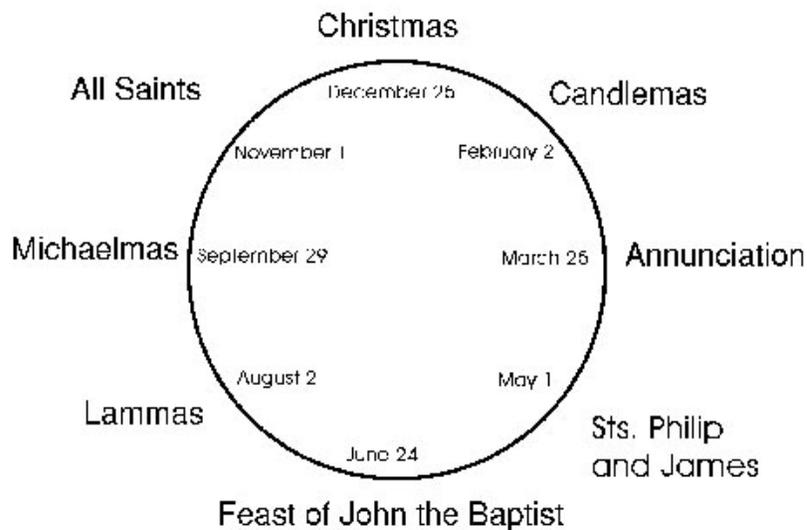


A Matter of Time

By Silas Hurry, Laboratory Director and Curator of Collections, HSMC

When Leonard Calvert and the Maryland colonists arrived in the New World, England celebrated the beginning of the new year on March 25. The practice of celebrating the new year on the 25th of March dates back to the early medieval period when the Catholic Church established a calendar which recognized a year as beginning in late March with the Feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary (March 25). In England, the Feast of the Annunciation was called Lady's Day and most legal arrangements, contracts, leases, and such were structured around this date. The calendar year was divided into quarters with religious feast days marking the periods. These feast days were called quarter days. In most of England, the quarter days were Lady's Day, the Feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary (March 25th); Midsummer Day, the Feast of St. John the Baptist (June 24); Michaelmas, the Feast of the Archangel Michael (September 29); and Christmas, the Feast of the Birth of Jesus (December 25).



Also of note were the cross quarter days which divided each quarter in half. These include Candlemas, the Feast of the Purification of Mary, (February 2); May Day, the Feast of Sts. Philip and James (May 1); Lamas, the Feast of St. Peter Delivered from Prison (August 2); and All Saints Day, the Feast of All Saints (November 1). Rents that were due quarterly had to be paid on these days and various other religious and legal activities were timed to these feast days.

When the colonists chose to officially take command of the new land on March 25, while still at St. Clement's Island, they were picking a day that had considerable symbolism for them and their countrymen. Not only was it the new year, but it was an important religious feast day that celebrated the Roman Catholic commitment to the veneration of Mary. Date choices were not random but instead highly meaningful. We see this in the alignment of the foundations for the brick chapel at St. Mary's City. Catholic liturgical practice called for churches to be aligned on a true east-west orientation. Evidence of the first Catholic chapel that stood on the site (before the Brick Chapel of 1667, which is

being reconstructed) is reflected in burials. However, the Brick Chapel of 1667 is aligned at 11 degrees off of a true east-west orientation as are the human burials associated with it. Why? There is also a tradition of orienting religious buildings to the rising sun on the feast day of the saint to whom the church is dedicated. Through careful calculation, we have determined that the sun rises directly in line with the church foundations on February 2, Candlemas, which is the feast of the Purification of Mary. Was the brick chapel in St. Mary's City in the colony of Maryland dedicated to the Virgin Mary? It seems quite likely and on reflection doesn't seem all that surprising given the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary as a saint.

Three hundred years ago, England refused to accept the Gregorian Calendar as a dreaded Papist creation. So, dates in England were ten days different than most of the rest of Europe in the 17th century. And since the New Year was different, March 25 rather than January 1, dates that occurred between January 1 and March 25th were part of the prior year in England while part of the current year in the rest of Europe. This led to the use of year dates that incorporated a slash—so that December 12 would be 1634 while February 14 would be 1634/5 and March 29 would be 1635. These dates are sometimes denoted with the abbreviations O.S. (old style or Julian calendar) or N.S. (new style or Gregorian calendar).



All of this confusion ended in 1752 when England finally accepted the Gregorian calendar. By that point, a full 11 days had crept in to the difference between Julian calendar dates and the Gregorian calendar. In 1752, the English Parliament decreed that September 2, 1752 would be followed by September 14, 1752 and that January 1 would be the beginning of the new year. So George Washington was born on February 11th under the Julian calendar which became February 22 under the Gregorian calendar after England and her colonies changed their date reckoning. It must have been difficult for those who were born between September 3 and September 13 in the year 1752 since they got a year older but never had a birthday party!

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