

The Wolfe Trapp

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

When man first came to the land that is now Virginia, there *was* no Chesapeake Bay, only a wide forested valley with raging freshwater rivers. The valley was an ancient floodplain, the remnant of former bays. So much water was stored in glaciers and ice caps that sea levels were about two hundred feet lower than today. The Susquehanna dominated this valley and cut a deep trench the entire length of the present bay, past the capes and on one hundred miles or so across the exposed continental shelf to the ocean. The continental shelf was then flat and forested, as was most of the valley. The Potomac, Rappahannock and York rivers also cut deep channels through their respective valleys to join the Susquehanna on its way to the sea. The independent James made its own way seaward.

The first inhabitants, small extended family groups of hunter-gatherers, camped along the numerous streams and hunted now extinct animals in forests of hemlock and spruce, all now under water. Most of the archeological evidence of the earliest human inhabitants is also under water. While clamming the shelves and shoals off Northumberland, Middlesex and Mathews counties, the late “Dink” Miller of Deltaville collected many artifacts, including axes and adzes for shaping log canoes as well as knives, hide scrapers and spear and arrow points.

As the climate warmed and ice melted, the sea steadily advanced toward the valley. By ten thousand years ago it had reached the present capes. By three thousand years ago it had completely flooded the valley all of the way to the present fall lines of the main bay and its tributaries. Thus our bay and its tributaries are wide and relatively shallow, except for deep channels, or deep-water connections, which deliver salty seawater all of the way from the ocean to the fall lines and account for the remarkable productivity of our estuarine system. Off Mathews County, between the mouths of the Rappahannock and York Rivers, shoal waters, former hunting grounds, extend far into the bay, ready to strand any unwary captain and destroy his ship.

One animal that the earliest inhabitants, and later European settlers, had to deal with was the wolf. Indians co-existed with this alpha-predator, but European settlers put a bounty on wolves and eventually eradicated them. Indians were recruited to help kill wolves and were also eligible to receive the bounty. Native inhabitants were not supposed to have guns so they trapped wolves by digging pits, covering them lightly with brush and baiting them with meat. References to this practice can be found in place names throughout the state, including Wolf Trap Farm in Vienna.

In Chesapeake Bay Country, the most familiar wolf trap is located about two miles from shore, where no four-legged wolf has roamed for thousands of years. In 1691, England was (again) at war with France. French naval vessels and Corsairs, or privateers, disrupted shipping in the Bay and Ocean. Pirates lurked off of the Capes and entered the Bay at will, capturing vessels for private gain. Shore defenses were abysmally ineffective and even settlements and plantations were raided. The British Admiralty hired a number

of private, armed vessels and sent them to the Chesapeake to escort and protect merchant ships. Among these ships was the Wolfe out of Liverpool, captained by George Purvis. The Wolfe cleared the Capes and was heading for the Rappahannock under full sail when she fetched up hard on the shoals. Trying to pull her off was futile, so Captain Purvis sent word to Middlesex and Gloucester counties for assistance (the land that is now Mathews was then part of Gloucester). Many sloops, boats and men responded with the reasonable expectation that they would be paid for their efforts.

It took weeks to remove her guns, ammunition and provisions in order to lighten her and eventually get her off. Purvis then refused to pay the men and boat owners, though he admitted that the Wolfe would surely have been lost without their assistance. In spite of orders from Lt. Gov. Francis Nicholson and the Council, Purvis sailed without settling his accounts. The circumstances were then relayed to the Admiralty in England and it was decided to pay the sailors but not to pay the ship owners for the use of the Wolfe until the Virginia matter was resolved. The men in Middlesex and Gloucester were eventually paid and the shoal waters have since been known as the Wolfe Trapp, though now modernized to “Wolf Trap”.



Photograph by Nick Norstad

The Wolf Trap shoals continued to be a hazard to shipping, so in 1821 a lightship was stationed. It was destroyed by the Confederates in 1861 and replaced in 1864. Then in 1870 the first lighthouse was built but was carried off by ice in the brutal winter of 1892. The present structure was built in 1894. Though it is now automated, it was manned continuously until 1971. In 2005, the U.S. General Services Administration auctioned several lighthouses online. Wolf Trap light was bought for \$75,000 by a 24-year-old Oregon man with visions of turning it into a bed and breakfast. About nine months later he listed it on e-bay and sold it for \$119,000. Though in private hands, the navigational aids are still maintained and serviced by the Coast Guard.

Deb Weissler is now writing the story of the lighthouse and its conversion to private use and she is scheduled to publish it in the November/December issue of Pleasant Living.

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