By Pete Lesher

On the morning of November 1, 1991, a low pressure system in the Atlantic now popularly known as the Perfect Storm brought unusually high tides to the upper Chesapeake Bay. The water in St. Michaels harbor topped the bulkheads and flooded lawns. The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum’s row of three historic houses momentarily became islands. With the water rising and threatening to flood the buildings, carpets were rolled up, furniture blocked up, and all the books on the lower shelves of the library (then in the first floor of the Dodson House) were moved higher. The tide failed to flood the buildings on that occasion, but in the next ten years, the buildings flooded twice. It became an all-too-frequent occurrence for these low-lying structures, and floods took their toll on the wood sills, floors, and lower porches.

These houses played a role in 150 years of St. Michaels history standing between the area’s two economic engines: agricultural fields to one side and the harbor that filled with oystermen’s boats on the other. The houses served in local tourism and hospitality in the late nineteenth century that was eclipsed by the growth of industry, and then, in the late twentieth century, they again hosted tourism, which helped fill an economic void left by the collapse of the seafood industries.

A History of the Museum’s Navy Point Houses

Above: The historic houses get their feet wet in an unusually high tide, c. 1991. Below: The paint schemes for the historic houses follow historic colors that were discovered as old paint was removed during the restoration. Opposite, bottom: The Navy Point houses as they appeared about a century ago with three log canoes tied up in front. Photo by Thomas H. Sewell, c. 1906, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.
There is scant evidence of much human activity on this site before the middle of the nineteenth century. A few flakes of chert and quartz, the tailings from a paleoindian’s efforts to make sharp stone tools, show that the marshy land around Navy Point was perhaps first used as a short-term camp. If English colonists or the early nineteenth century shipbuilders of St. Michaels used this site, they left no evidence that has been found today. Certainly, however, the area must have been cleared for tobacco culture, and it was farmland after the War of 1812 when Samuel Hambleton, a naval veteran, purchased the property. Hambleton named his farm Perry Cabin in honor of Oliver Hazard Perry, whom Hambleton served as purser during the Battle of Lake Erie. Hambleton procured the special flag that Perry flew during the battle, bearing the dying words of Captain James Lawrence, “Don’t give up the ship.” Hambleton settled there and farmed the land with a number of slaves and free blacks, among them Peter Mitchell, a brother-in-law to Frederick Douglass.

In 1849, Hambleton subdivided his field on the edge of St. Michaels, laying out ten lots along the harbor waterfront. His plat shows four streets bounding the ten lots: Bainbridge Street was the name for what we now know as Mill Street, with Porter Street to the east and Perry Street to the west, neither of which were completed, and Front Street running along the waterfront, which survives as the public walkway along the waterfront. William Bainbridge, David Porter, and Hambleton’s own commander Perry were all naval heroes of the War of 1812. Hambleton named the subdivision Navy Point. Two houses soon appeared on Navy Point lots, some time between 1851 and 1861. Thomas Hubbard took a 99-year lease from Hambleton on lot six and soon built a house there, now known as Higgins House. The western or main block of the small frame house was the first part constructed on this site. Curiously, the kitchen addition, the eastern or right side when viewed from the waterfront, is several decades older, featuring heavy hand-hewn beams, braces, and sills. It seems that this was an earlier house that was moved from some other location and tacked onto the original house on the lot later in the nineteenth century, possibly as late as the 1880s. Moving houses or portions of houses was apparently common in this area by the nineteenth century.

The earliest portion of the adjacent brick house, now known as Dodson House, built at almost the same time, was constructed for storekeeper Thomas Dyott, who was living there by November 1861.

Not long after these first two dwellings appeared, Navy Point was already becoming a mixed-use neighborhood. A steam sawmill was established nearby sometime around 1840, and it was twice rebuilt after a fire in 1860 and a boiler explosion in 1864. Clearly a sawmill was not an ideal neighbor for the residences, but the concept of zoning would take nearly
a century more to reach Talbot County. After the Civil War, the sawmill was joined by the first of several canneries in the neighborhood as well as a steamboat wharf.

If residences were incompatible with the increasingly industrial activities on Navy Point, it would seem that vacation cottages would be even more so. Nevertheless, that is what happened to the houses on the point in the 1880s when Richard Stearns Dodson began acquiring Navy Point’s waterfront houses.

Richard Stearns Dodson was raised in St. Michaels and took command of his father’s new schooner William K. Dodson in 1854 at age sixteen, becoming the fourth generation of Dodsons to follow the water by commanding a merchant sailing vessel. He distinguished himself as a sailor, setting a local record for a round trip to Baltimore with his first cargo of grain.³

The ambitious younger Dodson, however, gave up the schooner business for potentially greater rewards in the hospitality business, a trade that he would ultimately bring to Navy Point. He found work as manager of the Fountain Hotel in Baltimore, the Herdic House Hotel in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and finally the Atlantic Hotel in Norfolk, Virginia. By 1876 Dodson had made enough money to purchase the Atlantic.

