

## THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER SEVERN

By Bryan Jerrard

Gloucestershire has its own share in the distribution of English place-names in colonial America - especially along the eastern seaboard. There are examples of Gloucester County, of Gloucester itself, of Berkeley, a famous and beautiful plantation house and settlement in Virginia, and of Arlington, in Bibury, the name given by Gloucestershire settlers to land now well known as the present site of the national cemetery outside Washington D.C., in north Virginia.

The new country's capital city was built partly on land donated to the nation by Maryland after independence in 1783. This brief essay concerns land, trade, politics and religious aspects of Maryland's early history culminating in the Battle of the River Severn in 1655.

### THE FOUNDATION OF MARYLAND

The founding father of Maryland was George Calvert of Kiplin Hall, Yorkshire who was born in 1580 and left Oxford University in 1597. He became Sir George in 1617 and Lord Baltimore of Longford County, Ireland, in 1625. He served as secretary to Sir Robert Cecil, whose family had been connected to Maisemore Court in earlier times (Gloucestershire History, 1998, pp.8-9). Calvert served as a clerk of the Privy Council and as an MP for 15 years until 1624. During this time he was one of the principal secretaries of state - when this office was of less significance than later - and became an active Roman Catholic, his family's tradition. His interest in colonial ventures led him to become a member of the Virginia Company from 1609 to 1620, to venture to that colony (where his religion made him unwelcome) and to visit and buy land in Newfoundland in the 1620s. With James I's support he encouraged others to settle there.<sup>1</sup>

Finding the winters very harsh and with only a short season for farming, Baltimore petitioned Charles I to found a proprietary colony where Catholics would be especially welcome on the colonial mainland, between Puritan New England and predominantly Anglican Virginia. Problems over the precise boundary of 'Mariland in memory and honor of the Queene' (Henrietta Maria) meant that it was the fourth proposed charter that was finally acceptable to the crown in 1632 and signed, after his father's death, by Cecil Calvert, 2nd Lord Baltimore.

The land grant, of some 16 to 20 million acres (6.6



Queen Henrietta Maria

to 8.8m ha), allowed settlement and expansion on the peninsula and mainland surrounding Chesapeake Bay along the 40th parallel and to the south as far as the River 'Puttomack's' south bank, still the boundary between Maryland and Virginia. Two Indian arrows were the annual payment to the crown at Windsor.

The grant amounted to the establishment of a unique colony in the New World, 'of a society and religion which were being rapidly effaced in the mother country'.<sup>2</sup> The proprietor had feudal rights over manors and manorial courts and writs ran in his name and not in that of the king. There were, however, provisions for a representative form of government through an assembly of all freemen and for a small council to support the Governor. Good relations with the Indians were planned, as was religious toleration. A London pamphlet, published in February 1633, advertised the attractions of Maryland. 'The Land is excellent for Beanes, Pease, and all manner of pults (pulses) and rootes; pease in ten days rise to 14 inches high. The corne is very plentiful in each of three Harvests in the same year ...yielding ...in the better years fifteene or sixteene hundred for one...'<sup>3</sup> Baltimore's aim was to show the importance of subsistence farming first and thus obviate the 'starving time' experienced by the initial settlers in

Virginia to the south.

Leonard, Cecil Calvert's brother, set off as the colony's Governor from Gravesend with the Ark and the Dove and 128 settlers including two Jesuits. Cecil interviewed the settlers first. The two ships then picked up en route another 72 venturers and sailed from Cowes on 22 November, 1633 'with a gentle east wind blowing', according to Father White's memoirs. Maryland was founded in 1634.<sup>4</sup>

### PROBLEMS AHEAD

From the start, one major problem was religion. Virginians, especially the Quaker and Puritan settlers there, resented the establishment of a Catholic haven on their doorstep, a niche in English Protestant America where the Catholic Church established its first ecclesiastical presence. The Calendar of State Papers, Colonial, 1574-1650, records the crown's congratulations to the Governor of Virginia, Sir John Harvey, on his initial welcome to the establishment of Maryland. Although Virginians provisioned the first settlers, the Virginian Council was strongly averse to the plantation even before settlement began. They petitioned the crown in the spring of 1633 and objected twice in 1634 and again in 1635.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting that the founders of the new colony were the first to establish a series of acts granting religious toleration to all Christian faiths by 1649 and were a generation ahead of the mother country in this respect.

