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Virginia and Maryland, Herman Moll, 1736

The Chesapeake Bay: Its Influence on the Lives of Colonial Virginians and Marylanders

by Arthur Pierce Middleton, Ph.D.

This article is first in a series of papers presented by leading academicians at the history symposium "The Foundations of Future Prosperity, Alexandria 1749-1819." The symposium, held at The Lyceum on October 15-16, 1999, was sponsored by the City of Alexandria 250th Anniversary Commission and featured presentations by eight scholars, including this paper by keynote speaker Dr. Arthur Pierce Middleton.

Dr. Middleton's paper on the Chesapeake Bay explores the role this formidable body of water played in the settling of colonial Virginia and Maryland.

Today I wish to speak about the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries and to show you what a profound effect they had upon the history of Virginia and Maryland in the colonial period.

First, let me introduce you to the Chesapeake.

It is, really, the estuary of the Susquehanna River - the mouth of a river which has gradually subsided since the Pleistocene Period and been engulfed by the sea, extending ocean tides as much as 200 miles inland. From North to South, the Bay is 195 miles long and swells up to 22 miles wide. The Chesapeake has 48 navigable tributaries, and these in turn have 102 navigable branches, creating a total shoreline of over 4,600 miles. The surface area is more than 3,200 square miles, and the drainage area is nearly 65,000 square miles - approximately equal to all six of the New England states. This is more than England (50,000) with Wales (7,500) added, and more than twice the size of Scotland (30,000).

When the early settlers from England sailed between Cape Henry and Cape Charles, the entrance of the Bay, they had before them an enormous area of virgin land, interlaced by several great rivers and a large number of creeks and branches. Alexander Whitaker, the Anglican priest who baptized Pocahontas, wrote in 1612 that the Chesapeake "is interlined with seven most goodly Rivers, the least of which is equal to our River Thames." Another priest of the Church of England, Hugh Jones, wrote from Maryland in 1699 to the Royal Society that "the Number of Navigable Rivers, Creeks, and Inlets render it soe convenient for exporting and importing goods into any part thereof by water carriage that noe country can compare with itt."

He was, of course, quite right. And because of the natural system of waterways, settlement was rapid. It is an axiom of historians that the accessibility of continents is determined by the navigability of its rivers. And in that respect, the Chesapeake Tidewater was unequalled. Newcomers sailed up rivers and deepwater creeks and took up land, which was given free by the Lord Proprietor - 50 acres

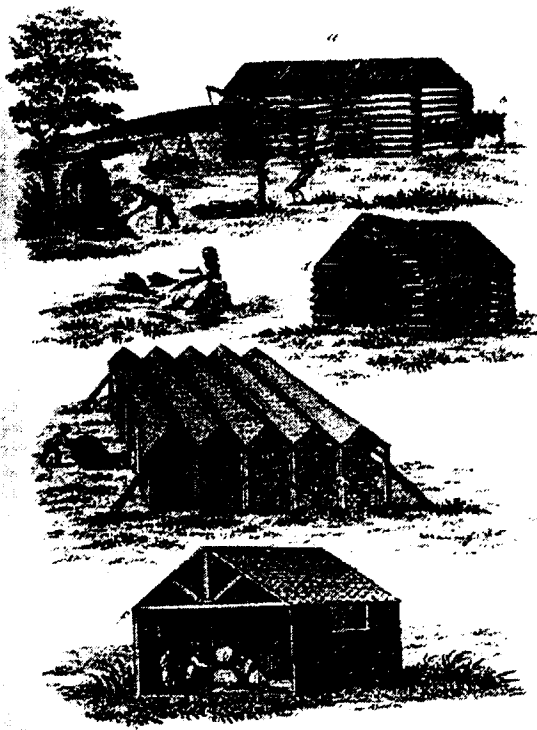
per settler over 16 years of age - more of which could be purchased at a very low cost.

Although the population grew rapidly, it was dispersed over a large area. This would not have been the case if the coast of Maryland and Virginia resembled that of California and had only a few natural bays - like those of San Francisco and San Diego - and a forbidding coastline between them. Without the network of waterways provided by the Chesapeake Bay, settlement would have created a large town - like Boston, New York, or Philadelphia - and the dispersion of incoming settlers would have been slowed down until roads could be built to connect the port city to the hinterland.

