FICKLE GROUND

Alex Daley Alex Fry Alex Heald Ruth Shatkay

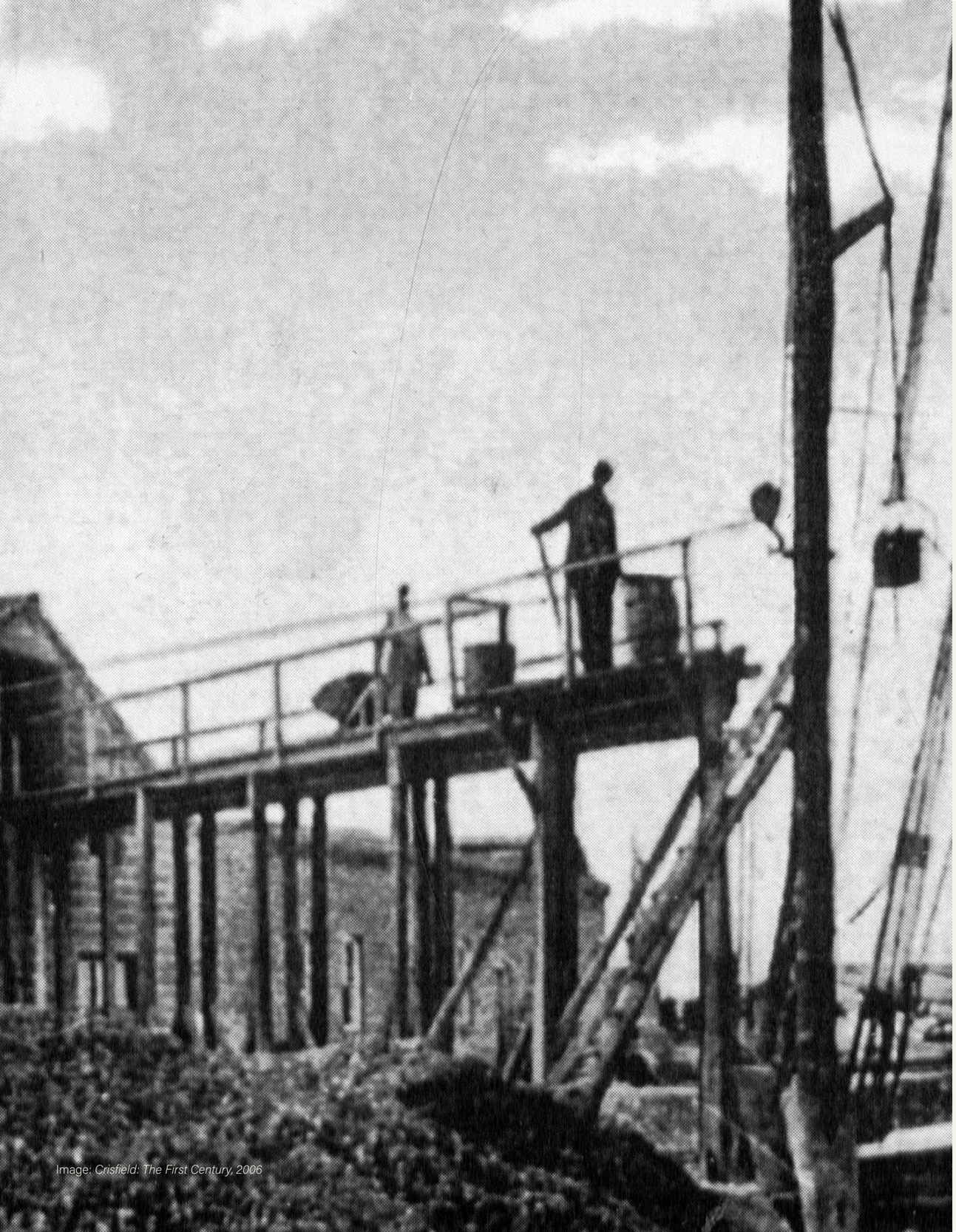


Image: *Crisfield: The First Century, 2006*

A Note.

Through this atlas, we aim to understand and express the people of Crisfield's historic and ongoing relationships with water. A city literally built on oyster shells, the town and its people are inextricably linked to the Bay. These connections reveal themselves in three primary ways:

(1) topographic manipulations

(2) the form and human experience of the city's fabric

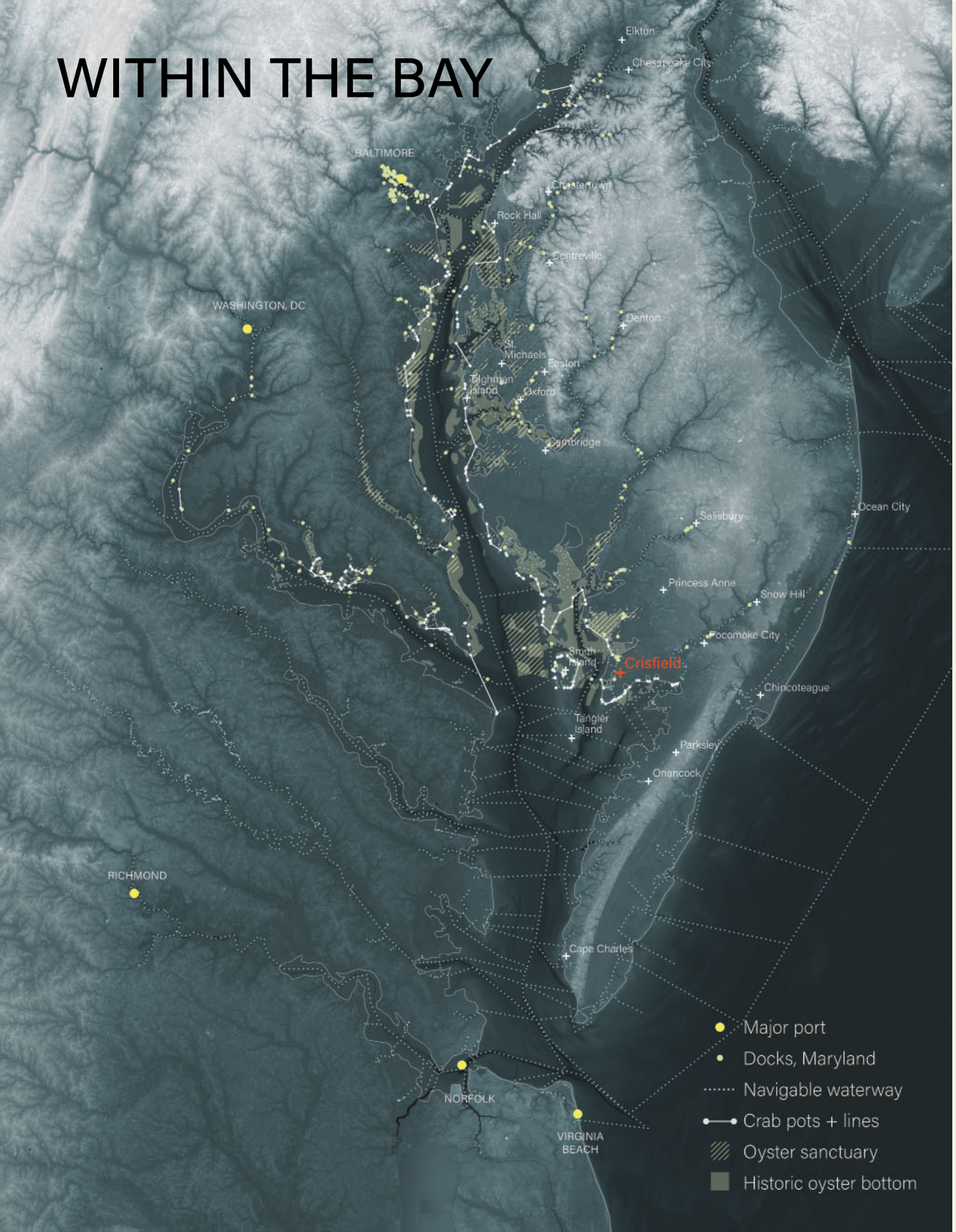
(3) flood adaptation plans

Here, we contextualize Crisfield, explore the city through these three lenses, and note the wonder that we see in Crisfield and its people through the years and anticipate into the future.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

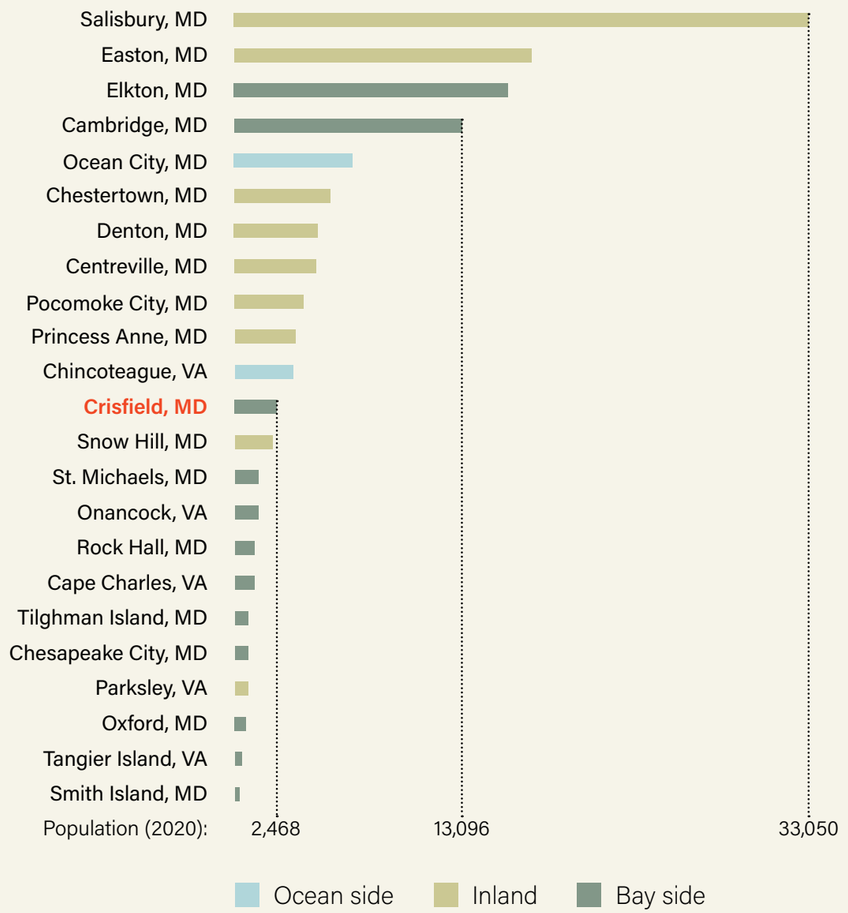


WITHIN THE BAY



Crisfield's plight in the face of climate change is widely seen as a bellwether for rural coastal communities in the Chesapeake Bay region and beyond.

