



American Shad and African American Watermen: Aspects of a Heritage Nearly Forgotten

Excerpted from presentation

Delivered at [The Accokeek Foundation's African American Heritage Day, Sept 25, 2010](#)

by Jim Cummins

The Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin

Preface

I am a biologist who works on the Potomac, including a project to restore the American shad. I am not a trained historian but I am an enthusiastic one – our natural resources are steeped in history – there are many important linkages. I have researched many aspects about shad, their biology, ecology and history, but by far the most inspirational is about black watermen and how the skills they developed on the river led to critical and unique roles; from our first interactions with the People here, to our War for Independence - when black sailors made up approximately 10% of the Continental Navy, to the removal of the chains of slavery and the Civil War, and many other services to our country.

I believe that heroism of black watermen on the Potomac before and during the Civil War is a particularly hidden history because:

1) The Potomac was a very hard line to cross for those escaping slavery. Any river was a hard line for those fleeing from the south, but the Potomac, as the last physical barrier between the North from the South, was made especially hard by the forces trying to preserve slavery and/or profit from those trying to escape its grasp. The harder that line, the harder the tongue - before, during and after the civil war. Hard tongues yield long secrets.

2) their important roles in the shad fisheries of the Potomac River faded in the last century as this once most abundant and economically important fish suffered from pollution, loss of spawning habitat and over-harvest.

Shad are coming back in the Potomac River.

Hopefully, hidden histories will also become more and more revealed.

A Heritage Nearly Forgotten - The Role of African American Watermen.



Hauling the Seine," Harpers Weekly, Sept. 28. 1861. Image by Porte Crayon

Shad Fishery
Commencing to boat seine.
Stony Point
Potomac River



If you research photographs or art of historic shad fisheries of the Potomac and other mid-Atlantic rivers, you will likely notice that black watermen are abundant.

Traditional Shad Fisheries on the Potomac River, circa 1890s





THE WASHINGTON NAVY-YARD, WITH SHAD FISHERS IN THE FOREGROUND.

There was a large shad fishery in Washington, DC., on the banks of the Anacostia River across from the Navy Yard. Today it is the location of Anacostia Park.

Several paintings by Thomas Eakins are beautiful examples of the work.



Thomas Eakins, from Shad Fishing Gloucester DE, 1881



Thomas Eakins' from Shad Fishing Gloucester DE, 1881



So are a series of photographs made of shad hauls on the Potomac, at Stony Point (Mason Neck), circa 1890, by the U.S. Fish Commission.

Shad
Cruiser House Stony Point
Fishery Potomac River.





Those processing the catch were also mostly black Americans.

Prior to the Civil War, every spring many slaves were put to work on the region's fisheries. Former Maryland slave Charles Ball wrote "the fishing season was always one of hard labor, it is true, but also a time of joy and hilarity.*"

Shad fisheries in particular were regarded as festive and abundant times. Most of the work took place in the evening and at night, with minimum supervision. The arrival of shad in April also brought an abundance of food at a time when food stores were at their lowest.

No one knows the origin of shad planking, but it is probably an African American adaptation of the methods used by Native Americans. In plantation life, food preparation was predominantly through black expertise, applying native knowledge to what was observed in America.

*Ball, Charles. *Fifty Years In Chains or the Life of an American Slave*. (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), p. 206



"A Night Haul" by David Hunter Strother, from *Harpers Weekly*, Sept. 28, 1861.
"Night was the slave's holiday." – Allen Parker, ex-slave and waterman
from his *Recollections of Slavery Times*. 1895

Important and unique roles of black watermen before and during the Civil War:

1. Inter-plantation Communication - helped overcome attempts to keep slaves isolated. Slave watermen frequently were hired out. They would travel up and down the river, following the runs of fish and crabs, and oystering in the winter. Through such movement, black watermen like Moses Grandy helped local slave communities overcome the attempts to keep them isolated from one another and uniformed, in particularly regarding antislavery movements and actions.

