New York City’s Oyster Barges
Architecture’s Threshold Role along the Urban Waterfront

Nevertheless, this . . . water-front of New York offers very interesting studies. It is full of striking industries, that show by some astonishing feats, what strength, skill, and endurance men develop under the high pressure of commerce.

—Charles H. Farnham, “A Day on the Docks,”
Scribner’s Monthly (1879)

Sitting on the banks of the Quinnipiac River in Fair Haven, Connecticut, is a two-story building perched on a large submerged scow. In its current state, with its hull buried, it strikes the viewer simply as a commercial building with popular nineteenth-century finishes. Near it, visible at low tide, lie the hulls of two other decaying oyster barges—floating structures once used to process and market oysters along lower Manhattan’s waterfront. But upon closer inspection of the beached barge, observers see its canted sides and begin to sense that this structure was designed with a specific purpose. This may be the last of the oyster barges that operated along Manhattan’s waterfront during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the city’s floating oyster market.

For the few who know what they are seeing, the sight of the oyster barge is intellectually compelling, emotive, and unexpected—collective sentiments calling for preservation and curatorial care. A senior fisheries historian speculates on which oyster firms may have owned the barge during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. A New Jersey poet, whose work has been inspired by the oyster’s capacity to sustain the pocketbooks of modest watermen and the diet of countless Americans, sees it as a symbol of democracy. A historic preservation student is moved to record it in measured drawings. Representatives from the New York Food Museum and the New York City preservation group Place Matters want to restore it and bring it back to the Manhattan waterfront—an opportunity for interpretive rapprochement in a city that so often appears historically and environmentally disconnected from the maritime world that shaped it. And, although not the focus of a recent popular history on New York City’s oyster trade, oyster barges grace the book’s cover. In the city’s public memory, the surviving oyster barge seemed to beckon for its return when a retro-titled restaurant, The Market Clam and Oyster Barge, opened in the atrium at Citicorp Center in 1977. Why the melding of a bold, new architectural statement with a reference to a feature once prominent in the city’s popular imagination? By extension, what story does the surviving oyster barge in Fair Haven tell? What might its preservation portend for New York City?

Viewed as individual and collective units of a working landscape, the logic of the oyster barge along lower Manhattan’s waterfront was an animated staging area for the transshipment of oysters from their watery habitat to America’s consumer marketplace. Labor patterns on and around the oyster barge—the segmented work and mercantile processes framed by this floating architecture—conformed to the frenetic rhythms associated with waterfronts throughout the world. Clustered in the vicinity of Oliver’s Slip, Catherine Slip, Pike Street, Broome Street, and Fulton Fish Market on the East River, and Washington
Market, Spring Street Market, and West Tenth Street Market on the Hudson River, oyster barges provided a work environment so fully suffused with the fast-paced rhythms of America’s leading entrepot that observers went beyond describing them as landscape features and instead as a “scene” that, “during the busy months of autumn and winter, is a very lively one.”

The distinctive “scene” associated with work at oyster barges—one among many in a landscape so heavily predicated on movement—was largely due to their placement within the dense confines of New York City’s waterfront (Figure 1). Unlike oystering operations in the less congested areas of Connecticut, along Long Island, and throughout the labyrinth of bays, coves, and riverine sites in New Jersey and the Chesapeake Region, work at New York City’s oyster barges dramatized the economic urgency of efficiently handling a perishable commodity in an urban context. The oyster barge’s role in orchestrating the processing and marketing of one of America’s most prolific marine resources began each fall as oyster sloops and schooners arrived at the waterside end of the oyster barge to unload their cargo. With their sterns facing the barge’s water-facing entrance, several sailing vessels could unload their cargo at once. One report recorded that, at a minimum, two hundred vessels a day arrived at the oyster barges during harvesting season to transfer their load. As colder months ensued and harvesting activity increased, vessels were often queued twelve abreast directly alongside the barge’s water-facing entrance and linked by a series of planks, while workers hired specifically as “oyster-carriers” transferred each vessel’s load into the hold of the oyster barge. After being stored in the barge’s hold, where they were kept cool during warmer temperatures and prevented from freezing during colder spells, oysters were moved to the main deck, graded by size, and prepared for shipment, either in the shell or shucked.

Given the trade’s “lively” pace and cramped quarters, oyster barges provided dealers with the means to scrupulously monitor the handling of a bulk commodity—a pressing concern in any merchant’s quest for profitability let alone one operating amid the increasingly complex social, cultural, and economic space of New York City’s late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century waterfront. To accommodate these concerns, balconies were placed on one or both ends of the oyster barge, a design convention that allowed merchants to keep a watchful eye over oysters entering and leaving the facility. Added to this feature was the narrow, open space of the oyster barge’s main deck whose clear sight lines ran the length of the structure and imposed few obstructions for those overseeing the sorting and shucking of bivalves.

Taking stock of these structures while they were moored at the foot of Christopher Street on the Hudson River, at the foot of Pike Street (not far from the Fulton Fish Market) on the East River, and at a number of other locations, viewers were struck by the appearance of one- and two-story houses perched on flat-bottomed barge hulls. A variety of vessels—sloops, schooners, and steamboats—delivered oysters to the barges via the structure’s water-facing entrance, and, once processed, either in the shell or shucked, gained entry to local and national markets through the structure’s street-connecting ramps. As a conspicuous threshold through which the oyster passed from its waterborne state to edible commodity, oyster barges embodied and expressed the palpable rhythms of a competitive consumer economy and framed an occupation’s dynamic waterfront culture.
Tightly fitted at a number of waterfront locations on the East and Hudson Rivers, oyster barges intentionally blurred the boundaries separating land and water (Figure 2). Hardly a visual illusion, their appearance was the result of the structure’s intended use, an outcome achieved through the integration of recognized commercial architectural idioms with traditional watercraft technology and naval architecture. These polymorphic qualities led to confused appraisals of the barge’s liminal condition from its beginnings in the early national/antebellum period through its twilight in the aftermath of World War I. New York City’s cosmopolitan flavor accentuated these perceptions, particularly among those pursuing eclectic encounters at the city’s waterfront (Figure 3).

