

## **LIFE ALONG THE “CRIK”**

It's easy to tell the locals from visitors in the Tuckerton, New Jersey area. Residents call the narrow body of water that snakes from Little Egg Harbor up to the town of Tuckerton a “Crik,” definitely not “Creek.”

Tuckerton Crik today is a mix of old and new. A feeling of nostalgia overcomes boaters as they pass by old clam houses and shacks. Many old homes have been restored. Yet much waterfront land is either wetlands or undeveloped. Cedar trees list out towards the middle of the Crik, reeds and phragmites growing undisturbed along the banks. Oyster and clamshells protrude from sand and muck, a reminder of the prolific quantity of both. Artists and photographers are in their glory here.

Occasionally a kayaker or two will pass quietly by, paddles digging into the red/brown colored water. Lake Pohatcong flows into Tuckerton Crik from an old dam under the only road to go through Tuckerton (Route #9), the color emanating from cedar roots and tannins from dead leaves. Salt water from the bay intrudes up the Crik leaving it brackish.

Birds are seen everywhere, especially during the spring and fall migration periods where Tuckerton Crik lies in the path of the Atlantic Flyway. Clean water is the norm; an absolute minimal amount of trash is seen. Turtles rest on logs; occasional raccoons scavenge for food along the banks at low tide. Million dollar homes are just beginning to be built next to or replacing much smaller bungalows from the 1950's or even as far back as 200 years.

If you want glitz head a bit south to Clam Creek, better known as the Inlet section of Atlantic City. There a stay at the Farley State Marina, Harrah's, or one of the smaller marinas can end up in a night or two at the casinos, fancy restaurants, and no doubt a much lighter wallet. Tuckerton Crik is for people who appreciate nature, have a hankering for some history, like to fish, enjoy boating, and covet their peace and quiet.

Revolutionary War battles and skirmishes took place in close vicinity to Tuckerton and the Crik. Stories still abound of families divided by the Revolutionary War, families vacillating from one side to the other depending on where their bread was buttered, and sometimes-rather-dubious and rakish privateers licensed to steal. Were there really pirates in the area? And, oh yes, the mythical Jersey Devil?

Clamtown, Middle of the Shore or Fishtown, as the area was alternately known, became Tuckerton after the Revolutionary War. Ebenezer Tucker supposedly had a party for local residents, got them rather soused, and passed around a petition asking for the town to be named after him. George Washington designated Tuckerton as one of the first ports of entry into the country in 1791. (You did read that correctly).

As off the beat as Tuckerton may seem today, it was once the center of shipping and commercial activity. Two inlets were within easy reach and the coastal trade along the Atlantic Ocean came within miles. Trade with big cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York was an easy day or two sail. Mainland trails roamed through the adjoining Pine Barrens connecting to the hub of Philadelphia.

Clam houses, oyster houses and commercial buildings lined the Crik as early as the late 1700's. Much wider and deeper than it is today, Tuckerton Crik was able to accommodate most any size boat. Ships up to 100' were built in boatworks, launched on marine railways. Local Atlantic white cedar was readily available in the boggy areas of the Pine Barrens. Some schooners sailed the route along the Jersey coast to East Coast cities; other large ships traded around the world. Small catboats, mainly used for fishing and shellfish, never sailed much further than Little Egg Harbor. Local saw mills flourished. Wood was exported, as were glass, salt, charcoal, and iron products.

An old article in The Camden County Courier stated:

“These sturdy pioneers turned to community enterprises. Shipbuilding grew apace to meet the demands of the coastal trade. Eventually Tuckerton became the shipbuilding point of the East Coast.

“Even as late as the 1860’s and 1870’s one shipyard in Tuckerton launched thirty ‘gallant ships.’ One of these carried 455 tons. The manufacture of charcoal to meet a demand of New York City was promoted. It was said the city beefsteaks were broiled on (local) charcoal.”

Baymen lived off the local waters either clamming, fishing, eeling, crabbing, oystering, or hunting depending on the season. In addition they harvested salt hay (for such things as animal bedding, stuffing furniture, and a number of things such as paper), eelgrass (used as housing insulation, packing, and was it really used in Henry Ford’s first dashboards and seats?), and anything else they could to make money.

When the railroad arrived in the mid 1800’s the bay catch was put on the trains and served fresh in city restaurants within hours. Tuckerton and Tuckerton Crik were one unit, one dependent upon the other.

