



THOMAS GUAY

Seeking and writing about America's past in historic Annapolis

As a journalist, Thomas Guay once trod the corridors of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, covering current events or, as he puts it, “tomorrow’s history.” These days, he resides in Annapolis, Maryland, steeped in American colonial history. On April 1, McBooks Press will publish his debut novel, *Chesapeake Bound: An Annapolis Novel*. The book is the first in a planned series featuring Michael Shea, who sails from London for America in 1763 as an indentured servant >

ABOVE RIGHT Thomas Guay at Bethany Beach on the Delaware shore, with the Wild Atlantic in the background.

All images are credited to Karen Guay unless otherwise designated.

aboard *The Delight*, an ill-fated brig. See our review on page 33 and an excerpt from the novel on page 23.

After settling in Annapolis with his wife, Karen, Guay's interest turned to Colonial America. Along the narrow cobbled lanes and sun-washed red-brick buildings, he found his inspiration for *Chesapeake Bound*.

Guay worked as a host at the historic Charles Carroll House and as a re-enactor and tour guide at other landmark colonial houses. At the same time, he researched indentured servants' lives, the merchant ship *Peggy Stewart* burned at Annapolis in 1774, and tax-related uprisings in the Chesapeake Bay region.

Guay says the ideas started flowing when he started working as a docent at the historic Charles Carroll House. Then he joined the ranks of the Watermark Tours colonial tour guides who affectionately call themselves "streetwalkers." It's through Watermark that he created the persona, Squire Tomás, a former indentured servant who works as a printer for Anne Catharine Green. At the same time, he delved into the lives of indentured servants, the story behind the burning of the merchant ship, *Peggy Stewart*, and other tax-related sparks that led to the American Revolution."

He also enjoyed life as a river rat with a river protection group, the Severn River Association. He was usually found behind the helm of a 20-foot Maritime Skiff, *Sea Girl*. Through the years, he trained teams of volunteers and student interns, built a water quality database, tracked Osprey populations, monitored oyster restoration reefs and hosted floating classrooms for students." When not on the river, he also sails the Chesapeake Bay aboard his 27-foot sailboat, *Salty Blue*. This past season, as in previous years, he logged over 100 days on the water."

In his spare time, musicianer Guay plays traditional fiddle with the popular music group



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TOP The Historic Charles Carroll House of Annapolis (left). The structures in the background did not exist in the 18th century.

ABOVE "Squire Tomás at the Charles Carroll House during colonial Christmas season."

The Eastport Oyster Boys.

Quarterdeck recently caught up with Guay ahead of *Chesapeake Bound*'s launch.

—George Jepson



Where did your interest in the sea originate?

Long, long ago . . . when my parents took my sister and me, as toddlers, to live on the Atlantic seashore, from Key West to Cape Cod, and later to the Outer Banks, Kitty Hawk, Roanoke/Croatan and annual vacations along the Delaware shore. There's always a sense of adventure walking along a shoreline, watching boats sail by, riding waves, and exploring sand dunes. It's easy to day-

dream about what life must have been like during the days of first contact at Plymouth, Jamestown and, especially, the mystery of Roanoke/Croatan settlers.

Have books been an essential part of your life? Do you favor particular authors and genres?

Books have always been a part of my life, especially tales about history, mystery, and adventure. I've always had a book in hand. I sup- ➤

pose it all started as a kid with the movies *Treasure Island*, *In Search Of The Castaways*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Mutiny On The Bounty*. I then read all the books and kept diving into sea stories.

Later, I read everything the library offered about the Pacific campaigns in World War II. In high school I read Samuel Elliott Morrison's histories and delved into the era of exploration, discovery and the destruction that followed. In literature classes, I especially enjoyed the *Odyssey* and *Jason's search for the Golden Fleece*.

In college, I was a student of Dr. Gordon Prange (author of the World War II history *At Dawn We Slept*, which was the basis for the film *Tora! Tora! Tora!*) and delved into Japan's motivations that led to Pearl Harbor, which in turn led me to *Shogun*. Dr. Prange also introduced me to Barbara Tuckman, William Shire, and John Toland. I became fascinated with their analyses of societies and political leaders who undertook misadventures that led to their ruin.

When we moved to Annapolis, the sailing capital of America, I got hooked on the Patrick O'Brian novels right as I was learning to sail myself. I was most captivated by the character of Stephen Maturin and his role as an intelligence agent. However, I must admit, I was cheering for the Americans when the USS *Constitution* appeared to do battle with HMS *Java* in *The Fortune of War*, and I was distressed at how quickly the USS *Chesapeake* was dispatched.

I'm also a big fan of John le Carré's George Smiley series and novels by Alan Furch and Phillip Kerr. For detective and mysteries, Arthur



Photo credit: Joe Evans.