In “The Narrative of the life of Moses Grandy, Late Slave of the United States of America,” (1843), Grandy explained that as a waterman, he was working “as far as a colored man could there be free.”



2. **US Navy Sailors** - as per all American wars from the Revolution on, and as soldiers - but sanctioned army participation came later (1863).



3. **Navigators** – With their intimate knowledge of the river, black watermen were widely sought by the Union, to undercut Confederates advantage in southern waters.

4. **Spies & Spy Masters** - often roaming 100s of miles up rivers behind the lines, here talking to Pinkerton agents upon return. These were heroes who took huge risks.



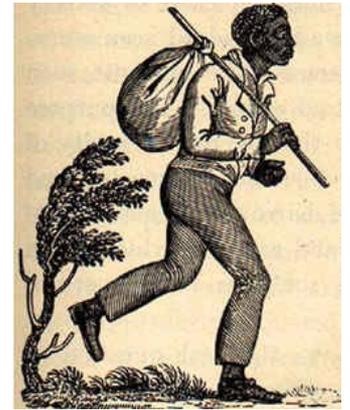
5. Fugitive Slaves Conduits –The “Underground Railroad” could just as appropriately be called the “Over-water Railroad,” because transporting fleeing slaves across rivers and marshy creeks of the south, and especially up the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay, dubbed “Chesapeake Station,” was such an integral part of the anti-slavery movement.

In the words of James McBride, author of “Song Yet Sung,” “The watermen, mostly black and some white, were the soldiers of the Underground Railroad,” “Watermen were like cowboys, only more rugged, physically stronger, and tougher and wouldn’t hesitate to pull a pistol if they needed to.” They needed to be tough, and extremely careful, because if caught they would be sold back into slavery, or worse.

Southern slaves who fled North had two major methods and routes. If they lived near coast they may be able to get on a ship sympathetic, or economically disposed, to helping them. Slavery became frayed at the edge of the sea, where racially mixed crews were common and where many of the ships of trade came from northern, anti-slavery states.



More typically, escaping slaves walked. Riding a horse, wagon or train were not options. It was a very long, arduous trip, fraught with danger. To avoid detection, they walked at night or deep in the swamps or forests, or both at the same time, through unfamiliar, hostile landscapes. Hostile in terms of the humans they might encounter, through whom a capture would have dire consequences, even death. Also the land was hostile by nature, with poisonous snakes, bees, mosquitoes, cougars and bears (in the deep south – alligators and scorpions). They suffered starvation and the extremes of the elements. It is hard to imagine the courage it required to travel through such hostile country, often with only the most basic of clothing or equipment, and poor maps or, worse, no maps at all.



Of the many obstacles you would have to surmount, rivers presented some of the greatest challenges as well as the most frequent encounters. Rivers are especially daunting if you cannot swim, tremendously so if they are wide and deep.



You needed help getting across rivers, watermen provided that help.

The fences of slavery were strongest, the post planted most firmly, along the Potomac River. The Potomac was a large physical and psychological line of freedom, where a wide, deep river merged with the tightest mesh of a human network set to capture and recover escaping slaves.

You needed exceptionally brave help to get across the Potomac River!



Frederick Douglass, left, worked for a time as a ships caulker. He wrote that white and black ship-carpenters worked side by side, and that black watermen were very highly esteemed and looked upon as privileged. Black watermen were also common on rivers and trusted.