Such intentions produced no shortage of whimsical impressions of oyster barges, with a writer in 1862 claiming that his waterfront guide had “slipped from the dock into the briny waves below, without noise or disturbance; but I was soon disabused on that point. I beheld Mr. Biggs standing with his back toward me on board a halfhouse half-boat arrangement, that lay moored, with many others of the same sort, at the wharf.” Challenged by its physical appearance, the pub-
lic's interest in typologically casting the barge's architectural form did not abate with the passage of time. Unbeknownst to many observers, their struggle to fit an architectural language to a structure they variously labeled a “little ship or factory or whatever it is”—a discourse lasting well into the 1920s—revealed the inherent cultural and environmental tensions of dwelling and working along the waterfront. But then, as now, the barge’s hybrid features were less troublesome to those onlookers and users who understood them as instruments in a tradition of flexibly utilizing waterfront space for the processing and marketing of oysters.

The hull of the oyster barge or oyster scow—as they were variously known—measured approximately thirty feet in length and twelve feet in breadth prior to the Civil War and, in keeping with the dramatic surge in fisheries production following the war, increased to sizes ranging from forty-five feet long and thirty feet wide to as large as seventy-five feet long, twenty-four feet wide, with a six-foot hull depth. The actual hull portion of New York City’s oyster barges was a common sight throughout the city’s working waterfront, a form of watercraft regularly built in a variety of shipbuilding and boatbuilding operations and used to haul and store bulk commodities in maritime locales throughout the United States. Some evidence suggests that canal boat construction served as a partial template in the evolving design of oyster barges in the years leading up to the Civil War. The Fishing Gazette reported, “half of a ‘lemon squeezer,’ or a Morris and Essex Canal boat was procured, and a rude shelter of boards, with a roof erected upon it, worked very well, until, as business increased, large scow-shaped boats were built.” The ubiquitous presence of canal boats in Manhattan’s maritime environs certainly provided a sufficient catalog of ideas for emergent oyster barge design, a fact underscored by the proximity of a depot for Morris and Essex Canal boats alongside the Washington Street Market and one for Erie Canal boats on the Lower East Side—two waterfront locations where oyster barges proliferated. With canal boats occupying valuable Manhattan waterfront space for inordinately long periods of time during the winter, a spatial concession David Scobey describes as both “arterial sclerosis” and “arguably the port’s

Figure 4. Interior view of oyster barge showing naval construction techniques—hanging knees and deck beams. Note the clear sightlines running the entire length of the barge. From the author’s collection.
grandest irrationality,” oyster dealers had ample opportunity to envision an architectural exchange between these vessels and basic barge design to produce the oyster barge. Notwithstanding these compelling influences, the oyster barge’s technological lineage strikingly revealed itself in the comparative context of its membership in the family of “capacious barges” that plied New York City’s waters. One could scarcely overlook the structural similarities between oyster barges and those hauling sand, hay, and coal. But the connection was unmistakable when viewing New York City’s Department of Docks floating derrick or “stranger still . . . the floating grain-elevators, which look like houses afloat.”

Wrought by the hands of ship carpenters, the oyster barge’s hull was not the only feature that revealed its compliance with traditional watercraft design. Manhattan’s surrounding waters were subject to both tidal action and the all-too-frequent afflictions of weather. Close inspection of New York City’s oyster barges reveals a canted
or tapered two-story superstructure or house to reduce top heaviness, a feature that ensured greater stability under the worst environmental conditions when moored or when the occasion arose to move them (under tow) to other waterfront locations. More extensive scrutiny of the oyster barge’s structural characteristics, such as the use of knees and deck beams, further underscores the shipwright’s role in successfully devising an architectural form that went beyond arbiting the interface of waterborne and terrestrial environments, but also embodied the dense economic and ecological matrix of New York City’s oyster trade (Figure 4).7

The oyster industry enjoyed a harvesting season of greater length than many fisheries (the “r” months, September through April), and the oyster itself was widely popular in the American diet and abroad. Needing to boldly respond to these conditions, New York City’s oyster barges architecturally commanded sections of Manhattan’s wharves through their deck plans, furnishings, and exterior ornament (Figures 5 and 6). Individually, many of the barges’ topside cabins exhibited every manner or arrangement of popular nineteenth- and early twentieth-century machine-made ornament, from decorative scrollwork and curvilinear eave line brackets to board-and-batten sheathing and functional, roof-adorning cupolas. For those barges lacking a conspicuous display of these period-defining, decorative architectural conventions, the moniker of being “substantially built” with a “stanch hull” revealed the oyster dealers’ collective intent to make these floating structures the visual bulwark of their claim to the water’s edge.8

Commentators marveled at the oyster barge’s capacity to nimbly negotiate the waterfront’s dialectic and, at the same time, embody it—land oriented or water oriented, boat or building, function and utility or architectural embellishment and the natural sublime. The collective architectural power of the oyster barge was evident when those at Peck Slip near the Fulton Fish Market were characterized as follows:

Fleets of thirty or more assembled there. They were triple-deckers, a cabin for office room and supplies, a wide middle deck for sorting and opening and shipping, and a capacious hold. Some of them could lodge as many as five thousand bushels in Winter against stormy weather or a rush order. Not being seagoing vessels, they were a little fanciful. They had balconies upstairs and front porches down below, and were painted red and green and yellow picked out in white.9

From another perspective, the dilemma of placing the barge’s idiosyncratic form, function, finish, and furnishings in either a land- or water-based building tradition was an eminently modern problem given the issues it architecturally resolved. Hardly afflicted by its anomalous design, oyster dealers were enfanchised by the multiple architectural solutions it offered and, perhaps more importantly, by the wonder people took from seeing them implemented. This was apparent in the remarks of a writer who, being conversant in the latest terrestrial and naval architectural trends, noted:

They are curious craft. The hull is built on the box-like plan of a sand barge, but in the designing of the upper structure the architect gave himself a free hand, so that they look something like houseboats, a little like frigates, only perhaps more like two-family apartment houses in Flatbush that have run away to sea.

