: New York on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 53.

aquaculture in the nineteenth century in order to produce larger quantities of oysters that could be marketed as specific varieties with unique flavors and appearances, refreshing commodities that would eventually fly off market displays.

Seasonality is critical for oyster growth, as oyster beds' life cycle allows them to replenish after harvest. Popular consumption before the rise of industrialized oyster cultivation adapted to the ecological needs of the crop. The rule of abstaining from oysters during months whose names do not contain the letter "R" has been observed by eaters of the shellfish since the 1600s, and in New York this rule held fast, dictating oyster production and consumption. Though this rule isn't strict as oysters are safe to consume year-round, its origin is in the fact that oysters begin to spawn when water heats up in the summer months, altering their texture and making their flavor less desirable.[2] Because of this opinion that summer oysters tasted subpar, the consumption of oysters in New York was strictly bound to season, with beds opening for harvest in the fall and winter to great excitement after hiatus in the summer. People who depended on oysters for sustenance respected the natural rhythm of oyster growth.

The *Crassostrea virginica* species is the oyster that settlers in New York first encountered growing in abundance, and eventually turned into one of the most intensely cultivated and marketed crops of the region. When the Dutch arrived in New York Harbor, they encountered hundreds of miles of oyster beds growing throughout the rivers and waterways around the island of Manhattan. These oysters had been part of the diets and culture of the land's indigenous Lenape people for thousands of years prior to European arrival in the seventeenth century, and though they had been harvested for generations by people living along the shores, the native oyster beds remained vast and productive until the early nineteenth century.[3]

The health of New York's aquatic ecosystem in pre-industrialized years proves that indigenous oyster management techniques were advanced and conscientious of the area's specific ecological needs, and the problem of depletion in later oyster cultivation stemmed from a lack of consideration for these traditional practices, the cycles of dormancy and maintenance the beds needed to replenish. Indigenous people understood that shells could be used for re-establishing and growing oyster reefs, and tossing them back into the water could provide the essential surface for young oysters to grow on. Lenape people left remnants of oyster consumption in the form of shell middens, giant mounds of shell that debris from other shellfish or bones. These middens illustrate the vast amount of oysters that were consumed prior to European settlement. The shells were scattered everywhere, even used to pave pathways and roads, inspiring names of early Manhattan infrastructure such as Pearl Street.[4]

The clearest culprit for oysters' shift from an abundant and accessible food to a scarce one is ecological depletion from overharvesting and pollution. The first wave of "Atlantic oyster collapse" in New York's waterways was in 1810, at which point native heritage oyster beds were

[2] Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster*, 79.
[3] Peter Jacques, "The Origins of Coastal Ecological Decline and the Great Atlantic Oyster Collapse." *Political Geography* no. 60 (September 1, 2017): 155.
[4] Ted Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound : The Ecological History of Greater New York*. (Riverside: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

exhausted, transitioning the industry to complete reliance on year-round oyster farming. The next wave of collapse took place at the end of the century through the 1920s, when cultivated oyster beds were closed due to overharvesting and health concerns related to water pollution which had affected the safety of ingesting raw shellfish. New York's oysters reportedly tasted like petroleum, confirming the end of the once-thriving local industry.[5] The change in ecological conditions was brought about by intensified oyster harvesting, producing effects felt not only by the aquatic environment, but the social and economic environment on land.

Section II: Labor: Practices and People

How did labor in the oyster industry look, from cultivation to harvest to distribution? What tensions arose in the transition from traditional to industrialized oystering practices? What does studying labor in the nineteenth century oyster industry reveal about race, class, environment, and culture at the time? How did the pressure to increase production alter relationships between oystermen, technologies, and natural resources? In this section, I will explore the practices and social dynamics of labor in the 19th century oyster industry, looking specifically at the New York and Northeastern states and the Chesapeake Bay and Virginia industries. At the turn of the 19th century, year-round oyster cultivation was introduced. Previously, oystering was only a seasonal aspect of coastal laborer's work, done on a small scale for subsistence in the colder months. Wild harvesting and naturally grown oysters were still part of the commercial oyster trade in the Northeast in the early years of the century, but this did not last for long before the industry grew and demanded more oysters than the environment could supply.

a. Traditional vs. Industrialized Oystering Practices

Before the nineteenth century, people living along the East Coast could harvest oysters from inshore natural beds freely, as long as they lived in the area, used tongs that were less harmful to the health of oyster beds, and didn't take more than a fair amount of oysters from the beds. As oysters provided sustenance for poor coastal families, many oystermen felt it was important that they be protected from overharvesting by outsiders with larger commercial intentions.[6] Before federal restrictions on harvest and oyster management laws were introduced after the Civil War, oystermen relied on shared local customs, working interpersonally with clear awareness of oysters' ecological needs to manage access and conservation of the natural resource that supplemented their livelihood.

