Worcester County
A Brief History

Contents

WORCESTER COUNTY MARYLAND
FOUNDED 1634
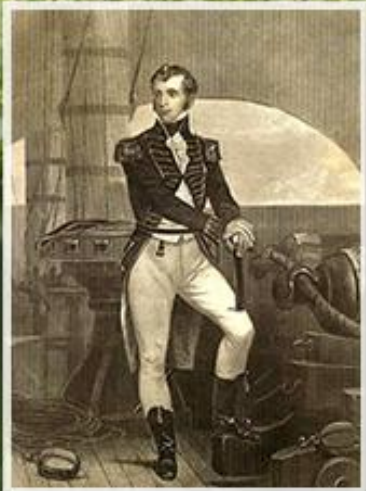
Worcester's Original Locals

Tribes of the north and mid Atlantic coastal plains including the native peoples of Worcester County were all part of the Algonquin Nations. They had similar language, dialects, and customs. One of the first Europeans to explore our county and meet these locals was Giovanni de Verrazano in 1524.

"*He described the log canoes, native dress and food of the local people as well as wild animals and the lack of stone in the area. He wrote:*

'The land is like the previous one in situation, fertility, and beauty; the woods are sparse; the land is covered with different types of trees, but they are not so fragrant since it is more northern and cold.

We saw there many vines growing wild, which climb up around the trees as they do in Cisalpline Gaul: they would doubtless produce excellent wines if they were properly cultivated, for several times we found the dry fruit sweet and pleasant, not unlike our own. The people must value them, because wherever they grow, the bushes around them are removed so that the fruit can ripen better.

We found wild roses, violets, and lilies, and many kinds of herbs and fragrant flowers different from ours. We did not find out about their houses, as they were in the interior of the country. We think from the many signs we saw that they were built of wood and grasses...

After staying here for three days, anchored off the coast, we decided to leave because of the scarcity of ports, and we continued to follow the coast which we baptized "Arcadia" on account of the beauty of the trees.' " [1]


Drawing of 16th Century Mid Atlantic Native Americans Attributed to Virginia Governor John Smith
This is believed to be typical of native people living in the region of Worcester County at the same time.

Giovanni Verrazano

Later, Captain John Smith and other explorers visited the Atlantic Coast of Maryland and made detailed maps which were used by other following European expeditions.

Another Englishman named Henry Norwood published a journal of his experience of being shipwrecked on Worcester's shores on his way to the Virginia Colony. The locals were very kind to Norwood and his companions and conducted them safely down the peninsula and across the Chesapeake to the Virginia settlement.

In 1669 the Maryland Council established Worcester County naming it for Henry Somerset, Earl of Worcester. By 1671 there were many European settlers in Worcester County pushing out the native people. A large Indian town in Maryland, Askiminokonson was established and the Pocomoke, Annamessex, Manokin, Nassawattex and Acquintica Indians were pressured to move there. This large reservation was laid out by the Pocomoke River near present day Snow Hill in 1686. Living conditions were not good there and within a few years these native peoples along with the Assateagues, mostly left the area to join with the Nanticokes who were settled in nearby Oak Orchard, Delaware. Many subsequently joined the Iroquois and emigrated north or the Delaware who moved west with the Cherokee. [2]
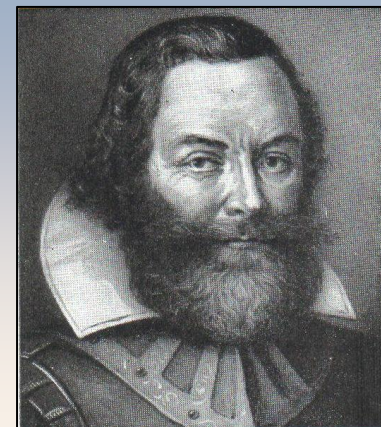
Captain John Smith

Native American dugout canoe exhibit and a working reproduction of a shallop, boats often used to travel the waters of the Pocomoke River and inland bays of Worcester County's coast during the colonial period.
Images courtesy of the Delmarva Discovery Center

