

A Brief History of Saxis Island

By Moody K. Miles III



An Aerial View of Saxis Island (Courtesy of Saxis Island Museum)

Technically speaking Saxis is not an island, but it has always been called an island on maps and charts and in books and articles, since the primary access to the island was by boat for the first few hundred years.

Saxis Island was first seen by the Jamestown settlers in 1608 when Capt. John Smith sailed by on his way up the Pocomoke River. He did not come ashore due the shallow waters around the island. In 1666 the northern end of the Island (150 acres) was patented by Robert Sikes and later in the year George Parker patented the southern end of the Island (200 acres). The island was called Sikes' Island, Sykes Island and by other similarly sounding names, and finally Saxis Island in 1884 when the Post Office was established.

William Anderson acquired both parts of the island in the 1670s and deeded it to his daughter Comfort in 1687 describing his housing, orchards, pastures and fencing and said the island's livestock were being tended by Indian Betty and Dick. Raising livestock was the primary activity on the island until the 1750s. It was owned by Comfort and her 6 daughters until the 1750s when their husbands started selling it off in 30 acre slices. Each slice having both waterfront and marsh side boundaries.

The first families to come to the island were Marshalls (from Marumsco in Somerset Co, MD), Starlings (from Crisfield, MD), Lintons & Lewises (from Guilford), Crocketts (from Tangier Island), Miles (from Messongo Creek), and Spences (from Smith Island, MD). By 1800 there were 48 people were living on the island and by 1850 there were 17 households on the island, 14 were farmers and 1 was an oysterman.

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The first Methodist Church, a small building known as the “meetinghouse,” was built near the current site of the old Crockett Store in 1852. Then in 1875 came “Connor’s Chapel” in the same vicinity and finally in 1889 the Methodist build the largest church on the island, which burned in 2000 and was rebuilt on the same site and is still in operation. The Saxis Baptist Church was built near the present Post Office in 1896 and closed in 1938 and was dismantled in 1940. The Saxis Holiness Church was built on the south end of the island near the Charles Furniss store in 1918 and burned in 1924, but was rebuilt on the same site and is still in operation.

By 1860 about half are farmers and half are oystermen and by 1870 nearly all are oystermen and it continued that way into the early 1900s. In the 1880s there is Pocomoke Sound oyster boom and the island population starts to rapidly increase. The population peaked at 636 in 1910 and clamming becomes a year-round business. Clams are found on the depleted oyster rocks and are competing with oysters as catching clams destroys the oyster spats.

The Steamboat Wharf was built in 1903 about 650 yards west of the island along the 6 ft depth contour, unconnected to the island, requiring the use of small boats and skiffs to transport oysters, goods and people to and from the wharf. This connected the islanders to Baltimore to the north and Norfolk to the south and brought another boom to the oyster business as it transports hundreds of bushels of oysters on each trip. The Steamboat Wharf was evidently destroyed by the “Storm of 1933.”

A new two story school was built behind the Baptist Church in 1908 with over 130 students. In 1926 the older students were bused to the new Temperanceville High School on the mainland. In 1920 Lee Evans opened a silent movie theatre in a new building at 20051 Saxis Road with his daughter Ethel at the piano. In 1923 he went to Baltimore on the Steamer and bought a player piano, which is now in the Saxis Island Museum. In 1926 Hugh Glenn bought the theatre and changed the name to the Empire Theatre and “talkies” were first shown in 1930. It could seat 200 people and dances were held there 3 nights a week as late as 1933. It was torn down in 1938.

The following article appeared in a local newspaper in November 1928. Saxis on a Saturday night! A novel experience for one who likes a place that's all broke out with local color and atmosphere. An ice cream parlor filled to the gills. Extra clerks and all that. Special seats for those who like to see and be seen. Boys with shoeshine boxes running helter-skelter and lamenting the precarious condition of your boots. Just a nickel, that's all. Then the pool room. The table back in the corner uncovered especially for the Saturday night rush. A boy with a derby and a red tie. Girls from Sanford and “down below.” A game of dominoes. A boy drafted to handle “the other chair” in the barber shop. Movies at seven-thirty! Candy and peanuts and a few to nod because they've had a hard week's work. Then through it all Uncle Tom battered by his ninety-eight summers reciting his oft-repeated plea based on what the Good Book says. That a world all in its self, a happy, peaceful world of sturdy sea-folk. A Kipling or a Conrad would glory in Saxis. It is entirely a delightful, refreshing place.

During the great depression, many Saxis residents began moving to Wilmington, DE to work for DuPont or to the shipyards in Newport News.

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The Works Projects Administration (WPA) built the bulkhead forming the current Creek Point in 1936. Then in 1937 the Army Corps of Engineers dredged the channel from the 6 ft. contour into Starlings Creek and created an anchorage basin, placing the dredged material inside the bulkhead and in 1938 the island road to the mainland was hard-surfaced.

In the 1950s oyster shucking houses were shipping truck-loads of shucked oysters to Washington, Baltimore, Georgia, Texas and Iowa. There are about a dozen oyster buyboats bringing oysters caught by Saxis tongers working on the James and Potomac rivers back to Saxis. The shedding of peeler crabs expanded using "floats" in pounds and in the 1960s in-the-water floats are replaced with on the dock tanks and pumps, still in use today. In the 1990s softshell crabs were the mainstay of the island's economy with as many as 8,000 dozen a day being shipped fresh and frozen to such distant places as the West Coast and Japan.

The new Saxis Elementary Brick School was opened in 1949 with a 250-seat auditorium and a new Post Office was built in 1951. The school was closed in 1971 and the students were bused to the mainland to achieve racial integration. The town became incorporated 1959 and a volunteer fire company was formed in 1960. After the school closed the building was converted to house the fire company and the town hall.

The eye of Hurricane Hazel passed directly over Saxis Island in 1954 and 80 boats were sunk and some were left up on the dock or out in the marsh. In 1965 the Army Corps of Engineers built the new Harbor of Refuge on the north side of Starlings Creek which was a more protected setting for mooring boats during storms and by 1991 additional bulkheads, a boat ramp and slips for 80 vessels were added. In 1999 Hurricane Floyd flooded nearly 30 homes on the north end of the island and one crab house at the end of the Creek Point was swept completely away. In 2012 Hurricane Sandy flooded many of the houses on the north end of the island that were not raised after hurricane Floyd and swept away all but one crab house on the Creek Point.

Over the years, the town had many small general stores and at one point there were 14 operating at the same time. Today there are none. The population is now a little over 200 in the summer and 100 in the winter. Only 50% of the properties are owned by island natives and the other 50% is owned by weekly or summer vacationers and retirees from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware.

Note: The previous essay was based on the book, *Almost an Island: A History of Saxis Virginia* by Kirk Mariner. This book is available at the Saxis Island Museum and both Saxis Island restaurants.