THE MENHADEN INDUSTRY OF LEWES
PRE VISIT LESSON 1

Aim:
Students will learn about the importance of the menhaden fishing industry on Lewes. Students will utilize learned vocabulary in the creation of their own fish factory posters.

Activity and Discussion:
Gather students and ask if any of them have ever gone fishing before. Invite students to share the methods they used while fishing and describe where they were while they were fishing (on land, in a boat, on a dock, etc.). Next, ask students how they think fish are caught on a much larger scale. After they have had time to share, introduce them to the picture of a menhaden fish. Explain that this little fish was responsible for turning Lewes into one of America’s busiest seafood ports. The menhaden fish, also known as bunker, moss bunker, pogy, and fatback, are an oily herring-type fish that were used primarily for fertilizer and animal feed. Native Americans taught the settlers the importance of this fish and it became an important part of the settlers’ lives.

Although this fish was not used for human consumption, nearly everyone who lived in this area had some sort of interaction with it.

From the late 19th to mid 20th centuries, the shores of Lewes Beach were lined with fish factories that processed the fish and sent it out across the country. In 1953, Lewes was the largest seafood port in the United States, processing over 390 million pounds of seafood, 360 million of which were exclusively menhaden.

In order to be efficient with their catch, the menhaden fishermen had turned to a variety of successful catch methods. One of the most important methods of menhaden fishing was to find a menhaden lookout. On early sailing vessels, a crows nest, or basket like perch, was installed at the top of the tallest mast of the ship. A crew member would climb up the mast to the crows nest and be the lookout for schools of fish. Menhaden are an oily fish that swim in large schools, so from the top of the mast, the crew member could spot a large dark spot through the waves and direct the ship to the school of fish.

As technology improved, airplanes became an important part of menhaden fishing. Planes would take off from areas near the fish factories, spot fish and radio down to ships below.

Share the article about life as a menhaden spotter with students. When they have finished reading, invited them to share what they learned in the article. (For full article, see The Journal of The Lewes Historical Society. Vol. III pg. 35-38)

Next, have students take a few minutes to think about how fish factories would advertise their catch and have each student create their own advertising poster.
Fish Spotting

By Earl F. Ritter, as told to Gary Grunder

I began working as a flying fish spotter in 1955 after I left the Air Force and continued until 1966 when the commercial menhaden fishing operation in Lewes operated by Otis Smith’s company Fish Products Inc., shut down permanently.

May to October was peak fishing time, so the six aircraft owned by the company flew six days a week for up to eight or nine hours a day. I liked to fly at about 1200 feet altitude; I found that was best for sighting schools of menhaden with my vision. We looked for dark colored “stains” on the water’s surface and determined by the shape of the stain which direction the school was going. This was important to know, for the fishing boats would have to move in front of the school.

We had no air traffic controller or altitude speed rules or assignments. There were just two rules: that everybody made only left hand turns and that all the aircraft from the different companies had to be on different radio channels.

When we starting fish spotting from the air, we simply reported by radio to our company where the fish schools were; the boats were then dispatched. By 1960, however, we pilots had assumed a major role in the operation. We looked for and found the fish, determined their direction of travel, contacted the steamers or “big boats” and directed them to the leading edge of the school.

Each steamer had two small side boats attached to its stern; these boats carried 1100-1400 feet of net, 36 feet in depth. When the steamer was positioned in front of the school, the small boats traveled together, moved towards the school, split apart as they reached it and paying out the net, encircled the school. When the boats met at the other or “back side” of the school, a 500lb weight called “the Tom” was thrown overboard, causing the net to close up like a zip-loc bag, trapping the fish. They were then stunned by a slight electrical charge and vacuumed into the steamer to be taken to the processing plant.

Schools often contained 300-500,000 fish, so a lot were harvested rather quickly. This process and harvest fished out the sea in our area by 1965-1966. There was a lot of action out there in those days, especially in the competition among crews from different companies. All this activity made the crop dusting I did before I went into the Air force seem like a tea party!

Sea Chanties

Pre-Visit Lesson 2

Aim:
Students will be able to recite a traditional call and response chanty. Students will be able to explain when and why chanties were used and be able to express why collaboration was essential on ships at sea.

Activity and Discussion:
Invite students to gather and ask if anyone has ever heard the term sea chanty before. Explain to students that a sea chanty is a song that would be sung aboard a ship at sea that allowed the crew of a vessel to accomplish a goal or task by working together.

These songs had repetitive verses or a call and response format that would allow a lead singer to sing a line and the remainder of the crew to sing a response. With each line of the song, a specific action would be performed, allowing the crew of the ship to work in a rhythmic pattern to achieve its goal. As the lead singer sang his line, the other crew members may be pulling a line to hoist a sail or be working to pull the anchor, or haul in nets full of fish.

Sometimes these songs were directly related to where the sailors were from or from an exotic location that they would like to visit. They often spoke of mermaids, storms, and rowdy ship mates who could sometimes stir up trouble on the mainland between voyages.

