

Joseph Wharton and the Crab Island Fish Factory

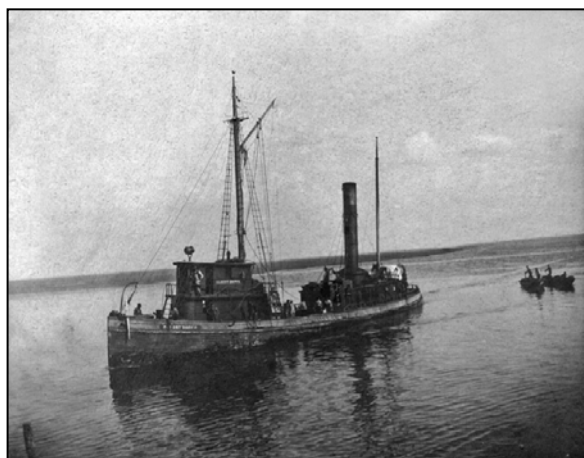
Wharton's third major economic involvement with New Jersey was fishing processing the catch at the factory Crab Island in the Great Bay. This is the most uncharacteristic of all his ventures. It bears no relation to the mining and refining of metals; has no connection with any scientific or educational project; is different in kind from his interest in railroads and in the pinelands. Catching the menhaden had not even any emotional involvement with a love of the sea. Wharton's papers give no indication that he made a voyage on one of his fishing boats or even visited the factories in which oil was refined and fish scrap prepared (and he must have done both).



Joseph Wharton

Other members of his family ignored the business and probably could not have described the difference between a mossbunker and a cod. Yet in its formative years Wharton gave the business a great deal of detailed attention and only relaxed in this when it became too big, and he too involved with other things. Then he put Roger Haydock in charge.

He set a value of \$20,787.59 on the business as of 21 December 1894. James E. Otis was then manager of the fertilizer factory on Crab Island and the steamers *Alert* and *Active*, which comprised the fishing fleet. That was the year, too, in which Wharton enlarged the business by employing George W. Miles to fish in New England waters. Miles owned a fish fertilizer plant at Welsh Point, Milford, Connecticut. Wharton chartered for him an ancient steamer at 188 tons called the *Acushnet* which had been used during the Civil War to catch blockade runners and had later been rebuilt as a passenger boat and had run between New York and New Bedford, Massachusetts.



The fishing steamer, *Albert Brown*
From the Marian Broome Photo Collection.

For the remainder of the nineties Wharton did little by way of expanding the fishing business. He purchased Miles' factory, bought and remodeled the *Acushnet*, and bought and sold another boat, the *Albert Brown*. In years when the fish were running he made money and took a renewed interest in the business. In off years he talked of selling.

Toward the beginning of the Spanish-American War the menhaden industry began to experience some consolidation. A syndicate was formed for the purpose in 1898, headed by Captain N. B. Church. At

first Wharton offered to sell the syndicate his various interests for thirty thousand dollars. When the syndicate failed to respond, he tried to sell the *Acushnet* to the federal government for a price of twenty-five thousand dollars, this being more than twice its actual value. The government was not interested.

Wharton's change in attitude toward the menhaden venture coincided with his departure from active work in making steel and nickel. In 1901 he bought another steamer, the

Olive Branch, whose name he petitioned to have changed to *Adroit*. Captain C. W. Mathis replaced Otis as manager of the fish works. Church's syndicate had by now been organized under the name, The Fisheries Company. Wharton put his fishing properties into another combination, called the Newport Fertilizer Company, in which he bought a controlling interest. From that point consolidation within the industry rapidly went ahead. The Newport company became the Wharton Fisheries Company. Wharton also acquired control over the Cape Fear Fisheries Company of South Carolina and finally in 1906 purchased Church's firm. The combination of the three companies was capitalized at three million dollars. Its properties included forty-one steamships and eight plants for making fish oil and fertilizer and employed about 2,600 people. Its yearly product was estimated to be worth approximately one million dollars.

These transactions effectively gave Wharton a monopoly over the menhaden fishing and fertilizer industry of the Atlantic coast. He was president of the enlarged Wharton Fisheries Company and Haydock was vice-president. According to an article in the *Philadelphia Bulletin* for 4 June 1906, "The deal has accrued to the advantage of Philadelphia. for the New York office has been closed and a handsome new suite of offices opened in the Drexel building."

In a sense all of his Jersey ventures were "to the advantage of Philadelphia." He had not planned it that way, but such was the result. It was, from his point of view, natural. That the city council rejected the water project, which would have been of greatest benefit, was not surprising. Politicians, he believed, frequently did things against the best interests of the people. Industrialists did better. Their work which they undertook for their own profit formed a woof into which were woven the strands of interests of family, city, state, nation, and humanity to form a seamless and attractive cloth.

Excerpt from *Joseph Wharton: Quaker Industrial Pioneer* by W. Ross Yates, Associated University Press, December 1987, 413 pages. Photos were added from the Bass River Community Library Photo Archives.