

Waterman

By Judy Colbert

The Waterman Monument is dedicated to all of the Maryland natives who have died while on the water. Until the second Industrial Revolution (mid-19th century through the early 20th century), Kent Island was an agrarian society. As the railroad, and particularly refrigerated cars on the train, spread across the country, the seafood market opened and expanded exponentially. Several factors combined to deplete the market and change the economics of Kent Island.

Realizing the impact these losses had on the population, far and wide, George O'Donnell decided there should be a monument for those who have dedicated and lost their lives to the vast water. He is a former commercial fisherman (fifth generation), a former member of the Kent Narrows Development Foundation, former Queen Anne's County Commissioner, and current liaison for the state fisheries at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources—a perfect person to spearhead this campaign.

So began seven years of fund-raising for the Watermen's Monument. People donated to have a name engraved on the monument or brick placed in the ground around it. "The Maryland General Assembly gave matching funds to the only statue in the state dedicated to the influence of Maryland fisherman," says O'Donnell. "We wanted to enhance Kent Narrows as a destination so people would patronize more businesses." The area now has a half-dozen restaurants, condos, hotels, and marinas to show for it.

Tilghman Helmsley IV, local artist and charter boat captain, was commissioned to create the statue. Sitting on a granite base, two nine-foot-tall bronze watermen stand in a small skiff, fighting the rough waters. Tilghman used local people and an old photograph as models for the watermen, "so, it's historically accurate, and he left them vague enough to represent the generations of brave souls who led the way. The statue faces "generally north," says Helmsley. "We saw how the light would hit it and a lot of planning went into the height of the site."

On November 22, 2003, nearly 300 people attended the unveiling. There are about 400 names on the monument and bricks are added each year. Names are added periodically when the engraver spends time etching each letter by letter. Alongside that, there's also a plaque listing names of contributors, both monetary and in-kind. O'Donnell patrols for weeds regularly to keep the area pristine and the county parks department maintains the area. You may not notice it as you drive over the six-lane bridge—. Or your attention may be drawn to it during the winter holiday time when decorated crab baskets are stacked upside down and festooned with lights to create holiday trees.



Helmsley's name may sound familiar to you. "The Tilghman and Helmsley families married long before the country was formed," he says. He's never counted the number of generations that might represent. In what sounds like a fascinating research project, Helmsley and O'Donnell say the stories weren't collected, so there's no "oldest," "longest working," "most inventive," or other designation for those inscribed on the monument and bricks. Helmsley worked with Tom Callahan on the monument. "We figured out everything we had to do, built a shop and the armature. Once you're doing the clay, it's a lot of fine work. If you're working on top, you'd have to build a bridge to connect it. Some of my sons were young then, so they did some work up in the leg."

Although the artist enjoys "dealing with sculptures, paintings are so much easier to produce. You go out and do a painting and put a frame on, it's done. I like working with figures and capturing working environments, like the blacksmith shop industry." The 62-year-old is working on a steel and aluminum piece of swans taking flight for Maple Lawn in Howard County. He's also spearheaded the mission to recover and recreate the statue of Christopher Columbus that was removed by vandals from its base in Baltimore and dumped into the harbor. Most of the skipjacks, bugeyes, buy boats, and other workboats are gone now, but O'Donnell has his statue to remind folks of those days.

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