

## Forts of St. Mary's

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Between 1634 and the 1650s, English settlers at St. Mary's City erected at least four fortifications. While no trace of these forts survives above ground and there are no maps or sketches from the period to guide researchers, Maryland's founders left a few written clues about these forts and their efforts to secure the fledgling colony. The paragraphs that follow summarize the history of these early military fortifications and describe archaeological evidence that has been found.

### **Fort St. Maries (1634 – ca. 1644)**

Soon after the arrival of the Maryland colonists in March of 1634, Governor Leonard Calvert, a brother of Lord Baltimore, selected the location of a Yaocomico Indian village along a small tributary of the Potomac River now called the St. Mary's River to establish the colony. They named the new settlement St. Mary's City and began construction of a fort. Governor Calvert in May of 1634 wrote that

*"we have seated ourselves, within one half mile of the river, within a pallizado of one hundred and twentie yard square, with fower flankes, we have mounted one peece of ordnance, and placed six murderers in parts most convenient; a fortification (we thinke) sufficient to defend against any such weake enemies as we have reason to expect here"* (Calvert 1634:21).

Major threats perceived by the settlers came from Chesapeake Indians and Virginia colonists who were opposed to the establishment of Maryland. Based upon this description, we assume that "Fort St. Maries" had a square shape and was 360 feet on a side with a bastion at each corner. It enclosed the early settlement and by 1635 was home to several hundred colonists. The chief military expert in the early colony was Thomas Cornwallis, a distant ancestor of General Cornwallis who surrendered at Yorktown in 1781. Cornwallis and

Calvert probably directed the design of the fort. Calvert further noted that they had "...seven peeces of Ordinance more" to mount. Fort St. Maries had eight cannons, purchased by Lord Baltimore in 1633. Of these, four were rated as sakers and four as the larger demiculverins.

Following is an early conjectural drawing of the fort that provides some sense of its scale and form. However, this drawing probably does not accurately reflect the actual construction.



Fort St. Maries was intensively occupied during the first years of settlement but this did not continue for long. Abundant land and the profits from raising tobacco lured people and most of the colonists left the fort in mid-1637 to establish individual plantations. The governor called the Assembly of all freedmen in the colony to meet on 25 January 1637 at “the ffort of St. maries” (Archives of Maryland 1:1-2) and occasional references to it are found in the early 1640s. Evidence suggests that this fortification was abandoned and dismantled around 1644, standing for only a single decade. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, people have speculated as to its location and several hypotheses were advanced about the fort. Lois Carr wrote the first detailed study evaluating the proposed locations but could not determine the precise placement without archaeological confirmation (Carr 1969). Archaeologists have searched for the fort since 1971 but despite much investigation and finding tantalizing clues, they have not yet conclusively found the fort. The relatively short life span of the fortification and its intensive habitation for only two or three years may be crucial factors making it difficult to find the fort. Archaeologists have recovered substantial numbers of artifacts dating to the first decade of settlement clustered in two places. One is along the St. Mary’s River and represents the traditional site of the fort in local legend. The other is along Mill Creek, near Mattapany Road, and was proposed by Riordan (1991). Both are strong possibilities and it will require extensive archaeological testing to determine which site represents the original fort.

### Fort St. Inigoes (ca. 1637 – ca. 1660)

In 1637, the Maryland settlers constructed another fortification downriver from St. Mary’s City. Fort St. Inigoes was built overlooking the river on a point of land that is still called Fort Point.



Its purpose was to allow better defense of the river and protect vessels in one of the major anchorages near the city. Thomas Cornwallis was probably involved in its design. No description of this fort survives but it continued in use until the early 1660s. Some legislation passed in 1650 provides a few details about the operation of this fort.

*“...the Gunner of the said fort for ... overseeing the Guns and making them usefull and ready for service shall have ... 1000 pounds for tobacco”* (Archives of Maryland 1: 293).