But in the Chesapeake colonies that was unnecessary. Instead of creating towns and ports, Virginians and Marylanders in the 17th century simply created plantations along navigable waterways, from which they exported tobacco and imported English goods in seagoing vessels that sailed from the wharves of London and the Outports of the Mother Country and anchored at their front doors. A French visitor in 1686 declared that "none of the plantation houses, even the most remote, is more than 100 or 150 feet from a creek." And in 1769, William Eddis, a customs official for Lord Baltimore in Annapolis, wrote, "The noble....Chesapeake [is] navigable for the largest ships. Many considerable rivers discharge themselves into this bay, by which the advantages of commerce are extended to the interior of the country; and planters whose habitations are far remote from the ocean, receive at their own doors, by water conveyance, the various productions of distant nations."

The Chesapeake and its tributaries allowed planters to become great producers of tobacco. Tobacco can grow in many places, but the

Chesapeake colonies became the center of tobacco production in the 17th and 18th centuries because of the natural transportation system found in its waterways. Dr. Charles Carroll, physician, planter, shipbuilder, and merchant of Annapolis wrote, “the great Bay of Chesapeake and the many Rivers falling therein and the many creeks, coves and branches thereof afford carriage commodious and easie for tobacco. Were it not for this convenience it would be impractical or at least very expensive to carry on the making of tobacco.”



From Tatham, Culture and Commerce of Tobacco, London, 1800

Curing and storing of tobacco

Most colonial Marylanders lived on or near the Bay and its tributaries. Water provided them with a natural network of highways at a time when roads were costly to build and hard to maintain. Water was used extensively for travel, transporting commodities, fishing, and pleasure. Nearly everyone in the Tidewater had a boat and often visited or went to church

by boat. In the 17th century, parishes often spanned rivers or creeks and early churches were located near landings. Marriage alliances commonly connected families across rivers, or up and down them, rather than with those living inland. It was easier to travel by water and social activities involved planters on both sides of rivers.

Even travel by horse or carriage was much affected by the bay and its rivers, which in their lower courses were much too wide to bridge. Hence, Tidewater roads often did little more than connect one ferry to another, and travel was an alternation between riding a dozen miles over land and ferrying over a broad river or creek. Before the Revolution, a traveler going from Williamsburg to Annapolis - perhaps 150 miles as the crow flies - had to cross no fewer than 12 ferries.

At best this slowed travel considerably. At worst it prolonged it unbearably, as sometimes the ferrymen were negligent. If only one boat was in operation and it happened to be on the far side of the river, the traveler was obliged to kindle a fire and “make a smoke” to attract the ferryman’s attention. Then two crossings were necessary before the impatient traveler was able to continue his journey.

For travelers going North, there was the convenience of sailing ferries across the Bay. Earlier, there were boats for hire that would take passengers and goods to any part of the Tidewater - a kind of water taxi. By 1746 at least two sailing ferries regularly ran between Annapolis and Kent Island, one operated by Ashbury Sutton and the other by Elizabeth Wilson. By 1753 another sailing ferry had joined the Kent Island competition. Later, one ran regularly to Rock Hall, a passage of 25 miles up the Bay from Annapolis. It was operated by Samuel Middleton, who also ran Middleton’s Tavern, and had the advantage

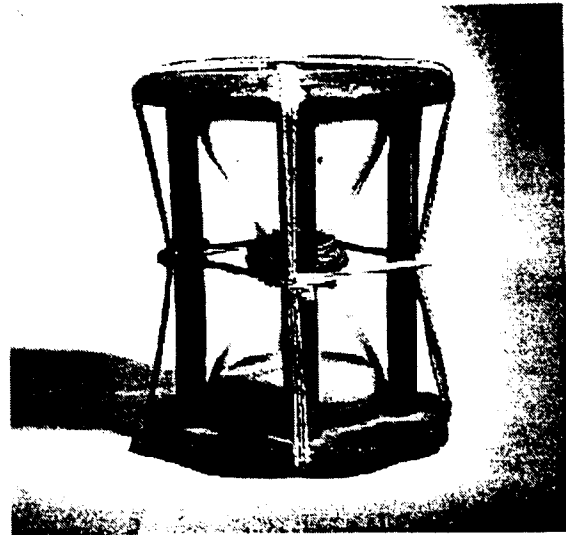
over the older Kent Island route by cutting off no less than 30 miles of land travel between Annapolis and Philadelphia.

