

**HISTORIC**   
**ST. MARY'S CITY**

# For Teachers

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. MARY'S CITY



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# THE YACOCOMICO

Long before European colonial settlers arrived in what is now Maryland, the region was inhabited for thousands of years by various Native American tribes. One such group, the Yacocomico, established their village along the banks of what we now know as the St. Mary's River. Their settlement extended southward to the Virginia shore, with the river and its tributaries serving as pathways for their dugout canoes. The Yacocomico engaged with larger tribal entities like the Piscataway and Powhatan Confederacies, forming a complex web of political, social, and cultural interactions. Like these neighboring groups, the Yacocomico communicated using a dialect of the Eastern Algonquian language and shared many cultural traits with other Eastern Woodland Indians in the Atlantic coastal area.

The Yacocomico were semi-sedentary, which meant their witchcotts, or homes, were constructed for long-term use. They practiced agriculture while also relying on hunting, fishing, and gathering, migrating seasonally to access vital resources. They adeptly utilized the natural environment to sustain themselves, crafting stone tools, creating implements from animal bones, producing cordage from plant fibers, bark, and sinew, and using fire for felling trees and making dugout canoes. They also fashioned pottery from local clay and tanned animal hides for clothing.

The Yacocomico held spiritual and social gatherings to commemorate significant events in tribal and village life, as well as seasonal activities, through feasting, dancing, and music. These occasions served as a way to unite the people, share their heritage, trade goods, and foster community. The community likely collaborated to construct buildings, clear fields, and undertake large-scale projects.

Tasks appear to have been distributed between genders. Women typically handled the construction of wicahons and household duties; they cared for children, foraged for and prepared food, and crafted mats, pots, baskets, and clothing. Historian and author Helen Rountree in her book, *Indians of Southern Maryland* (Seib and Rountree, 2015), suggests that women held a significant status in society due to their role in producing maize (corn), a prestigious crop regarded by native peoples as a form of wealth. The society also followed inheritance and kinship through the female ancestry group, this is called a matrilineal society. In contrast, men were mainly tasked with protecting the tribe, creating tools, grinding and shaping stone, constructing dugout canoes, collecting medicinal plants, clearing land for gardens, and making fishing nets.

The Yacocomico, similar to other tribal communities in the region, had a leader known as a werowance (where-o-wans), and a council of advisors referred to as wisoes (wee-sews). Village chiefs reported to tribal chiefs, who, in turn, answered to paramount chiefs. Paramount chiefs oversaw a confederation or chiefdom of tribes—such as the Piscataway Confederacy—and held the title of Tayac (tie-yac). The Tayac offered guidance and protection to tribes within the chiefdom, in exchange for support and gifts of food and material goods. These leadership positions were passed down matrilineally, meaning through the mother’s lineage. Such arrangements showed the intricate and interconnected nature of various tribes and chiefdoms surrounding the Chesapeake Bay, which fostered extensive trade networks. However, these interactions also led to conflicts, as groups like the Powhatan, Piscataway, and Susquehannocks expanded their chiefdoms and influence over others through warfare. Some archaeologists suggest that evidence of these conflicts reshaped village landscapes leading many Native People to construct palisades around their villages as defense measures against enemy raids. Others however, suggest that palisaded villages were expressions of social distinctions, demarcating sacred space.

Like their neighbors, the Piscataway, the Chopticon, the Mattawoman, and the Nanjemoy the Yacocomico had been subjected to attacks from Massawomecks (who occupied the area from Lake Erie to the present-day West Virginia panhandle) and Susquehannocks (who occupied the area from present-day southern New York through Pennsylvania, along what is now the Susquehanna River) venturing south into the region armed in some cases with firearms obtained through trade with northern French and Dutch colonies. The arrival of the English probably came as little surprise. Tribes living in the region were familiar with the European colonial efforts in Virginia and elsewhere and likely knew that English arrival brought prospects of trade and military alliances, but also foreign perspectives, a demand for land, and the potential for violence.

Under the advice of fur trader and interpreter Henry Fleet, Leonard Calvert sailed to Mayone, the capital of the Piscataway to meet their tayac Wanas. In this meeting Wanas demurred about allowing the English to settle near him. Calvert then led the English south to where the Yacocomico occupied land on what we now call the St. Mary's River to establish a permanent settlement.

With Fleet acting as translator, Calvert negotiated with the Yacocomico werowance. In exchange for textiles, axes, hoes, and other metal tools, the colonists were permitted to settle in half of the Yacocomico village (the village is also referred to in English records as "Yacocomico"). According to the arrangement, the Yacocomico would remain in the other half of their settlement until the fall so that they could harvest their corn crop; they would then vacate the east bank of the river.

