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Introduction to St. Mary's City History and Archaeology

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One of the first English settlements in what is now the United States was established in 1634 at a place known as St. Mary's City. Named for the Queen of England, the colony of Maryland was the vision of an English Catholic family in a Protestant world. St. Mary's City served as the capital of the colony until 1695, when the seat of government was relocated to present-day Annapolis and the land of St. Mary's City was converted to agricultural uses. For more than 200 years, the land was plowed, planted, and plowed again, burying the remains of the seventeenth-century capital beneath the loamy soil. Fortunately, the site was granted protection as a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1969, a status that honors the city's critical role in America's colonial beginnings. Today, the land within the NHL is owned by three stakeholders: Historic St. Mary's City Commission, St. Mary's College of Maryland, and Trinity Episcopal Church (see figure 1.1). Decades of investigation show that St. Mary's City is an immensely rich archaeological landscape with hundreds of sites identified thus far, dating before, during, and after the seventeenth century. In many areas, individual sites cannot be distinguished because the location was used repeatedly, creating a palimpsest of occupation spanning hundreds, or in some cases thousands, of years. Each successive occupation has left some trace of its presence, and this deep archaeological record makes St. Mary's an exceptional place to examine human life over a span of millennia. In the chapters that follow, we and our fellow contributors present some of the many stories that have been drawn from this research with a focus upon what life was like in colonial and post-colonial St. Mary's City.



Figure 1.1. Aerial view of St. Mary's City. The St. Mary's River is in the foreground and Chesapeake Bay in the background. (Courtesy of HSMC.)

THE HISTORY OF ST. MARY'S CITY

Credit for the vision of what would become St. Mary's City belongs to a Yorkshire farm boy named George Calvert, who rose from obscurity to a high station in early seventeenth-century England, serving as principal secretary of state under King James I. Calvert resigned his powerful position upon his conversion to the Catholic faith in 1624. As a reward for loyalty and service, the King made him the Baron of Baltimore in Ireland, and the new Lord Baltimore initially focused his efforts on expanding the King's realm in Ireland and Newfoundland. Calvert had long had an interest in English colonization, being an investor in the Virginia Company and the East India Company. His first effort to establish a colony was in Newfoundland at Ferryland in the early 1620s. Despite a huge investment, one brutal winter spent in Newfoundland in 1628–1629 caused Calvert to seek a warmer climate and he returned to England and began lobbying for a new colony near Virginia (Krugler 2004). This was finally granted by King Charles I in 1632,

but George died two months before the charter received the official seal. The challenge of founding a new colony passed to the second Lord Baltimore, George's 26-year-old eldest son, Cecil.

After much difficulty, Cecil sent the first expedition to North America with about 150 people in November 1633. They arrived in the Chesapeake in early March 1634 in the midst of a land that had been populated for more than 10,000 years by a variety of Native American tribal groups (Potter 1993; Rice 2009). At the time of the first expedition's arrival, the people settled along the Potomac shore were Algonquian-speaking groups united into a chiefdom named for the most powerful tribe, the Piscataway. Their Iroquoian enemies called them the Conoy (Potter 1993:19). A group called the Yaocomaco, probably allied with the Piscataway, inhabited the area of what would become St. Mary's City. In 1634, they were consolidating their habitations in an effort to put distance between themselves and their Susquehannock enemies. The arrival of the English seemed to provide a useful opportunity: the Yaocomaco could obtain compensation from the English for land they were prepared to vacate, while positioning the English settlement as a buffer between themselves and the Susquehannock to the north.

When the Calvert expedition arrived in the region, they established a temporary camp along the Potomac River while Governor Leonard Calvert, brother of Cecil, obtained permission from the *tayac*, or leader, of the Piscataway to settle. Afterward, Calvert was taken to a village, called Yaocomaco, by Henry Fleet, an English fur trader who spoke several Algonquian dialects. After negotiations with the community's leaders, the Yaocomaco agreed to vacate half of the village to provide housing for the new settlers. The rest of the village remained occupied by the Yaocomaco until the corn crop was harvested in the autumn. Because of the efforts to first negotiate with the Piscataway before settlement, the founding of Maryland involved an unusually harmonious cultural interaction between newly arrived English and the native inhabitants, a factor of much significance in the initial success of the new colony (White 1910). The Yaocomaco were the latest in a long history of native people to inhabit the place that became St. Mary's City (see chapter 6).

Maryland was unique as the only colony founded by English Catholics and the first in colonial America to make religious freedom its official policy. The plan for the colony, labeled "the Maryland Design," included the concepts of liberty of conscience, the free exercise of religion, and a lack of religious test for office or voting. This was in direct opposition to the policies of England and the colonies of Virginia, Plymouth, and Massachusetts Bay, especially because it included Roman Catholics. The Lords Baltimore tried to create a new society in which religion would not be a source of conflict

and hostility. Another policy that was essential for the others to be realized was having no official religion for the colony. Government and faith were separated in Maryland. As a result, the colony attracted Europeans from a diversity of religious backgrounds, including Anglicans, Anabaptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Quakers, Roman Catholics, and a few people of Jewish descent. The experiment of religious freedom ended after the removal of Lord Baltimore and the proprietary government in 1689. With the introduction of royal governance came the enforcement of Anglicanism as the state religion. Nearly 100 years later, however, the Calverts' policy of liberty of conscience would be reborn in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Maryland thrived for the first decade as settlers turned to the production of tobacco for European markets. Most settlement in the colony was on rural plantations scattered along the region's rivers and creeks. Tobacco had rapidly become the foundation of the economy, despite Calvert's hopes for more agrarian diversity and industry. The intricate water highways of the Chesapeake allowed ships directly from Europe to collect the bulky tobacco casks from each plantation and sell needed manufactured goods to the residents. This system meant that economic centers were not needed, and none developed in the first century of settlement (Carr 1974). Only government business and courts spurred any clustered settlement, and as a result, the capitals of St. Mary's City and Jamestown were the only places with a measure of urban character in the region (figure 1.2).