And one method the legislature devised to supply the fort was by taxing vessels trading at St. Mary’s City:

*“And all vessels ... having a deck ... shall pay to the said ffort half a pound of powder and two pounds of shott and a considerable quantity of match or so much value for every tunne of burthen for the use of the ffort...”* (Archives of Maryland 1:293)

There are also references to a small seven person garrison for St. Inigoes Fort. This fort was erected on a point of land subject to wave action and erosion and consequently, this natural process gradually destroyed the fort. Nevertheless, the approximate location at which it stood has endured in memory and is still called Fort Point on nautical maps. In the 1820s, a number of iron cannon were found in the St. Mary's river off Fort Point and Jesuit priest Joseph Carberry and his brother Thomas Carberry raised them in 1824. These cannons were probably brought to Maryland in 1634 aboard the Ark and were later moved to Fort St. Inigoes from Fort St. Maries. An article entitled [The Guns of St. Mary's](#) by Donald Shomette (1998), describes these weapons and the fascinating story of their recovery and subsequent history. Both sakers and demiculverins were found and these tubes are currently on display at Maryland's State House, Georgetown University, the Riversdale mansion near Bladensburg, in Leonardtown, Maryland and on the grounds of Historic St. Mary's City. An image of one of the demiculverins found off Fort Point that is currently displayed at St. Mary's City follows.

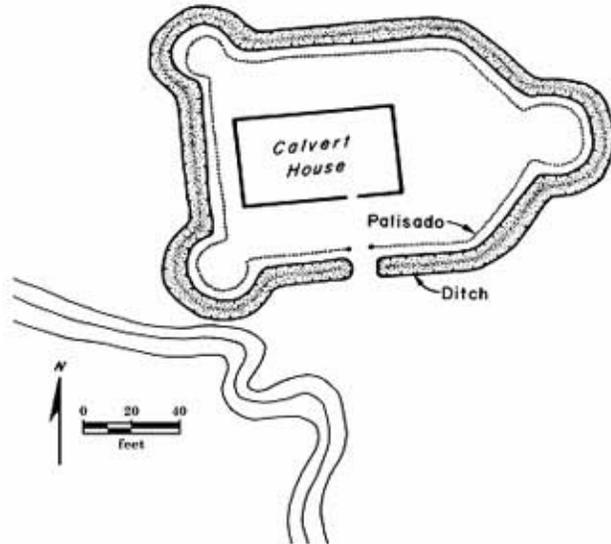


### **Pope's Fort (1645-ca. 1655)**

Maryland was a growing, prospering colony in the decade after its founding in 1634. But in early 1645, it was nearly destroyed by ripples from a conflict that was ravaging England. Since 1642 England had been embroiled in a vicious civil war between King Charles I and Parliament. The violence reached the shores of America in 1645 at St. Mary's City. Captain Richard Ingle, commander of the ship *Reformation*, launched a sneak attack on the capital of the colony on 14 February. Ingle was operating under letters of marque from Parliament and saw Maryland as a legitimate target due to its royalist preferences and the fact that the colony was owned by a Catholic proprietor. Furthermore, Ingle had personal scores to settle with some of the colony's leaders. The only military force to resist Ingle was the militia and since no attack was expected, there was not time to assemble troops. Ingle's men captured Fort St. Inigoes and then the capital. They began looting the homes of Maryland's leaders and Catholics and burned structures during a period that became known as "the Plundering Time." For the most comprehensive account of the attack and the events of this "time of troubles", see Riordan's [The Plundering Time: Maryland and the English Civil War, 1645-1646](#).

Before departing for England a few months later, Ingle and his men constructed a fort around the home of Governor Leonard Calvert. At the time, Calvert's house was one of the largest structures in the Chesapeake region, measuring 40 feet in width and 67.5 feet in length. When Ingle sailed for England, he left Nathaniel Pope, a Maryland settler, in command of the fort and it is referred to in documents as "Mr. Popes Fort". Governor Calvert returned in late 1646 with hired troops and successfully recaptured the colony and took Pope's Fort. Archaeological evidence suggests that the fort stood into the late 1650s. Because he took Ingle's side, Pope was no longer welcome in Maryland and he moved across the

