Chapter 1
The Birth of an Industry

The Delmarva Peninsula begins at the northern boundary of Delaware and extends southward for more than 200 miles to Cape Charles, Virginia. Except for the rolling hills of the extreme north, the Peninsula is extraordinarily flat, with only an occasional shallow marshy river and creek valley adding some variety to the landscape. On the east it is bordered by the Delaware River and Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, while to the west lies the Chesapeake Bay.

Although European settlers began settling the Peninsula in the 1630s, the continued existence of unsettled pockets of land kept alive some of the ambiance of frontier life for more than a century. While the prolific marine life of the Chesapeake and other nearby waters supported many early settlers, most turned to timbering and to cultivating the land. Initially much of the soil was very fertile and produced bountiful harvests of corn and tobacco.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, tobacco had lost much of its importance as a cash crop, and some of the Peninsula's soil was drained of nutrients by a careless form of agriculture that neither rotated crops nor fertilized fields. Although in the second half of the eighteenth century wheat was a key cash crop—particularly in northern Delmarva—it was increasingly difficult for the fields of Delmarva to compete with the fertile virgin farm lands beyond the Appalachians.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, agricultural practices in northern New Castle County, Delaware, reflected the most advanced scientific methods available to farmers of that era. As a result, both the fields and livestock herds increased their productivity. In the rest of the Peninsula, however, traditional methods that drained the soil and did little to improve the strain of cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, and chickens continued to be practiced. Not surprisingly, by the mid-nineteenth century an acre of farmland in Sussex County, Delaware, was worth only one sixth as much as a comparable acre in New Castle County.

During the decades just prior to the Civil War, except for Wilmington and its immediate hinterland, most of the Peninsula showed little sign of economic vitality. The vast majority of people continued to live on farms where they scratched out a marginal existence, producing a little surplus corn and wheat for market and a variety of vegetables, fruits, and livestock for their own tables in an effort to be partially self-sufficient. Many of their children, however, saw little promise in this kind of life and migrated westward to the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys or to the rapidly growing and economically vital urban centers of Wilmington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.

About the time of the Civil War and in the decades that followed, the construction of railroad lines into the very heart of the Peninsula and then on down to Cape Charles offered some hope for the future. Now perishable fruits and vegetables could be profitably grown almost anywhere on Delmarva because rapid bulk transportation to urban markets was widely available.

In 1859 the Delaware Railroad pushed south to Delmar on the Delaware-Maryland boundary line.
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connecting downstate Delaware with the urban markets of Wilmington, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. By 1864 the rail line had pushed through Salisbury to Princess Anne on Maryland's lower Eastern Shore. By the time railroad tracks reached Cape Charles in 1884, the Peninsula was crisscrossed with feeder lines that offered almost every town and village access to a rail network that stretched as far north as eastern Canada.

Although the traditional crops of corn and wheat continued to be important, the coming of the railroad dramatically changed agriculture on the Peninsula. Peaches became the first perishable truck crop to be widely grown for commercial reasons. A large number of peach orchards were producing a cash crop in the Delaware City region at the east end of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal in the 1830s. The peaches were then shipped to northern urban markets by steamboat. The advent of the railroad caused peach orchards to spread southward. After the Civil War, peaches became the most important cash crop throughout the central part of Delmarva.

By 1875, five million baskets of peaches were annually hauled out of the Peninsula by the Delaware Railroad. It was no wonder that Delaware called itself the Peach State.

But good things usually come to an end, and so it was with peaches. A blight called "the yellows" began to spread through southern New Castle County's orchards in the decade before the Civil War and then slowly moved south to follow the expanding peach culture. By the late 1890s, the yellows had ended the great peach boom on Delmarva.

By this time, however, the railroad network was in place and other truck crops such as tomatoes, peas, beans, melons, sweet potatoes, white potatoes, and strawberries were carried by train from the Peninsula to northern urban markets. By the early twentieth century refrigerated cars were used for those truck crops particularly subject to spoilage.

