
The Chesapeake Bay: Colonies of Different Pasts, One Future

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The first British settlements in North America were in the Chesapeake Bay region, which was of great economic significance to Britain in the colonial period. Present-day Maryland and Virginia surround Chesapeake Bay. This region was a good place to begin colonizing because the Bay is one of America's largest estuaries, and once had a coastline of over 3,000 miles. Being deep, it was always navigable by those settling and trading there. The Bay is also the outlet for many long rivers, some of which extend 150 miles inland.

Roanoke colony was established in 1585 by a special grant from Queen Elizabeth I, the first British colony in America. It was settled in what is now North Carolina, but the entire Atlantic seaboard was called Virginia. This colony mysteriously disappeared within a year, and it would be 22 years before another British settlement would be established in America.

This new settlement was Jamestown, Virginia, on Chesapeake Bay. The Virginia Company, a joint-stock company, established it for profit. The first years were the hardest for the settlers. Half the population died during the first winter. The British settlers were ill equipped for the needed work. They neglected to grow enough food because they wanted to use the land to grow tobacco, which was the main export of the colony.

The importance of tobacco to the colony played a large part in the development of the colonies' subsequent towns and its government. Towns were not centers of commerce or places for living; they were mostly just a place to house the government. The population was neither centralized nor inclined to town life. The only way to make a comfortable living in the colony at that time was growing tobacco, so a settler's goal was to acquire land. Tobacco plantations require a large amount of land because tobacco depletes the soil of nutrients so

quickly. With so many plantations, as the basis for the economy, the population was spread thinly over the countryside.

Virginia did not have a substantial government until it was granted a new charter in 1618. Sir George Yeardley was chosen as governor to administer the changes. Under this new charter, Virginia established the House of Burgesses, the first form of self-government in the British colonies. The House of Burgesses consisted of two representatives, called Burgesses, from each designated area, such as a town or plantation. The first meeting of the House of Burgesses took place in a church in Jamestown on July 30, 1619. Twenty-two Burgesses attended the meeting.

The Virginia Company dissolved in 1624, putting the colony under the authority of the British crown, and “royal” government was officially put into effect. The House of Burgesses did not officially meet after 1624, but special councils called by the royal governor transformed themselves into what the House of Burgesses had been before. In 1639, King Charles I declared that the colony could go back to its “old” privileges, and so self-government was once again part of Virginian colonial life.

Chesapeake Bay was important not only to the economic survival of the colony, but also to the patterns of its settlements. Originally there were eight counties in Virginia, seven of them on the James River. The James River extends nearly to the Appalachian Mountains, allowing the Virginia colony to develop deep into America. As a feeder to Chesapeake Bay, the James River was deep and navigable, and thus it was easy to get supplies to the colonists and to export tobacco. All the Virginia counties developed in this fashion. Expansion, however, was limited by continued conflicts that the colonists had with the Powhatan

Confederation of Indians. In 1622 this uneasy relationship brought on an Indian attack that killed about one third of the settlers. This and other attacks bred bitter anti-Indian sentiments in the colony.

Unlike most of the British colonies in North America, Virginia was not settled for religious reasons, but economic ones. Religion, nonetheless, played an important role in colonial life. Only members of the Anglican Church were allowed to vote. The colony's strong ties to the Church of England paralleled the colony's strong ties with England. During the English Civil War, Virginia was a haven for those loyal to the king. Other religions settled in Virginia, but they experienced much discrimination. This discrimination resulted in the founding of Maryland.

George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, tried to buy land in Virginia in 1628, but was refused because he was Catholic. Calvert worked hard to get land in America for Catholics, but was unsuccessful during his lifetime. King Charles I did grant land in America to Calvert's son, Cecilius Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, in 1632. He received the land north of the Potomac River, west of Chesapeake Bay, and south of the line from Delaware Bay to the source of the Potomac River. In addition, the colony was granted fishing rights in all the water it bordered. This proprietary colony was named Maryland.

The development of Maryland differed greatly from that of Virginia. Primarily, it was settled as a religious refuge for Catholics, unlike Virginia, which was an economic venture. Maryland adopted a policy of religious tolerance whereas Virginia was discriminatory to all religions that were not Anglican. The policy of religious tolerance in Maryland developed from the realization that there were not enough Catholics in need of refuge to make the colony

successful, and that the survival of the colony would depend partly on Protestants settling there. This policy helped Maryland maintain good relations with all the other British colonies.

Maryland's development also differed in settlement patterns. Instead of having the population spread thinly by large plantations, like Virginia, Maryland strived to establish towns. The major towns in Maryland, St. Mary's, Annapolis, and Baltimore, all developed on the Bay. Lord Baltimore set up Maryland similarly to the European feudal system of the Middle Ages. The gentry from England were granted the "manors," but there was also free land for ordinary settlers. This system is partly responsible for the initial failure of the crown-ordered assembly that started meeting in 1635. By 1660, however, Maryland was organized by counties rather than "manors."

Although originally settled for different reasons, both Maryland and Virginia had to survive economically. Both colonies took advantage of the fertile land of the Chesapeake Bay region to grow tobacco and, in Maryland's case, a few other crops. Price wars broke out between the colonies, as both tried to use slave power to drive the price of tobacco down and production up.

Slaves had been in America since its early settlement, but it wasn't until 1670 that they became a significant part of the population. By 1720 slaves made up 21% of the population of Maryland and 33% of the population of Virginia. To preserve the slave culture in those colonies, both legislatures passed laws that limited the freedoms of the blacks in bondage and required expulsion of free blacks in Virginia. Sadly, both colonies depended on

this system for their economic well-being, and it survived until the American Civil War in 1865.

Maryland and Virginia were two of the earliest British colonies in America. Maryland was established as a proprietary colony, while Virginia was established as an economic venture. This difference led the colonies on diverging paths in early development, but the similarity of the region, their economic interests, and eventually, their governments brought these colonies to a common path by the eighteenth century. Unlike the treacherous coast of present-day North Carolina, which saw the failure of the Roanoke colony, Chesapeake Bay was an excellent place to establish what became two of the most prosperous of the British colonies. The Bay has fertile land for growing tobacco, deep waters for fishing and navigating, and rivers going deep inland that allowed for expansion deeper into the colony. These colonies were also important to the new government that formed after 1776. Having been self-governing since the early seventeenth century, they were an example of governance for the new nation.

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