Tongers were oystermen who generally owned or co-owned small vessels and worked natural beds. Using long wooden scissor-like tools with metal rake heads to reach down, feel for oysters, and pull bushels onto the boat, tongers worked on the water for hours in this method which required considerable strength and durability. Tonging was the traditional way of oystering employed throughout the United States since before the nineteenth century. On the Eastern seaboard, Chesapeake Bay was home to many tongers, constituting an important element of the

[5] Jacques, "The Origins of Coastal Ecological Decline and the Great Atlantic Oyster Collapse", 155.
[6] Samuel P. Hanes, *The Aquatic Frontier: Oysters and Aquaculture in the Progressive Era*, Environmental History of the Northeast (Amherst ; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019): 22, 54.

Maryland-Virginia-region's "Southern trade" in oysters. Tonging was a working-class occupation, viewed by waterfront laborers as an economic safety-net, as it was cheap to obtain tonging materials and it could be done by an individual, with little assistance needed.[7] The individual nature of tongers drew comparisons to cowboys, exercising self-sufficiency and independence. Operating at a smaller scale meant tonging was more accessible to poor waterfront workers, and could support a livelihood, but independent tongers could not harvest the amount of oysters that would have provided them upward mobility.

The nineteenth century saw the wider adoption of dredging technology, and the beginnings of the commercialized oyster farming industry. Dredging is the mechanized process of dragging metal nets through oyster beds to dislodge them and harvest greater quantities quickly. Dredging required higher investments for machinery and larger vessels that made it a less accessible form of waterfront labor than tonging, meaning wealthier oystermen could gain monopoly in the trade.[8] All Eastern states banned dredging at one point or another, viewing steam-powered dredging boats as threats to local fishing communities, encroaching on the harvest of common oystermen and disrupting natural beds. Restrictions on dredging in the earlier half of the century aimed to conserve natural beds for use by small-scale oystermen, working with tongs in the traditional oystering method. Planting, or moving oysters between different sites to enhance their cultivation, was practiced alongside tonging before the 1880s with little conflict over the beds between tongers and planters.[9]

The introduction of stricter laws and regulations on oyster bed use after the Civil War formed divisions between traditional and modern methods of oystering. Before this period, the enforcement of oyster management fell into the hands of local oystermen, who viewed the beds as common property, but by the end of the century, disputes over maintaining traditional oysters techniques or newly proposed privatized control over the industry arose. The small-scale tonging tradition conflicted with the mission of proponents of industrial aquaculture, who used terms like "modernization" and "conservation" to communicate their goal of privatization and increased government control of the trade.[10] Shellfish commissions were established by governmental fisheries administrators throughout the Northeast after the Civil War, many of whom aimed to manage these underwater resources through intensified aquaculture. Commercial oystermen and fishing companies made legal efforts to restrict tongers' access to oyster beds and limit the gathering of seed oysters in New York waters, as larger, more lucrative Northern dredging operations could now sail south to the Chesapeake Bay on their steam-powered vessels for seed oyster stock instead of obtaining this product from local tongers. The intensification of aquaculture and unsustainable extraction of natural resources from inshore ecosystems pushed industrial operations further away from the communities that had once easily harvested oysters

[7] Christine Keiner, *The Oyster Question : Scientists, Watermen, and the Maryland Chesapeake Bay since 1880* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009): 42.
[8] Hanes, *The Aquatic Frontier,* 25.
[9] Hanes, *The Aquatic Frontier,* 39.
[10] Hanes, *The Aquatic Frontier,* 64.

for subsistence, requiring more and more machinery and transportation to bring oysters to consumers, thus leading to higher prices.

Issues of *The Oysterman and Fisherman* provide insight into how some oystermen engaged with their trade's transition into a highly commercialized industry. The trade publication based in Hampton, Virginia covered "seafood and allied industries" for fifteen years at the turn of the twentieth century, and appealed to oystermen interested in modernizing their own operations and staying up to date with the evolving industry (see Fig. 1).

