

## The Maryland State Art Collection and The Commission on Artistic Property of the Maryland State Archives

The state of Maryland possesses one of the most historic collections of art in the nation. It dates from 1774 when the portrait of *William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*, was presented to the state by Charles Willson Peale. Maryland's collection has grown over the centuries with portraits of leaders of the state, history paintings, and important fine and decorative arts. In 1996, the state acquired the Peabody Art Collection from the Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, thus adding an invaluable collection of paintings, sculpture, and works on paper to the state's ownership.

Many of the most significant portraits in the collection are on public display in the Maryland State House, where they have been since the 18th century. The monumental portraits of *William Pitt* and *Washington, Lafayette, and Tilghman at Yorktown* were returned to the State House in 2014 when the restoration of the Old Senate Chamber was completed. Both paintings have been completely conserved and the portrait of William Pitt has been given a new, period-appropriate frame.

Maryland's art collection is overseen by the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property which is an entity of the Maryland State Archives.

The mission of the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property is to serve the public as the official custodian of the state-owned art collection, as well as fine and decorative arts owned by or loaned to the state. The collection is comprised of those works of art and decorative objects that document the history of Maryland through subject, maker, or provenance. The Commission endeavors to make the collection accessible to the public through preservation, conservation, display and interpretation. Totalling more than 4,000 items, the collection is rich in portraiture of Maryland governors, legislators, and other public officials, as well as people associated with Maryland government and history. The collection also contains exceptional examples of decorative arts, including furniture and silver.

### COVER IMAGE:

*William Pitt*

by Charles Willson Peale, 1768-1774

MSA SC 1545-1113

Collection of the Maryland State Archives

### PREPARED BY

The Friends of the Maryland State Archives

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The Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Maryland

and

The General Society of Colonial Wars

In honor of Jonathan Woodworth Pine, Jr.



The Society of Colonial Wars was founded in New York in 1892 for the purpose of furthering the interest in, and study of, America's colonial history for the period between the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia on May 13, 1607 and the battle of Lexington on April 19, 1775.

The Society continues its mission by collecting and preserving manuscripts, rolls, relics and records; erecting memorials; hosting commemorations; and supporting academic research for the purpose of inspiring in the community respect and reverence for those whose public service made our freedom and unity possible.

To accommodate a Society of national scope the General Society was established in 1893 to charter state societies. The members of the Society are male descendants of those in military, naval and civil positions of high trust and responsibility whose acts and counsel assisted in the establishment, defense and growth of the American colonies.

Jonathan Woodworth Pine, Jr. (1957-2013) was a highly skilled editor and writer. At the time of his death, he was lieutenant governor of the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Maryland and the editor of the "Warrior," the Society's annual publication.

*The Friends of the Maryland State Archives is a volunteer, non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the Maryland State Archives by furthering the knowledge and understanding of Maryland's rich history. An understanding of the past is vital to planning and preparing for the future. Promoting such insight and knowledge, especially through educational and outreach programs for students and teachers, is central to the work of the Friends. An important activity of the Friends is the publication of books and pamphlets relating to Maryland history and culture. The Friends of MSA website can be found at: <http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/homepage/html/friends.html>*

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*William Pitt*  
FIRST EARL OF CHATHAM  
Supporter and Friend of the American Colonies

The Old Senate Chamber of the Maryland State House

# William Pitt, The Great Commoner and Friend of the American Colonies

William Pitt was born in London in 1708 and educated at Eton and Oxford. As his older brother had inherited the family estate, William had to choose a profession so he joined the army in 1731. His army career only lasted until 1735 when he joined Parliament representing Old Sarum. Pitt had a long and distinguished career in Parliament, and served as prime minister from July 30, 1766 until October 14, 1768.



William Pitt  
by Richard Brampton, 1772  
National Portrait Gallery, London

generate revenue. He told his fellow members of Parliament: “The colonies... are equally entitled with yourselves, to all the natural rights of mankind, and peculiar privileges of Englishmen: equally bound by its laws, and equally participating of the Constitution of this free country.”

Throughout much of his life, beginning while he was at Oxford, Pitt was subject to recurring attacks of gout which became more severe as the years progressed. It was this illness that prevented him from sitting for the portrait by Charles Willson Peale in 1768.

In April 1778, Pitt suffered a stroke on the floor of the House of Lords and died on May 11. He had five children, one of whom also became prime minister and was known as William Pitt the Younger.