The have each a front porch. The walls (or sides) have windows (or portholes if you think of them as ships). But the windows have blinds, so they must be windows. And surely that little non-practicable veranda running between two of the second-story windows has more of the smack of the Aladdin portable house than of any marine architect from Hand to Herreshof and beyond.10

Understandably, the anomalous or anachronistic impressions elicited by the oyster barge’s architectural features vexed observers of a Manhattan waterfront unceasingly gripped—oftentimes confusingly and sometimes in ways profoundly incongruous—by modernization’s material products and unbounded temperament. Oyster dealers did not have the proportional economic and political clout of most waterfront stakeholders, but their commodity held a place in New York City’s, and the nation’s, dietary canon that leveraged this
shortfall. Arbiting the flow of a valued commodity in the city’s market exchange, the oyster barge’s design and placement represented the industry’s accommodation to a context hardly reluctant to vanquish economic competition. In short, oyster barge design calibrated land- and water-based functions, yet it also, through its seemingly confusing array of features, architecturally reflected the processing and brokering of a traditional food source in the midst of a rapidly evolving mass-market revolution.¹¹

The oyster barge’s location along the waterfront, and its function as a transshipment center in America’s signature urban setting, made it noticeable as both an agent of the shellfishery’s far-reaching ecology and as a compass on the ecological map charted by the industry’s biological and economic relationships. Drawing much of their stock from New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey waters, barges principally brokered farmed oysters—products of seed or undersized oysters transplanted from locations where they naturally spawned to grounds privately held by oystermen known as “oyster planters.” Oyster planters sought to not only raise these immature oysters to marketable size but to use them to propagate future oyster sets on their privately managed oyster grounds. Whether obtaining their seed stock from their own grounds or from grounds managed as commons by their respective states or from Chesapeake Bay stock, oyster growers oriented to the New York City market instituted controls markedly different from many fisheries.¹²

This interpretive perspective, one that accounts for the oyster barge’s role in the industry’s ecological map—comparable to William Cronon’s portrayal of Chicago as the ecological turnstile of America’s national development in the nineteenth century—prompts consideration of vernacular built environments as hidden or overlooked components of market forces. Oyster dealers touted the barge as a context for unveiling ecological relationships too often obscured by

---

Figures 7 and 8. Maps showing the most immediate geographic network and ecological map of the New York City oyster trade. Figure 7 copyright Mystic Seaport Collection, Mystic, Conn., www.mysticseaport.org. Figure 8 from James B. Kirk II, Golden Light: The 1878 Diary of Captain Thomas Rose Lake (Harvey Cedars, N.J.: Down the Shore Publishing, 2003), reproduced with permission.
the metropolis’s grand sweep, a view characterized as “that phase of the great oyster industry which is hidden from view of the street by the market itself.” Rather than an incremental view, the barge encapsulated, “in the comparatively still waters of the slip . . . all hours of the day and night,” the ecology of a marine resource and occupational culture where “oystermen and their craft . . . ply between the market and the oyster beds along Long Island and New Jersey shores . . . and the warmer waters of the Chesapeake Bay and James River.”

Consistent with their status as one of America’s conspicuous fisheries-related landscapes, oyster barges brought public insight into the ecological web of New York City’s oyster trade. Amid a procession of clients and passersby, oyster barges bore the names of local and regional stocks they purveyed and betrayed their role as an agent in a web of environmental affairs that rippled well beyond the confines of Manhattan. Specifically, oyster barges were the most public face of shellfish merchants with investments in oystering operations along Connecticut’s shoreline, around Long Island and Staten Island, and in New Jersey’s Raritan Bay, to say nothing of acquiring stock from southern New Jersey and Chesapeake region oystering centers (Figures 7 and 8). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, New York City’s oyster merchants, intent on ensuring a steady oyster supply from the region’s nearby grounds, could not avoid becoming increasingly vested in market strategies and environmental politics driving the rise of oyster cultivation in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Qualitative assessments, based on such criteria as taste, color, and texture, were often associated with the areas where oysters bred and grew, and oyster dealers had much to gain in showing their affiliations to cultivated grounds by proclaiming the sale of “Blue Points,” “Prince’s Bays,” “Sounds,” and “Keyports” at their barges. These advertising gestures played to a patron’s gastronomical prejudices, but they also, in punctuating associations between oysters and the places or habitats that sustained them, showed how the oyster barge engendered the ecological significance of urban marketing’s geographical links. 

The capital expenditure required by oyster planting, along with the intended and unintended biological outcomes it fostered, linked a series of environments to the resource’s ultimate arrival via New York City’s oyster barges. Charles Stansbury, in a 1903 description, guided the reader from the “forest of stakes” delineating the oyster planter’s grounds to the sloops, skiffs, and oyster floats that facilitated the bivalve’s movement to the city’s oyster barges. Cultivated oysters, “drenched, bleached, and bloated” after being stored in brackish water, are “transferred to the sloop, which now sails for the oyster docks of the great city, where among a heterogeneous
tangle of craft she ties up... at the quaint row of oyster scows.” One of Stansbury’s principal informants, Captain Thomas Colon, was portrayed as among “the best of American yeomanry” when “the cargo... in bushel baskets, was wont to be transferred to one of the scows, and Captain Colon’s responsibility as a planter to cease.” The oyster barge was the metropolitan anchor of the oyster planter’s oyster grounds, his nearby support buildings, and his dredgeboats, while the less capitalized oyster tonger made his way in this network using smaller regional watercraft, oyster tongs, and the often nostalgically portrayed oyster shack.

Functioning as the nexus of an industry’s ecological network, New York City’s oyster barges framed the resource’s diffusion through an elaborate set of spatial arrangements. An 1883 *New York Times* article tacitly acknowledged this role by placing oyster barges at the center of a discussion on the daily and yearly workings of New York City’s oyster market and the broad geographical reach it exerted from the New York metropolitan area to the Chesapeake. Using J. W. Boyle, a prominent New York City oyster merchant and barge owner, as one its principal sources and making the oyster barge one of the principal themes of a general description of the region’s oyster industry, the reader’s view is fixed from the barge’s deck, looking seaward to the oyster grounds and its harvesters and landward to oyster houses and the consuming public. From the standpoint of commodity flow and its implications, Boyle drew attention to the oyster barge’s critical organizational role by linking 60,000 jobs and $25,000,000 in capital investment to the region’s oyster trade.

