

Historical Process and Narrative in Annapolis, Maryland and the Chesapeake

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This is a very ancient looking village ... Everything bears the face of cleanly and decent decay ... There are ruinous remains—still tenanted or lordly dwellings with their outhouses and pleasure gardens, spreading over acres—built in a substantial manner so as to retain an air of old age.

THOMAS SULLY ON ANNAPOLIS, JULY 22, 1833²

The title of this chapter articulates two ideas about geography that are both accurate and necessary for understanding the focus of this book. One reading is a pair: A city, Annapolis, Maryland and a region, the Chesapeake. Understanding the negotiated relationship between these two geographic entities is a main point of this book. In the following chapters I explore how to situate Annapolis in the Chesapeake and how the Chesapeake situated Annapolis within itself. Changes in this relationship between 1700 and 1900 tell a great story, and one that I believe provides new insight to understanding the social production of the landscape in Annapolis. A second reading is a list of three places: Annapolis–Maryland–the Chesapeake. This balance between the three, as independent, symbolic places in their own right, is also essential for knowing about Annapolis because Annapolis used these symbolic geographies in ways that shifted over time. Exploring the strategic use of these geographies provides key contextual clues for understanding how changes in the Annapolis landscape are tied to the social experience of history there.

Making this distinction also serves another end. In this chapter I review the history of Annapolis to provide a basic guideline for the book showing what happened and when, who did what, and why this matters here. However, this review will follow the guidelines of the previous chapter's discussion by presenting the history of Annapolis in two ways. The historical process section provides, in the form of an objective account, details about Annapolis as a physical and historical place which may be encountered today. The historical narrative section relates a social history that considers how the historical process might be expanded through better contextualization that shows how the historical process was woven into narratives of social life over the course of history in Annapolis. It is in these efforts that Annapolis was designed from a geographical perspective that placed it both within and along side its encompassing political and regional landscapes. The goal of the book is to discover these negotiations of landscape, thus I present here a historical overview of the social formations that created them. The final section of this chapter reviews

the archaeology of the Bordley-Randall site in Annapolis which, as the principle subject matter of this book, provides the material focus of these narrative constructions about the past in Annapolis over time.

THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF ANNAPOLIS

Annapolis, Maryland, is located on a peninsula of land on the south side of the Severn River, near its mouth at the Chesapeake Bay (Figure 2). The city is situated within Anne Arundel County, which is characterized by a mid-continental climate with moderate rain and snowfall. The proximity to water gives the area great humidity. The first recorded European occupation of the Annapolis area was in December, 1649, when a small group from Virginia established a protected settlement on the opposite side of the Severn River from present-day Annapolis. These settlers arrived in Maryland not to establish a town but to claim land for the purpose of planting tobacco. From this initial settlement, a population grew and diversified.

The first recorded use of the land now in Annapolis was by boatwright Thomas Todd, who established a shop at a cove on the south side the Severn (Baker 1986, 191). From this beginning, other settlers came over the next few decades and built a small town that came to be known as Arundelton. Prominent among these people was Robert Proctor whose tavern was a focal point for the local community. In fact, the settlement was known to some simply as Proctor's.

A higher status for the town came in 1683 when Arundelton was made an official port of entry for the tobacco trade. Such designation required a survey that was undertaken in 1684 by Richard Beard. This survey survives only in text, though Nancy Baker (1986, 192) has reconstructed the plan showing a handful of streets and a central area of developed lots. In 1694, the new Royal Governor of Maryland, Francis Nicholson, chose Arundelton to be the new colonial capital. Nicholson was the second Governor after the colony was taken over by Royal authorities following England's Glorious Revolution in 1688. Choosing Arundelton, Nicholson was less impressed with its harbor, the town plan, or its urban society than with the area's political stability that was the result of a majority Protestant, rather than Catholic, population. Combined with the fact that the peninsula steadily rose giving commanding views of the harbor and out into the Severn and Chesapeake, this made for a defensible and politically viable colonial capital. Nicholson re-christened town 'Annapolis' after England's Princess Anne and ordered a new survey to be performed. The Nicholson plan is still found in Annapolis today (Figure 3).

The new plan employed baroque features such as circles, radiating streets, and a large square creating "lines of sight to direct eyes to points of reference in space that represented hierarchy, and monarchy in particular" (Leone and Hurry 1998). Nicholson's plan accomplished this by setting at the end of the vistas two prominent architectural statements: the State House and the Anglican Church (St. Anne's). These two buildings stood in their own,