Native American Names

Accomac - Land on the other side

Assateague - The river beyond

Assawoman - A cross stream

Brockanorton - Fire people

Chesapeake - Great shellfish bay

Chincoteague - A large stream

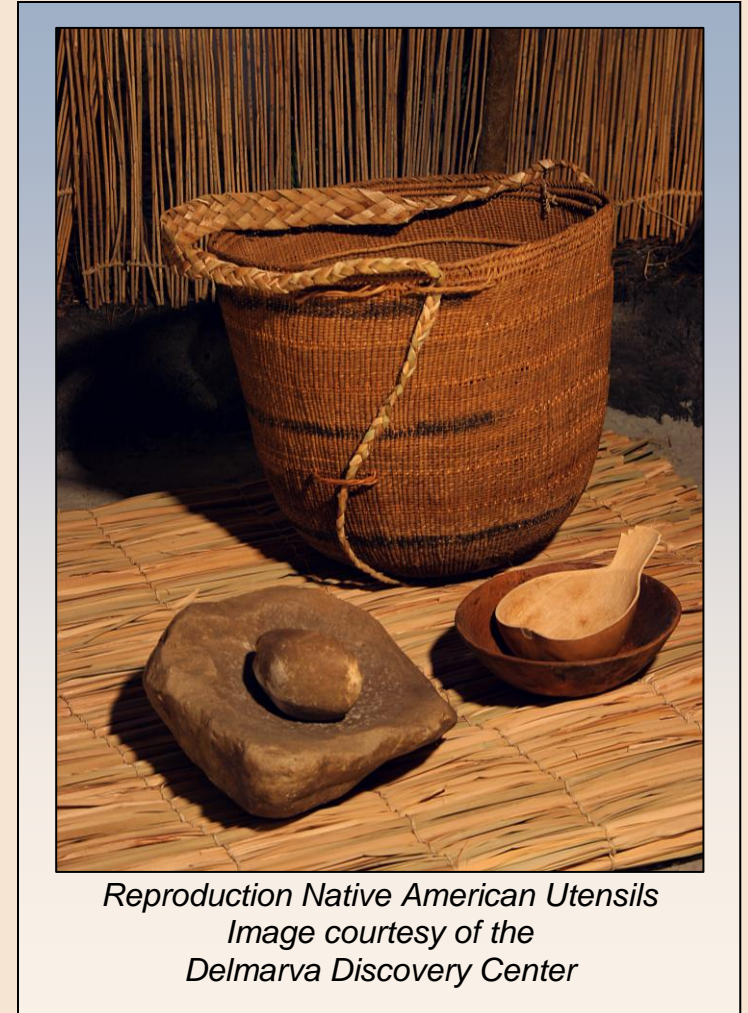Choptank - Stream flowing in the opposite direction

Nanticoke - They who work the tidewater stream

Pocomoke - Broken ground

Sinepuxent - Shallow

Wicomico - Pleasant village

Reproduction Native American Utensils
Image courtesy of the
Delmarva Discovery Center

Other tribes and place names found in the area:

Assacorkin, Chinquapin, Hominy, Hummock, Mattaponi, Nasswango, Queponco, and Transquakin [2]

From Colony To Free State

Worcester County was originally part of Somerset County until it was divided and the eastern portion became Worcester County. Early on the river provided access to the Chesapeake Bay which aided settlement and commerce.

The county had fertile soil which supported staple crops like corn and wheat. But during the colonial period the most valuable crop was tobacco. "*Because gold and silver currency was scarce, tobacco was used to buy land, slaves, indentured servants and imported goods. Another crop which was valuable to the early economy was cypress wood. Cypress trees grow along the banks of the Pocomoke River. The wood is resistant to rot and was used for homes and other buildings. Cypress wood, along with oak, pin, poplar and gum contributed much to the local economy into the twentieth century.*" [1]

On December 10, 1742 Worcester County was officially established. There were several border disputes between the states to the south and the north. Some Virginia residents on the lower peninsula wanted Somerset and Worcester to be a part of Virginia, but these efforts were rebuffed by Virginia's Governor William Berekley. The northern boundary was the subject of a longstanding argument between Charles Calvert and William Penn who both claimed parts of the Eastern Shore had been granted to them. It was not fully resolved until the Mason Dixon Line was surveyed and accepted by Maryland and Pennsylvania in 1764.

