

Mr. Henry Chandlee Forman, in his book Early Manor and Plantation Houses of Maryland, 1934, includes a photograph and sketch of Mt. Tirzah house. I know of no other record than the following observations I made in 1965.

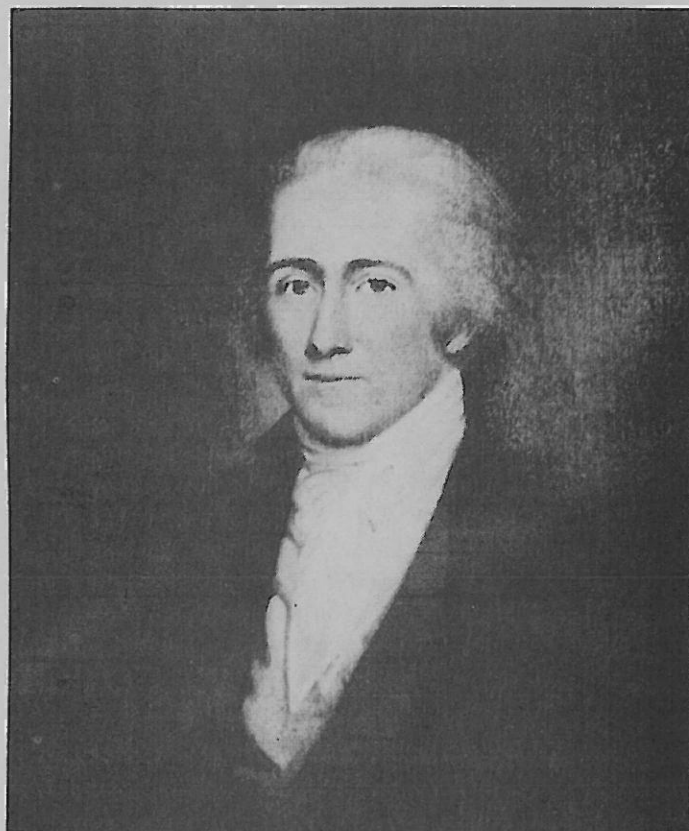
Mt. Tirzah commanded a view from a steep hill about two miles from the Pickawaxen Creek and the Potomac River. The incline had apparently been terraced into three tiers. The house itself was unique in that it was one of the few remaining large frame houses of the 18th Century. The main section was a two and a half story gambrel structure with three dormer windows and a porch on both north and south sides. A massive chimney almost covered the western end. Oddly enough, despite its size, this chimney contained only two main floor fireplaces. Constructed within the brick, between the fireplaces was a niche which formed a cupboard in the corner of the main room. This niche was plastered on the interior and contained scrolled shelves. There was no paneling in the house and the plastered walls were covered with graffiti. The house seemed amazingly solid, although most of the windows seemed to have been out for some time. The main floor was composed of four rooms, the larger two facing the river. The space behind them included a small hall, a boxed stairway and two lesser rooms. There were two chimneys on the east end which contained four fireplaces to accommodate the upper and main floor rooms. At this end of the house, rooms had been added to join the originally detached kitchen. This kitchen was gone but a shedlike structure had been attached to the old chimney. Southwest of the house, was the family gravesite. Although overgrown there were two markers and five flat slabs. These stones are recorded in the D.A.R. Tombstone and Bible Records of Charles County Maryland, 1939-40, by Ross.

The Harris family took active part in the Revolutionary War effort as indicated on various civil and military records and their name is among the signers of the Oath of Allegiance to Maryland and Charles County in 1778.

At the time of the War of 1812, Gwinn Harris (1780-1837) was a Naval Officer. An interesting letter written by him to the Secretary of the Navy in Sept. 1812 regards the capture of a British gunboat and the distribution of the money impounded. Upon retirement from the Navy he entered politics and at the time of his death was President of the Executive Council for Maryland.

The men of Mt. Tirzah served in the courts of Maryland for nearly a century. Thomas Harris, Jr. (1769-1829) of Mt. Tirzah and Annapolis served for about forty years as Clerk or Deputy Clerk of what is now the Court of Appeals of Maryland. He was compiler of Maryland Laws and editor of the early Maryland Reports, "Harris and McHenry", "Harris and Johnson" and "Harris and Gill". He was author of "Harris' Entries", a two-volume work of forms comprising 1500 pages, which he published in 1801 and which is still used largely in the Clerk of the United States District Court here.

A framed photograph of a portrait of Mr. Harris by either James or Charles Willson Peale was presented to the Court of Appeals of Maryland in 1937 by his great, great nephew. Because Mr. Harris was a Charles Countian, a contributor to the



THOMAS HARRIS JR. (1769 - 1829)

Bar, and a contemporary of the Reconstructed Court House at Port Tobacco, the Southern Maryland Regional Committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Maryland decided to have the portrait copied in oil as a gift to the Society for the Restoration of Port Tobacco. However, two years of searching did not produce the portrait, a copy, nor the framed photograph. It was realized that the photograph had disappeared in moving from the old to the new Court of Appeals Building in Annapolis. Finally, a photograph of the portrait was found and has been copied by a Baltimore artist, in the manner of Peale.

