

**Excerpts from “Aw, Shucks: The Tragic History of New York City Oysters” by Tom Hynes**

*Untapped Cities, 2/9/16*

<http://untappedcities.com/2016/02/09/aw-shucks-the-tragic-history-of-new-york-city-oysters/>

Oysters are one of New York Harbor’s best shots at clean water, as well as one of its best chances at protection from future storm surges. These are the same oysters New Yorkers have done their best to decimate with centuries of pollution and overconsumption. The oysters hold no grudges, however, and have returned to help restore the harbor, even if New York probably doesn’t deserve it.

When Henry Hudson sailed into New York City in 1609, he happened upon one of the world’s most impressive natural harbors. There Hudson saw whales, otters, turtles, and countless fish. What he could not have seen, however, were the 220,000 acres of oyster beds below the surface on the harbor floor, constituting nearly half of the oysters in the entire world.

The ensuing wave of European visitors to Manhattan were introduced to eating oysters by the local Lenape, who would open the shells by wrapping the entire oyster in seaweed before tossing them on a fire. The Dutch, like the English and others who subsequently made their way to New York, loved the tasty bivalves. Oysters quickly became synonymous with New York City, as Mark Kurlansky’s book, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell*, skillfully outlines. Long before hot dog carts could be found everywhere, oysters were the ubiquitous food items of New York City; the original street meat.

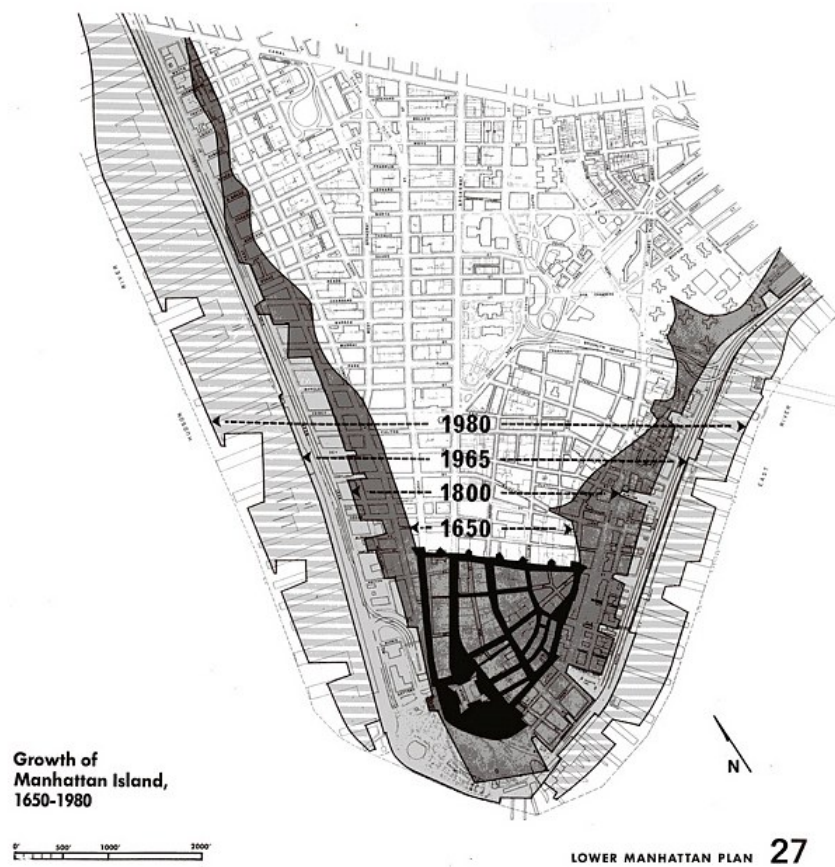
It seemed everywhere an enterprising fisherman looked, they found abundant oyster beds, from outer Long Island to Raritan Bay to Norwalk, Connecticut. In fact, oysters routinely grew to the size of dinner plates in the present-day Gowanus Canal...

Everyone in New York ate oysters. The rich saw them as a delicacy, and the poor enjoyed how cheap they were, not to mention easy to collect. Oyster taverns popped all over the city to feed the seemingly insatiable appetite. But, of course, this pace could not endure, and soon the oyster populations faced a multi-pronged threat to their existence.



Firstly, they were overharvested. Too many people were eating too many oysters (New Yorkers aren't exactly known for their restraint). Things began to look bad in 1820, when the oyster beds around Staten Island became depleted. Undeterred by this harbinger of things to come, New York continued to harvest oysters at an even greater pace. By the early 1900s, over 1 billion a year were being pulled out of the area's waterways.

Another major threat to the oyster beds were the city's ever-expanding shoreline. Between 1609 and 2010, Manhattan grew by roughly 20%. What was once a shoreline of marshy, rocky shallows – ideal for oyster beds – had been replaced with a nearly unbroken string of bulkheads, piers and landfill. It was good for trade and commerce, but bad for marine biodiversity.



Lastly, waste management, or the lack thereof, contributed to the oyster's demise. Until shockingly recently (circa 1970s), New York was dumping millions of gallons of raw, untreated sewage into the harbor on a daily basis. (Today, the city's combined sewer



system still ejects sewage with stormwater during peak flow). Not surprisingly, the oyster beds could not survive. In 1921, the New York City Health Department closed the Jamaica Bay oyster beds, then responsible for 80 million oysters a year, due to fears of foodborne illness, including typhoid. From there the end came fast, and six years later, in 1927, the last New York City oyster bed was closed in Raritan Bay.

With the passage of the Clean Water Act fifty years later in 1972, the harbor was given minor respite, but it was too little, too late. New York City oysters would survive as a species, but they would not be fit to eat again any time soon. And just like that, New York City had squandered one of its greatest natural resources, by imposing upon their habitat, over-harvesting their population, and literally dumping [sewage] on all that remained.

[...]

Today, New York would do well to make amends with the oyster, given all the oyster can do for New York. For one, oysters clean the waters in which they live. They are tiny beasts of burden in this way, designed to withstand troubled water and capable of filtering up to 50 gallons of it per oyster, per day. Oysters also act as keystone species, attracting other marine life to live around them, from microscopic organisms to crabs and fish.

[...]

In New York, specifically, oysters were once unsung local heroes. And they promise to play a role in its success once more. Figuratively, New York City was made with oysters insofar as they provided a cheap and abundant food source and generations of gainful employment. But even literally, a fair amount of New York City is made with oysters, most notably the lime used in Trinity Church is comprised of ground up oyster shells. Nearby, Pearl Street is named for the piles of oysters left there by the Lenape...

