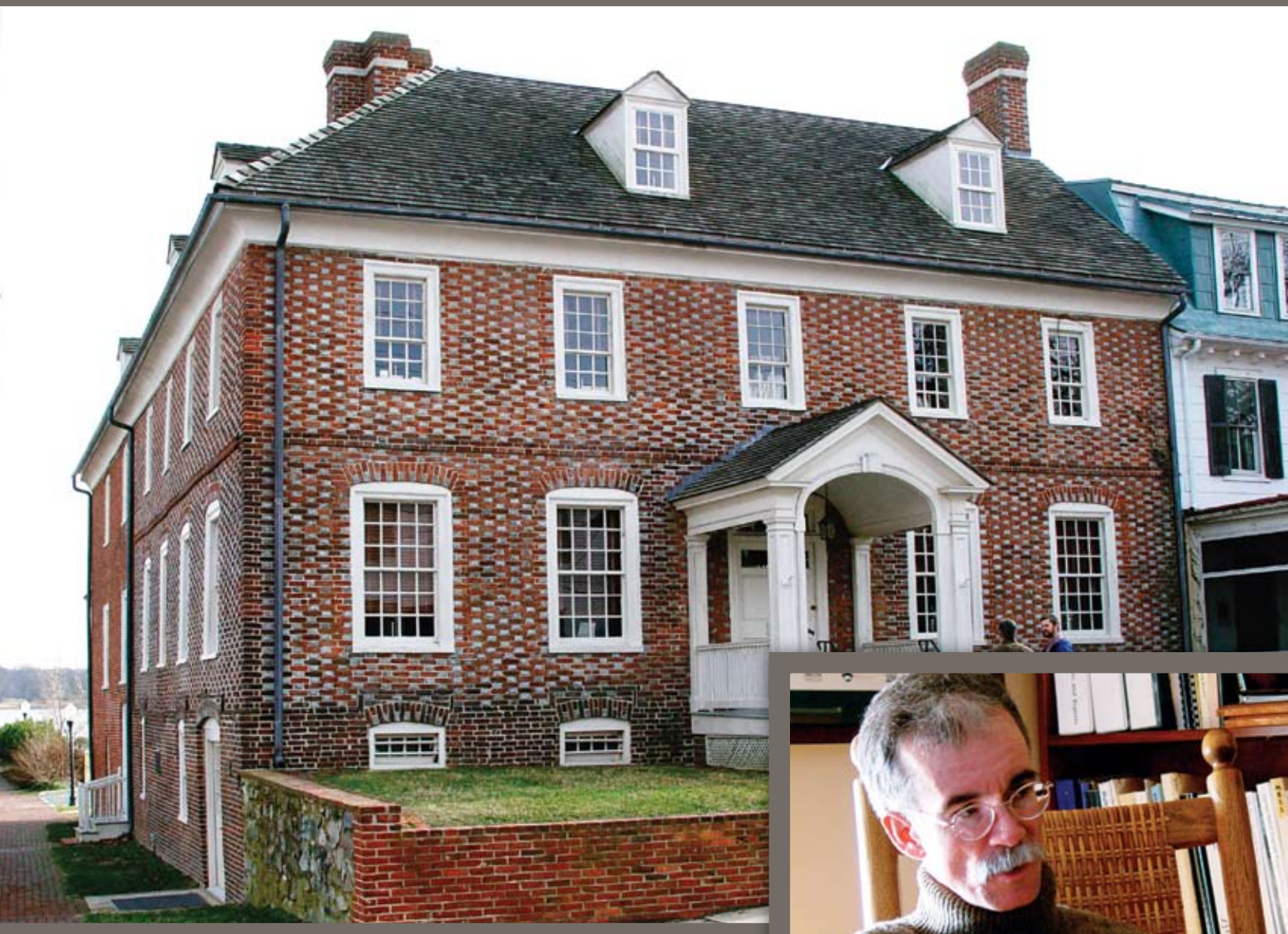
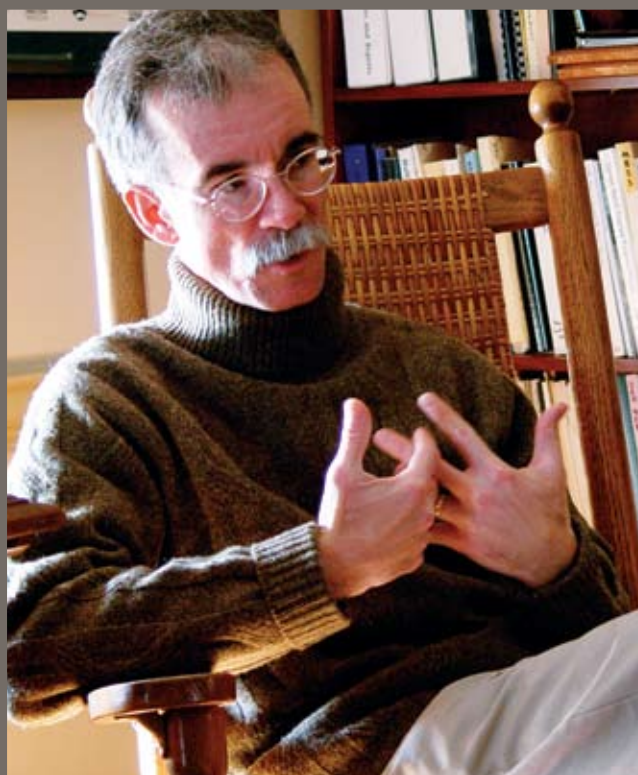
From the Books

