

One other, more indirect, source of land revenue for the Proprietor was the reversion of land to him by escheat. All land, under the socage tenure system was liable to revert to the Proprietor if certain conditions—most commonly lack of heirs, treason and non-payment of rent—warranted it. By regranteeing such land the Lord Proprietor undoubtedly added considerably to his land revenues, if the numerous escheat warrants found in the land records may be taken as an indication.⁶ There was always considerable opposition on the part of the colonists to this practice but it continued down to the Revolution.

Although the Lord Proprietor was the one most specifically concerned it must be remembered that he was not the only one to whom land was a matter of primary importance. The soil was the source of livelihood for the people of colonial Maryland and constituted their chief wealth. The mark of landlessness was an unfavorable one and even though landless persons such as leaseholders and overseers made a better living than the poorer freeholders they were left politically powerless and attached to the interest of an upper class. It has been estimated that in 1755 probably more than half of the free whites of Maryland belonged to families of the landholding class. The great majority of landowners was, of course, made up of the small freeholders, while the great beneficiaries of the land system were those individuals and families whose large holdings gave them power and prestige above the many. This power and prestige was enhanced in the case of many of these individuals by the holding of high offices and the accumulation thereby of considerable additional wealth in the form of fees.

HISTORY OF LAND ADMINISTRATION

In view of the pre-eminent role of land in colonial Maryland it is not surprising that from the beginning the Proprietors took great care of the administration of land affairs and of the keeping of records pertaining thereto.

The earliest evidence of land administration in Maryland comes indirectly through a grant made to Thomas Cornwalleys in 1640 mentioning how in a previous grant "for and in Consideration that our Governor and Comisioners of that our Province of Maryland

⁶ Gould, pp. 28-29.