

HARFORD COUNTY

From the time it was erected, the seat of government of Baltimore County had been located in or near the present Harford County. Then, in 1768, the county seat was removed from Joppa to Baltimore City, imposing a very real hardship on the citizens of the northern part of the County. Hardly had the transfer been effected before agitation began for the erection of a new county. By 1773, enough sentiment had been stimulated to interest the General Assembly. At the second session of the year an act was passed to authorize the creation of a new county to be named for Henry Harford, Lord Proprietary and illegitimate son of Frederick, the Sixth and last Lord Baltimore.¹ This Act provided also that the county seat should be in or near Bush or Harford Town, at the head of Bush River, where four acres were to be purchased on which to erect the county buildings. For this purpose the sheriff was to collect from all the inhabitants of Baltimore County 154,666 pounds of tobacco. (It was reasoned that since all of Baltimore County had shared in the proceeds of the sale of the former county buildings at Joppa it was only fair that all should contribute to this new county venture.) In addition, a levy of 200,000 pounds of tobacco was laid on the citizens of the new county.

The court of Harford County met for the first time, March 22, 1774, at Bush Town, in the "house wherein Thomas Miller now keeps store." The justices allowed the owner, Aquila Hall, twelve pounds current money annual rent and the lessee, Miller, ten pounds current money "for repairing the said house so as to be fit for the reception of prisoners."² No effort was made at this time to undertake the building of a courthouse. There is no reason given, but perhaps we may assume that the uncertainty of the times discouraged building here as it did in Annapolis and elsewhere. In any case, the provincial General Assembly was meeting for the last time during this first term of court of Harford County, and no doubt at the suggestion of the new county, an act was passed suspending the power of the commissioners for building a courthouse and prison in Harford County.³ The suspension was to remain in effect until the next session which, as it turned out, did not occur until February 1777, the first session under the new State Constitution. The suspension of powers was then and subsequently continued until the end of the November Session, 1781.⁴

First Courthouse at Bel Air

Unfortunately, when hostilities had ceased, the inhabitants of the county seemed no longer to be of one mind about the location of the county seat at Harford Town (or Bush). When the courthouse of Harford County next became a matter for legislative action, late in 1781, authority was granted for a referendum to decide between Harford Town, Otter Point, Cross Roads (Gravelly Hill), Lower Cross Roads (Churchville), and Aquila Scott's Old Field (Bel Air). The act further provided that if only two of these possible sites were placed on the ballot then the one receiving the larger number of votes would be selected; but if three or more were voted upon then the highest two in the results would be voted upon again in a sort of runoff election.⁵ Aquila Scott's Old Field was the choice of the electorate, but now new

¹ Ch. 6, Acts of 1773, November Session.

² Much of the information in this chapter has been drawn from Walter W. Preston, *History of Harford County Maryland*. Baltimore, 1901. Judge Preston was exceptionally full in his account of the courts and courthouses.

³ Ch. 13, Acts of 1774.

⁴ See Ch. 17, Acts of 1777, February Session; Ch. 1, Acts of 1777, June Session; Ch. 6, Acts of 1778, March Session; and Ch. 29, Acts of 1781, May Session.

⁵ Ch. 10, Acts of 1781, November Session.