

INTRODUCTION

When this work was undertaken some five years ago, we proposed to complete what the Historical Records Survey of the WPA had left undone in Maryland. This project, when it finally closed down, had published an *Inventory of the County Archives of Maryland* for seven counties. The remaining sixteen counties and Baltimore City had received some attention but not nearly enough to permit subsequent publication by the Hall of Records Commission. As time went on, the field notes which we as sponsor of the Project had inherited became useless, especially insofar as the location of historical records was concerned—this was due only in part to the transfer of records from the counties to the Hall of Records at Annapolis. In addition to the listing of records, the HRS described the functions of the recordkeeping officers, gave a short sketch of the history of the county and some notes on the county seats and courthouses.

It seemed to us that the county seats and courthouses were ill-treated in these books. Because I had edited the three earliest volumes, I knew why this was so; I knew how difficult it was to find the necessary information. I concluded, therefore, that an important additional service could be rendered to the citizens of Maryland if the county seats and courthouses, especially the courthouses—the setting for the records—could be compiled as introductory material to a catalogue of the records. Halfway through this task it became obvious that the introductory material had become too formidable for its original purpose and that there was no choice but to print it separately as a first volume of a two-volume work entitled *The County Courthouses and Records of Maryland*.

While the Hall of Records now has in its custody one of the finest collections of local records in the country at least for the earlier period, it soon became evident that other sources, mostly county, had to be found. The footnotes will indicate how diverse and how scattered these sources proved to be. And they were enormously mixed in quality because, with a few bright exceptions, Maryland has not been so fortunate as some other states in the number and quality of its local historians. Moreover, when most of our local histories were being written, few original records were available—although, to be sure, on other occasions records then in existence have now disappeared. In later years, most of our local historical writing had been unblinking borrowing from secondary sources. Few newspapers have been preserved, and when they are extant they are scattered through many depositories. Photographs of courthouses, even of those still standing or those only recently disappeared, were difficult to find. And finally, in this generation there was little interest in—perhaps because of little knowledge of—the courthouses.

Could it be that for this same reason all of the early courthouses have been so lightly discarded? Maryland, which suffered little by fire, war or flood or storm, has preserved only two courthouses of the eighteenth century, that of Queen Anne's County, dating from the last decade of that century, and one other at Easton, which is now encased in a Georgian structure of 1958; while Virginia, which has been ravaged by war, can still boast of a number of beautiful courthouses of the Colonial period.

Needless to say, there are still mysteries to be solved. Some counties because of their extreme antiquity, like Somerset, and their indecisive beginnings, are shorn of certain evidence;