

THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION  
OF THE CUSTOMS HOUSE  
AT CHESTERTOWN, MARYLAND.

Thesis prepared  
by  
Arnold W. Smoot  
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Tau Beta Pi Fraternity.

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## SUMMARY

The Customs house at Chestertown, Maryland was built in the very early stages of the development of the Maryland colony. The site of Chestertown was selected because it was earnestly believed that this town would eventually become the outstanding city in the colony. However, the Chester River, which runs through Chestertown, proved too shallow to accomodate the large ocean going vessels, and Baltimore, by its superior harbor, gained the proud distinction that was intended for Chestertown.

In constructing the building, the English made it strong enough and large enough to take care of the future development of the Maryland trade. When the building was no longer needed as a customs house, it was sold into private ownership. It still holds its proud head very high, but it keeps secret the wierd happenings which have occured within its walls.



## INTRODUCTION.

The origin of the beautiful Chester river is found in a spring near Smyrna, Delaware. From here it slowly moves westward through part of Delaware and across the eastern shore of Maryland until it empties its clear waters into the Chesapeake Bay at a point almost opposite the port of Baltimore. About twenty miles from the mouth and on the northern bank of the river there lies the quaint old town of Chestertown. To-day Chestertown has a population of five-thousand and is situated in the midst of some of the best agricultural lands of Maryland. The town is very proud of its many old buildings, some of which date back to pre-Revolutionary days; and of Washington College, founded in 1782, which bears its name by the expressed consent of George Washington.

The charm of Chestertown is not in its tree shaded streets by Washington College, although that gives it the repose and dignity that is shared by all college towns.

It is not in its houses dating back to the days of Queen Anne and the Georges, although these structures give the place an old world atmosphere of much beauty.

Nor is it in the charm of the quiet river down whose green banks the cattle go to drink, although the river is rife with the memories of its own tea party, when the men of Kent threw a whole cargo of tea to the fishes about the time the Annapolis and Boston tea parties and for the same grievances against the mother country.

It is in none of these that the main charm of Chestertown lies. Instead, there is an old exotic aspect about the place,



there is an old exotic aspect about the place, as of a time when ships with cargoes from the Spanish Main cleared at the ancient brick customs house down by the river, when cargoes of tropic woods and precious metals and treasures of furniture, sandalwood boxes and shawls and silver were unloaded from the hold of sailing ships, manned by sailormen with earrings in their ears.

The colony of Maryland was settled in 1634 by a small group of English Catholics under the leadership of Leonard Calvert. As Calvert tolerated all Cristian sects in his province, Protestants immigrated from Virginia, New England, and old England. In the year 1649 the Maryland assembly made religious toleration a law by passing the famous Act of Toleration, which states that " no person in this province professing to believe in Jesus Christ shall be in no ways troubled, molested, or discountenanced for his or her religion. " This is the first religious toleration act on the statute books of the American colonies, and it shows to some extent the character of the Maryland settlers during that early period.

Kent County dates from 1642 and was the first county to be set up on the Eastern Shore. Chestertown was made the county seat at an early date and it has remained as such ever since. It grew and prospered and at the time of the Revolution was the most important town on the Eastern Shore.

Chestertown is the birthplace of Colonel Tench Tilghman, who helped make history by his famous ride from Yorktown to Phila-



delphia, carrying the news that Cornwallis had been defeated.

It was in the old Episcopal Church at Chestertown at the close of the Revolution, that a body of Eastern Shore members of the church met and voted to change the name of their organization from that of the Church of England to the Protestant Episcopal church. Other churches throughout the colonies soon followed their example.

## HISTORY

Early Maryland settlers wanted to build a city that would eventually become the seaport of Maryland. They wanted a city that would be the port of entry to the colony. In selecting a site for such a city they chose the present site of Chestertown. The early Maryland settlers were so serious in building this city at the selected site that they constructed an immense customs house which still stands.

According to the present owner of the building, the customs house was constructed in 1683. At that time all ships entering Maryland must clear at the customs house at Chestertown. That is they must pay the customs on the imported cargoes before they could be landed.

For approximately seventy years Chestertown enjoyed the proud distinction of being the port of entry of Maryland. Baltimore was founded in the year 1720, but it was not until 1752, when it had a population of three-hundred, that a customs house was built



there. Because of the much superior harbor in Baltimore, the ships no longer cleared from the customs house at Chestertown but went to Baltimore to pay their import duties. This change of trade made the customs house at Chestertown much too large for the needs, and it was soon sold into private ownership.

There is a very old building near the customs house known as the Catlin Mansion. The builder of this house is not definitely known but it was constructed not later than 1735. Some say that it was constructed by the English crown for the offices of the Customs house.