Population of towns on the Eastern Shore



Jeremey Cox, "Crisfield gets funding for counterattack on sea-level rise, flooding," *Bay Journal*, August 8, 2024.

TIMELINE

c. 12,500 bce

Chesapeake Bay Formed

Retreating ice sheets and sea level rise form the Chesapeake Bay, transforming from tundra to grasslands and open coniferous forest

Paleo-Indian people begin to inhabit the region

1660s-1700s

Colonial settlers begin populating Somerset County

Feb 10, 1663: 'Emessex' tract containing Crisfield patented to Benjamin Summers who renamed it Annemessex ; the Somers family continue to be prominent land owners into the 20th century

Annemessex & Pocomoke Tribes of Algonquin nation inhabit the region with, 12 towns mentioned on lower Eastern Shore

early 1860s

Railroad arrives to Somers Cove

Michael Somers & Capt. Hance Lawson go to Annapolis to obtain the water rights for the future downtown Crisfield, bringing in business partner John W. Crisfield, lawyer, politician, and advisor to president to President Lincoln, who advocates for bringing the railroad to Somers Cove and fueling the formation of downtown Crisfield

early 1900s

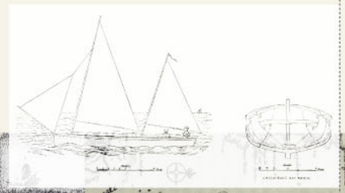
Crisfield was the home port for the most sailing vessels in the U.S. and it was reputed as the seafood capital of the world

Group of farmers construct 7 mile long, 6 foot tall tidal dike system with 24 tide gates to the southeast of Crisfield along Jenkins Creek

1970s-1980s

Shift towards tourism economy

Seafood industry declines as tourism industry begins to grow, with the appeal for visitors lying in the still active working waterfront. Cruises to Smith and Tangier islands become one of the biggest draws to the city.





FIRST STEAMBOAT....1867

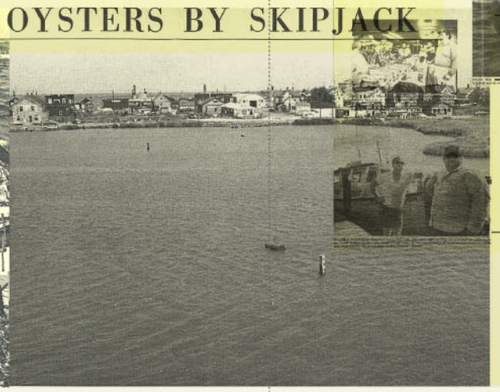
COMMERCIAL HOTEL.



COVE LANDING....1961



SOWING OYSTERS BY SKIPJACK



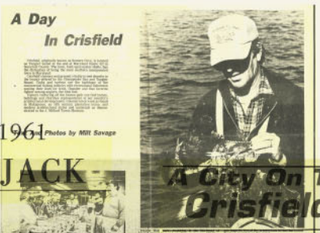




Figure 6.—Hand tongs have been used to harvest oysters along the east coast of North America from at least the early 1700's to the present.

1,000 ce

Native Americans begin living in village settlements and harvesting seafood

1800s

Lower Somerset County life is based on farming in the summer and oystering in the winter.

Most residents live in the community of Lawsonia, and what would become downtown Crisfield is still only water and marsh

1854

Michael Somers & Severn Riggins own a small staore at the head of the little Annemessex River, serving oyster men and locals

late 1850s

A large oyster bed found in Tangier Sound, drawing oyster brokers in from the North

1872

Town incorporated and renamed Crisfield to honor the president of Eastern Shore Railroad, John W. Crisfield. This brings paved streets, electricity, and the police and fire departments

1883

First of Crisfield's great fires

1922

Pine St passenger station opened for connection to the New York, Pennsylvania, and Norfolk line

1928

August- Crisfield breaks 2 fish shipping world records in 1 week, shipping 1.5 million soft crabs and approx. 1.5 million gallons of crab meat

Majority of uptown district destroyed in fire that began at the old Opera house causing $1 million in damages

1947

First Crab Derby

1954

Oct 15, 1954: Hurricane Hazel causes widespread damage to boats and buildings in the area

1956

Construction of the dual highway along the path of the railroad begins, connecting Maryland and Richardson Avenues and West Main Street

1961

Somers Cove Marina constructed, dredging out a depth of 10 feet

1987

Fire breaks out at Tawes Brothers Lumber Yard that burns down much of downtown area

2002

Condominium developers begin constructing waterfront property at the edge of downtown Crisfield at the former sites of oyster and crab packing houses

Grounding Crisfield.

This is a thin place. Its flatness means that even the smallest topographic changes matter a great deal. In Crisfield and the surrounding landscape, people have been working with and manipulating the ground for centuries. The range of strategies and ground manipulations indicate ways people have and will continue to live with and respond to this wet, ever-changing place.

delmarva bay

shell midden

elevated road

dredge mound

dredge channel

drainage ditches

Image: LAR7020, Spring 2024

TOPOGRAPHIC TYPOLOGIES

dredge mounds
HP 7.8'

dredge channel
LP -9.3'

elevated road
HP 4.5'

'delmarva bay'
HP 5.1'

shell middens
HP 3.2'

drainage ditches
LP -1.1'

fill

cut

0 .25 .5 1 2 mi.

delmarva bay





shell middens



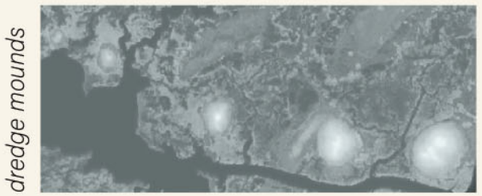


elevated road



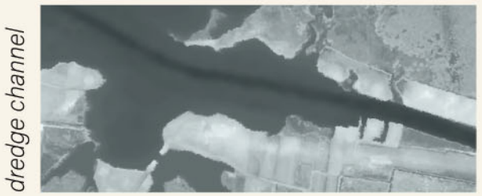


dredge mounds





dredge channel





drainage ditches





DELMARVA BAYS

Pockmarking the Eastern Shore are thousands of peculiar and distinctive elliptical depressions, usually about an acre in size with a crescent-shaped ridge.

These features, with their shallow basins that host seasonal freshwater wetlands, are called *Delmarva bays* (in the Carolinas, these features are known as Carolina bays and have a larger, more regular form).

While the cause of their formation is still somewhat of a mystery, it is now believed that they were formed by wind blowouts during the Pleistocene Era. Today, their ridges stand out as treed areas and agricultural land adjacent to ecologically-unique and diverse wetlands within the ponds.

Locally, these depressions were colloquially known as

"whale wallows" as it was speculated they were caused

by ancient whales beached by the great floods



Ashley Stimpson. "The mysterious Delmarva bays: exploring Maryland's most unusual wetlands." *Maryland DNR*. Oct. 1, 2018.

0 5 10 20 ft

SHELL MIDDENS

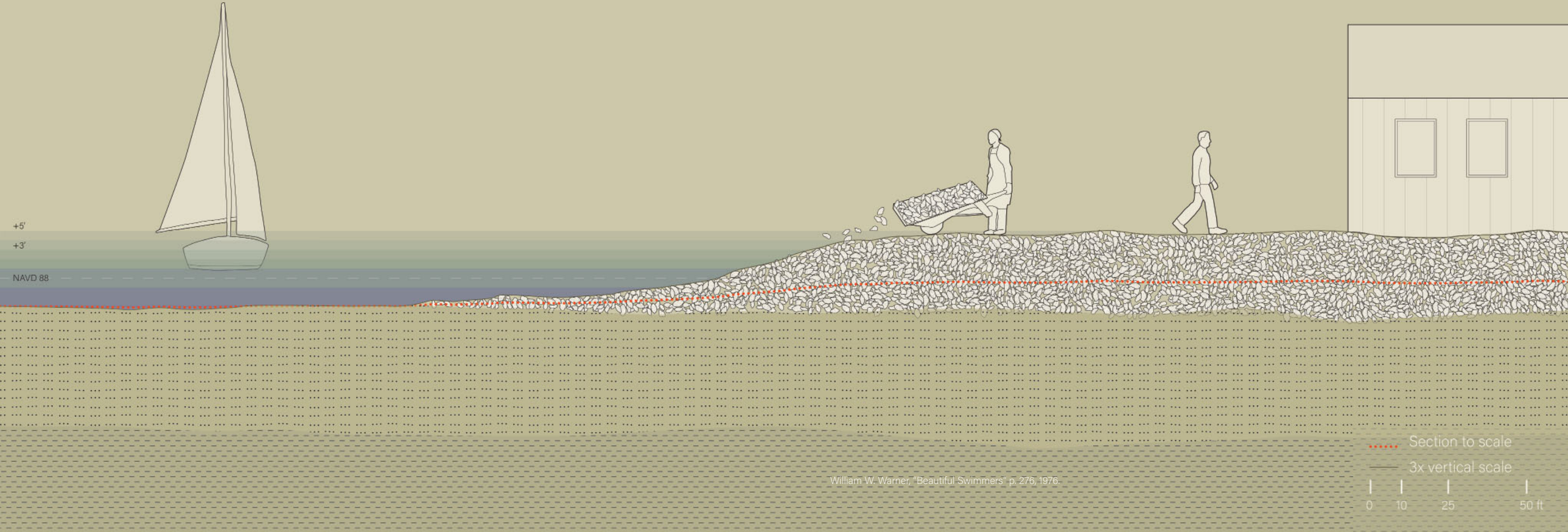
Shell middens - heaps of clam, oyster, and mussel shells - have formed along coasts for centuries, the result of shell dumping and the subsequent aggregation.