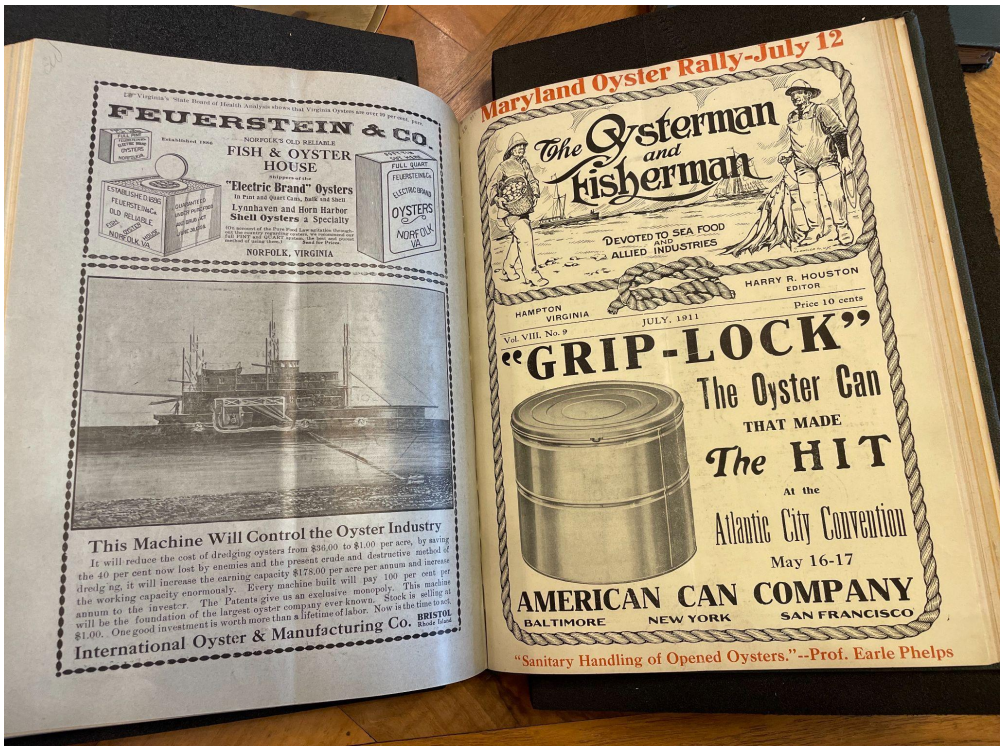

Figure 1. *The Oysterman and Fisherman* magazine, Vol. VIII No. 9, July 1911. Photo taken by author at the New York Public Library's Map Room, June 2023.

The capitalist and empirical vision of a new kind of oystering was communicated by the journal's advertisements for technologies like engines, food-safe cans, newly patented dredges, and pages of data on oyster's growing and selling conditions in various regions. Coverage of the West Coast industry increased in later issues, as Washington and Oregon succeeded the depleted Northeast as the center of the nation's oyster industry. Several articles describe the changes seen in the industry from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. In an article titled "The Relation of the State to the Oyster Industry," the involvement of the state in oyster cultivation is depicted as a step toward progress, and aquaculture as an option that would benefit business and laborers alike. The journal vigorously promoted aquaculture and industrial oyster cultivation under the leadership of private companies and government regulation, and made it clear that the future of the oyster industry was in farming, not in wild harvesting.

This conflict between traditional and industrialized oyster production at the end of the century created hierarchies and division between the northern and southern oyster trade, the wealthy and working class oystermen, and black and white oystermen. The transition from traditional to modernized methods of oyster harvesting reflected the changing economic and racial stratifications of nineteenth century America, changes that directly affected waterfront communities who historically relied on small-scale oyster harvesting as a source of income and subsistence.

b. African Americans in the Oyster Industry

The labor of African Americans was essential to the story of nineteenth century oyster culture. The oyster trade has a uniquely multiracial history that shaped social formations in coastal communities on and off the water. In Maryland and Virginia's oyster trade, almost half of all laborers were black, working primarily as tongers and in oyster packing facilities along the coast. The history of black oystermen in the nineteenth century exemplifies the oyster industry's under-analyzed connection to slavery, food, agriculture, and maritime labor. This section connects the cultural significance of the oyster industry to the roles of African Americans in coastal communities that worked in the industry during its most productive century.

Oysters were a pathway to freedom before emancipation for some African Americans, a form of labor that afforded significantly more autonomy and opportunity for self-reliance than laboring on land. Many black men on the Eastern seaboard gained experience with oyster harvesting and labor while enslaved, and in some cases bought their freedom through revenue from oyster sales[11]. Sections from 18th century Virginia petitions by Southern oystermen to ban Northern dredge boats describe slaveowner's complaints of slaves going out to work the oyster beds for Northern captains at night, demonstrating that oyster labor outside the confines of enslavement attracted African Americans seeking autonomy.[12] Shucking oysters was another job for the "lowest socioeconomic strata" in the nineteenth century.[13] Black and Irish workers, including women, were the predominant workforce in oyster packing plants throughout the East Coast, working alongside each other for equal pay. Selling, shucking, and harvesting oysters were some of the few careers that would provide black workers more independence, choice, and seasonal yet steady income than was standard in most professions at the time. Experience with oyster labor allowed free black people to find occupation in the oyster industry, and the trade provided a solid livelihood, sometimes even supporting a whole settlement, such as in the case of the Sandy Ground community on Staten Island.

At Sandy Ground, oysters were the backbone of the local economy, as black oystermen established autonomy through labor in the bay's abundant oyster beds. White Sandy Ground residents sold settlement land to black migrants from Snow Hill, Maryland seeking emancipation

[11] Michelle Zacks, "Oysters and Emancipation: The Antebellum Shell Industry as a Pathway to Freedom," in *Mapping Nature across the Americas*, edited by Kathleen A. Brosnan and James R. Akerman. University of Chicago Press (2021): 109.