By 1900 strawberries had become such an important cash crop in Delaware's Sussex County and in Maryland's Worcester, Wicomico, and Somerset Counties that the public school year was timed to

Oxen pulling wagon at Watkins Cannery (on right) in Odessa, Delaware, circa 1910. Oxen were the traditional beasts of burden for agriculture until gradually replaced by horses and mules in the nineteenth century.
Loading peaches and other produce for shipping to northern urban centers somewhere on the Delmarva Peninsula in 1908. By this date, peaches were no longer the chief cash crop of central Delmarva.

Greenbaum Brothers Pea Canning Factory in Seaford, Delaware, in 1896, was just one of a number of canning factories for fruits and vegetables found up and down the Delmarva Peninsula prior to the growth of the broiler industry.
Sweet potatoes harvested near Felton, Delaware, in 1896, were among the varieties of fruits and vegetables raised on the Delmarva Peninsula in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

end just as picking began. But the crops were so large that even with school children in the fields, more pickers were desperately needed. As a result, large gangs of white and black laborers were brought in from Baltimore and from other areas beyond the Peninsula to help harvest the berries. As late as 1933 John Jones of near Powellville, in northeastern Wicomico County, was bringing in a gang of 240 pickers to harvest his strawberries. In a move to protect their own interests, berry growers set up auctions such as the Selbyville Strawberry Exchange where buyers would gather to bid against each other. These auctions, they hoped, would drive up the selling price. After the auction the berries were loaded into railroad cars that formed long freight trains in such centers of production as Marion Station, Pittsville, and Salisbury, Maryland, and in Selbyville and Bridgeville, Delaware. In 1917 in Salisbury, for example, 1,907 rail cars were loaded with strawberries and sent on to the food markets of northern cities.

Tomatoes were another important cash crop made possible by the coming of the railroad. By the end of the nineteenth century there were tomato and fruit canneries in almost every Delmarva town. By 1910, even small villages with names like Beaverdam, Box Iron, Scarboro, Switch, Showell, St. Martin’s, and Wesley had tomato canneries. Although most were owned by wealthy investors, in the Lewes area of eastern Sussex local farmers combined their assets to build a cooperative cannery.

Because tomato canneries operated only about four weeks out of the year, temporary gangs of laborers were often brought in from beyond the Peninsula to operate the plants. Generally the workers were from Baltimore or other nearby cities, were recruited by foremen, and were usually immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Delmarva natives called them “Bohicks,” a local generic term for Italians, Greeks, and Slavs. The immigrant laborers tended to live in substandard housing, often in camps, and rarely spoke English.

But not all new industries were seasonal in nature and tied to immigrant labor. By the late nineteenth century the production of baskets and barrels was essential if the new crops of fruits and vegetables were to be shipped to market. Small factories in many Peninsula towns met these needs by employing local people or, like the Sussex Manufacturing
Picking strawberries on a farm owned by O.A. Newton, near Bridgeville, Delaware, in 1902. Newton was later in the broiler industry.

Tomato canning factory in Newark, Delaware, in 1911. Tomato canning factories further south on Delmarva were often converted into poultry processing plants (dressing plants).
Company in Georgetown, Delaware, by importing native whites from beyond the Peninsula.

The expansion of the railroads, the switch to new cash crops, the building of fruit and vegetable canneries and basket factories, during the late nineteenth and in the first two decades of the twentieth century, had a positive ripple effect on the Peninsula’s overall economy and led to the formation and growth of other local businesses that served the specific needs of Delmarva’s farm community.

The railroad, however, was a mixed blessing. Because roads throughout most of Delmarva were unpaved and impassable for much of the year, the only viable land transport for bulk products was by rail. This gave the local railroad a monopoly that led to overcharging Delmarva farmers and crop brokers when they wished to send their produce north to urban markets. During the early twentieth century, however, the rapid development of the automobile and the truck presented a challenge to the railroad’s monopoly. But to offer a viable alternative to moving produce north to markets, trucks needed good roads.