But Boyle’s privileged perspective on the wide-ranging spatial relevance of the industry’s ecology was unavoidably foreshadowed by his oyster barge experience. Dubbed “the historian of the fraternity” (the group of barge owners constituting New York City’s oyster market), Boyle drew authoritative voice from this affiliation, readily shedding insight into the barge’s important logistical role in a cultural landscape extending from New York and Brooklyn’s four thousand oyster houses to shipments of five thousand barrels a week to the European market. While these facts suited the promotional aims of the article, Boyle’s own affairs revealed the tangible connections of an occupational orbit coordinated from the oyster barge as well as its corresponding ecological dynamics. Boyle partnered with as many as thirty to forty oystermen in transplanting and growing oysters in Newark Bay, Prince’s Bay, and at a few locations in the Hudson River. At a time when oyster cultivation was in its ascendancy in the New York City area, Boyle’s actions roused the tempo in all quarters of the oyster barges and added a broader environmental dimension to the occupational experience. Although Boyle’s planting of 80,000 bushels of seed oysters in Prince’s Bay may have daunted some, they were equally struck by the sight of 200,000 bushels of oyster shell leaving the oyster barges to be planted as cultch (a solid substrate for oyster larvae attachment) on oyster grounds he was cultivating.

Taking route to the oyster barge either through the hands of oyster planters, oyster tongers (small-scale oystermen who sometimes planted oysters but mostly harvested directly from natural spawning areas), or coastal shippers working at the behest of oyster merchants, the succulent bivalve became part of a commercial exchange that reached into the heartland of America. Early on, oysters passing through New York City’s oyster barges made their way to the Erie Canal where they were reintroduced to the diet of Midwestern populations that had not seen a bivalve since their exodus to points west. This development no doubt excited the memory of those who emigrated from oystering areas on the eastern seaboard and prompted an even more complex set of environmental associations for those who had witnessed the sometimes carnivalesque atmosphere surrounding the oyster barge.

By the mid-nineteenth century, oysters moving across New York City’s floating thresholds were being easily shipped by rail to Midwest cities such as Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and beyond. After the Civil War, a miner in the West or a lumberman in the Upper Midwest’s north woods might find himself regularly dining on oysters processed at Manhattan’s waterfront. When an *Atlantic Monthly* writer inspected the city’s oyster barges in 1868, one of the oyster-openers reported “large quantities of these oysters are ‘kagged’...
Figure 9.
Daniel Beard’s aesthetic strategy in a Harper’s Weekly (September 16, 1882, 584) print dramatically surrounds oyster barges and their shuckers with images of the resource, the industry’s tools, and the work process. An avowed outdoorsman and antimodern, Beard authored and illustrated Shelters, Shacks, and Shanties (New York: Scribner’s, 1914), founded the Sons of Daniel Boone, and was a leading figure in the founding of the Boy Scouts of America. In aestheticizing New York City’s oyster barges, he accentuates the nation’s native, Edenic cultural disposition toward natural resource use by deftly using an occupation’s vernacular idioms to convey the essence of America’s ecological imagination.
for the Western market . . . in the neat little ashen kegs." Unable to resist the implications of the barge’s role in this exchange, the writer replied to the oyster-opener that “passengers in a railway train that was snowed up on a Western prairie, some years ago, might have starved to death but for the fact that one of the cars was freighted with oysters thus put up in kegs.”

Moving into both urban and remote locations in the Midwest and West, barge-processed oysters took their place in transforming the national diet. The seemingly modest processing work conducted in oyster barges defined the structure’s role in a geographic web of relationships linking, and dependent on, factors ranging from the health of East Coast oyster grounds to the web of food choices made in the trans-Mississippi West. Commentators linked the oyster barge’s work to the foodstuff’s particular cultural power in American society by describing “rows of shuckers” responsible for supplying local markets or, by placing oysters ‘into tanks of fresh water . . . supplying the great West with this American necessity.” However, as conveyed in a Harper’s Weekly illustration, contemporary consumers and the popular press were less inclined to assess the oyster barge’s effect on the basis of national and international trade and, instead, focused on the niche it occupied in unleashing and affirming America’s ecological imagination (Figure 9).

As agents of volume-oriented market forces, the city’s oyster barges put on display the industry’s human costs and capital investment and, in turn, revealed their share of collective responsibility in effecting the sustainability of the resource they brokered. Near the end of the nineteenth century, economic protectionism and declining stocks led the Virginia legislature to prohibit the exportation of its seed oysters to planted grounds such as those surrounding New York City’s market—a development that exposed this architectural threshold’s systemic environmental impact and commercial dependency. Such an episode said much about what was environmentally and commercially linked to the oyster barges, but it also suggests a great deal about what was communicated through its ecological matrix. When, in 1891, William K. Brooks, a biologist at the Johns Hopkins University and member of the Maryland Oyster Commission, penned his famous study The Oyster, he extolled the oyster planting system that sustained New York City’s market and portrayed it as the appropriate course of action to stem the demise of the Chesapeake Bay industry. Brooks drew support from the work of Ernest Ingersoll but, unlike Ingersoll, inadvertently put the context of the oyster barge directly into a national debate on how to best manage the resource.

Although many of New York City’s commercial networks were perceptually attenuated, the oyster’s niche in the city’s adjacent estuarine environment made it a cultural and economic benchmark of the port’s threshold experience. Oyster barges embodied these prerogatives, a landscape whose place-defining relevance rested in its being, in the words of one observer, “practically a home institution, thoroughly American in all its bearings.” The oyster barge’s capacity to embody such sentiment was fundamentally abetted by the commodity it handled—a food source equally welcome and available at both the tables of social elites and the rank and file, making it as much a civic threshold as it was a simple dietary preference. From this vantage point, the oyster barge’s service emerged as an all too visible crucible of an American environmental ethos wedded to the idea that the country’s fisheries resources should be readily affordable to all. With piles of oyster shells accumulating at their wharf-side mooring, the service of the oyster barge stood as an invitation to the masses to contemplate the significance of the marine environment that so heavily shaped the fortunes of New York City.