[12] Hanes, *The Aquatic Frontier,* 32.
[13] Keiner, *The Oyster Question,* 37.

and work in the state after New York abolished slavery in 1827. They had left Maryland due to the Chesapeake Bay's new discriminatory legal restrictions on black men's right to obtain licenses to own vessels and work oyster beds without the permission of a white captain, removing black men's agency in a profession where they previously exercised relatively equal status.[14] The sandy soil was unfit for agricultural cultivation of any crops other than strawberries, but the oyster beds were fertile, so Sandy Ground residents raked, planted, and sold oysters from the Raritan Bay to support the community. Black and white oystermen lived and worked alongside each other for multiple generations. Black oystermen at Sandy Ground on Staten Island usually owned or co-owned smaller vessels, and worked the natural beds, tending to the seed oysters that would be transported to deeper waters and grown to maturity by planters. By 1900 there were around 40 African Americans working as "natural growthers" (also known as common oystermen) at Sandy Ground who maintained local rights and customs that prevented overharvesting from the natural beds, which were open for common use.[15] The racial equality in oystermen's labor on the water promoted racial equality on land, as Sandy Ground families frequently socialized together across racial boundaries, including rooting for an integrated baseball team, and local children attended racially-integrated day schools.[16] Oysters affected the lives and social structures of coastal communities that produced and consumed them, particularly in the case of the unique environment of racial equality that formed around the oyster industry in Sandy Ground.

Black oystermen's primary mode of oyster harvest was tonging, but as technology and capitalism advanced by the beginning of the twentieth century, racialized rhetoric conflated black oystermen's work with regressive harvest practices and contributed to their marginalization in an industry that had once offered them equality. After the Civil War, oystering transitioned from an accessible form of labor that coastal communities used for subsistence to a commercial industry ruled by an intensively capitalistic business model. The Chesapeake Bay industry had lain dormant during the years of 1861-1865, and when the country emerged from war, the oyster trade was industrialized. Company-run dredging operations with larger mechanized vessels became the dominant mode of harvest, bringing wealthy boat owners and temporary boat crews to oyster beds that had once been commonly tended and used by residents of the harbors for whom oysters were a subsistence crop. Oyster company owners hoped to turn the oyster trade into a booming capitalist industry through privatization of the common-use oyster beds, and diminished tonging as ineffective in harvesting underwater resources compared to dredging. The independence that had drawn black oystermen to tonging labor now characterized them as outlaws by white businessmen who supported heavier legal restrictions on tonging in order to solidify company ownership over the beds. Black oystermen encountered obstacles with new commercial oyster companies that discriminated against them, refusing to buy the seed oysters or

[14] Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound,* ch. 8.
[15] William Askins, "Oysters and Equality: Nineteenth Century Cultural Resistance in Sandy Ground, Staten Island, New York," *Anthropology of Work Review* 12, no. 2 (1991): 8.
[16] Askins, "Oysters and Equality", 8.

mature stock that they once made a living selling to local captains.[17] This made traditionally accessible oyster labor less feasible, pushing African American oystermen who had once worked independently toward working on crews of larger boats, in packing facilities for low pay, or leaving the oyster trade altogether.

The physical connection tongers had to the water made them incompatible with the highly commercialized, regulated, and capital-driven oyster industry that had taken shape by the later half of the nineteenth century. Because of the nature of their technique which required specific and personal knowledge of the underwater landscape of the oyster beds, tongers were the most intimately aware of the ecological conditions of the oysters they harvested. This type of embodied, individualized approach to oystering did not fit into the new hierarchy of the oyster industry. In *The Aquatic Frontier,* Samuel P. Hanes describes how white oystermen perpetuated discriminatory stereotypes of tongers as lazy and inefficient that marginalized them as the industry grew intensely commercial: "The presence of two strikingly different modes of oystering fueled thinking about linear frontier progress. It was reassuring to think tongers possessed low morals, as it was less troubling to evict persons who stood in the way of progress and who were partly to blame for their fate".[18] This discriminatory characterization of tongers alongside the ecological decline brought by industrialized oystering threatened the livelihoods of common oystermen at the end of the nineteenth century.

Industrialization led to marginalization for oystermen who used traditional practices, bringing economic and ecological changes that disconnected working-class waterfront communities from a food that had once been a reliable source of income and sustenance. In a 1956 interview by Joseph Mitchell, Sandy Ground resident George Hunter contextualized the losses the community felt after the decline of the oyster industry that had once been its lifeblood: "The men in Sandy Ground had to scratch around and look for something else to do, and it wasn't easy… one did this and one did that. A lot of the life went out of the settlement, and a kind of don't-care attitude set in".[19] Mr. Hunter explained that much of the funding for the town's A.M.E. Zion Methodist Church was lost when oystermen were out of jobs at the beginning of the twentieth century, as pollution and overharvesting resulted in the Staten Island oyster beds being condemned and closed. Oystermen had predicted this end for the oyster beds as they watched their stock decrease as more companies and dredges came in and the waters became more polluted. The loss of these local oyster beds around New York Harbor and the Chesapeake Bay resulted in the industry moving to other coastal regions (primarily Western and Southern) and deeper waters away from the cities, leading to higher costs for oyster production and consumption, fomenting the oyster's status as a luxury commodity.

Section III. Culture and Consumption

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[17] Ayasha Guerin, "Underground and at Sea: Oysters and Black Marine Entanglements in New York's Zone-A," *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 13, no. 2 (September 26, 2019): 46.
[18] Hanes, *The Aquatic Frontier,* 83.
[19] Joseph Mitchell, "Mr. Hunter's Grave," *The New Yorker*, September 14, 1956, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1956/09/22/mr-hunters-grave.