ABOVE The Eastport Oyster Boys: l-r: Andy Fegley, Michael Lange, Tom Guay, and Kevin Brooks.

“My most popular songs are with The Eastport Oyster Boys who celebrate life in Annapolis, Eastport, and sailing the Chesapeake Bay.”

dialogue. I fictionalized a legal decision and created everyman characters in 300 words or less. The challenge was to draw our readers into studying something dry—a court decision. I discovered that if the characters were realistic and exciting, then my readers would invest the time to read the dialogue and then turn the page . . . literally, turn the page, to learn how the court ruled so they could avoid trouble for themselves in their jobs. I knew the characters were interesting because when our sales team called subscribers to renew subscriptions, the subscribers/readers would ask about my fictional characters, Buck Flanagan and Margaret Farley.

I also write original songs for my various musical groups. My most popular songs are with The Eastport Oyster Boys, celebrating life in Annapolis, Eastport, and sailing the Chesapeake Bay. The nautical life is all around us, and that's why our songs are immersed in the lore of sailing, though with a bit of humor. It's sort of like the cartoon series *Fractured Fairy Tales*.

[What drew you to write maritime fiction? >](#)

Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammet, Agatha Christie, Louise Penny and many more.

[What had you written before *Chesapeake Bound*?](#)

Before *Chesapeake Bound*, I was learning the ins and outs of using dialogue to entice and engage newsletter subscribers as part of a campaign to boost renewal rates. The idea turned into flash fiction. The primary vehicle in telling these stories was through dialogue as if the reader were watching a play where everything is revealed through



The combination of living in Annapolis, absorbing our city’s political, economic, social, and maritime history, working as a docent in the Charles Carroll House, learning to sail, becoming an 18th-century tour guide, and reading Patrick O’Brian ignited my interest in maritime fiction. This prompted the question: “How and why did our ancestors come to live in the Wildes of Amerikay?” I delved into maritime fiction and nonfiction to study life on an 18th-century ocean voyage.

Did you have any second thoughts about entering an already well-populated genre?

Not really. I used all the books in the nautical fiction genre as resources, as windows into the 18th century. I knew I wouldn’t compete directly with the masters of the art. I was focused on an immigrant story based on my historical research peppered with my personal experiences as a “musicianer” and the access this gives performers in all venues. And given my history studies in college, reading Dr. Prange, Tuckman, etc, I knew my focus would be on why wars start. I also thought I could mix in a bit of immigration, spying, romance, mystery, and intrigue with the adven-

ABOVE Tom as Squire Tomás performing Christmas dances at Hogshead house in downtown Annapolis.

BELOW Thomas Guay (left) and Kevin Brooks rock out with the Eastport Oyster Boys.

ture of an ocean voyage. As readers enjoy the adventure, I hope to share the insights I’ve gained about the behind-the-scenes causes of wars, revolution, social upheaval and why empires fall.

What most appeals to you about the mid-eighteenth century?

I’m living in an 18th-century colonial city. I’ve become a sailor. I’ve always been enamored with the adventure associated with the golden age of sailing, and it’s all around us in Annapolis. The town is almost the same now as it was 250 years ago. The city skyline is the essentially same as it was in 1770. What’s stunning to me is that most people are unaware of the city’s history and Maryland’s contribution to the founding of America. I wasn’t aware of all this when I first came here. But I am now and have powerful stories to share.

What was the genesis of *Chesapeake Bound* and your protagonist, Michael Shea?

Michael emerged slowly. First, before I knew who Michael was, things were brewing when I started studying fiddle, Irish traditional music >





Photo credit: Thomas Dunlavey.

“These events introduced me to a host of old school sailing vets and shipwrights, all with a long list of exciting stories and inspiring histories to share.”

and discovering my Irish heritage while performing in my Irish folk band days. Then other pieces started falling together. One is how non-traditional medicine can sometimes be more potent than modern medicine. I have experienced this type of healing, like acupuncture, reiki, and energy healing, which helped me tremendously. I wanted to explore what medicine was like in the 18th century before doctors knew about germs, bacteria or even that blood circulates. I gave Michael some alternative medicine skill, which develops through the series. I also wanted Michael to be a touchstone for immigration, which then begs the question, “why leave?” There are many reasons, and most do not paint the British Empire or Europe in a bright light. I suspect many Americans are also unfamiliar with their own history and perhaps I could enlighten readers, as they follow the adventures of Michael and friends. All these things blended together during the writing process.

Michael Shea is a musician. Did your folk band, the Eastport Oyster Boys, influence your development of his character?

ABOVE Tom performing aboard the schooner *Woodwind*.

Of course! Through the Oyster Boys, I entered the world of sailing—schooners, tall ships, clippers, frigates, shipwrights, sea chanties, and tall tales. I was fortunate to be part of the Oyster Boys as we became fixtures at sailing, cultural, seafood, and oyster festivals, and especially at downrigging events in Chestertown, Maryland, which hosts its own 18th-century British revenue cutter, *The Sultana*.