As a class, hand out the “Lewes Girls” chanty. Allow the students to have several minutes to read over the roles. As the teacher, you can either take the role as the lead crew member and read the first line, or assign a line to the student. After the first line of the chanty is read, students will reply with the bold lettered responses. In this chanty, there is a call, a response, a call, a response and a chorus that is sung between each verse. After each line of the song, the students will reply with the response and after each stanza is completed, students will recite the chorus.

The included chanty is based on a traditional chanty called “Cape Cod Girls,” which was based on the cod fishing industry of coastal Massachusetts. It was not uncommon for an existing chanty to be modified to relate more to local industries.

To listen to the traditional version of the chanty, visit http://www.songsforteaching.com/socialstudies/canada/capecodshantyeasternseaboardfolksong.htm

Extension Activity
Be creative with your collaborative tasks! You may want your class to work together to hoist a flag or you can use classroom building blocks to simulate moving cargo on or off a ship.
CALL AND RESPONSE SEA CHANTY

Call and response chanties were used on ships to help the crew work together for a common goal like hoisting a sail or performing a heavy task. With your classmates, see if you can work together to recite this chanty about the fishing industry in Lewes.

Lewes Girls

Lewes girls ain’t got no combs

Heave away, Haul away

They comb their hair with menhaden bones

And we’re bound away for the ocean

So heave her up. Me bully, bully boys,
Heave her up, why don’t you make some noise

Lewes boy ain’t got no sleds
They ride down hills on menhaden heads

Lewes mother’s don’t bake no pies
They feed their kids menhaden eyes

Lewes Doctors ain’t got no pills
They give patients menhaden gills

Lewes cats ain’t got no tails
The got blown off in northeast gales

Lewes dogs ain’t got no bite
They lost it barking at the East End Light

Lewes girls they are so fine,
They know how to cast menhaden line

Based on the traditional chanty “Cape Cod Girls”
SEA CHANTIES AND FISH SCALES—A TRIP TO THE LEWES HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In this trip to The Lewes Historical Society, students will have the opportunity to explore the Menhaden gallery of the Cannonball House Maritime Museum. Through a docent-led experience, students will be introduced to the history of the menhaden industry in Lewes and will have the chance to explore what it would have been like for a menhaden fisherman.

Students will be able to observe models of menhaden steamers, learn about the wreck of the Helen Euphane, as well as examine artifacts from retired menhaden vessels. Students will learn more about how menhaden were used by Native Americans, early settlers and in modern America in products such as fertilizers and pet foods.

Students will also discuss the rise and fall of the industry, and how the overfishing of menhaden resulted in the collapse of the industry in the mid 1960s. As students move through the exhibit, they will have the chance to listen to a series of sea chanties that highlight life on the seas and have the chance to discuss what working on the open water would be like.

Students will also have the opportunity to explore several other galleries in the Cannonball house that feature antique charts of the Delaware River and Bay and learn that pilots of the area still guide large ships up the river to ports such as Wilmington and Philadelphia. Students will also see a model of the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse that fell into the sea in 1926, and learn about the creation of the Delaware Breakwater, one of the United States’ first major infrastructure projects that created the Lewes Harbor.

Before students leave the historical society, they will have the chance to walk down to the United States Life Saving Service Station, located on the Lewes-Rehoboth Canal and see an original menhaden net reel. This reel would hold over 1000 feet of net that would be used to encircle the menhaden and help catch thousands of fish at a time. Students will also have the opportunity to discuss the locations of several of the menhaden fish factories and hear about Lewes’s infamous mid-century smell that reminded visitors and locals of Lewes’s greatest industry.
Common core standards
- C.C.4-6.R.I.2
- C.C.4-6.R.I.7
- C.C.4-6.W.7
- C.C.4-6.S.L.3

Next generation science standards
- 3-5-ETS1-1
- 4-PS3-3
- 4-LS1-2

Delaware State History Standards
- Geography 1.4-5a
- Economics 3.4-5a
- History 4.4-5a
TRIP TO THE LEWES HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S CANNON BALL HOUSE MARITIME MUSEUM

Can you find two examples of menhaden fishing boats? What do you notice about their design?
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Can you find the name of two important Menhaden fishing companies that operated in Lewes? What are they?
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Listen to the Sea Chanty singers in the Menhaden fishing room. What sort of things can you hear them singing about?
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Brainstorm! When you get back to the classroom you will be working with your classmates to create your own sea chanty. While you are at the Cannonball House, write down any important objects that you find that you may want to add to your chanty.
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CREATE A CLASS CHANTY

POST-VISIT ACTIVITY

Aim:

Students will work collaboratively to create a class call and response sea chanty. Students will utilize learned vocabulary and be able to clearly articulate what they learned at the Cannonball house. Students will be including descriptions of tools and artifacts they learned about while on their trip to the Lewes Historical Society.

Activity and Discussion:

Gather students and allow them time to share about what they learned at their experience in the Cannonball House. Encourage students to use descriptive language about the objects and artifacts they encountered on their trip and generate a classroom list of descriptive words that the students used.

