

Showdown at the State House

Politics and Revolution in Old St. Mary's City

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In this strident political season, a quiet stroll around Historic St. Mary's City may invite respite from roadsides littered with candidates' signs and airwaves blaring campaign commercials. How tempting it might be to escape into a gentler era where quaint buildings and garden pathways offer vistas of our beautiful St. Mary's River.

But, in fact, politics in the past was in many ways far more contentious. If we took a walk through the political history of St. Mary's City, we might start at the replica of the State House. The original structure, erected in 1676, symbolized the city's prominence as the seat of Maryland government.

Here, on the afternoon of July 27, 1689, Deputy Governor William Digges and a force of eighty loyalists gathered at the State House to defend Lord Baltimore's capital from assault by other Marylanders who threatened armed rebellion. Seven months earlier, the new Protestant monarchs of England, William and Mary, had deposed Mary's Catholic father, James II, in a "Glorious Revolution." Maryland's Protestant Associators, inflamed by years of genuine and imagined grievances against the colony's Catholic proprietor, Lord Baltimore, marched on the State House in July hoping to overthrow proprietary government and gain favor from William and Mary.

The Associators' grudges stemmed from decades of religious and political strife in both England and Maryland. Suspicion of Catholics in general, and of the Catholic Calvert family, festered throughout the century. The third Lord Baltimore, Charles Calvert, who held power in 1689, lacked the political skills of his father and grandfather. He ruled Maryland through a tight inner circle composed of blood relatives, in-laws, and fellow Catholics, and he seemed oblivious to changing realities.

The showdown at the State House ended without shots fired. Outnumbered by angry Associators, Digges and his loyalists surrendered. John Coode, an outspoken former delegate in the General Assembly, took control of an interim government. The Calvert vision of "liberty of conscience," or freedom of worship without an established church, ended in irony. Catholics and Quakers lost all political rights after the revolution, and the Church of England became supported through general taxation. The State House itself was turned over to the Anglican parish of William and Mary. It remained their place of worship well into the nineteenth century.

Our next stop is Garrett Van Sweringen's inn, just south from the State House. Van Sweringen, a Dutch-born entrepreneur, boasted the finest accommodations, food, and drink in the young capital in the 1680s and 1690s. Merchants and members of the Governor's Council were his clientele. As in Annapolis today, political deals were frequently brokered at Van Sweringen's table over a tankard of ale or a potent rum punch.



For a time after the overthrow of the Calvert proprietorship, Van Sweringen continued to prosper. But by 1698, former hopes of a bright future for St. Mary's were no more. A new royal governor moved the capital to Annapolis, the town lands of St. Mary's became abandoned, and the inn's business dwindled after Garret Van Sweringen died. The decline and fall of St. Mary's is vividly evident at this site.

Walking south, we arrive at the original town center where artisans are finishing work on a reconstructed building called the Print House. Digging here some years ago, archaeologists discovered many pieces of lead printing type, confirming a location of the first printing press south of Boston. English-born William Nuthead and his wife Dinah were the printers. Their business in this seat of provincial government concentrated on producing legal forms.

After the Protestant Associators gained power in 1689, they hired Nuthead to print a political tract petitioning the English monarchs for legitimacy. A surviving copy in London, titled "The Declaration of the Reasons and Motives," notes that it was "printed by William Nuthead at the City of St. Maries." This was the first significant instance of the press being used for propaganda purposes in Maryland. Capital cities have business for printers. Abandoned capitals do not. After William Nuthead died in 1695, his wife Dinah hauled the press up to Annapolis, where she became America's first licensed woman printer.

From the site of Nuthead's print house we can view a further casualty of Maryland's 1689 revolution. The lofty brick chapel built by Jesuit priests in the 1660s stood for only a few decades. It dominated the landscape of the capital, provided a forceful reminder of Catholic ascendancy, and must have been a source of irritation to Protestants. After the revolution, public worship by Catholics was banned and a 1704 law ordered the sheriff of St. Mary's County to lock up the chapel. The Jesuits dismantled their still-sturdy building and moved every reusable brick, tile, and fixture to a plantation at St. Inigoes. Only the massive foundations remained. The reconstruction now underway employs rigorously authentic materials and techniques.

Just as Lord Baltimore sought vainly to keep control of his colony, a faction of local freemen fought in vain against the move of the capital to Annapolis. They implored the General Assembly to consider how much money and effort had gone into establishing the capital at St. Mary's, but to no avail. The more central location of Annapolis, where Puritans held sway, and the reputation of St. Mary's as a Catholic stronghold combined to seal its fate.

Despite the rancor that characterized Maryland in its founding years, freemen both Protestant and Catholic often expressed yearnings for stability, greater self-government, and measured adaptation of English common law. The stirrings of democracy in early Maryland were tempered by prejudice, greed, racial slavery, and narrow ambition, but they were also informed by a growing recognition that personal freedom and equality under the law are ultimately inseparable.

A note of sincere appreciation to Dr. Lois Green Carr, whose extensive writings about St. Mary's City and the Maryland revolution of government are indispensable sources, and to Rod Cofield SMCM '03, whose research about William and Dinah Nuthead provides important new information about printers in colonial Maryland.

This article first appeared in The River Gazette (2006), a publication of St. Mary's College of Maryland.