The need to traverse the great Chesapeake Bay spurred the development of shipbuilding as an important industry. The rivers and creeks were lined with fine stands of timber, and swamps provided raw materials for pitch, tar, and turpentine. Hence, instead of being concentrated in a few port towns, shipbuilding sprang up all around the Bay.

Annapolis was the site of shipbuilding quite early and continued to produce vessels throughout the 18th century. It was only after the Revolution that large ships were built chiefly in Baltimore and Norfolk. Ropewalks and sailmakers also made their appearance in Annapolis, and by 1745 Thomas Fleming did a thriving business as a shipchandler "at the Sign of the Top-sail Sheet Block," near the Market House, selling "all sorts of Blocks for Shipping and making pumps for vessels." By 1736 an Irish sailmaker, John Conner, operated a business in Annapolis, and others soon joined the competition. When a ship bound from Cape Fear to England was forced to put into the Chesapeake in 1749 to repair a leak, the pilot at Cape Henry recommended Annapolis as the most advantageous place in either Virginia or Maryland for repairs. And when a ship lost all her anchors in a gale off Point Comfort just prior to sailing to England in 1754, instead of putting into Norfolk - almost in sight - she ran up to Annapolis because the captain thought it the most likely place to find shipchandlery.

Knowledge of navigation was widespread among educated men in the 18th century - and not something reserved to a handful of specialists. Books on the subject commonly appear in colonial inventories of estates. Astronomy enjoyed the same popularity.

Because of its practical application to navigation and surveying, together with its traditional place in the educational system inherited from the Middle Ages (one of the four subjects in the Quadrivium), astronomy was considered an essential part of a gentleman's education. Hence, colonial schools possessed celestial and terrestrial globes and advertised courses in surveying, navigation, and astronomy.



Navigator's sandglass from the eighteenth century

From The Manners, Museum, Newport News, Virginia

Familiarity with navigation was so common in colonial days that when the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina was surveyed in 1710-11, there was no necessity for calling in professional surveyors - all the gentlemen appointed to serve on the Commission were quite able to make their own noon sights and work out their latitude, and all owned their own instruments.

Although there were obvious commercial advantages to living on or near the Chesapeake Bay, there were also cultural disadvantages. Planters living apart from one another on their respective plantations had few opportunities to discuss politics regularly and form opinions. Moreover, the rise of local

craftsmen was retarded because of logistical difficulties. Three Virginians writing in 1697 declared that “for want of towns, markets, and money, there is but little encouragement for tradesmen and artificers.” To retail his goods, the tradesman would have to ride many miles over poor roads, stopping at one plantation after another, for his prospective customers rarely assembled in one place.

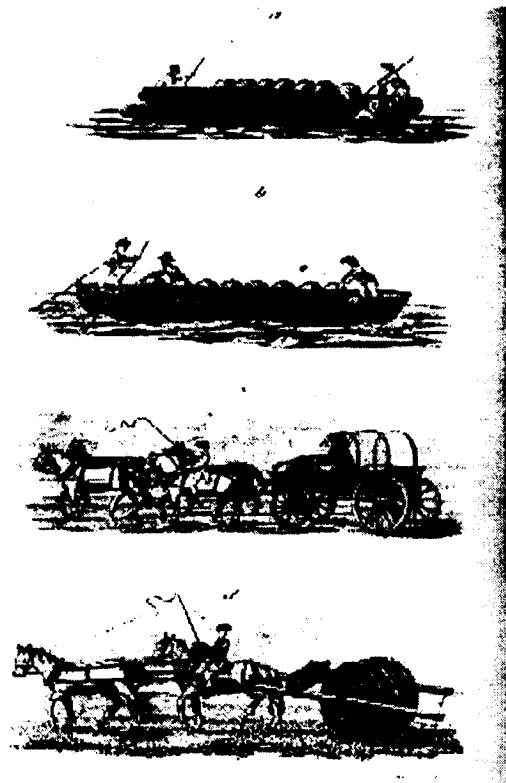
Lord Adam Gordon, visiting the Chesapeake, wrote that for want of towns the inhabitants were more dependent upon England for news, ideas, and fashion than any other colony - a fact he attributed to “the Nature of their situation being such from the Commodiousness and Number of Navigable rivers and creeks, that they Export to, and import from home everything they raise or want, from within a few miles or their own houses and cheaper than any neighbouring province can supply them.”