The phenomenal growth of steamship service to New York City during the final quarter of the nineteenth century only increased the stakes for the city’s valuable waterfront property, a development whose financial scale imperiled the efforts of oyster dealers to retain their moorings. Further complicating matters, oyster dealers had traditionally chosen sites where injury to their barges from nature’s forces and waterfront traffic was minimized—a feature that had been long prized at the barges West Tenth Street moorings on the Hudson River but whose criteria applied in equal measure to other established locations. Hardly a
matter of simply removing barges from one Manhattan locale to another, oyster dealers relied on the safety and market proximity of these sites to mitigate the financial risk they were incurring by investing in oyster cultivation at locations in Long Island, Connecticut, and New Jersey waters. Exacerbating these territorial considerations, oyster dealers needed to be mindful of how oyster barge locations or movements might be affected by waterborne disease. Typhoid outbreaks, particularly those traceable to given oyster dealers or regional oyster stocks, were a constant threat to this sector of the shellfish industry. Throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth century, efforts to aggressively sequester oysters from any possible contact with typhoid bacilli exposed oyster barges—susceptible to bacteria flowing from Manhattan’s older east–west sewage lines—to unprecedented scientific research and public-health debate concerning urban sanitation and uncontaminated food. This local concern exponentially increased with typhoid bacilli’s efficient spread and incubation in waterborne resources, environments, and networks; quite simply, the oyster barge’s setting, product, and far-flung supply areas snared it in scientific inquiry ultimately leading to stringent state regulation and the passage of the federal Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Gone were the carefree days when “on the pier, in front of the gangways that lead to the barges, groups of men sit upon stools, busily engaged in opening the bivalves.” In New York City, where public health concerns were among the most conspicuous in the United States and abroad, oyster dealers found they could ill-afford to not be vigilant in waterfront politics that compromised the sanitary context of their oyster barges.39

Following the Civil War, government institutions began playing a far greater role in fostering the contested politics of oyster barge placement along Manhattan’s waterfront (Figure 10). New York City’s rise to prominence among the globe’s ports prompted municipal officials to incur debt for dock and harbor improvements. The establishment of New York City’s Department of Docks in 1870 brought a bold progressive vision to the handling of the city’s waterfront, principally a master plan for a state-of-the-art bulkhead and pier system extending from Fifty-first Street...
on the East River around Manhattan’s southern tip to Sixty-first Street on the Hudson. The ambitions of this city agency and its master plan—a course charted by George B. McClellan, whose skill as a hydrological engineer far surpassed his Civil War reputation—aimed to make Manhattan’s waterfront technologically and aesthetically compatible with the unprecedented national and international trade that beckoned at its doorstep.

New York City’s waterfront planning initiatives did not insure a context favorable to the oyster barges and those throughout the oyster industry whose fortunes were linked to them. As early as the 1850s, the city’s Board of Pilot Commissioners was lodging formal complaints against barges adjacent to the Fulton Market claiming they were an encumbrance to commerce and, in 1870, it took the newly formed Department of Docks little time to declare that it was “not going to allow canal-boats and oyster boats to remain in one slip the year round to become boarding-houses, and interfere with the landing of cargoes from the hold of vessels engaged in domestic and foreign commerce.”

Interestingly, as tensions escalated between the Dock Commissioners and the oyster barge owners, both parties hedged their claim to the waterfront in terms that resonated closely with an emerging body of case law known as the public trust doctrine: court rulings seeking to insure that common property or natural resources—in this case, the waterfront—equitably served society’s greatest number of people. Unrelenting in its position, the Department of Docks “contended that these barges or structures were in no sense ships . . . and pointed it out as the duty of the oystermen to acquire premises on the streets, and leave the docks for the accommodation of legitimate shipping.” Countering these claims, counsel for the oyster barge owners saw their client’s wharf needs as inseparable from the needs of the commonweal, given “the extent and importance of the oyster trade of New York.”

Barge owners justified their claim not solely on the volume of oysters being landed but on the ability of barges to readily handle loads that, in the absence of barges, would spoil while their carriers awaited moorings at vacant dock space; since oyster barges generally used only one slip on both the Hudson and East Rivers at any given time, barge owners saw it as a reasonable stance. Not to be outdone by the opposition’s claim to being indispensable to the public good, a civic ally charged New York Times article sporting the banner “Our Waterfront” described, in laudatory terms, the work of the Department of Docks where “engineers and surveyors are carrying on an active crusade against the squatters along the upper portions of the river front, and are gradually reclaiming a very important locality from the oyster-boat and mud-scow monopolists.” Progressive planning’s commitment to order and scientific precision saw oyster barges contributing to the perpetuation of a chaotic landscape; in short, an outdated relic that did not make enough of a civic contribution and stunted the port’s economic growth. The irony of this position was probably not lost on New Yorkers who recognized oyster barges as being among the most environmentally synchronized architectural forms to occupy the waterfront.

Although environmental fit and culinary appeal provided oyster barge owners with some leverage in negotiating space for their floating structures, they could not impair the vision of the Department of Docks—whose mission now fused the tradition of internal improvements with the ideals of progressivism—or stop fragmentation within their own ranks due to market competition for oysters. By the late 1880s and 1890s, oyster barge owners had grown weary of the costs and other logistical arrangements associated with being displaced from one waterfront location to another and sought redress for their concerns. Recounting the pressure from commercial shipping that resulted in their moving consistently northward along the Hudson River from slips at Washington Market, Spring Street, and Christopher Street, barge owners took consolation in having occupied slips between West Tenth Street and West Eleventh Street since 1866. It was not simply the tenure of their occupancy that engendered this feeling but also the construction of an enclosing seawall around these slips that provided a safer haven for the barges and a harbor of refuge for sloops and schooners delivering their cargo.
Strongly wedded to this site, oyster dealers and planters organized in 1887 under the Oyster Dealers and Planters Association of New York “for mutual aid and protection” principally for the use of the Tenth Street docks. The New York Legislature responded to the group’s lobbying pressure, granting oyster barges special consideration at West Tenth Street, but still giving the Department of Docks power to sell and revoke leases at this site. The physical make-up of the West Tenth Street docks, combined with the barges’ long tenure at this location and some of the concessions they had received in using it by earlier city officials, harbor masters, and dock commissioners, led barge owners, “after being moved so many times . . . to the conclusion that they had a pre-emption right to the same; and, indeed, the Commissioners of Docks, in July 1880, did set it aside for the oyster business, subject, however, to revocation by said board.” In spite of any concessions this legal framework afforded oyster dealers, their future was imperiled when the dock commissioners allowed the Oyster Dealers and Planters Association to be outbid by an individual oyster dealer (not a member of the association) in the sale of the lease for the West Tenth Street slip. The new leaseholder, Tim Shea, upon announcing a raise in barge rents as high as seventy-five percent, precipitated the exodus of “a majority of the barges . . . to the West Washington market, thus dividing the oyster interest into two parts, at a considerable loss to the party bidding of the franchise, and much expense to the parties moving away to the upper market.”