It is on record that the brigantine Geddes arrived in Chestertown in 1774 with a small lot of dutiable tea for some of the neighboring counties. The men of Kent assembled May 13, 1774 and threw the tea overboard the same day as that of the Boston Tea Party. At this time, however, the customs offices were not in the original customs house there. The offices were probably in some smaller building that has since been torn down.

Since about 1753 the customs house was used as a dwelling house, although it was very large for such a purpose. The interior of the building was changed considerably for the transformation. Year after year the old structure served as a home for some family. The ownership of the building passed from one person to another, each year deteriorating and declining in value. This continued for forty-eight years until 1901 when the building was bought by Wilbur W. Hubbard. Mr. Hubbard took a great deal of interest in the customs house, and he bought the building in order to preserve it for its historical value. The building was in such a dilapidated condition



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that the entire interior was rebuilt and a new roof was constructed. The building was made into an apartment house and Mr. Hubbard rented the apartments in order to get a source of revenue for his work on the building. To-day the customs house is still used as an apartment house and it is still owned by Wilbur W. Hubbard. Mr. Hubbard has kept the building in an excellent state of repair.

This is all of the actual history of the building that I could obtain. There are many tales about the old structure that tell of unusual occurrences, and explain many peculiar mythological properties of it. These tales, however, could not be proved to be true, and consequently were not included in this thesis.

The greater portion of the history of the customs house was given to me by Wilbur W. Hubbard, the present owner of the building.

#### CONSTRUCTION.

The customs house was built in 1683 by the British government. The bricks used in its construction were probably imported from England, because the colonies had not been developed to any great extent at this time. The size of the bricks in the building is  $2\frac{1}{4}" \times 4\frac{1}{4}" \times 8\frac{1}{2}"$ . This is larger than the present American brick, and it is another reason to suppose that the bricks were imported from England, as the American brick is  $2\frac{1}{4}" \times 3\frac{3}{4}" \times 8"$ .



The building stand on the south-west corner of the intersection of Front Street and High Street facing north. It is 47' wide at the front. This width extends back 25'. Then the building drops in from the west side until there is a width of only 23'. This width extends back 51' more, making a total length of the building of 76'. When looked upon from above, the building looks like a huge "L".

The building is three and one-half stories high, and at present is painted yellow in color. The south east corner is now covered with a heavy growth of ivy.

On the west side of the house, the entire brick wall is made up of courses of headers. The south wall is made up of bricks that have five or six courses of stretchers to one course of headers. The east wall and north wall have their bricks laid in courses of alternate stretchers and headers. This shows that there had been no consistent system of bricklaying adhered to during the construction. The builders must have made a very good construction job, however, because at present the original walls show no sign of any tendency to crumble or deteriorate. There are but very few cracks in the wall and the bond between the bricks is in excellent condition.

The bond is approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick. This is the usual thickness of bond used in brick-laying circles to-day. The bond is a mortar composed of lime and sand.

The whole interior has been rebuilt and made into many rather small rooms for apartments. Therefore, a description of the



interior of the customs house would have no value from the historical or construction point of view.

There were originally three underground vaults on the north side of the building. Their entrances were on the north end of the first floor. Two of the vaults have filled but one is in practically the same condition as when it was built. There is a narrow passageway which leads down steps to the vault, which is about five feet below the surface of the ground. The size of the vault is about eight feet by eight feet. The walls are painted with white-wash, but the dungeon is so dark that the walls cannot be seen unless some artificial light is present. The floor and walls are perpetually damp with a cold moisture. Some say that the vaults were used for the storing of Negro slaves, for storing wines and liquors, and for the safe keeping of gold. The one vault that is open is not used for anything now. It is preserved merely for its historical value.

There was an underground tunnel that ran from the customs house to the Catlin Mansion nearby. Some say that the Catlin House was built as an office building for the customs house. This tunnel was probably used as a means of communication between the two buildings, should they be attacked by a hostile tribe of Indians. This tunnel is now filled in.

The southmost room on the first floor has been set aside by Mr. Hubbard for the storing and displaying of his private collection of antiques. In the south wall of this room there is still



preserved an old fire-place that was constructed with the building. This fire-place is six feet high, five feet wide and three feet deep. There are two large pot hooks in the fire-place, one on each side. One often supports a large pot, while the other supports a broad frying pan.

From the outside, the building is practically the same as it originally was, except that wooden porches have been built on the south and east sides of the building. The roof, which is made of wood has been replaced and dormer windows have been added.