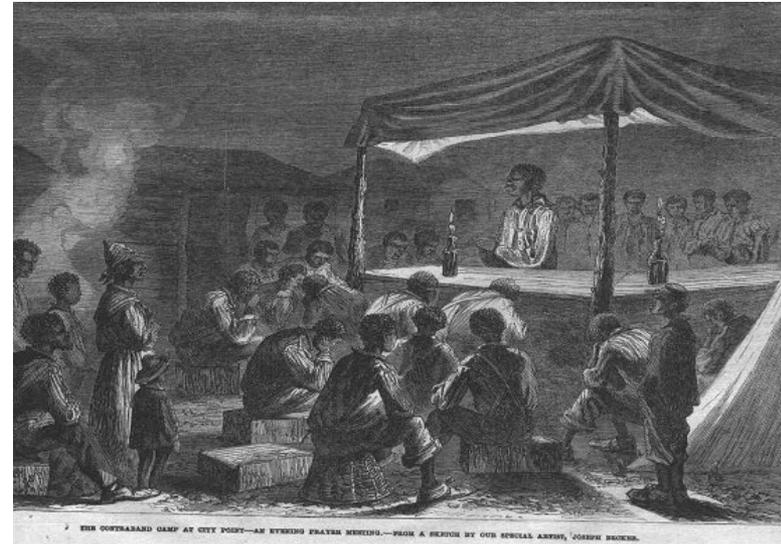
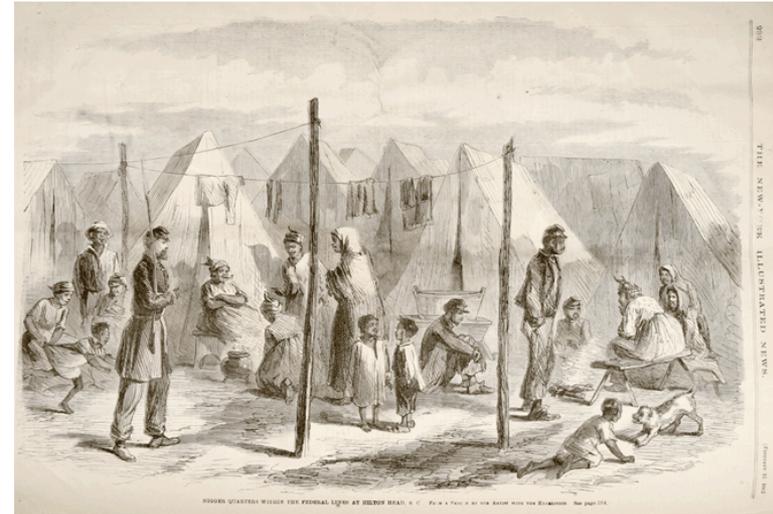
By taking a water route, Frederick Douglass wrote “we were less likely to be suspected as runaways: we hoped to be regarded as fishermen.*”

Slaves developed a unique set of signals: Quilts aired out on the porch of a shanty next to the river would often be flags denoting “Clear” or “Hold tight.” Black watermen would wrap their sail from right to left instead of left to right, meaning “Trouble was about.”

*Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845). This picture was taken about the age when he wrote his autobiography at 26. A gray-and-bearded picture of a much older Douglass is typically used on the book’s cover.

6. **Helped to feed “contraband” communities** – there were seldom any provisions set up for the make-shift towns which formed around the Union held “safe” areas.

7. **Establish self-reliance (jobs)** - after the civil war, fishing became a major source of income.



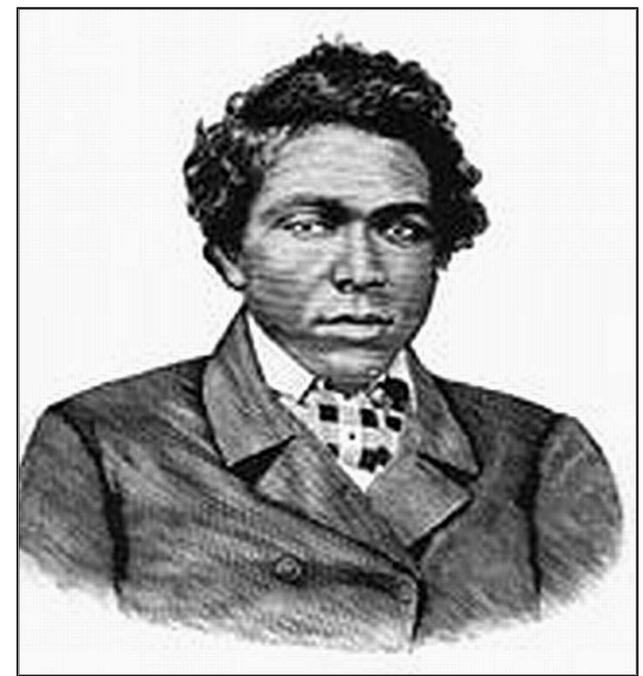
Special Spotlight - **Abraham H. Galloway** (1837-1870)