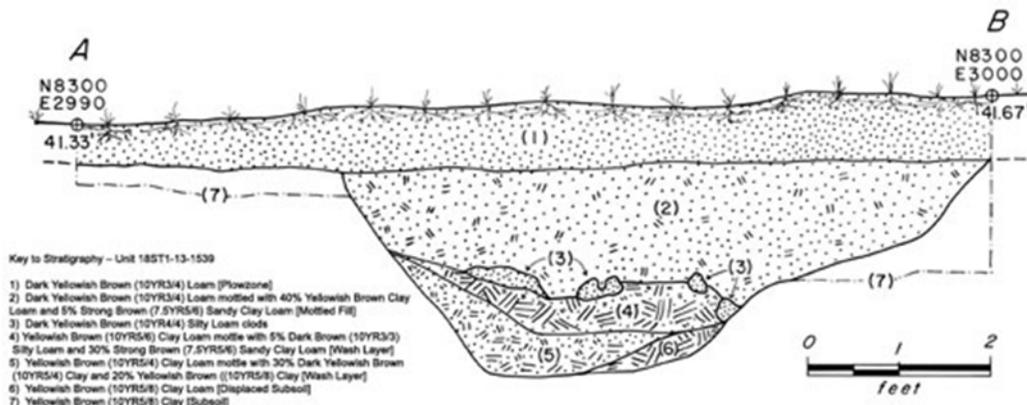
Potomac River to Virginia. His daughter, born at St. Mary's City, later married John Washington and began the family from which George Washington descended).



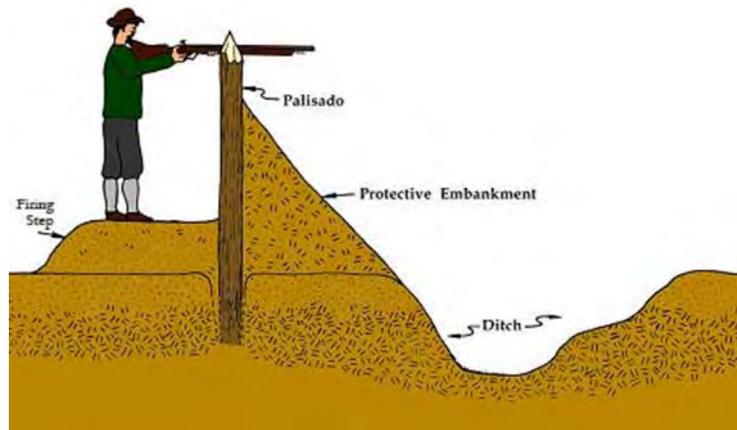
Archaeology reveals that Ingle's men built a fort with a timber palisade wall and an external ditch or moat (Miller 1986). The drawing below displays the original plan of this fort. It was approximately 190 feet long and 120 feet wide. Pope's Fort had three strategically placed bastions, with the largest on the landward side that could have held several cannons. Another bastion on the northwest corner controlled the St. Mary's River while the third helped with the river defense but more significantly overlooked a ravine that led to the beach. This

was important because a large spring that provided the fort's water supply was at the base of the ravine. A gate was located on the south wall, opposite the parlor door of the Calvert house. Overall, the Pope's Fort plan is well conceived as a modified triangular fortification, suggesting that the designer had knowledge of military design. This plan around a fortified house is similar to examples found in England and Ireland from the early to mid-17th century.

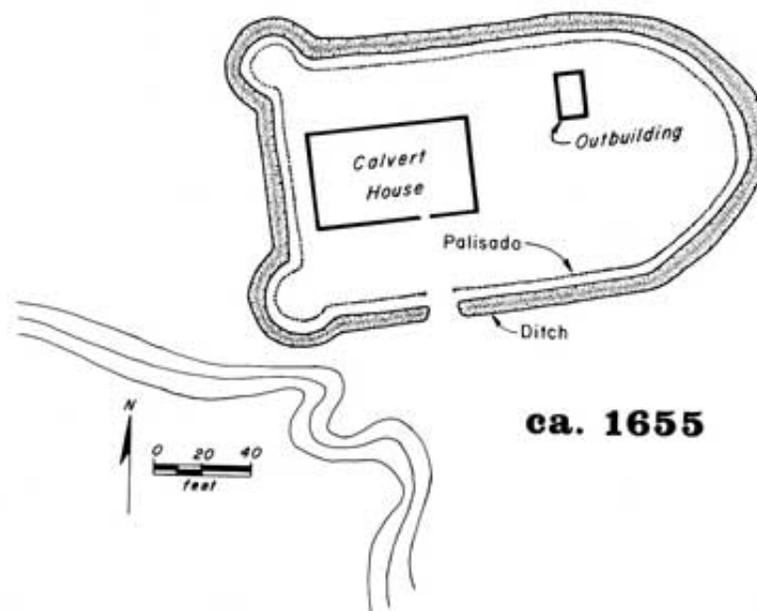
The ditch or moat of the fort was originally nine or ten feet wide and slightly over 3 feet deep. Analysis of the stratigraphy in the ditch indicates that the builders greatly enhanced the effectiveness of this ditch by using a specific construction method. As the cross-section below shows, large quantities of displaced soil washed into the moat from the interior (left) side. This indicates that they dug the ditch and after installing a wooden palisade wall five feet from the interior edge of this ditch, proceeded to pile and tightly pack the displaced soil against the outside of the palisade wall to create a steep 10 to 12 foot high barrier. This packed soil also provided defenders with some protection from incoming gunfire.