St. Mary's City was slow to develop because of internal and external conflict. The hostilities of the English Civil War reached the colony in 1645 when a Parliamentary ship attacked and captured St. Mary's City, nearly destroying the enterprise. Fithian discusses the archaeological evidence of this conflict in chapter 8. Some stability was experienced after 1648, but the Battle of the Severn in 1655 again threw Maryland into turmoil as hostile Virginians took over the government. In a brilliant political move, Lord Baltimore persuaded the government of England's staunchly anti-Catholic Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell to return control of Maryland to Baltimore in 1657 (Krugler 2004). Energized by the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, the colony began sustained growth that would continue unabated for centuries.

The capital of St. Mary's City likewise began expanding, and Lord Baltimore formally incorporated it as Maryland's first city in 1668. The government purchased Leonard Calvert's old house as the first state house in 1662, and a new brick state house and jail were commissioned in 1674. To accommodate a growing number of visitors, public inns (then called ordinaries) were established and innkeeping became a major industry of the settlement.

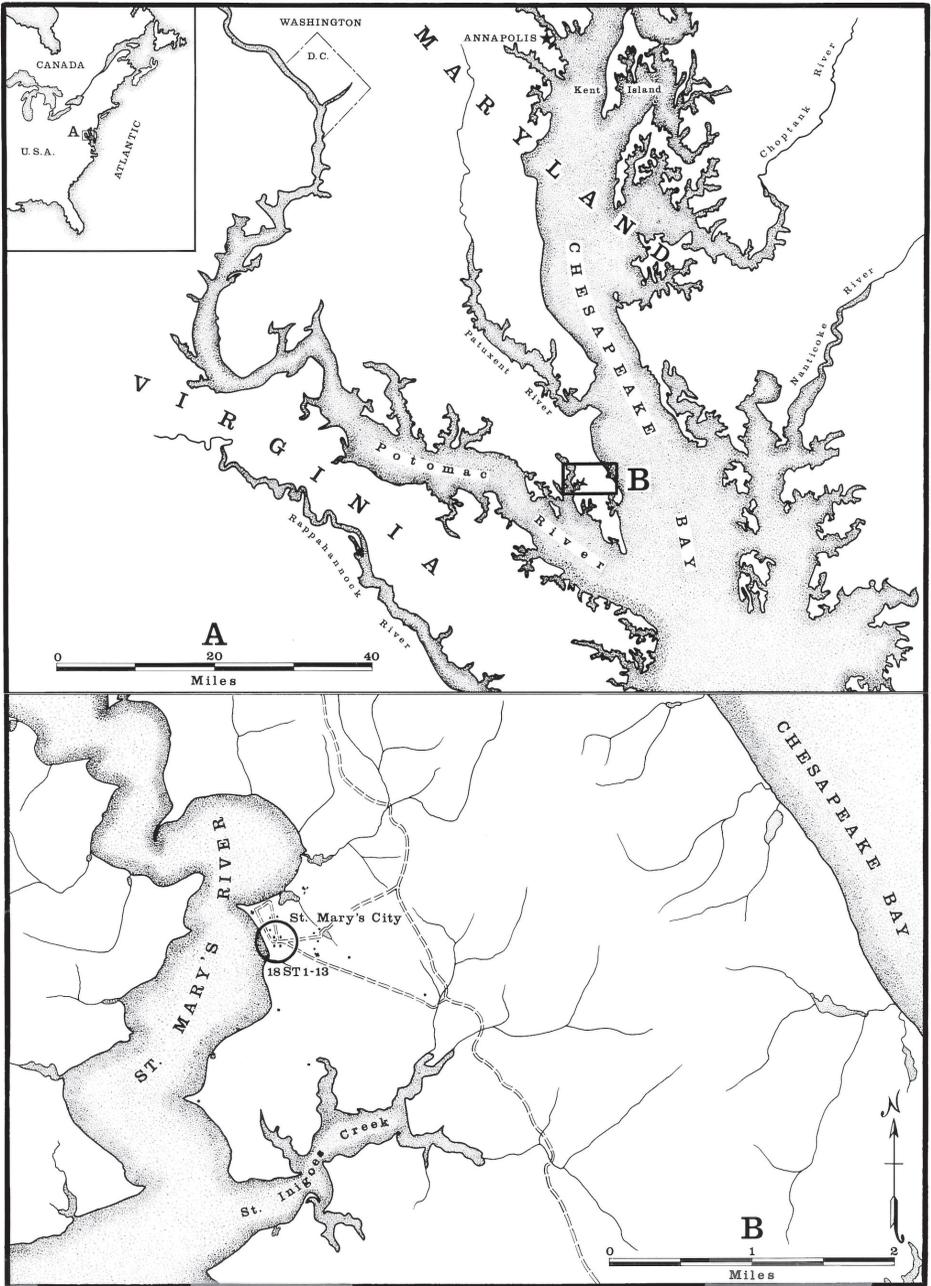


Figure 1.2. The location of St. Mary's City. (Drawing by James O'Connor, courtesy of HSMC.)