Pictured at right., a movie should be made of his life and accomplishments.

Born a slave in North Carolina, he became a waterman and pilot, escaped to Philadelphia in 1857, then worked as an abolitionist in Canada. At the outbreak of the Civil War, although he was a free man in a safe location, he returned to North Carolina and became a Union spymaster.

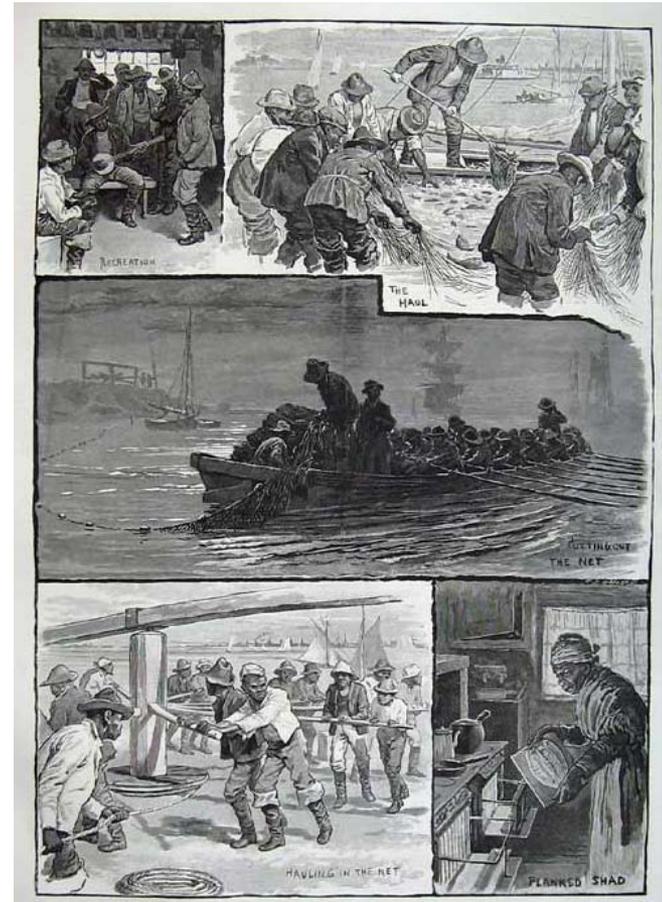
In New Bern, NC, he organized one of first African American regiments in the south, before Lincoln permitted blacks to serve in the army. When Lincoln did so in 1863, Galloway refused to relinquish his recruits to the Union army until military commanders agreed to the soldier's demands for fair treatment (such as equal pay, schooling for their children). He also argued that former slaves shouldn't be "denied political equality at the ballot box" if they "were to give at the cartridge box."

In 1868, he became one of the first black state senators in North Carolina. He met with Abraham Lincoln and urged suffrage for all Americans, regardless of race or sex. He was a man well ahead of his time.



By the 1860s, the Chesapeake Bay became the primary source of oysters in the U.S. and one of the major sources of shad, creating an industry in need of a strong labor force. Post-civil war, many newly freed blacks came to this region due to the availability of watermen jobs and relatively low start-up costs. In addition to harvesting the Bay's bounty, many also found jobs building boats and processing the day's catches.

