

Joppa (Old Joppa)

Old Church Drive

Joppa

Multiple public and private

The location of the colonial town of Joppa has always been known to local residents. However, the details of specific locations remained obscure until 1965, when Panitz Brothers surveyed the property which they planned to make part of the new development called Joppatowne. Attention was given to the possible locations of historical property in order that the original "God's Acre" could be deeded to the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland. In addition to land records, two maps were useful in identifying features of the original town: a plat of the town, as surveyed in 1725, and an 1814 map of "Part of Joppa." The historical records leave no doubt about the identification of the town site, and the potential for archeological remains seems high. It is not known, however, in what state of preservation these remains have survived. The boundaries of the district include the southern half of the town as laid out in 1725, and those areas between the town and the old shoreline as determined by a topographic survey of 1964. Excluded are those areas to the north where intrusions have eliminated all archeological value.

The town was begun by Queen Anne's decree as county seat of Baltimore County in 1712. It sprang from previously undeveloped land, became a center of northern Maryland commerce and government, but began an irreversible decline when the seat of power was transferred to the younger town of Baltimore in 1768. The land on which Joppa flourished reverted to its former use as lots were purchased and buildings destroyed, and the plow sealed 50 years of history under cropland. Today, only one building from the 18th century remains, the home of Benjamin Rumsey, lawyer, member of the local Committee of Correspondence, first Judge of the Maryland Appellate Court, and eventual owner of most of the destroyed town in which he had lived his most significant years. No other physical reminder of this Maryland patriot's life is known. Although altered by the present owner to accommodate the requirements of modern living, the house retains the character and appearance of the 18th century. Within the town area itself, erosion and excavation by industry have revealed evidence which strongly supports the theory that many foundations remain below the surface.

SUMMARY

Joppa Historic District

Located on the fringe of the huge Joppatowne residential development, the Joppa Historic District is a 17 acre tract containing the southern half of a town laid out in 1725. Between 1712 and 1768, Joppa was the county seat of Baltimore County, and as such, was a vital port that served the tobacco growers of the adjacent interior lands. In 1768, when the county seat was moved to Baltimore on the Patapsco River, an irreversible decline began for Joppa, and it never regained its mid 18th century vitality.

The Historic District contains the only extant 18th century structure, an imposing gambrel roof brick residence known today as the Rumsey Mansion. It was built for Col. James Maxwell, who owned the land on which Joppa was laid out. Maxwell, in 1709, was charged with the task of constructing a courthouse and jail, a job he completed in 1712. His stately house was probably built between 1710 and 1725, since a 1726 survey indicates two houses standing outside the boundaries of the proposed town.

The District also contains the sites of the courthouse and jail, the Rumsey family burial plot (the mansion passed from the Maxwells to the Rumsey family in 1768) and other sites of archeological significance. With the surrounding land totally developed, this Historic District is the only surviving part of what was once an important 18th century Maryland Town.

County learned that Queen Anne had refused to give her assent to the act creating a town on Foster's Neck.

We find in the year 1707 an act passed by the Assembly directing the site at Foster's Neck "to be deserted and in lieu thereof fifty acres to be erected into a town on a tract of land belonging to Ann Felks and called 'Taylor's Choice' and a courthouse to be built there."

Joppa 1709-1768

The third county seat was located at Joppa on the east side of the Little Gunpowder where Joppatowne now stands. It is referred to in Baltimore County Court Records of March, 1709, as "Gunpowder Town." It had a serious struggle in coming into existence and in infancy was the victim of misfortune.

The land which constituted Taylor's Choice was contiguous with Foster's Neck and was situated to the northeast of that tract. Taylor's Choice was an original grant made to John Taylor on July 28, 1661, and entered in the Rent Roll Books of the province on that date. The original certificate of Taylor's Choice read in part as follows: "Laid out for Mr. John Taylor, planter, a tract of land consisting of three hundred acres lying on the west side of the Chesapeake Bay on a river beginning at a Spanish oak and running down the river into a creek called Taylor's Creek." The grant passed from the hands of Taylor during the next half century, for by 1707 Taylor's Choice was referred to as the property of Ann Felks.