Dodson had not left the shipping business entirely, however. He had purchased a small wharf and warehouse along the Basin in Baltimore and in 1876 acquired a small steamboat named Olive, placing her on a run between Baltimore and St. Michaels. Since Dodson was busy with the hotel in Norfolk, he hired his uncle, Edward Napoleon Dodson as captain and entrusted his brother Henry Clay Dodson, a St. Michaels pharmacist, newspaper publisher, brickyard owner, and local bank president, as the steamboat’s general agent. When she arrived in St. Michaels on her three weekly trips, Olive tied up along Navy Point.⁴

Perhaps to generate a little extra passenger traffic for his steamboat, Dodson acquired the two houses on the Navy Point waterfront (Higgins House and Dodson House), and in 1886 began to renovate them. He added a new kitchen wing and expanded the third story on the brick house, finishing it with a sumptuous three-story porch with Victorian ornaments including fancy sawn balusters. The smaller frame house received a double porch and sawn ornaments around the eaves, and may have gained its kitchen wing at the same time. In April 1886, a local newspaper reported that Dodson’s purpose in the renovations to the “Navy Point Cottages” was to “afford accommodations for those who wish to get out of the heated city and spend a little time on the water during the summer months.”⁵ Lower parts of the surrounding yard were filled and sodded, shade trees planted, fences added, and outdoor lighting provided. Dodson hired Miss Caddy Story to manage the small hotel business as housekeeper and possibly as cook. In June Dodson visited the freshly completed project with his family, and by July had a complement of paying visitors.⁶ In 1888 Richard Stearns Dodson retired and turned the Navy Point Cottages over to his son, Robert A. Dodson, who continued to operate them for summer vacationers. How long they continued to take summer boarders is unclear, but it was not more than fifteen or twenty years.

Archaeological evidence recovered in 2001 points to some of the activities that may be related to the use of the brick Dodson House by summer visitors. Household refuse, including kitchen garbage, was buried in the backyards of the houses until the beginning of the twentieth century, and these remains reveal something about how the residents of the houses and summer visitors socialized and ate. Consumption of wine or liquors is revealed by a number of pieces of stemmed glassware and the glass stopper from a decanter found in the back yard, and a high proportion of ceramics from tea service pieces suggests that tea was an important activity either for vacationers or later residents. Animal bones found in the yard reveal that people in these houses favored beef but also ate pork. Although the bounty of the Chesapeake and the surrounding woods was available, there is only a little evidence of the consumption of fish, ducks, and geese from the archaeological investigation.⁷

In spite of the neighboring industry, St. Michaels appears to have been an attractive summer retreat. A visiting yachtsman in 1898 described the town’s “white oyster-shell streets fringed with grass” and a harbor with “little oystermens’ houses huddled close around it.”⁸ On a subsequent visit, he observed youthful summer boarders sailing and playing on the water.

“It is a great place for canoe sailing. . . . In the morning the crews, both girls and boys, are in bathing suits; then, if there is a smart breeze, the sailing is more than reckless:

Left: Eagle House as it appeared in about 1910. By this time, the original front stoop was replaced with the semicircular version that survives today, the original wood shingle roof was replaced with standing seam metal, and the original colors had gone out of fashion in favor of white. Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

Right: Steamboat captain Edward Napoleon Dodson lived in the Eagle House from about 1893 until his death in 1899. Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, gift of Amelia Dodson Bielaski.
to capsize means only another bath. They seem to dress for lunch, so that in the afternoon the sailing is more discreet. In the evening, when the girls have on white dresses, and the breeze is generally lighter, things are more placid, and banjos are in evidence.  

Archeological evidence of younger summer boarders turned up in the back yard of Dodson House. More toy fragments were found there than on the other lots, including a fragment of a German-made ceramic doll’s head and a miniature cup and plate from a play tea set, as well as a clay marble. Other evidence of domestic occupation showed up in each of the lots, from beads to bone, porcelain, and shell buttons and other ornamental clothing-related pieces.

About the same time as the Navy Point Cottages opened, or sometime between 1877 and 1891, the third house in this row was built on lot 8. Now known as Eagle House, it, too, became a Dodson family possession, purchased first by Henry Clay Dodson, then sold to his brother Richard Stearns Dodson, who owned the other Navy Point cottages. For a few years, their uncle, retired steamboat Captain Edward Napoleon Dodson, lived there. For some time it was thought that the eagle on top of the house’s entrance tower came from the pilothouse of the steamboat Olive, which Dodson had sold in 1891. However, photographs show it to be a different eagle than the one on Olive, and although it likely started as an ornament on a steamboat or tug pilot house, its exact origin remains a mystery.

None of the outbuildings survive today, but each of the three houses had a complex of small structures in the backyard, ranging from privies and various sheds to carriage houses and garages on the rear of the properties, bordering on Mill Street. In addition, picket fences ran down the property lines, and a grape arbor stood behind the Higgins House early in the twentieth century.

