

Education and the Maryland Colony

by Susan Wilkinson, Director of Marketing & Communications

About 30,000 students visit Historic St. Mary's City each year. Most are elementary school students of Maryland history on guided tours with their classmates. They're often surprised to find "colonial" children hard at work at the Godiah Spray Plantation. Our 20th-century visitors are quick to ask why these "colonials" aren't in school. Actually, these youngsters are in school, they are home-schooled students enrolled in Historic St. Mary's City's Terra Mariae program. But true to the role of interpreter, the "colonial" child answers, "My father can't afford the tuition, nor can he afford to lose my help."



Historians have found evidence of a school in St. Mary's City in the early days of the colony. Around the middle of the 17th century, Ralph Crouch, who had trained as Jesuit but didn't take vows until much later, opened an elementary school supported by tuition in St. Mary's City. It probably didn't run past 1652, when Protestants took temporary control of the colony. At the end of the century, a school in St. Mary's City is mentioned in a report from the Governor. He noted there were few schools, most on plantations for the masters' children, and one brick school run by the Jesuits at St. Mary's. In 1694, the Colonial Assembly placed a tax on imported liquors to support free schools and shortly passed an act providing for one school in each county. Another law that followed required schoolmasters to provide instruction free to poor children. Before the 19th century, elementary and secondary education in the United States was almost always private. Not until the 19th century did free public education become widely available in America.

In 17th-century St. Mary's City, education was reserved for the sons of the wealthy and by the early 18th century some were sent to Jesuit schools abroad. Upper class girls may have been tutored in music, art, and embroidery in the home or sent to a nunnery in Belgium or France. For the working class, education had a practical slant. Parents taught children the skills they needed to make their way in 17th-century Tidewater Maryland. And so the day goes for our contemporary Terra Mariae students, as they portray the Spray children and their friends. "You'll find them going about daily activities appropriate for the season, their age, and their sex. Tasks were gender specific. Boys might clean barns, stack fencing, make cider, or build a house to scale. The girls sew, cook, dye cloth, garden, study herbs, or make soap and candles. Reading, ciphering, and business would be part of the 17th-century curriculum, too, if the elders had those skills," according to Aaron Meisinger, Plantation Site Supervisor, who developed and oversees the Terra Mariae program.



One of the first things our modern day students learn is that living in the 17th century involved hard work. "Life then was not about doing what you like to do," Meisinger observed, "but there is a lot of satisfaction from doing something constructive." He describes two tiers of education in the early years of the colony, "The first was mastering survival skills: how to build a shelter and get food. The second level was how to earn a profit. In England, there was scant chance of getting past the first level. Here, the colonists found many opportunities to increase their wealth." For the Terra Mariae students, research, writing assignments, and lessons in history, chemistry, music, or sociology may be applied to the practical lessons learned at the Plantation.

A good education doesn't necessarily lead to a diploma. Nor does a diploma necessarily lead to success. If the measures of a good education are the ability to make one's way in the world, to attain happiness, or to serve government, God, or fellow man, we can find many un-schooled colonial citizens who were quite successful despite their lack of credentials. Many advanced economically, socially, and politically, far beyond where they would have gone in England due to hard work, practical skills, and the unique opportunities the colony offered. Their education served them very well in that time and place.

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