

**FOR TEACHERS**

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



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# Pre-Colonial:

Long before the first European settlers set foot on the soil of what is now Maryland, the land had been inhabited for thousands of years by various Native American groups. The Yaocomaco people—a small native community—were settled along the shores of what today is called the St. Mary's River. Their village extended to the Virginia shore, with the St. Mary's River and its tributaries acting as a roadway for their dugout canoes. The Yaocomaco interacted with other larger tribal groups, such as the Piscataway and Powhatan Chiefdoms, making up an intricate political, social, and cultural system. Like these other groups, the Yaocomaco spoke a dialect of the Eastern Algonquian language and shared many elements of a common culture with other Eastern Woodland Indians in the Atlantic coastal region. The Yaocomaco were semi-sedentary people, meaning that their houses—or witchotts (witch-otts)—were of a more permanent construction and they practiced some agriculture, but they also relied on hunting, fishing, and gathering, and would migrate seasonally to locations that held necessary resources. The Yaocomaco used the resources of their natural environment to survive. They knapped stone tools; made tools out of bones from animals they hunted; made cordage from plant fiber, bark, and animal sinew; used fire to fell trees and for making their dugout canoes; made pottery from local clay; and tanned hides for clothing.

Spiritual and social gatherings were held to celebrate the major events of tribal and village life—as well as various seasonal activities—through feasting, dancing, and music. These gatherings would act as a catalyst to bring people together to share their heritage, trade, and build a village. The community would have very likely joined together to build structures, clear fields, and perform large-scale tasks.

Responsibility for tasks seems to have been divided between the sexes. Women generally maintained and managed the witchotts and household fields; took care of children; foraged for and prepared food; and made mats, pots, baskets, and clothing. Experts, like historian Hellen Rountree, believe women had high status in society; they produced maize (corn), which was a prestige plant and recognized by native peoples as a form of wealth. Men were generally responsible for protecting the tribe, making tools, grinding and knapping stone, making dugout canoes, gathering medicinal plants, clearing land for gardens, and making fish nets.

The Yaocomaco, like other tribal groups in the region, had a leader called a werowance (where-o-wans), and a council of tribal advisors called wisoes (wee-sews). Village chiefs would answer to tribal chiefs, who, in turn, would report to paramount chiefs. Paramount chiefs ruled over a confederation or chiefdom of tribes—such as the Piscataway Chiefdom—and would have the title of tayac (tie-yac). The tayac would provide guidance and protection to tribes of the chiefdom, in exchange for support and gifts of food and material goods. These leadership roles were passed down matrilineally, which means through the mother's family. These arrangements show how complex and interconnected the many tribes and chiefdoms were that lived around the Chesapeake Bay, which created large trade networks. These interactions were also the basis for conflict, as groups like the Powhatan, Piscataway, and Susquehannocks grew their chiefdoms and influence over other tribes through war. Evidence of this warfare transformed the landscape of villages. Many Native people began building palisades around their villages as defense measures against raiding enemy tribes.

Like their neighbors, the Piscataway, the Yaocomaco had been subjected to attacks from Massawomecks (who occupied area from Lake Erie to the present-day West Virginia panhandle) and Susquehannocks (who occupied 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 iron weapons obtained through trade with northern French 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.

# Arrival of the Maryland Colonizers:

In the late 1500s and early 1600s, England began efforts to expand its empire into North America. At first, colonization was financed by entrepreneurs, including joint stock companies and individual proprietors. In 1632, the English king, Charles I, granted what is now the state of Maryland to Cecil Calvert, the second Baron of Baltimore, and named it in honor of his wife, Henrietta Maria.

The ships that brought the first colonists, *Ark* and *Dove*, sailed from London in October 1633, but Lord Baltimore's enemies had the ships stopped, charging that the passengers had not taken an oath of allegiance to the king. Counting the number of oaths taken, it is evident that at that point 128 colonists were aboard. The ships went on to the Isle of Wight, where the Jesuits and probably some or all of the Catholic leaders joined the other colonists, bringing the total to about 140 people.

In March of 1634, European colonists arrived in the Chesapeake to establish the Maryland colony. Among them were figures such as: Leonard Calvert, Maryland's first governor; Mathias de Sousa, the first person of African descent to serve in colonial government; and Father Andrew White, a Jesuit priest who recorded details about the initial voyage and settlement. They first sailed up the Potomac where colonial leadership met with Wannas, the tayac of the Piscataway, the paramount chiefdom in the area. In speaking with Calvert through an intermediary, Wannas "would not bid him goe, neither would hee bid him stay, but that he might use his owne discretion" (Hall, Clayton C., editor. 1910. *Narratives of Early Maryland 1633-1684*. Barnes and Noble, New York, NY). Wannas was likely aware of the conflict between the Powhatan and the English at Jamestown, Virginia a generation prior. Rather than accept the Maryland colonists into the territory near his seat of power, Wannas demurred.

