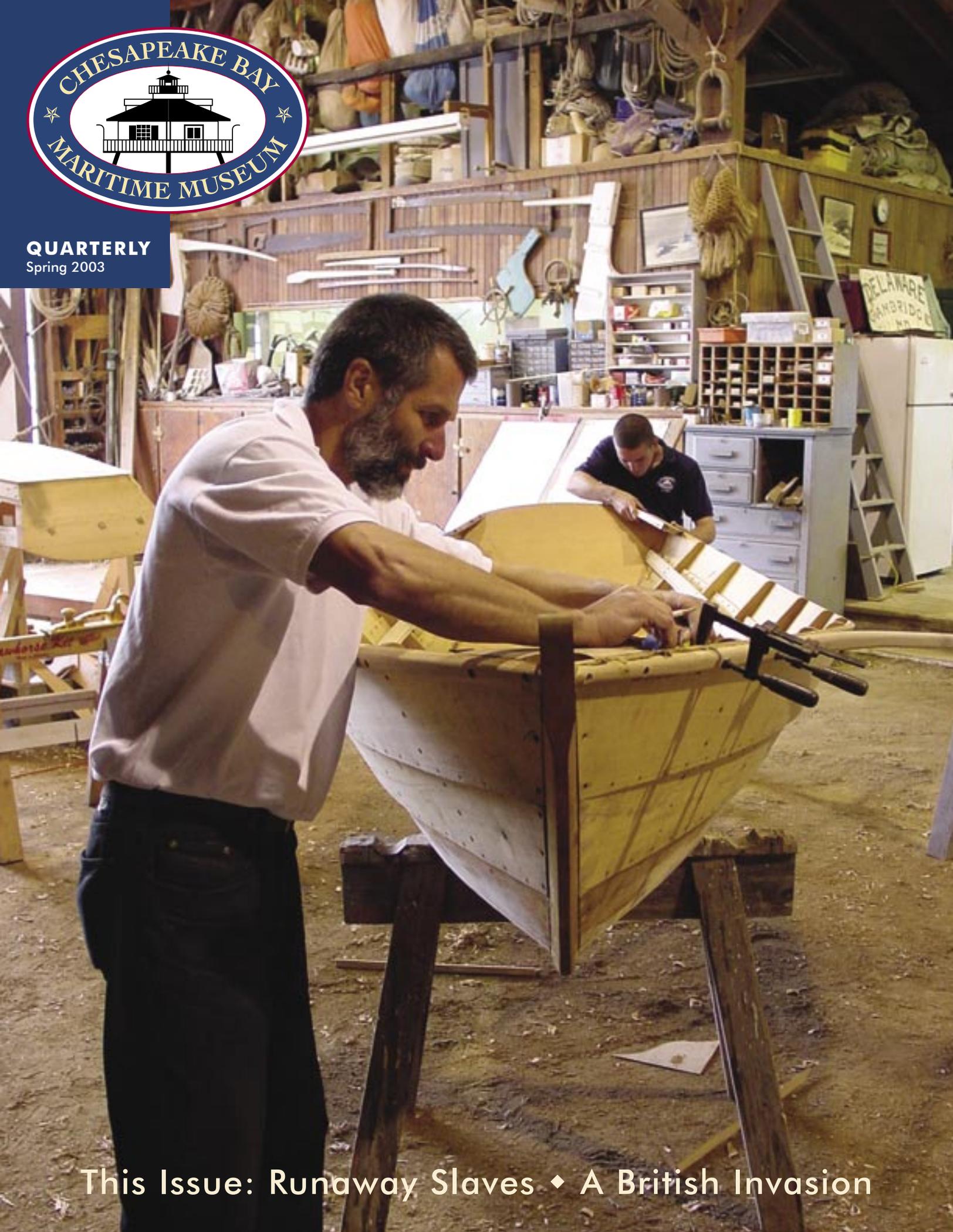




**QUARTERLY**  
Spring 2003



**This Issue: Runaway Slaves ♦ A British Invasion**



## QUARTERLY

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## On the Cover

Interim Boat Yard Manager Mike Vlahovich and apprentice Heron Schwalbach-Scott work on one of the rowing skiffs being created through the *Apprentice for a Day* program. The wooden vessels are built by weekend apprentices under the guidance of master shipwrights. Anyone can become an *Apprentice for a Day* and the skiffs are for sale with proceeds helping to sustain the program. For more information, contact Mike Vlahovich at 410-745-2916 ext. 186 or e-mail [mvlahovich@cbmm.org](mailto:mvlahovich@cbmm.org).

## President's Message



Enclosed please find Navy Point.

