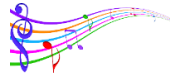


## *Eastern Shore Road Trip Series*

A Lifestyle Sponsored Series



### Cambridge, Maryland



Cambridge is the comeback kid on the Eastern Shore these days. The restaurant and bar scene is hopping. Old buildings are getting spruced up. New bike lanes and crosswalks and streetscapes keep sprouting up.

One reason why this is such good news is that Cambridge is a town with real Eastern Shore character—it's the kind of place where they build downtown Christmas trees out of crab baskets, compete in crazy tricycle races while wearing goofy costumes, and throw muskrat stew parties outdoors in the middle of winter.

The comeback has been a long time coming. This town thrived for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its streets packed with shoppers making their way from one to another of the three big department stores in town. But Cambridge had all of its economic eggs in one basket—a food processing outfit called Phillips Packing Company.

The story of that business is a fascinating one. It started out small as can be. Three local thirty somethings launched it with an agreement consisting of a total of three paragraphs.

But the company grew to become a colossus in canned foods, duking it out on a national stage with the likes of Campbell's, Del Monte, and Stockley-Van Kamp for the top spot in the sector. Here is what company executive Frank Robbins told the local Rotary Club one day in 1939: This year, Phillips will make “enough cans placed from end to end to reach from Cambridge to California; back to Cambridge, and then from Cambridge to New York, from New York to London, from London back to New York and back to Cambridge.”

Just about everyone in town either worked at Phillips or had a job at a business that depended on all those Phillips employees getting their paychecks. That worked out just fine until the 1950s, when the canning industry on the East Coast ran into hard times as improvements in transportation boosted the fortunes of cheaper produce from Florida and California. Phillips was just a shell of its former famous self when the company got sold to Consolidated Foods in 1957. Local operations closed for good three years later.

That sent this proud town into a long tailspin. Things didn't really start to pick up again until 2002, when Hyatt opened a swank riverfront resort on the outskirts of town and a handful of brave souls decided at about the same time that they would go out on a limb and open up shops in what was then a mostly shuttered old downtown. My wife and I moved to Cambridge a little after that in 2004 so yes, I'm biased about this particular Road Trip (so says author, Jim Duffy).

One of the cool things about the resurgence Cambridge has seen since then is that so many of the entrepreneurs behind it are energetic young locals determined to do their part for the town. Culinary Institute of America grad Ian Campbell was working with world-renowned chef Thomas Keller in California when he decided to come home and launch Bistro Poplar, which for my money is the best restaurant on all of Delmarva (per Jim Duffy).

An editor at a regional magazine told me a story a few years back about how one of his writers started asking all of the best chefs on the Eastern Shore which restaurant they themselves went to on their days off. After the first dozen or so calls, the magazine had to institute a “no-

more-votes-for Bistro-Poplar” rule because all of the chefs were giving the same answer. (As this book went to press, Chef Ian was launching a new project, a food truck specializing in grilled Caribbean fare and called Big Feller’s Hammock.) This book went to press in 2016 and FB reviews from the summer of 2016 are raving about the food, the truck seems to be parked behind the Bistro. (comment from your typist)

Amanda Bramble is another feel-good story. A few months after she opened the doors at Jimmie & Sook’s Raw Bar and Grill, newsman Tom Brokaw put her on national TV as a model for a new kind of 21<sup>st</sup> century entrepreneurship. Now she, too, is launching a second project—a waterfront farm to table affair called Three Sixty at the River’s Edge that’s located just outside of town.

My first bit of advice about Road Tripping in Cambridge, then, is to bring an appetite. There is some first rate eating and drinking going on in this town these days. Chris Brohawn and J.T. Merriweather, the guys behind the wildly successful RAR brewpub, are local natives, too. If you pull into town and find hundreds of people standing in line on Poplar Street, well, that would be a RAR can release. The talented chef Patrick Fanning may not qualify as a local, but he has earned a local following strong enough to support three different restaurants—The High Spot, Stoked Wood-Fired Eatery, and Rock Lobstah.

There is more coming, too. Two gorgeous old downtown buildings are being renovated as of this writing, with both looking to bring in new restaurants. And don’t ship the little Don Chuy Taqueria. It’s not much to look at, and it’s a little bit off the beaten path, but its authentic Mexican fare deserves all of the rave reviews it gets on the internet.

The prettiest walk in town runs along brick-lined High Street between downtown and the banks of the two-mile-wide Choptank River. Out on the water at Long Wharf Park is the postcard-pretty Choptank River Lighthouse, which is open for self-guided visits in the warmer months and features some interesting museum-style exhibit materials.

The skipjack Nathan of Dorchester sails out of Long Wharf, and the public can climb aboard for two-hour cruises on most Saturdays in season. The weekly Farmer’s Market is held out here too on Thursday afternoons. Also, there are guided walking tours between downtown and Long Wharf on Saturday mornings in the warmer months.

On the way back to downtown, take a turn from High Street onto Commerce Street (yes, it looks like an alley) and look for the red shack out on Cambridge Creek. That’s J.M. Clayton’s, which is the old seafood-processing house on the Eastern Shore and just might rank as the oldest one in the world. It’s operated nowadays by fourth-and fifth-generation descendants of John Morgan Clayton, who founded the operation back in 1890. Inside, they will sell you fresh-as-can-be crabmeat in season and pasteurized crab in the off season. They also have souvenir caps and t-shirts.