Another problem was trade rivalry. Virginian planters were enjoying a monopoly of tobacco exports to the English market and, via England, to Europe. As is well known, great efforts were made by the authorities to suppress Gloucestershire tobacco farmers in this period to safeguard the colonists' monopoly. Petitions to the crown and to Cromwell came from the colonies regarding this issue, mentioning in 1655 'rebellious persons about Winchcomb, Cheltenham and places adjacent, (who) still continue...planting tobacco,...that rebellious crew'.<sup>6</sup>

Maryland settlers established small farms often with indentured servants who had migrated and, as a cash crop, started to grow tobacco themselves at a time when the local price had fallen to barely 1d. (1/2p) a lb (.5 kilo). Planters needed six times that price for an economic return.<sup>7</sup> In Maryland tobacco, once cured, was exported in large barrels down riverine channels to traders and it soon became a medium of exchange and value. For example, by 1639 inventories were valued there in pounds of tobacco: '2 pistols, 40 lbs. (18 kilos), 1 cote and suit, 100 lbs. (45 kilos), four breeding sows, 600 lbs.' and 'One

servant, Samuel Barrett, 800 lbs'.<sup>8</sup>

Other problems were also significant in the early days of the colony. In an inhospitable climate, dysentery and malaria proved to be debilitating diseases which resulted in many early deaths - and widows and orphans were left bereft. Indeed, the safeguarding of the interests of orphans became so pressing that a permanent Orphans' Court was set up in 1654 to oversee their interests.<sup>9</sup> Besides, the early demise of substantial colonial men left a poverty of personnel 'of Estate and Ability' to provide political acceptability and stability on the Governor's council, set up in 1637.

At first, Cecil Calvert recruited almost exclusively Catholics to the council but in the 1640s, as Protestants came to comprise a larger and more significant proportion of the settlers and as religious struggles on both sides of the Atlantic intensified, Catholics were dismissed from the council and Protestants commissioned to replace them to strengthen the political hands of the Governor. A rapid turnover of membership, rivalries and dissension followed Governor Leonard Calvert's return to England in 1643 for two years and after his death in 1647.

New appointments were begun in earnest in 1649. Some were enticed by generous land grants to migrate to Maryland and to serve on the council. Among these was the Protestant William Stone, from an important London mercantile family, as the new Governor of the colony in 1649.<sup>10</sup>

### TERRITORIAL PROBLEMS

Over and above the difficulties of religion, trade and politics the major problem was that part of the Baltimore's fiefdom included land apparently granted to Virginians in the south of Maryland and especially the Isle of Kent in Chesapeake Bay,



Portrait of Augustan Herman engraved on his 1673 map of north Chesapaka Bay area of Maryland. Kent Island is identified and the River Severn flows east through Anne Arundel County.

actually settled by Virginians. Lord Baltimore's original warrants or copies have disappeared since their sale at Sothebys in 1929.

The Virginians had a good case. Their 1606 charter incorporated two Virginia companies, one for London and one for Plymouth. The London company was allowed to settle as far north as the 41st latitude and the Plymouth company as far as the 45th latitude. These geographical margins obtained after 1609 when the company was re-chartered as a joint stock company, the Virginia Company.<sup>11</sup> Lord Baltimore petitioned the king in May 1637 showing that the tract of land adjoining Virginia had, in fact, been granted to him in 1632.

Besides, the Virginians in November 1633 and again in November 1634 objected that their 'costly effort to settle the Isle of Kent in Chesapeake Bay... has since been comprehended in Lord Baltimore's patent'.<sup>12</sup> The island may be seen on the map where the dots represent plantations throughout the colony. William Claibourne objected to Baltimore's grant of Kent Island.<sup>13</sup> He was the surveyor appointed in 1621 to oversee grants to colonies by the Land Commission for Regulating Plantations, an executive body entrusted by the crown with extensive jurisdictional rights. (Incidentally, it was Claibourne who had surveyed the Virginian Berkeley Town or Hundred, associated with Gloucestershire entrepreneurs - including John Smith of Nibley, Richard Berkeley, Sir William Throckmorton and George Thorpe.)

Throughout this period Charles I consistently supported Baltimore and Maryland's case against the Virginians in the Privy Council itself, and in directions to the Commissioners for Foreign Plantations and the Committee for Trade and Plantations of the Privy Council (the predecessor of the Board of Trade in 1696.) The Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, called for all the papers on the issue in 1653 and commended in January 1654 'peace, love and the great interest of religion' as the way forward.<sup>14</sup>

## CONFLICT

Cromwell's way forward had already been long overtaken by events.

First, a Protestant group twice invaded Kent Island and created an informal assembly there as early as 1638, pressing their claim to give or withhold consent to laws made by the proprietor. This was a natural move by the progressives, aiming at political control of the disputed island and exercising their dislike of the Catholic hegemony.<sup>15</sup>

Second, it is likely that the grand style of the Governor's Castle, built in 1639 in the small capital town St Mary's, symbolised for some the power of the proprietor and the small but growing group of Catholic families in the first twenty years of the colony's development. Much of this settlement was along river estuaries round the Bay itself. Maryland's population reached some 8,400 by 1660; Virginia's was about 24,000.

