

## MARYLAND COLONIAL ERA HISTORY 1607-1776

### 6. Cultural Identity -- Literary, architectural, furniture-making, and cultural achievements

The following largely verbatim excerpts are taken from Weidman, Gregory R., *Furniture in Maryland 1740-1940* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1984) and cited as Weidman [page #]. Reprinted with permission of the Maryland Center for History and Culture.

[R]elatively little Maryland furniture, particularly pieces dating before c. 1750, has survived \*\*\* . The reasons for this are numerous and complicated. The lack of examples applies not only to objects made in Maryland (a comparatively small number to start with), but also to pieces imported to the colony. First, in seventeenth-century Maryland there were no substantial towns like those existing in New England to provide a suitable economic climate for the cabinetmakers' business. More important, life in general in the colony in the seventeenth century was essentially unstable due to an incredibly high mortality rate, unsettled economy, and many other factors. [fn omitted] Few substantial dwellings were built and virtually none from that era survives. [fn omitted] Not until the dawn of the eighteenth century did improvements in economic conditions encourage a few prosperous Maryland planters to build permanent brick houses and furnish them with pieces intended to last. Estate inventories from Baltimore County, for instance, show that only a handful of property owners prior to c. 1695 had more than the most basic necessities for survival in the New World.

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There are also [several] economically []based reasons for the survival of so little pre-1750 furniture in Maryland. In most cases, furniture was simply "used up." When it was no longer suitable for the parlor or best bed chamber, it was relegated to a back chamber, then to the attic, then to the servants' quarters, and finally to the wood pile. Furthermore, as tastes for new styles evolved fashion-conscious Marylanders bought new pieces to replace the old. \*\*\*

A final economic factor for the disappearance of pre-1750 furniture used in Maryland was the rise and fall of the local economy and individual family fortunes. Very few families that were prosperous in that early period maintained their affluence into [the 18<sup>th</sup>] century. Conversely, many families whose furniture of later eras has come down \*\*\* either did not have wealth to buy substantial furniture in earlier times, or they had not yet even arrived in Maryland. Exigencies of war and depression disrupted stable lifestyles and often caused old Maryland families to seek or renew their fortunes in other states or on the frontier.

Without a town-oriented economy Maryland was a far from ideal location for principally urban craftsmen such as cabinetmakers, silversmiths, and the like. Maryland's plantation economy made it easier for the planter, whether of great or modest means, to order his household goods through his factor in Britain. A farmer's tobacco crop purchased him credit in London (or Liverpool or Glasgow); he seldom had cash to spend in the shops of small neighboring towns. Furthermore, fashion-conscious Marylanders definitely preferred to own English furniture to the usually plainer, less sophisticated "country-made" pieces. As did their counterparts throughout the South, the Maryland planters of the middle- and upper-income groups (those whose furniture has survived) wished to replicate the comforts

of home (i.e., Britain) and to keep up with both the English gentry and their Maryland neighbors by owning the latest London fashions.

Most furniture used in Maryland between 1740 and 1790, therefore, was made in England.\*\*\*

Throughout the eighteenth century, London customs records show that Maryland and Virginia were by far the largest importers of English furniture. [fn omitted] Annapolis Port of Entry records for 1754-177 \*\*\* describe the dozens of ships per year bringing in goods from London and other British ports. Private accounts of Marylanders show that they ordered quantities of furniture through their agents in England.

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Not all the furniture imported into Maryland was from abroad, however. There is considerable evidence of a substantial amount of furniture being brought to the province from other American colonies. Probably the majority of goods of this sort were imported from New England.

Although the documentary evidence is quite slim, it seems likely nevertheless that a fair amount of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania furniture found its way into Maryland homes. One primary way, which would not show up in records, would have been through intermarriage of Maryland and Pennsylvania families. (This was particularly true of the closely connected Quaker communities.) Another factor would be that Marylanders in the northern and extreme eastern parts of the colony may have acquired pieces from the noted cabinetmakers in nearby Pennsylvania and Delaware.

Weidman 44

By the 1760's, two towns gradually emerged as the cabinetmaking centers of Maryland. The first of these was Annapolis, the "Athens of America," as it was termed during its heyday in the years immediately preceding the Revolution. As the town grew and prospered, particularly after the close of the French and Indian War in the mid-1760s, the economic setting became ideal for the urban craftsman to flourish. Wealthy planters and merchants, attracted to this economic, social, and cultural center of the colony, joined politicians and government officials in building important residences in the town. At least fourteen such dwellings were built during Annapolis' Golden age, 1763-1774. [fn omitted] Although English goods may still have dominated the market and been considered most fashionable, the builders of these impressive town houses also created a market for locally made cabinetwares.

