

Appendix 3b: Interpretive Development of James Michener's *Chesapeake* (DRAFT)

James Michener and the Writing of *Chesapeake*

James A. Michener was one of the most prolific and popular writers of the twentieth century. Born in February 1907, he was adopted and raised by Mabel Michener, a Quaker widow, in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He never knew his birth parents. James Michener graduated from Swarthmore College in 1929 and received a masters degree from the Colorado State Collage of Education (now the University of Northern Colorado) in 1936. Following service in the South Pacific in World War II, he wrote a series of short stories which were published in 1946 as *Tales of the South Pacific*. His book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 and became the basis for the musical *South Pacific*, launching Michener's writing career. Despite extensive travel, Michener maintained a home in Bucks County from 1948 through 1985 and was heavily involved in local social, cultural, and civic affairs.

Over the next fifty years, Michener wrote over 40 titles, including novels, short fiction, and non-fiction, much of which was based upon his extensive travel and interest in different cultures. He sold over 75 million books and was characteristic of the period's writers. Michener's best known books, including *Hawaii* (1959), *Centennial* (1974), *Chesapeake* (1978), and *Texas* (1985), were historical epics tracing the broad history of a region from pre-history to the recent past. These novels focused upon a few families representing the region's varying cultures and followed their stories through the region's changing history and through the impacts brought on by major historical events.

Chesapeake was written between 1975 and 1977, during which period he lived within the region. In the Acknowledgements to his novel, Michener cites many of the individuals, places, and experiences that influenced his writing. Michener's writing of his epic novels often began with a period of gestation and early research that could last years and during which he developed his basic storyline, characters, and settings. This was followed by a period of extensive research within the region, as outlined in his Acknowledgements. Research led to writing, and Michener was an intense writer, often working twelve to fifteen hours a day and producing 2000 words. Upon completing a first draft of his novel, he would re-write the manuscript from beginning to end. Chapters would then be sent to a secretary for transcribing and initial editing. The entire manuscript would then be edited by his colleagues at Random House. When complete, experts were retained to confirm the accuracy of the basic facts supporting the story.

In November 1977, Michener donated his papers related to the writing of *Chesapeake* to the Talbot County Free Library in Easton, where much of his documentary research had been undertaken. These papers include various working manuscripts of the book, research notes, and his *Chesapeake Diary* outlining his work.

The story of Michener's writing of *Chesapeake* needs to be brought together into a summary that can be used for student and popular information and which can support interpretation of the novel. In his books, Michener promotes cultural awareness, a love of history and nature, and the Quaker ideal of tolerance. He weaves his characters into their times and involves

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them in major historical events, even those of recent times. There is a moral sense to his stories that speak to his active real-life involvement in public affairs and generous philanthropy. During his life, Michener gave away over \$100 million to a wide range of organizations and causes. Through the interpretation of *Chesapeake*, the scenic byway and the region can help honor the man who honored them.

The Landscape of *Chesapeake*

Michener's *Chesapeake* depicts the broad sweep of the Chesapeake Bay landscape but centers upon the lower Choptank River in the heart of Chesapeake Country. As Michener writes in his brief introduction, the details of the Choptank River landscape as described in the novel are correct, but the specific places in which much of the action takes place are imaginary. A map he includes at the beginning of the book shows these imaginary places introduced and drawn into the actual landscape of the river. Inspired by a combination of actual locations he experienced within the region, these imaginary places depict the rich character of the Chesapeake landscape and provide the setting in which the novel's action develops. The novel's characters are closely tied to the landscape he depicts. Michener's invented places include Devon Island, Peace Cliff, the Turlock Marsh, and the town of Patamoke, among others.

Devon Island is shown on Michener's map in the wide mouth of the Choptank River, southeast of Tilghman Island. No island is actually located here. In the novel, Devon Island is the site of the first settlement of the region by the ancestor of the Steed family, having struck out from the English settlement at Jamestown to avoid persecution due to his Catholic faith. Devon Island serves as the Steed homestead, from which the family spreads to the northern shore of the river, eventually controlling thousands of acres of land and representing the region's agricultural plantation culture. Over the decades, the sandy Devon Island erodes away and disappears, as have other islands along the shores of the Chesapeake.

Peace Cliff is a prominence introduced to the end of Island Neck on the south side of the mouth of Island Creek. In *Chesapeake*, this is the place where the Paxmore family settles, "pax" meaning "peace" in Latin. The Paxmores represent the region's Quaker tradition, with which Michener was intimately familiar. As the novel develops, the Paxmores become the region's boat builders, craftsmen, teachers, lawyers, professionals, and community leaders.