In the United States today, oysters are considered a luxury. The strain on oyster cultivation by ecological and industrial pressures made oysters rarer, thus a more precious commodity, but they weren't always an elite food item. Consuming oysters had connotations with lower class status before the nineteenth century. Having analyzed the ecological, economic, and social factors that affected oyster cultivation and management, this final section returns to my initial key question of oyster's cultural significance and consumption, particularly how people interacted with oysters as a food in the nineteenth century. How did oysters go from a popular food eaten on street corners and in saloons to their status as a luxury item today, eaten primarily by elites?

At the start of the nineteenth century, oysters were a food eaten frequently across socioeconomic strata. In New York, they were seen as a food of the poor long before they gained the connotation of a luxury item. The abundance of oysters in periods of the nineteenth century where the industry was prosperous meant that they were eaten everywhere, for low prices (see fig. 2). Oysters were sold on street corners in carts for cents each, prepared to be eaten roasted or raw. English traveler Robert Sutcliff's diary of his journeys in America from the years 1804 to 1806 reveals the ubiquity of oysters on New Yorker's tables in the early years of the century, and their mode of consumption: "I went on board the packet for New-York, directly after a breakfast made chiefly of stewed oysters. These shellfish abound so much here, that little children are taught to eat them for breakfast. The landlady told me that she sometimes had 2 or 300 bushels in the cellar at a time in the winter season".[20] Oysters were seen as a stimulating, refreshing ingredient that could aid health and provide sustenance cheaply.[21] They could be preserved in stoneware jars in large amounts for later consumption, and eventually with the advent of steamboats, shipment across the Atlantic to Europe or by canal into the American interior for enjoyment by even greater populations of eager bivalve enthusiasts.

[20] Robert Sutcliff, *Travels in Some Parts of North America, in the Years 1804, 1805 & 1806* (Philadelphia: B. & T. Kite, 1812): 131.
[21] Eustace Clare Grenville Murray, *The Oyster; Where, How and When to Find, Breed, Cook and Eat It.* (London: Trübner, 1863), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011556016.

Figure 2. *Oyster Market, near Christopher Street*, lithograph by C.F.W. Mielatz, 1898. Photo taken by author at the New-York Historical Society, June 2023.

Oyster cellars became a fixture of New York food culture around the 1830s as social destinations for multiracial crowds of working-class New Yorkers. These establishments served cheap oysters on the half shell alongside alcohol, offering a space for community interaction and leisure. The city's oyster cellars were clustered around Canal Street and the Bowery, spreading through lower Manhattan into the Five Points neighborhood. This area was known (and scorned) for its poverty and open mixture of African Americans and Irish immigrant communities, who socialized and worked across racial boundaries.[22] Oysters became associated with these working-class poor areas, and elite New Yorkers drew a distinction between their own oyster consumption and that of the poor, preferring to patronize upscale oyster houses and restaurants in lower Manhattan. The spatial differences in the places oysters were consumed reflected economic disparity, as well as the entrepreneurial nature of New York's nineteenth century food industry. Though the locations in which oysters were consumed differed based on social class, every New Yorker was able to enjoy oysters as a nourishing and vital food of the city.

A waterfront venue where oyster consumers and laborers in the industry interacted were New York's oyster barges. The oyster barges moved, but their primary stations by the later half of the nineteenth century were near prominent fish markets on the East and Hudson River. These vessels were built as hybrid building-boats, linking land, water, and people by design. They featured dockside entrances for patrons on the waterfront as well as portals on the backside for

[22] Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014): 131.

access by laborers in other boats on the water. Unlike a restaurant or a market, oyster barges served multiple functions as an industrial space for processing freshly harvested oysters and a commercial space for distribution and consumption. On the barges, workers shucked and packed freshly delivered oysters to be sold in nearby markets, specifically Fulton Fish Market on the East River and Washington Market, Spring Street Market, and West Tenth Street Market on the Hudson River.[23] Oysters barges were a unique aspect of New York oyster culture that added to the city's bustling, vivid environment of its ports and waterfront.