## ST. MARY'S FORT

Upon settlement, Governor Calvert ordered the colonizers to immediately erect St. Mary's Fort. It was described by Calvert in a letter dated 30 May 1634 as being palisaded, about 360 feet square, and protected by cannon, which the colonists had brought with them to Maryland. It is not clear whether the colonists and the Yacocomico lived literally side-by-side during the earliest phase of the fort's occupation, but it is likely that their residences were positioned in relative proximity to one another. We do know some of the colonizers moved into vacated Yacocomico structures and that Father White held mass in a witchott. Colonial records tell us that the trees surrounding the settlement had already been cleared by the Yacocomico.

Within three years of settlement, colonists began moving out of the fort to settle their own plantations along the colony's waterways, where land was plentiful. In 1641, Leonard Calvert patented 100 acres described as the area "nearest together about the fort" to be his plantation. Calvert encouraged resettlement outside of his tract, called Governor's Field, going so far as to expel those still living in the fort in the ensuing years. Thus Maryland colonists were only present in the fort for 8–9 years at most, with roughly half of that time being a period of intensive occupation. After 1642 the fort is no longer mentioned in historic records and more than likely did not exist. It should be noted that English colonial records do not indicate that St. Mary's Fort was part of any direct military conflict. The king expected that, as proprietor, Lord Baltimore would send colonists to develop the province into a profitable operation that would bring new trade to England and profit to the Calvert family; it also assumed that the King could claim land that was home to thousands of Native people.

# LAND GRANTED, LAND TAKEN

Lord Baltimore was to be the ruler of this land, but his charter required that he make laws only with the consent of the freemen of the colony or their deputies. The charter offered a powerful protection for his colonists. As part of the agreement, Lord Baltimore, not the king, was permitted to grant all of the land within the colony, and until 1681, he granted land to individuals for each colonist they brought to Maryland. Lord Baltimore gave the first investors rights to 2,000 acres for every five men brought to the colony, or 100 acres per person for fewer than five. Later, these grants were reduced to 50-acre rights per person brought to Maryland. This incentive of granting land in exchange for importing indentured servants into the colony was called headright. In addition to these headrights, Lord Baltimore also gave rights to town lands—land that was demarcated from county land. For every person transported, he offered rights to ten acres of town land on the fields where his colonists first settled. At ten acres per person transported, town land grants ranged from 30 to 400 acres. These town land grants generally went to the wealthiest and most influential people in the colony. Even with these incentives in place, the land was not free. People had to pay fees to have their land surveyed and patented, as well as a small rent to the proprietor.

During the first few years of settlement English records suggest that the Yacocomico taught the colonists how to plant and cook maize and the two groups continued to trade during the brief cohabitation. The colonists' desire for land led some to encroach on Native lands, which sparked disagreement and violence. Primary sources indicate that it didn't take much time for relations to sour. A 1638 letter written by a Jesuit ministering in the colony reported that disease and the recent death of a colonist at the hands of an Indian had led colonial leadership to forbid the Jesuits from living among the Yacocomico.

# CONFLICT

In 1642, English colonist John Elkin took the life of the Yacocomico werowance for reasons that were never documented. Governor Calvert attempted to use his authority to preserve peace. Following Elkin's act of murder, a jury was convened to put Elkin on trial. The jury returned a verdict of not guilty due to the jury's view that the killing of a pagan does not constitute murder.. It appears that Leonard Calvert did not agree with the verdict, likely because it risked damaging relations with the many Native groups in the region that would notice the violence of the English. He subsequently "willed that the verdict be not entered as a verdict, but that another Jury be charged to enquire & try by the same evidence." Calvert dismissed the jury and called for a new one, instructing them to ensure a conviction. The new jury did convict Elkin, but on the lesser charge of manslaughter instead of murder, and his sentence was ultimately reduced. Shortly thereafter, the Yacocomico retreated into Virginia, where they eventually joined with one of the many tribes residing in Virginia's Northern Neck. Meanwhile, other groups such as the Piscataway, Choptico, Mattawomans, and Patuxents remained near the colonists, interacting with them in various degrees of cautious cooperation, diplomatic exchanges, and occasional conflicts.

# THE CITY DEVELOPS

Lord Baltimore wanted his colonists to build and live in towns. The colony's leaders all held town land properties, and though there was no real city, the town lands—an area of about 1,200 acres—became the seat of government. Early courts and assemblies met in Governor Leonard Calvert's house and at the house of John Lewger, the provincial secretary.

There was no town at St. Mary's until the 1660s. By then, the Maryland population was large enough and spread out enough to require more than the private houses of leaders to conduct public business and accommodate visitors who came there for public purposes. In 1668, to encourage development, Lord Baltimore chartered St. Mary's City, thus giving the residents of the city the ability to govern themselves directly as opposed to rule by the county or colonial government.