Yet another way in which the Chesapeake Bay made its inhabitants more dependent upon Great Britain was the fact that the mouth of the Bay was so wide - 12 miles - that it could not be protected by the largest cannons known in the 18th century. Hence, the only practical way to defend Virginia and Maryland from invasion by sea - whether enemy warships, privateers, or pirates - was to have a well-armed naval vessel patrol the waters between Cape Henry and Cape Charles. As a result, prior to the Revolution, the Chesapeake Bay region was wholly dependent upon the Royal Navy for protection against enemies.

As long as the population was largely confined to the Coastal Plain or Tidewater, there was little or no economic reason for the growth of towns. Jamestown and St. Mary’s were exceptions and served as seats of government of Virginia and Maryland. Even so, they were never large and they declined to

virtual extinction once they were replaced as colonial capitals by Williamsburg and Annapolis.

After 1700, however, when the Tidewater lands were largely occupied by planters, the never-ending stream of immigrants faced a choice of either becoming tenant farmers or going up into the Piedmont, above the head of the navigation of the Western Shore rivers. When the latter occurred, they no longer enjoyed the convenience of oceangoing vessels anchoring at their plantations. Ships from England had to unload below the falls or rapids that marked the head of navigation. The goods then had to be stored in warehouses until they could be carted inland to the Piedmont planters. In turn, the planters’ tobacco and grain had to be poled in flatboats down the rivers to the Fall Line in order to be loaded aboard seagoing vessels.



Land and water transport of tobacco

As a result, in the course of the 18th century there arose a series of important Fall Line towns that ultimately became the cities of today: Baltimore on the Patapsco, Georgetown and Alexandria on the Potomac, and Richmond on the James.

The growth of Fall Line towns also coincided with the development of small towns in the Tidewater itself. These towns, although in some cases founded earlier, were brought about by economic development. Their prosperity was bound to the warehouses set up under the tobacco inspection acts of 1730 and 1747 and also to the stores operated by the resident factors of British merchants. As more of the tobacco trade was handled by merchants in Glasgow, Liverpool, and Bristol - rather than London - factors were sent to live at strategic locations in the Tidewater where they imported British and West India goods and retailed them on credit to small planters. In this way, factors obtained control of their customers' tobacco when ready for export, and they made large profits in years when the crop was small and prices high. These river towns included Oxford, St. Michaels, and Chestertown on the Eastern Shore; Bushtown on Bush River; Joppa on the Gunpowder, Londontown of South River; Benedict, Lower Marlborough, and Upper Marlborough on the Patuxent; and Port Tobacco, Piscataway, and Bladensburg on the Potomac. After the American Revolution, however, the system of marketing tobacco changed and most of these river towns declined - some of them disappearing altogether - whereas the aforementioned Fall Line towns continued to grow and eventually became the large cities we are familiar with today.

Town-dweller and plantation owner alike were able to take advantage of the rich natural resources provided by the Chesapeake and its adjacent wetlands in the form of ducks, geese,

oysters, crabs, and terrapin. An early settler declared that the Bay area was a place "beautified by God, with all the ornaments of nature, and enriched by his earthly treasures." Waterfowl had propagated for centuries, not much reduced by an occasional Indian arrow. One flight of ducks in 1650 was estimated to be one mile square and seven miles long. Wild turkeys weighing up to 50 pounds were seen in flocks of 400-500. A Swiss visitor in 1702 pronounced the country to be a "real zoological garden."

That "garden" continues to inspire, as it did hundreds of years ago. Many of us would agree with a group of English visitors in 1736, one of whom declared the Chesapeake to be "the Noblest Bay in the Universe" which "plung'd us into an admiring Extasy."



Arthur Pierce Middleton, a 12th-generation Marylander on his father's side, and an 11th-on his mother's, was born in Berwyn, Maryland. He was educated at the University of Edinburgh (M.A. in 1937 - a First in Medieval and British History) and at Harvard (A.M. in 1938 and Ph.D in 1947 in Colonial History).

Dr. Middleton worked in the Research Department of Colonial Williamsburg for 14 years, serving as its Director in 1948-54. He was also the first Research Associate of the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Colonial Williamsburg and lectured on Colonial History at the College of William and Mary.

Dr. Middleton is the author of Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era (Mariners' Museum, Newport News, 1953 and John Hopkins University Press, 1984).

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