Col. James Maxwell, son-in-law of Ann Felks, and a presiding justice of Baltimore County, was authorized in 1709 to build a courthouse at Joppa for a sum of 4,500 pounds of tobacco and 600 pounds of tobacco for the lot on which it was to be built.⁷ From the specifications it appears that the new structure was 35 x 24 feet with two stories and rooms for the grand jury, petit jury, and the clerk on the second floor. It was to be completed "with all expedition." In the June court of 1709 a prison was ordered to be built.

It was not until 1712 that an act was passed setting the county court at the "house built on Taylor's Choice in the town of Joppa." In this act the name of Joppa first appears. Thus the date on which the court was moved from the fork of the Gunpowder to Joppa was between the years 1709 and 1712.

It is evident that the moving of the county seat was not without disension. Judge Preston refers to one of his ancestors, Jacob Bond, who was

⁷ Proceedings of Baltimore County Court, Liber J.S., No. B, page 96.

a member of the grand jury which protested the removal of the county seat "from the forks of the Gunpowder to Joppa."⁸

In its early days Joppa encountered numerous difficulties. The commissioners laid off the town and had the courthouse partly built when news came that Queen Anne had refused to give her assent to the Act of 1707, which provided for the location of the county seat at Taylor's Choice. Indeed, the Queen seemed reluctant to approve the erection of any so-called "paper towns" provided for by the Assembly.

The courthouse had first been built without legal authority, and now it was found that the commissioners had built it on land belonging to a minor who could not convey a valid title. The land was bequeathed by Ann Felks to Asael Maxwell, young son of James and Ann Maxwell.

Ann Felks, who died in 1719, made a will which reads in part as follows:

"I, Ann Felks of Baltimore County, widow, being weak of body but of perfect memory, praise be to God for it, do make this my last will and testament in the manner and form following, that is to say, my body to the ground to be decently buried and my soul to God that gave it and for what temporal estate it hath pleased God to bless me with, I give and bequeathe as is hereafter expressed: I give and bequeathe to my loving kinswoman, Ann Maxwell and her husband, James Maxwell, my former dwelling plantation situated at the head of the Gunpowder River in Baltimore County, commonly known by the name of Taylor's Choice and surveyed for three hundred acres of land, during their natural lives and after their decease to Asael Maxwell, the eldest son of my loving kinswoman, Ann Maxwell, and to his heirs forever."

The stumbling block of land ownership hindered Joppa's progress for twelve years, as a courthouse and prison were built but not a single dwelling house. Finally in October, 1724, the Assembly legalized the conveyance of the land by a special act, but reduced the area of the town from fifty to twenty-one acres. This act included the following: "The inhabitants of Baltimore County have made to appear to this Assembly that a courthouse and prison have been erected at Joppa, in the said county, at their expense, and that the right of the land is in a minor under twenty-one years of age, although his father, Col. James Maxwell, has received satisfaction for the same, and that the said inhabitants have likewise set forth that the business of the county is greatly delayed and obstructed by the want of some convenient places of entertainment at or near the courthouse, the officers thereof and suitors thereto being obliged to go a great distance for necessary accommodations, and lying under several other inconven-

⁸ Walter W. Preston, HISTORY OF HARFORD COUNTY, page 207.

iences, that the erection of a town at the same place would probably remove."