The Turlock Marshes have been added to the end of Grubin Neck on the north shore of the Choptank River. Dense and impenetrable, the marsh is settled by a convicted criminal, brought to Jamestown as an indentured servant from which he fled to the Chesapeake. Turlock purchases the marsh from the Indians with goods stolen from the more prosperous Steeds. He and his descendants live off of the bay's natural bounty. Over the generations, the poor, uneducated, and inbred Turlocks represent a dark side of the region's culture. Eventually, with their innate ability to live off of the land and water, they become the boatmen of the bay.

Patamoke is fictional town located on the north bank of the Choptank River across from present day Cambridge. A composite of actual towns within the region, Patamoke is

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established as a center for boat building and a port. It becomes the novel's economic, legal, and cultural center, with warehouses, schools, stores, and a courthouse. Patamoke is home to the Caters and the Cavenys. The Caters are the first freed slaves within the region and become leaders of the town's emerging African American community. The Irish Caveys come to the Choptank to build a railroad and become the region's middle class residents of workers, craftsmen, teachers, priests, policemen, merchants, and game wardens.

Themes and Storylines: The Voyages of *Chesapeake*

As described above, *Chesapeake* follows the life of the bay from the 1583 pre-settlement period of Native American occupation to the time of the novel's writing in 1978. Primarily, the book follows the developments of the five families mentioned above, the Steeds, Turlocks, Paxmores, Caters, and Cavenys, each of which represents a different cultural tradition. Each family has a different relationship to the land, and each portrays a different element of society. As the stories are woven, the characters face circumstances that combine social and economic transformations, cultural perspectives, and actual historical events representative of the region and its times. Michener's novel is divided into fourteen sections or 'voyages' and covers the four centuries. While fictional, each Voyage addresses themes and subjects significant to the history interpreted by the scenic byway.

Voyage One: 1583

The River

In the language of the Susquehannock Indians the Chesapeake is "the great river in which fish with hard shells abound." This voyage by a Susquehannock looking for a new, safe home describes the abundance of natural resources and the bounty of food on land and in the water. The peaceful Choptank Indians welcome him and he becomes their leader.

Voyage Two: 1608

The Island

The Island describes John Smith's voyage of discovery all around the Chesapeake Bay. A Catholic Englishman who has sailed with Smith is granted permission to start an outpost of the Colony along the Choptank River. He makes contact with the Indians and reaches an agreement with them for the purchase of his land. He clears fields and plants tobacco. Tobacco is very profitable but difficult to grow, but in time it becomes the currency of the Colony. Slaves are brought to Jamestown to perform specialized tasks. The labor in the Choptank tobacco fields is performed by indentured servants, but eventually they are replaced by slaves. The King ordains a predominately Catholic colony be established in his new world: the Palatinate of Maryland. King Charles grants George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, a new domain north of Virginia to be named after Queen Mary.

Voyage Three: 1636

The Marsh

This is the voyage of an indentured servant, ancestor of the Turlocks, who rebels and runs away from his master. He flees Jamestown, steals a boat, and hides in the marshland on the north bank of the Choptank River. He survives the harsh winter of 1638-39 by the grace of an Indian hunting party who stay with him and teach him how to live in the wild. He survives

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and buys the marshland from the Indians. Squatters come near the marsh and kill most of the Choptanks. Wherever the white settlers appeared, the Indians had to abdicate. In the 1640's Parliament tried to revoke Maryland's charter. Anti-Catholic sentiment rises up. King Charles is deposed and Maryland, the colony in which Catholic proprietors had offered religious freedom, becomes the scene of Catholic persecution.

Voyage Four: 1661.

The Cliff

This is the voyage of a persecuted Quaker, ancestor of the Paxmores, who escapes from Massachusetts. Quakerism is part of the "spiritual revolution" of the time. Massachusetts backed Parliament and Maryland backed the King. The Quakers persecuted in Massachusetts banded together on the Choptank River. In 1664 the Quakers built the first meetinghouse in Maryland, working together with the Indians. The Quakers go on to establish boat building, using the great stands of pine and oak along the river. Boat building progresses to ship building and the establishment of a ship building center in Patamoke. Ships allow the families of the Eastern Shore to control the movement of tobacco, the wealth of the new world, formerly controlled by London middlemen. Slaves are received by a Quaker of the region to help with the ship building work. But the Quakers find slavery intolerable and unjustifiable and they cannot live with slave ownership. The slaves are freed and the first anti-slavery message in any church in America is spoken.

Voyage Five: 1701

Rosalind's Revenge

Voyage Five is the story of a Catholic woman who leaves her well established home on the Rappahannock River in Virginia to become Steed's wife on the still sparsely settled Eastern Shore of Maryland. She arrives at her new home with a wealth of knowledge about raising tobacco and managing slaves. In 1707 the Chesapeake is held captive by pirates preying on cargo ships from Virginia and Maryland. Pirates sail up the rivers, burning plantations and stealing slaves and tobacco. The English navy is no help because of their commitments in Europe in the War of Spanish Succession. The Chesapeake is in a state of siege as more than a hundred transport ships, English from Jamaica and French from Martinique, wait helpless at Cape Henry.

