

Understanding Maryland Day

By Jean Russo, Ph.D.

Maryland Day celebrates an event that took place 375 years ago. How do we know today what happened on the 25th of March in 1634? And how do we assess the significance of what occurred on that day?

March 1634 is when the first two ships sent by Lord Baltimore arrived in the waters of the Potomac River, the boundary between his new colony of Maryland and land previously granted to Virginia. The passengers traveling on the *Ark* included Father Andrew White, one of the Jesuit priests who made up the first group of colonists. All of our knowledge of the voyage of the two ships and the first weeks after their arrival in Maryland comes from accounts written by Father White or drawing upon his narrative.

Having Father White's journal should make the task of knowing about and understanding the significance of the event we now call Maryland Day easier, but in fact it complicates the effort because there are at least three versions of the journal. Father White wrote two of them himself. In April 1634 he penned an account that Leonard Calvert, brother of Lord Baltimore and governor of the colony, sent to England to Sir Richard Lechford, his business partner, in May 1634. That account, "[A Briefe Relation of the Voyage unto Maryland](#)", (hereafter White-April) is now part of the Calvert Papers collection at the Maryland Historical Society. The "Brief Relation" appears to have been abstracted from a longer account written in April 1634 in Latin that White sent via London to Rome. In May 1634, White completed an English version of this second account that he sent to Lord Baltimore, who had it published in late July or August as the pamphlet [A Relation of the Successful Beginnings of Lord Baltemore's Plantation in Mary-land](#) (hereafter White-May).

The other two accounts either draw upon White or cannot be positively identified as his work. [A Relation of Maryland](#) (hereafter Relation-1635), published in London in September 1635, was a promotional tract that set forth revised conditions of plantation designed to attract investors and settlers for the colony. Written by John Hammond and John Lewger, the first chapter of the work draws upon Father White's journal for its account of the voyage and initial settlement. The final narrative of the first voyage is described as "a contemporary office copy" of the Latin version of the journal that White sent to Rome.¹ As the original Latin version is lost, there is no way to determine the accuracy of the copy (hereafter Rome-Latin).

Although all four versions agree in the essential narrative of the voyage to the new world and settlement in Maryland, there are differences: omissions in one version, additions in another, discrepancies or ambiguities about dates, and, in particular, considerable variation in the description of the events that occurred on 25 March 1634. The last account, Rome-Latin, describes a more overtly religious ceremony than does any of the other accounts. This may be because the manuscript was intended for the Vatican, so that White did not have to fear the repercussions that might confront Lord Baltimore where he to supply the same account for an English, largely Protestant audience. It cannot be ruled out with certainty, however, that the copyist expanded upon White's briefer description based on his own assumptions of what might have occurred in Maryland. The audience who may have witnessed the occasion, after all, was also largely Protestant, and reports might have reached England by other means.

According to all of the accounts, the two ships carrying the Maryland settlers passed through Capes Henry and Charles to anchor off in the James River off Point Comfort so that they could call upon the Virginia colony for supplies and other assistance after the long passage from the Caribbean. After a brief stay, the colonists sailed up the Chesapeake Bay to the Potomac River, and then traveled an additional distance up river to a small group of islands where they dropped anchor for the first time in Maryland waters.

According to *White-May*, the ships, which arrived on the 27th of February, remained at Point Comfort for eight or nine days, and on the 3rd of March came into Chesapeake Bay "at the mouth of the Patomecke." *White-April* recounts that the two vessels arrived at Point Comfort on the 24th where they stayed until the 3rd

of March. At that time, they came back into the Bay and set sail for the Potomac River to the north.

Relation-1635 places the ships at Point Comfort from 24 February to 3 March, sailing for two days up the Bay, and arriving at the Potomac River on the 5th, having covered a distance of about 24 leagues (around 85 nautical miles). Finally, *Rome-Latin* sets the arrival date in Virginia as 27 February, with the ships again staying eight or nine days, entering the Bay on 3 March, and heading north for the Potomac River.

Why does the account of this part of the journey matter? Many of the explanations of Maryland Day describe it as the day that the first settlers “arrived in Maryland.” There is no way, however, that any of the four accounts can delay the arrival of the *Ark* and the *Dove* until the 25th of March or even a day or two before that. The most plausible interpretation of the ships’ progress must be that they arrived at Point Comfort on the 24th of February, stayed until the 3rd of March, sailed up the Bay over the next two days, and reached the Potomac about the 5th of March. The ships would have sailed with the tide as much as possible and anchored at night. The shallowness of the bay would have permitted this although perhaps not with much shelter for the vessels.