During the Revolutionary war period, there were both loyalists to the Crown and Patriots to the newly forming country. The Eastern Shore region saw comparatively little bloodshed and was dubbed the "breadbasket of the Revolution" because its farms supplied the Continental Army. Much needed salt for provisions was produced at a plant near Sinepuxent. Local militias from Worcester County served in some of the most famous battles of the war.

During the War of 1812, defense of the county was concentrated along the coast. Locals found themselves fending off piracy and land raids by British ships. Meanwhile Worcester County native Stephen Decatur, commanding the frigate the United States, captured the British ship Macedonia while defending American interests in Tripoli. He was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal but unfortunately later died in a duel. [3]
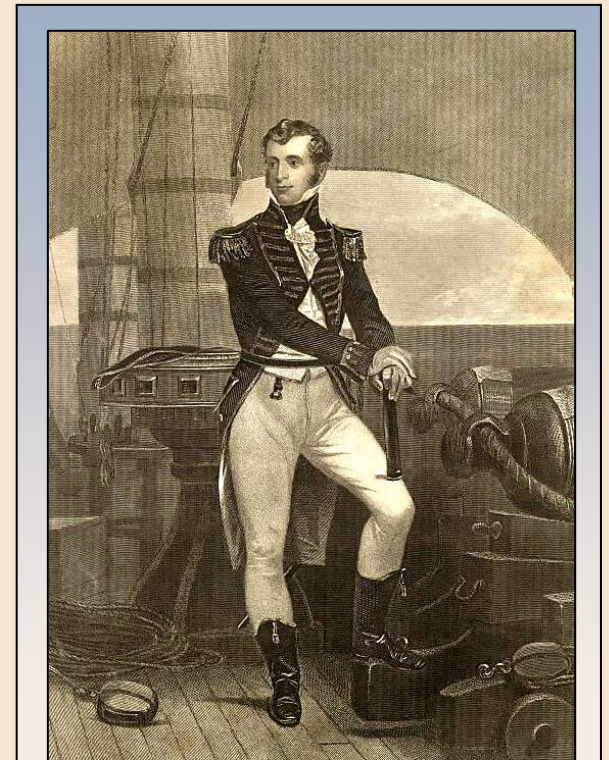
Commodore Stephen Decatur
Image courtesy of the
Library of Commerce

A Divided Land: Civil War

Many Worcester County landowners were slave owners and therefore Southern sympathizers during the Civil War. Before hostilities broke out local militias were formed to prevent slave insurrections. A little more than a third of the county's residents were slaves at that time. But many people wanted to protect the Union and free the slaves, so eventually the locals divided and served in armies on both sides of the war.

In November 1861, Gen. Henry H. Lockwood commanded a force of about 4,500 United States Army soldiers in and around Snow Hill. Some of the troops camped on the Worcester County Courthouse yard. His orders were to reassure the civilian population, restore lighthouses to working order, and to disarm and disperse any Confederates that his command encountered.

Worcester County Courthouse circa 1861
Image courtesy of the Worcester County Commissioners

Isaiah Fassett
(Photo courtesy David Briddell)

Lockwood encountered small numbers of Confederate troops in Newtown (now Pocomoke City) and also in Virginia at Temperanceville and Drummondtown. *"The Confederates fled, and many of them threw their weapons aside as they escaped. Lockwood, along with his family, occupied the Drummondtown house of Dr. Peter F. Brown, who had fled across the Chesapeake Bay. The expedition was considered successful and ended on November 22."* [4]

One local hero was Isaiah "Uncle Zear" Fassett from Sinepuxent. He and his brothers, Franklin, Andrew, John, and George, were freed slaves who served in the U.S. Army. *"His owner, Sarah A. Bruff, released him from bondage at age nineteen on November 11, 1863, when the U.S. Army paid her $300 in compensation."* Fassett's regiment *"was among the first to occupy Richmond on April 3, 1865. After the Confederate capital fell, Fassett was promoted to corporal."* [5]

Storm Surges & Modern Times

For almost a century following the Civil War, Worcester County was simply a quiet farm and fishing community. The commercial crops grown were mostly corn, rye, soybeans, potatoes, tomatoes, beans, and strawberries. Poultry farming and lumber also grew to be important industries. Agriculture continues to be a central part of the local economy.