No less contested were the rugged working conditions and dockside cultures that shrouded everyday life at the oyster barge. Friendly competition among shuckers aside, those classed as “oyster-openers” saw themselves as skilled workers and, with oyster demand at its all-time height in the final decades of the nineteenth century, organized themselves into the Oyster Openers Union to claim their stake in the prosperity flowing from the New York City oyster barge. Regardless of how actively oyster dealers monitored their own work force, the barge itself and the commodity it handled could not avoid the wider thievery and tramp culture of New York City’s docks. Charles H. Farnham expressed the plight of oyster dealer and non–oyster dealer alike when, in 1879, he said “it is impracticable to guard thoroughly such a long line of merchandise; and the irregular, nook-and-corner structures along the docks offer abundant shelter for prowlers . . . the docks are full of irregular, nook-and-corner men, preying on every kind of produce landed on the wharves.” With oysters being a target of petty and felonious thieves from the Chesapeake to the New York metropolitan area, barge owners had reason to exercise surveillance beyond the

working in a context where market competition for oysters was rising, oyster barges became engulfed in the complicated race relations of the post–Civil War era, particularly when some barge owners decided to hire all-black crews. Whatever social or economic gradations separated sorts, carriers, or shuckers by race, ethnicity, or class, none were immune from the stress of occupational injury at the oyster barge—whether one risked life or limb while walking the planks between sloops and schooners moored to the barge or gradually developed an inflammatory condition known as “shucker’s keratitis” from the accumulation of oyster shell particles in the eye (Figure 11). W. H. Rideing captured these human costs, alerting the public that “accidents are common along the river-front, and this one has the effect of toning down our felicitations on the external brilliancy of the traffic, and reminding us of the lives that are spent in its maintenance.” Outside the oyster barge, workers deftly stepped along the gang-planks connecting oyster boats to each other as well as to the barge, and ducked an ever-present thicket of vessel rigging while either hoisting baskets of oysters from a vessel’s hold with block-and-tackle or carrying them on their shoulders. Although the movements of these workers appeared instinctual, giving the impression they were beyond harm’s reach, they were easily prone to the fate of Levick Joyce, who, in 1886, “While at work on William Chrystie’s oyster barge . . . fell overboard and was drowned.”

Regardless of how actively oyster dealers monitored their own work force, the barge itself and the commodity it handled could not avoid the wider thievery and tramp culture of New York City’s docks. Charles H. Farnham expressed the plight of oyster dealer and non–oyster dealer alike when, in 1879, he said “it is impracticable to guard thoroughly such a long line of merchandise; and the irregular, nook-and-corner structures along the docks offer abundant shelter for prowlers . . . the docks are full of irregular, nook-and-corner men, preying on every kind of produce landed on the wharves.” With oysters being a target of petty and felonious thieves from the Chesapeake to the New York metropolitan area, barge owners had reason to exercise surveillance beyond the
immediate confines of their individual barges. Where wide open spaces shielded thieves in bays and rivers, under the docks, they were afforded refuge in a seemingly endless labyrinth of “cribs of beams and spiles,” a clandestine existence only feet from the objects of their desire and the workers who handled it. Lurking in “mouths of sewers, odd holes here and there along the rocky shores . . . some of it almost inaccessible,” these “wharf rats,” “dock rats,” or thieves—as they were known based on age, social profile, or volume of contraband secured—proved even more formidable when organized as gangs. Barge owners combated these mobile transgressors with their own watchmen, relying additionally on the city’s river police in the patrol steamer Seneca. Filling out this scene, as Farnham describes, “a wharf loafer overhauls a pile of refuse shells and cullings, to find a few rejected oysters” at the West Tenth Street barges, while the accepted sight and presence of “sleeping tramps” or the “gentleman tramp”—frequent subjects of the city’s social reform movement—clarified the barge’s role in reinforcing New York City’s docks as a “great panorama of human life, filled with toils, pleasures, and miseries” (Figure 12).  

While the oyster barge’s water-facing portal was functionally and symbolically slanted toward the structure’s environmental fit, its street-facing orientation accentuated a space whose ambient qualities provoked the public’s gaze, interaction, and response. From the street, the stark verticality of the oyster barge’s facade seemingly catapulted the oyster from its waterborne state and, architecturally adorned beyond what was needed to fulfill their basic function, brought a sublime cast to the handling of the humble bivalve. Driven to compete in New York City’s gaggingly competitive marketplace, and its correspondingly crowded built environment, oyster dealers deployed the oyster barge as an architectural troupe to garner a patron’s attention away from any number of sensory diversions along the waterfront. Judging by Ernest Ingersoll’s awestruck impressions in the 1870s and 1880s, as well as sentiment from those who saw such architectural whim as a calculated commercial prop, the enduring effect was unquestionable. When these barges were in their twilight, Joseph Mitchell, the dean of New York City’s waterfront essayists, could readily report of their “balconies with banisters shaped like tenpins on their upper decks, and the offices in several had mahogany paneling: the reputation of an oyster company partly depended on the splendor of its barge . . . all were painted a variety of colors and all had ostentatious black-and-gold name-
boards across their fronts and all flew swallow-tail pennants; people visited the waterfront just to see them.” The oyster barge’s endurance on the waterfront, and the countless gazes it elicited, mirrored the intractable task of making oysters conform to modern food processing—a shellfish whose variable size and shape defied mechanization and preserved the barge as a vestige of New York’s City’s premodern, agrarian past.¹³

The oyster barge’s striking vernacular aesthetic did not rest solely on the incorporation of a number of popular architectural idioms but also in its framing of a waterfront encounter. Central to this experience was the barge’s everyday working aesthetic, a series of ambient features ranging from the sound of “the incessant ‘tap, tap’ and ‘click’ of the oyster opening implements” to the sight and smell of “shells which form so conspicuous a feature before these houseboats” and “speak more emphatically than tongue of the work going on inside.” In an era when Americans began yearning for a reconciliation of national and regional identity, and searching for authentic experiences to accompany it, they turned to the oyster barge. They were guided in this search by such serial publications as *Harper’s Weekly* and *Leslie’s Magazine* (Figure 13; see also Figure 9) along with other forms of the popular press, where in both pictures and prose the spectacle of the oyster barge was aestheticized in an effort to claim it, and the process it brokered, as representative of all that was compellingly productive and seemingly innocent in America’s devouring urge to transform natural resources into commodities. Even though the economic concept of value added had yet to enter America’s popular parlance, New York City’s oyster dealers used ethnographic imagery of the oyster barge to promote their product in fisheries trade journals. These architectural and landscape associations resonated with an audience driven by the sentiment of America’s mythic ecological design and its supposed liberating expectations.¹⁴