By Michael Valliant, *Editor*



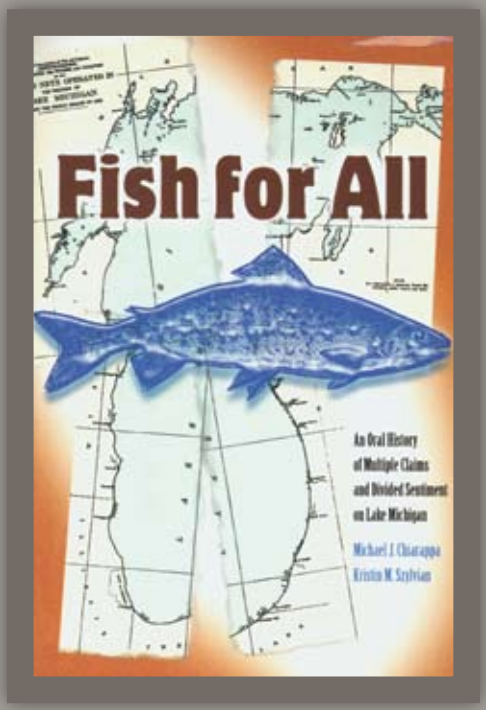


(Above) Inside The Custom House in Chestertown, Maryland, environmental historian Dr. Michael Chiarappa (near right) directs The Center for the Environment and Society at Washington College. Prior to his move to the Chesapeake Bay, Chiarappa was a professor at Western Michigan University, where he helped found the Great Lakes Center for Maritime Studies and led a project called "Fish for All," an oral history initiative, which documented fisheries allocation debates on Lake Michigan.

to the Field

Michael Chiarappa took the scenic route from the Delaware Bay to the Chesapeake. He went through Michigan and the Great Lakes. Chiarappa is the new director for Washington College's Center for the Environment and Society in Chestertown, Maryland. He grew up in South Jersey, so the Chesapeake is familiar territory.

"Over the years, I have been struck by the similarities between the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays. There are a lot of connections—families and boats going back and forth between the oyster fisheries. When you look at the maps that cultural geographers put together, they often lump the two regions together."



When Chiarappa saw the job posting for Washington College, he saw a way to fuse his research interests and his coastal wetlands background. The combination of teaching, outreach, and research fit his mantra of opening the doors of academic inquiry to a larger audience. That's how he landed on the other bay, an hour and twenty minutes from where he started.

His interest in maritime communities stems back to his childhood days.

"As a kid I loved going over to Philadelphia and being around the docks," says Chiarappa. "When I was a boy working with my father in South Jersey I loved going down to the bay and shoreline communities along the ocean."

While in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania (he received his PhD in 1992), Chiarappa got involved with the restoration of a 1928 Delaware Bay oyster schooner called the *A.J. Meerwald*. The goal of the restoration was to be able to use the vessel to educate people about the history, culture, and environment of the Delaware Bay.

"That's how I really made the jump—immersion—and really started all my research and energy into topics related to maritime communities," he recalls.

After graduate school and teaching for a time at Youngstown State University in Ohio, Chiarappa found a unique opportunity at Western Michigan University. They were looking for someone whose research interests included maritime communities, the environment, and public history. They were describing Chiarappa.

"There weren't many schools that were looking at how the Great Lakes were instrumental in the regional history and culture," he explains. "When I was there I got really involved with the Michigan Maritime Museum and we had a partnership where I started the Great Lakes Center for Maritime Studies."

One of the center's signature projects was an oral history initiative titled "Fish for All." Chiarappa, his colleague, Kristin Szylvian, and their students set out to interview, document, and engage the various stakeholders in the Great Lakes lake trout fisheries. The public products that were created included a museum exhibit and a book, *Fish for All: An Oral History of Multiple Claims and Divided Sentiment on Lake Michigan*. The take-home message that comes through loud and clear is the complexity—biologically, economically, politically, and socially—of managing one of the world's largest freshwater fisheries.