Vintage Ocean City Postcard

During two World Wars (and all the conflicts have followed) local young people have joined in the armed services. World War II saw fishing vessels being attacked by German submarines off the Worcester County coast. But storms have always been the greatest threat. A hurricane on August 23, 1933 destroyed the fishing village on what is now the North end of Assateague Island and cut the inlet at what is now the southern end of Ocean City. This destroyed the rail road bridge which had brought tourists, and changed the town forever. The storm also destroyed a very popular resort at Public Landing on the coastal bay due east of Snow Hill. That little town once attracted visitors to rides, a bowling alley, and swimming. The pier, the swimming area, and a small tight knit community remain there.

In March of 1962 another storm caused extensive flooding and again threatened to destroy Ocean City. But what followed was a building boom. Now on busy summer weekends the county's population jumps from just over 50,000 to over 300,000 souls.

Midtown Ocean City Skyline - Photo Courtesy Dana Kester-McCabe

Our Historic Towns [6]

Berlin

The village of Berlin (accent on the first syllable), began in the 1790s around the original 300 acre 1677 land grant that became Burley Plantation. The town's Main Street was originally part of the path connecting the Assateague Indians with the neighboring Pocomoke tribe. In colonial times the path became the Philadelphia Post Road, the main travel route up the shore to the centers of commerce to the north and west.

It is believed that the name Berlin was derived from a contraction of "Burleigh Inn," a tavern at the crossroads of the Philadelphia Post and Sinepuxent Roads. In the early 1900s Berlin's bustling commercial and tourist business supported more hotels than neighboring Ocean City.

Berlin boasts 47 structures on the National Register of Historic Places spanning two centuries of architecture. The town is the 1885 birthplace of the Reverend Charles Albert Tindley who composed the now famous song "We Shall Overcome" among his many achievements. Berlin is also the birthplace of Stephen Decatur, the 19th century naval hero.

Today, the downtown commercial district is a true success story. Tree lined streets, art galleries, antique shops, the restored Atlantic Hotel and the Globe once again captivate and attract visitors. Berlin was recently the filming location for Paramount Pictures Runaway Bride and Disney's Tuck Everlasting.

Berlin Chamber of Commerce: http://www.berlinchamber.org

Berlin, Maryland

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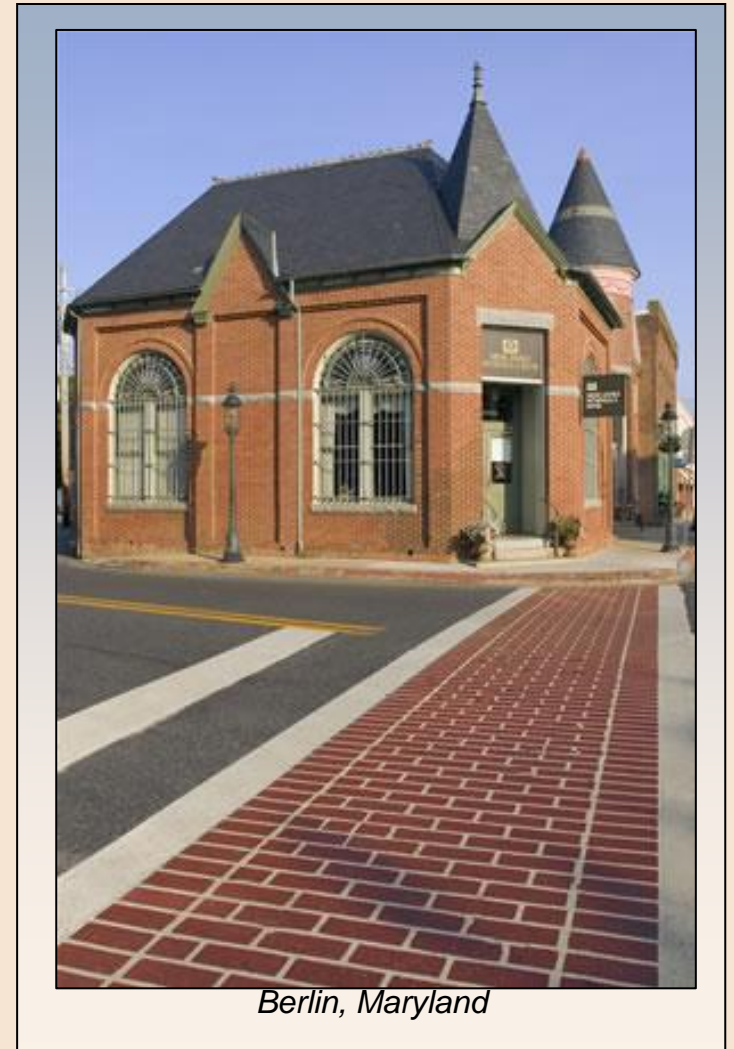
Ocean City

