

munity. La Plata, however, is not content to live in the past and its citizens are vigorous and confident of its future. The town is not shackled by tradition or unmindful of today's obligations and opportunities as is shown by its recent growth. Its progress has been slow but sound with wise heads to shape its path. Its people and their buildings are reminiscent of a past when one had time to savor the good life; but, with a surge in population to twenty four hundred and a growth in area to five square miles, life can no longer move slowly in the county seat.

Documents Restored by Barrow Restoration Shop

by Marcia E. Monaco

With funds provided by the Historical Society of Charles County, three unique and valuable documents belonging to the Society have been processed for preservation at the W.J. Barrow Restoration Shop located in the State Library Building in Richmond, Virginia. The Barrow Shop is an internationally recognized facility for the restoration and preservation of paper materials. Libraries from every state and many foreign countries send their priceless documents to Richmond for treatment.

Founded by William James Barrow in 1936, the Shop was, until 1977, a research laboratory funded for over 20 years by the Council on Library Resources with monies supplied by the Ford Foundation. At the laboratory Mr. Barrow and his associates did basic research in paper preservation methods, document restoration, and the development of equipment which would assist in the preservation of paper materials and records. Equipment and processes invented and perfected at the Barrow Laboratory have been installed and are in use today at the Hall of Records in Annapolis, at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., and in many other states and foreign countries.

The basic Barrow process consists of deacidification of the paper document and then a process of lamination using tissue and cellulose acetate film which provide permanent protection

with the characteristics of stability, strength, visibility, and the potential for removal of the laminate in the future should it ever become necessary. The document thus preserved may then be handled without fear of damage, and may be examined by scholars without further deterioration.

The three documents which the Historical Society has now restored and which are on permanent loan to the Southern Maryland Room at Charles County Community College were all from the J. Bruce Kremer collection. These priceless items include a letter from Thomas Jefferson with its original franked envelope, dated January 10, 1826, written at Monticello shortly before Jefferson's death to Edward A. Turpin of St. Francisville on the subject of the University of Virginia; a letter from Henry Clay, written at Ashland, Kentucky to Henry S. Randall, dated September 21, 1840, on the subject of merits of Hereford and Durham Cattle; and, a letter from John Hanson to the Governor of Virginia (Thomas Jefferson) dated January 11, 1782 at Philadelphia, concerning an ordinance regarding the legality of captains on the water.

The Society spent \$135 to preserve these three items, but \$100 of that was for the Jefferson letter alone because of its badly torn and bug-eaten condition. The money thus spent will provide for future historians a unique treasure estimated to be safe from further deterioration for at *least* 300 years (the average life of an untreated document is less than 50 years).

The Southern Maryland Room has several dozen more fascinating documents from the J. Bruce Kremer and other collections badly in need of the Barrow process. As money becomes available the preservation of all such materials will be completed.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Articles of historic interest on Southern Maryland are needed for future issues of **The Record**. Please send articles and other communications to: Editor, **The Record**, P.O. Box 273, La Plata, Maryland 20646.

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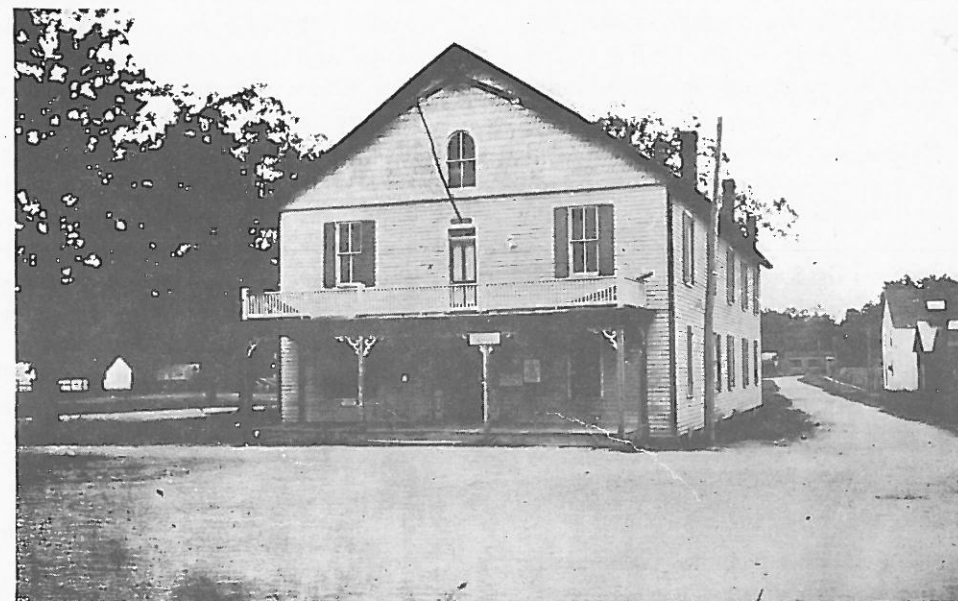
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TOWN HALL, La Plata, Md.