Next, ask students to share what they heard while listening to the sea chanty portion of the exhibit. After students have shared, explain that they will be working together as a class or in small groups to create their own call and response chanty about their experience. Students will be using the words from the list that the class generated to create their chanty as well as create a task to be accomplished while the chanty is being recited. The task can be as simple as passing a bean bag around a circle or hanging back packs in the closet.

The objective is to get students thinking about how these songs related to the lives of the sailors and how critical these songs were for sailors to work collaboratively and to keep morale high.

Once the class or each group has finished reciting their call and response chanty, gather students to discuss what it was like to use the song to work together towards a common goal and if they felt that it helped make the task easier because they were working together or more challenging because they had to think about the words of the song.

STANDARDS

Common core standards
C.C.4-6.W.3
C.C.4-6.W.4
C.C.4-6.S.L.1
C.C.4-6.S.L.5

Next generation science standards
3-5-ETS1-2
4-PS4-3

Delaware State History Standards
Geography 4.4-5a
History 2.4-5b
History 4.4-5b

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Once students have completed their chanties, you may want to host a chanty day where students can invite their families to come hear them sing their classroom songs of the sea.
Around 1960, a local newspaper columnist named Marjorie Virden wrote several articles for the local papers lamenting the fact that many of Lewes’ fine eighteenth century buildings were rapidly disappearing. Particular attention was called to the plight of the David Rowland House on Front Street, which carries in its foundation a cannonball memento of the War of 1812 and the Bombardment of Lewes in April of 1813. Over the years, the house had been so neglected that the interior brick nogging was visible through missing shingles.

One day in 1961, a group of concerned citizens including Robert Orr, Ginnie Orr, and Sarah Chambers were sailing down the canal towards Roosevelt Inlet. As they passed the Rowland House, someone remarked that despite much talk, no action had been taken to save Lewes’ historic architecture. That same evening, Mrs. Orr held a meeting at her house for dozens of concerned citizens. Soon after, a general meeting was held to organize the Lewes Historical Society. Temporary officers were selected, invitations sent - with excellent results - to prospective members, and the Lewes Historical Society was officially founded on January 19, 1962.

Later that year, a lot at the corner of Third and Shipcarpenter Streets was purchased and named the Lewes Historic Complex. Gradually, the Burton-Ingram House, Thompson Country Store, Rabbits’ Ferry House, Creamery, Necessary, Early Plank House, Blacksmith Shop, and Ellegood House were moved to the Complex and restored. Conservation efforts continue today. The neglected house of David Rowland was eventually bought by the Society and restored. Today it sits on its original site at the corner of Front and Bank Streets and serves as the popular Cannonball House Maritime Museum.

In 1989, the John Farrace Bequest enabled the Society to purchase 110 Shipcarpenter Street, then known as the Watts property, and renamed as the Hiram Rodney Burton House to honor a local physician and Delaware’s Congressman from 1901-1904. This structure houses the Society’s library, archives as well as the administrative offices of the organization. In 1991, Freddie’s Barn, the Society’s maintenance facility, was built to honor long-time historic preservationist and restoration specialist, Fred Hudson, who has worked for the Society from 1962-2008. The Doctor’s Office, previously located on Second Street, was moved to the Complex to consolidate Society properties and in 2000, it was joined by Midway School #178.

With the cooperation of the City of Lewes, the Society received a lease to the waterfront property on the canal at the foot of Shipcarpenter Street, where the Society berthed the lightship Overfalls and where the boathouse of the Lewes Life Saving Station sits. Since 1997, the Society has leased the Ryves Holt House at the corner of Second and Mulberry Streets from the Episcopal Diocese of Delaware. Located in the heart of Lewes’ thriving business district, the Ryves Holt House serves as the Society’s Visitors Center.

The Society continues to offer a rich and exciting array of activities that engage our visitors and promote Lewes’ unique heritage to an ever-increasing number of seasonal guests and year-round residents of the area. From our Winter Meeting Series to the summer Antique Shows and Craft Fairs the Society offers annual programs that have become signature events of the Society. The Society has sponsored several conferences of Lewes and Delaware History, has invited numerous local, national and international scholars and dignitaries to speak at its events, and promoted the arts and cultural exploration and appreciation in Southern Delaware. As Lewes continues to grow, the Society will strive to maintain a record of the past of this special and ancient town by the sea.
Booking your Trip

Thank you for your interest in The Lewes Historical Society’s educational programming!

To book a trip for your students, visit our website at www.historiclewes.org.

We offer a variety of educational programs ranging from traditional historical complex walking tours to in-depth multi-disciplinary curriculum unit programs. Each of our programs meet the latest Common Core, Next Gen Science, and Delaware State History Standards.

The fee for our programs are $1.00 per child, due no later than the scheduled date of your tour. Once the form is complete and submitted, you will receive an email receipt of your reservation. If you have any questions or comments, feel free to email education@historiclewes.org or call 302-645-7670.
Professional Affiliations

American Alliance of Museums, American Association for State and Local History, Delaware Museum Association, Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Preservation Delaware, Small Museum Association, United States Life-Saving Service Heritage Association