

A Memorable Cruise To Tangier Island

By BIGNALL JONES

Children of Tangier, a small island in Chesapeake Bay, still walk to school and carry their lunches. There are no buses rolling to and from the accredited school and few motor vehicles to endanger little children walking, often hand in hand, to the school. Classes are small as the total enrollment of the school is around 125 with classes taught from kindergarten through high school. There are no troubles with segregation as there are no minorities living on the island. The principal is a native, a veteran of World War II, with two degrees from the University of Virginia, whose dream has always been to be a principal of Tangier High School.

Neither is there any cause for religious quarreling among the 850 inhabitants of the island who are devout believers in the teaching of the Bible and most of whom belong to the Methodist Church. There is but one other church on the island, an interdenominational church.

Women on Tangier Island remain at home while the men go to sea in their own fishing boats seeking crabs, (as Tangier is the soft crab capital of the world) clams and a large variety of fish, and one local historian said that this adds to peacefulness of the island, as the men leave home before daylight, and are in bed by 10 p. m., thus creating no disturbance from late parties.

In its November 1973 issue, The National Geographic published an article, entitled "This Is My Island Tangier," by Harold G. Wheatley. Wheatley is now principal of the Tangier High School. A copy of the November 1973 National Geographic may be found in many local libraries and is filed away by many subscribers to this magazine. Other information about this historical island may be found in "Visitors Guide to Tangier Island, Va." and "Something Fishy from Tangier," both of which may be obtained from the museum gift shop on the island. Also for sale at the gift shop is "20-Fathoms Cook Book Tangier Style," which contains over a hundred recipes. It is priced at \$2.00. "Something Fishy from Tangier" sells for \$1.50.

Origin of the name Tangier is not certain, but it has been suggested that the island was named by Captain John Smith for Tangier, Africa, where he was once held prisoner. Captain Smith visited the island in 1608. The first white man to own the island was a Mr. West from the mainland who bought the land from the Indians for two overcoats. In 1666, according to a cruise bulletin, he sold part of the island to John Crockett who settled there in 1666 with his wife and four sons. Tangier families intermarried and today there are many families of the same name such as Crockett, Dies, Parks, Pruitt, Thomas and Wheatley.

"Tangier is a romantic destination for those who would see a largely unspoiled fishing village, 'the soft shell crab capital' of the world. Although modernization has come to the island it still has not lost its charm. . . ." The island is 2½ miles long and only about 4 feet above sealevel. When the British came there in 1814, the island was about half a mile wider and about 14 feet above sea level. Erosion has taken its toll and a fort and fortifications built by the British are now under water. There are some 850 residents on Tangier Island today, all of English descent.

The only way to reach the island is by air or by boat. A mail and passenger boat leaves Crisfield, Md., at 12:30 p. m. six days a week, and leaves Tangier for Crisfield, Md. at 8 a. m. It takes one hour and 10 minutes to cross the 12 miles. The other boat route leads from Reedville, Va., to Tangier and it takes an hour and 45 minutes to cover the 20 miles. This cruiser operates only during the summer months and reservations are necessary, and persons wishing to board the boat should call or write Tangier and Chesapeake Cruise, Inc., Warsaw, Va. 22572. Phone (804) 333-4656. The Reedville-Tangier route is the one we took, going from Warrenton by Richmond, Va. On the way to an embarking point, we were fortunate enough to visit Reedville, the menhaden capital of the nation, which is an unusually beautiful town. It is said to be the richest town per capita in Virginia, and the



Passengers are shown aboard the cruise ship, "Captain Thomas," as it begins a trip to remote Tangier Island. The ship sails from Reedville, Va.

to the Chesapeake Bay island during the summer months. It can carry 150 passengers.



Tangier Island, only four feet above sea level, has the appearance of floating low in the Chesapeake Bay at high tide. The island can be reached via

cruise ships sailing from both Virginia and Maryland. A mail boat and private planes also visit the island regularly.

homes and lawns indicate it.

We had been advised to be at the embarkation point early Sunday morning and arrived before 9:30 a. m. and parked and locked our car. As we approached the ship we fell into conversation with one of the passengers who said he was Bill Land from South Hill, Va., and asked us if we knew Mrs. Sallie Baskerville and her son, Bill. Both are good friends of ours. Mr. Land was making his second visit to Tangier, having visited there in 1941.