These events introduced me to a host of old school sailing vets and shipwrights, all with a long list of exciting stories and inspiring histories to share. When the tall ships visit Annapolis—*Pride Of Baltimore*, *Sultana*, *Virginia*, *Kymar Nichel*, and others—

I’m touring the vessels, taking notes and pictures for later reference. I even enjoyed touring the *Bounty* in Annapolis harbor just before she took her final sail into Superstorm Sandy.

The Oyster Boys connection led me to the schooner *Woodwind*, where I’m a featured entertainer performing 18th-century fiddle tunes and sharing tales about the Golden Age Of Annapolis. For example, I point out the spot in the river where George Washington spent the night on a ferry that ran aground. Another fun story is about John Adams when he attended the nation’s first Congress in December 1783, when Annapolis was our first nation’s capital. John writes to his wife Abigail to complain about how Annapolitans like to party, dance, and enjoy themselves. He starts his letter, “Dear Abby . . .” (wait for the laugh).

And, since the Oyster Boys write our own songs, I’ve contributed a few “hits” that celebrate the Chesapeake. My history song, “Let Her Burn,” tells the tale of the “Burning Of The *Peggy Stewart*.” Another hit, “Hot Crabs, Cold Beer,” celebrates the *joie de vivre* of Eastport and our love of steamed crabs. I have some downbeat ballads as well, “Long Cold Run,” ▶

about single-handed sailing on a cold winter journey, “Where The Wild Winds Blow,” about separated lovers in the age of sail, and even a Christmas song, “The Christmas Light,” about a ship rescued by Santa Claus showing them the way out of a deadly storm.

How did you research *Chesapeake Bound*?

I started by reading all sorts of histories, biographies, diaries, travel narratives, and nonfiction related to the 18th century, and, of course, I read all the nautical fiction I could find in the local boating stores. I also studied 18th-century maps, paintings, and drawings of people, places, and ships at sea to get a visual of those times, people's dress, etc. I especially enjoyed William Hogarth's satirical paintings and etchings. I also concentrated on researching the *Peggy Stewart* incident and made presentations, wrote a song, produced a video, and wrote an article commemorating the 250th anniversary of the event for *SpinSheet Magazine*. The article is available at:

<https://www.spinsheet.com/news/last-voyage-chesapeake-built-sailing-brig-peggy-stewart>.

Living in an 18th-century colonial city makes it natural to set my story here and tell a largely untold story, the how and why most of our ancestors came to the Chesapeake. Since most immigrant stories center around Ellis Island in the 19th and 20th centuries, I wanted to start my story in the 18th century, a time that has yet to be as well documented.

Once my family relocated to Annapolis, I researched Maryland's colonial history, religious tolerance, development of Annapolis into a thriving port, the Carroll family's story, colonial tobacco economy, society, politics and the buildup to the American Revolution. I started as



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ABOVE The Burning of the *Peggy Stewart* by Jack Manley Rosé, an early twentieth-century American artist. The painting once hung in the tavern at Carvel Hall (aka the William Paca House in Annapolis). It depicts the merchant sailing ship in flames near the present Luce Hall at the US Naval Academy on the Severn River, Chesapeake Bay.

a docent at the Charles Carroll House and delved into the long history of the Carroll family. Then, as a member of Watermark's colonial tour guide team, we review the history of all the grand mansions and every winter, we revisit the history of the Maryland colony, which dates back to the reign of Henry VIII. This complemented earlier work studying the age of discovery, from Columbus to Sir Walter Raleigh's failed attempts to plant a colony in Roanoke. Everywhere I turned, there was an ocean voyage.

Did you write the story for a particular audience or the book you want to read?

Well, I certainly wanted my mom, who was a librarian, to read and like the novel. I'm hoping my five sisters and my brother will all read it! To be honest, I'm hoping *Chesapeake Bound* will appeal to women readers who are drawn to character development. I thank my literary professor, Lynn Schwartz, for this insight. I'm hoping that by focusing on characters, their loves won and lost, a bit of intrigue, and, of course, ▶

sea adventures, I'll help broaden the market for nautical fiction. I'd like to share little known stories and, perhaps, bust a few myths along the way. I'm combining a focus on characters, their backstories, motivations, dreams, and heartbreaks, and, since the only way to get to the Chesapeake from London was to risk an ocean voyage, a nautical fiction emerged. It's the best of all worlds.

How do you name your characters?

