

ST. MARY'S COUNTY

Courthouse at John Hammond's

Although Giles Brent appointed justices to hear cases in St. Mary's County August 26, 1644,¹ there is no record of a fixed place of county government until ten years later. On October 20, 1654, the General Assembly passed an act establishing a county court² and shortly thereafter, December 5, 1654, John Hammond was authorized to build at his own cost a fitting courthouse and jail. In return for this service he was granted permission to operate a ferry over Newtown River for the convenience of those having business with the court, and he was also allowed to sell wine and hard liquor at retail.³ The best authorities now believe that this courthouse was located on Hammond's property about a mile east of Leonardtown.⁴

Courthouse at St. Mary's City

When the General Assembly adjourned, October 18, 1694, it was understood that barring an emergency this session, which began September 21, would be the last ever to be held in St. Mary's City. Among other things left behind when the State government departed was the handsome, if fragile, state house then only twenty years old. A replica of this large cross-style building, one of the most remarkable in the colonies, was built as part of the Maryland Tercentenary Celebration in 1934.⁵ The specifications of the General Assembly authorizing the structure are unusually full:

An Act for the building of a state house and Prison att S^t Maries.

To th end there may be a decent and Convenient place for the administracōn of Justice and a prison Erected for the Restraint of Malefactors & persons indebted the two houses of your Lordships Generall Assembly Doe pray that itt may be Enacted that there be a State house & a prison built att the City of S^t. Maries And Bee itt Enacted by the Right Hon^{ble}: the Lord Proprietary with the aduice and Consent of the upper and lower houses of this present Generall Assembly and the Authority of the same That there be a state house and Prison built att the City of S^t Maries the said state house and Prison to be built of brick or stone with lime & sand and to be Covered with Slate or tile laid in Morter and to be of these demencōns (viz^t) the said State house to be two Stories high and to Continue in length forty five foote from outside to outside with a porch in front sixteene foote Long and twelue foote broad in the Clear on the Inside and a staire case over against the Porch on the other side sixteene foote Square in the Cleere on the inside the first story of the said house Porch and staire Case to be twelue foote from the topp of the floore which shall be paved with flatt paveing Stone or Brick to the lower side of the summer and the second story to be Nine foote in the Cleere from the upper side of the board to the lower side of the summer the walls of the said house Porch and staire case to be built vppon a good secure and sound foundacōn of twenty eight inches thick from the bottom of the said foundacōn to the water tabie which shall be three foote Cleere aboue ground and made shelving of and The Rest of the said story to be twenty four Inches thick upp to the first floore the walls of the second story of the said house Porch and staire Case to be Ninteene Inches thick upp to to the wale plate and soe from the wall plate to the brest of the windows

¹ *Arch. of Md.*, III, 150-51.

² *Ibid.*, I, 347.

³ *Ibid.*, X, 410.

⁴ Much of the information in this paragraph comes from Edwin W. Beitzell, "Newtown Hundred," *Md. Hist. Mag.*, 51, 125-27. No description of this courthouse seems to have been preserved nor is it certain that it was not replaced before the county seat was transferred to St. Mary's City. The total loss

of the county records has caused this gap in our knowledge of the courthouses of St. Mary's County, a gap which is likely never to be filled. It is worth noting that on August 7, 1677, court was held at the house of Stephen Murty at Newtown (*Arch. of Md.*, LXVIII, 91). Was Murty an innkeeper?

⁵ For a thorough study of the original building and the replica see Henry Chandlee Forman, *Jamestown and St. Mary's, Buried Cities of Romance*, Baltimore, 1938, pp. 282-95.