*Broadside* [n.d.]

by Charles Willson Peale  
Library of Congress

Pitt’s repeated refusal to accept an aristocratic title led to his being called the “Great Commoner.” However, in 1766, Pitt left the House of Commons and joined the House of Lords as Earl of Chatham. In the House of Lords, he was an active supporter of colonial rights and in 1766 demanded the repeal of the Stamp Act of 1765 in which Parliament taxed nearly every paper document passing through colonists’ hands, including newspapers, licenses, and even playing cards.

American colonists revered Pitt for his opposition to the Stamp Act. He believed that Parliament should pursue increased trade, not taxation, with colonists to



# The Two Portraits of William Pitt

The idea of a portrait of William Pitt originated with a group of gentlemen in Virginia who wished to honor the statesman who had so strongly supported the American colonies in Parliament.

Execution of the portrait was placed in the hands of Colonel Richard Henry Lee who contacted Benjamin West, an American painter in London. West, however, was reluctant to take on the commission as he did not wish to endanger his position with King George III who was very angry about the unrest in the American colonies. The commission eventually passed to Maryland artist Charles Willson Peale who was in London, studying with West and badly in need of income.

At the time, however, Pitt was very ill with gout and not accepting visitors of any kind. Peale, ever resourceful, heard that the sculptor, James Wilton, was preparing two life-size statues of Pitt for display in Charleston, South Carolina and New York. Wilton gave Peale permission to use the heads of the two statues as models for his portrait.

Peale’s next challenge was how to portray the great statesman. As Pitt was widely known as “The Great Commoner” Peale did not want to paint him in elaborate ceremonial robes. Instead, he chose to depict Pitt in classical dress, as Augustus talking to the Romans. Before the painting was complete, Peale decided to make a second, slightly larger version for the Virginia commission, which he sent to Colonel Lee in Virginia in 1769. With its unusual theme and rich symbolism, the painting was, at first, quite controversial.

When Peale returned to Annapolis in 1769, he brought his original, as yet incomplete, version of the portrait with him. As the new Maryland State House was under construction, he heard that the General Assembly was considering the commission of a statue of Pitt. Peale, instead, offered his painting as a gift to the state. It was accepted and the artist was granted an honorarium of £100. The portrait has been displayed in the State House continually since the building was completed in 1779.

The portrait originally hung in the Old Senate Chamber and was there when Congress met in Annapolis in 1783-84. It has, over the centuries, had several different locations within the State House. With the restoration of the Old Senate Chamber in 2014, this portrait was returned to its original, historic location over the fireplace in the chamber.



William Pitt (Lord Chatham)  
by Charles Willson Peale, 1768  
Westmoreland County Museum  
Montross, Virginia

# The Extraordinary Symbolism of the Portraits of William Pitt

Charles Willson Peale’s portraits of William Pitt have been called allegorical, as many of the details can be interpreted as republican symbols. Pitt appears not in the robes of an earl, but in a Roman toga, to associate the statesman with classical Roman heroes who would have worn similar attire.

There are many other republican symbols in the paintings, including:

- ❖ A copy of Magna Carta which Pitt holds in his left hand. American colonists looked to this document as a model for their own Declaration of Independence;
- ❖ A statue of British Liberty that Pitt points to with his right hand. This female figure holds a staff topped with the liberty cap of the ancient Romans. Ironically, she is trampling the petition against the Stamp Act drafted at the 1765 Congress at New York. For Peale, Liberty’s action signified that “States which enjoy the highest Degree of Liberty are apt to be oppressive of those who are subordinate;”
- ❖ Barely visible on the lower left side of the portrait is an American Indian with a dog at his side, showing the faithfulness and firmness of America;
- ❖ An altar with a perpetual flame, illustrating the sacred cause of liberty, features carved busts of two famous martyrs to the cause of liberty: John Hampden and Algernon Sidney;
- ❖ On the altar are the flame of liberty and a crown of laurel leaves;
- ❖ Behind Pitt is the Banqueting House of Whitehall, from which British King Charles I was led to his execution in 1649. This was meant as a warning about the fate of monarchs who violate the rights of free citizens;
- ❖ The cloudy sky recalls the troubled times in which Pitt lived.



Peale, a fervent supporter of republican values, drew many of these visual details from established symbolism created by Whig artists. They would have been recognizable to both English and American audiences.

## The Frame

For its reinstatement in the Old Senate Chamber, the portrait was reframed in a period-appropriate reproduction frame, the design of which was based on frames used on similar Peale portraits. The frame’s elaborate details were hand carved and then gilded, as they would have been in the 18th century. The new frame was designed and created by Gold Leaf Studios of Washington, DC.