More than a century ago, Ocean City was a barren, wind-swept barrier island that separated the Atlantic Ocean from Sinepuxent Bay. This lonely stretch of sand was known only to a handful of fishermen who came to the island. Shortly after the Civil War in 1869, the Rhode Island Inn was constructed for the fishermen and others who sought the beach as a refuge.

The popularity of the inn began to realize the beach's potential to attract visitors. In 1872 early developers of the island named it the "Ladies Resort of the Ocean" inferring a gentility to attract families to visit.

Access from the mainland was by stagecoach and then by ferry. The Atlantic was the first hotel. It opened on the fourth of July 1875 and still stands today. Popularity of the resort grew rapidly with the construction of the railroad bridge. This was followed by construction of the famous boardwalk, which was permanently laid in 1910.

Ocean City Life-Saving Station Museum

Then in August 1933, a hurricane ravaged the island. The town was slow to recover but benefitted by the event. The heavy seas opened an inlet separating the town from what is now, Assateague Island. The inlet created a safe harbor for fishing vessels and boosted the town's economy.

Today, the town is a year round destination which truly offers something for everyone The Ocean City Lifesaving Station Museum traces the history of Ocean City from a quaint fishing village to the state's largest resort. Built in 1891, the station has served both the U.S. Life Saving Service and the U.S. Coast Guard. Unusual objects from shipwrecks are displayed as is an exhibit of the Life Saving Service on the Eastern Shore. Aquariums, dolls houses, mermaids and old fashioned bathing suits are also featured.

Town of Ocean City: http://www.oceancitymd.gov
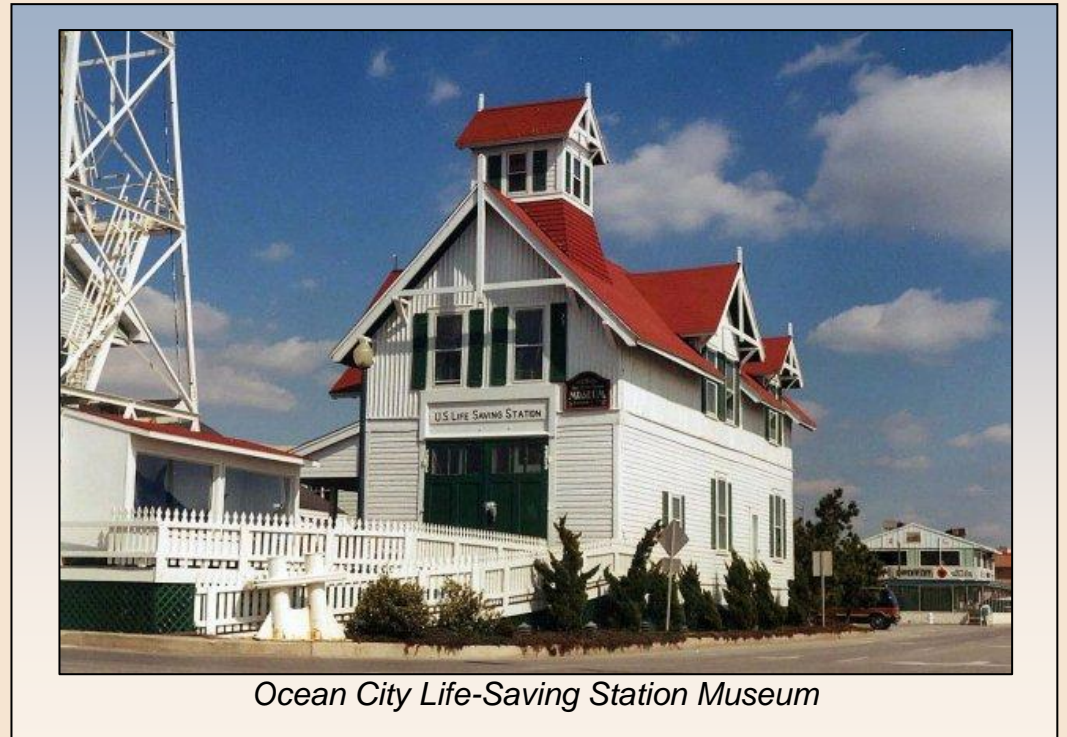
Ocean Pines