By 1910 John G. Townsend, a timber man and strawberry broker who lived in Selbyville, Delaware, had grown increasingly disenchanted because his profits from purchasing and then sending strawberries north to market were being eaten up by the abnormally high prices charged by the railroad. So unfair were the rates that a shipment from Norfolk, Virginia, to Philadelphia cost less than a similar shipment from southern Delaware to Wilmington.

A disgusted Townsend found in T. Coleman du Pont, who was president of the Du Pont Company in Wilmington, an ally who believed with a missionary’s zeal that a modern highway system was an absolute necessity for Delaware. Moreover, du Pont offered to pay for and build “the world’s best road” from Wilmington to Selbyville out of his own pocket. In 1911 he established a construction company to do the job. Although a majority of Delawareans hailed du Pont’s offer, a strong suspicion of his motives surfaced in Kent and Sussex counties. After all, hadn’t President William Howard Taft described du Pont as “slippery as an eel and crooked as a ram’s horn?”

At this crucial juncture Townsend, who clearly understood the financial advantages that this proposed road would bring to the agricultural and business communities along the route, convinced his fellow southern Delawareans to accept this munificent gift and to sell crucial plots of land for road development. In 1924 the road, often called the DuPont Highway, was finally completed from Selbyville to Wilmington at the cost of four million dollars to T. Coleman du Pont. Although somewhat scaled down from the original plan to build the “world’s best road,” the DuPont Highway (Route 13 from Wilmington to Dover and Route 113 from Dover to Selbyville) provided a two-lane paved road that would prove crucial to the marketing of truck crops and, subsequently, the Peninsula’s broilers.

During World War I, farmers on the Delmarva Peninsula and across the nation experienced unprecedented prosperity. The desperate demand of European nations for American farm produce and an expanding domestic urban market drove up the price of almost every agricultural commodity. As a result, farmers on the Peninsula and elsewhere worked their fields more intensively than ever before and often went deeply into debt to purchase additional acres for cultivation.

When World War I ended, however, European nations resumed agricultural production, causing a world market glut of farm commodities. The oversupply pushed prices for farm-produced goods into a free fall, with wheat declining 40 percent, corn 32 percent, and hogs 50 percent. On the Peninsula, as elsewhere during the 1920s, the decline in farm incomes led to even more production by desperate farmers to compensate for ever-lowering commodity prices. But this only exacerbated the problem because growing surpluses served only to further depress market indices.

The irony, of course, was that while rural Delmarva suffered through economic difficulties, the Wilmington region—along with most of the rest of urban and suburban America—prospered. This was clear to a resident of Kent County, Delaware, who noted that although the decade “was the roaring and supposedly...affluent twenties, for us, times were
hard and money was almost nonexistent." Willis Hancock, who grew up on a farm further south in Worcester County, Maryland, remembers that the 1920s so conditioned most Delmarvans to hard times that they failed to notice much change when the Great Depression of the 1930s hit the area.

In addition to the national and international slump in commodity prices, Delmarva's farmers faced specific local problems in the 1920s that further eroded their ability to make a decent living. Strawberries, the single most important income-producing truck crop, were ravaged by a fungus disease. In addition, finding a large enough labor pool to harvest the berries became more problematic as the decade wore on. Although strawberries continued to be Delaware's most important truck crop into the 1930s, elsewhere their production had been significantly down for a number of years, with the decline beginning as early as 1911 in Worcester County, Maryland.

Another specific source of Delmarva farm income also faced difficulties in the 1920s. Historically almost every farm wife raised a small flock of chickens, primarily for the production of table eggs. But when its laying days were over, the hen went either into the family stew pot or off to town to be sold. Additional chicken meat was provided in the late spring of each year when excess cockerels (young males), of about one-and-a-half to two-and-one-half pounds, were culled from the flock and then sold to brokers in town who, in turn, sent them off to hotels and other urban eating establishments.

The meat from old hens was tough while the more tender cockerels were few in number and were gen-

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Chicken house, late nineteenth century

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During the first quarter of the 20th century, poultry for the marketplace reached the poultry packers by trains as well as by truck. Birds were transported in these “live-poultry cars” when birds were carried for more than a day.

