

A History of Baitcasting in America

Appendices in Sequence

(Not published in the book)

Page 1 Fish Ladders

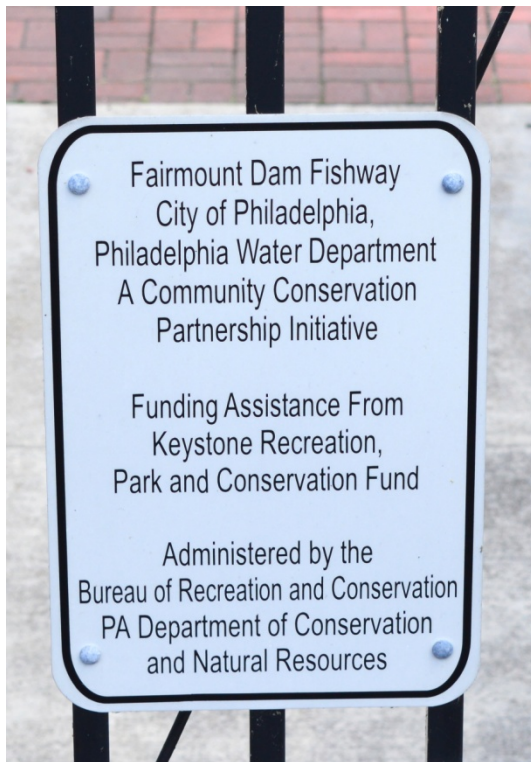
Page 6 Bass and Bass Fishing, published 1857

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A fish ladder (or fishway) is a structure designed to allow fish the opportunity to migrate upstream over or through a barrier to fish movement. (e.g., a dam)

“The Schuylkill River once supported massive spring runs of anadromous fishes...American Shad, Striped Bass, Blueback Herring “until the construction of the Fairmount Dam in 1820 blocked their movement. (78) For this reason, The Schuylkill Fishing Company’s clubhouse relocated to Rambo’s Rock below the dam in 1822. From 1818 until 1979, fish migration past the dam was impossible. In 1979, the first Schuylkill fish passage facility, constructed on the west side of Fairmount Dam, started operation. (79) However, very few anadromous species were utilizing the passage, so by 1984 the fishway was abandoned (78). Thankfully, a plan was hatched to make improvements. Following seven years of research and construction in 2009, the major structural modifications at Fairmount Dam were complete. (80) Now, resident fish species are utilizing the passage with seemingly minimal difficulty and five anadromous species, including the renowned Shad, travel the river once more on spawning runs. Over 26 species of fish are known to use the fishway.



Posted sign on the Fairmount fish ladder, 2015

Led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Philadelphia Water Department, the renovation of the fishway will benefit the shad and all other fish as well as the sports anglers. The Fish Ladder at Fairmount Dam is the principal fish passage in the Schuylkill watershed, and its major restoration was significantly important because it is the farthest downstream passage of the Delaware River Basin. This water flows directly into the ocean and therefore provides anadromous fish with a direct route to travel upstream unimpeded to their spawning areas. American shad, “the main target of the fishway”, spawn genetically, returning to the same spawning waters generation after generation. (81)

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Fishway located on the Schuylkill River on the western side of the Fairmount Dam.



The author's belief is that the original clubhouse of The Schuylkill Fishing Co. was less than a mile north of the dam on the west bank just past the confluence formed by the Girard Ave Bridge and the rail bridge, about where the sweep (rowing) boat in the photo is moving through the water. The light blue Girard Bridge is visible through the rail bridge arch.

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An illustration of the steps in the fish ladder, superimposed onto the bottom of the following photo of the fishway at the Fairmount Dam (taken from the east side of the river), reveals the operation of the ladder.



We recall that in Chapter 1, another river played into the early days of angling - the Merrimack River at the former location of Amoskeag Falls in Manchester, New Hampshire. There during the fishing season of 1739, a Christian cleric delivered a message regarding the morality of angling, a blood sport. As one might expect, in subsequent years, a dam was erected at that location; the Amoskeag Dam, named with a Native American name meaning "Great Fishing Place," was built in 1836 and the fish bore the pain just as they did on the Schuylkill. There is good news, however. "In 1989, Public Service of New Hampshire, in cooperation with the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, constructed the current fish ladder. The ladder is comprised of 54 pools, each one a foot higher than the preceding one. The pools act as steps, allowing the fish to 'climb' to the top of the falls, bypassing the hydro station. In order to support the effort to restore anadromous fish populations to the Merrimack River this ladder was necessary." (82) I took the following photographs there in late June 2015:

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Merrimack River Fish Ladder, Manchester, New Hampshire



Some days are better for fishing than others. Certainly late June is not the time to observe American Shad running upstream through the Merrimack River fish ladder, but I got lucky. With only one opportunity to catch a fast-moving fish with my Nikon, I was thrilled to land this photo on the left.