As you pass through the North or South Gates of Ocean Pines to view this unique, carefully planned waterfront community, drive down the parkway to savor the breath taking bay view of the Ocean City skyline.

The planned residential community of Ocean Pines encompasses 3500 acres, with over nine miles of waterfront and waterways, twelve miles of canals and 67 miles of surfaced roads. There are 7000 platted lots in the community, with 4500 homes built or under construction.

Since opening on July 12th, 1968, the development now offers a diversity of lifestyle options, ranging from starter homes, condominiums and age-restricted communities, to million dollar estates. Seasonal, weekly and long-term rentals are available. An assisted living community offers weekly care, allowing the elderly to vacation with their families while still receiving the assistance they need.

Ocean Pines, Maryland

 Golf, tennis, nature trails, dining, marinas, and special events are available for public use. Ocean Pines is home to the Delmarva Peninsula's only 18- hole golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones, Sr. The Championship level tennis courts include eight composition and four hard courts staffed by professionals ready to provide individual or group lessons. Cruise to the marina restaurants to enjoy spectacular waterfront dining.

Spend family time together on the Hiking, Biking and Walking Trails leading through the Pines from our public parks. The community also hosts holiday, family and cultural events throughout the year.

Ocean Pines: http://www.oceanpines.org

Pocomoke City

Pocomoke City is at the county's southern tip. Settled in the 1600s on the banks of the Pocomoke River, the town has been called by many names through the centuries, beginning with Stevens Ferry, Warehouse Landing and Newtown. The name of Pocomoke City was finally adopted in 1878.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s shipbuilding was the largest enterprise. Tull Shipyards, on the banks of the river near downtown, built some 200 vessels from luxury ocean-going schooners to steamships. Furs, whiskey and tobacco found their way from Pocomoke to ports in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. Today, it is the industrial center of Worcester County. A 98-acre fully serviced industrial park is ready for immediate construction of new industrial buildings.

Pocomoke City's commercial district is reminiscent of the early 20th century. A beautiful example is the art-deco Mar-Va Theater. Other attractions include the Costen House Museum, home of the city's first mayor, the Sturgis One Room School House Museum, and Cypress Park and nature trail. The town also hosts a first class museum the Delmarva Discovery Center which has permanent and special exhibits devoted to the history and environment of the region.

But the Pocomoke River continues to be the centerpiece. Its surrounding wetlands are known as a sanctuary for birds and waterfowl. More than 127 species of birds have been sighted in its swampy reaches, including the pilliated woodpecker, and the bald eagle. The Pocomoke River has been designated a wild and scenic river by the state of Maryland. Avid fishermen are drawn to the dark, tea-colored waters. Popular species include perch, gar, catfish, pickerel, herring and large-mouth bass.

Pocomoke City, Maryland

The town also has a nature and exercise trail along the river, boating, year-round golfing, and bicycling along the Viewtrail 100 bike path through Worcester County.