White-May goes on to recount that once in the Potomac, “we sailed some 20 leagues [too high an estimate; the distance is about 22 nautical miles] up the river to Herne Iland. . . . here we first came ashore.” In the White-April account, “Wee tooke land first in Saint Clements [the name given to one of the Heron Islands].” The version that went to Rome states that “We first left the ship at St. Clement’s Island.” *Relation-1635* comes closest to the distance covered (about 14 leagues) but says only that the ship “came to an Anchor under an Island neere unto [Heron Island], which they called S. Clements.” So whatever Maryland Day represents, it is not the day on which “Marylanders celebrate . . . the arrival of the first colonists to the land King Charles I of England chartered to Lord Baltimore in 1634.”² That day would have been around the 6th or 7th of March.

Three of the accounts make it clear that almost the first thing the travelers did once they had anchored off St. Clement’s Island was to send the women servants among the ship’s company ashore with the laundry so that everyone (or perhaps just the “Adventurers,” as the investors in the enterprise were known) would have clean linen (undergarments: shirts for the men, shifts for the women). “Saint Clements . . . is compared about with a shallow water, and admitts no accesse without wading; here, by the overturning of the Shallop [a small boat, returning from the island], the maids which had beene washing at the land, were almost drowned, beside the losse of much linnen, and amongst the rest I [Father White] lost the best of mine, which is a very maine losse in these parts.” Father White would have to wait until the arrival of the next ship from England to replace the garments he lost with anything of comparable quality. The three narratives associated with White include the story of losing the linen. It is missing from only the Hammond-Lewger account (*Relation-1635*), where it is not relevant to the larger purpose of the pamphlet.

What the Hammond-Lewger account does say, immediately after relating that the ships anchored off St. Clements, is that the island was the place “Where they set up a Crosse, and tooke possession of this Countrey for our Saviour, and for our Sovereigne Lord the King of England.” Only in this one version, then, does the ceremony associated with Maryland Day take place immediately upon going ashore. It is also the one account not written at all or in part by a participant in the events. At the same time, the only activities reported in this version are erecting a cross – an action that by itself would not have offended Anglicans, but no mention of a mass or other observances – and claiming the land for God and King – but not for Lord Baltimore, who was the individual actually acquiring the seven million or so acres of land that Maryland encompassed.

In the three narratives written by White (subject to any changes in the copied version in Rome), some portion of the leadership of the settlers next explored the island. Judging it to be no more than four hundred acres, they considered it too small for their settlement but selected it as a place to build a fort “to keep the river from forraigne trade.”³ Only at this point do these three narratives then describe the events associated with Maryland Day.

“A Briefe Account” (White-May) says only that “in this place on our b:[lessed] Ladies day in lent [25 March],

we first offered [possibly a mass, perhaps only prayers], erected a crosse, and with devotion tooke solemne possession of the Country.” The longer version (White-April) expands considerably upon the account (but does not mention any date):

Heere wee went to a place, where a large tree was made into a Crosse; and taking it on our shoulders, wee carried it to the place appointed for it. The Governor and Commissioners putting their hands first unto it, then the rest of the chiefest adventurers. At the place prepared wee all kneeled downe, and said certain Prayers [again, possibly a mass]; taking possession of this Countrey for our Saviour; and for our soveraigne Lord the King of England.

From the Latin text, of which the White-April account is supposed to be White’s own translation, the editors provide the following English version:

On the day of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Virgin Mary we celebrated mass for the first time in this island; this had never been done before in this region of the world. When mass was over, we took an enormous cross, which we had hewn out of a tree, on our shoulders, proceeded in rank to a designated place and, with the help of the governor, his associates, and the remaining Catholics [a distinction neither of White’s original narratives mentions; this would have been a small minority of the entire company – were they the only ones ashore at this point?], erected a monument to Christ, our Savior, while we humbly recited the Litany of the Holy Cross on bended knee, with much emotion.

