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**Delmarva's Chicken  
Industry:**  
*75 Years of Progress*

*by*

*William H. Williams*

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# *Dedication*

*To J. Frank Gordy (1906-1987)  
whose vision and leadership played a key role  
in the growth and development of the  
Delmarva broiler industry.*



## *Acknowledgments*

The contributions of many people made possible the writing and publication of *Delmarva's Chicken Industry: 75 Years of Progress*. I am particularly indebted to George Chaloupka, who made available his private collection of books and photographs, and his considerable knowledge of the history of Delmarva's broiler industry. Dr. Spangler "Buzz" Klopp initiated this project while President of Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc., and then proceeded to offer needed advice and encouragement. Bill Satterfield was deeply involved with every step of the process and, with efficiency and humor, moved this project forward from an idea to a book. All three read the manuscript and offered constructive criticisms.

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Finally, I thank Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc., which decided that it would sponsor this book to commemorate the first seventy-five years of the broiler industry both on Delmarva and in the United States, and then supplied members of its support staff to help with clerical details.

The collective result of all of these efforts has produced a book that is the first overview of the broiler industry on Delmarva from 1923 to 1998. Because *Delmarva's Chicken Industry: 75 Years of Progress* is written for a general audience, my hope is that it will be followed by a more scholarly treatment in the near future.

William H. Williams  
Georgetown, Delaware  
July 23, 1998





## *Introduction*

Throughout most of history, tender young chickens were such an expensive luxury that only the wealthy could afford to eat them. But this did not stop the middle and lower classes of Europe and America from dreaming of the day when they too would regularly dine on tender young chickens. Indeed, some political leaders sought to enhance their own popularity by promising their constituents to fulfill this dream. Henry IV of France (r. 1589-1610), for example, endeared himself to his subjects by saying, "I want there to be no peasant in my Kingdom so poor that he is unable to have a chicken in his pot every Sunday." Presidential candidate Herbert Hoover, on his way to victory in 1928, promised American voters a chicken in every pot.

Neither Henry IV nor Herbert Hoover, however, was able to deliver on his promise. Rather, it took a series of dramatic innovations in breeding, growing, processing, and marketing over the last seventy-five years before broilers (young chickens grown expressly for eating) became affordable for almost every American family.

But unlike the growth of steel manufacturing, where Andrew Carnegie was the towering figure, or the development of the oil industry, where John D. Rockefeller was clearly the dominant force, the broiler industry owes its dramatic growth to the contributions of hundreds of relatively anonymous men and women. So dramatic have been the cumulative effects of these contributions, however, that they have revolutionized the eating habits of a nation. By producing tender young chickens at a very inexpensive price to the consumer, the broiler industry has become the leading

producer of meat in the United States and represents, according to many observers, the most advanced form of food production in the entire world.

The figures speak for themselves. In 1934, the average American consumed only about 14 pounds of chicken a year and less than one pound of that was broilers. By 1997, annual chicken consumption in the United States had dramatically increased to 75 pounds per person, of which 74 pounds were broilers. By contrast, consumption of beef and pork, the meats once heavily favored by Americans, had declined respectively to 67 pounds and 50 pounds per capita by 1997. Clearly the chicken—more particularly the broiler—is king. This shift in American meat-eating habits has been so dramatic that it has forced pork producers to meekly urge potential customers to buy "the other white meat."

In 1997 only about 8 percent of America's broilers were produced on the Delmarva Peninsula (Delaware and the eastern shore of Maryland and Virginia). Although Sussex County, Delaware, continued to lead all of the nation's counties in broiler production, and Wicomico and Worcester counties, Maryland, were seventh and thirteenth respectively, the Delmarva Peninsula as a whole ranked behind Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina. Although Delmarva's production of meat-type chickens has continued to increase in recent years, it has been at a much lower rate than those other hot beds of the broiler industry.

But there was a time when Delmarva produced far more broilers than all the rest of America combined. Indeed, the modern

broiler industry was born on the Peninsula in 1923, in Baltimore Hundred, southeastern Sussex County, Delaware. From there the production of broilers soon spread to most of the other counties of Delmarva. By 1936, an estimated 66 percent of the nation's broilers were raised on the Peninsula. Although by 1943 skyrocketing production of meat-type chickens elsewhere in the United States caused the Delmarva figure to slip to 44 percent, it was clear to those Americans and foreign nationals interested in the production of broilers that a pilgrimage to the Delmarva Peninsula was essential to see how it was done.

While this industry, born and nurtured on the Peninsula, changed America's eating habits, it also dramatically altered the nature of agriculture on Delmarva and had an enormous impact on other sectors of the Peninsula's economy. In the 1920s and 1930s the Peninsula, south of Wilmington, was an economically depressed area. Broilers provided a desperately needed new cash crop that was increasingly in demand in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. The subsequent need by broiler growers for increasing numbers of chicks and more chicken feed stimulated the expansion of local hatcheries and feed companies. During the 1940s and 1950s, many local feed companies turned from selling national brands to mixing their own feed. Because locally mixed feeds demanded large amounts of locally grown corn and soybeans, these two crops began to dominate most of the Peninsula's agricultural landscape.

The partial integration of different components of the Peninsula's broiler industry under one corporate body began when some of the feed companies acquired hatcheries or, as in the case of Perdue Farms, hatcheries added feed companies. Even before these types of partial integration, however, some hatcheries and feed companies began contracting with local farmers to grow their chicks into broilers. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, processing plants were added to the other components to produce fully integrated poultry companies that controlled broilers from the hatchery to delivery at the supermarket warehouses. Subsequently, because of the cost-effectiveness of total integration, independent hatcheries, feed companies, growers, and processors could no longer compete. Some were absorbed by the integrated giants while others simply disappeared from the scene.

By 1997 more than twenty thousand people were directly employed in Delmarva's broiler industry while thousands of others owed much of their income to the ripple effect of the Peninsula's most important year-round industry south of Wilmington. Clearly the remarkable growth of the Peninsula's broiler industry has been crucial to the region's economic health. No wonder Robert Street of Princess Anne, Maryland, who has been a keen observer of the Peninsula's economy since the 1920s, summarized the impact of the broiler this way: "Every time I hear a rooster crow, I want to stand and salute him."