In Crisfield, this shell landform grounds the downtown: in the late 19th century, shucking houses along the shore dumped their oyster shells into the adjacent waters. Soon thereafter, with the accretion of billions of shells, a solid bed formed to become inhabitable ground.

So ubiquitous was this that businessmen in the late 19th and early 20th century bought underwater lots with the intent of building them above sea level using the town's discarded oyster shells.

The first shucking houses dumped oyster shells by the billions
all around their watery premises, So it is true.

If you live in downtown Crisfield, you live on oyster shell.
Several city blocks of it, in fact,

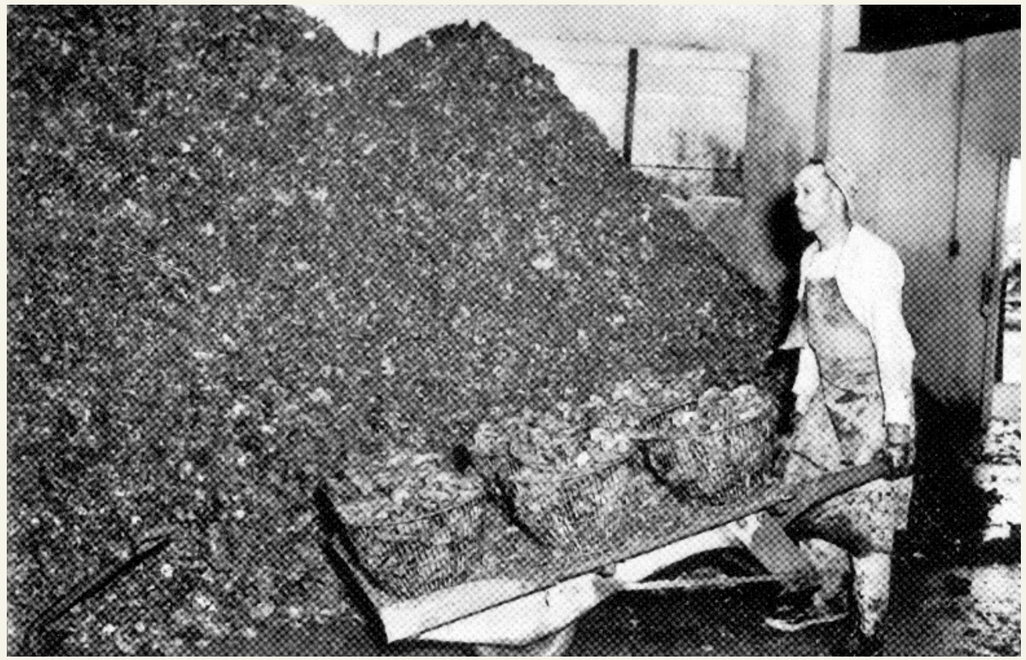


William W. Warner, "Beautiful Swimmers" p. 276, 1976.



Oyster houses, Crisfield, 1891

Image: Nabb Research Center Online Exhibits, https://libapps.salisbury.edu/nabb-online/items/show/463.



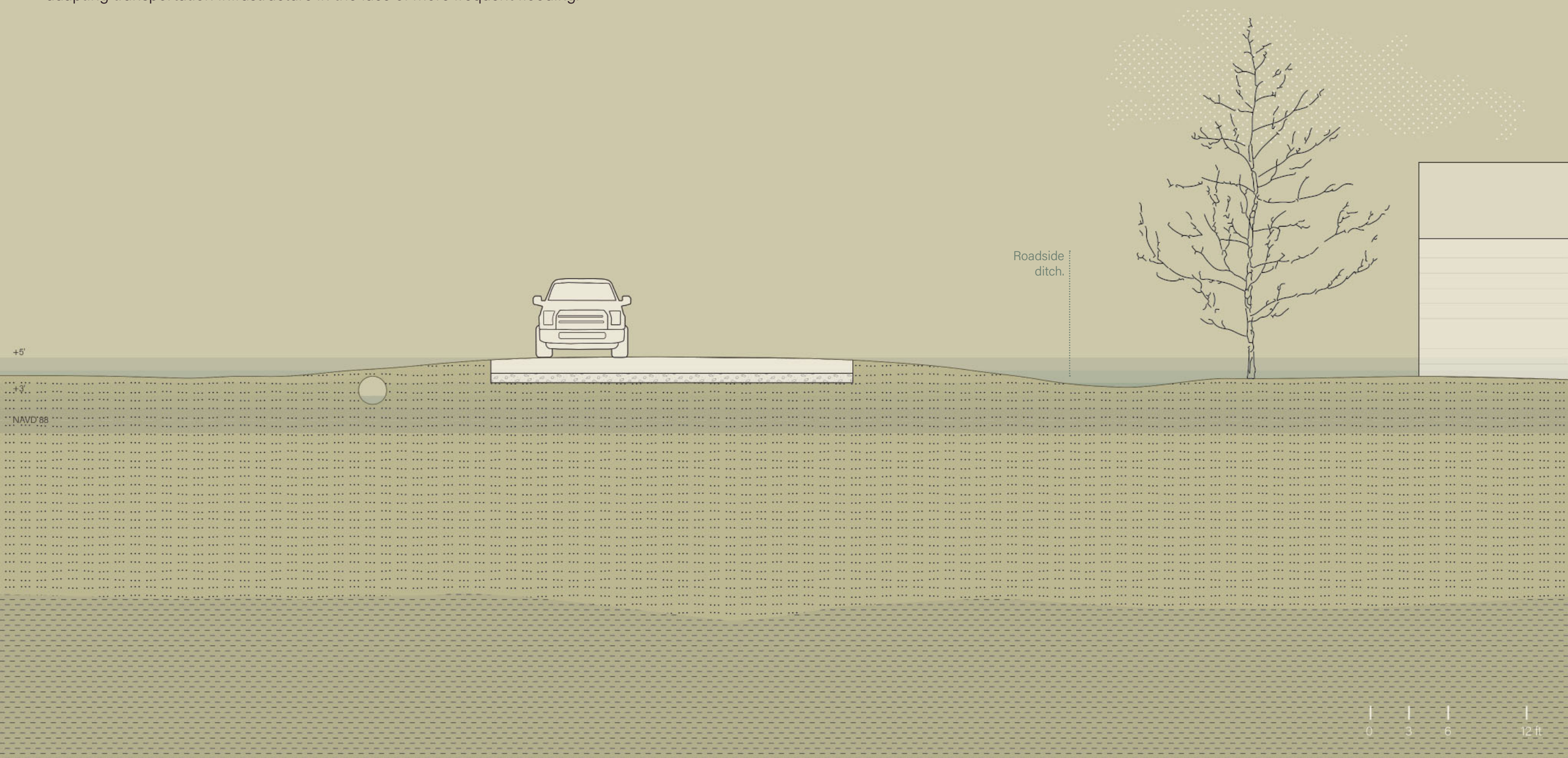
Discarded shells at Geo. A. Christy and Sons processing plant, Crisfield, 1955.

Image: *Crisfield: The First Century, 2006*

ELEVATED ROADS

In flat, coastal places, roads are often some of the highest features in the landscape. Typically, roads are elevated a few feet above there surroundings so that they may serve as evacuation routes for people living near the shore.

Strategies for raised road-swale systems are continuing to be considered and employed throughout the Delmarva as states and localities consider approaches to adapting transportation infrastructure in the face of more frequent flooding.



DREDGE MOUNDS

In this shifting place, sediment is endlessly moving and endlessly dredged. The dredged material is placed in a designated location and accumulates into a mound. These mounds become the highest spot in the landscape, a place where trees – species less tolerant of inundation and the Chesapeake's brackish water – may grow.

The mounds are a fairly stable area as the water level fluctuates, and the tall, dark loblolly groves cast a stark form upon this otherwise thin and open landscape.

lined with dark trees

It has a certain sinister look, but not very

sinister; it is too beautiful.



Hulbert Footner, "Rivers of the Eastern Shore," p. 76, 1944

DREDGED CHANNELS

The marina and channels around Crisfield have been created and maintained through dredging for more than a century, with large dredging projects along the channel that links Somer's Cove Marina and Daugherty Creek Canal recurring every 20 to 40 years.

The Daugherty Creek Canal, first dredged by hand in the early 20th century to provide passage for Crisfield's watermen, has been maintained as a navigation channel and is the spine of Janes Island State Park. Numerous water trails run through the canal, and campsites sit along its banks.

