

Madison Avenue: Colonial-Style

by Susan Wilkinson, HSMC Director of Marketing and Communications

An Account of the Colony of the Lord Baron of Baltimore, in Maryland, near Virginia: in which the character, quality and state of the Country, and its numerous advantages and sources of wealth are set forth.

Free land for hard workers! You, too, can be a lord! All Trinitarians welcome! When the proprietor of Maryland, Cecilius Calvert, needed to attract shareholders and citizens—the laborers, taxpayers, consumers, and producers of more citizens—that were key to the success of the new colony, he followed the custom of the day and advertised. Imagine the fun Madison Avenue could have had with this client, had advertising agencies existed 375 years ago.

Advertising began with signs merchants posted that pictured the goods or services shoppers could find at their establishments. Advertising pamphlets and handbills began appearing in 15th-century England after Gutenberg invented movable type. In the 17th century, about four out of ten of English men and one woman in five were able to read. Talk took over where reading left off. Promotional pamphlets and broadside posters became an accepted medium for spreading the word of colonial ventures.

As English colonization began, tracts endorsed the notion as the solution to overpopulation and meager resources in England as well as an opportunity to spread Christianity. Glowing descriptions of the wonders to be found in the Americas were circulated. In 1584, Arthur Barlowe wrote, "The earth bringeth forth all things in abundance as in the first creation, without toil or labor." Thomas Harriot, who traveled to Virginia with Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585 "found the soil to be fatter, the trees greater and grow thinner, the ground more firm and deeper mould, more and larger champions, finer grasse." Today's ad copy is succinct, amusing, functional and memorable --- Just do it! Just say no! Let your fingers do the walking. Reach out and touch someone. But recruiting investors and workers willing to risk their fortunes and lives requires more than a 15-second sound bite. Advertising for the colony was more in line with a prospectus for an I.P.O.

The first promotional tract for the Maryland colony, *Declaration of the Lord Baltimore's Plantation in Maryland* published in 1633, is the only tract we know of that was written before the trip. Written for the Calverts by Father Andrew White in cultured and measured tones, it is a few adjectives beyond a completely objective description of the colony and the benefits of participating. Eventually the paragraphs depart from the material and venture into the spiritual. "The first and most important design . . . is . . . sowing the seeds of religion and piety" and back again, acknowledging ". . . since all men have not such enthusiastic souls and noble minds, as to . . . consider nothing but heavenly things; because most men are more drawn, secretly or openly, by pleasures, honor and riches, it was ordained by the wonderful wisdom of God, that this one enterprise should offer to men every kind of inducement and reward".

Subsequent promotional tracts, produced after Maryland was settled, penned by educated gentlemen who were among the first colonists, offer accounts of the natural state of the region, a study of the native people, and commentary on the culture of the day. Most famous of these was the 1635 *A Relation of Maryland*. These provided valuable information to potential settlers and continue to serve contemporary scholars.

A promotional tract produced in 1666 may have been an early example of "spin," an effort to influence public opinion. George Alsop, an Englishman who served a four-year indenture near Baltimore,

returned to his home country and wrote a tract called *A Character of the Province of Mary-Land*, apparently with encouragement from the Calverts. In the 1660s, the state of affairs in England began to improve and stories of harsh conditions awaiting servants in the Chesapeake were circulated. Emigration of indentured servants declined. Meanwhile, in Maryland, after years of strife the Calvert family was stepping up efforts to develop the colony and attract laborers.

Alsop departs from the straight-forward style of previous promotions sponsored by the Proprietor. Employing overblown prose, exaggeration, and half-baked analogies dosed with a heaping helping of opinion, his vastly entertaining account sings praises of the colony. Like a good barroom raconteur, he doesn't let the truth corrupt a good story. His *Character* describes flora and fauna and illuminates life, experienced and imagined, in Maryland.

*'Tis said the Gods lower down that Chain above,
That tyes both Prince and Subject up in Love;
And if this Fiction of the Gods be true,
Few, Mary-Land, in this can boast bur you"
Live ever blest, and let those Clouds that do
Eclipse most States, be always Lights to you;
And dwelling so, you may for ever be
The only Emblem of Tranquility.*

Joseph Alsop,
Character of the Province of Mary-Land

The pages include a convoluted argument for servitude as a sobering influence that checks the exuberance of youth. Alsop describes Maryland as a "well-conditioned Estate" where "Roman Catholick, and the Protestant Episcopal . . . concur in an unanimous parallel of friendship, and inseparable love intayled unto one another." He reports that the Susquanahanna Indians' ". . . skins are naturally white, but altered . . . by the several dyings of Roots and Barks," that they are "seven foot high." Concerning the Native American's religion, he states, "They own no other Deity than the Devill, " and "Once in four years they Sacrifice a Childe . . ."

Today, advertising should be more or less truthful. Surprisingly, legislation that emerged early in the twentieth century was promulgated by the advertising industry itself to enhance its credibility. Centuries ago, truthfulness was guided by integrity. But an old adage has always applied -- Let the buyer beware!

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