Town Hall, La Plata, Md. CIRCA 1900

(From the collection of Mrs. Ira Dell Newcomb)

The Town of La Plata, Charles County, Maryland A Historical Profile

by Kathryn Cochrane Newcomb
Historian for the Town of La Plata*

La Plata was just a crossroads in an oak forest until the Stonestreets on the west and the Chapmans on the east gave the Pennsylvania Railroad the land it needed for a right of way to build its railroad in 1869. The town, which was destined to become the most important settlement in the county, was really a creature of this railroad because of a scheduled stop called "La Plata Station". The station, still in existence, consisted of a warehouse and a passenger waiting room. In the past year, 1980, the station, in sad state of disrepair, has been leased by the Davis Corporation and restored to prime condition, just as it appeared when the railroad first came to town. Because of the litigation in which the railroad is now involved, no permanent disposition of the station can be made at this time. The townspeople think it would make a fine town museum since La Plata developed as a child of the railroad. It is interesting to

note that this portion of the Pennsylvania Railroad from Bowie to Pope's Creek is really the "mainline" of this company, established in order to obtain a branch line into Washington, D.C., which city's transportation rights had been franchised to another railroad.

In the beginning, the town on the east side of the railroad tracks was built on Chapman land and the Chapman family donated the land to construct the streets in this section. Thus, both the station and the town took their names from Chapman's "La Plata Farm" as it was commonly known. The land for the first Christ Church rectory on Oak Avenue was also a gift of this family. The first post office was established in 1873 with Robert F. Chapman as its postmaster. In this year also, the railroad started its service to the town and La Plata began to grow.

La Plata had a rather tumultuous beginning whose background goes back to the last quarter of the 19th century. The then county seat of Port Tobacco was a storm center of a bitter political battle concerning the moving of the county seat to La Plata or Chapel Point. La Plata, three miles inland, to the east, boasting a railroad siding and a telegraph station, was growing and began to demand the Court House. A special election was held in Port Tobacco in May 1892 to determine whether the Court House should remain at Port Tobacco or be

*Presented at the Charles County Historical Society Meeting on January 31, 1981.

moved to La Plata. Port Tobacco easily won but less than three months later, the Court House burned, however, not before the records had been carefully removed. Obviously an incendiary act, no one was prosecuted and no one ever admitted to knowledge of the deed. Feelings ran so high, it seemed impractical to rebuild the Court House at Port Tobacco. Another special election was held in 1895 to determine whether to move the county seat of Charles to La Plata or Chapel Point, but, because of the railroad, this victory went to La Plata.

Thus, in 1896, the county seat was moved to La Plata and the Court House was built of red brick in a rather imposing but unattractive Victorian style. The building committee consisted of Dr. Andrew J. Smoot, William Wolfe, J. Hubert Roberts, John H. Mitchell, John W. Waring, Adrian Posey and George W. Gary. The designer of the original La Plata Court House was Joseph C. Johnson and its contractor was James Haislip.

In 1953, the Greek Revival facade of the building was added as the south addition to the original. This addition was from the drawing board of Frederick Tilp and the construction contractor was the Kahn Engineering Company of Washington, D.C. Dedicated on October 2, 1954, the renovations had been sponsored by County Commissioners William Boone, Bernard Perry and Calvin Compton. Its building committee was chaired by Judge John Dudley Digges with Desales Mudd, Patrick Mudd, Calvin Compton and J. Hampton Elder as members. Its cost was \$257,000 and Charles County now presented an elegant facade to its citizens.

In 1974, the center section and north addition was completed in Georgian design. Baltimore architects, Wrenn, Lewis and Jencks were responsible for this beautiful section. The renovation was directed by County Commissioners James C. Simpson, Mrs. Eleanor Carrico and Michael Sprague. The building committee was headed by Judge James C. Mitchell with Judge George Bowling, J. Douglas Lowe, John McWilliams, Thomas F. Mudd and Mrs. Gretrude Wright assisting. The construction was by the Davis Corporation of La Plata with the cost to the county, \$2,038,238.

Today, atop the Court House, a graceful cupola with gold dome and fluttering weathervane pierces the skyline and welcomes visitors to this century old town. Beneath the dome, the official business of the county is conducted. Even after the extensive renovation in 1974, the present building is overcrowded. The county is looking, perhaps, to the renovation of the late Milton M. Somers Middle School to house its overflow.

Next to the Court House and facing Charles Street is another historic building, Christ Church of Port Tobacco Parish. The last of three Christ Churches built in Port Tobacco, it was moved to La Plata in 1904. Its stones were carefully marked with numbers and carried by oxcart to the new county seat. Here it was rebuilt in its Victorian Gothic style, lighted by its dog-house dormers with their curvilinear trim. It was built in the exact location to the Court House that it had occupied in Port Tobacco with the distances between the buildings being the same. In 1906 its interior was gutted by fire but it was soon repaired and ready for Easter services the next year. When this 1906 construction took place, a Gothic bell tower was added at the southwest end. Christ Episcopal Church, as parish church of Port Tobacco Parish, is located in one of the thirty original Church of England Parishes, created in the Province of

Maryland by an Act of Assembly in 1692. It is continually visited by history buffs and those seeking outstanding examples of stained glass.