We boarded the luxurious "Captain Thomas," at Reedville, Va., at 10 a. m. This 70-foot sight-seeing ship is equipped with rest rooms, snack bar and stereo music. It is approved by the Coast Guard to carry 150 passengers and designed for pleasant cruising on the Chesapeake Bay.

"The trip on the Captain Thomas is something of a passage through history, social and economic," states the brochure handed passengers. "Reedville is the center of the Chesapeake Bay menhaden fishing industry and the ship often passes a fish boat setting a purse seine around a huge school of fish. It also crosses the ship channel with its traffic of freighters bound to and from Baltimore, Washington and Norfolk."

Frequent comments on interesting objects passed by the ship and on Tangier by Captain Thomas Pearsall reached the passengers over loudspeakers. He informed us that Tangier had no jail and said that was due to the fact that "there are no Baptists on the Island." As we were passing two large ships in the Bay he informed us that they were target ships bombed frequently with smoke bombs by members of the U. S. Airmen. He said both ships, one of which had been split in half, were World War II Liberty Ships, built by Kaiser Shipbuilding Company, built hastily at the rate of one a day, in sections. The split in one of the ships, he said, was not caused by a bomb, but by being pounded on the bottom of the bay by winds and tide.

Of special interest, to us from Warrenton, was Captain Thomas' account of the British assault on Fort McHenry, Maryland, in 1814. Twelve thousand to 14,000 British marines had been quartered on ships off Tangier in preparation for this assault. Prior to their sailing Francis Scott Key had visited the island in an effort to affect a prisoner exchange, but was charged with being a spy and carried on a war ship by the British to Fort McHenry. While watching the bombardment of the fort, Key wrote "The Star Spangled Banner." Of interest to us is that Key's granddaughter is buried in the graveyard of the Warrenton Episcopal Church. Key's daughter married Congressman James Turner of Warren County, and later the family lived in Warrenton while Turner was principal of a Warrenton school.



The Methodist Church on Tangier Island is situated at the end of the widest street on the island. It is one of two churches found on Tangier.



Tourists can travel Tangier's quaint narrow streets aboard a converted golf cart.

as we rode down the narrow streets and along some paths.

Of deep disappointment to my wife, Grace, was the discovery that picket fences that once surrounded each yard had been replaced by chain-link fences. A guide later explained to us that the fences were erected primarily to keep dogs out of the gardens, as all the residents had good gardens, and that the women not only served bountiful meals to their husbands, but did much preserving of fruits and vegetables while the men folks were out fishing.

The dinner that we enjoyed consisted of vegetables taken from these gardens and from crabs and clams taken from the Bay. Incidentally, we learned that lodging is available at The Chesapeake House, where meals are served, and that for those who do not prefer the family style dinner, there are hot dogs and hamburgers, and sandwiches served near the wharf, and that picnic tables are provided for those who prefer to bring their own lunches. Captain Pearsall had told the passengers just before we disembarked to leave all alcoholic drinks on the boat as Tangier had enjoyed prohibition since 1831. That fact, with the further fact that the population is homogeneous, and busy, has a great more to do with lack of crime than no Baptists in the population.

Unless the jail has been abolished since 1973, Captain Pearsall had been given the wrong information about the jail, for School Principal Wheatley, in his article on Tangier in the November 1973 issue of The National Geographic, says that "we do have a jail in the Town Hall, but it is seldom occupied." He said that major crime is almost unknown on Tangier. The town sergeant is mainly concerned with speeding offenders. (One of the attractive pictures in the National Geographic article is that of half a dozen firemen riding a converted golf cart, such as were used in our tour.)

"In the past few years, motorcycles have come to Tangier, and some of the young bucks cannot resist that temptation to roar along faster than our 15-miles-per hour speed limit. Although our main street is so narrow you can nearly span it with outstretched arms, we now have 30 motorcycles and motor scooters, seven cars and four trucks. If two cars meet on the main street, one has to give way and back up to the nearest side road.

