

A Brief History of St. Mary's City

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, England began efforts to develop a New World empire in North America. The beginnings were financed by allowing entrepreneurs, some of them joint stock companies, some of them individual proprietors, to establish colonies along the Atlantic seacoast. In 1632, the English King, Charles I, granted what is now the state of Maryland to Cecil Calvert, the second Baron of Baltimore. The king expected that as proprietor, Lord Baltimore would send colonists to develop the province into a profitable operation that would bring new trade to England, and profit to the Calvert family. Lord Baltimore was to be the ruler of this land, but his charter required that he make laws only with the consent of the freemen of the colony or their deputies, a powerful protection for his colonists. As part of the agreement, Lord Baltimore, not the king, was permitted to grant all the land within the colony and until late in the seventeenth century (1681), he granted rights to land in return for the transportation of colonists. The first investors got rights to 2,000 acres for every five men or 100 acres per person for fewer than five. Later, these grants were reduced to 50-acre rights per person brought to Maryland. The land was not free-people had to pay fees for their surveys and patents and a small rent to the proprietor-but the land was cheap.

Lord Baltimore wanted his colonists to build and live in towns. For every person transported, he offered rights to ten acres of town land on the fields where his colonists first set down. At ten acres per person transported, town land grants ranged from 30 to 400 acres. The colony's leaders all held town land properties and even though there was no real city, the town lands-an area of about 1,200 acres-became the seat of government. Early courts and assemblies met in Governor Leonard Calvert's house and at the house of John Lewger, the provincial secretary.

There was no town at St. Mary's until the 1660s. By then, the Maryland population was large enough and spread out enough to require more than the private houses of leaders for conducting public business and accommodating visitors who came there for public purposes. In 1668, to encourage development, Lord Baltimore chartered St. Mary's City.

Lord Baltimore was a Catholic and his plan was for Maryland to be a place where people of different religions could live together peacefully. In England, Catholics could not worship in public or hold public office. Catholic priests were supposedly banned from England, although a few were able to live as members of private households and conduct mass in Catholic homes. In Maryland, Lord Baltimore proposed that Catholics would worship openly and, when otherwise qualified, participate in political life.

Initially, Lord Baltimore's investors and leaders, the people who paid the way of the other colonists, were Catholic. People of other religions were encouraged to come with a promise that their beliefs would be tolerated. This practice, in place at the beginning of settlement in 1634, was made into law in 1649 with An Act concerning Religion. The law was limited-providing toleration only for Christians, but it was the first statement of religious toleration in America. Ultimately, the great majority of people coming to Maryland were Protestants-mostly poor indentured servants who would work in the colony in exchange for their passage.

Father Andrew White, one of the Jesuit priests who came on the first expedition, wrote a narrative of the voyage and the founding of the first settlement. With this and a few letters, something is known about the earliest days of the Maryland colony. The ships that brought the first colonists, the Ark and

the Dove, sailed from London in October 1633, but Lord Baltimore's enemies had the ships stopped, charging that the passengers had not taken an oath of allegiance to the king. From the record of the oaths then taken it is known that, at that point, 128 colonists were aboard. The ships went on to the Isle of Wight, where the Jesuits and probably some or all of the Catholic leaders joined the others, bringing the total to about 140. In November, the Ark and the Dove set sail for the New World. Father White describes terrible storms that separated the ships, but eventually they made it safely to the West Indies, where they re-supplied with food and then sailed for the Chesapeake, arriving in late February in Jamestown, Virginia. Early in March they sailed north to the Potomac and up the river to St. Clement's Island. Governor Leonard Calvert took the Dove further up the river to a village of Piscataway Indians and asked permission to settle in the area. The Indians were somewhat suspicious, but a Virginia fur trader, Captain Henry Fleet, helped reassure them. The Indians possibly thought that European allies might be useful against their enemies to the north, the Susquehannock, who had been attacking the tribes in the area, and told Governor Calvert he could settle where he wished.

Captain Fleet then brought Governor Calvert to a site on the St. Mary's River. Here the Yaocomaco Indians had already cleared land but were preparing to leave, possibly due to hostilities with the Susquehannock. Cleared land, fertile and ready for crops, was what the new settlement needed. Although some of the Yaocomaco had already left, it was agreed that within a year those remaining would leave the village to the colonists. In exchange, the English presented metal hoes and axes and cloth to the Yaocomaco. The land was claimed in the name of King Charles I and Lord Baltimore and was called Saint Maries in honor of the queen, Henrietta Maria.

A fort was built immediately which Governor Calvert described as palisaded, about 360 feet square, and protected by cannon which the colonists had brought with them. However, no enemies appeared, making the fort unnecessary. The colonists lived in and near it for a while, but within three years, perhaps sooner, the leaders began to take up the lands promised them and move their servants to distant plantations. By the early 1640s, the fort was in decay.

The survival of the colony was the first order of business, but the Maryland colonists could not raise the grain crops they had known in England because these required plowing which required complete land clearance. Clearing virgin forests proved too time consuming, so agricultural practices were borrowed from the Indians. They girdled the trees-that is they stripped a piece of bark all around the tree so that the sap could not rise. The trees then died and lost their leaves allowing sunlight to reach the ground. Sharpened sticks, shells or stones, or in the case of the English, metal hoes, were used to make hills in which could be planted Indian corn for food and tobacco for export. To the English, Indian corn was a miracle crop, bringing a minimum of 200 kernels in return for each that germinated. Twice as much food per acre could be produced by planting Indian corn rather than wheat or other English grains.

Indentured servants and ex-servants were the backbone of the 17th-century labor force. Seventy to eighty-five percent of the immigrants to Maryland came as indentured servants who had to pay for their transportation with several years of service. However, once free, these people worked to become landowners and importers of servants themselves and many had success. Unfortunately, many others died before achieving this goal. Life expectancy of all immigrants was extraordinarily low because they had no immunity to local strains of diseases. Malaria was particularly widespread. Ironically, Europeans brought the disease with them and infected the local mosquitoes. Malaria was not often fatal in itself, but it weakened one for other diseases-influenza, dysentery, etc.

In the 1660s, opportunities for poor men began to improve in England and emigration of indentured servants began to decline. Enslaved persons began to replace indentured servants and by the early 18th

century, outnumbered them. Tobacco, sold in Europe, was the foundation of the Maryland economy, but tobacco required a great deal of labor. Unlike indentured servants, enslaved people did not eventually become free and leave planters stranded for labor. By the mid-18th century almost all bound laborers in St. Mary's County were enslaved and this remained true until the Civil War put an end to slavery.

Today, everything that once stood on the 17th-century town lands has disappeared-at least above ground. St. Mary's City was abandoned for the present Maryland capital of Annapolis in 1695. Fortunately, there was very little later development to destroy the site of what was once the first capital. Archaeologists are slowly uncovering the 17th-century remains of buildings and their contents and the belongings of the people who once lived there.