Weidman 45

Although one tends to think of Baltimore's rise to economic prominence as being a post-Revolutionary phenomenon, in actuality the town had begun its great period of growth in the preceding decade. In 1770, when the population of Annapolis was approximately 1,500, that of Baltimore had jumped to 3,000. There were then two principal cabinetmakers working in Baltimore, both of whom, significantly, had received their training in Philadelphia. The first of these, a cabinetmaker who would have an important influence on the trade in Baltimore for over three decades was Gerrard Hopkins (1742-1800) \* \* \*. The other leading cabinetmaker of pre-Revolutionary Baltimore was \*\*\* Robert Moore (1723-1787).

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The woods used by cabinetmakers working in Maryland in the 1740-1790 period are typical of those found in the mid-Atlantic area. In the earlier period, walnut definitely predominates, as shown by both

the surviving examples and descriptions in estate inventories. Mahogany had become the most fashionable primary wood by the mid-1750's \* \* \* , and large quantities were being imported from the West Indies into Annapolis from that time until the Revolution. Although mahogany was probably favored in that sophisticated town and in Baltimore, handsome and stylish pieces were still being made in walnut in the 1770's \*\*\* . Another popular cabinet wood used in Maryland was cherry \*\*\* and inventories record the use of cherry furniture in many middle and upper-income households. Inventories also show that pine, poplar, and oak were used for simpler, more utilitarian pieces \*\*\* , but only a few have survived.

The secondary woods used by Maryland cabinetmakers were primarily those that grew in abundance in the area. Poplar was perhaps most frequently used (particularly for drawers and backboards). Yellow pine was also favored, particularly by the more rural craftsmen. Atlantic white cedar, a popular choice of Philadelphia cabinetmakers, also grew and was used in Maryland. By the mid-1760's, white pine was being imported from New England in large quantities. (In 1770, for instance, one ship entered Annapolis with a cargo of 95,000 board feet! [fn omitted]) White pine was probably used more frequently by craftsmen in the bigger towns of Annapolis and Baltimore. Local oak and chestnut were both used where strength was particularly important. A typical Maryland case piece might contain three or four secondary woods, although yellow pine and poplar were occasionally used exclusively.

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The following largely verbatim excerpts are taken from Brugger, Robert J., *Maryland A Middle Temperament: 1634-1980* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) and cited as Brugger [page #]. Reprinted with the permission of the Johns Hopkins University Press.

#### Artisans

Annapolis artisans proved the town at least somewhat deserving its renown for opulence. For many years Marylanders of means had purchased New England furniture and Philadelphia silver while preferring English luxury items to all others. Now, if they wished (and not all did), they could patronize a growing number of local silver and goldsmiths, makers of cabinets and clocks, and portrait painters. In about 1730 Philip Syng, Sr., moved to Annapolis from Philadelphia to open a silver and watch shop. Possibly after an apprenticeship with Syng, John Inch in 1741 began plying his trade in the capital. There, as in Chestertown, Easton, and Baltimore Town, the work usually ran to repairing imported pieces and making commonplace items like knee buckles and simple jewelry.

Brugger 78

#### Literary achievements

In 1708 Ebenezer Cook, an English immigrant and former tobacco agent who eventually claimed the title "laureate of Maryland," published *The Sot-Weed Factor*, a poetic commentary on the sickness, rascality, and rawness of early Maryland. Noticing a gap between design and reality (also satirizing the disillusioned European to America), Cook wrote that Annapolis was "A City Situate on a Plain/Where scarce a house will keep out Rain." [fn omitted]

## Brugger 41-42

Had the polished Governor Calvert lived longer, he might have grown well pleased with life in Maryland; quite likely he would have enjoyed Annapolis. From humble beginnings it had grown “rich and opulent,” wrote Cook in *Sotweed Redivivus*. He sang of Annapolis as “The famous Beau *Metropolis/Of Maryland*.”

