

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

The National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings

Chestertown Historic District, Chestertown, Maryland

Chestertown's beginning dates from 1698 when the court house for Kent County was erected on the bank of the Chester River at the future site of the town. In 1706 streets were laid out for a town and in 1708 the small settlement, then known as New Town, was made a Port of Entry for Cecil, Kent, and Queen Anne counties of Maryland. New Town, however, failed to grow and the leading tobacco port on the Eastern Shore during the first half of the 18th century was Oxford, located in Talbot County on the Tred Avon River. Founded in 1683, Oxford was for some time a close rival of Annapolis as the busiest port in the province.

Chestertown's growth as a major port began in 1730, when its owner, Simon Wilmer, resurveyed his land and laid out the existing gridiron plan of streets and house lots. From about 1750-1790 the town flourished as the chief tobacco and wheat shipping port of Maryland's Eastern Shore. During this period merchants and planters constructed fine Georgian brick town houses in the town. Some 50 of these structures still stand.

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NSHSB: 12/22/69
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Other Sites Considered

Chestertown Historic District, Maryland

Location: Kent County, Chestertown.

Ownership: Various, private and public. Mr. Maynard P. White, Chairman, Historic District Commission, 107 South Mill Street, Chestertown, Maryland 21620.

Boundaries of Historic District (See attached map): The area is roughly bounded by the Chester River on the southeast, by Cannon Street on the southwest, by Cross Street on the northwest, and by Maple Avenue on the northeast.

History and Condition

From about 1750 to 1790 Chestertown flourished as the chief tobacco and wheat shipping port of Maryland's Eastern Shore. During this period merchants and planters constructed fine Georgian brick town houses in the town. With the exception of Annapolis, Chestertown has more extant pre-Revolutionary buildings than any other Maryland community. Most of Chestertown's some 50 historic houses, however, have undergone considerable alteration.

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Chestertown's growth as a major port began in 1730, when its owner, Simon Wilmer, resurveyed his land and laid out the existing gridiron plan of streets and house lots. As the heavy water-borne trade with Philadelphia grew, wealthy merchants and planters began building town houses in New Town. By 1775 the town had emerged as the chief tobacco and wheat shipping port of the Eastern Shore. In 1780, when the town charter was revised, the name of New Town was changed to Chestertown. In 1782 Washington College, the first institution of higher education in Maryland, was founded at Chestertown by the Reverend William Smith. The first college

structure, a large three-story brick structure modeled after Princeton's Nassau Hall, was completed in 1784.¹ The town's first newspaper began publication in 1793. By 1800, however, Chestertown was in decline as a port and was rapidly losing its trade to Baltimore.

On September 23, 1910, a serious fire swept the business district of Chestertown and destroyed 20 stores and six houses. The 18th century residential area, lying between the business section and the Chester River, however, escaped without damage. The town still has approximately 50 houses that were erected in the period 1730-1800, but most underwent considerable modification in the 19th century. The finest of these Georgian and Federal Period houses are concentrated along Water Street, near the Chester River. There are few intrusions on this street, but the problem becomes more serious as one proceeds Northwest from the river to the business district. Among the structures of architectural interest are the following buildings:

1. Ringgold-Pearce House (also known as the Abbey), 100 South Water Street. In 1767 the merchant Thomas Ringgold bought two houses that had been built by Nathaniel Palmer and Nathaniel Hynson, Jr. around 1735 and united these dwellings with a new section into a Georgian three-part composition two-and-one-half story brick house. The elaborate interiors of the house were decorated by William Buckland, noted architect of Annapolis, in 1767-1771. The original Chippendale-Georgian paneling of the drawing room was purchased and removed from the house by the Baltimore Museum of Art in the 1920s. The house was restored in the 1930s and now serves as the residence of the president of Washington College.

2. "Custom House," 101 South Water Street. A long three-story brick building with a dormered and gabled roof, obviously erected in two stages, this building is said to have been built by the Ringolds in 1694. The first floor, which contained three large storage rooms, served as a warehouse, and the upper floors were utilized as the living quarters. Maryland colonial port authorities rented a room in this house for use as Chestertown's custom house.

3. Widehall, 101 North Water Street, at High Street. Erected by Thomas Smythe, merchant, about 1770, this is a large two-and-one-half story brick Georgian house with a hipped and dormered roof and elaborate interiors. The exterior, however, has been altered: a mansard roof was added in the 19th century and the existing hip roof is a reconstruction; the present large two-story porch with tall Ionic columns was added across the rear (river) elevation in 1910.

¹Washington College's original building was destroyed by fire in 1827.

4. River House, 107 North Water Street. Built in 1737-43 by William Timbrill, a Barbados merchant, with elaborate interiors dating from around 1762, this is a large three-story brick Queen Anne style house. The exterior, however, has been altered by the addition (c.1825) of a Greek Revival porch on the street elevation and the construction of a new wing, which also involved the demolition of the original galleried porch, on the rear (river) elevation in 1912. The fine Chippendale-Georgian paneling of the third floor master bedroom was purchased and removed from the house by the Henry Francis Dupont Winterthur Museum in 1926.
5. Meteer House, 110 North Water Street. A brick dwelling built in 1780.
6. Perkins House, 115 North Water Street. A brick house dating from around 1726.
7. Bacchus House, 201 North Water Street. A brick house erected around 1780.
8. Nicholson-Daringer House, North Queen Street. A fine brick Federal Period town house built in 1788 by Captain John Nicholson of the U.S. Navy.
9. Emmanuel Protestant Episcopal Church, High and Cross Streets. A brick church, greatly altered, built in 1768. The structure is treated individually and in detail elsewhere in this report.
10. Palmer House, 532 West High Street. A one-and-a-half story stone house.
11. White Swan Tavern, 231-235 East High Street. A two-and-one-half story brick building erected around 1750 and once used as a tavern.
12. William Barroll House, 108-110 East High Street. A three-story brick house said to have been erected around 1735 by William Barroll V.
13. Wiches House, 100 East High Street. A three-story brick tavern built by Samuel Beck prior to 1775.

CHESTERTOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT, MARYLAND

Boundaries of the Historic District:

The historic district is bounded on the southeast by the Chester River, on the southwest by Cannon Street, on the northwest by Spring Street, and on the northeast by Maple Avenue. Precise boundaries are recorded in ink on copies of the following two maps: U. S. Geological Survey Map: Chestertown Quadrangle, Maryland, 7.5 Minute Series (Topographic), 1953, and a more detailed Street Map entitled "Boundaries of Chestertown Historic District, Maryland." Copies of both maps are on file with the Branch of Historical Surveys, Division of History, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service. _____

FOXLEY
MANSION

LEAS
CORNER

MORNING RD

HOLLY AVE

WINDMILL RD

COLLEGE AVE

6

HIGH ST

CANNON

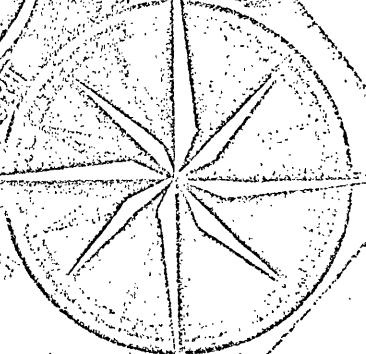
CALVERT

WENT

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WELL

BYFORD COURT



CHESTERTOWN

SPRING

WATER

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BYFORD

COURT

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Boundaries of Chestertown Historic District,
Maryland