

Courthouse at New Yarmouth on Eastern Neck

By 1679, there was a courthouse on Eastern Neck at the town of New Yarmouth on Gray's Inn Creek. The land on which it was built was deeded by James Ringgold to Lord Baltimore in 1680. It is also recorded that a jail had been built on this lot by the Kent County justices. This site seems to have remained the seat of justice for about sixteen years, but nothing is known of the building.⁴ At the April-May Session of the General Assembly of 1696, an act was passed providing for a more convenient site:

Whereas by the Late Division of the County of Kent [Establishment of Talbot County?] there is absolute Occasion for the ease and Conveniency of the Inhabitants thereof that the said County Court should be houlden att some other place, in the said County then att the present Court house⁵

By the terms of this act the justices of the county were authorized to purchase three acres of land and if no price could be agreed upon or if for some legal reason the owner could not sell, the justices were empowered to condemn.

First Courthouse at Chestertown

The justices were not long in taking advantage of this act. At the August term of court, 1696, they ordered the sheriff to impanel a jury to meet the following Tuesday—the order was issued August 26—“att the house of Mr. Isaac Calke for the Laying out and Valueing of Three Acres of Land whereon to build a Court house for this County.”⁶ Nor was the sheriff slow to act, for he and his jury had already examined the land which lay on the north shore of the Chester River between the plantations of Edward Fry and Isaac Caulk and reported to the court held on September 1 that its fair value was 2,000 pounds of tobacco.⁷ In the list of county charges presented for the approval of the justices, October 30, 1696, we find the following items related to the building of the courthouse:

To ditto [Simon Wilmer] for laying out the Land for the Court house and recording the same	200
To John Sutton for building a Court house the agreement to remaine in the Sheriff's hands until the house be finished.	6000
To the Land for building a Court house on and to remaine in the sheerif his custodie untill the right owner appeares that can give a sufficient and good title to the county for the land, or till the Justices of this County shall otherwise order the sd. tob.	2000 ⁸

Apparently Sutton had finished the courthouse, or at least his part of it, by January 28, 1696/97, for on that day the court ordered the sheriff to pay him the total amount levied for the purpose.⁹ On June 23, 1697, the sheriff, Captain Edward Sweatman, was ordered to have the courthouse plastered and to provide pillory and stocks.¹⁰ The court which met November 8, 1697, included among the county charges certain additional items for the courthouse: Geofry Power was given two sums for nails for the plasterers; Morgan Browne was allowed 700 pounds of tobacco for building the chimney; a considerable amount was set aside to pay the plasterers “when finished”; William Bladen was allowed 400 pounds for drawing the bill which was presented to the assembly authorizing the purchase of the land for the courthouse; and to James, Simon Wilmer's Negro, 190 pounds were paid for the hair used by the plasterers.¹¹

⁴ Skirven, *loc. cit.* The deed from Ringgold to Lord Baltimore for the New Yarmouth courthouse is found in Kent County Deed Book, Liber B., ff. 146-49.

⁵ Ch. 8; *Arch. of Md.*, XIX, 376.

⁶ *Kent County Court Proceedings, 1676-1695*, f. 597, Ms.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ff. 609-10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ff. 656-57. Payment for the land was subsequently

made to Edward Fry, Kent County *Land Records, Liber C, 1692-1706*, f. 121, Ms. Shortly thereafter “fifty foot squared” of this land was leased for twenty years to Geofrey Power at six pounds sterling per annum. Could this have been for an inn or an ordinary?

⁹ *Kent County Court Proceedings, 1676-1695*, f. 704, Ms.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 755.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ff. 805, 806.