

CHARLES COUNTY

Records

The first loss of records in Charles County of which we are aware occurred December 16, 1746, when the home of the clerk, Edmund Porteus, burned. At that time he had in the house the proceedings of the court for the June, August and November terms of that year as well as many original papers; and these all went up in flames. The General Assembly, after taking measures for the reconstitution of the lost records, forbade any recordkeeping officer of the province to remove any of the records of his office from their proper place during the hours from eleven at night until six in the morning.¹ Unfortunately, this law was more honored in the breach than in the observance.

When the courthouse burned in 1892, several favorable circumstances conspired to save many of the important records. According to the accepted story, there were people in the courthouse (it is reliably reported that they were engaged in a poker game) when the fire broke out, and they and others in Portobacco set about carrying out the records. Moreover, the bound records for the period 1662-1786 and a volume of extracts of deeds from 1785 to 1803 were at that time in the office of the Land Commissioner at Annapolis, having been sent there by an order of the Charles County Court of May 21, 1889.² They were formally made a part of the records of the State by a Joint Resolution of 1896,³ but eighteen years later they were reclaimed by Charles County.⁴ What is important, however, is that they were in Annapolis out of reach of the disaster of August 1892.

One other volume escaped in a different way. Liber A, containing the court records from 1658 to 1662, was deposited at the Maryland Historical Society, September 13, 1886, by Vivian Brent, an attorney of Charles County. It remained in the custody of the society until 1926, when it was returned to La Plata.⁵ How Mr. Brent came into possession of this volume is a matter for speculation, but it is certain that his act, however motivated, effectively insulated this volume from the fire.

There were also two other losses, both minor, which were repaired after an uncertain period of time. At one point, two pages, folios 277 and 278, were removed from Liber V No. 1. These pages contained a plat and description of the public land of Portobacco, made in 1697, which have proved to be extremely useful. It is probable that these pages were never actually removed from the courthouse for they were found filed among the papers of his office by the present clerk of the court, Honorable Patrick C. Mudd. The original pages have been repaired and laminated and remain in the county, a photostatic copy has been inserted in the original record volume which had already been transferred to the Hall of Records when the missing pages were discovered.

In July of 1947, the Librarian of the Duluth, Minnesota, Public Library sent to the Archivist of Maryland some scraps of old paper which when assembled proved to be pages 497 and 498 of *Liber D No. 3* of the Court Records of Charles County. These scraps were said to have been picked up during the burning of the Confederate Capital at Richmond, Virginia in

¹ Ch. III, Acts of 1747.

² *Report of the Commissioner of the Land Office of Maryland October 1, 1893, to September 30, 1895*, p. 19.

³ Acts of 1896, Joint Resolution No. 9.

⁴ Ch. 59, Acts of 1914.

⁵ Bernard C. Steiner, "The Beginnings of Charles County," *Md. Hist. Mag.*, XXI, pp. 270-273.