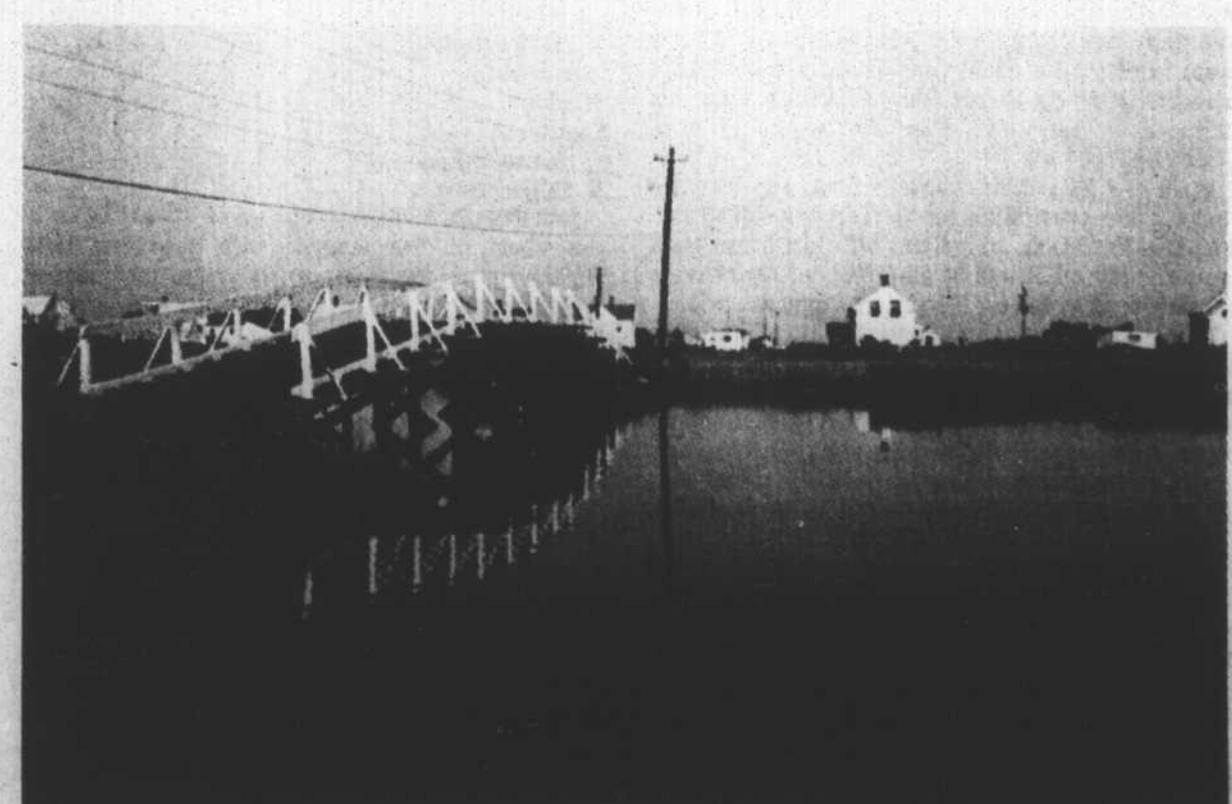
"Offenders are assigned to public work: cleaning the cemeteries, streets and other public places. Normally the sentence is for one or two weeks. The lawbreakers remain at liberty during the night but report to the town sergeant every morning."

After completing our golf cart tour of the Island, we had about an hour to spend before re-embarking on our ship for a return trip to the mainland at 2:30. This time was spent at various gift shops and a museum-gift shop on Main Street, where my wife picked up several cards, a recipe book, a history of Tangier, written by a native, and possibly a gift or two. I enjoyed a short visit with Vernon Bradshaw, a retired artist, and bought a few black and white sketches of Tangier scenes, which he had sketched. He was very friendly. When I questioned the statement that 90 percent of the island's income was derived from fishing, he said that he feels that a fourth of its income comes from tourism, which is steadily increasing.

In addition to other reasons, many persons come to Tangier to shoot waterfowl, which is prevalent in the waters around Tangier.

The return trip to Reedville was very pleasant, although this time we spent about half our time in the cabin and the remainder on the deck. We saw many more ships with purse seines, due perhaps to the time of day, and Captain Pearsall told us that in winter many fishermen painted their boats camouflage green for the benefit of sportsmen drawn to the island by the amount of ducks and other wildfowl found around Tangier.

We reached Reedville at 4:15 as scheduled, disembarked, and after finding our car began the journey home, knowing that our trip to Tangier was an experience we would never forget.



Narrow, picturesque bridges span the waterways of Virginia's Tangier Island. Tourists often walk along island paths after eating a family style seafood dinner at the famous Chesapeake House or dining on sandwiches at the patio shop overlooking Tangier's harbor. Visitors are invited to bring a

picnic lunch, if they so choose, and eat aboard ship or at the picnic tables at the dock. Many take time to walk around the island and visit the gift shops before heading back to the mainland of either Virginia or Maryland aboard a cruise ship.