A brother of Gwinn and Thomas Harris, Jr., Joseph Harris (1773-1855) of Ellenborough in St. Mary's County, was Clerk of the Circuit Court for 50 years. He was held in such esteem by the people of Leonardtown that upon his death at Mt. Tirzah, the home of his son, Henry Reeder Harris (1822-1894), a day of mourning was declared on the day of his interment at Ellenborough.

Another son of Joseph Harris, Benjamin Gwinn Harris (1806-1895) was a Representative from Maryland's 5th District, which includes Charles County. He was elected to the 38th and 39th Congresses (Mar. 4, 1863 - Mar. 3, 1867) after having served in the State House of Delegates (1833-1836). An account of his Congressional career is found in Chronicles of St. Mary's Vol. 4, No. 4, 5 and 6. The issues dealt with debates on slave holders' compensation and trials by military

courts which belonged in civil courts, e.g. Lincoln Assassination Trials. They give an account of his arrest for treason in 1865, his imprisonment in "Old Capitol" prison at the same time as those accused of complicity in the "Lincoln Plot", his trial by Military Court and his conviction. Subsequently, he was pardoned by President Johnson. Upon returning to Congress, Mr. Harris worked for moderation in the reconstruction of the South. In 1867 he and other Marylanders were responsible for the U.S. Naval Academy being permanently located in Maryland. In 1861, it had been moved to Newport, R.I. and was returned to Annapolis in 1865.

These issues are good evidence of the pressure of the Federal Government upon the people of Southern Maryland during and immediately following the Civil War. They help to give evidence to support the reason for the general decline politically and economically of the whole area at this time. An economic depression on a national scale followed the Civil War. In addition to the local depression, a scarcity of labor to work the fields was of prime importance. The land records of Charles County attest to the hardship as many properties were heavily mortgaged and large holdings were split into parcels. Mt. Tirzah did not escape this trend as the Harris family too began to lose its economic grip. In 1876 the land was divided into 3 parcels with the house site retaining 285 acres. After the death of Henry Reeder Harris in 1895, his widow moved to Baltimore and the property became heavily mortgaged. The last Harris of Mt. Tirzah was Benjamin G. Harris (1849-1936) who taught school at Harris Lot at the turn of the Century. The land records show the property gradually divided among family members and Mt. Tirzah House no longer served as a shelter for the Harris family but became the home of family connections, the Maddox.

During the 20th Century the house became dilapidated and finally abandoned. In 1965, I researched Mt. Tirzah for a Graduate History Course at the University of Maryland. At that time I wrote . . . "I am afraid it is to become part of the great east coast megalopolis unless it is rescued by someone SOON who will value it as a magnificent restoration project . . . The House itself, . . . typifies a lovely family seat of the Eighteenth Century and its beauty should awaken an interest in its preservation."

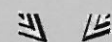
Alas, the Harris surname is gone, the House is gone, the Peale portrait is gone. Except for Mr. Forman's record, my Seminar paper, and accompanying slides (now a part of the Charles County Historical Society), all is gone.

As the newspaper article reported - AN OLD HOUSE BURNED!

## NEW OFFICERS

The annual Meeting of the Charles County Historical Society was held at Old Durham Church on October 21, 1978. The officers elected for the 1979-1980 period were: George C. Dyson, President, Mrs. John Hanson Mitchell, Vice-President, and Vivian S. Malczyk, Secretary. The Board members for the three year term 1979-1981 are: Warren Barley, Charles LaHood Jr., Mrs. R. L. Mitchell, Louise Turner, and Jim Ward.

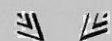
Mr. Watson Perrygo retired as President after serving for the past eight years - a period of impressive growth and activity, particularly marked by the reconstruction of Friendship House on the Campus of the Charles County Community College (See: The Record, May 1976 for a full description of this noteworthy historic project.)



## GIFTS

The Colonial Dames of Southern Maryland presented to the Society on October 1, 1978, two early documents of the Thomas Harris Family. Both documents were restored and framed and are now hanging in Friendship House.

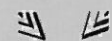
Epsilon Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma presented to Friendship House a framed copy of the Dent Family Coat-of-Arms.



## NEW ACQUISITIONS FOR FRIENDSHIP HOUSE

The Friendship House Committee has acquired a Pennsylvania tavern table (24" x 60") and an early small country blanket chest. Both pieces of furniture are now in place.

The Committee stands ready to accept gifts of furniture and other early items of interest for possible use in Friendship House.



