



Chesapeakeville

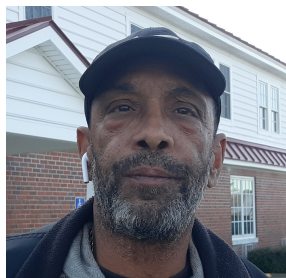
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For nearly 150 years in the Northern Neck, African-Americans have played essential, hardworking roles in menhaden fishing, and worked shoulder-to-shoulder with white fishermen in unique harmony since one's life might depend on the other. They also slept together in the same berth. Respect was hard earned and advancement limited. Black mates and captains were the first to breakthrough followed by others with initiative. A generation are ending their Omega Protein careers and merit special recognition.

Kenny Pinkard Historic Union Man

Growing up in White Stone in the 1970s, Kenny Pinkard (62) got an opportunity bagging groceries at a Safeway store in Kilmarnock. One day, his union rep explained that as a union member he earned \$2.50 an hour, which was higher than the minimum wage. He made a mental note. By age 18, he was a cashier making \$8.40, good money for a kid, and again the union's value made an impression. His father Kermit worked on fishboats for 35 years and warned his son to go to college or find a career. So, the son paid his own two-year tuition for community college then worked as a grocery stock clerk and cashier for several years before becoming a cook and night watchman.



Strangely, fishing money came calling in 1984 when he was contracted as a cook and deckhand on a Gulf Coast fishboat because the pay was good. Mid-season, the company was sold, wages cut 30% and crews reduced by two. Crew workers grumbled. Pinkard returned to Reedville, hired an attorney and won in court for lost wages – and thought of starting a union. The next year he was not retained by a captain before the season. Luckily, he picked up another cook job, the boat made money but the year after was down. Too many things were against crews and they needed additional rights and benefits. Then Pinkard, Emerson Norris and others realized, *We got to do something*. They met at Reedville Masonic Hall, used a legal pad for petition signatures, then Pinkard drove to D. C. to file as a union with the National Labor Relations Board. What a feeling it was for the once teen, union grocery worker. The Independent Reedville Fishermen Assoc. was born and Pinkard was president for the first three years. By 1993, boat crews working long, laborious boat hours wanted healthcare and better pay. Led by Pinkard and knowing they were rare, experienced and talented fishermen in the rural Neck, they struck for 13 long months while maintaining a picket line. They struggled but held out for more favorable negotiations with the company.

Finally, a settlement was reached and Pinkard went back to work. A year later, he helped workers at a Reedville and a North Carolina menhaden company unionize. He spent the next 25 years, the last seven on the *Rappahannock*, as a fishboat cook while becoming a wise union man. Amazingly, his nephew Darawn Kenner is a trained chef and works on a fishboat bringing healthier cuisine to younger crews, and benefiting from his uncle's efforts. The union merged with the United Food & Commercial Workers union in 1990 for more clout, and is allied with the even more influential AFL-CIO. Through his union work, Pinkard has company-wide respect and camaraderie with management. He took a stand and followed through and stuck with it. Scores of fishboat crews have benefited from his efforts and will do so into the future. His dad would be so proud his son got his education *and* made menhaden fishing work better for him and many others.