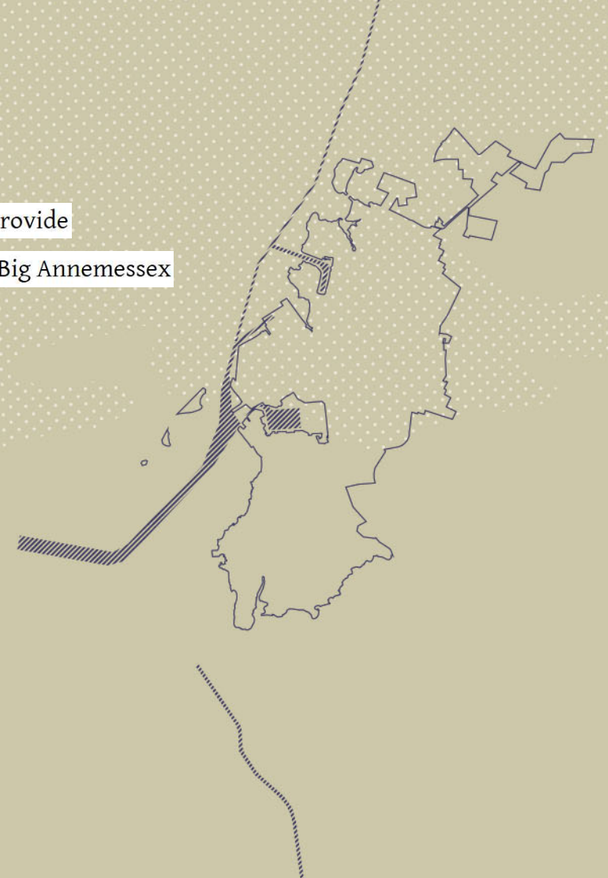
Daugherty Creek Channel — dredged decades ago to provide

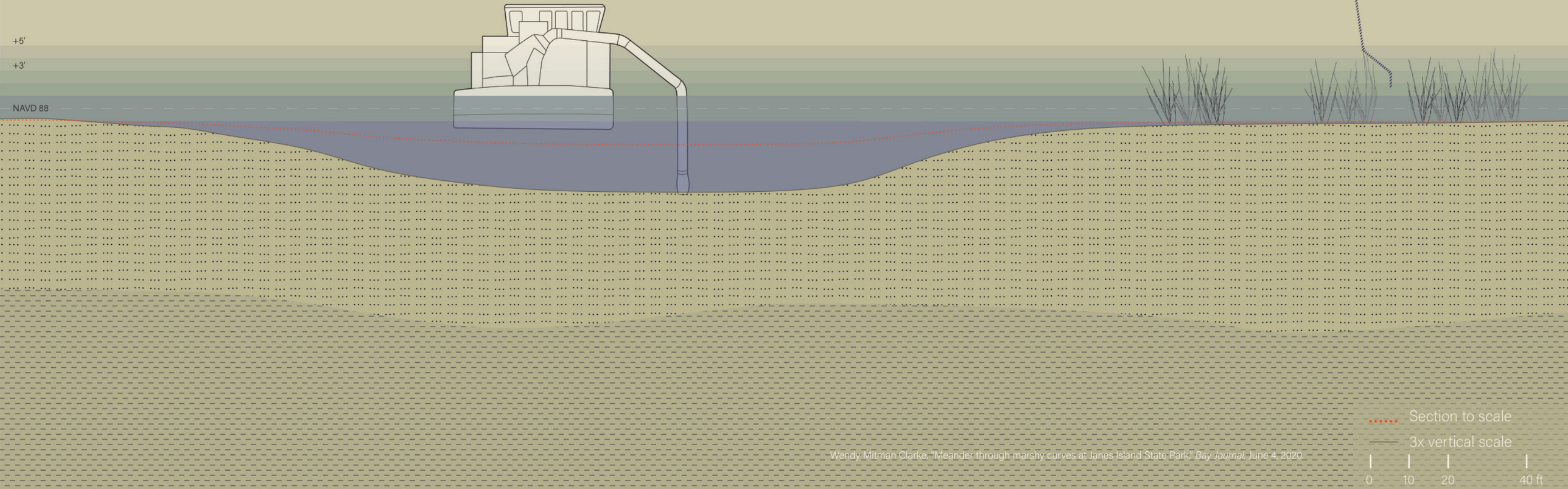
Crisfield's watermen a safer, quicker way to the Big Annemessex

— is the only straight line

amid the winding tangles of water that

make it a paddler's paradise.





Wendy Mitman Clarke, "Meander through marshy curves at Janes Island State Park," *Bay Journal*, June 4, 2020.

Section to scale

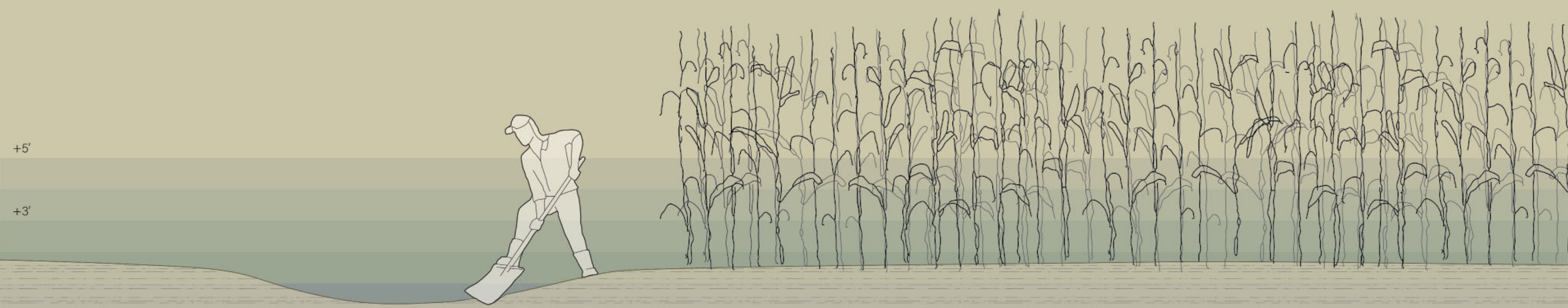
3x vertical scale

0 10 20 40 ft

DRAINAGE DITCHES

Ditches are ubiquitous throughout the Eastern Shore: mosquito ditches in marshlands, drainage ditches on agricultural land and adjacent to roads, these thin signatures line the landscape here.

Needed to drain this flat, low-lying land, ditches have been dug and maintained for centuries and continue to be a primary approach for stormwater management, adopted in urban areas and as part of Crisfield's current flood adaptation plan.



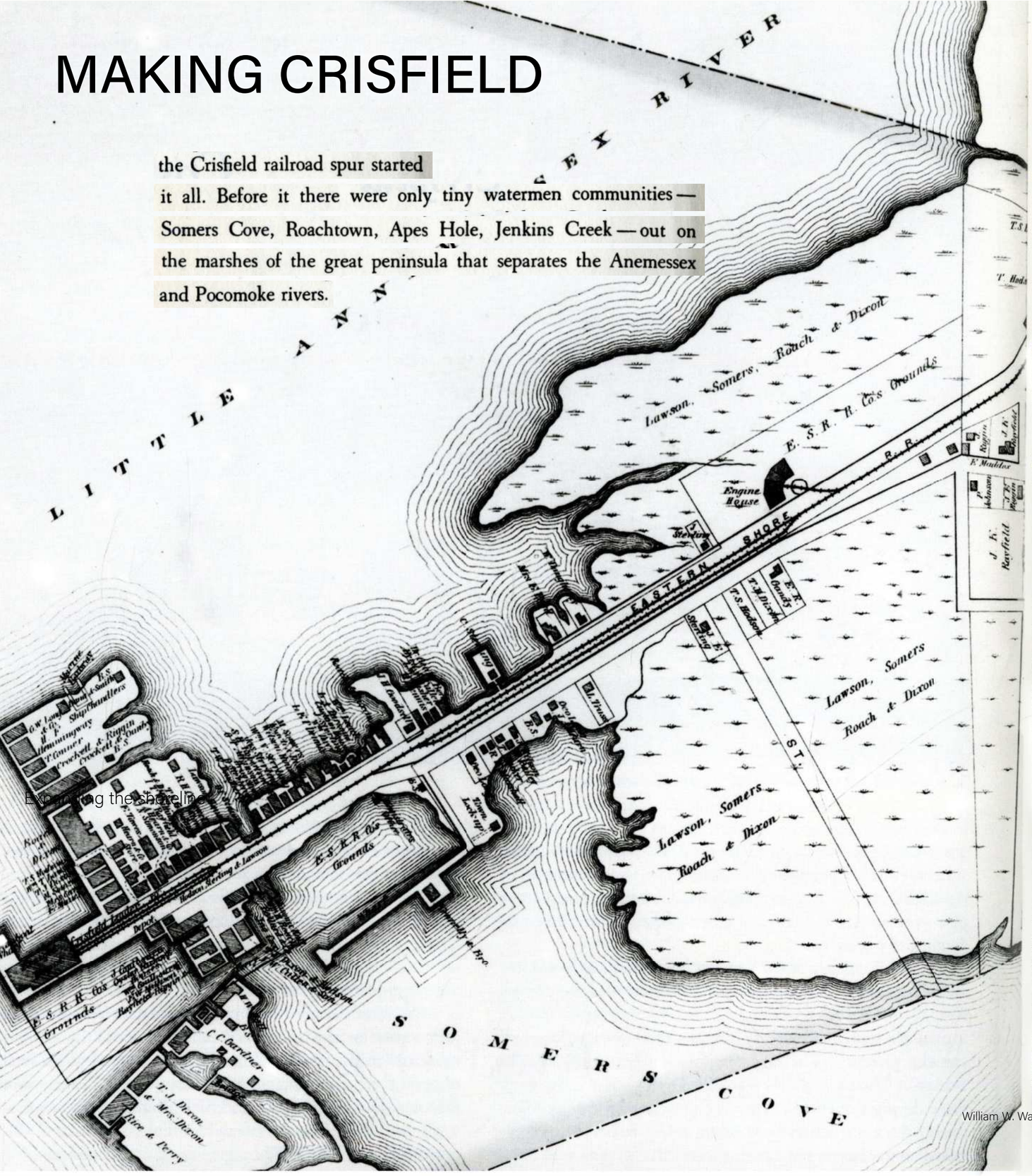
Crisfield's Changing Character.