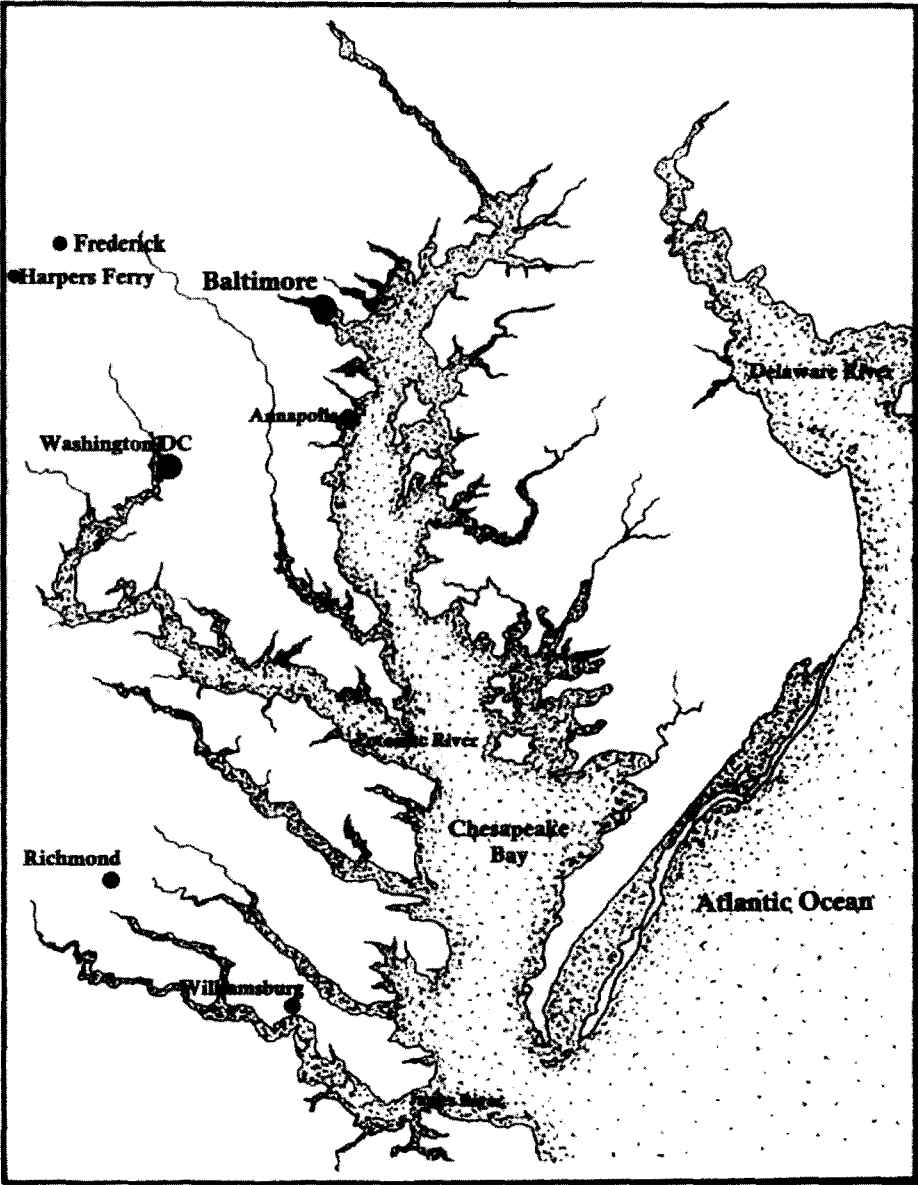


Figure 2. The Chesapeake region of Maryland and Virginia, drawing by Les Graves.

independent circles placed atop the two highest points in the city, State House hill being slightly higher. Though the symbolism of power is important, the plan also structured the town's later development.

Baker (1986, 194–97) shows that from about 1695–1705, following the move of the colonial capital, several wealthy Anne Arundel County planters

