

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts. *Commissioner*  
= *on fisheries and game*

A REPORT

UPON

THE MOLLUSK FISHERIES

OF

MASSACHUSETTS.



BOSTON:  
WRIGHT & POTTER PRINTING CO., STATE PRINTERS,  
18 POST OFFICE SQUARE.  
1909.

### *History of the Industry.*

Although the oyster laws are the mile-stones which mark the progress of the oyster industry, and any consideration of the development of these laws naturally gives many historical features, it is nevertheless necessary, at the risk of repetition, to give a separate account of the history of the oyster fishery. The Massachusetts oyster fishery can be divided historically into three distinct periods: (1) the free fishing period; (2) the period of bedding southern oysters; (3) the period of oyster grants.

(1) *The Free Native Fishery (1620-1840)*.— In the early colonial days the oyster fishery was considered in the same way as the other shellfisheries are now looked upon, *i.e.*, held to be the common property of the inhabitants of the Commonwealth. The natural supply was abundant enough to meet the needs of all the inhabitants, and for many years no signs of decline were manifest. In 1775 the natural beds of Wellfleet gave out, furnishing the first record of unmistakable decline. From that time there arose an extensive series of protective laws, with the one object of preserving the natural supply by limiting the demand. This policy of protective laws, though perhaps temporarily beneficial, was based on an erroneous principle. It was preventive, but not constructive, and did not build up the demolished fishery.

(2) *Oyster Bedding (1840-70)*.— With the decline of the natural beds, the practice of bedding southern "plants" became an important part of the oyster trade. The southern oysters were bedded on the flats in the spring and taken up for market in the fall. Salem, Wellfleet and Boston were the leading places in this new phase of the oyster industry, and many thousand bushels were annually planted.

(3) *Oyster Grants (1870-1908)*.— So successful was this summer

bedding of southern oysters that experiments were soon made in rearing oysters. This proved successful from the start, and within a few years the extensive grant system which is now in vogue was inaugurated on Cape Cod and Buzzards Bay.

These three methods, although separated by definite periods in which each have been the leaders, remain to a greater or less extent at the present day. The natural beds are still in existence, and, as at Wareham, are opened once in three or seven years, according to the discretion of the selectmen, for catching "seed." The summer bedding of oysters still continues, as certain planters find it more profitable to fatten than to grow oysters, and the oyster grant system is now in full operation.

A comparison of the industry of 1907 with that of 1879 shows several changes. These changes are for the most part improvements which have arisen with the development of the industry. In some cases the changes have been detrimental, and a few localities have shown a decline. New fields have opened to the oysterman both in new localities and through the extension of the present beds. On the whole, there has been a great increase in the grant system of oyster culture, while the "bedding" of southern "plants," which in 1879 employed many men, boats and extensive capital, has practically disappeared. The annual production has increased gradually, and for 1906-07 is approximately five times as large as in 1879. The following figures, except for 1907, are taken from the United States Fish Commission's reports, and show the gradual increase in production:—

YEAR.	Bushels.	Value.	YEAR.	Bushels.	Value.
1879, . . . .	36,000	\$41,800	1898, . . . .	101,225	\$156,395
1887, . . . .	43,188	64,115	1902, . . . .	103,386	135,682
1888, . . . .	45,631	66,453	1907, <sup>1</sup> . . . .	161,182	176,142

<sup>1</sup> Returns of the Massachusetts department on fisheries and game.