

TOBACCO INSPECTION ACT

The welfare of the people of Maryland was largely dependent upon its principal industry, the raising and exporting of tobacco, the staple that was also its established currency. No legislation so much concerned all classes as did what was commonly known as the Tobacco Inspection act, a law which not only regulated in every detail the grading, storing, and shipping of this staple, but under the provisions of the same act, sought to prevent frauds in the collection of His Majesty's customs, and limited in terms of pounds of tobacco the amounts which all public officers might collect as fees, and also fixed the amount of the poll tax for the support of the clergy. Legislation covering these questions had been passed by the Assembly at various intervals for a great many years. When the 1763 Assembly met the business of the Province was still being conducted under the terms of the "act for amending the staple of tobacco, for preventing fraud from His Majesty's Customs, and for the limitation of officers fees", passed at the October–November, 1753, session, which had been extended at the December, 1758, session for another five years, to expire December 1, 1763.

Early in the 1763 session a bill was brought before the Lower House to further extend the act of 1753 and 1758. This chamber promptly passed, on October 7, 1763, the bill which had been brought in by Thomas Ringgold of Kent, and sent it to the Upper House (pp. 299-301), where it was as promptly rejected because it was felt that certain amendments were necessary. The Upper House suggested a conference between the two houses to consider these amendments (pp. 223-224); but the Lower House refused to enter into a conference at this stage, and suggested that the upper chamber first submit its proposed amendments in writing (p. 308). On October 18 the Upper House transmitted a long list of these proposed amendments (pp. 228-231), which the Lower House took up seriatim. Some of these which were unimportant and related to administrative details were objected to by the lower chamber as causing unnecessary trouble and expense to the small planter, and were not insisted upon by the Upper House. More strenuous objection was made, however, to what the Lower House thought was the desire of the upper chamber to have all Provincial administrative costs and officers' fees, chargeable against the public, made payable on the basis of pounds sterling instead of in pounds current, as provided for in the act about to expire, the Lower House declaring that there was hardly enough sterling in circulation to pay the Proprietary's quit-rents (pp. 333-338). The Upper House replied on August 28 that when it had changed "currency" to "sterling" throughout the bill, it was only with the intention to rate "dollars" at four shillings sixpence each, and to thus make them equivalent to sixty pounds of tobacco (i.e., nine-tenths of a penny a pound) in payment of officers' fees, and the poll tax of thirty pounds of tobacco for the support of the clergy. It should be explained that this new bill reduced the clergy poll tax from forty pounds of tobacco under the expiring act to thirty pounds under the new (pp. 238-240). The market value of tobacco at this date was in general rated as equivalent to a penny a pound.