The paradox of the oyster barge was its inclusion in a landscape that might, in one sighting, be pejoratively viewed as “unsightly, dangerous, and inconvenient,” but also, both in juxtaposition and with equal frequency, capable of transfixing onlookers with the appeal of being “picturesque.” To impart the oyster barge with the moniker of “picturesque” was to see it, in artistic terms, as constructively contributing to the variety of the American experience, a proposition taken very seriously by visual artists seeking to express America’s multiple identities following the Civil War. Pursuing this quest with the likes of...
Figure 13.
By the early twentieth century, perhaps in response to the oyster barge’s increasingly anachronistic appearance, photographic and written depiction focused more explicitly on the structure’s ecological context and ethnographic detail. In this portrayal from Leslie’s Weekly (November 7, 1901, 434), a barge’s African American shuckers, along with a queue of oyster vessels at an oyster barge, are complemented by images of oyster planting, harvesting, and peddling.
Thomas Eakins and Eastman Johnson at the Society of American Artists Exhibition in 1881, John Henry Twachtman’s painting “Dock, Foot of Tenth Street,” also labeled “Tenth Street Docks” in another review, ably used the oyster barge in an artistic vision that embraced “the most prosaic and local of themes . . . proving that even such homely material might be brought into satisfactory and, of course, quite original sorts of art.” Indeed, this painting was heralded as Twachtman’s best in the exhibition, showing “in enfilade the ends of oyster-barges that are moored in a basin at the foot of West Tenth Street; before them are at anchor several oyster sloops of the picturesque Manhattan variety.” The artist’s estimation of the oyster barge’s meaning, and what it could possibly convey, was not rash; the barges were included in his earlier painting entitled “Oyster Boats, North River” (circa 1880; Figure 14). One art critic saw “Oyster Boats” as nodding to “the quality of ‘studies of nature’ so prevalent in Twachtman’s work, and going directly to depictions of the barge’s ecological significance, stated that the artist “see things very directly and feels them very strongly, and furthermore very pictorially, noting their relations as well as themselves” (italics mine).  

In passing muster with New York City’s discriminating art critics, Twachtman’s “Tenth Street Docks” reconciled artistic notions of the “picturesque” with those aesthetic ambitions purposely driven to express local and regional identity. Duly affirmed by accepted cultural authority, Twachtman’s painting lent greater credence to the barge’s reputation as “tasty” in appearance, and thus, in accordance with the cultural context of such a characterization, an eminently consumable visitor experience where the “world of fashion journeyed down to the Fulton Market once in a while to an oyster bar to be so much nearer to the source of fresh supply.” Treatment of the barges from Twachtman and other artists, writers, and popular pictorialists led the way for members of polite society to visit these venues under the ethnographic, voyeuristically charged cover of “slumming” in the hope that they, in the words of one artist, would discover “the most delightfully picturesque bits of New York” and in “a throng of men who rattle past, pushing hand-trucks top-heavy with their load of oysters . . . come upon the market’s pièce de résistance.”

From the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, New York City’s oyster barges became a signature element of the metropolis’s eclectic waterfront life—a seemingly inescapable feature that well-known oyster chronicler Ernest Ingersoll described as being similar to “the conventional ‘Noah’s Ark’ of toy shops, and the Sunday School picture books.” Ingersoll’s rapt gaze and the lengthy description it prompted was widely shared, a legacy of responses elicited by a distinctive architectural form and architectural idiom (Figure 15). Viewed in the abstract, Ingersoll’s reaction to the city’s oyster barges gives the impression he was simply awestruck—like many others—by an architectural form whose appearance seemed increasingly at odds with the metropolis’s sweeping transformations. But he was equally taken by the seasonal and daily drama performed at these sites, a frenzy of activity featuring a diverse workforce driven to move, process, and market vast amounts of oysters. Ingersoll specifically integrates his description of the barges with statistical accounts of unprecedented numbers of oysters being handled in New York City; through his lens, the oyster barge’s architectural distinction appropriately punctuates the economic ambition and environmental demands of high volume oyster harvesting.  

Figure 14. Engraving of John Henry Twachtman’s oil painting “Oyster Boats, North River (Hudson River)” with oyster barges projecting from the right side of the image. From Scribner’s Monthly, July 1880, 332.
Ingersoll’s reputation as an observer of America’s oyster industry, along with his wider knowledge of the nation’s maritime affairs and subsequent revelations of his acute insight into the pulse of New York City’s economic and cultural life, shed light on his vivid characterization of the city’s oyster barges. More than chronicler’s hyperbole, his comments were a reaction to the barge’s relevance as both an instrument and emblem of a nation whose economic vision justified high-volume use of natural resources. To the classically educated Ingersoll, the oyster barge blatantly staged the bivalve’s modern place in America’s longstanding Edenic vision of its bountiful natural endowments.

By straddling two environments and appearing to emerge from the estuary’s depths just like the bivalve it housed, the barge was material evidence of the tensions between the nineteenth-century fascination with the pastoral, agrarian premodern and the drive toward ever-greater mass production and consumption. Oyster barges effected a series of exchanges of the live, perishable commodity starting with oysters being moved from their natural spawning grounds and taken directly to market by oyster tongers, or moved to an oysterman’s planted grounds where they were cultivated for future sale. Then they were shipped and stored live on oyster barges until they were either shucked or shipped live in the shell to those who depended on them for sustenance (see Figure 13). While, as David Scobey notes, other portals of New York City’s vibrant commercial life went to great architectural lengths in expressing society’s “tribute to the fetishism of commodities” by monumentally adorning grand freight terminals, the metropolis’s less ostentatious oyster barges managed to hold their own distinctive place in this pantheon of market thresholds. Seeking to convey these dynamics, one contemporary writer saw particular significance in the daily drama of the oyster market:

[But more interesting to the human drudge are the long rows of oyster-barges that are moored permanently along the wharves at certain points. Villages of oyster houses, rather, are they, very compactly built and closely ranged, and painted white . . . The poetry that tinges the life even of the oyster-opener

