

## **Garrett Van Sweringen**

*(1636– 1698)*

Many people assume that America was settled mostly by the English, but even within English colonies, there was significant ethnic diversity. Among the immigrants to colonial St. Mary's was Garrett Van Sweringen, a Dutch- man who became a leader in the development of Maryland's first capital city.

Van Sweringen was born in 1636 in Holland but little is known of his early years. He was evidently well educated and multi-lingual, speaking Dutch, English, and French. He came to America in 1657 as an agent for the City of Amsterdam. He sailed as part of an expedition charged with reinvigorating the Dutch colony of New Amstel (now New Castle, Delaware), on the Delaware Bay, but the ship wrecked on the shores of Long Island, resulting in the loss of many of the supplies and personal possessions of the passengers. After finally arriving at New Amstel, Van Sweringen served in several positions, including sheriff, a councilor, and deputy commander of the colony. In this capacity, Van Sweringen had contact with Maryland's leaders and gained some knowledge of that colony.

When English forces invaded and captured the Dutch colony in 1664, he again lost most of his estate, this time from plundering during the conquest. Soon afterward, Van Sweringen moved to St. Mary's City with his wife Barbara, a native of Flanders, and their family. Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, appointed him as an alderman on the new city council in 1667, and made Van Sweringen and his family some of the first naturalized citizens of Maryland in 1669. Documents from that year describe Van Sweringen as an innkeeper.

His ordinary was probably located in a structure newly built by William Smith, who died shortly before it was completed. It is likely that Van Sweringen initially leased the building from Smith's widow and her new husband, Daniel Jennifer. In December of 1672, Van Sweringen purchased the Ordinary and began major renovations. The building was doubled in size and had a number of expensive refinements added including plastered walls and decorative tin-glazed tiles.

Much of Van Sweringen's trade came from those traveling to the capital city to do business with the government. Many of these visits were subsidized by the state. Evidence of substantial payments to Van Sweringen, in pounds of tobacco, are stored in the Maryland Archives.

Like so many immigrants to Maryland, Van Sweringen's wife Barbara died. In 1676 he married Mary Smith, a 17-year old English woman. Van Sweringen ultimately fathered at least ten children by these two wives. The Van Sweringens operated Smith's Ordinary until early in 1677. At that time, the complex with most of its furnishings was leased to John Derry. Court documents indicate that Van Sweringen wanted to give up ordinary keeping so that he could open a private house and engage in brewing. By law, an ordinary had to accept anyone at any time who appeared seeking lodging. The law also set rates that could be charged by ordinaries. A private house was less bound by these regulations and thus potentially more profitable.

In 1677, Van Sweringen acquired the building that had been used as the meeting place for the Governor's Council and public records office. These functions had moved to the new brick State House, which was completed in 1676. There is no question that Van Sweringen's latest venture was designed to appeal to the elite, especially members of the Governor's Council. Archaeology suggests Van Sweringen made a sizable investment in renovations, including building a new kitchen, adding chimneys, plastered walls, and installing a brick veneer. Just as the lodging house was being finished, disaster struck once again. Smith's Ordinary, which he still owned but leased to Derry, burned to the ground. Van Sweringen's loss was a staggering sum yet he recovered from adversity once again.

His new lodging house began attracting the elite of the colony, and it became the most elegant establishment in Maryland. From time to time, the higher charges for feeding and housing the Council members became a subject of contention. Nonetheless, Van Sweringen received very substantial payments for his services. The quality of the food and drink served is suggested in the record of a discussion that took place in the General Assembly in 1682, where rates that would be charged for cider were set. Van Sweringen's boiled cider was the only exception made to the rates.

*"...and therefore Resolved that they be allowed for syder 25 lbs of tob. P Gall except Mr. Vansweringen & he to have for his boyld syder 30 lbs. Tob P Gall..." (Archives of MD 7:429).*

Van Sweringen kept sheep at the site, a source of fresh meat for the table and wool for the household. There was a garden containing cabbage and other vegetables. One of the most unexpected documentary references from 17th-century St. Mary's City is found in the 1698 will of Garrett Van Sweringen. In it, he bequeaths to his son, Joseph, "ye Council Rooms and Coffee House and land thereto belonging". Coffee houses were fashionable urban institutions in Europe and of growing popularity in England during the late 17th century. Coffee houses served wine and other beverages but little food. They were places for social interaction. It is surprising to find this reference in early Maryland.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the outbuilding originally built for brewing and baking may have been the coffee house. This outbuilding was fitted out far better than most such structures. The artifacts associated with the building suggest that it was the scene of much smoking and drinking but little food consumption. Other evidence comes from traces of the vanished colonial landscape - fence trenches. They formed an unusual public entry corridor to the Coffee house, probably so that people could come to the structure without going through the private yard.

Scattered references suggest that Van Sweringen had some role in providing medical treatment. Other records show that Van Sweringen was a merchant involved in trade with England, Ireland, Jamaica, and New York. He also provided construction services. In June 1674, Van Sweringen was paid 800 lbs. of tobacco for building the stocks and a whipping post for the colony.

Van Sweringen owned a plantation just south of St. Mary's City, the 1,500 acre St. Elizabeth's Manor. At his death, the inventory lists four enslaved Africans who might have been working in agricultural production. However, there is no direct evidence as to the nature of his plantation operations, aside from cattle-raising and perhaps dairying.

When Garrett Van Sweringen died in 1698, he had amassed a large estate valued at over 300 lbs. sterling, placing him among the top 5% of all the householders in St. Mary's County for his time. His story reflects the hard work, innovation, risk-taking, and the will to succeed which characterizes generations of immigrants to America. His entrepreneurial spirit and persistence took advantage of the many opportunities offered by early Maryland, and set a precedent for future immigrants who still come to these shores.