The following drawing shows the method of wall construction suggested by the archaeological evidence.



Extensive testing in the area of the fort indicates that it was expanded in the late 1640s or early 1650s. On the east end of the fort, workers extended the ditch and palisade to make the total length of the fort about 220 feet. This effort made the large east bastion of the original fort useless, since it was inside the new wall line. With this bastion backfilled, the simple extension of the palisade increased the interior space of the fort by one third. Who was responsible for this enlargement and why they felt it necessary is unknown.



This image shows the enlarged plan.

There are no documents detailing the armaments at Pope's Fort but archaeologists have recovered a barrel fragment from an exploded iron demiculverin cannon in the ditch fill. Also from the ditch came an iron cannon ball for a saker, indicating that both gun types were at the fort. These cannons were probably the same ones brought to the colony by the first settlers in 1634. Other military-related materials include a cutlass hilt, fragments of Pikeman's body armor, lead bullets, and locally made gunflints. Excavators also found one unusual bullet flattened by impact. Spectrographic analysis of the impact surface and study of the specimen's shape suggests that it was fired into the fort's earthen wall (Stacy, Miller and Froede 1990).



***Piece of cannon and cutlass hilt.***



***Flattened bullet***

There is at least 600 feet of filled fort ditch surviving but only 40 feet have been explored thus far, so a wealth of new evidence about "the Plundering Time" remains to be collected. Pope's Fort is significant because it is directly tied to the English Civil Wars and is the only military evidence of this conflict yet discovered by archaeologists in North America.

### **St. Thomas Fort (ca. 1640 – ca. 1650)**

The final fort known to have stood in the St. Mary's City area also dates from the English Civil War period. It surrounded the home of colonist Margaret Brent and was known as St. Thomas's Fort. Parliamentary forces under Richard Ingle captured it sometime in 1645. There are only a few historic documents about this fort and one references its capture:

*"John Greenhold ... being prisoner att Mr. Sturmans, after the taking of St. Thomases fort..."* (Archives of Maryland 5 April 1648)

Margaret Brent was a major landowner, a Roman Catholic and the sister of acting governor Giles Brent, who had arrested Richard Ingle in 1644 for not supporting the King. Margaret Brent saved the colony of Maryland after Governor Calvert died in 1647, and in 1648, famously asked for the right to vote in the Maryland legislature, the first woman to request a vote in America. She continued living at the St. Thomas Fort until 1650, when she moved to the upper Potomac. No details about this fort are known but there is a documentary reference to its earthworks still being visible as late as 1705. This implies that St. Thomas's Fort also had a ditch or moat. Archaeologists have not yet identified the exact site of

this fortification although its general location can be determined from land records. That area has been in agriculture for the past three centuries, making it very likely that the remains of St. Thomas's Fort are well preserved below the plowed soil.

The forts at St. Mary's City are of much significance in the history of early America. Fort St. Maries is the founding place of Maryland, the fourth successful English colony in North America. It probably incorporated part of the Yaocomico Indian village that the newly arrived English peacefully acquired. This fort was the cultural setting for the first sustained interactions between the Chesapeake Indians and the Maryland settlers, as well as the place where the English began the process of adapting to the new environment of America. Pope's Fort and St. Thomas's Fort are within one half mile of each other and these fortified houses are directly linked to the English Civil Wars. Their moats are filled with early artifacts and comprise virtual time capsules of life from the mid-17th century. Future exploration of these unique archaeological sites will yield valuable new insights about the beginnings of Maryland and more clearly reveal how the bloody Civil War between King and Parliament impacted the fragile colonies of English America.

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