

WORCESTER COUNTY

Like Charles County, Worcester County has had two births. Its first birth resulted from an effort of Lord Baltimore to make good his claim to Delaware, and it did not achieve its purpose. It was declared established and its bounds set by an order in Council of October 22, 1669.¹ The Lords Proprietary fought more or less vigorously until 1750 when they finally admitted defeat, and the disputed territory has been in the undisputed possession of Delaware ever since.² As there was no courthouse—perhaps even no government—and no records of Old Worcester, it can be ignored for our purposes.

Worcester County as we know it today, with the exception of the area which it lost to Delaware in its infancy and the large part which went to form Wicomico County in the next century, came into being in 1742. By an act of that year, the General Assembly provided for the splitting of Somerset County to form Worcester County; and at the same time it created a special commission to build two new courthouses, one for Somerset County at Princess Anne and one for Worcester at Snow Hill.³ This act also provided for the sale of the old Somerset County Courthouse, the proceeds to be divided between the two counties. In addition, each county was permitted to levy up to £1,000 current money for the purchase of a plot of ground (it was specified that this should be no less than one-half acre and no more than one acre) and the erection of the county building thereon.

Only a few weeks after the adjournment of the General Assembly, the first book of records of the county was opened with a transcription of the commission given the justices of the county by Governor Bladen. This is followed by the minutes of the first meeting "held at Snow Hill town on the Eleventh day of December . . . at the house of David Murrays."⁴

The act setting up the county had provided that should it be impossible to purchase ground for a reasonable price the justices were to set up an inquisition composed of twenty-four landholders who would fix a just price. The inquisition was called on the same day, December 11, and it fixed a price of £15 current money for the two lots.⁵ Nothing at all is known of this first courthouse because all of the relevant county records have been lost, and there seems to have been no further recourse to the General Assembly.

First Courthouse at Snow Hill

Perhaps this courthouse of 1742-1743 was thoroughly undistinguished and so, like human beings of the same ilk, left only a record of birth and death. The cause of death in this case was fire, a common fate of courthouses and records in Maryland. This fire, a veritable holocaust, occurred in 1834. The following account by an eyewitness is useful because what it describes is an occurrence, unfortunately too frequent in Maryland.

We are sorry to learn from the following letter, that a most distressing fire took place on Monday night, the 24th ult. at Snow Hill, consuming forty houses, the Court House, eight Stores, two Hotels, &c.

¹ *Arch. of Md.* V, 57, 108.

² Details of this controversy may be found in Walter A. Powell, "Fight of A Century Between The Penns And Calverts Over The Three Lower Counties On Delaware [River] Which Resulted In Making The State of Delaware A Separate Commonwealth," *Md. Hist. Mag.*, XXIX, pp. 83-101. See also

Clayton Torrence, *Old Somerset On The Eastern Shore Of Maryland*, and Charles B. Clark, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 1077-1094.

³ Ch. 19.

⁴ *Land Record, Liber A, 1742-1747*, f. 5, *Ms.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 7. Presumably, the land was bought at this time, but no conveyance has been found.