Under the advice of fur trader and interpreter Henry Fleet, the colonists traveled farther away from the Piscataway, heading instead up the St. Mary's River where they met with the Yaocomaco.

With Fleet acting as translator, Calvert negotiated with the Yaocomaco werowance. In exchange for textiles, axes, hoes, and other metal tools, the colonists were permitted to settle in half of the Yaocomaco village (the village is also referred to in English records as "Yaocomaco"). According to the arrangement, the Yaocomaco 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 area.

Upon settlement, Governor Calvert immediately erected 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 Yaocomaco 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. Colonial records tell us that the trees surrounding the settlement had already been cleared by the Yaocomaco. 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. By the early 1640s, the fort was in decay. 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. 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. However, the land was cheap.

During the first few years of settlement, while the two cultural groups lived near one another, relations remained relatively stable. English records suggest that the Yaocomaco taught the colonists how to plant and cook maize and the two groups continued to trade during the brief co-habitation. 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 Yaocomaco. In 1642, English colonist John Elkin murdered the Yaocomaco tayac for reasons that went unrecorded. Governor Calvert sought to use his authority to maintain peace. In the aftermath of Elkin's murder of the Yaocomaco tayac, a jury was summoned to try Elkin for murder. Much to Governor Calvert's chagrin they came back with a verdict of innocent. This infuriated Leonard Calvert, as this could damage relations with the tribe. He then dismissed this jury and called for a new one, giving them instructions to convict. The jury did convict though with a lesser charge of man slaughter as opposed to murder (and Elkin's sentence was ultimately commuted). Soon after, the Yaocomaco retreated into Virginia, where they eventually merged with the Matchotics living on Virginia's Northern Neck. Other groups, such as the Piscataway, Choptico, Mattawomans, and Patuxents, remained in proximity to the colonists and engaged with them in varying states of cautious accord, intergovernmental diplomacy, and sporadic conflict.

# Development of the City as the Capital:

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 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.

Initially, Lord Baltimore's investors and leaders—the people who paid the way of the other colonists—were Catholic. 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*. The law was limited—providing toleration only for Trinitarian Christians—but it was the first statement 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.

# 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. Rather, the colonists borrowed agricultural practices from the Yaocomaco and Piscataway such as 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 adopted the practice of making hills in which corn could be planted for food, and tobacco could be planted for export, rather than plowing fields as was done back in England. To the English, corn was a miracle crop, bringing a minimum of 200 kernels in return for each 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; often one in five new arrivals died within their first year in the colony. This is because they had no immunity to various diseases and the added effects of a new climate; this is often referred to as the "seasoning." Malaria was particularly widespread. Ironically, Europeans brought the disease with them and infected the local mosquitoes, which are the vector 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 ex-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 typically chose to enter into a contract in which 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. The terms of service depended on a variety of things. Indentures typically lasted for five to seven years. However, a child would be indentured until they became an adult, therefore remaining in indenture for a much longer period of 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, but many others died before achieving this goal.

In addition to indentured servitude, slavery was another form of labor that was utilized by the English in the colony of Maryland. Slavery, unlike an indenture, was forced on an individual. Slavery has existed throughout human history and was practiced in the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, in the New World, and in the Iberian Peninsula. The chattel slavery that we are familiar with today was different than these other forms of slavery and had its roots in the 1600s. The English, familiar with how the Spanish and Portuguese enslaved native peoples in their colonies and imported enslaved Africans, attempted to emulate this type of slavery. This system of slavery was set up on an idea of race that developed during this time. Importation of enslaved Africans began 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 numbers of enslaved Africans remained

low for the first half of the century. Towards the latter half of the 17th century, dependence upon indentured labor was replaced by that of enslaved 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, a law passed by the colonial legislature made slavery into a race-based system in which Africans or people of African descent were enslaved for life and passed that status to their children. Laws passed in the 1660s and 1670s further imposed a system of forced labor on the enslaved African population, arguing 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.