Culling leghorn cockerels in 1920s.
erally available only once a year. Moreover, neither old hens nor the culled cockerels were plump birds bred for eating. In short, this inefficient production and marketing of chickens for eating purposes was simply a by-product of egg production and was light years removed from the highly specialized production and marketing patterns of today's broiler industry.

Far more significant to farm family incomes than the sale of cockerels were the table eggs brought to town by farm wives to be bartered for store goods or to be sold to egg brokers for shipment to urban markets. The income potential of eggs produced for urban markets soon became apparent to a handful of Delmarvans with a certain entrepreneurial spirit. By the end of World War I, a number of commercial egg farms were in operation up and down the Peninsula and, as a railroad agent in Salisbury by the name of Arthur W. Perdue noticed, all seemed to be making money. This convinced Perdue to leave the railroad and, in 1920, to establish his own commercial table-egg farm a few miles east of Salisbury.

In the mid-1920s an outbreak of “fowl” or “range paralysis” dealt a staggering blow to many of the Peninsula's commercial egg producers. The Leghorn, which was by far the most popular laying breed on the Peninsula's commercial egg farms, was particularly susceptible to the virulent disease. But, in one of those strange twists of fate that would help launch the broiler industry, “range paralysis” didn't seem to affect chickens until after they were at least twelve weeks old. The commercial egg-producing area hit hardest by the epidemic was Baltimore Hundred in southeastern Sussex County, Delaware.

A second development that had a particularly significant impact on Baltimore Hundred during the 1920s was the changing salinity levels found in...
Indian River Bay. The barrier islands, which have long shielded the eastern coast of the Peninsula from the pounding surf of the Atlantic Ocean, shelter bays that were once abundant in fish, crabs, clams, and oysters. But stability and balance in marine life were threatened when the salt content in the bays' waters significantly increased or decreased. In short, each time that ocean or backed-up bay waters broke through the barrier islands to force open a new inlet, or each time an old inlet silted up, the salinity level in the bays rose or fell with a potentially catastrophic impact on local marine life. Because so many coastal residents depended on the fish, crabs, clams, and oysters taken from the bays for both nutrition and income, salinity changes threatened their economic well-being.

Before 1911, for example, young menhaden flourished in Chincoteague and Sinepuxent Bays. Coastal residents of Worcester County, Maryland, netted the menhaden in large numbers and then sold them for fertilizer to local farmers. Beginning in 1911, however, new inlets forced through barrier islands by rising bay waters or the Atlantic Ocean caused a dramatic increase in the salinity of the two bays and a dramatic decline in the presence of young menhaden. This, in turn, had a negative impact on the local economy.

To the north of Chincoteague and Sinepuxent Bays and just to the north of Assawoman Bay is Indian River Bay, which is fed by the fresh waters of the Indian River from the west and the salt waters of the Atlantic through an inlet to the east. Although the inlet to the Atlantic had always been somewhat unstable, the salinity content of Indian River Bay remained constant enough over the years to provide a large number of local farmers a second income as part-time watermen. In 1908, for example, at least three hundred men were catching crabs from the Bay and from the mouth of the Indian River, and many were local farmers. As late as 1924, during high season, as many as sixty-thousand crabs were taken daily from the Bay. Fish, clams, and oysters were also harvested in considerable numbers from Indian River Bay.

During the early twentieth century, the inlet from the Atlantic became far less stable and closed up entirely in 1911, 1912, 1915, 1923, 1925, 1931, and 1933. The closing of the inlet and the resulting significant drop in the bay's salinity prevented certain fish from entering the bay and eventually killed most of the bay's crabs, clams, and oysters. The closing of the inlet in 1925 was particularly catastrophic to local marine life and caused hundreds of watermen to lose their jobs.
To many living on the south side of Indian River Bay in Baltimore Hundred (hundreds are subdivisions of Delaware's counties), the loss of marine income meant further erosion in what was already a hand-to-mouth existence. Progers, as the full-time and part-time watermen in the area were called, now desperately looked for a new source of income such as growing strawberries and raising laying hens. But the presence of fungus disease and "range paralysis" seriously curtailed the profitability of either venture.

