



REMAINS OF A BYGONE WAY OF LIFE IN SOUTHERN



M A R Y L A N D

Tobacco's Legacy

by joe flanagan photographed by renee bieretz / historic american buildings survey





ALL PHOTOS RENEE BIERETZ/NPS/HABS

DRIVING INTO THE TIDEWATER REGION OF SOUTHERN MARYLAND, THERE IS NOT SO much a sense of place as of vacancy—available space for nearby Washington, DC, extra room for the metropolis to stretch its ever-expanding influence. This is clear in the large condominium complexes that line the road south, in the strip malls and new town house developments with names like “The Preserve” harkening back to the days when the agrarian aristocracy, wealthy from the tobacco trade, ruled like feudal lords along the Potomac’s estuaries. Occasionally there is a lonely symbol of the region’s once thriving tobacco economy—a dilapidated barn sitting by itself in a field, sometimes a stone’s throw from the McMansions that surround it. Southern Maryland was once one of the main sources of tobacco in the United States, a lucrative agribusiness that generated great wealth, shaping geography and culture. For 350 years it was the primary industry, critical to the state’s economy. From the early colonial era to the latter part of the 20th century, tobacco’s fortunes waxed and waned dependent not only on labor, soil, and climate, but on the fickle tastes of the public. It finally died out for good with a state tobacco buyout agreement in 1998, which basically paid farmers not to grow it.



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THE ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY TOBACCO LEFT BEHIND IS EXPRESSIVE TESTIMONY TO A history all but buried in the growing urban context. Yet the further south one travels, the faster all reference to Washington falls away, until one is, as National Park Service interpreter Scott Hill says, “in the land that time forgot.” Here is a trailer from the 1940s, rusting into the ground, perhaps still occupied judging from the dirty lace curtains in the window. Here is an outbuilding subsumed by brown vines. Billboards proclaim the coming of luxurious housing developments with rural-sounding names, but they haven’t arrived yet. They are just an idea, a suggestion in bright colors against the somber brown-gray monochrome of an old landscape.

Previous pages: Sarum, Charles County’s earliest documented home. Tree-ring analysis dates it to 1717. *Left:* Outbuildings at the Thomas Stone National Historic Site in Port Tobacco. *Above:* Lone structure at McPberson’s Purchase, which boasts the county’s largest intact collection of early agricultural buildings.

The tobacco culture's plantation houses, barns, churches, and other structures have lately been of great concern to local preservationists, given the tremendous development and changing agricultural picture. "Tobacco barns are really the emblem of southern Maryland," says Cathy Thompson, Charles County community planning program manager. "They're the character-defining feature of the rural landscape." In 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation added Maryland's tobacco barns to its list of most endangered places. The designation led to the Southern Maryland Tobacco Barns Preservation Initiative, a cooperative effort by the National Trust, Preservation Maryland, the Maryland Historical Trust, and local governments. Other structures have come into focus as critical to southern Maryland's identity, from the mansions that tobacco built to the quarters of those enslaved to the system. The Historic American Buildings Survey of the National Park Service, whose photographs are shown here, recorded many of the sites as part of an ongoing collaboration with MHT.

ENGLISH SETTLERS DISCOVERED NICOTANIA *tabacum* through the Indians, and began cultivating it as one of many endeavors to gain a foothold in the Chesapeake region. Southern Maryland was particularly suited to tobacco growing. Its gently rolling landscape offered plenty of space, the soil was right, the rain plentiful, and the two major rivers, the Potomac and the Patuxent, with their numerous tributaries, meant that the product could be easily moved. For the English government, looking for a quick return on its investment in the New World, tobacco was the answer. There was high demand in Europe, and soon the entire region was involved in its cultivation. According to a nomination of the barns to the National Register of Historic Places, "The vast majority of the early settlers to the Chesapeake . . . arrived to earn a living from tobacco. The tobacco trade paid the way for more than one-third of all immigrants from the British Isles before 1640." Tobacco drove population growth in the Chesapeake for the next 100 years.

