



SAILING RAMS

James E. Marvil, M.D.

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Second Edition

A HISTORY OF
SAILING SHIPS
BUILT IN AND NEAR
SUSSEX COUNTY
DELAWARE

1974

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II

CONDENSATION OF THESIS BY MISS BETTY KNOWLES,
GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER OF
CAPTAIN WILLIAM THOMAS MOORE.

In 1711 an Act of the Maryland Assembly created this section of land as an Indian reservation. It is at this point that a true historian can understand why the territory west of Laurel and Seaford passes from mention as playing any real part in the early development of the lower part of the state.

It must be remembered that the area mentioned became involved in the great boundary dispute between Penn and Lord Baltimore. When one realizes that the territory was claimed by two semi-independent proprietors, little wonder is there that settlers would not want to buy or purchase land within the area. Oldsters were just as intelligent in those days concerning their security as we are today, and no settler buying a grant from Penn would want to settle and have the cavaliers of Lord Baltimore at his back driving him from his purchased land.

This area was considered part of Somerset County, Maryland, having as its parish name, St. Stephens. It was not until 1770 that Broad Creek Hundred built its first Anglican parish church near Laurel. (Christ Church, Broad Creek)

After the establishment of the southern and western boundaries between Delaware and Maryland by Watson, Mason and Dixon about 1756, it would be expected that the area along the navigable waters of Broad Creek and the Nanticoke would develop with great rapidity. Such, however, was not the case and the "V" shaped piece of land between Broad Creek and the Nanticoke remained for many years without substantial habitation. It was a timber region with considerable growth of pine and cypress, with small farms dotting the area here and there. Oddly enough it was this virgin timber that attracted the shipbuilding industry.

On April 29, 1909 George K. Phillips, William T. Moore and John M.C. Moore sold the Bethel Marine Railway Company yard to Samuel J. Furniss and James Manlove Eskridge. Three boats were built after this time. Smith and Terry, Inc., purchased the yard in 1916, but due to certain difficulties concerning the ownership of the title, the purchase only resulted in the operation of the yard during construction of the two Smith & Terry barges, No. 1 and No. 2 in 1917 and 1918.

Many of the ships that were built at the Bethel railway were brokered and sold by Wootten and Fooks, of Laurel, Delaware, and after launching rarely, if ever, returned to Bethel.

In most every instance the masters and crew of the ships were cho-

sen from the town's population.

Once having left Broad Creek and the Nanticoke, they began to ply their coastwise trades which ranged from the Chesapeake Bay ports south to Cuba and north to Halifax. They carried south the commodities of the north and brought back lumber, turpentine and other naval stores. In the management of the vessels, the captains received one half share of the charter and the owners the other half. In those days the captain was the manager, not only in regard to the finances, but also obtained the cargoes, figured the tariffs, kept the ship in repair, managed the crew and made his report to the owners. The captains, therefore, must have been men of substance, not only business managers but they also had to be seamen.

Bethel profited through their experiences and by 1900 the town was a place of rather noted men. To mention a few, William T. Moore, John M. C. Moore, William J. Insley, J. B. Quillin, Reuben Quillin, Manlove Eskridge, George W. Elzey and others. Bethel reflected these experiences in the nature of the homes they built. Each of the above mentioned men had in that locality quite pretentious homes for Sussex County in that day and age. Today some of them still stand but their fences are not in repair and some are in sad need of paint. This is due to the architecture of the time in which they were built, which called for numerous porches and wooden trimmings of various cuts and shapes. Today the average painting bill on one house would amount anywhere from \$1200.00 to \$1400.00, (1955)

The inhabitants of the town in those days lived a strange life. The population probably never reached two hundred fifty people, but twenty five percent of the heads of the families sailed the bays, rivers and oceans and on Sundays when everyone went to church the congregation was predominately feminine.

During the week the general store was the common meeting place. In the town supper was served at five o'clock and by six the general store became full. The center of attraction was the captain newly returned to his home while his ship was undergoing repairs at some Atlantic coastal port. It was at these gatherings that the townsfolk learned first hand the latest information concerning people and events, for these sea captains were travelers and talkers with many thrilling experiences.

The winter months were particularly somber. The newspaper "Philadelphia Record" was avidly read by the population for it was considered to have one of the best pages on shipping, and it was from its columns that the people of the town learned the coming and goings of their ships. The women would almost plot the courses of their husbands as their ships sailed from Savannah, Jacksonville and Charleston northward, and the women of the town all knew the probabilities of endangered ships and captains with storms on the Atlantic off Cape Hatteras and Cape Henry.

It was at these times that the women congregated at the homes of the captains most likely to be affected by the storm.

On an average the captains got home about once every three months, and in the summer time the wives and children of the captains often made trips with their husbands and brothers.

Bethel was essentially a religious town and the Methodist Church, built in 1885, was very well supported. The inhabitants of the town together with some Methodists in Laurel founded the Laurel and Bethel Camp Meeting. This Camp was probably the largest and best attended Camp on the Eastern Shore. Its revival services attracted attention from all the eastern seaboard. It lasted for two weeks in the beginning of August. Families would rent or own one of the very small houses surrounding the commons of the Camp. The Pennsylvania Railroad Company ran excursion trains from Wilmington south to Broad Creek, which is the railroad crossing midway between Seaford and Laurel, and two miles eastward from Bethel. One can see the Camp from this railroad crossing.

These men of the sea also had an interest in the political life in their hundred, and eventually many of them served in the State Legislature. William T. Moore, a Democrat, was a State Senator, John M. C. Moore a Republican, served many times in the House of Representatives. S. J. Furniss was a Democrat and represented the hundred in the Senate. Captain Eskridge was also a Democrat and George W. Elzey was a prominent Republican and after his retirement was an employee in the State Department at Dover.

Electricity came to Bethel about 1912. The quaint little oil street lamps at that time were taken down and destroyed, but at the same time another type of change was passing across the face of the village and this was nothing more than progress written in the words steam and naphtha. With the advent of steam coastwise shipping was absorbed by the larger vessels. The naphtha engine, the forerunner of the gasoline engine, made transportation by small boats propelled so much faster than sail. The marine railway at Bethel never got away from sail. Maybe if Smith and Terry of New York had obtained clear title to the land of the railway, the conversion might have taken place and Bethel would have been a flourishing town, still building small craft. At the present time there is not even a skeleton of the railway on what was the old property.

The town is being reclaimed by retired business men and is becoming a residential area, very beautifully kept and improved. There will never be any more future in industry so far as the Creek is concerned, and it will probably remain a sleepy little town, and with no historical recognition by placard. This is an incident in history that covers little

time, lots of energy and forgotten credit.

Seaford may have her nylon - Laurel may have her baskets - but Bethel had its romance, and after all - What is life without romance?