I use a mix of personal connections and inventions based on pondering about hints to their backstories. I gave Michael a family name from my Irish ancestors, Shea, and he's from my mother's family's home village, Clonakilty, in the southwest corner of Ireland. I wanted Michael to be a musician and since I play fiddle, so does Michael. Unlike me though, Michael is a master on the fiddle. I also wanted to explore the world of medicine, which was very crude at the time, even for the best physicians of the day. So, Michael becomes a medical apprentice. To cover the other side of my heritage, Michael lived in France for most of his life to be a fluent French speaker, something I am not.

The Danny character is loosely based on some pals who in various ways played big brother to me, led me to embrace my Irish heritage and introduced me to traditional Irish music. Another pal used to enthrall me with his tales of his life as a truck driver. His sense of wanderlust easily transforms into a London street kid with dreams of an ocean voyage adventure. It all infuses the fictional Danny's back story. Based on my experiences in various musical endeavors, we musicians dream together, just as Danny and Michael do in *Chesapeake Bound*. It's Dan-



Charles Carroll of Carrollton

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“My most popular songs are with The Eastport Oyster Boys who celebrate life in Annapolis, Eastport, and sailing the Chesapeake Bay.”

ny who has the realistic dreams, not Michael.

The Moira character is partly based on one of my sisters who was a nurse. She wasn't in my original outline. The Muses sent her my way as the story progressed. Since she wasn't in my original outline, the Muses helped me develop her character.

Vintner Baker is based on a real Irish pub owner at Ireland's Four Provinces in DC who always made us musicianers in the Shannon Tide feel right at home, offering us free food, drinks etc.

Emma Baker, the Broot Brothers, the surgeon Oliver, and Jonathan Clayborne are all inventions.

Jonathan's surname is inspired by William Claiborne, a 17th century entrepreneur who set up an Indian trading post on Kent Island when it was originally part of Virginia. Mr. Claiborne, a Puritan sympathizer, was not happy to suddenly find Kent Island had been transferred to the Catholic-owned Maryland colony. This led to trouble, but that's another story.

For the villain Broot brothers, since they were going to be selfish brutish con men, brute turned into Broot. I gave Marcellus his first name thinking about the behavior of some Roman emperors.

Do you plot out your novels before beginning to write?

I did start with a grand outline and story arc of a hero's journey. At first, I started the early chapters with bullet points of ideas I wanted to address, but I was also cognizant of letting go and seeing where the Muses take you. To be open to their inspiration, I followed Steven Pressfield's advice to start each writing day by reciting the Invocation of the Muses from >

Homer's *Odyssey*, as translated by T. E. Lawrence. This bit of magic worked for me. When I sat down and got to work, they showed up and guided me.

At what point in the process do you begin writing?

I started at the beginning, with Charles Carroll in London suffering from smallpox. And then I inserted my character, Michael, as a medical apprentice. That allowed me to establish the setting and lay out some historical themes that will weave through the narrative.

Then, as the story needed characters, they emerged. I'd name them, spend time with their backstories and plow ahead. The surgeon Oliver presented himself when I wrote that first chapter. He wasn't a bullet point on my chapter outline. He just appeared as I needed him to fulfill a role in the story—to elicit Michael's comments, spark his conversations with Charles Carroll and introduce the idea of Annapolis. And throughout the rest of the novel, I believe the Muses whispered in my ear. For example, all the characters in the White Lyon Tavern scene presented themselves as I needed them while writing those chapters. As Pressfield says, good things usually result when you show up every day to do the work it takes to write a novel. I must admit that I didn't realize all this then. I was just writing. But in hindsight, during editing, I realized how the Muses were helping me.

Please describe where you write?



© Colin Baxter.

ABOVE The original cover art for *Chesapeake Bound* by English marine artist Colin Baxter.

“I'd find a quiet spot in the basement, grab a coffee, power up the laptop, and be back in the 18th century.”

My favorite writing spot is at McDowell Hall on the St. John's College campus in Annapolis. Built in the middle of the 18th century, there's history just oozing out of the walls. I'd find a quiet spot in the basement, grab a coffee, power up the laptop, and be back in the 18th century. My wife, Karen, was instrumental in getting me started like this to take a break from my 9-5 job. She'd drop me off at St. John's so I could escape my everyday world. I wrote the lion's share of *Chesapeake Bound* there, thanks to

Karen's push. Just around the corner is the Maryland Archives, so when I needed a research break, I'd spend a day there and then get back to McDowell Hall to push on. And, as I studied creative writing with Lynn Schwartz, I felt like an honorary Johnny there. During the day when students are in class, I had the place to myself.

What lies on the horizon for Michael Shea?

A sequel to *Chesapeake Bound* is in the works.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Well, thanks to my wife, Karen, for all her support through the years as I talked my way through this process. That was a lot of thinking out loud that she's had to endure. She's also been my indispensable personal editor through the years. I'm absolutely thrilled to be part of the McBooks Press lineup. I hope readers will rally to *Chesapeake Bound* and clamor for more tales of Michael Shea. ■

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