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Top of the Amoskeag Dam



The old Fairmount Water Works sits below the Philadelphia Museum of Art

The old Fairmount Water Works Interpretive Center in Philadelphia, PA, and the Amoskeag Fishways Learning and Visitors Center in Manchester, NH, are marvelous facilities that provide the public with valuable information related to fish migration and the impact of water on our daily lives. The learning exhibits are motivating for children and adults alike. The facility in Philadelphia, situated on the Schuylkill River Trail and internationally known for its elegant neoclassical buildings and handsome grounds, is within walking distance of the famed Philadelphia Museum of Art; my wife and I spent a memorable day there.

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Reference, *The History of Baitcasting in America*, by Emmett J. Babler, citation number (80) found on page 59: Author, Silverside, Title, Bass and Bass Fishing; Published in Porter's Spirit of the Times, Whole No. 29, March 21, 1857, Vol II, No. 3, p. 38.

The following article, Bass, and Bass Fishing, written by a Kentucky author using the pen name of Silverside, appeared in the March 21, 1857, edition of *Porter's Spirit of the Times*, a weekly New York City newspaper. This is the earliest essay on bass fishing that I discovered while writing the book, *A History of Baitcasting in America*.

Optical Character Recognition (OCR), used to extract the text from a scan of the original article, resulted in numerous problems that required correction prior to arriving at the words that follow. Please excuse any errors you may find. Thank you.

March 21, 1857

BASS, AND BASS FISHING —No. II.

Written for "Porter's spirit"

BY SILVERSIDE

The angler must use the most lively "shiner" minnow (for no other class of minnows have that thieving propensity, or reputation) that he can procure; and the very moment he "gets a bite," he must strike.

He may fail the first, or even the ninth time, but it is, notwithstanding, the only way to be successful; and, being repeated, will not always bring defeat.

During the summer months, the bass drop down to the deepest pools of water, and, during the heated tern, do not consume much food; and just here, I will mention a thought, " I have entertained for some time.

I have been often asked why that the bass are not as easily taken, or rather why they do not "bite" as well during the summer and winter seasons, as in the spring and autumnal seasons.

During the winter, the fish are chilled through with the cold, and digestion is suspended. Without a proper proportion of warmth, the functions of the stomach are not performed, and this is equally true of warm-blooded animals, as it applies to cold-

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blooded; and I have found, in my dissections of the bass, the contents of the stomach in a state of complete preservation, and found none of the evidences of the process of digestion and assimilation present. I have found, in mid-winter, the larvae of the insects that generally entirely disappear before winter has set in, contained within the stomach of this fish. The craw-fish, which usually buries itself in the deep marl of the river during winter, I have also found in the stomachs of the fish examined late in that season. And I have observed the small fish of nearly all classes living in harmony with the bass under the ice; a contiguity and familiarity certainly never witnessed in the spring or fall season.

And then, with the excessive heats of summer, combined with the impure water of that season, comes that indolent languor that is felt by all the animal creation; and, though digestion is not so certainly suspended, nor so entirely, as in winter, still the angler will be as unsuccessful as in winter.

These propositions, I apply unequivocally to the shallow streams of Kentucky. I know not how they may apply to the deeper streams, or the lakes of the North.

Again, in winter, our fish are driven by the more frequent recurrence in the rise in the water, the rush of ice, and the necessity for seeking a place of safety; all tending to disperse or alarm them.

In summer again, also, if the digestion of the fish was as active, the objects upon which they prey being multiplied, and so easily obtained, that the chances of the angler is greatly diminished as to his success.

All the animal creation seems to have their periods of torpor, and instinct seems to prepare them for those periods. The raccoon, opossum, bear, &c., have been known to lie for three months without food. During the fall season, nature has covered every part with a redundancy of fat; the cellular tissue, and the long bones of the body, are clothed and filled to repletion with this deposition, and, during the long season of their inaction, this surplus is carried back by the action of the absorbents, and appropriated to the general nutrition of the system again. It will be found that the long bones of all animals are emptied of their marrow after a severe winter. The fish, however, possessing no bones of this description, are indebted to that deposition which takes place in the cellular tissue, for this involuntary means of subsistence. And thus it is, that a portion of the animal creation are so miraculously preserved from starvation, when all nature is locked in icy chains; and exhibits that wondrous goodness of Him, who, while he rules the destiny of worlds, looks not with indifference upon the stricken sparrow.