# Latter Interactions with Native People and the Colonial Government:

By the late 1600s, relations with Native people were becoming strained. As more colonists arrived, and in their quest for wealth, they encroached on land occupied by the various tribes. The two groups of people tried to find ways to live together, though it was the Native people who would ultimately lose the most in these interactions. We can see an example of this 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. This speech led to one of the first 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 it was ultimately unsuccessful—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 to resign themselves to living under the new colonial government. It should be noted that the Piscataway are still living in Maryland and are a legally recognized tribe in the state of Maryland.

Today, everything that once stood on the 17th-century town lands has disappeared—at least above ground. St. Mary's City was abandoned for the present Maryland capital of Annapolis in 1695. Fortunately, there was very little later development to destroy the site of what was once the first capital of Maryland. Archaeologists are slowly uncovering the 17th-century remains of buildings, their contents, and the belongings of the people who once lived there.

# How do we know about the history of St. Mary's City?

Historians interpret the past based in part on the evidence that survives from a particular time period or is associated with a particular person or event. Historians call this evidence primary source material. Historic St. Mary's City bases its interpretive programs and exhibits on the information that survives directly from the early years of the colony, as well as information that survives about life in other English colonies, England, and Europe. Some of the primary sources that provide clues about Maryland in the 1600s are:

**Written documents** that include government, business, and church records, diaries, journals, letters, and some maps. Only a few documents have survived which provide researchers at Historic St. Mary's City with information about the earliest days of the colony. Some written accounts of life in colonial Maryland can be interpreted as promotional pitches or otherwise self-serving accounts for the benefit of investors or religious leaders in Europe, and their content must be examined with care.

In the 1600s, people conducted nearly all of the affairs of daily life by word of mouth. Only one in ten people—usually men—could read and/or write. As people struggled to survive, very few had the time or ability to write detailed descriptions of their houses, their belongings, or their daily activities. Inventories taken at the time of a man's death have become good sources of information about what particular people owned, but inventories from Maryland's early colonial period survive for only a small portion of the population. Although legal records can provide useful information, if a person had little or no business with the courts, they could pass through life leaving very little in the way of a paper trail.

# How do we know about the history of St. Mary's City?

Native Americans had no written language so there are no records or first-hand accounts that survive directly from their culture. Much of what is known about them comes from written accounts of English colonists such as Father Andrew White of Maryland and John Smith of Virginia. This evidence naturally reflects a European bias and is typically ethnocentric and androcentric (from a male perspective) in nature. Outsiders (Europeans) may not have been permitted to see or take part in certain native practices such as spiritual matters, medicinal and burial customs, so few descriptions of these activities exist. There are also oral testimonies given by Native people in official capacities. Their words are preserved in official documents, such as court records. An example of this is a 1660 Assembly record. The brother of Uttapoingassinsem relayed how the Piscataway leader inherited the position, and then explained the direct line of 13 generations of leadership. But again, we must be mindful of what is said as it is passing through an English translator, that might not fully understand all the cultural nuances of the people they are translating.

Not only must we be mindful of the sources we use to learn about Native Americans, but other groups of people as well. Women, enslaved Africans, and those of less economic means also did not or could not write about their lives. If we do have written documents on these individuals it is often written by wealthy, educated European men who wrote with a particular bias towards those who were different than them, if they wrote about them at all. In order for us to learn more about these groups, we use other sources to help us better understand the past these sources are paintings and especially archaeology.

# How do we know about the history of St. Mary's City?

**Drawings or paintings** that were done at the time of an event or by a person who was present at a particular place are often considered primary sources. Since much of daily English culture and customs was transplanted to the New World, paintings done in England and Europe also provide clues about how people in Maryland might have lived.

*In the 1580s, John White painted several watercolors of native peoples living in the Roanoke area (an area that would eventually become North Carolina). These watercolors were translated into engravings by Theodor de Bry. When combined with written, descriptive accounts by the English colonists, White's images provide many clues about the Indians of the mid-Atlantic coastal regions.*

**Artifacts** are objects produced or shaped by humans that provide clues about the past. Artifacts often survive either as items passed down from one generation to the next, or are retrieved by archaeologists through excavation. Archaeologists who work at Historic St. Mary's City often combine the evidence they find with surviving written records to draw conclusions about life in early Maryland.

**Features** are evidence of human activity on the landscape. This can be something like where a fire discolored soil, or the remains of postholes. Postholes are places where humans dug a hole and put a post in it to build a witchott, house, or fence depending on the culture and intended use. The general public may not be familiar with features as they are with artifacts but both are very important for understanding past human behavior and actions.