Nothing on the Chesapeake at the time could withstand the assault of a pirate with a ship of forty guns and a crew of two hundred. The colonists devised a system: English ships would cross the Atlantic in giant convoys for mutual protection, one leaving London in October and another departing the Chesapeake in May. During the rest of the year only swift blockade runners had a chance.

Battling shipworm was time consuming and expensive for ocean vessels of the time. The bay's shipbuilders learn to move their boats far up the Choptank River into fresher water in the hot summer months to prevent infestation. A benefit of having estuaries, having ships that are free of shipworm resulted in ships of greater strength and greater speed. The plantations of the Eastern Shore were self-sufficient centers of economic activity. Towns did not develop as early as in other places. Boys approaching manhood learned to tend the fields,

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make casks, figure profits, and sail. The region prospers from the activities associated with tobacco production and processing: the warehouse, the barrels, and the ships.

Voyage Six: 1773

Three Patriots

Voyage Six describes the arrival of the newly appointed Rector of Wrentham to a site north of the Choptank. The Rector was awarded his post by blackmailing the Lords proprietor in London, who are able to appoint whoever they want as clergymen of the Church of England. In this lucrative position the Rector can demand exorbitant tithes from the population, including the Catholics and Quakers. If residents cannot pay, the Rector can take their land, not for the Church but for himself. This is one more insult to the colonists who resent and suffer from the taxes, damage to trade, and discrimination against them in favor of London-based monopolies.

The American Revolution ensues. Together the Catholic and the Quaker protagonists design the Chesapeake schooner "Whisper," designed for speed and maneuverability with enough guns for effective hit and run tactics. During the war there are ongoing negotiations with the French to open their ports to American trade. Due to British blockade, no major port on the Atlantic seaboard was open. English vessels dominated the entire Chesapeake Bay. Finally, however, the French arrived to clear them out. In December 1777, the Quakers of the Choptank became the first religious group in the South to bar slavery among its members.

Voyage Seven: 1811

The Duel

Voyage Seven is the story of a young man who leaves home to search for the head of the Susquehanna River. Michener describes the relationship between the river and the bay. This is a time of exploration and invention. The English return during the War of 1812, and English sea captains roamed the bay with as many as 1,000 ships at a time. The schooner *Whisper* is captured and destroyed. The Patamoke shipyard is saved from fire and a new boat, *Ariel*, takes to the seas. This vessel in the hands of the marsh-dwelling Turlocks becomes a slave trader. The English have outlawed slavery and are catching the slavers at sea and sending the sailors back to England to be hanged. The *Ariel* is confiscated.

Voyage Eight: 1822

Widow's Walk

Voyage Eight tells of the wild Canadian geese that migrate from the Arctic to the marshes of the Choptank, there to be hunted down by Turlocks. This is a period of decline and neglect on the Eastern Shore's plantations. We see the ravages of erosion in the shrinking fields and disappearing pine woodlands. We hear first mention of the planting of wheat as well as tobacco. The rapidly growing port of Baltimore supplants Annapolis.

Voyage Nine: 1832

The Slave-Breaker

Voyage Nine describes the kidnapping of an entire African village for enslavement and transport to Cuba to be sold. Both England and France had outlawed slavery by this time.

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Maryland, however, was insulated from the pressure to follow Europe's lead. The Steed family's plantation at this time consists of 30,000 acres with 693 slaves and only 18 whites. Society had developed a strict hierarchy. At the top are the plantation owners, followed by the artisans and merchants in the towns, the small farmers in the country, then poor whites, and at the bottom are the slaves. There are no slaves on the plantation who were born in Africa; the new arrivals were all born in America. On the Choptank one family in eight owned any slaves, yet they all believed their economic existence depended on the continuation of slavery.

Voyage Ten: 1837

The Railroad

Voyage Ten tells of a young Quaker of the Choptank area who proposes marriage to a Quaker woman he had met at the annual meeting of Friends. He sails his sloop. Rough roads link towns to the county seat at Easton and horse trails lead out to homes at the end of necks, but the water was the preferred means of transportation.