Come we, now, to that season of the year, which, of all others, is certainly the most delightful; and, with it, comes all of those sports, that add a charm to existence. A charm I have said; aye! let me repeat it. Where, on the broad face of earth, has it happened that a genuine sportsman has ever pointed the suicide's pistol against himself, or sought

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refuge in the grave from ennui and a world that was entirely unloved by him, and that could offer nothing that made life desirable?

Think ye that that man, filled with the genuine ardor of the true follower of Walton, who had gone forth with rod and reel in hand, when the first frosts of autumn had purified both air and water, and when the forests were clothed in all their gorgeous grandeur; and stood upon the banks of the silent river, and saw the maple mirrored in its purple robe; and saw the golden leaves that seemed cast like gems from their royal owner, and rushed to meet their counterpart, that seemed to rise from the depths below “and mingle into one;” and who has heard the faint shriek, and rustle of wings, as of unseen spirits, of the birds of summer, passing away to the far-off islands of the South; and who has looked upon the forest in its stillness and mourning; saw the tallest trees weeping their leaves to the earth, and yet that stillness, as if every tree was listening to the symphony of the requiem that the wood nymphs were the symphony of the requiem that the wood nymphs were hymning to the beautiful decay of nature; or perhaps listening to hear the shrieks of old Boreas' voice, that would come, first a faint note far down yonder glen, and then the startled wood would repeat the note like echoes, and, as the fearful note stole through the forests, the old oaks, that had learned, centuries ago, what awaited them, would sway their mighty arms, like giants preparing for combat? And, hark! that unearthly shriek that is borne upon the blast! It comes like some deep mouthed dragon, that rushes madly upon the track of autumn; and the oaks, the monarchs of the forest, bend down their dark heads, and acknowledge the sway and merciless reign of the storm-king. But take the picture of the forest in its stillness, ere the storm-king come. And who has stood upon the banks of the river, and seen the tyrant pike rushing upon the defenceless creatures that are pent up in yonder cove? And who has learned to capture those tyrants? That have felt his monstrous strength surging against the frail and tiny cord? The fear? The hope? And, at length, seeing the gasping destroyer lying at his feet.

Think ye, that he who has learned to love these scenes will ever weary of life? No. And if I could teach one frail mortal to love these sports—learn that there are amusements, in pursuit of which he can forget the sickening cares of life—learn to love these sports better than the haunts of men, where avarice and covetousness predominate, and lead men into the paths of crime, would it not be a benefaction?

But I hope for permission for this digression, and I shall return to my subject proper.

This, the autumnal season, I have said, affords the best and, I may say, the most uniform sport of the entire year.

The bass, recovering from the stupid lassitude of summer—thanks to the bracing, tonic breath of autumn—are seeking out again the haunts of their prey, and are eagerly devouring everything in their way. And there can be no question as to the intention of

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this fish now. He is laying in a store for winter; and if the angler finds him taking hold of his hook, if he is skillful, he will be almost sure to capture him.

I will here venture a few remarks upon some side questions connected with my subject.

The time of day best suited for taking the bass depends upon the period of the season.

Early in the spring and late in autumn it is not necessary that the angler should be at his post so early. The water is then cold; and they are in search of food only while the warmth of the sun is greatest. But, while the water is warm, the angler must not be in his bed at daylight, but at his favorite fishing stand, at any rate, by sunrise. And I remember an incident that happened some years since: My brother and myself had repaired on a fishing excursion to the river, and were awaiting the “birth of the rosy morn,” which the little warblers, the oriole and others, were heralding from the maple-tops with their sweet matins; and, being impatient, my brother cast his hook into the water, while it was yet quite dark, and almost immediately drew forth a two-pounder. Our supposition was, however, that it was a male, watching the spawn—it being in the month of May. And I have thought that nothing can equal their watchfulness at this season elsewhere.

From sunrise till eight or nine o'clock, A. M.—as the spring advances—and in the afternoon from four o'clock until sundown.

In autumn, this will very much depend upon the state of the weather, which is more capricious than at any other season; consequently all rules will be subject to variations, as aberrations of weather may exist.

