



A Brief History of the Crab Claw Restaurant

Compiled by CBMM's Chief Historian Pete Leshner

As Maryland crabs grew in popularity during the 20th century, a new type of restaurant emerged—the open-air waterfront crab house. Some had indoor seating, but outdoor seating, close to the waters that produced the crabs, was typical. The staple of these restaurants was steamed crabs, always steamed with a hot spice mix: Old Bay, for example, or whatever custom spice mix the crab house created as part of its brand. Because picking crabs is a messy endeavor, the tables were typically covered in brown craft paper, which eased the cleanup job—the crab waste got rolled up in the paper for disposal.

The site of the Crab Claw restaurant goes back to at least 1877 when it appears on the *Lake, Griffing, & Stevenson Atlas of Talbot & Dorchester Counties*. At that point, there is clearly a pier—a solid extension of land—on the site. By the 1890s, the town's steamboat wharf, including a one-story building with a cupola, stood on the site. By the 1920s, the steamboat wharf structure was demolished and replaced by petroleum tanks, which remained on the site until the mid-20th century.

The Crab Claw restaurant grew out of the Eastern Shore Clam Company, which originally occupied the cinder block first story of the current building. Eastern Shore Clam Company was founded in 1959 by a partnership of William (Bill) Jones and Edward (Ed) H. Higgins and incorporated in 1962.

When CBMM opened to the public in 1965 on the adjacent property, Jones' wife, Sylvia, proposed a restaurant featuring steamed crabs. They constructed a second story over the Clam Company building, and it's believed to have opened to the public in 1965. We're told that they originally named it the Crab Pot, but someone else claimed the trademark on that brand, so they changed it to the Crab Claw.

Higgins did not share in the restaurant operation. Ultimately, Jones took sole ownership of the property. As business grew, they expanded to an open-air bar and waterside deck on the first story. The Clam Company continued to operate into the 1980s, and as it tapered off, Jones kept a wholesale seafood business going on the waterfront—watermen would come off the Miles River, tie up to the Crab Claw, and sell directly to him.

While steamed crabs has been what the restaurant is best known for, the Crab Claw has long offered the variety of seafood dishes that might be expected of a Maryland crab house—crab cakes, clam strips, fish filets offered as either sandwiches or entrees, scallops, and the like. The Jones family has their own proprietary crab cake recipe, as you might expect for a seafood restaurant.

When both CBMM and the Crab Claw opened, the owner of the Perry Cabin Farm, Edward Watkins, rented the edge of one of his fields to each for their parking lots. When Watkins sold Perry Cabin to CBMM in 1976, the sale was conditioned on CBMM selling the section used by the Crab Claw to the restaurant.

CBMM did so, retaining an easement across the waterfront to connect the two sides of CBMM's expanded campus. For years, the Crab Claw parking lot was paved with fresh clam shells or oyster shells—a byproduct of the business. The shells were freshly shucked, and the odor of freshly spread shell could be quite powerful.

Neither Bill nor Sylvia Jones is still living, but the restaurant has continued in operation by its second-generation owner, Tracey Jones Wass. Generations growing up in St. Michaels have worked at the Crab Claw as their first job, learning customer service and developing an appreciation for classic Maryland seafood.