In 1922 Asa Bennett of Frankford, a village located a few miles west of Baltimore Hundred, began to raise broilers in his laying houses after range paralysis wiped out his entire laying flock. By the end of the year Bennett sold three flocks of broilers at an average price of fifty cents per pound. Sally Hall, also of Frankford, grew broilers about the same time. But it is Cecile Steele of Ocean View, Baltimore Hundred, who is generally credited with being the founder of the broiler industry in the United States. Cecile Steele was a short, heavyset, hardworking, and pious housewife with red hair and "a fiery temper." Like many other married women of the Peninsula, she looked after a small flock of laying chickens to help support her family. But unlike so many other wives in the area, Cecile had a husband, David Wilmer Steele (generally known as Wilmer Steele), who brought home a very modest but dependable income from his job with the U.S. Coast Guard at nearby Bethany Beach.

Each year Cecile Steele would order fifty new chicks to replace losses in her laying flock. In 1923 Vernon Steen, who operated a small hatchery in Dagsboro, about eight miles west of Ocean View, mistakenly sent Cecile five hundred chicks, or ten times what she ordered. Rather than send the excess...
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Vernon Steen hatchery in Dagsboro,

This is believed to be one of the original broiler houses used by the Steele family in Ocean View, Delaware. This building, renovated in 1973 for the 50th anniversary celebration of Delmarva’s broiler industry, is now a part of the poultry exhibit at the Delaware Agricultural Museum and Village in Dover, Delaware.
chicks back to Steen, she initially housed them in a piano box while Roland Beauchamp, a lumberman from Berlin, Maryland, built a small shed to house her new flock. (Beauchamp subsequently became a leading feed dealer and broiler grower in Worcester County.) Eighteen weeks later the 387 survivors, weighing about two-and-one-half pounds apiece, were sold by Cecile at sixty-two cents per pound— in 1998 that would be about five dollars per pound—to a local buyer, who then shipped them north to be consumed in restaurants and hotels.

This was a very profitable transaction, and the next year a very pleased Cecile Steele ordered one thousand chicks. Shortly thereafter her husband, Wilmer, “saw the light that he could make good money with these chickens” and left the Coast Guard to build chicken houses and to raise chickens full-time. By the spring of 1926 the Steeles had increased their housing capacity to about ten thousand birds.

News of the Steeles’ success enticed others to raise their own flocks solely to sell for meat, and by 1925 approximately fifty thousand broilers were being raised in Baltimore Hundred. By 1928, there were approximately five hundred broiler growers in Baltimore Hundred and the adjacent area. The people of southeastern Sussex badly needed a new source of income and now they had it. The modern broiler industry may have been born out of a mistake by a Dagsboro hatchery in filling an order from an Ocean View housewife, but its explosive growth first in Baltimore Hundred and then throughout much of the rest of the Delmarva Peninsula was fueled by the fact that raising broilers met a very pressing economic need.
Of course, raising chickens solely for meat wasn't an entirely new idea. Ventures in this sort of poultry production surfaced as early as 1880 in the area of Hammondton, New Jersey. By 1923 other attempts had been made in such scattered locations as Hall County, Georgia; Benton County, Arkansas; and southern New Hampshire. On the Delmarva Peninsula Henry S. Anthony of Smyrna, Delaware, in 1885, and Joseph P. Harris of Preston, Maryland, in 1892, attempted commercial broiler operations. But most of these earlier ventures were short-lived, and those that survived failed to provide the foundation blocks for the modern broiler industry. It wasn't until the tiny crossroads community of Ocean View, Delaware, got serious about raising chickens solely for meat that an industry was launched that would significantly impact the economy of the Peninsula, alter Delmarva's agricultural patterns, and change the eating habits of the nation.