Third, these years saw a significant increase in the number of Puritans and Quakers settling in Maryland, often harried by demands for allegiance to the Church of England by Virginia's Governor, William Berkeley. Maryland offered religious toleration. Some Puritans from the James River in Virginia landed in 1649 on the north side of the mouth of the River Severn to establish Providence, the first settlement in that part of Maryland, named in 1650 'Anne Arundel County' after the wife of Cecil Calvert.



Anna Arundell, wife of Cecil Calvert, second Lord Baltimore  
(Note the second 'L' was soon dropped.)

Local records show Providence was sometimes called 'Severn' or 'The Town of Severn': it is now the site of the American Navy's Golf Course and a Primary School.

During the English Civil Wars some 300 Puritans left Royalist Virginia in one move, uncomfortably viewed there by loyalists as enemies of the colonial establishment.<sup>16</sup> Their growing discontent with the Catholic influence in the Baltimore's fiefdom came to a head at the River Severn in 1655.

The River Severn, spelt in a variety of eight ways between 1666 and 1801, rises within Maryland and is about 15 miles long and over a mile wide before it debouches into Chesapeake Bay. These days the Department of Natural Resources of the State of Maryland, the City of Annapolis, Federal Agencies

and the Severn River Association work together to conserve the river and its environs for the education and enjoyment of a growing population. On its southern bank, near the Bay, one residential area commemorates its link with the river - Severna Park. Locals believe the river was named after the Gloucestershire river though it is remotely possible that a ship's captain named John Severn, who sailed in the area from the 1630s to the 1650s, gave his name to this American river.<sup>17</sup>



The River Severn Watershed. Spa Creek is to the west of the starred circle which represents Annapolis.

## THE BATTLE

The background to the conflict involved Governor William Stone's request to the elders in Providence to negotiate a treaty with the Susquehannocks, an Indian tribe who were naturally belligerent - the settlers were taking their hunting grounds. A peace treaty was signed with them in July 1652 ' at the river of Severn '. Stone soon asked for Puritan military support to defeat the same Indians on Kent Island and they refused because of the recently signed treaty but offered to negotiate a peace. Stone was outraged and ordered the Providence settlers to swear allegiance to Lord Baltimore in 1653. They again refused and some marched on the government at St Mary's. Stone's fury came to a head in Spring 1655. The Puritans heard that Stone was sailing towards them. They commandeered a boat, the Golden Lyon, and mustered some 100 men under Captain Fuller.

Stone sailed up the Severn River with 12 boats and 250 men. On the afternoon of March 24, 1655 Stone's forces were bombarded from the Golden Lyon which trapped Stone's vessels in the nearby Spa Creek, at Horn's Point. The Puritans crossed the river and marched their small army against Stone, who opened fire first, killing one man. The Puritans then retaliated, lost some six men and accounted for 50 of Stone's men, dead or injured. Stone barely escaped with his life and was captured. The Puritan Council met the next day and condemned to death most of the enemy force but only three of the many prisoners were executed by the victorious Puritans in a conflict that is reminiscent of descriptions of men and arms in Gloucestershire's Men and Armour.

This was the Battle of the River Severn.<sup>18</sup> As a result the local, colonial government was

overthrown. The Governor's defeat meant that power was lost by the Calverts. A Protestant supremacy in the colony lasted for three years when one of the two Parliamentary Commissioners appointed to be in charge of the colony was William Claibourne. Oliver Cromwell restored Maryland to the Calverts in 1658, a move that was confirmed in 1660.

## References

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13. Andrews, Vol.1, p.413.
14. *CSP,C.* Dec.1653, Jan.1654.
15. McFarlane, *op. cit.*, p.72.
16. Clifford Dowdey, *The Great Plantation, A Profile of Berkeley Hundred and Plantation, Virginia, from Jamestown to Appomattox*, pp.59-60, 1988, Berkeley Plantation, Virginia.
17. *CSP,C.* On 14 April, 1634 the *Calendar* refers to Capt. John Severn, master of a London ship, *The William*, sailing with tobacco and in June, 1643, as captain of *The Elias*, he was entrusted by the government to ' take ships in the American seas.' In 1656 he signed a bond to take military supplies from New England to Jamaica.
18. I am very grateful for details of the Battle of the River Severn to James Martin, Past President of the River Severn Association for pointing me to Steve Carr's article on the battle in *The Severn River Log* of August 1998. James Martin has also donated other copies of the monthly *The Severn River Log*, a copy of *Maryland Scenic Rivers: The Severn* and a 345 page documentation, *Gems of the Severn*, comprising a classic planning and implementation analysis of the 70 square miles of the River Severn watershed. These texts have been donated to the County library, Gloucester. Harold J. Counihan *History of Anne Arundel County, Annapolis*, nd.

## Illustrations

The 1673 map of North Chesapeake Bay area is based on p.189 of James Truslow Adams *Album of American History, Vol.1*, reproduced by kind permission of Macmillan publishing, 1633 Broadway, New York, USA.

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