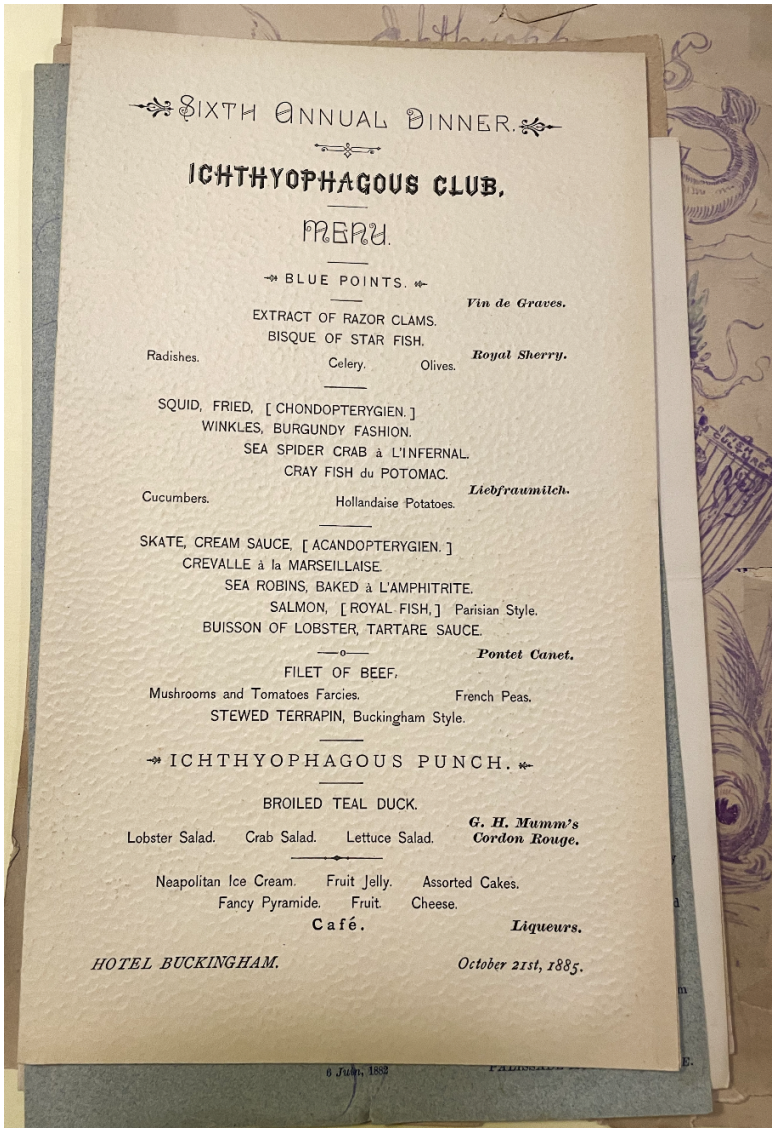
Urban elites made moral judgements about the consumption of oysters by the working class, and disapproved of the activities their status as a saloon food associated them with. The interest of affluent audiences led them to newer upscale oyster houses and seafood-serving restaurants which billed themselves as "family-friendly," such as that of H.R. Newton, whose sign mentioning "ladies and gents" signaled to wealthier clientele that it was a refined establishment of superior morals where men could bring their wives (see fig. 3). The division between working class and elite oyster consumption became more pronounced as higher-end oyster houses replaced the street culture of oyster cellars and stands. Reduced availability changed how oysters were perceived as cultural symbols, increasing their social and culinary value.

Figure 3. "Exterior of H. R. Newton's Oyster House", New York Public Library Digital Collections.

[23] Michael J. Chiarappa, "New York City's Oyster Barges: Architecture's Threshold Role along the Urban Waterfront," *Building & Landscapes* 14 (January 1, 2007): 84.

One eclectic example of elite consumption in the nineteenth century was New York's Ichthyophagous Club, a private dining club dedicated to underappreciated seafood which met yearly from 1880-1887[24]. Members of the club were high-powered figures in the fishing industry of New York and the Northeast, such as Eugene G. Blackford, New York's Shell Commissioner and Fulton Market fish-dealer who conducted critical surveys of the health of New York's oysters in 1885. The club's interest in seafood provision to the broader public through their roles in fisheries, trade, and fish commissions was aligned with their aim to celebrate these aquatic species, but the club's membership was selective and elite. The menus for their dinners contextualize how seafood, including oysters, became valued in New York's elite culture as a commodity. Ticket prices for the feast were $5, which converted to today's dollar is almost $200, the club catering to the upper class interested in an exoticized seafood dining experience. An invitation to the 1883 club dinner reads: "To discuss the qualities of many rare and excellent fishes, as well as some of the less prized but no less toothsome molluscs, reptiles, and denizens of the deep, interspersed with such due admixture of familiar flesh and fowl as may sustain the strength of the least adventurous, and satisfy the yearnings of the most fastidious." The humorous tone and fanciful decoration of the club's menus and invitations denotes that common shellfish may have once had unsavory associations, but on these tables became coveted items, prepared in French styles that were popular in upscale restaurants at the time.[25] Though oysters were on the conventional end of the club's seafood dishes, at wintertime dinners Blue Points were the first course– no introduction needed.

[24] Michele Humes, "The Way We Ate: The Ichthyophagous Club." Diner's Journal Blog. *New York Times.* January 6, 2010.
[25] Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster*, 109.



SIXTH ANNUAL DINNER.

ICHTHYOPHAGOUS CLUB.

MENU.

BLUE POINTS. — *Vin de Graves.*

EXTRACT OF RAZOR CLAMS.
BISQUE OF STAR FISH.
Radishes. Celery. Olives. — *Royal Sherry.*

SQUID, FRIED, [CHONDOPTERYGIEN.]
WINKLES, BURGUNDY FASHION.
SEA SPIDER CRAB à L'INFERNAL.
CRAY FISH du POTOMAC.
Cucumbers. Hollandaise Potatoes. — *Liebfraumilch.*

SKATE, CREAM SAUCE. [ACANDOPTERYGIEN.]
CREVALLE à la MARSEILLAISE.
SEA ROBINS, BAKED à L'AMPHITRITE.
SALMON, [ROYAL FISH,] Parisian Style.
BUISSON OF LOBSTER, TARTARE SAUCE. — *Pontet Canet.*

FILET OF BEEF.
Mushrooms and Tomatoes Farcies. French Peas.
STEWED TERRAPIN, Buckingham Style.