The kinds of bait best suited for the capture of the bass I have had occasion to mention occasionally, elsewhere. For all seasons I prefer the minnow—the living, lively minnow—and for any other season, than the time of spawning, I would make little difference between the shiner, or silverside, and the sucker. (I hope I use such names as will render me intelligible, and easily understood.) There is a fat, clumsy little creature in all our streams, called generally by our people, the chub that never attains a greater length than three and one half inches that is sometimes used successfully for bait. But the young perch, catfish, gar, &c., are entirely worthless, and are never used for that purpose.

Too much care cannot be observed in protecting the little fellows from injury, which is of the utmost importance, and especially during the spawning season will it be so; for the bass will pay no attention to the crippled, small fish, of any species. With proper care, the life of the little captive may be preserved for hours in the still water, but in the swift running water you will generally destroy him in a few minutes.

I prefer, usually, hooking the bait in the mouth. Pass the hook through the under jaw first, commencing below, and then through either nostril to its exit above, and by a careful handling of the fishing-pole or rod, the little fellow may be dropped easily and

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without injury into the water; while on the contrary, it can be thrown with such violence as to destroy its life at once.

The proper size, is from two and one half to five inches. Early in the season the crawfish of our streams—while it is first shedding its hard shell—is found to be sometimes an excellent bait; but it is best suited for the angler who is pursuing the white and silver perch, the cat-fish, and more especially the rock bass, or the “red-eye,” to use the nomenclature of Kentucky. The best anglers of this State never use them, except in case of inability in procuring the minnow.

Worms, slugs, crickets, &c., are almost out of the question, and the bass must be very hungry, indeed, when he will swallow either, or when offered to him in those localities where he is with such immense numbers of his own ravenous species, that everything is consumed upon which he feeds.

Fly-fishing has been attempted, but with little success; the bass will not often rise to the surface, else in pursuit of some fleeing minnow.

No angler possessing a knowledge of the intelligence of our Kentucky bass, being in his right mind, would attempt to catch the bass in our streams with the spoon, or other contrivance of eastern invention.

The amateur angler will find, during his novitiate, that these facts are not all that are necessary to be learned. One might imagine, that perhaps with this small store of knowledge, he might repair to the river and return again, laden with the spoils of an hour; but he will, unless accident leads him, aright, often be greatly disappointed. The bass do not, I have before suggested, remain at the same places during the entire year, and much judgment will sometimes leave to be exercised in the selection of the proper point for angling. -

In the spring he will be found at the dams and falls. He remains at these places for a few weeks, and during that time, these points are the best. But this not all. An angler might occupy one position at the mill-dam an entire day, and though the spiders might have altogether abandoned every fear that their tiny web—which was carefully stretched from his head to every accessible point near—would be interrupted or broken, and believe him to be a fixture of the neighborhood, still, the angler might find, when he saw the lazy bat skulking from his hiding-place, or heard the laugh of the screech-owl, and saw the last rays of the king of day painting the highest peaks of the eastern hill-tops with golden tints—or, indeed, that night was fast closing in around him, that his marvelous patience had not been rewarded with a solitary nibble; and, yet, the urchin, whom he had seen wading through the water, like a fish-duck, all day, with his paw-paw pole, old flat-headed hook, corn-stock float, his mother's flax thread stolen for a line, and pocket full of crawfish for bait, would call to him from the opposite side of the river, while he

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held up a string of bass almost as long as himself, and ask our patient hero: “What luck?” and then struggle up the hill-side with his fish and his rags, and disappear in the next glen.

It will require, generally, at an unfrequented point, some hour's prospecting to ascertain the precise point the fish are biting best. And this will be the same, at the same season of the year, one year after another.

Cast your hook into the water, where the foaming mass is rushing in rapid current from the tumbling water, as it has fallen, over the dam, and let it float down to where the current is scattered over the rough heaps of rocks below. After the formation of the dams upon our Kentucky streams, the timbers being thrown precipitously by the angry floods against the limestone bottoms of the river, large masses of the stone are disengaged, and carried by the stormy volume of water, and deposited some thirty or forty feet below, and thus a deep pool is formed just at the foot of the dam. A deep channel, or passage, is sometimes formed through this heap at some point, thus connecting with the pool of water below.

Against the walls of this channel the fish often lie; or along those of the lower side of this entire pool, some point will be found where they feed; and at several mill-dams, at which I have spent many days, I find these same points the same every year. Very often have I observed the fact, that one's success would depend upon the correctness with which one's hook was cast within an area of two or three feet. I have often found the fish not biting beyond the line of union of current and eddy. Sometimes, again, only where the current rushed wildly upon the rocks below, and where the depth was not more than one and a half or two feet.