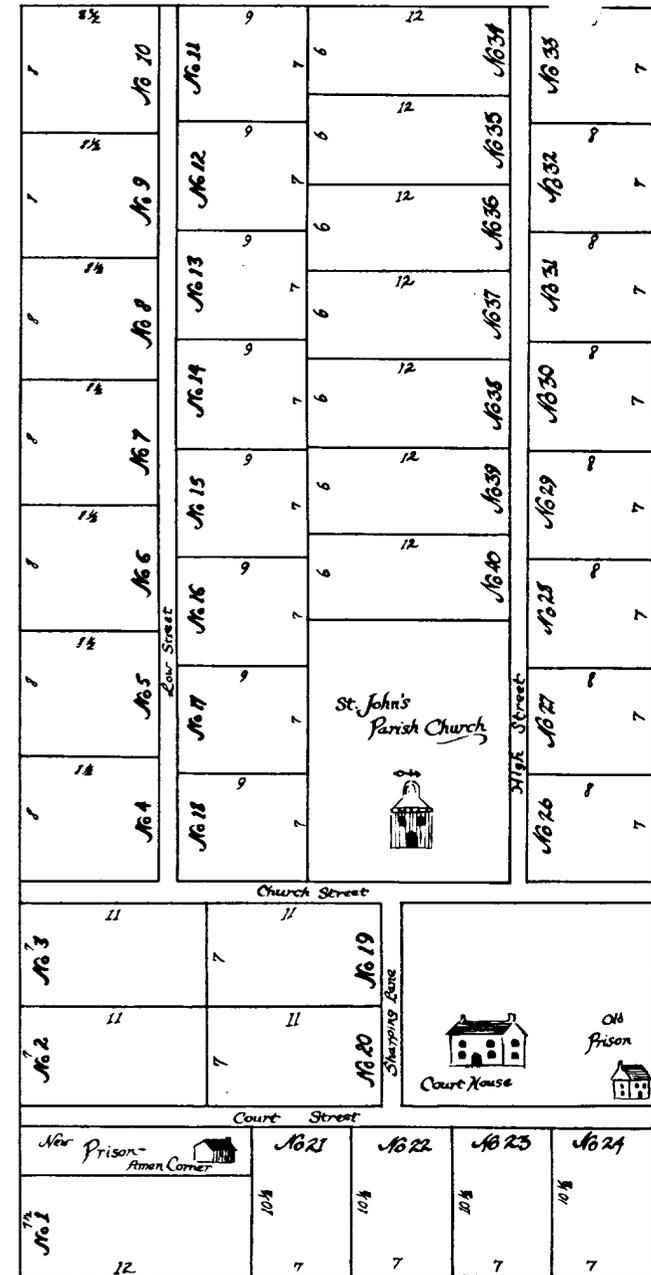
By the Act of 1724, Thomas Tolley, Captain John Taylor, Daniel Scott, Lancelott Todd, and John Stokes were appointed town commissioners. On April 20, 1725, Mr. Tolley, Mr. Taylor, and Mr. Scott met and proceeded to lay off twenty-one acres of land and divide it into forty lots for the building of homes. One acre, almost in the center of the town and adjoining the courthouse, was for the use of St. John's Church. Col. Maxwell was offered three pounds per acre, which he declined, until a warrant was about to be placed in the hands of the sheriff requiring condemnation. Col. Maxwell then agreed to the offer and the deal was arranged without difficulty.

In another year the survey was completed and the town laid off by the county surveyor, Col. John Dorsey, who received 500 pounds of tobacco for his services. The plat was divided by Court Street and Church Street, running east and west, and Low Street and High Street, running nearly north and south. The lots were of unequal area, some less than one-half acre, some more. They were carefully numbered and offered for sale, the smallest selling for one pound, seven shillings. Among those who purchased lots were: Thomas White, surveyor and clerk of the town; Col. John Dorsey, for his son, Greenbury Dorsey; Joseph Calvert, merchant from Kent County; Aquila Paca, sheriff; Col. James Maxwell and Asael Maxwell, his son; Joseph Ward, innkeeper; Catherine Hollingsworth, widow; Samuel Ward, carpenter; and John Higginson, innkeeper. Other lots were acquired by Roger Matthews, John Crockett, John Stokes, Richard Hewitt, William Lowe, John Roberts, John Hall, Jr., Captain Thomas Sheredine, Thomas Tolley, Daniel Hughes, Nicholas Day, William Hammond, Valentine Hollingsworth, Samuel Maccubins, James Isham, Benjamin Jones, Stephen Higgins, Hannah Ward, Abraham Johns, and Benjamin Rumsey.

