



IT'S NO "FERRY" TALE! HARBORING HISTORY AND HERITAGE IN THE TOWN OF OXFORD, MARYLAND



The ferry boat Talbot, plying the waters of the Tred Avon River

Oxford, MD – Nestled on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the Town of Oxford may be diminutive (its population numbers less than 1,000), but its historical significance is anything but. And like so many things Oxfordian, that history lives on today, nurtured by the residents and businesses who give this waterside hamlet a heart as big as the Chesapeake.

The Oxford-Bellevue Ferry, established in 1683. Believed to be the nation's oldest privately operated ferry service, and running continuously since 1836, the ferry makes the three-quarter-mile trip between Oxford and Bellevue, Maryland in about ten minutes, with continuous crossings seven days a week except in November, when it operates on weekends only, and December through March, when it is closed for the winter season. It can accommodate nine vehicles, passengers, bicycles, and motorcycles ... and the occasional cherry picker and dump truck, too.

Celebrating its 328th birthday in 2011, the ferry has a past that makes for quite the tale. Current owner-captains Tom and Judy Bixler tell the stories best, but here are a few highlights:

- The ferry's first operator, Richard Royston, was paid a stipend of 2,500 pounds of tobacco for his efforts in 1683. Formerly a London merchant and one of Oxford's founding fathers, Royston was convicted of forgery in 1686 – the details are lost to history – and punished by means of a public whipping. He died at sea in 1694.
- The ferry's original customers included farm workers, often enslaved, traveling to and from orchards and other local agricultural operations.
- No fewer than five women have had a hand in running the ferry over the centuries – and not all of them in recent times. In fact, the first was Judith Bennett, she of three husbands, who ran the ferry herself for more than ten years in the early 1700s "when between spouses." A descendent, Catherine, became the ferry keeper in 1737; she was the first to be paid in cash rather than tobacco. (Smart girl!) Elizabeth Skinner kept the ferry in the 1750s, when it still consisted of a scrow propelled by sculling using a fourteen-foot sweep oar. Valerie Bittner and her husband Dave

worked in the family ferry business from 1975 to 2001, and Captain Judy and her husband Tom took the wheel in 2002.

- It wasn't until 1886 that steam replaced sails and oars as the means of powering the ferry. The crewmen were pleased when the steam tug was finally replaced by a gasoline tug in 1912, however, as the former "had a habit of sinking during the night A couple of times ... when we got her up we had to get the crabs and the hardheads out of her" (in the words of one deck hand).
- The first self-propelled ferry was launched in 1931. Built in Oxford by one of the town's most famous sailors, the wooden ship stayed in service until 1974.
- Captain William L. Benson had the longest known run as operator, from 1938 to 1974.
- The current ferry boat, the *Talbot*, was built of steel by Blount Shipyard in Warrant, Rhode Island, and placed in service in July of 1980.
- Although it continues to provide the essential function of transportation, the ferry does much more than that: it has hosted marriages, Fourth of July celebrations, charity events, full-moon-in-June parties, and an annual race with ... two paddlewheel boats! (Even when it flew a spinnaker, the ferry *still* lost the race. Sturdy the *Talbot* may be, but speedy she's not.)

From scandalous scoundrels, to women ahead of their time, to midnight sinkings, the Oxford-Bellevue Ferry line has seen its share of history. Captains Tom and Judy, originally from Long Island but now firmly ensconced in Oxford's civic and commercial life, love to share those "ferry" tales with visitors – there's the famous-people sightings, that cherry picker, and the summer thunderstorm that blew the sailboats in the marina right off their cradles, among others – and kids (and kids at heart) are always welcome in the wheelhouse of the *Talbot*!

Oxford, Maryland: a tiny but terrific Talbot County town

About Oxford, Maryland:

The historic town of Oxford, Maryland, founded in 1683, is located in Talbot County on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Until the American Revolution, Oxford was an international shipping center, surrounded by tobacco plantations and home to a number of prominent national figures. Later it thrived on oyster harvesting and packing and other watermen's trades, even as tourism and leisure activities increased. It guards its peaceful personality, architectural integrity, and small-town virtues to this day, while warmly welcoming visitors from right next door and around the world. The Oxford Business Association welcomes inquiries by telephone (1-410-745-9023) and at its website (www.portofoxford.com); the Town of Oxford website has a calendar of events and additional information (www.oxfordmd.net); and the Talbot County Office of Tourism offers comprehensive information and trip planning services at its Easton office (1-410-770-8000) and on its website (www.tourtalbot.org).

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