Their ability to resist the current is almost incredible. In their search for prey, they will often seem poised in the midst of the most rapid current of water, as if without an effort, and being hooked, will dart away up stream with astounding, rapidity.

Sometimes, when the day is dark and cold, he may be found under the dam, or at the side of a log, or, again, at a ledge of rocks, beneath which he often finds refuge and sleep.

As the season advances, those not engaged in spawning, will be found more wary; and as the objects upon which they feed have increased in number, and are all around them, their capture will be found more difficult. And it will be observed, notwithstanding the angler may be perfectly aware that one of them is about his hook, that he does not seize the proffered bait with that avidity that characterized him in early spring. I have had one to approach the minnow, and toy with it carelessly, very often take it into the mouth, and discharge it, without injury; perhaps leave off without further molestation or effect than, scaring the little creature half to death, or sometimes seemingly swallow it without the intention, and move sluggishly away.

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If the bass can be captured at all in our streams during summer, it will be amongst the old logs, and at "the deepest water; very early in the morning, or late in the afternoon. Sometimes, during August, when the first cold nights have come, he may be seen out among the shallow rocks in pursuit of the small fish, but he is scarcely worth the trouble; and the scorching rays of the summer sun from above, and the equally burning reflection from below, would render a stay at the river's bank anything but pleasant.

In autumn the fish will be found at the foot of the long deep, pools of the river. And when some deep rocky shore, or jutting point, or sand-bar, lies nearly opposite the deepest part of the river, there will be found the best fishing. If the water is very clear, fasten the rod into the bank, adjust the alarm wheel of the spool, and retire from the shore; that is, if the water be still; but if the water is running briskly, stand upon the shore, and cast out the hook some ten, fifteen, or even twenty feet, until you have learned the precise point at which they are biting. And it will be observed that almost every fish taken, will receive the minnow very nearly at the same point.

If you can find a shelving rock, in the neighborhood of a fine pool of water, beneath which the bass can find shelter from the floating ice in winter, you may be assured of finding them present.

But I have already pursued my subject to a prolixity, and must close, though the reader will discover the want of completeness in many of the points discussed.

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Reference, *The History of Baitcasting in America*, by Emmett J. Babler, citation number (88) found on page 64: Author, John Ward Cooney, Title, *My Recollections of ex-President Martin Van Buren and his friends*, Parts 1 - 11, Los Angeles, CA. Annual Publications, Historical Society of Southern California, January 1, 1912, Annual Publications, Vol. IX. J.R. Walters, Printers. ISSN 21629145.

An additional story about Martin Van Buren: The Smoking Turtle

As I remember Mr. Van Buren, he was a little man with keen eyes, a gentle smile, a wide full forehead and gray side-whiskers, which he had a habit of twisting sidewise to a point when he was very much moved. Perhaps his chief characteristic was the kindness of heart. He hated to give pain to any living creature. One incident which I remember recalls this forcibly to mind. Returning from one of his trips to New York the President brought with him a splendid fishing rod, which was said to have cost ten dollars, in those days an enormous price for a fishing rod. To be able to boast that I had caught a fish with the president's wonderful new rod became at once the greatest object in my life. Eagerly I accompanied him on the next fishing trip. On the road we passed an enormous turtle and the president with the almost childish curiosity which was one of his characteristics, amused himself by poking the reptile with the end of the pole, a proceeding which the turtle resented by grabbing it and proceeding calmly on its way. "Johnny! Why, Johnny!" gasped the old man, as he tugged at it ineffectually. "Why — he has my new rod. What shall we do to make him let go?"

We exhausted all expedients, but it was no use. Let go, the turtle would not, not even for an ex-president of the United States. "Well," I concluded, "there are only two things we can do: Cut off the turtle's head, or cut off the end of the rod." "No, Johnny, no; we can't kill it — we mustn't kill it." And for over an hour we followed his turtleship, one end of the rod in the turtle's mouth, the other in the president's hand, the latter fretting and fuming, but unable to make up his mind whether to sacrifice the rod or the turtle. Finally, I strongly advised killing the turtle, but Mr. Van Buren again objected. "No, Johnny, we can't kill the poor thing. Cut off the rod as close as you can." In vain, I protested, but Mr. Van Buren's mind was made up and the ten-dollar fishing rod was sacrificed to save the turtle's life. With about six inches of the rod, still up tilted aggressively in his mouth the creature waddled on down the road, with a triumphant air. Amused at the ludicrous sight, Mr. Van Buren sat down on a stone by the roadside and laughed heartily. "Look at him, Johnny. Why, he looks like a drunken sailor smoking a cigar.