The lots were sold subject to building restrictions, which were probably the first zoning and building codes of Harford County. Owners of lots were each bound to build a dwelling house covering not less than 400 square feet and to have a good brick or stone chimney.

The town soon became a unique spot. In addition to the forty or fifty dwellings of influential citizens, there were two prisons, a courthouse, St. John's Parish Church, several large warehouses, wharves, inns, stores, and shops.

One of the large warehouses was built by David M. Culloch, merchant, who died on September 17, 1766 at the age of 48 years. His was one of the standing tombstones remaining in Joppa. An original deed shows



Plat of Joppa in 1725 SELMAN G. WRIGHT

MA 1315



Photo by Dr. David C. Hodge

TOMBSTONE OF DAVID M. CULLOCH

Merchant of Old Joppa. Died 1766. Only remaining marker
in St. John's Churchyard.

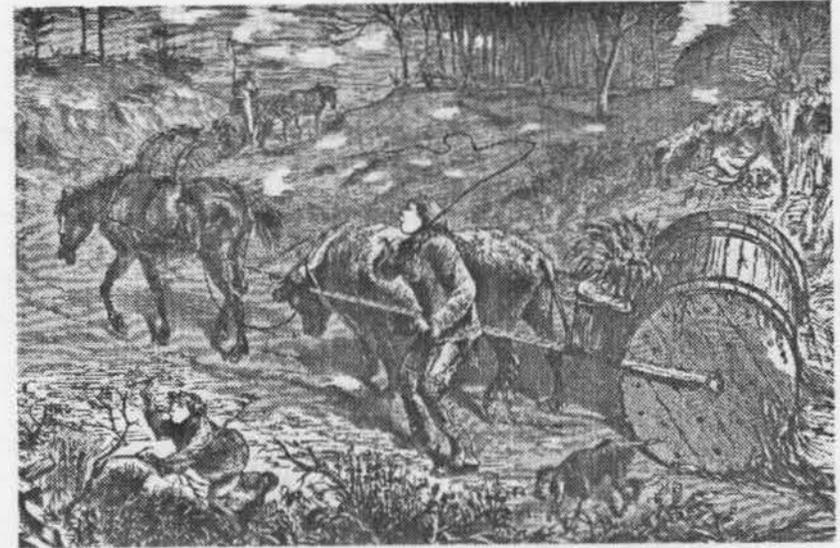
the sale of this warehouse in 1775 by James Christie to Benjamin Rumsey. A part of the deed is as follows: "James Christie for and in consideration of 150 pounds grants to B. Rumsey and his Heirs all that stone warehouse built by a certain David M. Culloch and then in possession of Cowen Buchanan, merchant in Joppa, supposed to stand partly on a Lott distinguished on the plan of the town called Joppa by Number Four and partly on a tract of land called Taylor's Choice, now resurveyed and called Westminster, and the land whereon the same is built, and the land contiguous thereto within the bounds following to wit—Begining at the water side and running parallel with the line of the street in the plan of the said town called Church Street to the nearest corner of said stone warehouse, situated near the water side next the said street."⁹

It could be truthfully said that "all roads lead to Joppa." It became a booming seaport, a port of entry, where ships from Europe and the West

⁹ Harford County Land Records, Liber A.L., No. 1, page 185.

Indies brought cargoes of manufactured goods to be distributed far and wide throughout Maryland and adjoining colonies. The ships returned to their own lands, laden with corn, tobacco, and other products.

The large shipments of tobacco gave rise to the famous "rolling roads," which extended to the rich tobacco fields of northern Maryland and Penn-



Courtesy of Equitable Trust Co., Aberdeen

ROLLING HOGSHEADS OF TOBACCO TO JOPPA

sylvania. The large hogsheads of tobacco were rolled over those roads by a simple but practical contrivance, which made each hogshead its own vehicle. A gudgeon or pin was inserted in each end, to which hoop pole shafts were attached to the collar of the horses and mules used as beasts of burden. The long lines of hogsheads proceeded to the wharves and were ready for shipment.