ICHTHYOPHAGOUS PUNCH.

BROILED TEAL DUCK.
Lobster Salad. Crab Salad. Lettuce Salad. — *G. H. Mumm's Cordon Rouge.*

Neapolitan Ice Cream. Fruit Jelly. Assorted Cakes.
Fancy Pyramide. Fruit. Cheese.
Café. — *Liqueurs.*

HOTEL BUCKINGHAM. *October 21st, 1885.*

Figure 4. Ichthyophagous Club Menu, 1885. Eugene G. Blackford papers, Center for Brooklyn History.

African Americans were formative to not only the industrial operation of the oyster trade, but its culinary significance as well. Oysters are still an important aspect of African American food culture along the southern and eastern coasts of the United States, with a history of abundance and accessibility that made them an important source of sustenance for people enslaved in the Southeast. Excavations of a Virginia plantation's waste revealed Chesapeake Bay oyster shells that historians believe were collected and discarded by slaves, demonstrating a region's oyster use similar to a shell midden. Oysters were traditionally fried or cooked into stews for meals, and slaves sometimes used oyster shells as building material or utensils. Fried oysters breaded in cornmeal are still a classic dish prepared throughout the South today[26]. The

[26] Lisa Shiflett, "West African Food Traditions in Virginia Foodways: A Historical Analysis of Origins and Survivals." Dissertation, East Tennessee State University, August 18, 2004. 52.

use of oysters in black Southern food cultures reflects their status as a food that the poor and dispossessed were able to readily gather, helping to sustain these communities.

In the northern states, oysters became a source of food security and economic support for freed black people. Black-owned oyster houses and cellars were one example of the strong African American presence in the industry, filling formative roles in the oyster industry on both the production and consumption sides of the trade. Entrepreneurial working class black New Yorkers would sometimes convert their apartments to oyster cellars on weekends, creating spaces of leisure for their communities where people could gather and enjoy company and food.[27] Oysters connected the environment, food, and culture as a source of capital and an important commodity for African American coastal communities in the nineteenth century.

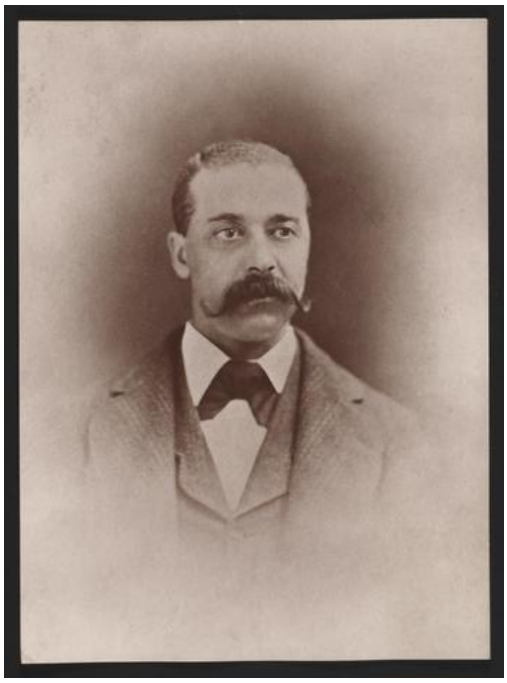
As oysters became a popular commodity coveted by American middle and upper classes, familiarity with cultivating and processing oysters created business opportunities for newly emancipated African Americans. This was the case for black oystermen and restaurateurs like Thomas Downing and Roscoe Dixon, both of whom had roots in the Chesapeake Bay region and started out tonging oysters as a livelihood, eventually moving North and West and to open their own restaurants which served black and white guests.

Thomas Downing's popular oyster house at the corner of Wall and Broad Street in lower Manhattan was a notable part of New York's mid-nineteenth century food culture, setting a high standard for oyster consumption. As one of New York's first black-owned businesses, Downing's oyster house is essential to the history of the oyster industry in relation to culture, particularly on the restaurant side of the industry. Established in 1825, Downing's was one of the first family-friendly oyster houses that distinguished itself from the consumption of oysters as a street food, serving affluent guests in lavishly decorated dining rooms. Though the business started out selling Downing's own oyster catch which he harvested himself early each morning, eventually the house's menu grew beyond the standard raw, fried, or stewed selection, boasting exotic menu items such as "scalloped oysters, oyster pie, fish with oyster sauce, and an unusual specialty, poached turkey stuffed with oysters".[28] Downing was well-respected by both black and white New Yorkers as a businessman and member of the community, and became a leader and participant in several black social organizations. The restaurant's financial success allowed Downing to donate generously to the local church and schools, as well as hire black cooks and waiters in his establishment, using oysters to support his community.[29]

