

# Explore the Elizabeth's Lauded Past

The Elizabeth was named in the early 1600s during the reign of King James I of England in honor of his daughter Princess Elizabeth. Captain John Smith was sent to explore the Chesapeake Bay in search for one special thing, an ideal harbor for trade with the New World. He found it on the Elizabeth River, which is still known today as the largest natural harbor in the world. The river is the cradle of maritime history, the very spot where such innovations as dry docks, iron clad ships and air craft carriers were invented.

Since this river's discovery, the challenge and opportunity for the Elizabeth has been to remain a living river, a healthy spot for crabs and fish to thrive alongside shipping traffic, while growing into a great port. Unfortunately, over the centuries the river has become the most polluted river on the Chesapeake Bay. While her surface sparkles like diamonds, quite a bit of goo has settled down to her bottom. As The Elizabeth River Project and her many members and partners like to say, "The goo must go!" Thanks to the Elizabeth River Project, for the first time we all have the opportunity to restore the health of a great harbor by working together. Our great port is beginning to reclaim its heritage as a living ecosystem.

When Captain Smith and his crew arrived 400 years ago in a small rowing and sailing vessel called a shallop, the captain noted in his journal, "Shores overgrown with the greatest pine and fir trees we ever saw in the country." One reason those same trees no longer line the Elizabeth River is that many were used long ago to build great sailing ships. .

Long before the English arrived, residents of the Chisapeake tribe were established along the Elizabeth's shores. They referred to her as "Chisapeake," translated to mean plentiful shellfish and Mother Waters. She was the source of fish, oysters, crabs and transportation to the tribe. As for the health of the river in those times, Captain John Smith noted oysters the size of dinner plates, enough to feed an entire family, were in the Elizabeth River portion of the bay! He recorded fish so plentiful his crew could catch them by leaning over the side of the boat and hitting them on the head with a frying pan.

The wonderful natural harbor here attracted the founding in 1767 of the oldest and largest naval shipyard in your country, today known as Norfolk Naval Shipyard. If you had lived then, you would have seen the river's great forests disappear into tar pots, timber sheds and a sawpit, with the smell of oak gum filling the air to make the great sailing warships of the day. Many firsts and military turning points for the world occurred here, including building the world's first ironclad ship, the Merrimac- so splendid an achievement that after she was built here, wooden ships became a thing of the past. Later came the first dry dock in the Western Hemisphere, where the world's first aircraft carrier was built, the USS *Langley*. During WWII the naval shipyard employed 43,000 people in order to support the U.S. Navy war effort.

To accommodate modern lives in the 1880s, the Elizabeth River started to be filled to two-thirds her normal width and dredged to twice her normal depth. This obviously destroyed much of the wetlands and shallows that supported the river's abundant crabs and fish. The Elizabeth River lost 50 percent of her tidal wetlands and her shores were converted to concrete as much as six miles at a stretch. Wetlands are amazing ecosystems that help filter nitrogen, control erosion, serve as habitat and are as precious as coral reefs.

Into the 1900s, the harvest of oysters was banned due to contamination from sewage and is still banned today. Down the Southern Branch, there is a site known as Money Point where wood

treatment facilities coated the great timbers with tar, made into "creosote" and allowed it to drip and wash into the river bottom. Scientists say the creosote pooled on the bottom of the Elizabeth's Southern Branch and represents some of the highest concentrations in the world—associated with cancer in our fish and risks to human health.

Now for a bit of hope. Early as 1940, our communities realized they wanted a healthy river, not just a great harbor. Hampton Roads Sanitation District began the job of managing our sewage. In 1991, four citizens founded the Elizabeth River Project based on the belief that citizens, government and industry can work together, hand in hand, to achieve the balance of a healthy river and a healthy economy. Out of such an unusual idea was born a most potent partnership. Today we see the powerful results on every shore, brought about by dozens of industries, government partners and ordinary citizens, rallying for our river's restoration. These industrial stewards are called "River Stars."

In 1999, the Norfolk Naval Station, the world's largest naval base, located at the mouth of our Elizabeth, was named the first Model Level River Star with the Elizabeth River Project for voluntary progress reducing pollution and restoring vital habitat. Today we have 60 River Star industries participating, including almost every one of the largest industrial interests on the river. This year alone, they documented reducing pollution by 3.4 million pounds! Not only are today's port facilities reducing pollution, they're bringing back the green shore. In 2004, one of our River Stars, Norfolk Naval Shipyard, won an award from the White House for restoring a wetland. The Naval shipyard wetlands are part of a project that the national head of the US Environmental Protection Agency has called a model for the nation.

Today, you can visit Paradise Creek Nature Park in Portsmouth. This amazing park is being developed with many partners, the City of Portsmouth and the Virginia Port Authority. Scientists found more than 188 species of birds, fish, insects and other wildlife within the park. You are invited to come out and enjoy the blooming wild flowers, the new gorgeous wetlands and revitalized forest.

As for that nasty creosote creating fish cancer on the Southern Branch, the Elizabeth River Project is helping coordinate three cleanup projects with public and private partners. Soon the **goo will be gone** from Elizabeth's bottom. The oyster reefs that once grew oysters large enough for entire families are being restored by Elizabeth River Project partners. In fact, more oyster reefs have been restored on the Elizabeth than anywhere on the Chesapeake Bay. One can look along the shore and see them growing today on every piling. By the year 2000, the Elizabeth River showed the **most improving trends** for water quality on the entire Chesapeake Bay. But she still has a long way to go and each of us has a chance to be part of her revitalization legacy.

In the words of the late CBS commentator Charles Kuralt who was a friend to the river:

*"When the wetlands really come back, when the forests return to the shore, when healthy fish, clams and oysters find a home in the Southern reaches of the river again, and the sun rises off the Atlantic in the morning to reflect itself in the serene pure waters of the Elizabeth River, our children and grandchildren will know that we had them in mind."*

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