POPES CREEK ON THE POTOMAC

John Wilkes Booth escaping from Popes Creek after Lincoln assassination (engraving c. 1867)
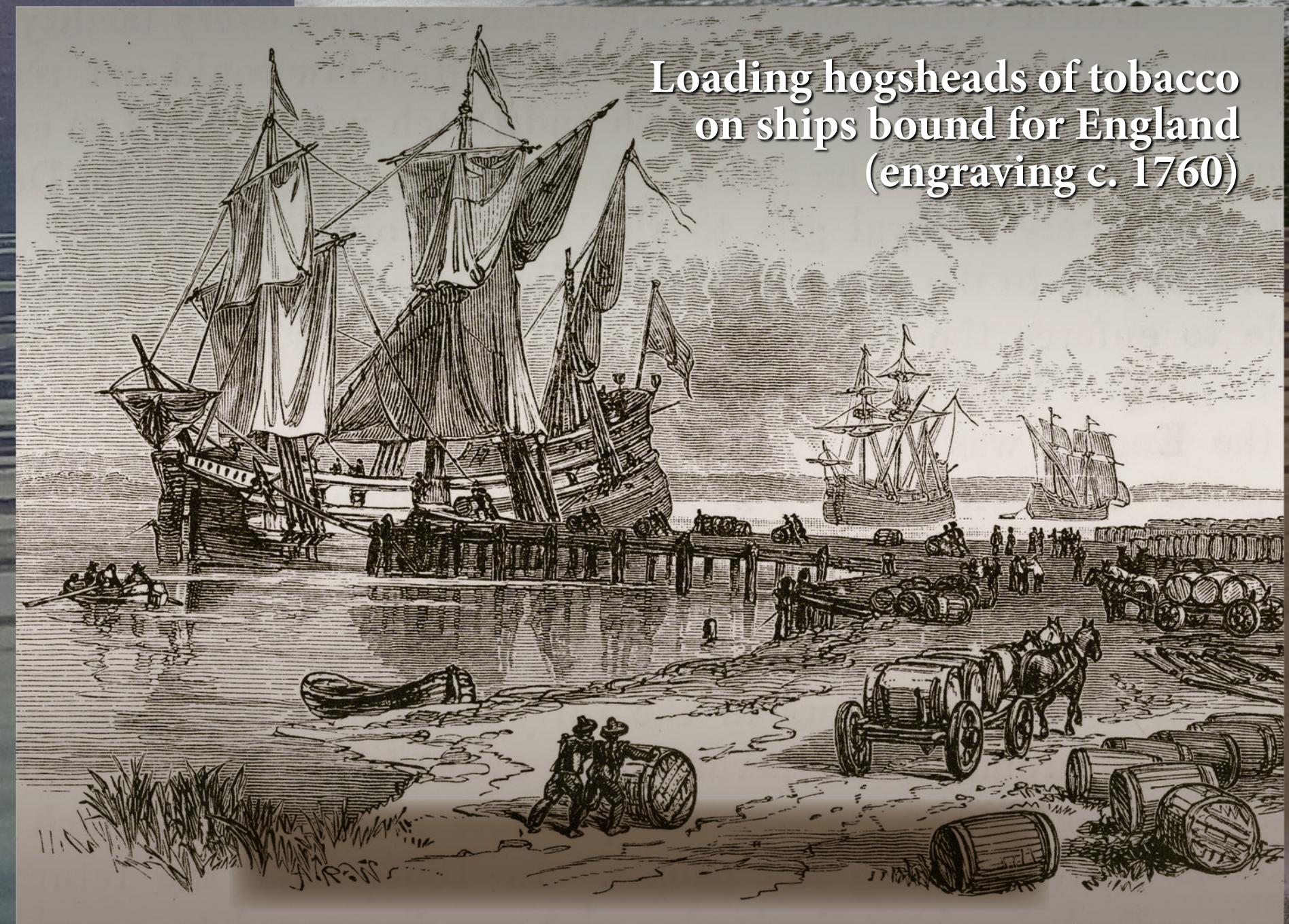
The steamboat "Talbot" served many Potomac River landings from 1923 to 1932

Loading hogsheads of tobacco on ships bound for England (engraving c. 1760)

Tonging for oysters, c.1910

Locomotive #39 served Popes Creek until 1949

A string of crabs at the Popes Creek Waterfront
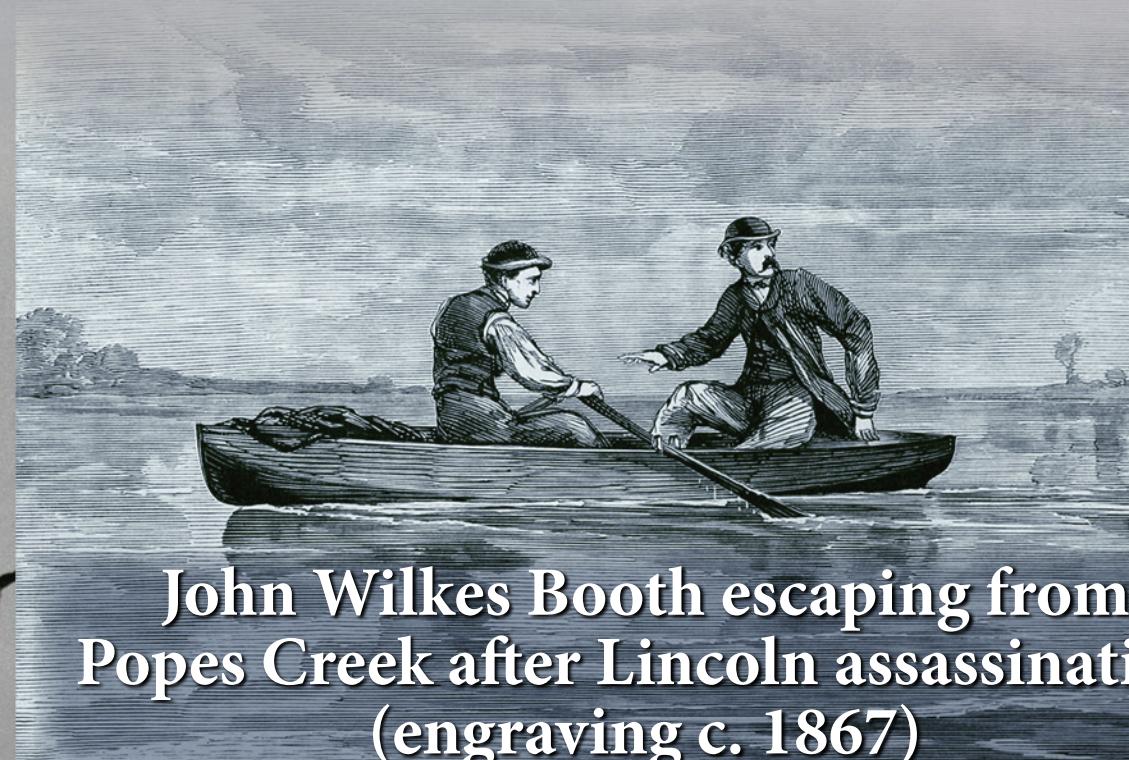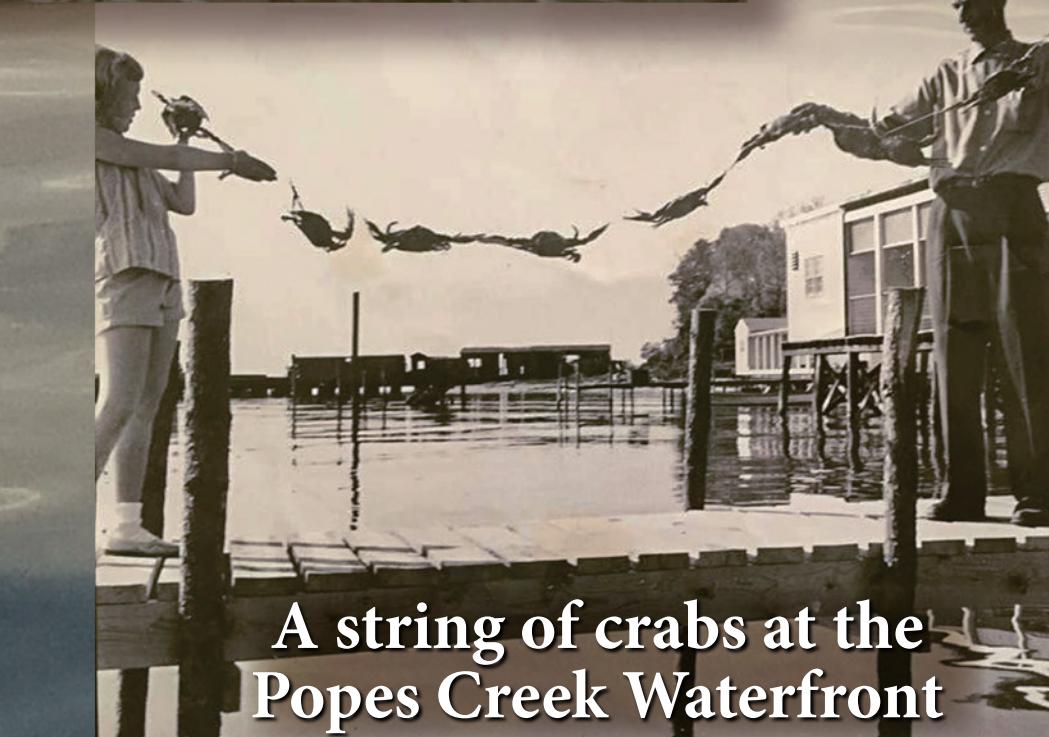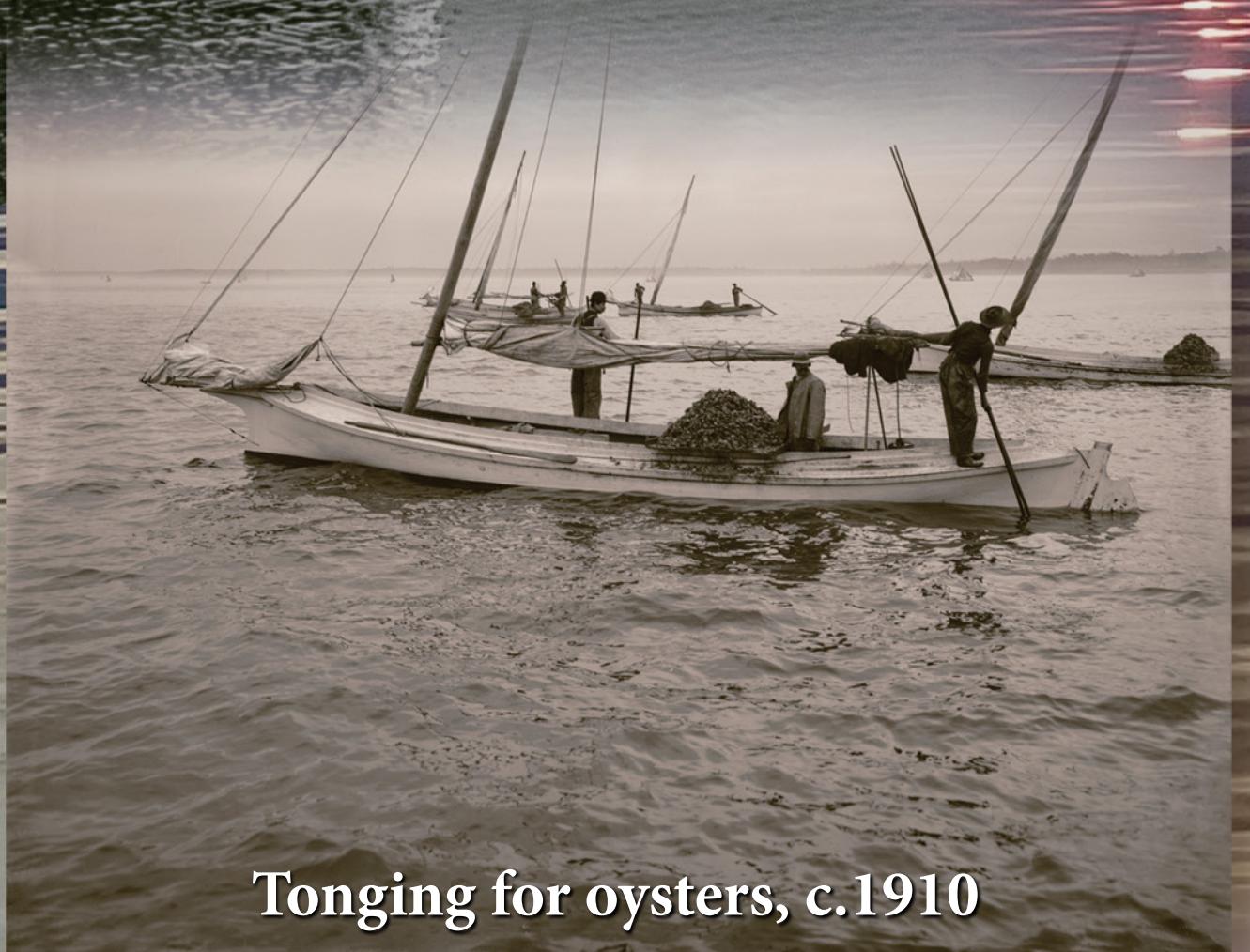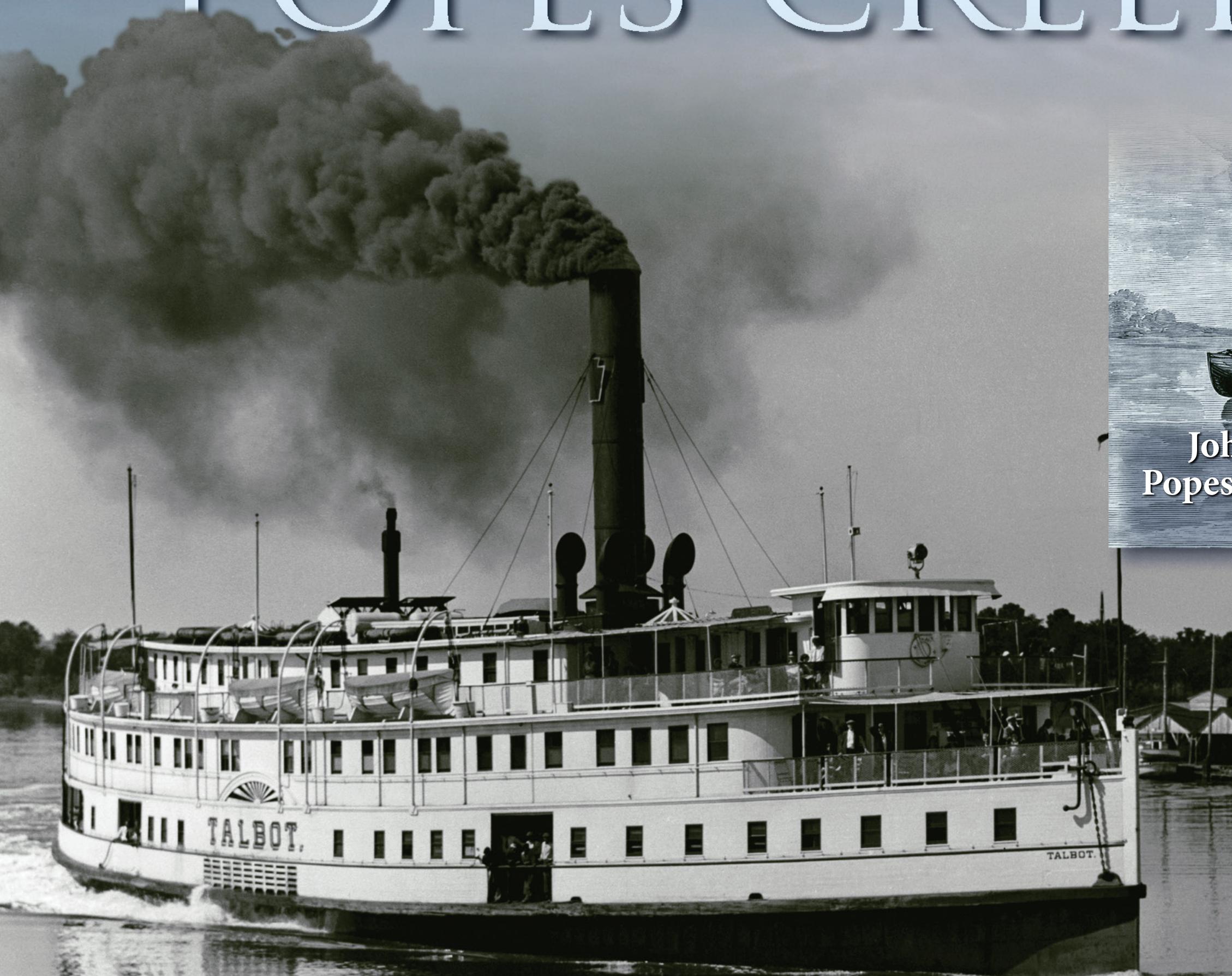