Back downtown, you will find a few nice shops and galleries for your browsing and buying pleasure. You will also be able to admire some top flight historic rehab work by a Washington,

D.C. company, NOVO Development, that owns half a dozen or so buildings downtown and has played a key role in the Cambridge comeback.

Underground Railroad heroine Harriet Tubman was born in the countryside outside of Cambridge, and there is a little, volunteer run, Harriet Tubman Museum downtown that is definitely worth a stop. Tubman may be all the rage nowadays among historians and politicians—she is slated to be featured on the \$20 bill, for example, and a big state park and visitor center is going up in her honor (it's scheduled to open in 2017)—but we shouldn't forget that the homegrown volunteers in this little museum were working their tails off to keep the Tubman flame alive back when the rest of world wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention.

Most of the best parties in town take place in this downtown area. There is a big crab cook-off block party in July (yes, you can get tastings); another big block party in September, with the aforementioned crazy tricycle races. The also-aforementioned Crawfish Boil & Muskrat Stew Festival happens in late February. The nearby waterfront is home to a couple of annual sailing events a weekend long Schooner Rendezvous in late October and the annual Choptank Heritage Skipjack Race in September.

Outside the downtown area, be sure and stop at Crabi Gras, a fun shop on the highway that specializes in hot sauces, spice rubs, and specialty dips, along with a line of clever Eastern Shore themed T-shirts and hats. Just up the street from there is Ocean Odyssey, a restaurant owned by a prominent family of watermen, the Todd's. The young chef there, Travis Todd, is another of the impressive homegrown talents on the Cambridge dining scene.

The entrance to the aforementioned Hyatt is out on the highway as well. Believe it or not, the resort is located right across from the Wal-Mart, on the site of an old psychiatric hospital. But it really is a gorgeous 400-acre site and well worth a stop, whether you are staying overnight or not. Visitors are welcome to stroll around the grounds and have drinks or a meal in one of the restaurants. Sunset cruises are available to the public in the warmer months through local company, Blackwater Paddle and Pedal.

Cambridge still has a way to go. A couple of blocks in the downtown area are still a bit sad and downtrodden. There are a lot of big-box and little box vacancies in the malls out on the highway. But the town really does seem to be getting over the hump at long last—here's wishing much continued good luck to the Comeback Kid.

This has been reproduced from the book, *Eastern Shore Road Trips* by Jim Duffy and is available on Amazon. This book has so many wonderful articles that will not be reproduced by your typist, Susan Rayner.

## Things to Do:

Hyatt Spa—personally recommended for a real treat, we enjoyed the Champagne Massage

[The Richardson Maritime Museum](#) at 401 High Street, was founded to celebrate the art of wooden boat building. The museum, a repository of Chesapeake Bay wooden boat memorabilia, is open April – Oct., from 1:00 – 4:00 Wed., Sat., and Sun.

[The Choptank River Lighthouse](#) is a replica of a six-sided screwpile lighthouse. The lighthouse is open daily from 9:00 am to 6:00pm for self-guided tours. Located at the end of the pier at Long Wharf Park (at Water and High Streets).

[The Merideth House](#), at 902 LaGrange Ave., is the home of the Dorchester County Historical Society. The house is furnished with fine antiques, several portraits of early County residents, and other household items. On the second floor, there are two rooms of particular interest: the Children's Room, which features a collection of antique dolls and toys, and the Governors' Room, which exhibits memorabilia from the seven Maryland governors who have resided in the County.

The [Skipjack Nathan](#) is a traditional Chesapeake Bay skipjack built to preserve the nautical heritage of Dorchester County. The skipjack offers sailing cruises, educational programs, and serves as a sailing ambassador. The Skipjack Nathan is berthed at Long Wharf Park at the end of High Street. The Nathan offers 2 hour sails on the Choptank River when she is in Cambridge. Check their website at [www.shipjack-nathan.org](http://www.shipjack-nathan.org) for more information.

When in the area, be sure to visit the nearby [Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge](#), 10 miles south of Cambridge. The refuge features 21,000 acres of marshland and is a major stopping point for wintering waterfowl traveling the Atlantic flyway. The refuge is also an excellent place to spot Bald Eagles. They have a new [Wildlife Drive Guide App](#) for iphones that uses audio, video and photos to describe stops along the drive.

## Places to Stay:

- [Mill Street Inn](#) – Restored Victorian bed & breakfast in the historic district. Located a half block from the Choptank River, 5\* TripAdvisor
- [Cambridge House Bed & Breakfast](#) – Historic district bed & breakfast in a former sea captain's manor house. 4.5\* TripAdvisor
- Albus Phillips Inn—A wonderful trip into the past. 4.5\* TripAdvisor

## Places to Eat:

[Bistro Poplar](#) Casually elegant eatery in a historic building serving traditional French cooking with wines.

**Address:** 535 Poplar St, Cambridge, MD 21613

**Phone:** (410) 228-4884

**Menu:** [places.singleplatform.com](http://places.singleplatform.com)

**Hours:** 5–9PM



### Carmela's Cucina Italian Cuisine

**Address:** 400 Academy Street, Cambridge, MD 21613

**Phone:** [\(410\) 221-8082](tel:(410)221-8082)

**Hours:** · 10AM–9PM

Jimmie & Sook's     Laid-back fish house with maritime decor offering simple local seafood, a bar & weekly live music.

**Address:** 527 Poplar St, Cambridge, MD

**Phone:** [\(410\) 228-0008](tel:(410)228-0008)