

MARYLAND'S OYSTER WAR

The following appeared in The New York Times on December 13, 1888

Annapolis, Dec. 12. - Capt. T.C.B. Howard of the steamer McLane of the Maryland fishery force gives the following story of the battle with the oyster pirates:

“We left Annapolis at 4:40 Monday afternoon at my suggestion for Chester River, as I had heard of the violations going on there. We arrived about 7 o'clock and found a fleet of boats, about 10 or 15, under Wickes Beach. I did not board them, although I felt certain they had been dredging all day. I proceeded up the river and found a still larger fleet, all anchored, at Hale's Point, except one schooner I saw coming down the river. I boarded her, expecting to find unculled oysters. I did not find any. We got under way and went up the river, and just opposite Judge Robinson's found three or four boats at work dredging, two of them pretty close together. I blew to the first boat to haul down its jib. The Captain paid no attention to it. I then called to him, and he still refused to haul down his jib. I then opened fire on him with rifles, first in her rigging and then into the cabin, when he hallooed for quarter. I stopped firing, boarded him, lowered his sails, anchored him, and told him to remain where he was.”

“I then saw five or six bullet holes in the cabin of the dredger. The boat nearest to him and to the windward hauled down the sails, saying 'the balls came too hot for him. He didn't want any aboard his boat.' Just to the windward of this fleet, on Piney Point Bar, were 15 or 20 dredgers at work. They started up the river. They had considerable start of me. The first vessel I saw was tacking to the westward. He ran ashore, I was firing rifles at him all the time. Just outside of him I boarded a schooner, found unculled oysters, arrested the crew, put a man aboard, and started down the river. The others of the fleet that was eastward started down the river while I was boarding these boats to the westward. I followed and passed them and met and anchored two more boats. I started up the river. The wind was blowing fresh from north-northeast, the moon was up, and though not clear, I could see well. I then saw 10 or 12 boats made fast together and coming down in a solid body, showing red and green lights. I knew that that meant fight, from the manner in which they had acted previously. I told my men to get the rifles out, see that they were properly loaded, to keep cool, and not to shoot until I gave the order.”

“I had six men on deck and the pilot and myself in the pilot house made eight. I shot a great deal. I met these boats and gave them the signal to haul down their jibs. They paid no attention to it. I then hallooed to them to haul down their jibs. I got no answer. I order rifles fired across their bows. They promptly returned the fire. I then hauled right across their bows, barely avoiding collision. I was afraid I would get tangled in their bowsprits. When I got the cannon to bear in the centre of the fleet I gave the word to fire. She was loaded with grape and canister, and the load struck half mast high, doing great damage to spars, rigging, and sails. As soon as I fired the dredgers rattled away at me heavily again. I had to keep the men down below the bulwarks to prevent them from being shot. This gave me great difficulty in loading the cannon. I got her loaded again and ran right under their sterns and let go again in the centre of the fleet. This shot raked and tore the sails, we being right on top of them and only 20 feet from them. The dredgers had gone below when they saw me getting ready to fire the cannon, but as soon as it was discharged they

began to fire away lively at me again. I told the boys to load the cannon and get her ready, that I was going to run into them. The steamer has an iron bow. I ran into them, striking the Julia Jones on the starboard quarter, and let go the cannon at the same time. I backed out with one dredger on board, who had boarded me to save his life and begged like a wild man. I told him to throw up his hands, which he did. I don't think he ever stretched them so high in his life."

"As I backed out one ball came in the pilothouse and struck Mate Charles W. Frazier, who was assisting me in steering. He said: 'Captain Tom, I'm shot! I'm done for! I can't help you anymore!' I said: 'Old boy, I hope not seriously! Lay back in the corner.' I backed out, got Frazier down into the cabin, saw the extent of his wound, which was not fatal, bandaged his arm, and took Perryfields into the pilothouse, ran to the windward of the dredgers, and hauled dead for them and struck the J.C. Mahoney on her port quarter, and hung up and could not back out. I went ahead on her with full force and turned the Mahoney on her beam ends and come back with full steam and cleared her. In the meantime the Jones had sunk while we hung on the hull of the Mahoney. It was the hottest time of the fight. The dredgers, about eight boats, were pouring broadsides into us, and my crew were returning the fire as fast as possible. We backed off and the dredgers then dispersed. Each looked out for himself and got off in the darkness in range of the fleet on Hale's Point, and I was afraid to shoot there, as I would hit innocent persons on the boats anchored there. The Mahoney sunk after I rammed her. The crew crawled upon my bow calling for 'God's sake to save them. They had had enough of dredging.'"

"There were eight of them, and I took charge of them, gave them supper, and put them in jail the next day at Centreville. I laid-to all night, which was very dark and stormy, and the next day took the schooner Corbett to Centreville and tried the crew before Squire Goldsborough for having unculled oysters. Capt. Jones was fined \$100 and costs. I then returned to the scene of action, and laid all Tuesday night in a fleet of dredgers off Hale's Point. I saw no dredging. I certainly am proud of the way my crew acted. Not a man shirked his duty"

Gov. Jackson said to-night that he heartily approved of the battle conducted by Capt. Howard on Monday night, and that just as long as there is any necessity for such proceedings just so long he wanted such things done.

The city of Annapolis was advised to-night by telegram from Baltimore that an attempt to assassinate Capt. George W. Clarke would be made to-night by a fleet of 40 dredgers. Clarke is the Captain of the State Fishery Force schooner Folly, now on guard at Hackett's Point Oyster Bar, four miles from Annapolis. The steamer McLane was here, but having repairs to her boiler in progress, and her cannon being in process of remounting, she was unable to go to Capt. Clarke's relief. In this strait application was made by Gov. Jackson to Commander Sampson of the Naval Academy to allow the State the use of several steam launches and Gatling guns. Commander Sampson could not grant it without Secretary Whitney's order. This was telegraphed for., and at 11:30 P.M. a dispatch was received from Secretary Whitney to furnish the State of Maryland additional arms and ammunition. Commander Sampson is now making ready two steam launches, one armed with a howitzer and another with a Gatling gun. Capt. Howard of the McLane will be in command of these boats that are to be manned by his crew, and they will go to Hackett's Point at once.