

St. John's Site

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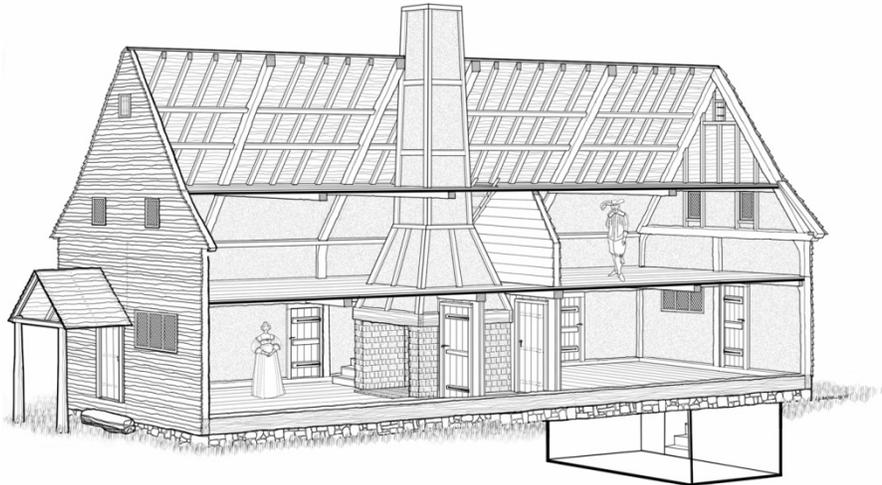
In 1638, Maryland's first government administrator, John Lewger, built a new house at St. Mary's City on a tract he named St. John's. The Lewger home became the busy center of one of the earliest tobacco plantations in the colony, the place the Assembly repeatedly met, and the location where Maryland's official records were kept. While the legislature met there in 1642, a freedman named Mathias de Sousa served in the Assembly. He is the first person of African descent to vote in an American legislature. Six years later, Margaret Brent attended another meeting at St. John's and requested the right to vote. Although denied to her, she became the first woman in American to ask for "voyce and vote" in government. In the 1660s, St. John's became the home of Governor Charles Calvert, and during his occupation, Susquehannock Indian chiefs signed an important treaty there. Later, St. John's served as a public ordinary or inn, and records office. After witnessing over 75 years of Maryland's early history, St. John's finally succumb to decay and was abandoned around 1715.

Historic St. Mary's City began excavations at the tree-covered site in 1972 under the direction of Garry Wheeler Stone and the late Alexander H. Morrison II. Previously, in 1962, pioneer architectural historian H. Chandlee Forman located and did some test excavation on the site with a crew or volunteers. When the museum returned to the site a decade later, St. John's became the first 17th-century site to be intensively investigated using modern archaeological methods in Maryland. Archaeology continued from 1972 to 1976. Some sampling was conducted in the late 1980s. Another major phase of excavations occurred from 2000 to 2005, supervised by Ruth Mitchell and Henry Miller. These efforts produced an estimated 1.4 million artifacts, although substantial sections of the site still remain unexcavated. These comprise the first major 17th-century artifact collection dug from Maryland, and are allowing scholars to learn about life during that significant but poorly understood first century of settlement. Digging at St. John's revealed the remarkably well preserved cobblestone foundations of Lewger's 1638 house, the bases of two generations of central "H" shaped brick chimney with back to back hearths, and a unique stone-lined cellar.

This image shows the site in 1975.



Analysis indicates that Lewger built an English hall and parlor house at St. John' using an architectural style then popular in the East Anglia area of Britain. Called a Lobby Entrance house because the front door opened into a small waiting area from which doors led into the two ground floor rooms. Above were chambers reached by a stairway originally built next to the chimney stack. Lewger erected a story and a half house as shown in this illustration made by artist L. H. Barker.



Later in 1678, the ageing structure was subjected to much needed renovation. As part of the lease from Lord Baltimore, Innkeeper Henry Exon was to make a number of changes. One was to reroof the building with imported Dutch pantile. Another involved dismantling the original chimney and building a new and wider "H" plan brick stack build against the north wall of the house. Why move the stack northward? The purpose was to allow placement of a new stairway to the upper floor adjacent to the main entry door into the house. This would have made for easier access to the lodging spaces upstairs for patrons of the ordinary. The overall history and the initial analysis of the house architecture was developed in a doctoral dissertation by Garry Wheeler Stone ([See PDF here](#))

Exon also repaired the old outside kitchen, tearing down its wattle and daub chimney and built a new one of brick on the north gable of that structure. He also replaced the wooden piers that supported the sill and walls of the building. Archaeologists found the bottom course of brick of this chimney and the holes where the wooden blocks had been placed.