At least that's the idea behind our new magazine. We are sending the activity and excitement of the Museum's campus to our members across the country. Our publications enable us to broadcast the ongoing stories, news, and events that define the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

This publication represents a new direction for the Museum: one that combines the news, programs, and calendar of our quarterly newsletter

*On the Beam* with feature articles and scholarship of the semi-annual *The Weather Gauge*. The result is a quarterly publication that gives us a forum for communicating the breadth of the Museum's mission and vision to our members and friends.

This inaugural issue is sponsored by the Museum's Volunteers' Association. The generosity of our volunteers, both financially and in terms of service, cannot be easily measured. The Volunteers' Association is closely tuned to the needs of the Museum. They made the first gift to our successful capital campaign. Our volunteers have helped equip the library and supplied our Boat Yard with tools. They renovated the Model Guild Shop and this past year; built a fully functional replica of a Smith Island crabbing skiff, fittingly christened *Volunteer*. Heartfelt thanks to our volunteers for helping the Museum launch its most comprehensive publication to date.

In this issue, you will see how our Boat Yard garnered international acclaim by lending aid and expertise to the British vessel *Irene*, dismantled by a severe Atlantic storm. You will learn why the Chesapeake Bay was a refuge for African-American slaves seeking freedom. You will find our program calendar for spring and early summer, which you can pull out for your convenience. And we'll bring you the news around campus: from the Museum acquiring the world's largest collection of oyster cans, to seeing plans for the new recreation exhibit building, to a staff profile of Vice President of Finance Ann Rybon, who recently became the first Museum employee to serve twenty-five years on staff.

Each issue will sign off with a guest columnist sharing stories or reflections about his or her personal connection with the Bay. Our first writer is J. Taylor Buckley, long-time editor for *USA Today*, who recently retired to his Eastern Shore farm. Mr. Buckley tells a witty and compelling personal story about his fascination with sinkboxes, an improbable but true tale that connects waterfowling on the Chesapeake with a flea market on the outskirts of Paris.

With this first edition of our magazine, we move forward in providing our members with stories and articles about the extraordinarily rich and diverse heritage of the Chesapeake Bay. But we only do this if we strike a chord with our members. You are our best critics and we value your opinions the most. Please let us know what you think.

John R. Valliant  
President

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## Features

### In the Can 3

Though few Chesapeake oyster packing plants remain in operation, there is no shortage of oyster cans at the Museum.

By Bill Thompson

### Recreation Exhibit Plans 6

Plans for the new recreation exhibit building reveal a structure that has been designed from the inside out.

### “Bred up to the Water” 11

A historical look at how runaway slaves employed the Chesapeake Bay as a waterway to freedom.

By Benjamin H. Trask

### Earl Grey & Old Bay 17

After a harrowing run-in with a violent storm at sea, a battered British vessel seeks refuge and repairs at Navy Point.

By Bill Thompson

### “It Came from France” 22

A long-time *USA Today* editor reflects on Chesapeake Bay sinkboxes.

By J. Taylor Buckley

Under the experienced hands of British shipwrights John Habgood (above) and Adrian Grigg and with help from Museum apprentices, a new mast for the storm-damaged *Irene* emerges from a log of Douglas fir.

## Departments

Breene M. Kerr Center  
for Chesapeake Studies 5

From the Boat Yard 7

Volunteers 8

Advancement 9

Events Calendar \* 11A

Profile 21

\* Events Calendar is a special pull-out section that can be found between pages 11 and 12.



Museum Acquires World's Largest Collection of Oyster Cans ♦ By Bill Thompson

# IN THE CAN



When it comes to epiphanies, the one that struck Ronnie Newcomb back in the early 1970s was little more than the garden variety. A part-time collector of Chesapeake Bay hunting decoys and other tidewater memorabilia, Newcomb was on the prowl when some empty oyster cans—the kind that usually ended up in the garbage—caught his eye.

“Through my decoy collecting and travels, I started noticing the oyster tins with their really nice colorful labels,” he said. “It was funny to me, all these same oysters were going into so many different cans with different labels.”

He picked up a can here and a can there and, like the children’s story of the old couple who could not resist adopting every cat they saw, Newcomb eventually amassed what turned out to be the largest and most valuable collection of its kind.

Late last summer the Museum acquired Newcomb’s 592 oyster containers as well as an assortment of 300 other oyster-related artifacts ranging from thimbles to large advertising signs. The earliest of the tins date to the 1880s and one container still holds the oysters originally hand-packed on the assembly line. Most cans are gallon-sized, while some have eight-ounce capacities and others held five gallons of the soft and salty mollusk.

The value of the collection has been appraised at more than \$200,000. But aside from the monetary worth and the Museum’s bragging rights of having more oyster cans than anyone else, the significance of the collection lies in what it says about the history of the Chesapeake Bay’s once dominant seafood industry.