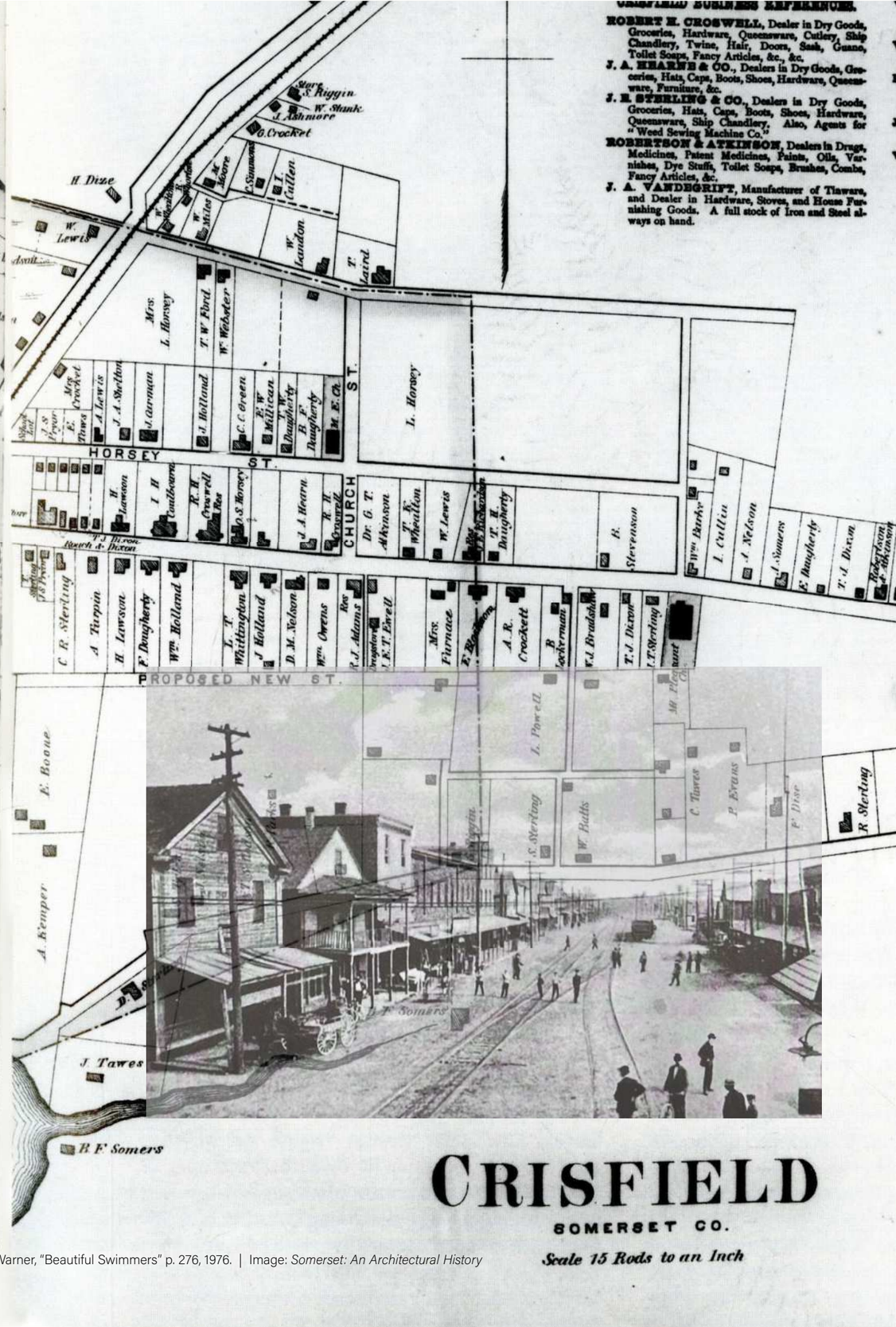
Crisfield's urban fabric and culture has long related to the water: its main road and former railroad lead one directly to the bay. This human-water relationship has many facets, and these qualities express themselves in the built fabric of the city, its economies, and the activities that people here partake in as they have developed and changed with time.

MAKING CRISFIELD

the Crisfield railroad spur started it all. Before it there were only tiny watermen communities — Somers Cove, Roachtown, Apes Hole, Jenkins Creek — out on the marshes of the great peninsula that separates the Anemessex and Pocomoke rivers.

Excerpting the shoreline





William W. Warner, "Beautiful Swimmers" p. 276, 1976. | Image: *Somerset: An Architectural History*



Crisfield port, early 20th century.

Image: Crisfield Heritage Foundation, https://crisfieldheritagefoundation.wordpress.com/history/



Crisfield downtown, 2024.

Image: Scho & Jo, “The Ultimate Guide to Crisfield, Maryland,” https://schoandjo.com/crisfield-md/

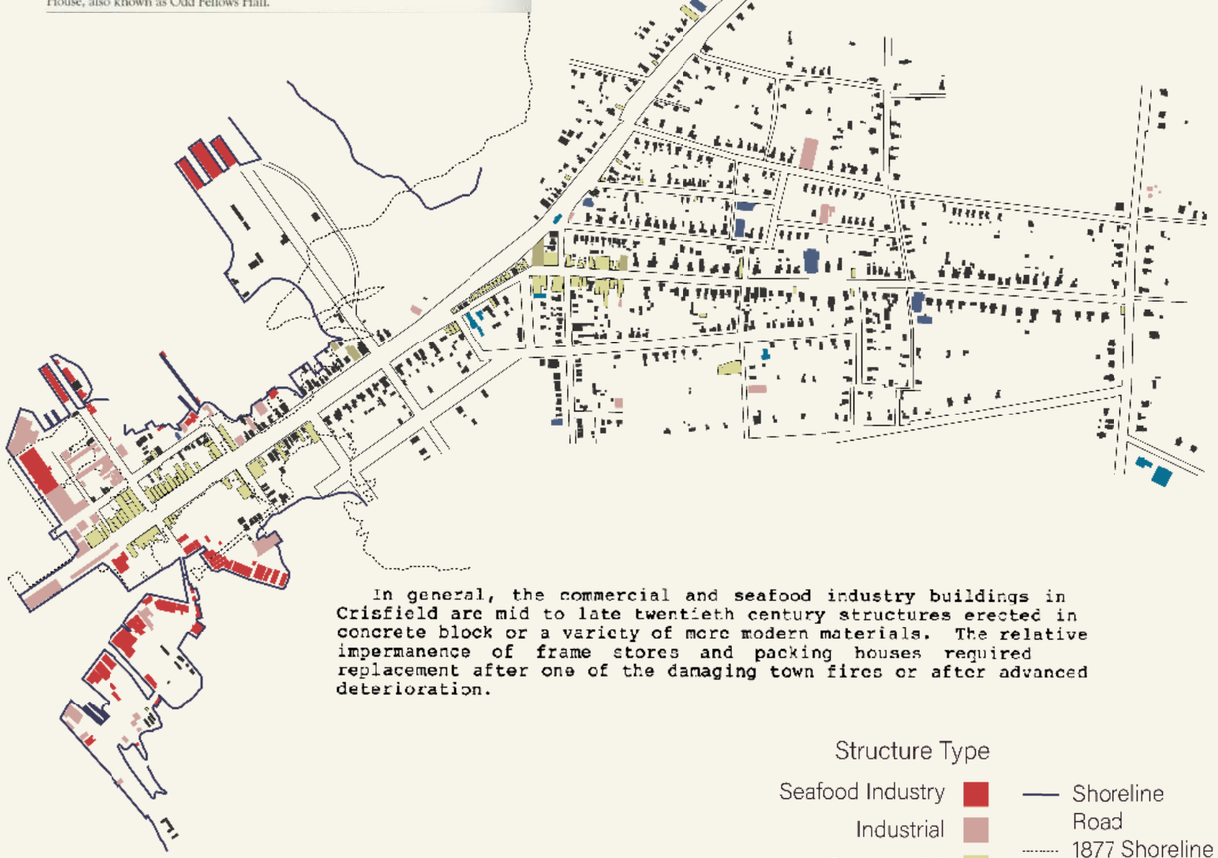
BUILT FABRIC OVER TIME



UPTOWN. Gasoline and other goods could be purchased on Main Street when this early-1920s photograph was taken. The tall building to the far left is the Crisfield Opera House, also known as Odd Fellows Hall.



PACKINGHOUSE. The crew of the *Edna Mae* unloads the day's crab catch alongside Dize Seafood in this July 1945 image.



1923 Sanborn Map

In general, the commercial and seafood industry buildings in Crisfield are mid to late twentieth century structures erected in concrete block or a variety of more modern materials. The relative impermanence of frame stores and packing houses required replacement after one of the damaging town fires or after advanced deterioration.

Structure Type

- Seafood Industry
- Industrial
- Commercial
- Hotel/Tourism
- Boat Infrastructure *(Present Day)*
- Community
- Religious
- Domestic or other

- Shoreline
- Road
- 1877 Shoreline
- 1923 Shoreline *(in present day map)*

"Crisfield Historic District," *NAtional Register of Historic Places Registration Form,* May 21, 1990.