Though the population of Joppa was not large, it was no doubt a busy one. In addition to the thriving local business in tobacco, flour, and other products, it was made a port of entry years before Baltimore on the Patapsco and served business houses as well as industrial plants to the north and west. In the 1750's an Ohio company was operating extensively beyond the Alleghenies, and it is said some of the company's commerce went through the port of Joppa.

Tobacco was king and its use as currency stimulated trade in both foreign and domestic goods. An early historian has told us that a special

arrangement was made to induce debtors to bring their tobacco to Joppa in payment of their debts, ten pounds of tobacco being allowed for each hundred pounds used in the discharge of an obligation.

Records provide some colorful sidelights on the activities of the town:

November Court, 1713—"The Grand Jury found that Col. James Maxwell ought to have his pay for building of the courthouse levied, if finished according to contract."

"Agreed with James Maxwell, the younger, for the keeping of a ferry to and from Stoney Barr at this Town of Joppa and the Widow Adams pay for her landing."

June 4, 1713—"Rum is assest to twelve shillings in ready money per gallon or six pounds of tobacco per gill and so pro rata."

November Court, 1714—"Death of Queen Anne and accession of King George proclaimed on 2 November."

1720 Term Court—"Ordered that sheriff be supplied with a good sufficient cat-o'-nine-tails."

1721 Term Court—"New prison of stone authorized, same to be 18 feet by 24 feet with walls 2 feet thick."

July 1738—Deposition of John Greer "that he was bitten by a rattlesnake in the woods about thirty perches above the mouth of Long Green River."

November 1740—Deposition of John Howard, commonly called lame John Howard, "that he killed a rattlesnake in branches of Deer Creek and took out its heart and swallowed it."

November 28, 1753—The MARYLAND GAZETTE contained the following news item: "John Barrett was executed at Joppa for the murder of his wife, and was afterward hung in chains on a gibbet as high as Haman's Gallows, near Baltimore Town, where he committed the crime."

Old Joppa was a lively town, and while comforts of today were lacking, the records show that sports and horse racing were popular pastimes. An announcement read: "On Thursday the 11th of October, 1750, will be run for at Joppa in Baltimore County, a purse of twenty pistoles, by any horse, mare, or gelding, and on the 12th and 13th of October, races will be run for purses of ten and six pounds, current money respectively." Horses had to be entered on the day previous to the race and the owner paid one shilling as entrance fee.

Celebrations of various types were held. Public morals were well preserved but liquor was in abundance and the whipping post and the gallows were used as a deterrent of crime.

As election districts had not yet been set up, all voting took place at the county seat. The MARYLAND GAZETTE, noting the importance of such events in its columns of March 5, 1752, stated that at an election held at Joppa for Representatives to the Legislature, more people were present

than ever before, or perhaps at any place in the province. One writer describes this election as an extremely bitter contest. Four men were elected to the House of Delegates, but through a petition, were restrained from taking office.

Whether truth or fiction, citizens complained that William Govane made many of the local voters drunk, not capable of giving their votes with prudence and discrimination. Another election was held. It lasted three days, with street fights—in which two persons were killed—taking more time than actual balloting. One thousand votes were cast.

Little is recorded regarding education in the early town. As many of the inhabitants were fairly well-to-do, it is presumed that private tutors were employed for at least the elementary education and some went to church schools, such as Spesutia. In 1723 an Act of Legislature provided for a "Free School" in each county, with much of its maintenance coming from 100 acres of land provided by grant. This early school was located near the town on a tract of land known as "Scholar's Plains."

By 1768 Baltimore Town on the Patapsco, which had its beginnings as a city in 1730, became a contender for the trade, commerce, and social distinction that for a half-century had belonged to Joppa. The new city, with its spacious harbor, attracted business and shipping, and the center of population moved to the south.