#### CONCLUSION.

When I first saw the proud looking old customs house, I thought surely that there were many records of the history of the building. When I learned that it had been constructed as soon *early* as 1683, I felt sure that almost any old citizen of Chestertown would know many interesting tales that related to the history of the structure. However, I found that I was mistaken in this idea. I found that there were very few people who knew even the first thing about its history. The owner was the only one who could even give me a skeleton outline of the buildings past and present. Nowhere could I find any written records of the history of the



structure. All that is known about the early life of the customs house seems to have been handed down from person to person by word of mouth.

This is such a fine old building that I believe that it should be preserved for its historical value. It is a good example of the thoroughness of the engineering and workmanship of building in the early days of our great country.



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I wish to state that most of the information in this thesis was obtained from Wilbur W. Hubbard, who gave me this information in an interview with him.

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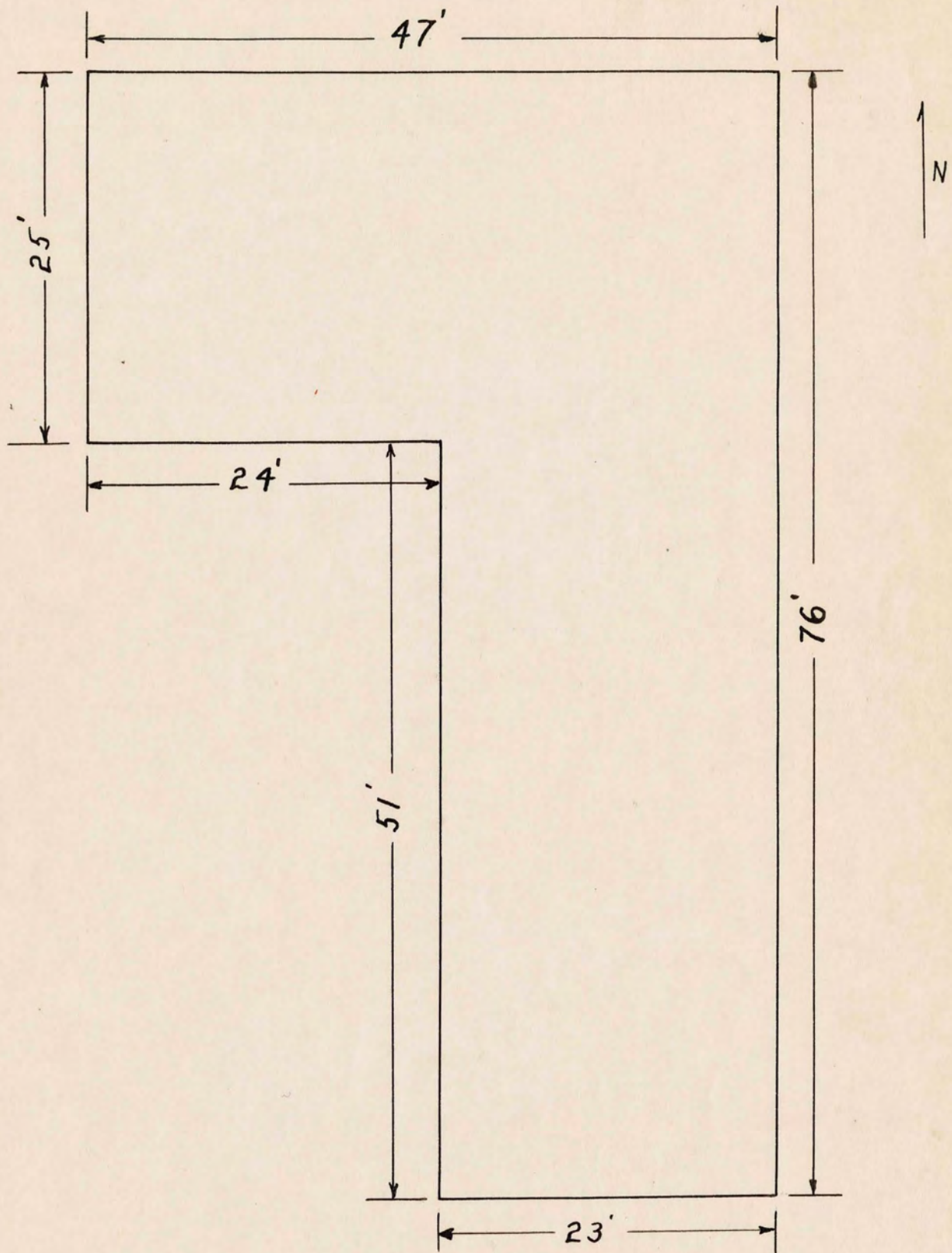


The Custom House viewed from the south east.



A view of the Customs House  
looking from the wharf.





PLAN VIEW OF THE CUSTOMS HOUSE.

Scale 1"=1'.