Popes Creek was named for Francis Pope (1610-1670), an English-born Charles County tobacco planter whose land holdings extended for miles along the Potomac River, including part of present-day Washington, DC. Before the first Englishmen arrived, however, Native Americans had been living along the Potomac shores for thousands of years leaving behind great heaps of discarded oyster shells at Popes Creek. Part of this prehistoric shell heap was discovered right where you are standing and if you look carefully an occasional remnant might still be found.

Through the years canoes, sailing vessels and eventually steamboats brought people, mail, farm products and life's other necessities to and from Popes Creek. Hogsheads of tobacco from colonial plantations were rolled down to nearby river landings for transport to England upon ocean-going sailing ships. Ferries connected Popes Creek to other locations on the Potomac, and fishing boats of all descriptions harvested crabs, fish, and oysters by the millions. Rampant poaching led to the violent and sometimes deadly "Oyster Wars" (1865-1959) fought between competing watermen and the Maryland Oyster Police. By the mid-1900s oyster populations were decimated due to overharvesting and disease, all but ending a centuries old way of life on the Potomac River.

During the Civil War rebel sympathizers from Popes Creek secretly carried Confederate communications across the Potomac, and at the war's end John Wilkes Booth escaped from Popes Creek to Virginia after assassinating Abraham Lincoln. In 1873 the Baltimore & Potomac Railroad reached Popes Creek, opening the once remote Southern Maryland peninsula to the world. The dark nights in rural Southern Maryland became illuminated for the first time when the Popes Creek power plant was completed in 1938. Shortly thereafter Popes Creek became the staging area for construction of the Harry W. Nice Bridge (Rt. 301), the only Potomac River crossing south of Washington, DC. After World War II, obsolete Navy warships were scrapped at the Popes Creek wharf by the Potomac Shipwrecking Company, and slot machine gamblers flocked to waterside restaurants to try their luck while relishing the famous Southern Maryland seafood.

The long-ago events that framed the character of this sleepy hamlet on the Potomac are now only distant memories. But if you pause for a moment, close your eyes, and carefully listen, echoes of the past can still be heard.