

HISTORIC 
ST. MARY'S CITY

For Teachers

MARYLAND'S FIRST CAPITAL



PHYSICAL ADDRESS

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St. Mary's City was Maryland's first capital and was intended to serve the colony as the center of commerce and the seat of government. A plan for the town was made in the 1660s. The structures housing the government (the State House) and the church (the Catholic brick chapel) were located at opposite ends of the town. Because there was no government-set religion, the church was built only with private funds. Few families ever actually lived in St. Mary's City year-round because most people lived on tobacco plantations. People who visited the town were primarily those who had business with the courts or the government. Most of the buildings that served government needs were inns and ordinaries that provided food and lodging, or were lawyers' offices. Later, there was a printing house.

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STATE HOUSE

The earliest government business in Maryland took place in the colonial leaders' homes. Eventually, the house occupied by the first governor, Leonard Calvert, was bought by the province of Maryland and became known as the Country's House. It served as the State House until a building, specifically for that purpose, was erected in 1676. Most central government business took place in the State House.

In the State House, the room on the lower floor was the Assembly Hall, where the elected landowners gathered to enact legislation. Lord Baltimore had the power to enact new laws with the consent of the freemen, but many of Maryland's laws were based on or modeled after existing English laws. The second floor of the State House was where the Upper House of the Assembly met, and the third floor was where weapons and ammunition for defense were stored.

The Assembly Hall in the State House was also where the St. Mary's County Court and the Provincial (colonial) Court met. The county court tried minor offenses against the public order, civil cases, actions to collect debts, and more. This court met every two months. When the court was in session, large numbers of people came into the town and used the occasion to conduct other business as well. Court days were also social times as participants learned the news of events beyond their immediate neighborhoods, discussed issues of general concern, and traded or bargained for goods or services. During the 17th century, ten counties in addition to St. Mary's were established in Maryland.

In the 17th century, the Provincial Court was the next highest court in Maryland and met only three or four times a year. The court usually met at St. Mary's City for as long as it remained the capital. The Provincial Court had jurisdiction over major crimes such as murder and sedition and over cases involving land titles. It shared civil jurisdiction with county courts and heard appeals from these courts. Appeals from the Provincial Court went to the Council, which acted as a Court of Appeals. However, until 1694, the membership of these two bodies was the same.

In early Maryland, a person's social status was an important part of everyday life. Because there were few men of noble birth in 17th-century Maryland, most men's social status was based primarily on their wealth and reputation. In a credit economy, it was important to have a good reputation. Since it was important to know who could be trusted, punishments for people who broke the law usually involved some sort of public humiliation; being put in the pillory or in the stocks; being branded with a "T" for thief or an "H" for hog thief; or having a hole bored through one's tongue for saying untrue things about another person. These punishments were designed to leave a lasting physical mark on the offender, making him easily recognizable as a convicted criminal.

BUSINESSES

Although few people lived in the city of St. Mary's year-round, there were some businesses that managed to exist, and sometimes, thrive. Most important to travelers visiting the town on business were ordinaries where they could get a night's lodging. An ordinary was a place where anybody could expect to receive a bed, a meal, and a drink. Most rates and rules for ordinaries were set by the Assembly. A typical charge was ten pounds of tobacco for a meal and four pounds of tobacco for a bed¾usually a flock or feather-filled mattress on the floor often shared by more than one person. Travelers would pay on credit. Planters paid debts after the tobacco crop was harvested each year. Some might instead exchange goods¾possibly fresh vegetables, or services such as chopping wood¾for food and lodging. Few women stayed in ordinaries since few women traveled. Ordinaries were especially active during the times when the Assembly met or when court was in session. The masters of merchant ships bringing in goods to exchange for tobacco would also go to ordinaries to find customers for their wares.

There were probably no shops open year-round in St. Mary's City, but some merchants might have kept a warehouse to store extra goods that as businessmen they had purchased directly off the ships arriving from England. Most ships only came to Maryland once a year with necessities like tools, pots, and cloth. Once the ships returned to England, these warehouses might be the only place for local residents to find needed supplies. The warehouse could be quite a profitable business for their owners.

THE CAPITAL MOVES

In 1694, after the Calvert family lost control of the colony to the Crown, a new governor, Francis Nicholson, came to Maryland. He decided to move the capital to a new location that was called Providence, which was renamed Annapolis after Princess Anne, who would later become queen of England. Governor Nicholson moved the capital for two main reasons. First, as the colony grew, there was a greater need for a more centralized location; second, he wanted to have a capital that was clearly distinct from the Catholic populated area of St. Mary's City. Even the layouts of the two cities – Annapolis and St. Mary's City – are different. In St. Mary's City, you can see a physical separation between the Catholic Chapel and the State House, a way to symbolize that Maryland did not have a state – sanctioned church. However, in Annapolis, the State House and St. Anne's Episcopal Church were constructed side by side, symbolizing that the Church of England was the only government – sanctioned church in the colony. After Annapolis became the new capital, many of the businesses, such as the printer and ordinaries, moved too. By the time of the American Revolution, the city of St. Mary's had become one large plantation and everything above ground from the 1600s disappeared.