

AMERICAN LEGION SELLS HISTORIC CANNON TO DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Cannon dates back to 1868, when it was used by the Oyster Police to protect the Chesapeake Bay's oyster supply.

By [Marc Shapiro](#)

It's not every day that a relic of Maryland law enforcement and Chesapeake Bay history just pops up. That's why Lt. Gregory Bartles of the Maryland Natural Resources Police spent three years working to acquire one 12-pounder Dahlgren Light Boat Howitzer.

"This cannon is something I always thought of as the Holy Grail for [Department of Natural Resources] history," Bartles, the Area 8 commander and agency historian for the Maryland Natural Resources Police, said.

The Maryland Oyster Police, the earliest predecessor to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), used the cannon during the "oyster wars" of the late 1800s. The state purchased the cannon Thursday night from the American Legion Post 116 in Reisterstown for \$40,000.

"This cannon is one of the most important artifacts in the history of the Department of Natural Resources and a true Maryland state treasure," said Director of the U.S. Navy Museum Kim Nielsen, via email.

A private donor gave DNR half the money for the cannon, and DNR Secretary John Griffin matched the contribution.

But before this 142-year-old cannon wound up in Bartles' possession, it spent its time protecting Maryland's oyster supply and gracing the lawn of a prominent Maryland businessman.

In 1868, the state created the Maryland Oyster Police to enforce previously enacted laws that aimed to protect the state's oyster supply. Prior to the agency's founding, these laws, which prohibited oyster harvesting for the state's benefit and required boats to have licenses to harvest, were hard to enforce without an authority on the water, according to DNR's website.

The agency's first commander was a Naval Academy graduate and former Lt. Commander in the Confederate States Navy named Hunter Davidson. After assuming his new post, he asked a friend from the Confederacy if there were any cannons he could have for a ship, *Leila*, the agency's first vessel.

The cannon Bartles acquired on Thursday was that very cannon, which was made at Tredegar Iron Works, a foundry in Richmond. It wasn't just for show—it

saw a lot of action as unwelcome vessels, "dredgers," sailed into the Chesapeake Bay to illegally harvest Maryland oysters. These boats would drag metal baskets with large pouches attached to them across oyster beds.

"Right after the Civil War and up to the 1890s, the oyster industry was the biggest industry in Maryland," Bartles said. "It was like the gold rush in California."

One news account said in 1888, dredgers harvested 10,000 bushels a day.

Bloodshed was common, often taking the form of shoot-outs between dredgers and the oyster police.

"There was a lot of money and a lot of greed," Bartles said. "There were bodies in the water every other day."

The cannon was referred to as a 12-pounder because of the weight of the projectiles it would fire. The *Leila* was taken out of the Oyster Police's fleet in 1884, the same year a ship called the *Governor McLane* was built.

A news account describes the *Governor McLane* as having a 12-pounder Dahlgren howitzer installed in Annapolis in 1888.

"I can't say this is the same howitzer [that was on *Leila*], but I firmly believe it is," Bartles said.

In 1891, when Congress passed legislation that helped equip naval militias, the cannon was retired. It was given to Isaac Emerson, who invented the antacid Bromo-Seltzer, as a token of appreciation from the state.

The cannon sat on Emerson's lawn until 1938, when it was given to Reisterstown resident Clifford Sullivan, who was clearing snow in the area of the Emerson estate.

Sullivan kept the cannon at an Esso Station on the corner of Chatsworth Avenue and Main Street, where it sat until the American Legion found a home in the 1950s. Other than being used at a few state-run demonstrations over the years, it has been sitting at Post 116 since then.

When the post's past commander, Tim Clarke, emailed the Chesapeake Bay Journal to try to find a photo of the *Leila*, a chain of emails led to Bartles, who had to have that cannon.

"It's been on my bucket list," Bartles said. "This was a monumental effort and it took me three years and a whole lot of politicking."

The post plans to use the money from the cannon's sale in its general fund to make post improvements and support the various charities the post works with.

"It's better served for the people of Maryland than our membership here," Clarke said.

Post Commander Glenn Krout was sad to see it go, but glad it will be protected and viewable by the public.

Bartles said the cannon will be initially on display in the lobby of the Tawes State Office Building in Annapolis, where DNR is headquartered. The cannon will then travel to the Baltimore Museum of Industry, where Bartles hopes to have an event on March 30 to celebrate the Oyster Police's 143rd anniversary. Finally, he hopes to find the cannon a home at the National Sailing Center & Hall of Fame in Annapolis.

While the fine print of the cannon's future travels still needs to be worked out, Bartles said DNR officials and other parties involved are on board.

"It's going to do wonders to educate generations," he said.