A view of what the kitchen may have looked like after Exon's repairs is seen here, as painted by L. H. Barker working with the HSMC archaeologists.

Exon was to make other repairs to outbuildings, the many fences and the site and replant portions of the orchard. His renovations and repairs were key in allowing the building's life to be extended into the first years of the 18th century.

Excavations at St. John's also led to the first discovery of the colonial earthfast architecture in the upper Chesapeake. Subsequent excavations have shown that the vast majority of the structures in 17th-century Maryland and Virginia were of this earthfast type, built on wooden posts. This building was a 20 by 40 foot structure probably built in the early 1650s by Dutch merchant Simon Overzee as a storehouse. Later it was converted into a dwelling space and is called the Quarter. The structure was built with stout wooden posts set in deep postholes and the smaller studs that supported the walls were set directly into shallow postholes; the building had no sills. A wattle and daub chimney was later added to the south gable of the building for heating. This image shows the archaeological evidence of the north end of the building with the large structural post holes of rectangular shape and with an orange tinted fill and the smaller dark brown stud posts running every 2½ feet in between.



The quarter was a typical Chesapeake building with its walls and roof made of split oak strips called clapboard. It probably stood until the end of the 17th century. An artist's conjectural painting of this building by L.H. Barker is seen here as it may have appeared in the 1670s

Finding long vanished buildings is one valuable aspect of archaeology. However, these structures were not isolated, but surrounded by yards and integrated into landscapes of human creation. To find out about the yards, pioneering efforts were made at St. John's by Stone to carefully excavate and date the traces of various fences at the site. Other insights came from innovative research by Robert Keeler to map artifact concentrations and tell where dumps or doorways once existed. Keeler and John Foss also produced the first maps of soil chemical distributions over a colonial site in America. Study of animal remains recovered from various features by Henry Miller yielded the first archaeological insights regarding the changing colonial meat diet and the environment of early Maryland. This effort continued with the first ecological analysis of oyster shells from a Chesapeake site by Brett Kent. Ceramics found at the site guided the development of a new analytic tool, the POTS typology system, for vesselizing and comparing early colonial pottery from different sites. St. John's is a remarkable archaeological site. It has changed our understanding of Lord Baltimore's colony and served as an important testing ground for the application of scientific methods to colonial archaeological sites. Ongoing analysis of the materials recovered during the 2001-2005 excavations continues to yield new insights about this major 17th-century site.

Due to its high degree of preservation, very significant history and rich archaeological findings, the question of how to tell the story of St. John's was of concern to HSMC archaeologists from the mid-1970s. The main house remains were covered by a fiberglass A-frame in 1976 so that the central element of this site could be viewed by the public. Over thirty years later, in 2008, a major new museum building over the site was opened. Unlike traditional museums, the one at St. John's makes the archaeological remains of the manor house and a nearby kitchen the central focus of the exhibit. The original 1630s foundations, chimney, and cellar are fully exposed to view. To show what the house these foundations once supported probably looked like, the west gable of the house is fully reconstructed, resting over the original foundation.



Artifacts are displayed throughout the exhibit, and supplemented with audio-visual programs and computer interactives. Other exhibits tell of the main householders at the site and their families, major events that occurred at St. John's and the legacies this site and early Maryland hold for people today. All are within a modern building that uses materials sympathetic to the original ones, including a new pantile roof. This structure follows the shape of the original house but is slightly larger to protect the archaeology of the house. The analogy used during design for the exhibit was of a priceless violin (the site) enclosed by its protective case (the new building). We want visitors to see all the real remains of the building, touch a piece of the carved stone from the cellar wall or one of the original Dutch tile placed on the roof in 1678. Through this experience, our hope is that the public are brought into direct contact with the traces of the past and learn some of the fascinating stories about life in 17th-century America. And with over half of the site still preserved, future archaeologists can return to St. John's and explore their own new questions about early Maryland.



Exterior View of St. Johns exhibit building