

KENT COUNTY

Perhaps the most complicated of the county histories is that of Kent County. Before the grant of Maryland to Lord Baltimore, Virginians under William Claiborne were licensed to trade on the shores of the Chesapeake by Charles I. Shortly after this license passed the privy seal and in the same year, 1631, a trading post was established on the Isle of Kent, which was subsequently stoutly defended by the Virginians against the claims of Lord Baltimore both in the courts and in the field. Legally the issue was settled in favor of Lord Baltimore by an order of the Committee of Trade and Plantation, April 4, 1638, but it was several years before he finally secured his claim to the Island. It was perhaps no more than a feint in this contest, but whatever the reason, in this same year, the Governor and Council of Maryland appointed a sheriff of the Isle of Kent and this date is, therefore, often taken as the beginning of Kent County. However, there is no evidence that county government began at this time, and more cautious historians have preferred the date August 2, 1642, when Commissioners were appointed for the Isle and County of Kent. There is a unanimity of feeling that the county court also began to function at this date, although no records earlier than 1648 have survived.

The Isle of Kent or Kent County presumably governed—however loosely—all the area now known as the Eastern Shore until the northern tip, now most of Cecil County, was joined to Baltimore County in 1659. With the creation of Talbot County in 1662, the governmental breakup of the Shore began in earnest, not to end until the middle of the nineteenth century with the creation of Wicomico, the ninth county formed from the original area of Kent. As fortune would have it, even the Island which gave the county its name was one of the first areas to be lost, going to Talbot and then to Queen Anne's. Kent County is now the second smallest in the State lying between the Chester and the Sassafras, the border of Delaware and the shore of Chesapeake Bay.¹

The First Courthouses, Kent Island

Before the erection of Kent County, there was of a certainty a Kent Hundred Court which began to function around 1639. This court is mentioned frequently in the earliest records of the General Assembly, but if there was a fixed place of meeting it is not noted.² According to some historians the place of meeting was old Kent Fort. Tradition has it further that this site soon became inconvenient for most of the inhabitants and the place of holding court was removed to Broad Creek, also in the southern part of the Island. After another short period, this site was also abandoned, and the court began meeting at private homes. At some time before 1674, the place of holding court was transferred from Kent Island to Eastern Neck Island at the home of Joseph Wickes, for in that year the Governor ordered "that the place for holding your County Court be in some part of the easterne neck and not upon the Island [meaning Eastern Neck Island] as formerly."³

¹ The clearest account of the establishment of Kent County is to be found in Mathews, *The Counties of Maryland*, 511-15.

² *Arch. of Md.*, I, *passim*.

³ *Arch. of Md.*, XV, 42. A good account of the peregrinations of the Kent County Court before the Chestertown period is to be found in Percy G. Skirven, "Old Court House, Chestertown," *The Patriotic Marylander*, III, 51-54.