To add to the difficulties of Joppa, sediment from the hinterland, which had been divested of its forests, had begun to fill the harbor, thus making it increasingly difficult to navigate to the port. A smallpox epidemic had also hindered the growth of the town. Joppa could no longer withstand the pressure brought by influential citizens of the city on the Patapsco which promised to be a growing and more progressive center.

When Baltimore Town became the county seat in 1768, the courthouse and lot were bought by Benedict Edward Hall who sold his right to Benjamin Rumsey in 1773. The prison was sold to John Beale Howard in 1773 who received a deed for the property.¹⁰

In 1768 an Act of Assembly was passed authorizing a commission to build a courthouse and prison on the "uppermost part of Calvert Street next to Jones Falls." We learn that the opposition to the change was very pronounced and the actual removal of the records by the clerk of court, Alexander Lawson, was attended by some "violence and outrage."

During the next decade the town that had overcome many obstacles in its founding, and which our ancestors in their pride had hoped to develop

¹⁰ George W. Archer, Harford Historical Collection at the Maryland Historical Society.

MA 1515

into a great metropolis, faded before its rival on the Patapsco and finally became what some writers have called a "lost or vanished town." As mud filled the harbor, warehouses and wharves fell into decay, population decreased, and trade dwindled.

Although the removal of the county seat in 1768 sounded the death knell of the town, the commercial glory it had gained did not pass at once. Tradition says that as late as the Revolution a war vessel was built there.

The MARYLAND GAZETTE reported on April 10, 1776, the following: "We learn from Joppa that special messenger came to that town on Sunday last with the agreeable news of the repeal of the Stamp Act." When this was reported to the inhabitants, it was received with great joy and the event was celebrated by ringing of bells and illumination of every house in the village.

The history of Joppa's decay is not recorded, but the decline continued during the next century. Judge Preston wrote: "A solitary house, once a stately mansion, built of bricks imported from England, and a few mouldering grave stones, overgrown with weeds and grass, still mark the site of the once flourishing town of Joppa." The writer on his first visit to the spot in 1915 found the place almost the same as this description relates.

The old Rumsey house, the one surviving example of the buildings at Joppa two hundred years ago, still stands as a reminder of an ancient port. The mansion was the property of a distinguished Maryland family. The mansion is thought to have been built by Colonel Maxwell sometime between 1720 and 1724, with brick imported from England. The house is in fair preservation, with much of the original brick still in place. Stucco has been placed on the lower walls to keep out the moisture. The outstanding Georgian design, with its peculiarly shaped roof and chimneys at either end, gives the unique appearance of an eighteenth century dwelling.

The new owners and developers, realizing the historical importance of the old site, have made plans for its preservation for enjoyment of future generations. When restoration is complete, the Rumsey mansion will serve a dual function; first, as a permanent museum for artifacts remaining from early times; and, second, as a luxurious yacht club, where members and guests will be able to enjoy the many services furnished by a modern club.

The history of Joppa would not be complete without an account of St. John's Church, which served as a religious center of this early community. We are indebted to the Restoration Committee of the Old Joppa

Church and, with their permission, are using information from their pamphlet, "Reestablishing the Church in Gunpowder Hundred."

When William of Orange and his wife, Mary, came to the throne of Great Britain in 1688, they sent Royal Governor Lionel Copley to the Province of Maryland to establish the Church of England more firmly in the new world. Baltimore County was early divided into three parishes, St. George's, St. John's, and Patapsco. The church at Gravelly in St. George's Parish is thought to have been in existence as early as 1671.

St. John's was established in the Gunpowder Hundred in 1692, and the first church built in 1695 was located at Elk Neck, where the Officer's Club at Edgewood Arsenal now stands. The original church was a crude log building, 20 x 40 feet, which served the parish only for a short time.