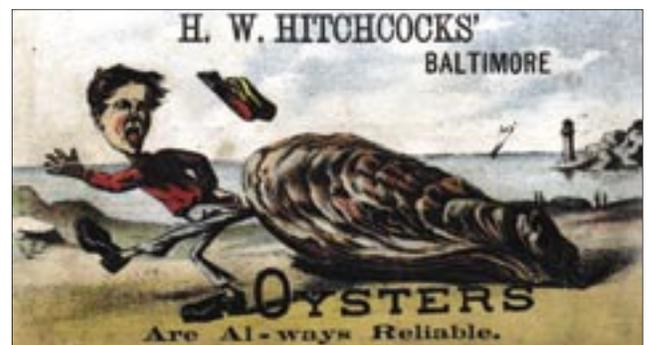
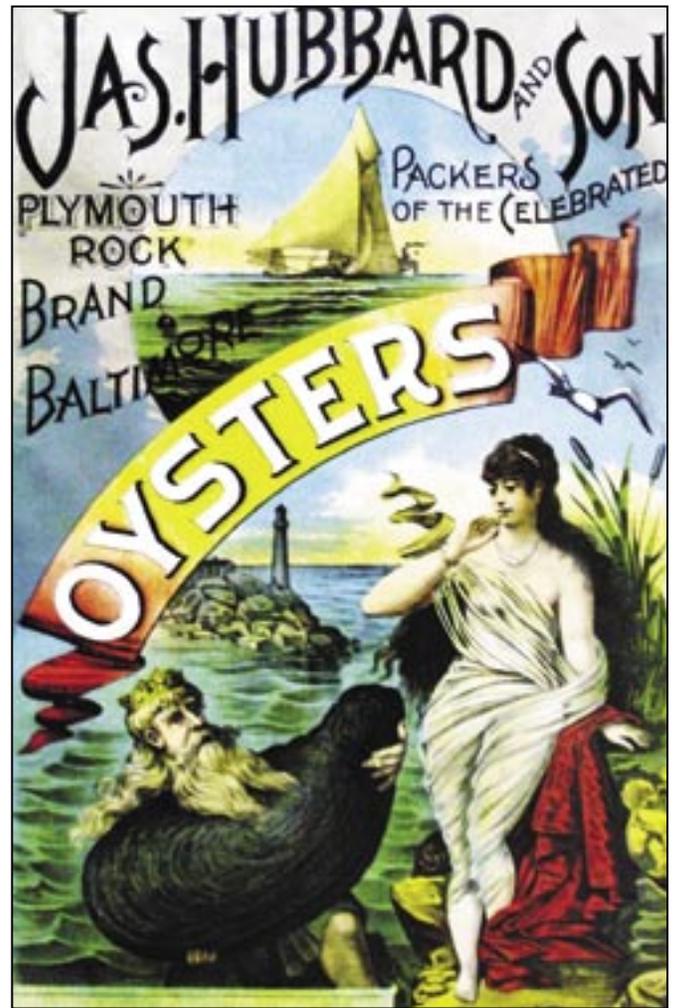
“The importance of this collection to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum is hard to overstate,” said Museum Curator Pete Leshner. “These artifacts are a key to a number of projected exhibits and Kerr Center for Chesapeake Studies research projects that will be ultimately transformed into various sorts of public programming. This collection will be invaluable to historians looking for clues to the existence, location, products, and dates of operations of early business enterprises.”

Former Kerr Center scholars Dr. Virginia Jenkins and Paul Touart have already documented the business and marketing history of Maryland’s Eastern Shore seafood companies. And current scholar Harold Anderson is researching the role of African Americans in the seafood packing business. Museum officials believe the new oyster can collection is an invaluable addition to the continued study of tidewater history.

Museum President John Valliant, whose great-grandfather once owned a canning plant in Talbot County, said he hopes that the public will have an opportunity to see the collection. In the meantime, individual cans may be used to refresh the smaller collection in the *Oystering on the Chesapeake* exhibit.

Like the cans themselves, there were so many oyster packing houses along the shores of the Chesapeake at one time that their role in the daily economic and cultural lives of tidewater residents was taken for granted. In fact, the Museum’s Navy Point campus once was the site of several oyster packing plants. Today few oyster packing buildings have survived the pressures of a changing economy. They are gone or vacant or converted to some other use.

Thanks to Ronnie Newcomb’s eye for colorful labels, a unique treasure of oyster cans has survived. ♦



(Opposite page) Museum Curator Pete Leshner and President John R. Valliant stand amidst a sea of oyster cans. The acquisition of nearly 600 cans, along with scores of rare labels and unusual marketing materials (above), represents the largest collection of its kind.