After Richard Stearns Dodson died in 1897, the properties passed to one of his sons, Richard Slicer Dodson, who sold the Eagle House to Meredith and Ethel Dryden in 1907, whose children lived in the house for nearly forty years. The following year the Drydens purchased the Higgins House, which passed through a number of owners in the twentieth century, the last of whom was yacht yard owner John D. Higgins. When Higgins sold the house in 1964 to the Historical Society of Talbot County, his name remained associated with it. Richard Slicer Dodson sold the brick house in 1907, but reacquired it in 1912 and resided there until his death in 1959. Like other members of his family, Richard Slicer Dodson was prominent in local business affairs, working as a banker and serving in the Maryland General Assembly.

Navy Point became progressively more industrial in the twentieth century. By 1910, the sawmill disappeared and was supplanted by yet another seafood packing house, an industry that already dominated the St. Michaels economy. Navy Point became so crowded with seafood packing houses that the point was extended with oyster shell fill. George R. Caulk had an oyster house on the south side of Navy Point, next to the steamboat wharf, where he packed oysters under the “Navy Brand” for J. L. McCready, a business partner in Baltimore. J. Edward Watkins operated another plant on the north side of Navy Point, and between the two was the African-American owned Coulbourn and Jewett, a firm that packed oysters but was one of the earliest to specialize in crabmeat. In 1916, after taking losses for three years, Watkins sold his business to the St. Michaels Packing Company, a vegetable and fruit canner as well as seafood packer, whose landmark brick chimney stood until 1971. In 1936 Harrison & Jarboe Seafood Company was the last seafood packer to open a plant on Navy Point, sandwiched between the recently-closed St. Michaels Packing.
Company and Coulbourne and Jewett. Hundreds of workers found employment on Navy Point during the oyster season and at the height of the fruit and vegetable canning season, but this activity suddenly declined in the 1960s.

At almost the same time, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, formed as a project of the Historical Society of Talbot County, acquired the Dodson House in 1963 and the Higgins and Eagle Houses early the next year. It was a favorable time and location, and the organizers of the new museum took advantage of the historic opportunity to acquire almost all of the various tracts on Navy Point. Coulbourne and Jewett was the first of the seafood houses to go out of business, closing in 1965. Early the next year, the Museum’s founders purchased the company’s property and tore down the dilapidated buildings. In 1967, Edward Morris sold his oyster house, the site formerly occupied by Caulk. The following year Harrison and Jarboe closed its St. Michaels plant, the last of the seafood industries on Navy Point except for William Jones’s seafood buying house, which Jones converted into the Crab Claw Restaurant. In less than a decade, industry disappeared from Navy Point and was supplanted by the Museum.

When it opened to the public in May 1965, the all-volunteer maritime museum used its historic houses for exhibitions, with a waterfowling theme in Higgins House, sailing craft and the fisheries exhibited in the Dodson House, and steamboat artifacts in Eagle House. Gradually, however, as more suitable exhibition buildings opened on the Museum’s expanded grounds on Navy Point, the houses were converted to offices for the growing staff. In 1986 the houses were named to the National Register of Historic Places as part of a nomination for the St. Michaels historic district, and ten years later, the Museum began documenting its three original houses in anticipation of a major rehabilitation. Just before the work started in 2001, the Museum commissioned an archaeological survey of the grounds around the houses that would be disturbed in the process of construction. Now, after more than thirty months of work encompassing almost every structural, exterior, and interior element on all three houses from foundation to roof, the houses are better suited than ever before for Museum administration and education offices. The houses were set on higher foundations, and the land was filled around them to raise the grade a little higher above the harbor. They now sit comfortably above the flood plain, having escaped the record storm surge of Hurricane Isabel last September.

**Sources**


2. To cite just two examples, the Jeremiah Sewell house, now relocated to St. Mary’s Square, was constructed in 1840 on Mill Street in St. Michaels from parts of Samuel Harrison’s unsuccessful 1819 steam grist mill on nearby Mill Point; free black Peter Mitchell’s c. 1840 dwelling on Lee Street in St. Michaels, now relocated to the grounds of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, was half of an earlier hall-and-parlor house moved from an undetermined location. See Oswald Tilghman, History of Talbot County Marland, 1661-1861, (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1915, vol. II: 390-1; Orlando Ridout V, “The Mitchell House: An Architectural Analysis,” 1982, ts in Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.


4. Dodds and Hingst, 6.

5. Easton Gazette, 3 April 1886.


8. Robert Barrie and George Barrie, Jr., Cruises Mainly on the Bay of the Chesapeake (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: The Franklin Press, 1909, 50.


12. Dodds and Hingst, 9.

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*The footbridge that connects Navy Point to the foot of Cherry Street is little different today than when it was first built in the late nineteenth century. The house behind the bridge survived until the 1950s, and Higgins House is visible in the right background. Photo by Thomas H. Sewell, c. 1910, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.*