



This isn't your father's museum. Historic St. Mary's City makes great use of interpreters and re-enactors who bring to life the 17th century for visitors through interactive presentations and demonstrations.

Diggin' Historic St. Mary's City

Unearthing the Roots of America at Maryland's Earliest Colonial City

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BY APRIL BARTEL



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HISTORIC ST. MARY'S CITY, ABOUT TWO AND A HALF HOURS SOUTH OF FREDERICK, IS A PLACE OF "FIRSTS." IT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PERMANENT ENGLISH SETTLEMENTS IN NORTH AMERICA, Maryland's first city, home to the first legislator of African descent and site of the first petition for women's voting rights—all before 1650. St. Mary's also served as Maryland's first capital for 61 years. Large for its time, the town was home to about 200 people at its peak. Today, it's a destination for family-friendly, hands-on history programs that bring 17th-century America to life.

An active archaeological site year-round, the 800-acre Historic St. Mary's City museum complex is open to the public Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., through spring and summer and until the end of November. Admission is

\$10 for adults and includes access to four living history sites, presentations, exhibits, and other reconstructed buildings.

"When people think about museums, they expect to stand still, keep quiet, and keep their



St. Mary's City isn't a passive experience for visitors, who are often encouraged to take part in everything from Native American dances to archeological digs. We want people to touch and explore," says Susan Wilkinson, director of communications and marketing for Historic St. Mary's City.

hands to themselves, but we are not that type of museum. We want people to touch and explore," says Susan Wilkinson, director of communications and marketing for Historic St. Mary's City (HSMC).

HANDS-ON HISTORY

"Interactive" isn't just a buzz word here. While there are plenty of plaques to read and displays to observe, Historic St. Mary's City's twin treasures are its costumed interpreters and ongoing excavations.

Wilkinson suggests spending four to five hours to see some of everything. There is a 1¾-mile loop from the Visitor Center. In addition to the State House of 1676, the St. John's Site Museum and Brick Chapel, there are four living history locations: The Woodland Indian

Hamlet, the Waterfront, the Town Center and the Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation.

Wilkinson says venturing out to the plantation is especially worth the trip. "The interpreters assume the character of a 17th-century person. They will talk to you and treat you likewise," she says. "There are few intrusions from the 21st century, so

choose. Heritage livestock round out the scene.

In the Town Center there are a number of reconstructed buildings, including an "ordinary" (tavern/inn), a warehouse and a print shop. Guests can try printing at the Franklin Press, modeled after the first press established in the English southern colonies. There are colonial crafts and

"THERE ARE FEW INTRUSIONS FROM THE 21ST CENTURY, SO IT'S A VERY IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE."

—Susan Wilkinson, Historic St. Mary's City

it's a very immersive experience." Visitors are welcome to help work in the tobacco field, cook a meal or try their hand at grinding corn, if they

games for kids of all ages. The nearby waterfront features a replica of the Dove, one of two tall ships that brought the first settlers from



The waterfront in St. Mary's City features a replica of the *Dove*, one of the ships that brought the first settlers to Maryland from England. Historians say that approximately 140 people founded the first Maryland colony and were selected for the voyage because of their vocations, such as farmers, carpenters and brick makers.

England. Visitors can climb aboard and imagine what it would be like to spend weeks at sea as the wood creaks and the water sloshes against

the colony. It also served as a legislative building, standing witness to discussions ranging from the separation of church and state

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the hull. The Woodland Indian Hamlet showcases typical daily life of the local Yeocomico/Yacomaco tribe with several witchotts (long houses). The natives welcomed the newcomers, teaching them about the area and even giving them homes.

There is no admission charge to tour St. John's Site Museum. The original foundation of the building is preserved. It was home to the first provincial secretary and one of the largest enclosed spaces in

to voting rights. The State House and Brick Chapel are also open. Rare lead coffins unearthed at the chapel belonged to members of Maryland's wealthy founding family, the Calverts.

DOWN AND DIRTY

The old place hasn't given up all of its secrets yet. When Annapolis became the state capital, Historic St. Mary's City was nearly lost to history. Many original buildings

were stripped for supplies. The rest were virtually abandoned and left to decay. Ironically, the land's subsequent agricultural use preserved many of the buried relics left behind. Now owned by the State of Maryland, the HSMC research department was established in 1966. The archaeology program began in 1971, affiliated with adjacent St. Mary's College of Maryland.

During the college's summer session, students can sign on for a 10-week accredited anthropology course where they learn and dig alongside a staff of professional archaeologists. Some get to sail on the *Dove*. And, because excavations are open to the public, students get to interact with visitors, too. This Field School is acknowledged by the Archaeological Institute of America for revolutionizing "the understanding of colonial architecture and material



Abandoned and left for ruin, all that remains of St. Mary's City's earliest buildings are foundations and other relics that were preserved beneath farmland for centuries. Today, St. Mary's City is an active archaeological site that is open to the public from spring through November.

culture." There's also a minicamp for younger history buffs and plenty of opportunities to volunteer.

Everyday folks can help sift through history during Tidewater Archaeology Weekend, July 25 and 26. The museum will celebrate its first traditional May Day this year. Hearth and Home in Early Maryland serves up samples and insights in November, while Colonial Christmas and Holiday Madrigal Dinners cap the annual events. Daily highlights and workshops may focus on music or recent findings at excavations.

PASTORAL AND PRETTY

Nearby Leonardtown has its own cache of historic sites, diversions and amenities, including a riverfront park. Mechanicsville has the Potomac

Speedway, Maryland International Raceway and Budds Creek Motocross & Speedway. There is a Patuxent Wine Trail, four lighthouses and adventures for geocaching enthusiasts around St. Mary's County. There are 536 miles of shoreline with public beaches, boating and paddling for soaking in the glory of nature—and popular seafood specialties. Church dinners for fried oysters and stuffed ham are a deep-rooted custom.

The museum complex is somewhat off the beaten path. You won't find big malls or glitzy shopping just outside the gates, but that's not why people come here. They come to take a break from modern stress and reconnect to our collective past, because when we understand our history, we understand ourselves. **FM**

If You Go



For more information about upcoming events in St. Mary's County, go to www.visitstmarysmd.com or visit the Historic St. Mary's City website at www.stmaryscity.org.