New African-American communities were built along the Potomac's and Bay's shores. These communities became economic and cultural centers for blacks in the region. African-American traditions that were practiced in these communities were incorporated into the local fishing industry.



The Future? As the bay undergoes changes, so, too, does black waterman culture.

"African American watermen aren't encouraging future generations to pursue that trade," said Vince Leggett, who directs the Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation . "For many African Americans, there are increasing opportunities to move into other fields, where at one time it was just so limited.*"

Watermen, black and white, are becoming charter boat captains or marine contractors and construction workers. "That way, they can still use their boats. They still have independence. They still rely on time and tide to guide their day," said Leggett.

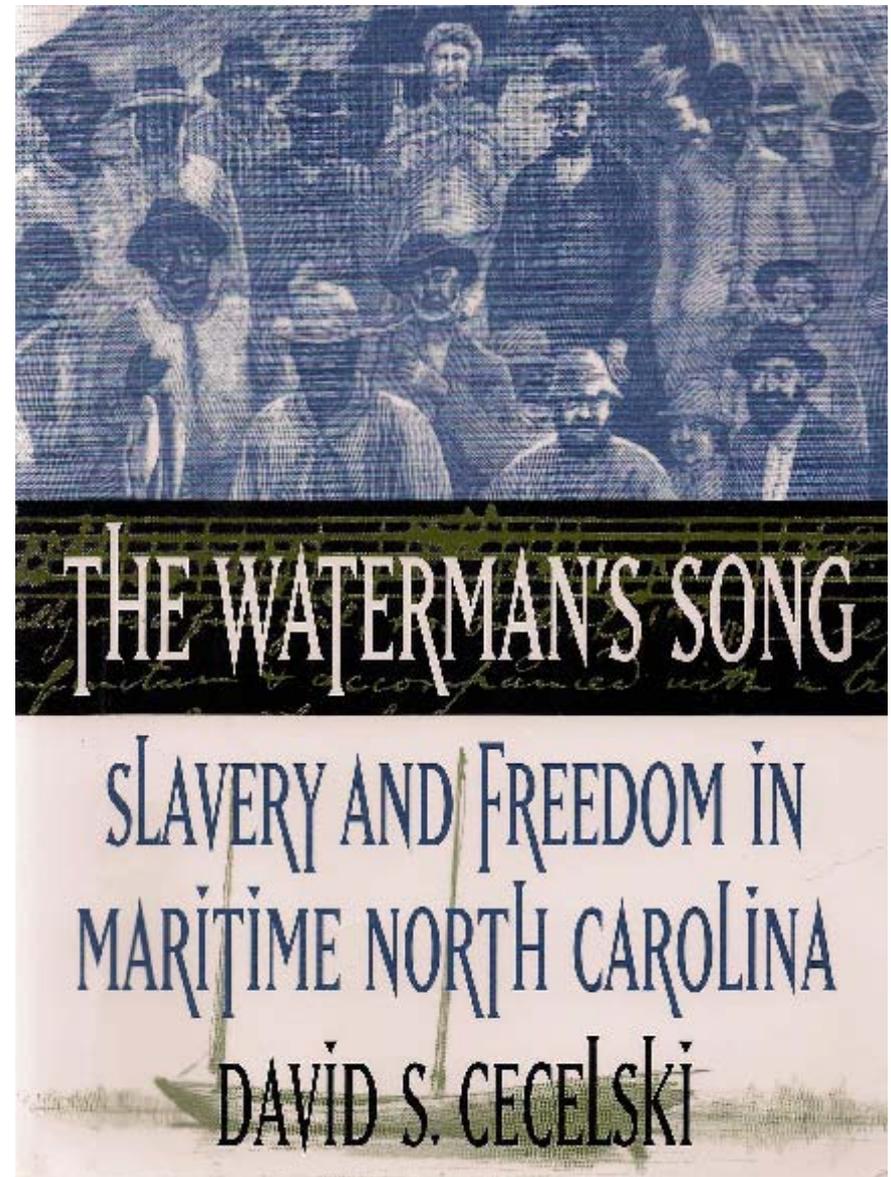
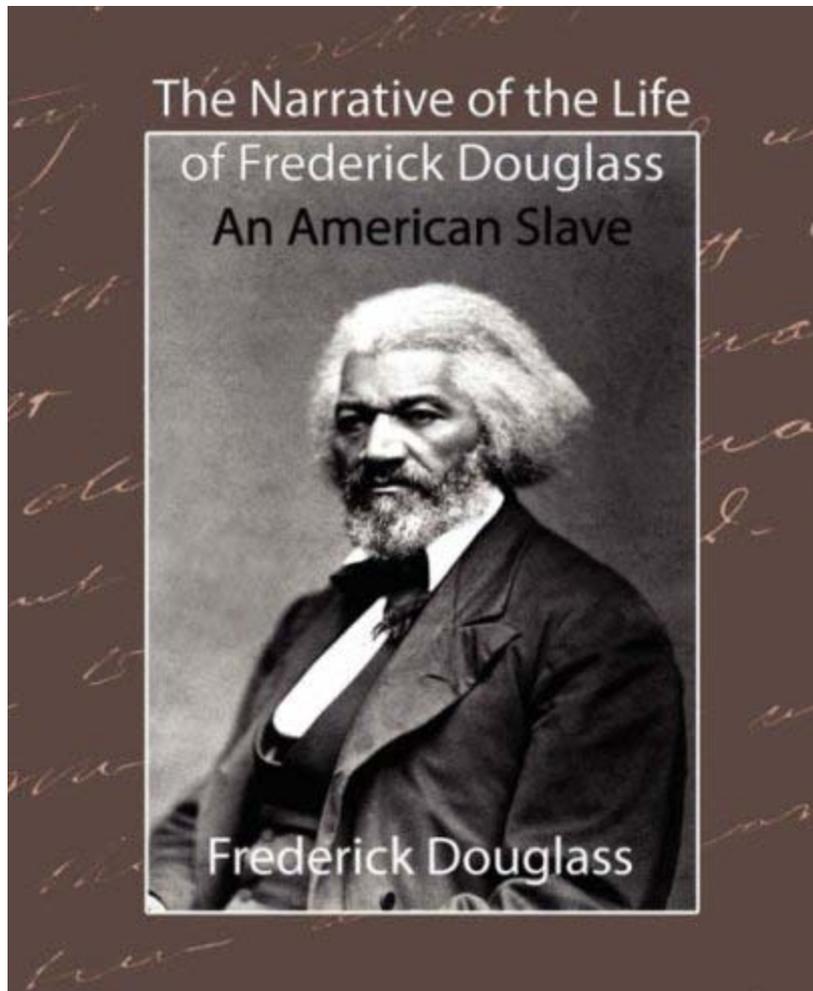
The remaining black watermen, their families and communities, still possess pieces and parts of a fuller story. We need to harvest their family histories, from either shallows or deep, and mend them as a net together.

It is a story, a richness,
which all should know
and appreciate.

*From: "Quilt Stitches Together the Story of Black Watermen"
By Catherine Krikstan, Capital News Service
Friday, December 4, 2009



These two books are great resources .



Other great sources can be found on the internet:

“Blacks of the Chesapeake” By Vince Leggett. A project that celebrates the legacy of African-Americans in the Bay region.

“Black Men, Blue Waters” By Harold Anderson. An article from Maryland Sea Grant on African-American watermen.

“Menhaden Chanteys” Another Maryland Sea Grant article by Harold Anderson which explains this maritime legacy.

“Abraham Galloway: Prophet of Biracial America”

By David S. Cecelski , from *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement*. Edited by Susan M. Glisson