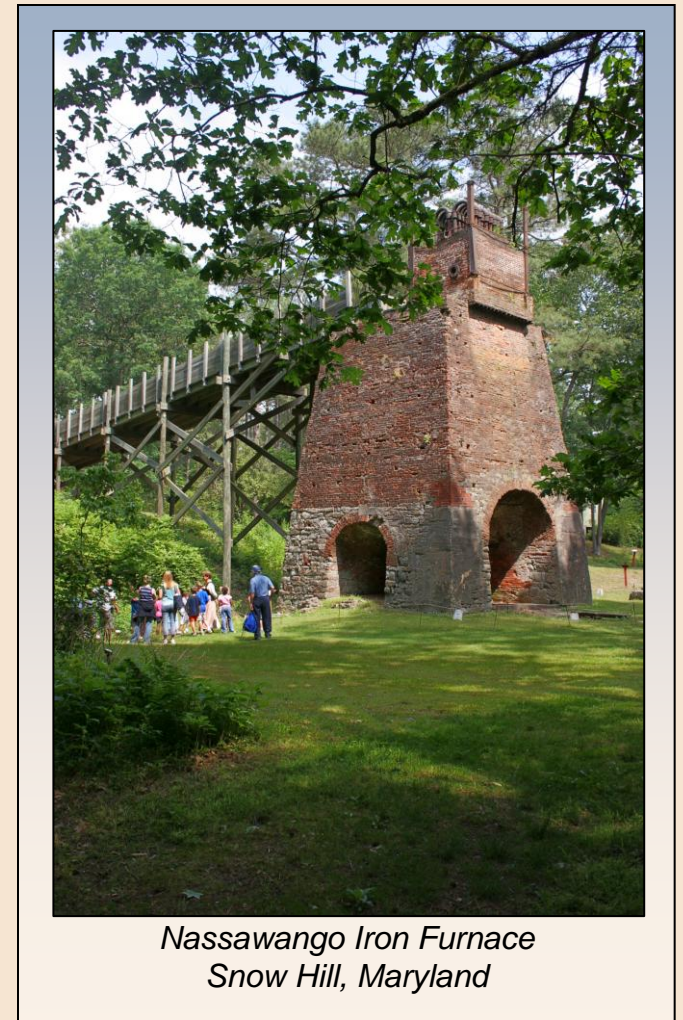**Pocomoke City Website:** http://www.cityofpocomoke.com
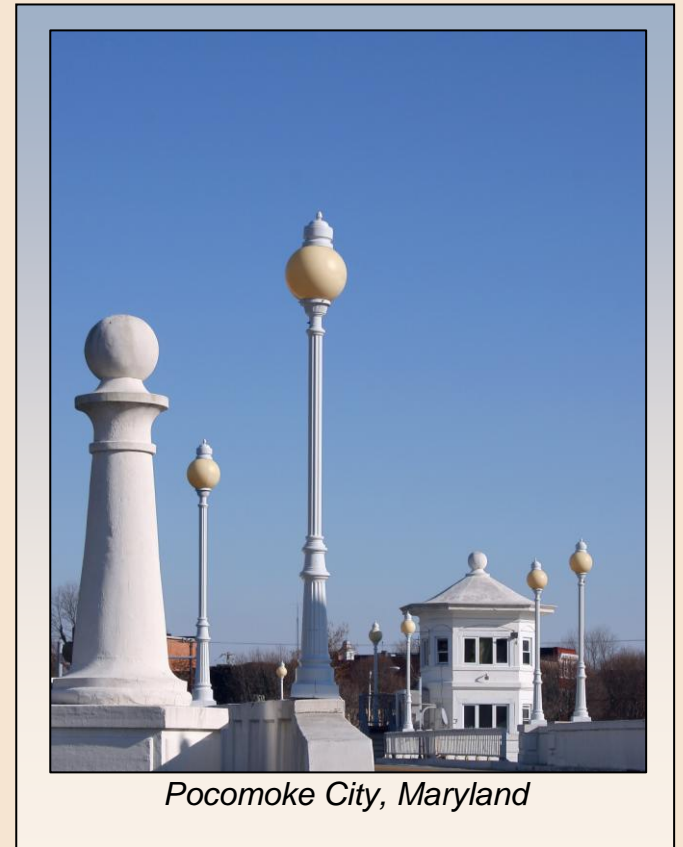
Snow Hill

Chartered in 1686, this small settlement grew and prospered as a farming and business community with the Pocomoke River playing a key role. Snow Hill became the county seat in 1742, when the county was formed. Imported goods came through Snow Hill to be taxed. In addition, Snow Hill was the home of a thriving shipbuilding industry. The railroad provided a new boost after the Civil War, continuing the town's importance in the shipping of goods. It has remained a trading, commercial and governmental hub of a rich agricultural area.