This chapter follows the region in the years before and during the Civil War. By the 1840's the population was divided generally into two groups: the wealthy plantation owners (who sided with Georgia and the Carolinas in accepting dissolving the Union if need be) and the middle class of farmers and business (who favored preserving the Union). In 1842 both groups were convinced of the need to bind the Eastern Shore's three sections together (the Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia sections) by construction of a railroad line from Wilmington to Cape Charles. To that end the plantation owners sailed to Ireland to bring back workers who were fleeing the potato famine, including the Cavenys. The rail line was never built because Baltimore interests feared Wilmington might become a rival port. With wheat supplanting tobacco as the nation's primary crop, the nation's economic focus would be west and Baltimore's railroads were positioned to dominate shipping and transportation. The Eastern Shore assimilated the Irish families, who built churches and schools, but lived in isolated communities.

The Quakers, despite the Runaway Slave Act, helped slaves escape to free states via the Underground Railroad. For a border state the question of the slave system versus free labor was a vital issue. After Fort Sumter the slave-owning counties of Maryland thought they should join the South, but the greater number of counties lay close to Pennsylvania. Maryland remained on the northern side, within the Union. Southern sympathizers on the Eastern Shore were recruited by Virginia to fight for the Confederacy and many did. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, it was effective only in the states at war against the Union; it did not free the slaves in Maryland. The value of slaves, however, dropped drastically. Union soldiers appeared and enlisted slaves to fight for the North. The plantations were left with no young men, few slaves, only old men and women.

Voyage Eleven: 1886

The Watermen

Voyage Eleven describes the devastating effects of the great hurricane of August 1886 when the Susquehanna River flooded, and its waters poured downstream into the Chesapeake Bay.

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The water in the Bay became practically salt-free. The flood brought huge volumes of silt which settled and buried the oyster beds in mud. They also brought sewage that contaminated the Bay. The Bay eventually recovered and the fishing industry rebounded.

Baltimore flourished and its many new hotels were supplied with ducks and oysters by watermen of the Chesapeake. In 1887 the Labrador retriever was introduced to the Chesapeake to aid in duck hunting. In hunting fowl, the watermen used the "big gun," which at 11 feet 6 inches long, 110 pounds in weight, and mounted in its own special skiff, could bring down 60 canvasbacks, a dozen blacks, and a score of other ducks with a single explosion.

In the 1890's the Chesapeake skipjack was developed with its retractable centerboard that enabled it to navigate the shallow salt flats for oysters. Prejudice was suspended on the skipjacks, where Blacks were hired as cooks and crewmen. On board a man's reputation was based on his skill, not his race. The skipjacks' enemies were the boatmen from Virginia who encroached upon the oyster beds. The Virginians were armed and their boats were much bigger, but the skipjacks were nimbler.

On land, Blacks were segregated in their own neighborhoods. In 1899, the Democrats proposed an amendment to the Maryland constitution which would rescind the right of blacks to vote. All of the southern counties who remained loyal to the Confederacy voted for the bill. The western counties voted against the bill and it did not pass. Maryland became a test case for civil rights.

Voyage Twelve: 1938

Ordeal By Fire

Voyage Ten tells the story of a well known and well respected Quaker of the Paxmore family who believes that to discriminate in any way against the Jews is to deny the heritage of Jesus Christ. He travels to Germany to work on the Jews' behalf. With the promise of \$1 million to the German government he is given permission to take 40,000 Jews out of the country. He begs other governments in Europe to accept these refugees. In the end, when all his resources are exhausted, the other countries are willing to take only half of the refugees.

By the 1940's, 29% of the Eastern Shore population was Black. They were segregated to a section of town with no streetlights, no paved roads, and no playground. Blacks had their own poor school with books donated after the white school was done with them, and they had their own AME church. The races lived in separate worlds, and the Blacks' tactic for survival was "don't fight the whites, sidestep."

The crab industry was thriving. Blacks were employed in factories "bobbing" crabs. After the meat was cooked and combined with a unique blend of spices it was sold in Baltimore. The duck population was severely in decline, and the goose population was dwindling. In the spring of 1940 serious erosion occurred due to storms from the northwest that washed away the banks of the Eastern Shore. During the 1940's tomatoes and canning factories prospered. By the end of the decade the soil depletion was being felt, and farmers began to raise corn.

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Gigantic corn harvesters were brought in, making large scale agriculture possible. The harvesters were not as efficient in picking as people, and corn was left behind after harvesting. The geese began to return, attracted by the corn on the ground. Their return revitalized the Eastern Shore.

The Chesapeake Bay Bridge was constructed connecting the Eastern Shore directly to Annapolis, Washington, and Baltimore for the first time. The local Black population hoped for jobs in construction of the bridge, but whites were brought in from out of state for the work. By the 1960's social warfare was brewing. Young blacks questioned and opposed servility to whites. They were done stepping aside. Riots occurred and public buildings were burned.

In the 1960's a large section of marshland was designated a landfill. The marsh was filled with trash and dirt by the Turlocaks, subdivided into lots, and sold as prime waterfront property.