After Joppa became the county seat, the town became the thriving center of the territory and many of the members of the parish made their home there. The Act of General Assembly of 1724, which made provision for laying out the new county seat, set aside one acre of land in the center of the town for St. John's Church. Here the prosperous planters, merchants, and sea captains on June 15, 1724, made an agreement with Col. James Maxwell to build a brick church at a cost of 25,000 pounds tobacco. By 1730 the modest church was completed and replaced that at Elk Neck. At the November court of 1729, it was ordered that there be an "assessment of tobacco per Poll on St. John's Parish for the carrying on of the new church."¹¹

The decline of the town of Joppa and the removal of the county seat in 1768 seriously affected the welfare of the church. As the town fell into decay, by 1814 only four houses and the fast deteriorating church were left. By 1821 the church lay in ruins and the churchyard and burying grounds, with only one tombstone left, were grown up in weeds. The parishioners moved to other places, mostly in the fork of the Gunpowder.

But the old St. John's Church was not to die, for in 1815, Edward Day built at Kingsville, at his own expense and on his own land, a stone church and rectory which he deeded in 1817 to the vestry of St. John's Parish in Baltimore and Harford Counties.

Many of the mementos of the earlier church were incorporated in its structure or installed within. Among these relics was the pewter communion service given to the Joppa Church by Queen Anne. This third church, having served the people of St. John's Parish for almost a century, was replaced in 1896 by the stone church used today, and the abandoned church is being restored in preparation for its sesquicentennial in 1967.

¹¹ Proceedings of Baltimore County Court, Liber J.S., No. B, page 312.

As the town of Joppatowne is being laid out and constructed, it is most significant that the Diocese is planning to reestablish the church on the original site of Old Joppa in Gunpowder Parish.

While this volume is intended to cover mostly only those events of our distant past, it seems appropriate to call briefly to attention the plans for



Photo by Dr. David C. Hodge

RUMSEY HOUSE AT OLD JOPPA

Built by Col. James Maxwell, 1724. Later, the home of Benjamin Rumsey, Member of Continental Congress.

recognition of the historic spot around Old Joppa. The man-made island surrounding the imposing brick mansion, now being converted into a museum and yacht club, has been appropriately named Rumsey Island in honor of Benjamin Rumsey. The fast growing Joppatowne, with its modern

homes and extensive system of waterways, also preserves in name the historic importance of that early county seat.

Baltimore On Patapsco 1768-1773

Removal of the county seat to Baltimore Town on the Patapsco in 1768 was opposed by many of the citizens of the region around the upper Chesapeake and Bush River, due to the long distance they had to travel to serve on juries and to transact other necessary business.

The new courthouse in Baltimore Town was constructed largely by private subscription of money and tobacco. In the Act of Assembly creating the new county of Harford, we find that a considerable sum was raised by the sale of the old courthouse and prison at Joppa and this was applied to the erection of the new courthouse at Baltimore Town. The Act further provided that a sum be levied for reimbursement to Harford County for building a courthouse at Harford Town.

The first courthouse in this new county seat was located on Calvert Street where the Battle Monument now stands. It was a building of two stories with a high steeple and so constructed that traffic on Calvert Street passed underneath, between its two outer supporting walls.

Baltimore, laid out in 1730 as a small village, was a growing town, having united with Jones Town in 1745 and Fell's Point in 1773. The spacious harbor made it ideal for the new port of entry and the trade in tobacco and wheat from the fields of the Pennsylvania Germans started it on its career as the great port of today.

Bush (Harford Town) 1773-1782

After five years, a feeling of discontent over the distance to Baltimore Town caused a petition to be filed with the Assembly at Annapolis for a division of Baltimore County and for the establishment of a new one by the name of Harford. This Act of the General Assembly of 1773 is quoted in part:

An Act for the Division of Baltimore County, and for Erecting a New One by the Name of Harford

WHEREAS, A considerable body of the inhabitants of Baltimore County, by their petition to this General Assembly have prayed, that an act may be passed for a division of the said county, and for erecting a new one out of part