Community Assets

(1) City Dock/"The Depot"
(2) MeTompkin Bay Oyster Company
(3) The Water's Edge Restaurant
(4) Captain's Quarters Condos
(5) Harbor Light Condos
(6) Crab Pot Depot
(7) Fisherman's Grille
(8) It Takes A Village to Help Our Children
(9) Tawes Historical Museum
(10) Gordon's Confectionary
(11) Somers Cove Marina
(12) Community Center
(13) Crisfield Housing Authority
(14) Crisfield Wastewater Treatment Plant
(15) Handy Seafood
(16) Crisfield Fire Department
(17) The Elks Club
(18) St. Paul African Episcopal Church
(19) Blancia Rose Faith and Healing Chapel
(20) Shiloh Memorial Episcopal Church
(21) City of Crisfield Municipal Offices
(22) Enon Baptist Church of Deliverance
(23) Immanuel United Methodist Church
(24) Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church
(25) First Baptist Church

American Legions Club
Wellington Beach
Food Lion
Little Boat Harbor
Library
Somers Cove
Rodeway Inn at Somers Cove
Woodson Elementary

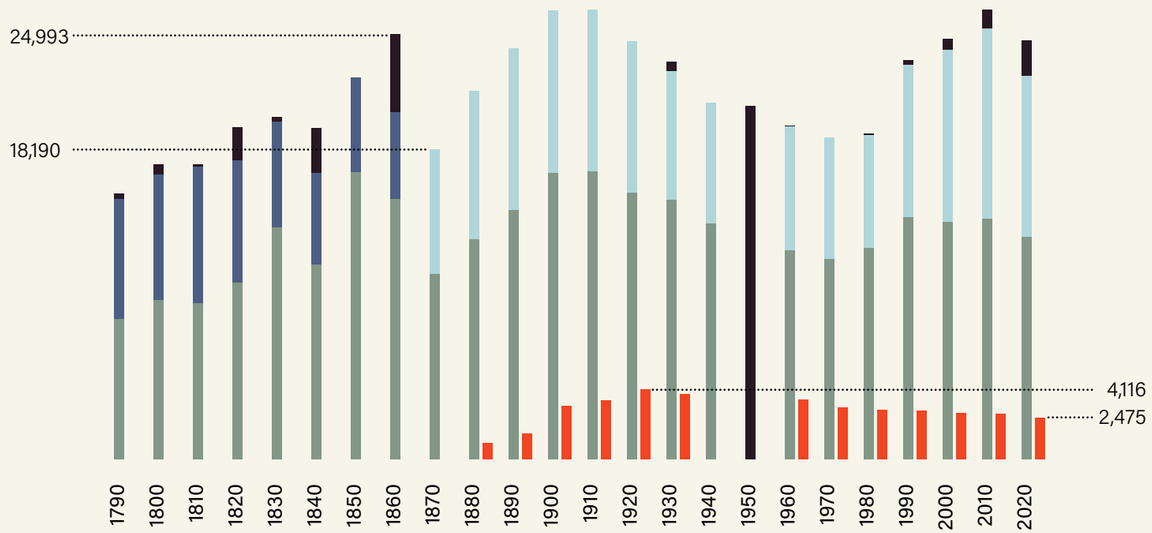
Present Day Crisfield

0 340 680 1,360 2,040 Feet

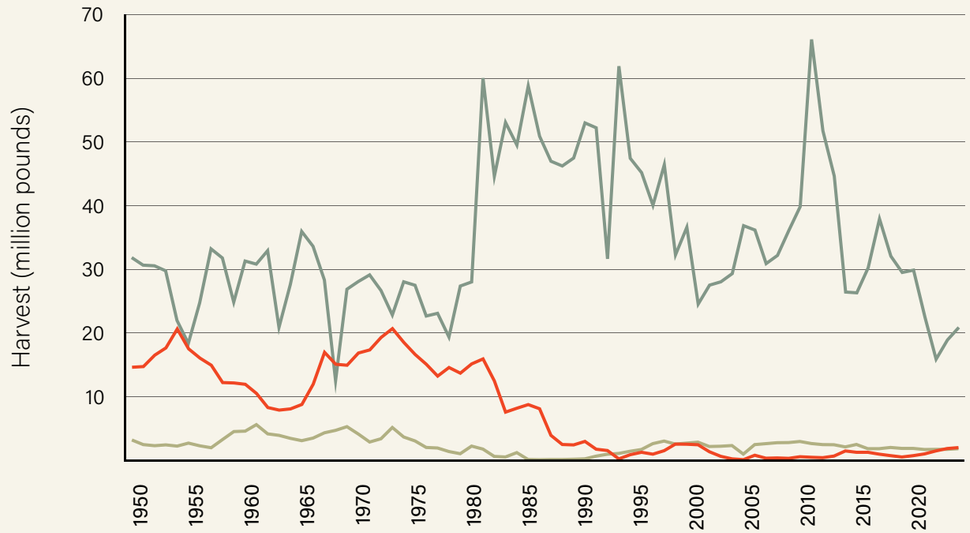
POPULATION DYNAMICS

from long experience with the Bay, some would say,
a fickle Bay that sometimes provides
and just as often withholds or subtracts.

Population of Crisfield and Somerset County, 1790-2020



Seafood Harvest, Maryland, 1950-2020



an antic disposition, one almost wants to say — that permits them to laugh
in the face of economic or natural disasters, of which Crisfield has had more than her share.
An outlook necessarily forged

William W. Warner, "Beautiful Swimmers," p. 282, 1976.



Crab pickers at Milbourne Oyster Company, Crisfield, 1940.

Image: Maryland State Archives, https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/stagser/s1259/153/html/0044/womenhist/wmenwork.html



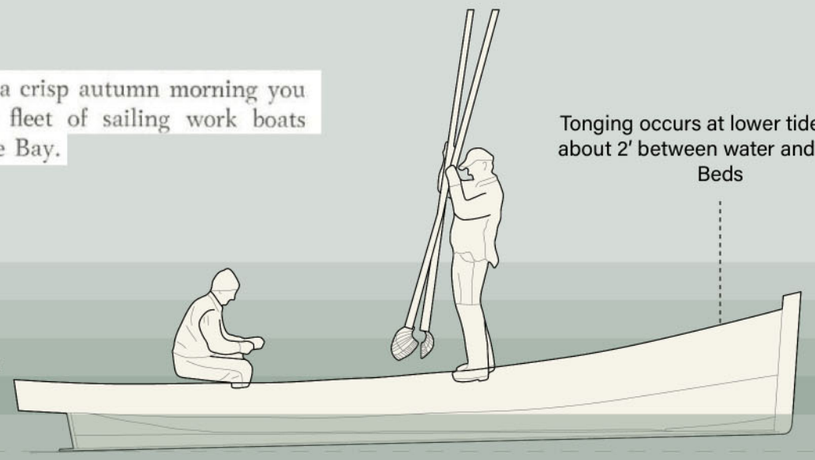
Watermen unloading their catch near the Jersey Island Drawbridge, Crisfield, 1960.

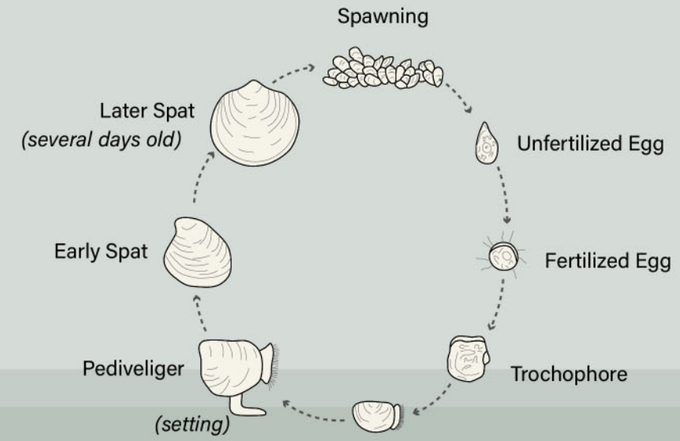
Image: *Crisfield: The First Century, 2006*

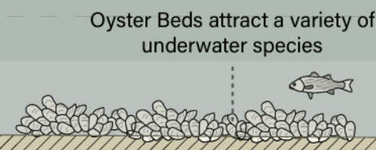
EASTERN OYSTERS

The Eastern Oyster, *Crassostrea virginica*, spurred the Chesapeake Bay's seafood industry. A boom in oyster harvesting led to a steep decline in the 20th century, but harvesting still persists. Commercial and recreational harvesters use a variety of techniques, including tongs and dredges. Oystering requires intimate knowledge of the bay, through tidal fluctuations and yearly change.

But on a crisp autumn morning you will see a fleet of sailing work boats ranging the Bay.



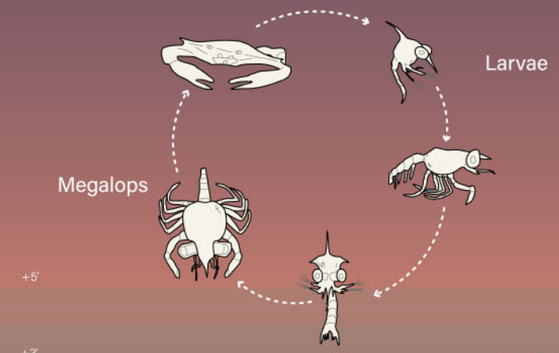






BLUE CRAB

Crisfield has cultivated a present identity around the Blue Crab, *Callinectes sapidus*, a lasting seafood product. The stuff of crabbing: pots, scrapes, trotlines, and dredges, can be found at sea and on land. One must be driven to grab successfully – early mornings well before sunrise are a must.