Both White-May and Rome-Latin place the erection of the cross and the prayers offered as occurring on the 25th of March, which was the Feast of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, a day of great significance in the liturgical calendar, particularly in a colony named Mary-land whose proprietor was a Roman Catholic. Neither account states directly, though, that the ceremony took place immediately after the events described in the preceding section of the narrative. It seems likely that White inserted at this point in his account – to emphasize the significant ceremony of taking possession of the colony – something that did not in fact occur until the 25th of March, nearly three weeks after the colonists’ arrival in Maryland (see below). This is a much more likely explanation than the narrative that would have to be constructed to account for the time that elapsed between the entrance of the two ships into the Potomac River on the 3rd of March and the events of the 25th, if the ceremony immediately followed the arrival off St. Clements (once the laundry was done).

White does account for this interlude in the next section of his journal, following his description of the prayers at the cross, with two concurrent stories. Leonard Calvert traveled up the Potomac River with a small party to meet with the leader of the Piscataway Indians to explain “the cause of our comming.” While Calvert was away, the rest of the company maintained a “Court of guard . . . night and day upon St. Clements Ile: partly to defend our Barge, which was brought in pieces out of England and there made up, and partly to defend the Captaines men, which were employed in felling of trees, and cleaning pales for the pallizado” – in other words, building the fort that would protect the river from foreign trade.⁴

After Calvert finished meeting with the Piscataway, he traveled back down the river, but at this point events again become somewhat murky. Both White-April and White-May state that the governor having returned, “wee” – presumably the two ships and most or all of the colonists (some might have been left to work on the fort) – continued further down the Potomac to the river they named St. George’s where they negotiated with a local chief to purchase land for the settlement they named St. Mary’s. Relation-1635, however, recounts a slightly different set of events. Calvert returns to St. Clement’s Island and, having decided to settle closer to the mouth of the Potomac, takes the assembled barge – better suited for exploring smaller rivers and creeks – to look for a suitable place to establish the colony. Once he had reached an agreement with the Yoacomacoes, Calvert sent for the *Ark* and the *Dove* to bring the rest of the settlers, and “the Governour tooke possession of the place” on the 27th of March.

If we begin with the premise that the ceremony on St. Clement’s took place on the 25th of March, then the simplest account of the events that occurred between the 5th of March and the 27th of March would be as

follows. The two ships sailed up the Potomac River and anchored off St. Clement's Island on the 6th or 7th. Leonard Calvert, accompanied by some portion of the council and an interpreter, traveled up the river to meet with the Piscataway leader while the men left behind assembled the barge and began to build the fort. When Calvert returned from his trip up the river, he brought back the consent of the Piscataway "Emperour" "to us to sett downe where we pleased." At this time, on the 25th of March, some portion of the company erected a cross and took possession of the territory granted to Lord Baltimore in the name of God and of the King of England. The occasion included prayers that most likely consisted, at a minimum, of a mass to underscore the importance of the ceremony and the day. The two accounts sent privately to England contain circumspect references to prayers, while the Relation, which was publicly available in England, mentioned only the cross. The longer narrative sent in Latin to Rome, however, includes a fuller recounting of the religious aspects of the first weeks: the presence of another of the Jesuits, Father Altham, in the party that accompanied Calvert to the Piscataway town and "who explained through an interpreter some of things about the errors of the pagans." The interpreter being a Protestant, Altham could not go into further detail at the time but promised to return soon for that purpose. And it is this version that explicitly describes the celebration of mass and a recital of the stations of the cross by the Catholics among the party. None of the accounts make any mention of it, but it is also possible that the day's events included a public reading of the charter granted by Charles I to Cecilius Calvert, second Lord Baltimore. The charter granted Baltimore not only the territory that was his personal property as Lord Proprietor but also the authority by which he ruled the colony, describing both the powers granted to him and the limits on those powers imposed by the rights of Englishmen that applied even to those on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. It would have been a fitting way to mark the formal beginning of English settlement in the colony.

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1. Barbara Lawatsch-Boomgaarden, editor with Josef Ijsewijn, *Voyage to Maryland, 1633 – Relatio itineris in Marilandiam*, by Andrew White (Wauconda, Ill.: 1995), 16.
 2. "America's Story from America's Library" [of Congress], accessed 3/10/09 at http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb/colonial/maryland_1
 3. "A Briefe Relation"
 4. *A Relation of the Successfull Beginning...*