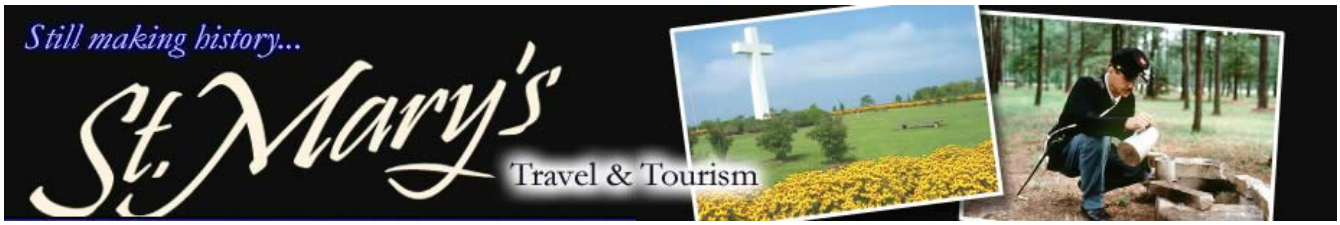

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

County History

Early St. Mary's County

St. Mary's County is the birthplace of Maryland. Maryland was an idea of George Calvert, First Lord Baltimore, who wanted a place where all religions were allowed to practice freely. George Calvert petitioned King Charles I in the early 1600's for a land grant to establish a new colony. George Calvert died before he was able to see his idea come to life. His son, Cecilius Calvert, Second Lord Baltimore, inherited his estate. In November 1633, Cecilius Calvert sent his brothers George & Leonard Calvert, along with 140 passengers aboard the *Ark* and the *Dove* bound for Maryland. The two ships landed on St. Clement's Island in March of 1634.

On March 5, 1634, Father Andrew White, who sailed with the first colonists, celebrated the first Roman Catholic Mass on St. Clement's Island. The island was small, so the ships traveled further south. Leonard Calvert bought about 30 miles of land below the Wicomico River from the Yaocomaco Indians with bolts of fabric, axes, and other farm tools. The settlers moved in among the Indians who assisted them while they established their settlement. This area became the State's first capital, St. Mary's City. The capital was later moved to its permanent home in Annapolis.

Colonial life was difficult, but settlers soon began to grow tobacco, which became the lifeblood of the colony. Tobacco was prosperous for many farmers which allowed them to purchase land and build large plantation homes such as Sotterley Plantation. Tobacco was a labor intensive crop linked closely with the development of slavery in Maryland. During this time the area's rivers played a major role in plantation life as these were the highways of that era. Barges would go up and down the waterways of the county transporting supplies

Revolutionary War

In July of 1776, the residents of St. Mary's County were confronted with the reality of war when a British fleet of 72 ships made an unexpected appearance off Point Lookout.

The fleet was under the command of John Murray, Earl of Dunmore and former Royal Governor of Virginia. The fleet's target became St. George's Island, a two square mile piece of low lying marshland at the mouth of the St. Mary's River. The fleet was short of provisions, particularly fresh water, and beset by a serious outbreak of smallpox.

The St. Mary's County militia harassed the British landing parties. By the end of July, Lord Dunmore realized that using the island as a base of operations in the Chesapeake Bay was on shaky ground and at the beginning of August his fleet quit the Island. The British Navy continued to harass the lower part of the county and to forage along its shores. Many prominent plantations along the banks of the waterways were all targets of unrelenting plundering. In desperation barges were loaded with explosives and floated at night into the anchored British ships.

Many men from St. Mary's County fought with General Smallwood against the British in New York. St. Mary's County's lost some 2,000 men, 40% of its labor force, during the Revolutionary War.

The Civil War Years

Although no battles took place in St. Mary's County, sympathies for the South ran high among the white population. Many St. Mary's Countians transported food and other supplies across the Potomac to Virginia to aid the Confederacy. Smugglers slipped through the night in a game of cat-and-mouse with the heavily patrolled

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Union's Potomac Flotilla.