## EDITOR'S NOTE

Articles of historic interest about Southern Maryland are welcome. Please send articles and other communications to: Editor, The Record, P. O. Box 273, La Plata, Maryland 20646.





## WINTER MEETING NOTICE

The Winter meeting of the Historical Society of Charles County will be held on Saturday, January 27, 1979 at 7:30 p.m. at the Hawthorne Country Club. Mrs. Elaine Smith, Public Education Officer for St. Mary's City Commission, will present a slide lecture entitled: "Perspectives on St. Mary's City and the Maryland Dove."

Coffee and dessert will be served. Please phone Sally Barley (934-9629) by Monday, January 22, if you plan to attend. Please note: THIS IS THE ONLY NOTICE YOU WILL RECEIVE FOR THIS MEETING.

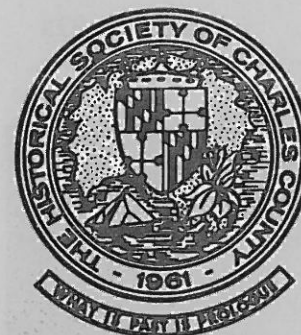
## SPRING MEETING

The Spring Dinner meeting has been scheduled for Saturday, May 19, at the Methodist Church in La Plata.

The Historical Society of Charles County  
Port Tobacco, Maryland 20677



Mr. Michael Nozzio  
Rt # 1, Box 65  
Indian Head, Md. 20640



## The RECORD

Publication of the Historical Society of Charles County, Inc.

January 1979

George C. Dyson, President

Charles G. LaHood, Jr., Editor

## AN OLD HOUSE BURNED

By Louise Boone Turner

In 1969, an article in the Maryland Independent\* reported:

*An old house on Maddox Farm in Thompkinsville, belonging to Millard F. West, Jr. of Chevy Chase, burned completely on November 5. There was no one living in the house and no electricity was in use. The Sheriff's Office suggests the fire was set deliberately.*

The account did not include the name of the devastated house, nor the name of the farm. To a handful of my generation this article drew only curiosity. To the next generation possibly it will not even draw attention. This seemingly obscure house was far from that! Although not the seat of a nationally famed family, it does represent the substantial values and lifestyle of a people who played a significant role in Southern Maryland history. Here is a classic pattern too often repeated in this area, an old landmark wiped out with no data compiled relevant to our heritage.



MT. TIRZAH

Mt. Tirzah, first called Harris Land, has through the years had six different names. It was originally a 300 acre freehold grant to Thomas Harris, planter, who came to the colony from England in 1650 with his wife and one manservant. This grant was recorded in "St. Mary's City" in 1651 before William Stone, Lt. of the Province. An investigation of the Harris property shows the changes in the political districts of Southern Maryland as the province changed from a Palatinate into part of an independent nation. As first recorded, the land lay within the William and Mary Hundred, an area which contained 100 families. Later, Maryland was divided into 23 counties, with Charles, the fourth county, formed in 1658. In 1690, to support the Established Church, the counties were divided into Parishes. The Harris family, being Anglican, probably did not mind paying its tithe (usually in tobacco) to the William and Mary Parish. In 1868 Charles County was divided into nine election districts and this area between the Potomac and Wicomico Rivers was classified as Harris Lot, District 5.

Evidence that the Harris family prospered at Mt. Tirzah is in the records of Charles County. An estate inventory presented "in open Court held for orphans", 1664, listed the chattels and 300 acres of "Thomas Harris's sone of Thomas Harris's deceased". An indenture record of 1673 proves "Thomas Harris of Pickaaxen" had an indentured servant. During the 17th Century, as there were virtually no Indian, nor other acute survival problems for the settlers of Charles County their energies were turned to tobacco production. This very lucrative crop required a large acreage and labor force. Records do not reveal the time and perseverance required of the colonists to transform a wilderness into a productive agricultural area. Ultimately, by the first census, 1790, a Thomas Harris had 24 slaves and the Harris lands had increased to over 800 acres. This plantation family was typical of the landed gentry of Southern Maryland in the 19th Century.

In 1764 a Thomas Harris (1741-1815) married Ann Gwinn, and it is their family of thirteen children through whom the Mt. Tirzah story runs during the latter 18th and 19th Centuries. In approximately 1774 Mt. Tirzah was built. This was 124 years and four generations after the first Thomas Harris acquired his freehold grant. A fact often overlooked, by the uninitiated in reviewing Colonial architecture, is the span of time from which the Colonial family acquired land to the actual construction of the 18th Century mansion. It is interesting that the following Southern Maryland landmarks were either built, or maintained by Harris offspring: ELLENBOROUGH, HARD BARGAIN, LAGRANGE, MT. TIRZAH, TUDOR HALL, MT. REPUBLICAN AND WAVERLY.

\*Maryland Independent. Vol. 95, No. 45, November 13, 1969, P. 1.