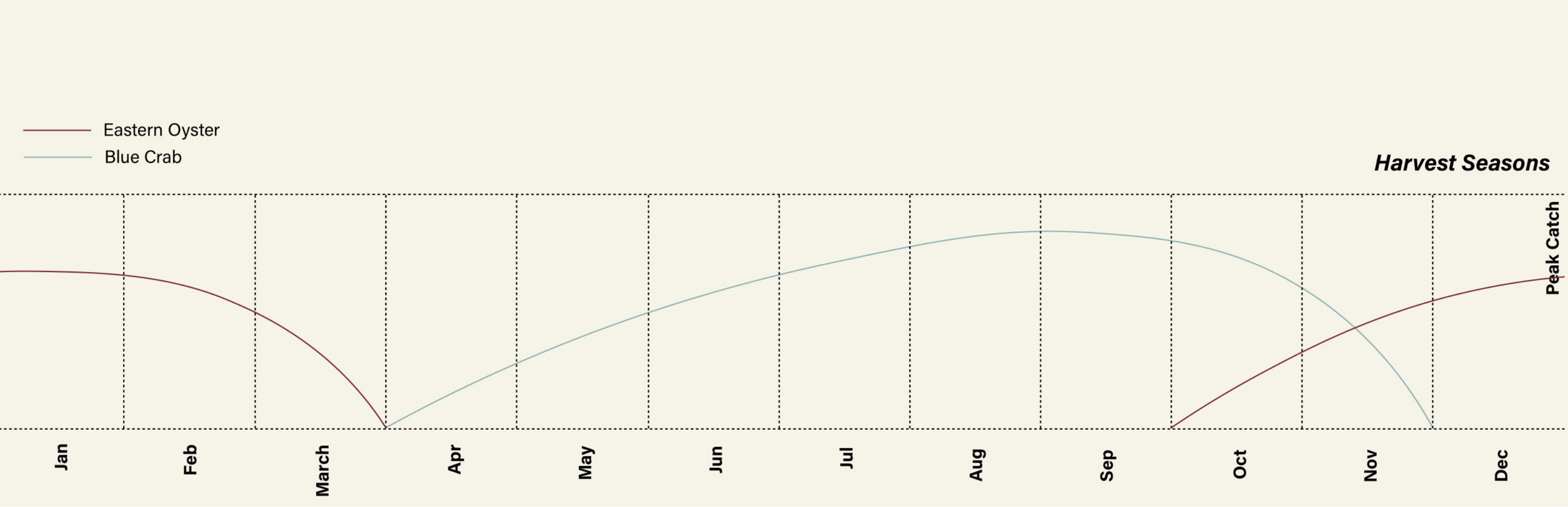




Oyster Skipjack, Chesapeake Bay, 1960. c. Orlando V. Wootten



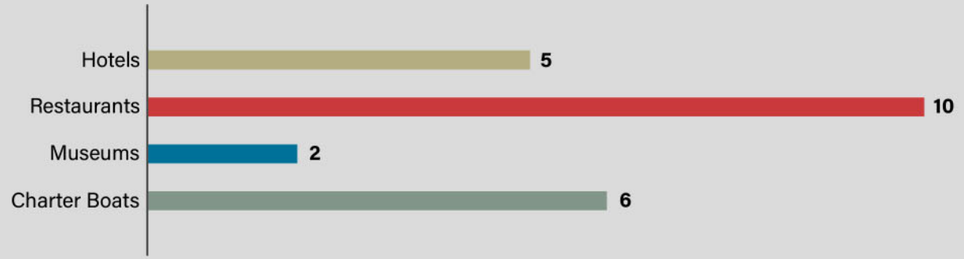
TNC Photo of Crab Pots, Crisfield, 2022. c. Jay Fleming



TOURISM

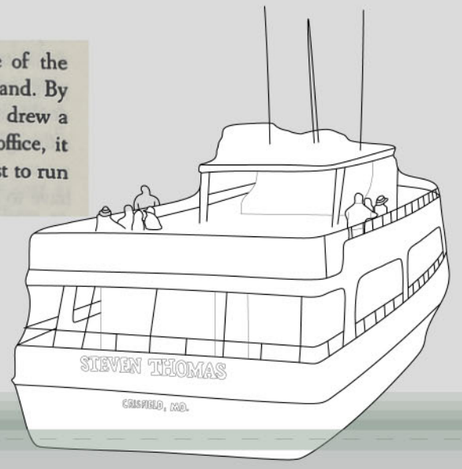
Tourism in Crisfield is becoming a bigger part of the economy, filling the void of drops in seafood harvests. Charter boats throughout the year, fishing excursions, and the National Hard Crab Derby draw a decent crowd to this small city. Crisfield's Crab Derby is an exciting highlight, where blue crabs race to the death.

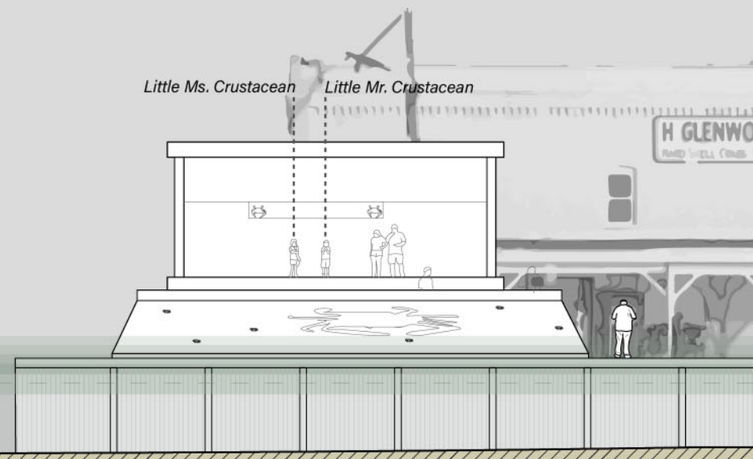
Tourism Shapes Crisfield | 2025



tion:

"It started back in 1947, near as I can recollect. Some of the boys were talking about how fast could a crab run on dry land. By and by they got to making bets on the subject, so someone drew a big circle on the street, right out in front of the old post office, it was, and let go a bushel of crabs in the middle of it. The first to run out of the circle was the winner, you see.





+5'
+3'
NAVD 88

0 8 16 32 ft

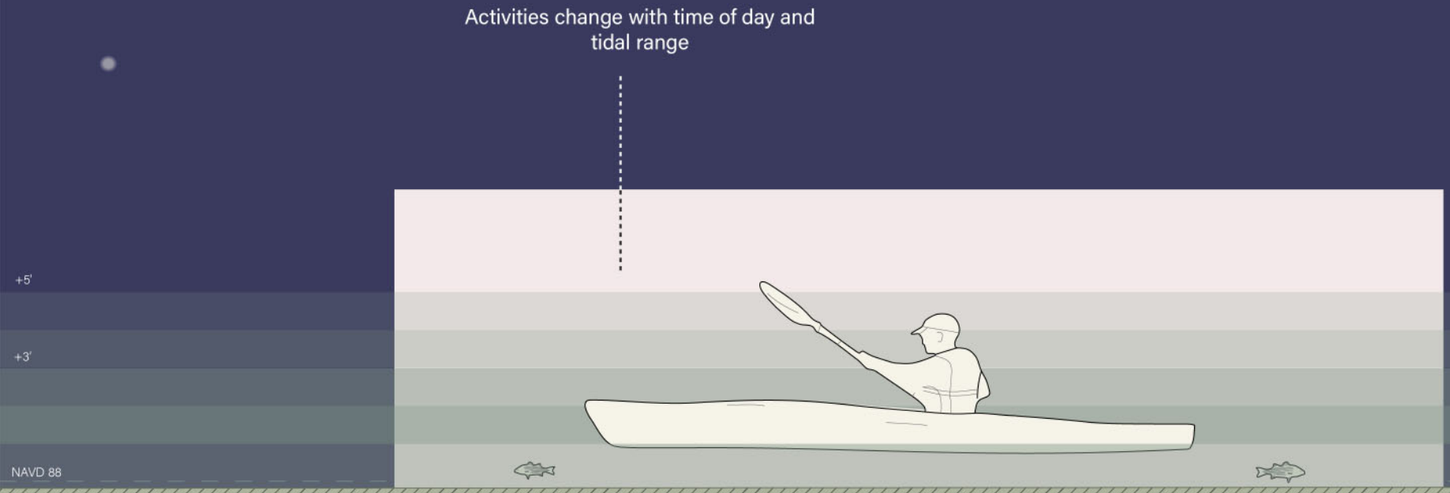
RECREATION

Janes Island State Park draws a fairly large amount of visitors to the Crisfield area, around 100,000 annually. Activities on and around the park allow people to engage with the flora and fauna of the marsh. One can be out on the marsh at any point throughout the day, partaking in “night crabbing” or floating away on a kayak.