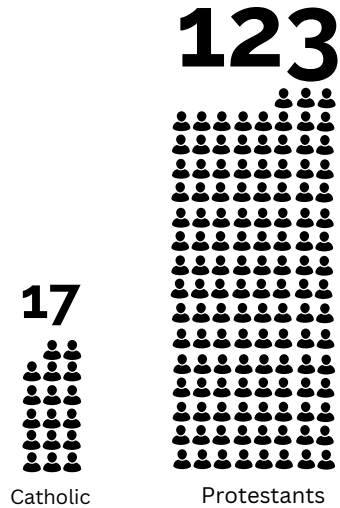
Lord Baltimore was a Catholic, and his plan was for Maryland to be a place where people practicing different forms of Trinitarian Christianity—Christian denominations who believe in the Holy Trinity—could live together peacefully. In England, Catholics could not worship in public or hold public office. Catholic priests were supposedly banned from England, although a few were able to live as members of private households and conduct mass in Catholic homes. Strict rules on faith and the ability to participate in government were also in place in the other three established English colonies. In Maryland, Lord Baltimore proposed that Catholics and other Christians outside of the established Church of England could worship openly and, when otherwise qualified, participate in political life.

The majority of the colonizers were not Catholic; rather, Catholics made up 10% of those aboard *Ark* and *Dove*. From the start, people of other Christian beliefs were encouraged to come to Maryland with a promise that their beliefs would be tolerated. This practice was made into law in 1649 with *An Act Concerning Religion*. Although the law had its limitations, allowing toleration solely for Trinitarian Christians, it marked the first declaration of religious toleration in America.



Ultimately, the great majority of people coming to Maryland were Protestants, mostly poor indentured servants, who would work in the colony in exchange for their passage.

17 men were Catholic  
out of the approximately  
140 people who arrived in 1634.



The majority of those arriving were a variety of faiths  
Including (in alphabetical order):

- |           |              |
|-----------|--------------|
| Anglican  | Lutheran     |
| Catholic  | Presbyterian |
| Jewish    | Puritan      |
| Labbadist | Separatist   |

# SURVIVAL IN THE COLONY

The survival of the colony was the first order of business, but the Maryland colonists could not raise the grain crops they had known in England because these crops required plowing and complete clearance of trees—roots included—from the land. Clearing forests in this way proved too time-consuming. Instead, the colonists adopted agricultural practices from the Yacocomico and Piscataway, including girdling trees. This process meant removing a piece of bark from all around the tree so that the sap could not rise, causing the tree to lose its leaves and die. Without the leaves to shade the ground, sunlight could reach the plants, and crops could be grown. Colonists also embraced the Yacocomico technique of creating mounds for planting corn for sustenance and tobacco for export, instead of plowing fields as was customary in England. Corn was a miracle crop to the English, yielding at least 200 kernels for every seed that germinated. Planting Indian corn rather than wheat or other English grains could produce twice as much food per acre.

Life expectancy of all immigrants was extraordinarily low; roughly one to two out of ten new arrivals perished within their first year in the colony. This was primarily due to their lack of immunity to various diseases and the added effects of a new climate. This acclimation period was referred to as the "seasoning." Malaria was particularly widespread. Ironically, Europeans brought the disease with them and infected the local mosquitoes, which are vectors for spreading the disease. Malaria was not often fatal, but it weakened a person's immune system, making them more susceptible to other diseases such as influenza and dysentery.

# LABOR IN MARYLAND

Indentured servants and freed servants were the backbone of the 17th-century labor force. Seventy to eighty-five percent of the immigrants to Maryland came as indentured servants. An indentured servant was a person who usually opted to enter into a contract where their transportation to Maryland or other colonies was paid for by another person. The indentured servant repaid this debt by working for a set number of years (typically 5 - 7). The terms of service depended on a variety of things. However, a child would be indentured until they became an adult, therefore remaining indentured for a much longer time. Inversely, if a person possessed certain skills, they could negotiate a contract for just 2-4 years. Once free, these former indentured servants worked to become landowners and importers of servants themselves. Many former indentured servants became landowners; however, numerous others died before achieving this goal.

In addition to indentured servitude, enslavement was another form of labor utilized by the English in the Maryland colony. Slavery, unlike indentured servitude, was forced on an individual. The English engaged in capturing and transporting of Native peoples to be used as slaves throughout the English colonies of North America. Colonial records also indicate that enslaved Africans were present within the first decade of the establishment of the Maryland colony. But due to the high cost relative to that of an indentured servant, the number of enslaved Africans remained low for the first half of the century.