Figure 15. “Oyster-Barges at the Foot of West Tenth Street, North River (Hudson River), New York City.” From Ernest Ingersoll, The History and Present Condition of the Oyster Industry—Tenth Census of the United States (Trenton, N.J.: John L. Murphy Senate Printer, 1882), plate 33.
is observable in the old horseshoes nailed to most of the gangways; for superstition is poetry, and there is something mystic and pleasing in the idea of thus exorcising the nocturnal goblins by whom the fresh oysters might be spoiled.\(^{17}\)

The barge laid bare the oyster’s biological and commercial susceptibility in the city’s intoxicating economic juggernaut. At the same time, it served as nature’s nexus in a society seeking to preserve a premodern myth that supposedly sustained the best intentions of America’s consumer habits. Both the architectural and working spectacle of New York City’s depots and terminals paid homage to the nation’s love affair with commodity exchange, but in the midst of intensified competition for the city’s waterfront space and the social divisions it fostered, the oyster barge’s raw machinations made a spectacle of challenges confronting, as Joseph Taylor notes, “the Jeffersonian ideal of . . . perfecting nature” in an industrial age.\(^{18}\)

Seeking to capitalize on the mythic appeal of oyster barges, one commentator assured readers that “a peep at the interior of any one of the oyster barges in the market would be a revelation . . . and a walk through the market would afford him an insight into the workings of a craft,” while others wanted to romantically embrace them as a landscape “simply quaint and lovable . . . with its memorable smells . . . oyster floats, half house, half boat” (Figure 16). These gestures, whether they consumed the onlooker’s attention in prose, picture, or on site, were a call to witness the most conspicuous oyster processing location in the United States, with the oyster barge’s ambidextrous tether at center stage—a mirror of the estuarine environment’s mixed world and the oyster’s capacity to live in and out of water. Herein was the spectacle of the oyster barge, like New York City itself, a gateway phenomenon whose voracious transformational rhythm was emblematic of more than taking oysters from the raw to the cooked but also a host of ecological relationships and consumptive patterns at the heart of America’s national temperament. The gaze oyster barges garnered stemmed from this multidimensionality, a landscape capable of con-

Figure 16.
Oyster barges figured prominently in the allure of nostalgia and the power of the picturesque. This image, entitled “Smacks and oyster-floats near Fulton Market,” from Jesse Lynch Williams’s New York Sketches (New York: Scribner’s, 1902), accompanied text that characterized the feeling around New York City’s floating oyster market as “simply quaint and lovable . . . with its memorable smells . . . oyster floats, half house, half boat.”
taining physical components, natural resources, and human participants that animated a discourse signaling the ambitions and tensions of the country’s environmental ethos.

The endurance of oyster barges along Manhattan’s waterfront as late as the 1890s defied many of the prevailing social, economic, political, and technological patterns of the day. Their survival, be it in the form of the actual barge itself or the memory it evoked, was a telling counterpoint to these trends. Reluctant to let them go—either as artifact, image, or memory—some barge owners and commentators challenged their New York audience to see oyster barges as embodying the tensions and grandeur of the metropolis’s ecological dynamics, and, at the same time, as an architectural form capable of bringing greater understanding to the human action that transformed it. This role kept the oyster barge at the forefront of people’s consciousness while the waterfront it helped define was fading away. In 1906, according to older oyster barge captains, connections to the waterfront became frayed when customers simply contacted oyster planters at their remote locations by telephone or telegraph for their orders rather than come to the barges. Later, a sympathetic observer noted, “The oyster barge is a story of defeat. They were amphibious hybrids, and the waterfront of New York had no permanent parking space for boats that neither crawl on dry land nor go to sea . . . freshly painted every Spring, equipped with electricity, ice-cracking machines and telephones but still not proof against the mutations of civilization.”

In what proved to be a slow requiem, Joseph Mitchell, with pen in hand, recorded the barge’s palpable environmental linkage in print, while renowned photographer Berenice Abbott captured it on film (Figure 17). Ironically, Robert Moses and his cadre of modern planners spelled the end of New York City’s oyster barges at the wharf when they began their campaign to reconnect the city to its “rim of water” through highways and parks rather than through the more tangible experience of the working waterfront.

Figure 17.
Berenice Abbott’s photograph of oyster barges at the intersection of Pike and South streets along the East River. From Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
But these final chapters of New York City’s oyster barges did not diminish their status as signature features of metropolis’s historic waterfront, notable as thresholds for coordinating the systematic use of terrestrial and waterborne resources. Instead, in human terms, they revealed the extent of oyster barges as thresholds of an environmental experience where a working landscape framed the fruit of labor and, along with it, the inevitability and perception of social conflict, government oversight, scientific curiosity, and artistic commentary.1

Some might view the surviving oyster barge on the bank of the Quinnipiac River as a compelling artifact whose story is compromised by its removal from Manhattan’s waterfront. As well intentioned as this interpretive or curatorial perspective might be, it benignly neglects, and at worst stunts, consideration of an architectural form whose unique appearance was certainly based in the demands of its immediate, original setting in New York City but was equally complicit in work, commerce, and biological exchange that reached far beyond Gotham’s urban context. Few would dispute that oyster barges were quintessential earmarks of New York City’s vernacular landscape. But the boldness of their expression, based on their specific oyster-processing function and their inclusion in the wider place-specific dynamics of the Manhattan waterfront scene, suggests that what we see as most bounded in vernacular landscapes is exactly what makes them so much more consequential in lives, venues, and ecological relationships far removed from them. Whatever its fate, there will be no need to mourn or celebrate this vestige of Manhattan’s waterfront. Not unlike much of what Manhattan represented physically and temperamentally, these landscape features did not belong solely to the city but were bellwethers of far more diffusive relationships—forms of vernacular architecture whose movement to the Quinnipiac River were a plausible outcome of the very commercial and ecological orbit they structured.

NOTES

Portions of this article were presented at the 2006 Vernacular Architecture Forum Conference in New York City. The author would like to acknowledge the useful comments provided by conference participants. The author is also grateful for comments and assistance from James B. Kirk III, Kristin M. Szylvian, and Robert Havira in the preparation of this article.


17. Ibid., 2.


22. “Removal of the Oyster Barges at West Tenth Street,” *The Fishing Gazette* 13 (May 2, 1896); Leo Marx,


33. Charles Henry White’s, “The Fulton Street Market,” Harper’s Monthly Magazine, September 1905, 616–23, is an excellent example of an artist/writer describing his encounter and portrayal of the oyster barges and