For the better part of the 17th century, tobacco farms in southern Maryland were scattered and remote, situated along creeks and tributaries. They were isolated and self-sufficient, so there were no social organizations or cultural institutions. Many were modest in scope, and at first

Above: Entrance to Mount Republic, built in 1790 on 350 acres with a sweeping view of the Potomac River Valley. Right: Dating to 1732, Old Durham Church.

the workers were primarily indentured servants from England. The complex of waterways allowed planters to ship and receive goods practically at their doorstep. This meant there was no need for major towns like Annapolis or Williamsburg. Since tobacco quickly exhausts the soil, planters were frequently looking for new land. Sometimes they simply left existing structures to rot and moved elsewhere to start again.

Tobacco's profitability brought a surplus of hopeful planters. Encouraged by the fortunes of others, immigrants and newly freed indentured servants wanted to try their hand at it. Between 1620 and 1680, the trend led to an oversupply of tobacco and an attendant drop in value. Consumers came to favor the sweeter variety grown across the river in Virginia. In the last years of the century, emigration dropped dramatically. Opportunities were better in England, where wages and working conditions had improved.

Into the void stepped the wealthy landowners. Powerful agricultural interests—akin to today's agribusinesses—began taking over the small farms. Africans were enslaved in large numbers. According to the National Register nomination, "Before 1684, less than half of the wealthy tobacco growers owned slaves, but by 1712, nearly all of the gentry class did." In the early 1700s, Maryland's robust leaf came back into favor, reinvigorating local tobacco growing.

There were still many moderate and small-sized farms that had neither servants nor slaves, their owners having diversified into other crops. Tobacco was labor-intensive, difficult to produce without an army of workers. The plant did best in virgin soil, and while it could be grown in previously cultivated areas, size and quality were often diminished. A field that grew tobacco for three consecutive years would need another twenty to recover. This drove planters to clear out forests in search of rich soil. By the

mid-18th century, Maryland farmers were running out of land.

Thomas Stone National Historic Site is likely typical of how wealthy plantation owners lived during tobacco's 18th century heyday. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Stone built the house, "Haberdeventure," in 1771. Says Hill, "It had been a tobacco plantation for eight decades before he purchased it. The soil was depleted and it was no longer a viable cash crop." Today, the site comprises 322 acres of fields and woodlands but Stone owned over a thousand around the county. It was a sign of status among the gentry to have at least some



Today the architectural legacy tobacco left behind is expressive testimony to a history all but buried in the growing urban context.





tobacco in the ground, says Hill. Tobacco meant land. It meant slaves. Even for someone like Stone, who made most of his money practicing law, tobacco was the sign of having arrived.

While Stone's meticulously kept estate—a partial replica, the original burned in 1977—conveys the character of rural Maryland around the time of the Revolution, a short excursion outside park boundaries reveals another picture. The houses of the wealthy, many of which are preserved today, have names that call to mind English country estates: La Grange, Linden, Black Friars, Mt. Bleak. Like Haberdeventure, they tend to be set back off the road and isolated. Yet today many are a little down-at-heel, as if the region were once a retreat for the rich, who have since moved on. Less than two miles from Haberdeventure, Port Tobacco, on the river of the same name, was once Maryland's second busiest port. Today, there are only a few 19th century buildings, a restored courthouse, and a brick outline where a church used to be. Some distance beyond, the land dips, forming a large trough, grown-in and swampy. A hawk watches from the top of a dead tree. This, says Hill, is where the river used to run. Farming filled the rivers with silt, impeding navigation. Archeologists have determined that most of it came from tobacco's heyday. Though an outdoor exhibit shows a plan of the town at its zenith, it is difficult to believe there was anything here at all.

The waterways served as the roads, says Lucy Lawliss, superintendent of Thomas Stone and George Washington Birthplace National Monument, just across the river. "The Potomac was the I-95 of its time," she says. "There were a lot of relationships across the river between families . . . it was the way information was exchanged." Ferries were common. Today, Lawliss says, visitors to the birthplace say it is "out in the sticks," but in the 18th century it was anything but. "These places that seem so isolated now were very connected then," she says. Hill points out that a drive from Alexandria to Stone's house is now a round-about 30 miles; then it would have been roughly 12 as the crow flies, crossing the river by boat. When George Washington was on his deathbed, his doctor—Stone's neighbor—arrived via ferry. Hill says that a pair of water trails, the John Smith and the Potomac, encourage getting out on the water, which gives a great perspective on the geography.

"IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO TALK ABOUT TOBACCO CULTIVATION WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT the labor involved," says Thompson. It is not a crop that lends itself to mechanized processing. "There was little that could be done with tractors, even when that technology was available," she says. From the planting to the cutting to the hanging in the barns to dry, it was very

hands-on. This is reflected in the spike in the slave population, with Maryland at one point the second-largest slave-holding colony. By the middle of the 18th century, the biggest plantations had 100 or more slaves, most working the tobacco fields. In 1712, enslaved workers were 18 percent of the county's population, by 1850 more than half.

A short distance up the road from Port Tobacco is St. Ignatius Church, one of the oldest continuously active parishes in the United States. Situated on a high point with a dramatic view of the river, it preserves its former servants' quarters. The place is deserted but for a caretaker, who unlocks the padlock on the tiny wood frame structure to allow a look inside. Repairs in 1963 uncovered part of a tunnel that seems to have led to the river; although its use as such is as yet undetermined, some local historians believe St. Ignatius may have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

It seems reasonable that John Wilkes Booth, after escaping Ford's Theater, would have slipped into the swamps and thickets here. Southern Maryland was a hotbed of clandestine pro-Confederate activity. A woman named Olivia Floyd, who lived at the estate next to Stone's, was a Confederate agent. Union troops searching for the assassin saw a dilapidated Port Tobacco, a harbinger of the future. With the abolition of slavery, the tobacco economy crashed. Other regions developed new varieties popular with smokers as Maryland growers struggled through the rest of the century. Some let fields go unplanted. Some went bankrupt. Others

switched to less labor-intensive crops. While some black residents left to find opportunities elsewhere, most stayed to try their hand at tenant farming. Some farmed tobacco.

Above and left: Tobacco barns and outbuildings in Charles County. Barns are an iconic presence in Maryland, their preservation a national concern for state and local groups working with the National Park Service and the National Trust.



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—Cathy Thompson, Charles County community planning program manager





THE RISE OF THE BLENDED CIGARETTE—AND THE FEMALE SMOKER—RESCUED LOCAL tobacco. Pleased with its burning qualities, aroma, and low tar and nicotine content, the Swiss bought large quantities for cigarette manufacturing after World War I. Sweden, France, Germany, and the Netherlands were importers as well. Maryland tobacco also became an additive in American blends. The prosperity was unlike anything since before the Civil War. The local price per pound tripled between 1938 and 1945, and smoking skyrocketed after World War II. Black farmers played a big role locally, many making the transition from sharecroppers to landowners.

The 1980s—after a years-long drumbeat of health warnings—saw the beginning of the end. Farms disappeared while the suburbs grew. The final blow was the buyout, funded by a \$206 billion settlement between the tobacco companies and 46 states. Tobacco auction houses closed one by one as farmers switched to other crops. The change was profound. Because raising tobacco required so many hands, it engendered a sense of community among those who spent days in the fields and barns. The auctions were an opportunity to visit with other farmers and exchange news. While there is still agriculture here, it is but a shadow of the days of big tobacco. Today, with suburban development perhaps just over the horizon, alarm over the fate of the barns helped secure a grant from the federal Save America's Treasures program. This funded research for a National Register nomination, and a project by the University of Delaware Center for Historic Architecture and Design to document 30 barns with measured drawings. Preservationists are working with landowners on ways to save the barns through adaptive re-use.



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MANY SUBURBS NEVER GET THE CHANCE TO NEGOTIATE THE VALUE OF THEIR RURAL past. They are simply enveloped too quickly. Southern Maryland seems in an enviable position of having the time to pause to examine its history, still everywhere in evidence, not simply in the disused barns and sequestered houses of the former tobacco lords. There is the possibility that the region might not want to trade its character for what has made other places anonymous. There is, in each winding turn, in the mist rising off the fields, a timelessness that, even though you might be a stranger there, you would like to remain untouched.

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Left: Rose Hill, overlooking the Port Tobacco valley. Above: Thomas Stone NHS.