In the summer of 1857, William Cost Johnson purchased 400 acres of land at Point Lookout for a resort. The property was eventually turned over to the United State Government for a military hospital. The facility was named Hammond Hospital. Less than a year after the arrival of the first patients at the hospital, the Union decided to establish a prisoner of war camp there and they named it Camp Hoffman. Tens of thousands of Confederate prisoners were held there under miserable conditions. More than 3,389 Confederate soldiers died at Camp Hoffman. Two monuments located outside Point Lookout were erected to honor confederate prisoners who died there. Black countians, both slave and free, joined the U.S. Colored Troops regiments and fought against the Confederate army. Three were awarded the U. S. Medal of Honor for bravery.

After the war, St. Mary's County's economy went into decline and 17% of the population migrated to Kentucky and other parts west due to the availability of western land. Another reason for emigration was that a large portion of St. Mary's Countians were Catholic. Catholics were not allowed to hold any political office in Maryland, which angered many in the county.

In addition to tobacco farming, making a living off the water was a traditional way of life in St. Mary's County. For centuries, the surrounding waters of the Patuxent and Potomac Rivers and the Chesapeake Bay were the waterman's means of survival. His greatest asset is his boat and a large variety of special working boats were used to fish, crab and oyster. These included nancys, dories, skiffs, log canoes, skipjacks, bugeyes, and pungies.

The Twentieth Century

The establishment of the Patuxent River Naval Air Station in the 1940's has had a lasting effect upon the lives of the residents of St. Mary's County. During World War II, the U.S. Navy established a flight-testing center. Here major advances in aircraft such as the Harrier, Tomcat and Osprey were evaluated. It was here that the nation's first astronauts were trained. Today, the Patuxent River Naval Air Station provides the most employment opportunities in the county.

In 2000, the state government decided to decrease the amount of tobacco grown in Maryland through the "Tobacco Buyout Program". Farmers who wish to participate are paid to stop growing tobacco. They are paid $1 per pound of tobacco based on their average crop for 10 years. Farmers participating in the buyout looked for alternative crops such as bedding plants, produce, and corn. The waterman population has also decreased. Today, only about six percent of the population works the water. Although the farmers and waterman have declined, St. Mary's County is on the rise in terms of technology jobs. In 2003, St. Mary's County had over 200 technology companies and is steadily expanding these numbers each year. St. Mary's County has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state at 2.8% for June 2004. This is the 3rd lowest employment rate in the state.

The Twenty-First Century

St. Mary's County is continuing to grow as the defense industry builds up around the Pax River Naval Air Station. The growth of the defense industry gives St. Mary's County the highest percentage of high-tech employment in the region. The manufacturing industry is also growing in St. Mary's County as companies such as BAE Systems and Wyle Laboratories produce cutting-edge products for the military, transportation, law enforcement, communications, and custom plastics. In 2002, St. Mary's County was designated by the State of Maryland as a Technology Corridor, making it the second Technology Corridor in the state. The increase in defense and technology companies is also bringing more commercial businesses into the county, such as restaurants and shopping.

The citizens of St. Mary's County tend to be highly educated. Highly educated workers are needed to staff the defense and technology companies locating within the county. To help support the local defense and technology industry, STEM Academies were introduced into the county for the 2007-08 academic year, which are intense academic programs with a strong emphasis in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. St. Mary's County also has many institutes of higher education, including the College of Southern Maryland, St. Mary's College of Maryland, and the Southern Maryland Higher Education Center, which help to fuel economic growth as well.

Famous Firsts

On March 25, 1634, the first Roman Catholic Mass in the English speaking colonies was celebrated on St. Clement's Island under a hand-hewn cross.

Mathias DeSousa, one of the original colonists and an indentured servant, was the first person of African American descent to vote. While living at St. Mary's City, he served in the 1642 legislative assembly of freeman.

In 1639, Margaret Brent arrived in the new colony with her sister establishing the "Sisters Freehold." On June 24, 1648 she petitioned the assembly for the right to vote. Although she was denied, Margaret Brent is known as the "first suffragette."

In 1649, Maryland's Act of Religious Toleration was passed. The law recognized freedom of religion in the colonies. This made St. Mary's the first colony to practice religious toleration.

In 1676, the first State House was built in St. Mary's City by Captain John Quigley and paid for with 300,000 pounds of tobacco.

Banner Images – 1.St. Clement's Island State Park 2.Civil War Re-enactor , Point Lookout State Park

The St. Mary's County Division of Tourism strives to make every effort possible to ensure accuracy; however, information is subject to change. It is recommended to call ahead for more information as the Division is not responsible for damages arising out of changes, errors or omissions.