

## The Lure of Sotweed: Tobacco and Maryland History

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Today, as at the beginning of Maryland, tobacco is a controversial subject. When the colonists established their first settlement at St. Mary's City in 1634, Lord Baltimore urged the new colonists to develop a diversified economy of farming, lumbering, fishing, mining, etc. Despite this desire and his repeated efforts, Calvert was completely disappointed in this goal. The lure of fine profits to be had from growing tobacco proved too much and Marylanders rapidly adopted this crop as the mainstay of their economy. That decision, in turn, shaped colonial life and the society which developed along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. The story of tobacco, or sotweed as it was called, thus became integral to the history of Maryland.

Native Americans were the first to smoke tobacco and the Spanish and Portuguese introduced this New World plant to Europe and Africa in the mid-1500s. As the craze to smoke the new "weed" swept England, prices were extraordinarily high since the Spanish were the only suppliers. This situation began to change in 1612 when a Virginia settler, John Rolfe, planted tobacco seeds at Jamestown that were smuggled from Venezuela. Rolfe's experiment proved that the Chesapeake's soil and climate were ideal for this crop and production of tobacco exploded in Virginia, expanding from 2300 pounds in 1615 to half a million pounds in the 1620s. Maryland's settlers quickly joined in this boom, growing Oronoco tobacco. By the early 1670s, over 10 million pounds were being exported from the Chesapeake. It became the main product of the region and caused mariners to give the Chesapeake another name - the Tobacco Coast.

So important was tobacco in the Chesapeake colonies that it became the money. Items were bought, debts settled, innkeepers paid and tavern drinks purchased in pounds of tobacco. Maryland designated this crop as the official medium of exchange in 1637. In part, this was due to a severe shortage of coinage in England and her American settlements. However, other colonies never resorted to making a crop their official currency, such as sugar in Jamaica or wheat in Pennsylvania. This is a powerful indication of the central place tobacco held in early Maryland.

Demand for tobacco rose quickly as new peoples tried it and enjoyed the effects of smoking sotweed. In addition to the pleasure derived from smoking tobacco, people during the 16th and 17th centuries also believed that the smoke offered significant health benefits, especially for ailments of the lungs. English and Dutch merchants began an international trade in Chesapeake tobacco to meet this growing demand, exporting it to Europe, Africa and Asia. As a result, Maryland was connected through tobacco to the emerging global economy. Artifacts found on sites attest to this international trade. Ceramics from England, the Netherlands, the Rhineland, France, Portugal, Italy and even Turkey appear on colonial Maryland sites. The most distant and exotic of these artifacts are rare Chinese porcelain vessels. The desire for tobacco and the excellent waterways of the Chesapeake directly linked Maryland colonists to the wharves of London or Amsterdam and from there, to the wider world.

As tobacco became more available, this had a notable effect upon how people smoked. Clay tobacco pipes found archaeologically appear to evidence this change. Pipes were originally copied from Native American examples and made in Europe using molds and white clay. These English and Dutch pipes were then shipped to the Chesapeake and elsewhere. The earliest pipes are tiny, reflecting tobacco's steep price. Smoking consisted of placing a small amount of tobacco in the small pipe bowl, lighting it and filling ones lungs with the smoke until the tobacco was totally consumed. This was called "drinking" tobacco. As the supply of tobacco increased, costs declined and smokers could afford to

burn it less carefully. They would load the bowl and smoke in a leisurely manner, as do pipe smokers today. This change is probably reflected by the gradual increase in pipe bowl sizes over the 1600s, physical evidence of the success of the Chesapeake tobacco industry.

Building a tobacco economy was not an easy task, however. Colonists lacked any agrarian traditions or knowledge of how to grow or process this new crop. When was the best time to transplant it from the seed beds? What type of soil made the finest tobacco? How could you tell when the crop ready for harvesting? What were the most effective ways to cure tobacco? How could it be shipped without spoilage? Answers to these and many other questions only came slowly through experience. For example, planters initially tried to cure the leaves by placing them under a layer of straw but soon discovered that air curing produced a far better product. At first, they air cured by removing the green leaves from the stems and hanging each leaf from a string. Such a laborious approach gave way by the 1670s to a method where a small peg was pushed through the stem of the intact plant and the peg then hung on a horizontal timber. Near the end of the 1600s, this method was made more efficient by hanging several tobacco plants from a single tobacco stick that pierced their stems. This same basic method is still used by Maryland tobacco farmers today. Experience also taught Maryland settlers how to grow tobacco more efficiently. This became a necessity as tobacco prices fell, because planters were forced to raise more plants to maintain their income. Historian Lois Carr estimates that in 1640s Maryland, a single worker could tend about 5000 plants. By the 1660s, improved methods resulted in that number climbing to over 7000 individual tobacco plants. Further advances during the last quarter of the 17th-century led to one person being expected to care for roughly 10,000 hills of tobacco. In part, this was achieved by working servants and enslaved Africans harder, but new methods and techniques were key.