Historically the Crik was strictly commercial. Flat bottomed, shallow draft, snub-nosed garvies were invented in the area, becoming one of the boats of choice for the baymen. Popular for harvesting the bay, garvies first had sails, then motors, as they became available.

Sneakboxes were used to hunt ducks. Lined with decoys across the transom, marsh grass green colored sneakboxes sailed out to the hunting grounds. After unloading all the excess, anchoring the decoys, and camouflaging the boats, hunters would hunker down in these small 12 – 15’ floating duck blinds and wait for the ducks to fly overhead. Birds were shot to put food on the table and to sell. After hunting laws were enacted in the early 1900’s the boats were used by local yacht clubs and camps to teach children to sail.

Today hunting is regulated, and there are not nearly so many birds around. Local boatbuilders continue to make sneakboxes and garvies out of Atlantic white cedar. Both are still seen along the Crik with sneakboxes (today’s version have outboards) appearing during the fall and winter hunting seasons. Garvies are still a popular boat for fishing, clamming, crabbing, or just taking the family out for the afternoon.

Parson’s Clam House sags into itself, the walls and flooring now almost gone. It has seen five generations of Parson family clammers and others bring their clams to market, and stands as a proud symbol of activity that once took place along the Crik. A newer clam house and retail clam market sits a few hundred feet away on Green Street; but a garvey is usually found tied up at the dock. A member of the Parson’s family still owns the business that once supplied so many of the clams for Campbell’s clam chowder in Camden.

During the heyday of charter fishing the Tuckerton Yacht Club was the home of fishing boats and their colorful captains. Catboats were first used for charters; later the masts were cut down and the sails replaced by motors. Gasoline fishing boats were chartered during the 1920’s – 1940’s. All that remains of the Tuckerton Yacht Club today is a partial foundation in a low lying area and a few pilings from its once active dock.

At the end of Tuckerton Crik stands the Tuckerton Seaport dedicating to preserving the heritage of the baymen. Located on 40 acres this impressive site is located on a former castor bean farm. Here decoy carvers show visitors how decoys were made without nails. Cedar chips fly as axes fall, and drawknives and spokeshaves remove “anything that does not look like a duck.” Sneakboxes and garvies are built in the Perrine boatworks while the history of Tucker’s Island and U.S. Life Saving Service are highlighted in the replica of the Tucker’s Island Lighthouse. A reproduction of the Tuckerton Yacht Club houses the Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve Exhibit, a Gift Shop, a potpourri of Sneakboxes, and birds and animals of the area.

One of the most popular exhibits at the Seaport is the reproduction of Parson's Clam house complete with sliding wooden doors (necessary for clammers unloading their harvest), rakes, baskets, and a sorting machine. Docents are on hand to explain the way "things used to be" by telling how today's small number of clammers must rent their beds from the state, seed them with clam seeds, and wait a few years until they are big enough to harvest. During the summer months local Crik critters are displayed in tanks.

Egrets and herons feed along the banks of Tuckerton Crik. Boats filled with families sightseeing or fishermen slowly wend their way up or down. A few old bulkheads are still made of cedar posts. Just past the Tuckerton Seaport is Stewart's Drive In, a popular stop for families thirsty for some old fashioned root beer, a float, or hamburger. A bigger than life Elvis looks down on hungry diners who are served 1950's style in their cars.

Both the Seaport and Stewarts have docking facilities, as do other marinas in the area. Gas is readily available. Tuckerton is fast becoming a destination in itself with an upgraded streetscape and landscaping along with a number of quality antique, collectible and gift shops. The Tuckerton Emporium is located in the old Gerber Store while the popular Lizzie Rose and Middle of the Shore Shops are within easy walking distance. An upscale art gallery, the Watermark Gallery, overlooks Tuckerton Crik in an old home once owned by the Shourds family.

Restaurants ranging from the Tuckerton Pub and pizza take-outs to the Tuckerton Beach Grille and a Chinese buffet are close by. Panini Bay and the Dockside Café are Crik side with dockage. During the warm months boaters are continually crossing Little Egg Harbor and motoring up the Crik from Long Beach Island. Going to a favorite restaurant such as the delicious Skeeters, located at the Tuckerton Seaport, by boat is a popular outing.

Life along Tuckerton Crik seems to stand still in time. Ducks and geese outnumber the people seen while meandering at idle speed. It is easy to think about the numerous oyster beds that used to be outside the mouth, clammers that once worked their tongs seven days a week almost year round, or a tall sailing ship loaded with wood headed for foreign ports. In an age of extreme waterfront development it is satisfying to know a place like Tuckerton Crik still exists.