## LABOR IN MARYLAND

Towards the latter half of the 17th century, dependence upon indentured labor and enslaved Native people was replaced by that of enslaved African labor. This process was set about by members of the colonial elite who wrote laws laying the foundations of the institution of chattel slavery and protecting their economic interests for many generations. In 1664, the colonial legislature passed a law that made slavery a race-based system in which Africans or people of African descent were enslaved for life and that status passed to their children. Laws passed in the 1660s and 1670s further imposed a system of forced labor on the enslaved African population. Lawmakers argued that they had the right to do so based on their perception of racial superiority. By the mid-1700s, almost all bound laborers in St. Mary's County were enslaved, a legal status that was passed from mother to child. This remained true until the American Civil War brought an end to American slavery.

## CHANGING LANDSCAPES

By the late 1600s, relations with Native people were becoming strained. As more colonists arrived, their quest for wealth led them to encroach on land occupied by the various tribes. Evidence of the effect on the Indigenous tribes was recorded when a man named Mattagund spoke to the Upper House of the Assembly in 1666. Mattagund spoke for the Anacostians, the Piscataway, and the Doegs. He informed the Upper House how the native people were tired of continually being pushed off of their land, and how the colonists' livestock roamed with impunity, eating their crops. "Your hogs and cattle injure us you come too near us to live and drive us from place to place.

We can fly no farther let us know where to live and how to be secured for the future from hogs and cattle” (Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, April 1666 – June 1676, Pg. 15). This speech led to one of the major treaties, called the Articles of Peace and Amity, between the Maryland colonial government and various tribes, including those aforementioned. This treaty sought to make peace between the groups, but over time the colonizers repeatedly broke the treaty in quest for more land – as were many of the treaties that were made between Europeans and Native peoples. Many Native people had the difficult decision to either move away or resign themselves to living under the new colonial government. For those that stayed they were forced to live on marginal land, but were able to keep tribal traditions. For many centuries they continued to persevere through their communities despite the many adversities.

Today, there are 3 tribes recognized by the state of Maryland. These are the Piscataway Indian Nation, the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, and the Accohannock Indian Tribe.

Tribes served by the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs include:

- Accohannock Indian Tribe
- Assateague Peoples Tribe
- Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians
- Piscataway Conoy Confederacy
- Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians
- Piscataway Indian Nation
- Pocomoke Indian Nation
- Youghiogheny River Band of Shawnee Indian

# HOW DO WE KNOW?

Historians analyze the past, partly relying on the evidence that remains from specific time periods or related to particular individuals or events. This evidence is referred to as **primary source material**. Historic St. Mary's City bases its interpretive programs and exhibits on information that has survived from the colony's early years, along with insights from other English colonies, England, and Europe. Here are some primary sources that offer valuable insights into Maryland during the 1600s:

- **Written documents** such as government, business, and church records, diaries, journals, letters, and certain maps provide valuable insights. Only a limited number of these documents have survived, offering researchers at Historic St. Mary's City glimpses into the colony's early days. Some written accounts of life in colonial Maryland may serve as promotional materials or self-serving narratives aimed at benefiting investors or religious leaders in Europe, so their content should be analyzed carefully.
  - In the 1600s, most daily affairs were handled verbally. Only about one or two in ten individuals—typically men—could read and/or write. As people focused on survival, few had the time or means to document detailed accounts of their homes, possessions, or daily routines. **Inventories** compiled upon a person's death have become valuable resources for understanding individual ownership, yet records from Maryland's early colonial era exist for only a small segment of the population. While legal documents can offer useful insights, individuals with little or no interaction with the courts often left behind minimal documentation.

- Artworks, such as **drawings or paintings** created during an event or by someone present at a specific location, are frequently regarded as primary sources. Given that many aspects of daily English culture and customs were brought over to the New World, paintings from England and Europe also offer insights into how people in Maryland may have lived.
  - In the 1580s, John White created several watercolors depicting the native peoples of the Roanoke region, which would later become North Carolina. Theodor de Bry transformed these watercolors into engravings. Together with the descriptive accounts written by English colonists, White’s illustrations offer numerous insights into the indigenous peoples of the mid-Atlantic coastal areas.
  
- **Artifacts** are human-made or modified objects that provide valuable insights into history. They often endure through generations as heirlooms or are unearthed by archaeologists during excavations. At Historic St. Mary’s City, archaeologists frequently combine their findings with existing written records to draw conclusions about early life in Maryland.
  
- **Features** represent evidence of human activity on the landscape. This can include signs such as soil discoloration from fires or the remnants of postholes. Postholes indicate where individuals dug holes to insert posts for constructing structures like witchotts, houses, or fences, depending on cultural practices and intended purposes. While the general public may be more familiar with artifacts, features are equally important for understanding past human behaviors and actions.