

Shad, the Civil War and riding the rails

American shad have long been an important food fish for people. Many soldiers during the Civil War were nourished by American shad. The shad fishery was such an important source of food during the Civil War, that the owner of a shad fishery in North Carolina was captured by the Federal Army to prevent his fishery from feeding the Confederate soldiers. He was released when he gave his word not to catch any more fish until the war was over.

After the Civil War, the American shad fisheries grew up and down the east coast. Millions of pounds of American shad were caught for food in North Carolina. At the same time there was an increase in the construction of dams to power mills for grain and provide water to communities. These dams blocked American shad from migrating. On some rivers in n North Carolina people do not realize that shad used to inhabit the local waters.

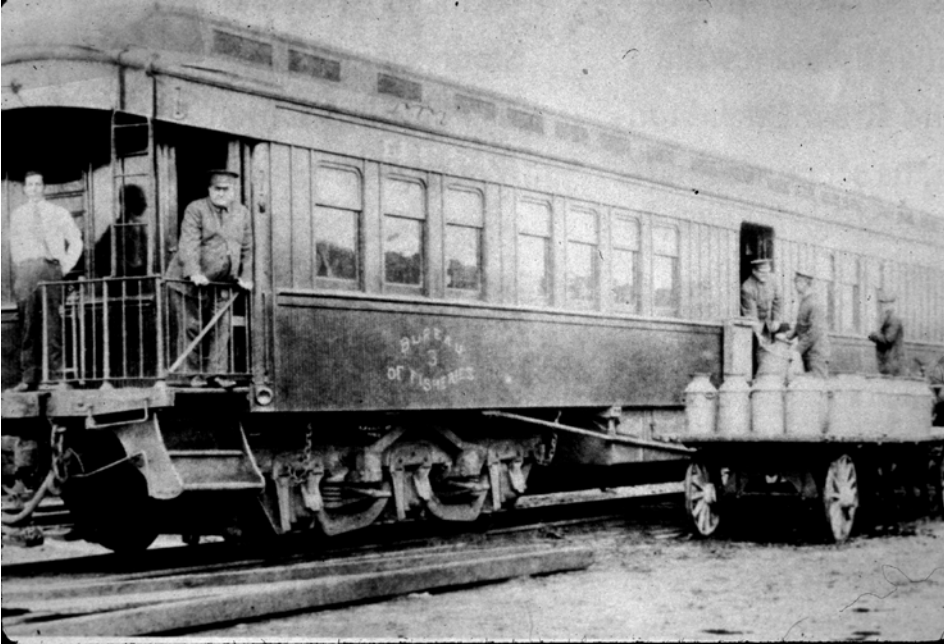
In the late 1800s, biologists with the U.S. Fish Commission, which later became the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, were trying to increase fish populations around the United States to help increase the food supply. ([Harper's Weekly article dated July 21, 1888](#)). Biologists with the Commission were working with hatcheries to raise salmon, trout and shad to ship to populate streams and rivers throughout the country. American shad, which were not native to the West Coast, were picked to be shipped to the West Coast. One of the hatcheries which raised American shad was located in an old Civil War fort near Washington D.C., Fort Washington.



1880 Egg hatching jar and pail used to raise shad.

Eggs from shad were gathered and placed in “hatching” jars. The jars allowed oxygen into the water so the eggs could hatch during the trip. These jars were the first mobile hatching jars created by the commission. The hatching tanks used today to grow shad in the classroom are very similar to those developed in the 1880s.

They put these jars on a train in specially designed fish cars with rows of stands to hold the jars steady for its trek across the country. After departing Washington, D.C., the shad eggs hatched in Kansas. Feeding them was not necessary since the juvenile shad can live off of its egg sac for a several days. By the time the train reached San Francisco, Ca. they shad were ready to be released into the local rivers. Biologists released thousands of baby shad into the Sacramento River between 1888 and 1889.



Train being loaded for the trip out West.

Since that time offspring from those American shad have multiplied and grown to one of the largest populations of coastal fish in the Pacific Northwest. They live in waters from California to Canada and are an integral part of the ecosystem. Pacific Salmon that were shipped to the Potomac River on the East Coast did not survive. The habitat was to different than that in the West Coast. There is Atlantic salmon that is found on the East Coast, but not in the Potomac River, or in rivers south of the Potomac.

Today biologists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service focus on bringing back native animals, rather than introducing non-native species to new locations. To learn more about the importance of not introducing non-native species visit [Habitattitude](#).

American shad are a priority native fish for the Service to help restore along the east coast. Biologists work with others to help create fish passage to get shad by historic dams, or work to remove them entirely under the [Fish Passage Program](#). Thanks to these efforts, American shad are now returning upriver to areas where they traditionally spawned. Hopefully, this effort will help restore this important fish to our coastal waterways.