

The Treasure of the Oystering Bays

By
Carol Child

I live in Smyrna, near where the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays almost meet, the Delmarva Peninsula. I live where lore speaks of contention among settlers over Penn and Calvert land, where exists yet today some of the richest farmland in the nation – for a time; where lore



speaks of Blackbeard the Pirate stashing his treasure up the creek in Blackbeard Forest, the forest named for him, later politically corrected to Blackbird Forest; where lore speaks of General Howe's massing 265 British warships at the head of the Elk River and missing three Colonial top guns – General George Washington dining with Major General Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island and the Marquis de Lafayette prior to their turning in for the night at Hollingsworth Inn nearby. Howe missed his target due to a nasty rain storm which flooded the

roads and got the ammunition wet. Here in Smyrna, lore speaks of Revolutionary soldiers and the Underground Railroad running through tanner John Mustard's Smyrna mansion, where still today a couple of ghosts remain as compassionate stewards; and lore speaks of the lifestyle of the oysterman swiftly vanishing in a thickening fog of government regulations.

In this part of Delaware below the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal where once, some historians have written, most dwellers thought they lived in Maryland, the farmers are getting old and retiring. They are selling their land to big developers. Crops of bedrooms are springing up in a maze of communities where just the other day someone told me she once got lost driving amidst a maze of cornfields along back country roads. A Walmart distribution center just came to Smyrna, promising 350 tractor-trailers per 24-hour day traveling east and west on a two-lane road. Do you know how many trucks that is an hour? Middletown, 15 miles up the road, two years ago what some might have called a one-horse town, has since been besieged upon seemingly out of a space ship in the night by hoards of SUVs and 18-wheelers. Out west of town Middletowners are getting their very own Walmart.



I can travel 40 minutes to Rehoboth Beach on the Atlantic Ocean, 10 minutes to Woodland Beach on the Delaware Bay or 40 minutes to Annapolis on the Chesapeake Bay. I can travel 30 minutes to Iron Hill, historic park and site of a once open-pit iron mine since before recorded history, where Washington reconnoitered Howe's troops back on August 25, 1777. I can travel one hour to Philadelphia where General Howe was headed. But I like getting home,

south of the canal, to “slower Delaware” and the fresh salt breezes criss-crossing the peninsula from the bays. I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to enjoy such enviable repose.

The farmland is being pirated and treasures are being stashed. In September I drove between the tall rows of corn last time. A hundred years ago a flock of blackbirds 10 miles birds swooped in to get grain in the Delaware Bay marshes. by guys wearing black eye black, but by ribbons of black beige apartment houses, rows of boxcars. The railroad from Smyrna/Clayton to carry freight trains. There’s passenger trains down from would make it an easy in, move, say, to that new they’re digging out of the Road, hop on the commuter Station and ride all the way to was headed to besiege our New York. (Howe didn’t ride the train, though.) They plan for the train to stop at Middletown, too – Middle City.



on Rabbit Chase Road for the ago someone reported seeing long fly over Smyrna. The and carry it off to their roosts We are being overrun, but not patches or birds plumed in macadam and couplings of amazingly resembling tall tracks carrying the Victorians Dover and Wilmington still talk now of their running Wilmington to Dover. It commute. You could swoop Smyrna housing development cornfields on Rabbit Chase train at historic Clayton Philadelphia, where Howe Colonial capital – or even to

I like walking to the Four Corners where Main and Commerce Streets meet here in Smyrna for an ice cream or to buy some fresh herbs. I like walking along the historic brick



sidewalks past wrought iron fences and old boxwood gardens to the post office or the opera house. The four sisters who grew up in our Victorian home of which we are now stewards painted their two-story barn purple and lavender one day while their mother was at the store. “It could be seen from all around,” one daughter told me. The barn is long gone. So is Myrtle who lived in the Victorian home across the street, the one of which everyone tells me, “Oh, it was a beautiful Victorian house! You should have seen it.” Myrtle passed on a few years ago, and her home, inhabited by termites, was torn down. In its place there’s a green lawn with some grand old trees lining the lot. Oh, how I love to hear the wind whush through the tops of those tall trees – and hear the pair of bard owls “hoo-hoo ... hoo-hoo” in an occasional night. But now the church owns that piece of paradise and there’s talk they’ll soon pave it for parking.

My first Christmas Eve in Smyrna I went out onto our Victorian porch, and it started to snow. The air was fresh and crisp and cold and the flakes stuck fast to the brick sidewalks. Carolers came by in an old wagon and then Santa in a fire truck. “What a magical little town,” I thought, smiling, probably looking like an extra in the final scene of *It’s a*

Wonderful Life.” I haven’t changed. The people here are open, friendly and welcoming. I can get to the big cities or the beach easily from here. I like walking downtown and saying hi to the townsfolk. I don’t want it to change. I moved here two-and-a-half years ago. Now that I’m here, I don’t want anyone else to come in.

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For *The Bystander*