## Brugger 77

Annapolis also became the center of literary and artistic life on the Tobacco Coast. After 1726, with the arrival of an English-born printer, William Parks, the town had a press, and the next year, in the *Maryland Gazette*, the first newspaper in the Chesapeake. In addition to printing the official proceedings and acts of the assembly, Parks published political broadsides, literary works like Cook’s poetry, an almanac, a primer, and religious sermons. When Parks left for Williamsburg in 1737, a gifted member of an old colonial printing family, Jonas Green, took his place in this publishing work. In 1745 Green revived the *Gazette*, which had lapsed in 1734. He began writing political and critical pieces – and accepting locally written material – that gave the paper weighty voice and sparking character.

## Cultural achievement

Thus, Annapolis suggested the importance of urban focus and patronage in the life of expression. Many a planter with his wife and children played musical instruments and performed for themselves and neighbors; Annapolis attracted instructors in dance and drew professional musicians who by the 1740s performed regular concerts. Some of the chamber music heard there was the work of Reverend [Thomas] Bacon, an estimable amateur composer, whose [Talbot] parish had an active musical calendar of its own. The curtain went up on Maryland theater in June 1752, when a “Company of Comedians” began a two-month stand playing John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* and David Garrick’s *The Lying Valet*. The troupe later divided its time between Annapolis and Williamsburg, with occasional performances at Upper Marlborough, Port Tobacco, and Chestertown to please crowds attending horse races. By 1770 the appeal of these theatrical and music events led to a subscription drive to build a new playhouse in Annapolis. When it opened in the fall of 1771 it apparently was the first brick theater in the colonies. One member of the audience that evening, George Washington, often attended plays and races in the capital.

## Brugger 78

## Architecture

The Georgian home of mid-eighteenth-century Maryland epitomized the order, balance, and gracious living that marked life at the highest reaches of society. A style that owed much to Christopher Wren’s designs for middle-class English homes during Queen Anne’s reign, Georgian design came to America by way of several architectural handbooks published in England in the late 1720s. By about 1732, when work began on the central part of Readbourne, a brick country house in Queen Anne’s county, the style had arrived in both Maryland and Virginia. In early Colonial form the brick Georgian mansion stood two stories high, with hipped or gabled roof and sashed windows placed evenly on either side of a paneled, pedimented front door that opened into a great hallway and staircase. Interiors, calculated to be just as imposing yet comfortable, featured high ceilings, richly carved woodwork around doors and fireplaces, and a floor plan as ordered as the façade. In the third quarter of the century, builders added hyphens and wings to central blocks, creating the five-part houses that marked the apogee of colonial architecture \* \* \* . Capitalizing on the riches of earth and water, Marylanders where possible placed

their homes to complement both – to take in fully “the very beautiful prospects” visitors seldom failed to note. While the boxwoods and terraces did have English prototypes, the Chesapeake setting—gardens sloping gradually from house to waterside – leant extraordinary beauty to some of these homes.

Brugger 79-83

When did the colonists begin to think of themselves as Americans as distinct from British subjects? Did they think of themselves as both?

At some point in the early eighteenth century, men and women born in Maryland became a majority of the population, which climbed to about forty-three thousand in 1710 and nearly doubled in the next twenty years. Better health, an improved ratio of women to men, and younger marriages provided the basis for this growth. Native-born children were less susceptible to the diseases that had decimated newcomers. Not facing the terms of service that delayed marriage among seventeenth-century servants, they wedded earlier—men before age twenty-five, women in their late teens. The continuing, though declining, preponderance of males in the population and their eagerness in seeking mates did most to explain the younger age of marriage among women. Once established, the pattern quickly worked a revolution in the colony, which before had been so grimly dependent on settlers for population growth. Having married younger, native couples ordinarily had larger families than did immigrants – on average as many as nine births – and their grown children did also. Lower mortality rates and a longer life expectancy among native Marylanders meant that more parents lived to see their children reach maturity. In material terms this demographic change meant that fathers more likely lived long enough to acquire property that they could pass on to their children, that their children would live to inherit, and that families, over generations and through intermarriage, consolidated their wealth in each locality. On the Eastern Shore, for example, perhaps half of the landowners were linked to each other by marriage or kinship ties.

The rise of the native-born had political effect as well. Governor Seymour, who did not always have his way with the lower house of assembly, wrote the Board of Trade and Plantations with alarm and impatience that the natives “by the name of Country Borne” stood aloof “from the rest of her Majesty’s Subjects.” He meant that Marylanders had begun to think of themselves as such and to use their identity as a bond in struggles against “outside” authority.

Brugger 60