Still another innovation from the tobacco economy was a new architectural form, the tobacco house. Originally, these were a barn-like building covered by clapboard and with horizontal poles added on the interior from which to hang the tobacco. By the early 18th-century, movable boards began being built into the sides to increase air flow and enhance curing. Such a form has long endured, for tobacco barns used in Southern Maryland today are quite similar in design to the colonial tobacco houses. Knowing how to grow and cure tobacco is thus the result of generations of experimenting, observing and learning about the needs of this demanding plant.

Tobacco determined the rhythm of life in early Maryland. Work began in February and March with the preparation of new land and planting beds. Using a Native America approach, trees were left standing but had their bark cut to kill them. After burning the land under these trees to remove leaves, limbs and other vegetation, a planter, their servants and later, enslaved Africans, broke up the soil with an iron hoe and worked the ash and charcoal into it as nutrients. Soil was then formed into small hills. In May or June, seedlings were transplanted to these hills. From then until harvest time in late August or September, workers had to regularly hoe weeds and pull tobacco worms from the leaves, remove the tops of plants to stop them from flowering, remove the bottom leaves and tear or cut suckers off the stems. The scale of this effort is indicated by the fact that each worker was expected to tend about 10,000 tobacco plants by the 1680s. Properly caring for the crop meant constant attention and backbreaking work six days a week during the heat of summer. The standard work day was at least 12 hours long. In late August, weather permitting, the tobacco was ready to harvest. Workers cut the plants at their bases, carried them into barns, and hung the tobacco to air cure. By November or early December, curing was finished and the tobacco was taken down, prepared and placed in large wooden barrels called hogsheads. This ended the yearly cycle and the planters eagerly awaited the arrival of the annual Tobacco Fleet from England, which brought new manufactured goods, foods and alcoholic beverages to exchange for the crop. December and January were times to celebrate and relax before beginning the cycle once again.

One problem with growing tobacco is that it rapidly depletes soil fertility and as a result, a piece of land could only be used for four or five years. Colonists lacked the means to fertilize the soil, and the few attempts to do so with animal manure reportedly produced a harsh, foul tasting tobacco. Instead, they adopted an approach from the Chesapeake Indians and abandoned the old fields for about 20 years. During that interval, nature restored soil fertility and tobacco could again be grown there. With this approach, new crop land had to be regularly prepared to keep a plantation operating. Historians estimate that about 50 acres were need to keep one worker continually raising tobacco. As a result, plantations tended to be large, averaging about 250 acres. This created a settlement pattern of farms widely dispersed over the landscape. Because most colonists lived along or near the water and the Chesapeake provided excellent water highways for ships, the planters had little need for markets or towns, since they could buy goods directly from ships. Only government business, such as courts, meetings of the legislature, etc. and the related need for inns and taverns produced urban places in the Chesapeake, primarily the colonial capitals of St. Mary's City, Jamestown, Annapolis and Williamsburg. Minimal town development is a highly distinctive feature of the colonial Chesapeake, a feature closely related to the focus on growing tobacco.

Relying upon tobacco as the engine of the Maryland economy caused other problems. Most serious was that the slightest change in tobacco prices in England or Europe directly impacted the colonists. Boom times and depressions occurred repeatedly during the 17th and 18th centuries. Depressions would produce modest efforts to diversify the economy but as soon as tobacco prices rose again, planters returned to "sotweed making". Only in the mid-18th-century did grain production begin to occur on a large scale. After the American Revolution, wheat and other grains became the major crops. This shift, along with greater industrial development and a much larger human population, finally resulted in the diversified economy that Lord Baltimore had urged 150 years earlier. Despite these changes, tobacco remained an important crop for Southern Maryland farmers and was still being grown at the end of the 20th century.

Since the founding of Maryland, tobacco has been important. It was the staple crop and economic foundation upon which the colony grew. Seventeenth-century Marylanders cultivated this plant for an export market that was becoming global in scope. It is remarkable that tobacco growing in Maryland in the year 2000 is still being exported internationally, and produced using many of the same methods developed here three centuries ago. Indeed, Southern Maryland is a location in which farmers have cultivated tobacco annually for over 360 years, perhaps the longest record of its production in the United States. Growing tobacco is a unique activity which still connects our distant past and contemporary world in important ways. While medical science has revealed the serious health problems associated with tobacco, there is no doubt that this crop built Maryland, greatly influenced the society that developed here, and is an undeniable part of the state's rich cultural heritage. It is also a cultural legacy that forms the very roots of Southern Maryland's extraordinary human traditions.