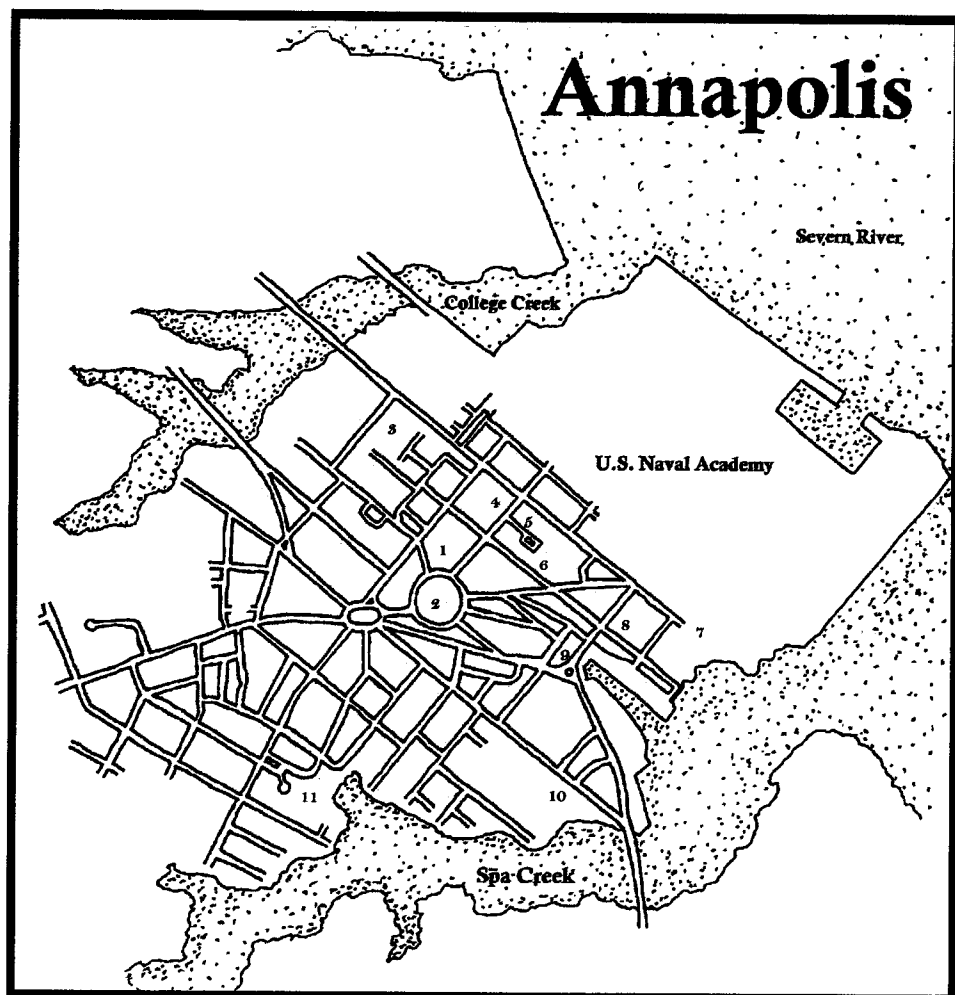


Figure 3. The Annapolis street plan showing the location of sites discussed in this book, drawing by Les Graves. Key: 1. Bordley-Randall house and garden, 2. State Circle, 3. St. John's College, 4. Chase-Lloyd house, 5. Hammond-Harwood house, 6. William Paca house and garden, 7. former location of Hell Point, 8. John Sands house, 9. City market, 10. Acton House.

purchased city lots. These acquisitions did not spur population growth, but were undertaken as investments by wealthy men who hoped for future population growth. This strategy largely worked, but instead of a resident population of freeholders settling in the town, large parcels of land were picked up by a few well-placed residents who commanded leaseholds from other residents. These new resident-owners between 1705 and 1720 acted like their rural counterparts using their superior resources to undermine the independence of their poorer neighbors by establishing debt-relations while gaining social authority in return (see Chapter 3). With this local social structure in place, a new phase

of growth began in the 1720s. The population grew as skilled craftsmen and colonial bureaucrats, obtaining leaseholds from the wealthy local gentry, settled in the town bringing establishing households which included family, servants, and increasingly slaves. The principle crafts established in Annapolis by the middle of the 18th century included tanning and shipbuilding. Other sorts of craftsmen also settled there including those of the building and luxury trades such as joiners, masons, goldsmiths, watchmakers, and saddle makers. From about 1730 to 1763, the city could be said to have finally assumed the character of an urban place with a full-time, non agricultural resident population.

In the 1760s the character of the city dramatically changed in association with the political struggles of the American Revolution. Annapolis became an elite social and political center. Much of Maryland's gentry concentrated their political power in the capital in order to protect their standing by assuming roles in the colonial legislature and Proprietary court. Their social actions led to the demise of much of the earlier industrial growth as productive crafts were replaced by retail merchants with a heavier focus on luxury trades. This era (1763–1783) is now known as the city's Golden Age because Annapolis became a well-known social center in the colonies, home to a vast number of luxury town houses, and, in association with the American Revolution, a site of certain events key to the formation of the independent American nation-state.

At the end of the Golden Age, however, Annapolis declined. From the 1780s until the 1840s, a new urban geographic order developed in Maryland based on the commercial and industrial growth of Baltimore. Annapolis in this time was pushed off the main course of modern development. While the city survived, for the next two generations it essentially remained unchanged. Within Maryland, Annapolis was increasingly, though unwillingly, peripheralized by the political economic structures of Baltimore that focused interests and investment in the development of other parts of the state.

Relief came to Annapolis in 1845 when the city was chosen to be the site of the United States Naval Academy. The Academy brought new meaning to the town in the form of new capital and the national recognition of Annapolis as a significant place. Yet the Academy made demands on the city that led to changes in other ways. To keep the Academy the city struggled to stay modern by building a railroad spur, installing water and gas utilities, and continually searching for mercantile opportunity. It was also at this time that the city embraced 'The Ancient City', as its nickname. Being such a place helped to attract another new source of income—excursionists. Finding a balance between staying modern enough and seeming ancient enough became the pivotal issue in Annapolitan development after the 1840s.

Since the late 19th-century the city has seen a fair amount of development in its urban core as lots, many of which had remained intact since their original formulation in the early 1700s, were subdivided. These subdivisions were mostly residential as people with connections to the Baltimore and Washington, DC, commercial centers settled there. Especially as other efforts at mercantile development failed, the city turned ever more towards the attraction of tourists and new residents.

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