

DORCHESTER COUNTY

The exact date of the erection of Dorchester County is unknown; however, it was surely in existence before February 16, 1668/69, for on that date the Lord Proprietary issued writs to the sheriffs of all the counties of Maryland commanding them to hold an election for delegates to the next Assembly. Such a writ was issued to "Raymond Staplefort Sherriffe of Dorchester County."¹ An alternate date, February 4, 1668/69, is given by some historians, but evidence for this earlier date has escaped the writer.² The actual setting up of county government occurred a few months later, to be precise, on May 6, 1669, when the bounds of the new county were set, the justices appointed and instructed in their duties, and a clerk chosen to keep the books and records.³

Courthouse at Harwood's Choice and Before

According to Elias Jones, the first courts of Dorchester County were held in private homes. Thereafter the county seat was located at John's Point on Brook Creek and from there, in turn, removed to Harwood's Choice perhaps on a branch of Fishing Creek. The removal to Harwood's Choice was prompted by a persuasive gift from William Worgin of twenty-five acres "and a new house lately built and finished by George Seward for the keeping of court there." Worgin also gave timber for additional building and firewood, and he gave bond to the amount of 12,000 pounds of tobacco to warrant and defend the gift.⁴

Due to the loss of the records—those between 1674 and 1690 were already lost in Jones' time—we have no details about this first courthouse; but tradition insists that it still survives. A photograph of an ancient structure, purported to be the "First Court House and Jail of Dorchester County," is found in the work of the late historian, Swepson Earle.⁵ It is a small two-room brick structure with a jerkin-head roof and dormer windows. Its location is approximately correct, but at this late date positive identification is difficult. It is more likely that this building is the structure on John's Point referred to above.

First Courthouse at Cambridge

According to Jones and later historians of Dorchester County, the move of the county seat to Cambridge was made as a result of an Act of Assembly of 1686. But no trace of such an act can be found at the Hall of Records or in the county courthouse at this writing. Unfortunately, the Proceedings of the General Assembly—but not the acts—have been lost for this year, and the minutes of the county court have also disappeared. It seems likely to the writer, therefore, that the change was made by a simple order of court. The little information which we have about the first Cambridge courthouse is to be found in the indenture cited in full here below:

This Indenture made the Sixth day of Decem^r. in the Twelfth year of the Dominion of the right honble Charles absolute Lord and Propty of the Province of Maryland

¹ *Arch. of Md.*, II, 155.

² Mathews, *The Counties of Maryland*, p. 477; Virginia Webb, "Dorchester County," in Charles B. Clark, *The Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia*, II, p. 1013. The later date is found in Elias Jones, *History of Dorchester County*, Baltimore, 1920, p. 33.

³ Jones, 33-35.

⁴ This information is taken from Jones, who cites as authority the court records for a session of December 11, 1673. This record has apparently disappeared; it was no longer in the courthouse when his list of county colonial records was compiled by Louis Dow Seisco in 1928 (*Md. Hist. Mag.*, XXIII, 243-46).

⁵ *The Chesapeake Bay Country*, Baltimore, 1934, facing p. 389.