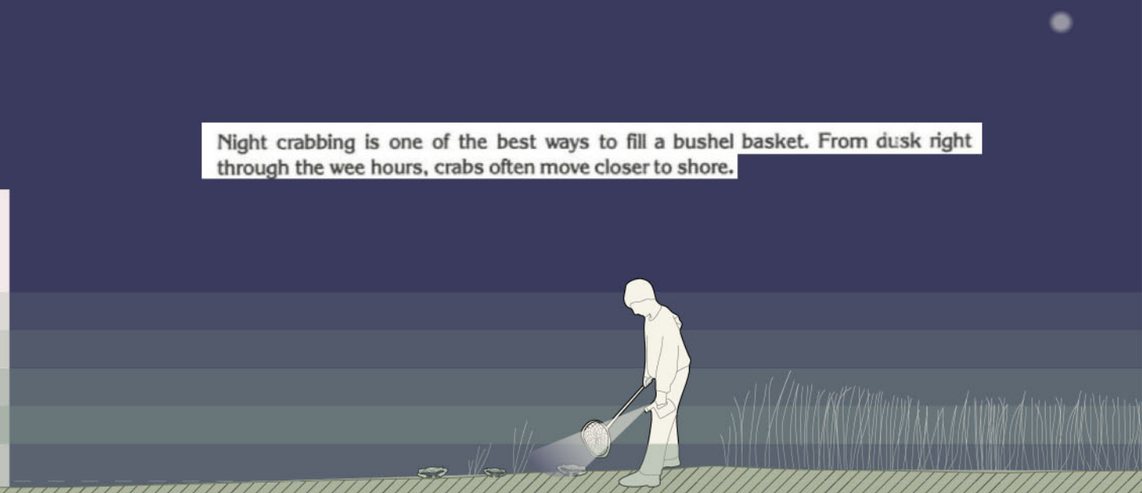
Recreation Pulls Visitors

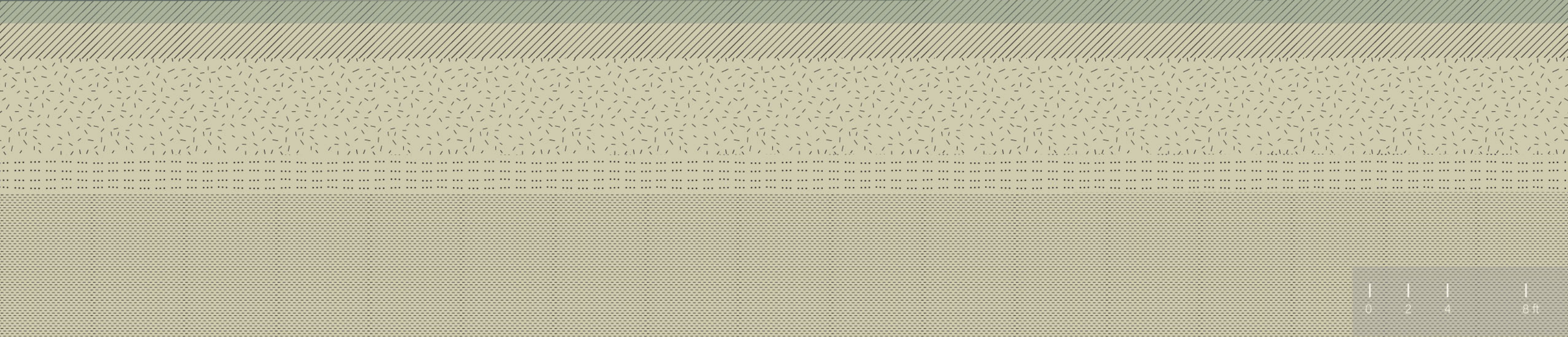


Activities change with time of day and tidal range



Night crabbing is one of the best ways to fill a bushel basket. From dusk right through the wee hours, crabs often move closer to shore.





Living with Flooding.

Crisfield has always been a wet place in need of flood infrastructure. With a tidal range of just over 2' and an average elevation of about 3', a network of ditches, berms, tidal gates, marshes, and hard edging has been employed since the town's founding to drain land. Still, water can never be kept entirely at bay. The majority of flooding that Crisfielders experience is tidal and is colloquially known as "sunny-day flooding" or **"nuisance flooding"** and occurs many times per year, leading to repeated damages and safety-related access impediments. Crisfield is in the process of designing an extensive overhaul to its flood infrastructure targeting 5' of sea level rise as its goal for protection.

Image: submission to mycoast.org, a grassroots nuisance-flood tracking website

SEA LEVEL RISE & TIDAL FLOODING



0′ *NAVD 88 datum*



+1.5

Experienced 88 times in 2021*



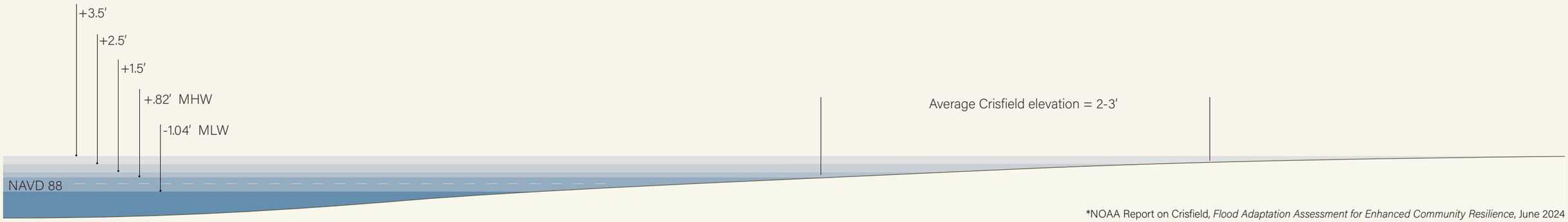
+2.5′

Experienced 6 times in 2021;
May become a daily occurrence by 2050*



+3.5′

0 500′ 1000′ 2000′



*NOAA Report on Crisfield, *Flood Adaptation Assessment for Enhanced Community Resilience*, June 2024

"Nine out of ten times, the flooding in Crisfield is tidal. …

You're at the mercy of the tides."



GREAT TIDE OF 1962.

Crisfield: The First Century, 2006



Downtown Crisfield, 2023

Image: Jay Fleming

NOAA Report, *Flood Adaptation Assessment for Enhanced Community Resilience*, June 2024

EXISTING FLOOD INFRASTRUCTURE

Hard edges along the marinas, and marshes on Jersey Island and the northern inlets of the city help keep water at bay. In addition, an extensive ditch network alongside roads helps drain water into pipes and away from the built fabric of Crisfield.

However, the city struggles to keep up with funding the maintenance of its flood infrastructure. Drainage ditches become clogged, tide gates stop functioning, and animals burrow into dikes. As a result, Crisfielders spend hundreds of dollars a year on flood-related damages and prevention while access to essential services such as the hospital are regularly comprimised.



Unmaintained, vegetated berm of historic dike system was once 6' tall



1950s Eastern Shore Public Service Worker

Mayor Darlene Taylor said

I think the issue is we've got to maintain the ditches

- Bulkhead
- Riprap
- Historic Dike
- Building
- Road
- Tide Gate
- Stormwater Ditch
- Stormwater Inlet
- Stormwater Pipe
- Stormwater Mgmt Facility

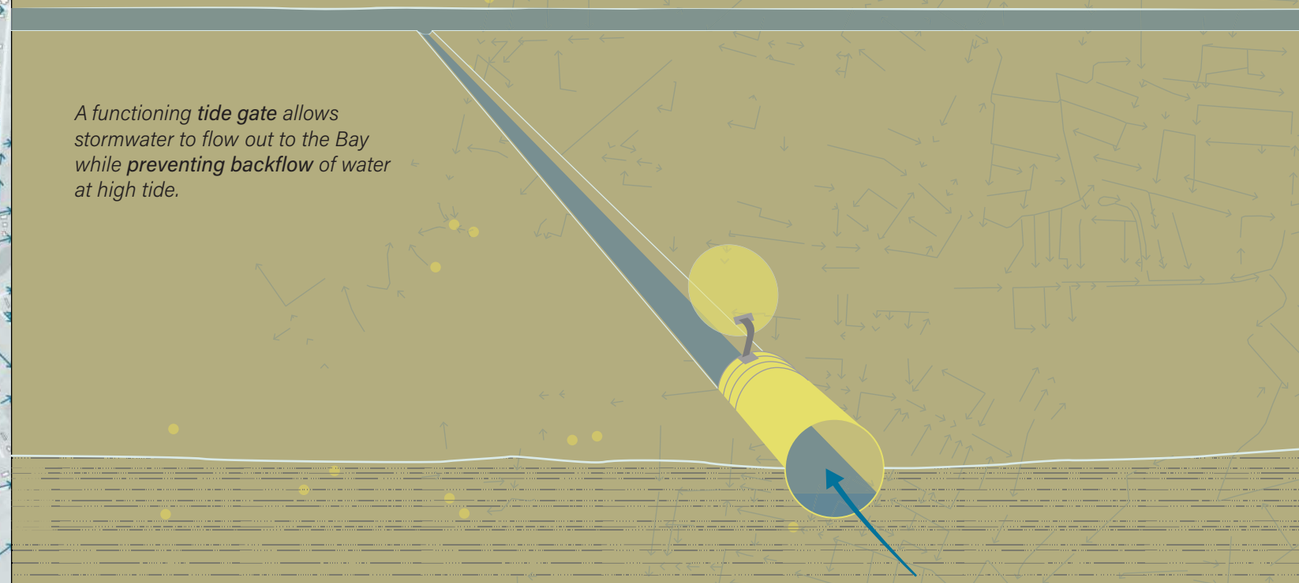
0 500' 1000' 2000'

Crisfield: The First Century, 2006
Army Corps of Engineers, Southeast Crisfield Study Fact Sheet, 2015

PROPOSED FLOOD INFRASTRUCTURE

Flood mitigation plans in development propose an encompassing infrastructure of elevated roads, berms, recapped bulkheads, wetland restoration and new tide gates to achieve protection from 5′ of sea level rise. The approach proposes enclosing the city more tightly than at present and adding a series of modern tide gates at closer proximity to the town center, allowing for easier maintenance access. In 2024 the city secured funding for over $30 million from FEMA to help support the intensive rehabilitation of its flood infrastructure.

*A functioning **tide gate** allows stormwater to flow out to the Bay while **preventing backflow** of water at high tide.*



"We can't stop it from raining,

but we can help the rain drain away"*

*Councilman Eric Banks

New / Maintainted Tide Gate
Maintained Stormwater Ditch
Pump Station
New Bulkhead
Elevated Roads
Elevated Berms
Wetland Restoration

0 500′ 1000′ 2000′

NOAA Report Figure A.7, *Flood Adaptation Assessment for Enhanced Community Resilience*, June 2024

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