The story of Roscoe Dixon's oyster house illustrates how livelihoods formed around oysters could support individuals as they moved throughout the country, and in Dixon's case, provided income for one of the first black pioneers in Oregon. The oyster industry began to move westward as nineteenth century came to an end. Dixon was the first black businessowner in Oregon, where he opened his oyster house in the coastal town of Astoria in 1880. According to the inscription on the back of an 1881 photograph of Dixon, he had gotten to Massachusetts

[27] Kurlansky, 167.
[28] John H. Hewitt, "Mr. Downing and His Oyster House: The Life and Good Works of an African-American Entrepreneur." *New York History* 74, no. 3 (1993): 233.
[29] Hewitt, "Mr. Downing", 248.

from Virginia by underground railroad, and then came to Oregon to pursue work in the oyster industry.[30] Dixon may have continued to harvest oysters himself when he came out west and became a pioneering black businessman and restaurant proprietor in the frontier town, owner of Roscoe's First-Class Oyster Saloon (see fig. 6). He eventually left Oregon after his business faltered in the mid-1880s to move to Seattle, Washington, where his brother Robert was a figure in the community of early black settlers.[31] These stories illuminate how oysters played a role in social development and newfound economic independence for freed African Americans after the war. The culture and business of oysters in the nineteenth century was certainly about enjoying the food, but also generating prosperity for oneself and one's community.



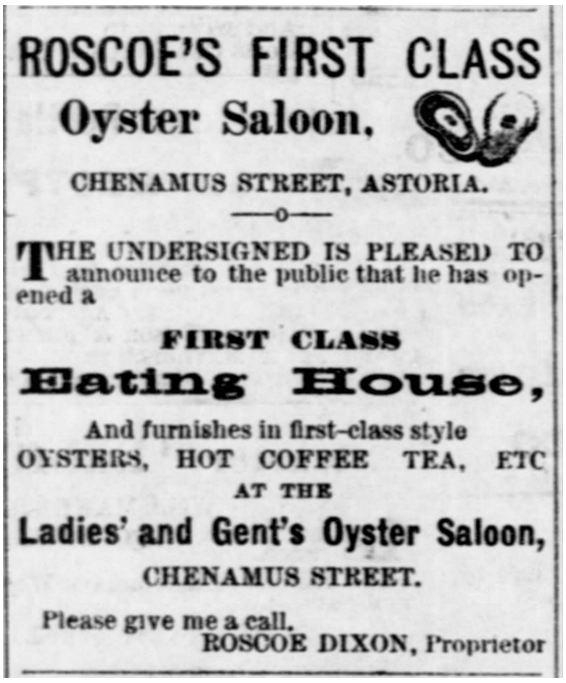


Figure 5. Portrait of Roscoe Dixon, c. 1881.
Figure 6. Newspaper clipping, Morning Astorian, June 1883. Oregon Historical Society.

Conclusion

Oyster consumption declined due to health concerns when contaminated water came to be understood as a cause in the cholera epidemic.[32] As waterways were polluted due to industry, the eagerness to consume oysters drawn from the clearly unhealthy waters around New York and other coastal cities was decimated. The decline in oyster consumption directly affected coastal communities that had once sustained livelihoods through tonging and planting. The industrial dredging operations and increased legal barriers had already been pushing oystermen out of the trade, but ecological decline in oyster quality and the subsequent loss of revenue from consumers

[30] Oregon Historical Society, https://digitalcollections.ohs.org/portrait-of-roscoe-dixon .
[31] Zachary Stocks, email message to the author, July 12, 2023.
[32] Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster*, 253.

resulted in a total career change for many oystermen. They could no longer use this resource that had once been a given, and they turned to other work, some moving onto other fisheries, others just gave up working the water altogether. Thomas Downing, who made his fortune from oysters, saw these health concerns as harmless, famously stating, "If any gentleman can prove he died of the oysters I work in, I'll pay his expenses to Greenwood [Cemetery]".[33] However, by the end of the nineteenth century, people were no longer eating oysters on the scale they once had. The confirmed association between water, disease, and oysters was a large factor in the decline of the oyster industry, cementing the fate of oysters as a somewhat scarce and pricey commodity, no longer that source of accessible sustenance and steady livelihood for coastal communities.

The mechanization of the oyster industry and subsequent marginalization of traditional oystering methods affected socio-ecological patterns. Oysters and people were once connected through environment, labor, and consumption. Disturbances to this connection resulted in the loss of a crucial part of the American cultural ecosystem. In future research, the role of cartography in the effort to regulate oyster management and the effects of oyster bed maps on local harvesting and consumption might be explored, as prior scholarship on the Indian Ocean oysters addresses.[34] Current efforts to restore oyster reefs to combat water pollution and rising tides in New York Harbor by organizations such as the Billion Oyster Project underline the significance of telling this history and strengthening the connection between people and oysters. By emphasizing the role oysters played in nineteenth century American social history, I hope to deepen readers' understandings of the connection between humans, environment, and culture, expanding scholarship on the subject through sharing narratives of people, practices, and places where oysters weaved together social and environmental histories.

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[33] Hewitt, "Mr. Downing", 252.

[34] Tamara Fernando, "Mapping Oysters and Making Oceans in the Northern Indian Ocean, 1880–1906," Comparative Studies in Society and History 65, no. 1 (January 2023): 53–80.

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