Through his work with "Fish for All," Chiarappa helped create a model for other fisheries to engage stakeholders and drive a purposeful dialogue.

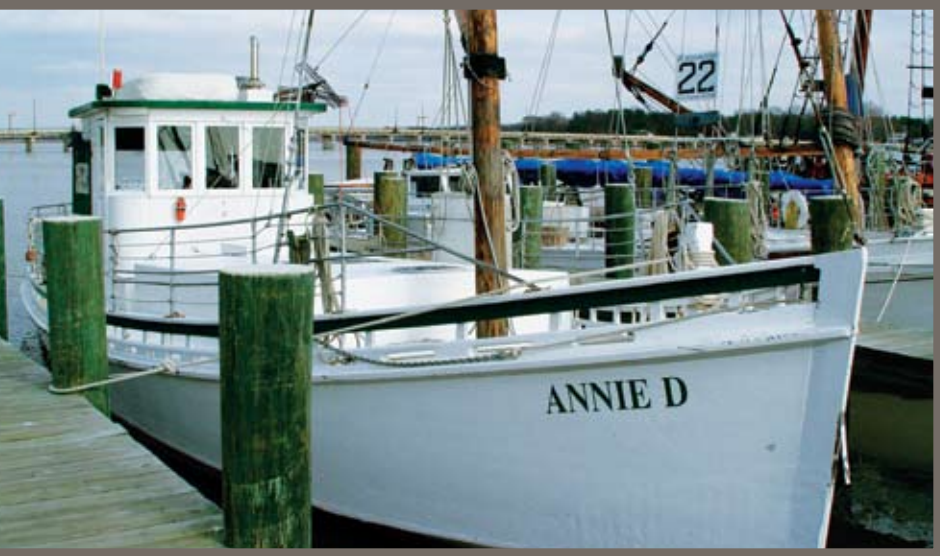
"You get out, you acquire oral history, you learn something about the lives of these people, but you are also producing scholarship and public programs that really help us deal with the environmental dilemma; that help us deal with the social and economic implications of how the use of natural resources impacts people's lives in terms of livelihood, their traditions, their identity," he says. "And what we were doing was trying to be facilitators."

Coming to the Center for the Environment and Society, Chiarappa brings this model now to the Bay, where he feels there are many similarities. Pick your maritime community; you are likely to find contentious relations over resources and their allocation. On the Great Lakes, the issue was lake trout, on the Bay, it is oysters. Strained relations? Think Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Maryland Waterman's Association.

(Right) Chiarappa focused his research and studies exclusively on maritime communities after helping restore the Delaware Bay schooner **A.J. Meerwald.** *(Below) Today, the vessels he encounters are those of the Chesapeake Bay, such as the buyboat* **Annie D.** *on the Chester River.*

"I see the Center as a deliberative body, helping steer a course to find common ground among these constituencies that's productive in terms of how we manage the Bay and its resources," he notes. "We have the ability to do scholarship that is socially engaged and reaching a wider audience than what we see in the traditional academic context."

Washington College students benefit from the Center's unique positioning. In addition to a solid academic grounding in the classroom, students spend time in the field at partner organizations. Field school experiences have included projects at organizations such as Adkins Arboretum, the Smithsonian, and this summer at CBMM.



One of the field schools offered this summer will have students documenting boat building in the Pot Pie (now Wittman) area. Students will interview boat builders, survey the boat shops where they have worked, and gain a real-world perspective on a vanishing maritime trade.

"Getting out in the field helps make tangible some of the more abstract and removed material they get in the traditional classroom setting," says Chiarappa. "The idea with the Pot Pie project is to document a site where a lot of work boats were produced—a site emblematic of a lot of boat yards around the Bay. How can we take sites like these and construct the world of the Bay around it?

So what is it that the college and the Center for the Environment and Society want students to take away from their time spent in the classroom and in the trenches? According to Chiarappa, the various parts of the program all come together under a larger vision. That vision is interdisciplinary—it encompasses history, science, ecology, and environmental planning as cornerstones for cultivating an environmental ethic. That's the Center's niche. Students, by studying and working with the community, help create a sense of stewardship and a way of thinking that fosters a sustainable, healthy, culturally vibrant Bay.

"Students—whether you go on to graduate school or you're just a citizen living in a community—you'll have the tools, the perspectives, and the fluency to understand what factors need to be considered if you are conducting your daily affairs in a community where the water and land are dynamically connected," he says. "I often tell students, 'if you can understand some of the cultural and ecological quandaries of the Chesapeake Bay, you can go lots of places in the world and take that model and that template and use it to your advantage.'"

A holistic, interdisciplinary way to envision, live, and work on the Bay. A framework for understanding the opinions of various stakeholders and the factors to be considered for a sustainable future for a fishery. That's quite a niche. ◆