A disastrous fire destroyed the original downtown in 1893 but, fortunately, many of the historic homes and public buildings remain. Its appearance of quiet elegance and tree-lined streets contrast with the bustle of county business. The Pocomoke River attracts boaters, canoers, kayakers, fishermen, birdwatchers--and is a beautiful setting for concerts at the pavilion.

Resting on the banks of the scenic Pocomoke River, Snow Hill is a collage of handsome churches and manicured Colonial and Victoria-style homes. Enormous sycamores line streets. It seems to live in a forgotten era that is nonetheless familiar and comforting. The Julia A. Purnell Museum displays historical memorabilia and antique stitchery. The downtown also boasts a vibrant arts district with galleries, antique shops, restaurants, and live entertainement.

Just a few miles from Snow Hill, the Nassawango Iron Furnace brings Worcester County history to life. Now a living history museum, it recreates daily life during the mid-nineteenth century. From 1828 to 1850, the Nassawango Iron Furnace was in its heyday. Hundreds of people -- miners, sawyers and colliers, molders and firemen, carters, draymen and bargemen -- were engaged in gathering iron ore from the nearby bogs, smelting it day and night in the furnace, and loading cooled pig iron bars into barges to be floated down Nassawango Creek to the Pocomoke River.

Nassawango Iron Furnace
Snow Hill, Maryland

Snow Hill's Website: http://www.snowhillmd.com

Worcester County Map

In addition to the towns already mentioned, there are many charming small hamlets and unincorporated towns.

1. Berlin
2. Bishopville
3. Boxiron
4. Cedartown
5. Friendship
6. George Island Landing
7. Germantown
8. Girdletree
9. Goodwill
10. Ironshire
11. Klej Grange
12. Libertytown
13. Nassawango Hills
14. Newark
15. Ocean City
16. Ocean Pines
17. Pocomoke City
18. Poplartown
19. Public Landing
20. Showell
21. Sinnepuxent
22. Snow Hill (County Seat)
23. South Point
24. Stockton
25. Taylorville
26. West Ocean City
27. Whaleyville
28. Whiteon

Worcester County Symbols

The county flag is a navy blue field with two arrows centered on a red cross.

The official seal of Worcester County is of a shield bearing the Calvert Arms above which is a coronet (symbolic of the Earl of Worcester) and is inscribed the words "County Worcester".

Assateague Wild Horses

Though they are not an official symbol of the county the wild horses of Assateague are a favorite of locals and visitors alike. There are a number of theories about where they might have originally come form:

1. They were refugees from a Spanish galleon which wrecked on the coast during a storm.

2. They were livestock taken to the island to be hidden from tax assessors.

3. They were livestock taken there to graze and then never retrieved because something happened to the owners.

Sources:

[1] Along the Seaboard Side: The Architectural History of Worcester County Maryland, Paul Baker Touart, 1994, Worcester County

[2] Indians of The Eastern Shore of Maryland & Virginia, C.A. Weslager 1950, Lewis Historical Publishing Co. Inc. NY

[3] Worcester County Maryland's Arcadia, Dr. Reginald V. Truitt and Dr. Millard G. Les Callette, Worcester County Historical Society 1977

[4] Maryland Civil War Trails: Worcester County Courthouse

[5] Maryland Civil War Trails: Isaiah Fassett

[6] Descriptions of Our Historic Towns came from the 1995-2009 Worcester County Tourism Website: http://visitworcester.org

Unless otherwise noted all images are property of Worcester County Tourism or from the public domain.

Find out more:

Worcester County Heritage Sites: http://www.visitworcester.org/index.php/site/pages_heritage

Worcester County Museums: http://www.visitworcester.org/index.php/site/pages_museums

Worcester County - African American Heritage: http://www.visitworcester.org/printables/Worcester_African-American_Heritage.pdf

A Timeline of Worcester County's History: http://www.mdgenweb.org/worcester/history.htm

Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Council: http://www.lowershoreheritage.org/

Maryland Kid's Page: (State Bird, Symbols, & more) http://www.mdkidspage.org

About Maryland's Flag: http://www.sos.state.md.us/Services/MdFlag.htm

Maryland's Government: http://www.maryland.gov

Maryland Historic Trust: http://mht.maryland.gov