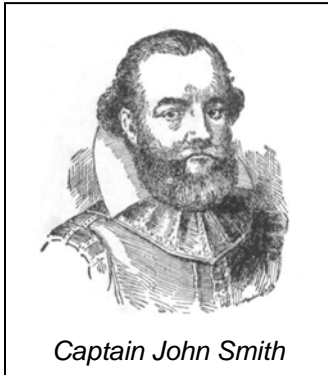


History of Somerset County

"Old Somerset," as its natives know it, is located on the southern most portion of Maryland's Eastern Shore. Lord Baltimore issued a proclamation on August 22, 1666 for the creation of Somerset County through his Governor, Charles Calvert. Somerset County was named in honor of Lord Baltimore's sister-in-law, Mary Somerset. At the time of its creation, Somerset County included what are now Worcester, Wicomico, and Somerset Counties in Maryland and a portion of Accomac County in Virginia.



Giavanni de Verazano



Captain John Smith

Somerset County was first sighted by explorer John Calvert in 1498, and later explored by Giavanni de Verazano in 1524, Sir Bartholomew Gilbert, in 1603, Captain Christopher Newport, in 1607, and Captain John Smith in 1608.

It took many years after this in order for people to settle on the land, later to be named Somerset County. The first record of white settlers was in 1620. County court records show that John Westlock admitted to trading with the Indians in what is now known as Stewart's Neck. In 1622, there were reportedly one hundred settlers in Somerset County.

The settlers grew corn and tobacco. Tobacco and beaver skins were used in place of their currency.

The settlement of Somerset County was very quick. There were two main reasons for this: location and the toleration of diverse Christian religious sects, as called for by the Religious Toleration Act of 1649. Quakers from Virginia, who were denied their religious freedom, quickly fled across the state line into Somerset County.

The location of Somerset County provided food and jobs for the settlers just as it does today. The water of the area, including the Chesapeake Bay, has always been a major influence on the lives of the people. The water also provided major business opportunities such as fishing, crabbing, oystering, and boat building.

In the colonial period, as was the case with most of the communities on the Delmarva Peninsula, the people of Somerset were isolated from the mainstream and therefore developed their own habits, customs, traditions, loyalties and a great deal of self-sufficiency which may still be seen today.

Princess Anne, the county seat since 1744, retains much of the 18th century flavor of its early years. A post town, incorporated in 1733 and named after the 24-year old daughter of King George II, Princess Anne is the site of many historical Episcopal Churches. The Samuel



The town of Princess Anne was established in 1733 by an act of Maryland's General Assembly. It was named in honor of the daughter of the British King George II.

Chase House, built in 1713, was the birthplace of this signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The Teackle Mansion, a pink brick Scottish-style manor house, was built in 1801 by Littleton Dennis Teackle, a prominent yet overly ambitious business entrepreneur who represented Somerset County for many years in the Maryland Assembly. The Boxwood Gardens, planted in 1842 by General George Handy, border Somerset Avenue, one of the main streets in the town. During Olde Princess Anne Days, the second weekend in October every year, historic homes, churches and the Boxwood Gardens are open to the public. Candlelight walking tours and other special events help to recreate the elegance of bygone days.

About fifteen miles southwest of Princess Anne is one of the oldest residences in the United States, Makepeace. Built in 1687 in the Crisfield area, Makepeace is still used as a family home today. The city of Crisfield, which had its origins in a settlement of Benjamin Somers in 1866, in a sheltered cove of the Tangier Sound, today looks like the 19th century bay port that it was in the period of its most rapid growth.

"Chesapeake" in the Native American dialects indigenous to the area translated roughly to "Sea of Fishes." The Bay's incredible wealth of seafood had long dictated the character of Crisfield. Early Native Americans collected the abundant oysters with wooden tongs and dried their catch to use in trade with inland tribes. The white settlers gradually built up a network of fishing shacks and piers over the waters of Somers Cove, as the fishing community was then known. Centuries of dumping oyster shells in the marsh caused new land to form. The J. Millard Tawes Museum, down near the present day docks, has a glass plate set in the floor to reveal these oyster shell underpinnings.

Oysters became "big business" with the advent of the New England oyster dredges around 1840. The dredges could scoop up much larger hauls making them more efficient than the old hand tongs. New sailing crafts, the "bugeye" and the "skipjack" which could carry the extra weight of the dredges, replaced old log canoes. The extension of the railroad in 1866, Ward's Crossing, to one mile north of the piers, opened still wider markets.

Somers Cove was renamed for the man, John W. Crisfield, who was responsible for the coming of the railroad. The first packing house opened in 1875, and the steamers began to call regularly at the Crisfield wharf to take on lumber and farm products.

The vigor of the old bay port and its debt to the Bay are memorialized each summer by the J. Millard Tawes Crab & Clam Bake in July, and by the Hard Crab Derby on Labor Day weekend. Labor Day itself is reserved for the annual Skipjack Races of Deal Island between the dozen or so remaining members of the old oyster dredging fleet. The Skipjack is the Maryland State Boat.

