

the said City there formerly built att the Cost and Charge of this province and in no other place of the said County whatsoever the same State house being hereby Allotted and appointed by this present Generall Assembly to the County of S^t Marys for holding and keeping their Courts in and such other decent Services as to the Justices of the same County in full Court shall be Consented and agreed to.”⁷

But after the lapse of only a very few years the same residents of St. Mary’s County and City who had tried to persuade the members of the General Assembly that St. Mary’s City—and not Annapolis—was the most convenient place in the Province for the holding of courts and for other governmental business, now argued that St. Mary’s City was not even a convenient place for the county seat of St. Mary’s County! We know that in 1697/8 the state house was still in use as the county courthouse,⁸ but sometime between that date and 1708 it ceased to serve that purpose.

First Courthouse at Shepherd’s Old Fields–Seymour Town

In an act of the November Session of 1708, the General Assembly notes that “the publick buildings and the Lands thereto belonging in the Town of S^t Maries in S^t Mary’s County are now diverted from the Use for which they were intended, therefore it is thought fitt the same be Sold and disposed of for the use of the publick.”⁹

In the same act, permission was granted for the selection of Shepherd’s Old Fields as the new site for the county seat, and commissioners were appointed to lay off a town and to erect the necessary buildings. And until the buildings were ready, the court could meet at the place of Thomas Cooper near the new town site. When the General Assembly convened for the October Session of 1710, this new wooden courthouse was finished and an act was passed authorizing the justices of the county to continue meeting at the new site, which was then already known as Seymour Town¹⁰ and which was later to become Leonardtown.¹¹ The justices were now absolved from the mandate of the Act of 1695 requiring them to meet forever afterward in the old state house at St. Mary’s City, and they were ordered to remove the records from that place to Seymour Town.

Second Courthouse at Seymour Town–Leonardtown

In 1736, the General Assembly empowered the justices of St. Mary’s County to replace the wooden courthouse which had fallen into disrepair, and to build a new courthouse and repository for the records; and the act further specified that the new building or buildings should be of brick.¹²

It seems that this courthouse of 1736 was extraordinarily sturdy for we hear of no complaint for almost a hundred years. It must have been large too for the times in order to meet the expanding needs of the court, but since there is no description, we cannot be sure. In any case, it survived until March 8, 1831, when it caught fire and was almost totally destroyed.

Third Courthouse at Leonardtown

In the ceremonies accompanying the cornerstone laying of the new building, it was said that “the Seat of Justice of St. Mary’s County accidentally took fire and notwithstanding the presence of a large concourse of Citizens the flames had progressed too far to be arrested, and the building with many of its land and other records was entirely consumed.” The Levy Court

⁷ Ch. 13, Bacon’s Laws. Text taken from *Arch. of Md.*, XIX, 214.

⁸ *Arch. of Md.*, XXII, 102.

⁹ Ch. 3, Bacon’s Laws. Text taken from *Arch. of Md.*, XXVII, 349.

¹⁰ Ch. 6.

¹¹ Ch. 16, Acts of 1728.

¹² Ch. 14, April Session; *Arch. of Md.*, XXXIX, 483.