The land on which Christ Church was built was purchased from Mary and Adrian Posey, two of the largest landowners in the town limits. It was part of the plat known as "The Hermitage" and previously owned by George Matthews. The deed for the Court House site has not been located but it is surmised that this land was part of the same grant.

Other religious denominations represented in the town are the Lutherans whose sleek modern church is located on Route 6 going east; the Roman Catholic, whose Sacred Heart Church, with its building of fine contemporary design, presides over St. Mary's Avenue; the United Methodists, whose church keeps watch from its tower behind the Howard Johnson on U.S. Route 301; and, the Baptists, who have located on the western perimeter of the town on Hawthorne Drive West, and have completed recently a new brick edifice.

Business tend to take the form of stores, offices and banks. Banks and Savings and Loans are represented by the Bank of Southern Maryland, Maryland National, Maryland Federal Savings and Loan, First Federal Bank, and the Maryland Bank and Trust. The usual utility concerns such as plumbing, electrical wiring, building and supply houses, and telephone facilities are spread indiscriminately throughout the town. Offices, food stores, bottling works, department and hardware stores, two bars, and service stations all battle for recognition with traditional or colonial architecture on Charles Street, which is Maryland Route 6 through the center of the town.

The present flavor of Charles Street is consciously period. Restorations, such as the newly converted Mitchell Building of Dietrich Steffens, the award-winning re-designed Matthews-Howard Building of the Davis Corporation and the renovated T.R. Farrall Store of the Baldus Real Estate Company are reminiscent of early county architecture. Along this street, broken pediments, columns and colonial doorway vie for favor. A well known Maryland writer, Hulbert Footner, once said that La Plata had no "claim to fame" and was a "straggling sleepy town with no plan and no style". Today would tell a different story as the town develops into one of Maryland's outstanding small county seats, under the direction of a sagacious planning and zoning commission which encourages builders or renovators to maintain a colonial or period atmosphere on Charles Street.

Across Highway 301 to the west is a different story; bustling shopping centers with national food chains, motels, oil companies, service stations, instant food restaurants, a new jail, a modernized sheriff's department, auto sales companies, a well-established American Legion Home, a National Guard Armory, a Masonic Lodge, and a splendid telephone building show remarkable progress in the twentieth century.

Industry, except on a very small scale, is limited to dry cleaning establishments, a newspaper publication, bottling works, laundromats, auto repair shops, a printing business, a shoe repair shop, various beauty salons and barber shops.

In 1940, an entirely new industry invaded the town on a seasonal basis; the Edelen Brothers Warehouse for the sale of looseleaf tobacco at auction was built on an extension of Maple Street. The tobacco season began early in April and ran until the middle of July. Personnel from the various national tobac-

co companies vied for rooms in private homes. Shorty's Restaurant, Vic's Bar and Stumble Inn did fantastic business serving food and drink to these migrants. The town took on a carnival air as the dashing southern gentlemen squired our local girls to dances at Chapel Point or parties in the town. Tobacco trucks loaded with hogsheads rolled through the town all hours of the night. Labor for the packing poured in and the town had a resurgence of prosperity after the depression of the thirties. Local boys and men found new jobs. Today, the season is much shortened as computers and a dwindling tobacco acreage have cut it to seven short weeks. Although La Plata has grown in other ways, this industry does not sustain the impact it once had.

Insurance and real estate are prominent businesses in the county seat. Agents and adjustors mingle with other professions as the town has lunch at its new railroad restaurant, "Casey Jones", or at the fast food restaurants on 301.

The professions, of course, are much in the limelight with the very modern two-story circular unit of Physicians Memorial Hospital providing livelihood for nurses, doctors, and technicians. The last decade has seen an increasing number of foreign born specialists enter the medical field along with our native practitioners and surgeons. The scope of the dental profession has widened to six offices.

At the top of the list of professions, the legal group is predominant as would be expected in a county seat. Judges and lawyers abound on Charles Street, St. Mary's Avenue and La Grange while the New Wills Hotel, now known as the Carrico Building, provides lawyers' offices as if to stand sentinel at the corner of Charles Street and St. Mary's Avenue. Across St. Mary's Avenue is the Digges Building, a beautifully renovated unit which was originally built in 1912 by the La Plata Realty Company for the Masonic Lodge and the J.M. Cochrane, General Merchandise Store. Today, it is the home of the Maryland Federal Savings and Loan and law offices. Next to it on Charles Street and directly across from Christ Church is an authentic 1920's automobile garage, known as Mitchell Motor Company with H. Maxwell Mitchell, Jr., one of the descendants of the founding family, as its present owner-manager.

Several late Victorian clapboard houses survive to tell their story of another century; interspersed among them are new ramblers and split levels, a Georgian mansion, bungalows of the thirties and small sub-divisions of medium priced houses on side streets. Springing up on Kent Avenue are low-cost apartment complexes and town houses. Out Route 6 east, in a new town annexation, is the most prestigious of the developments, Clark's Run, named for the stream which cuts north and south across Route 6 just west of Mount Rest Cemetery. West on Route 6, a new housing development known as Quailwood has recently been annexed by the town. Away from Charles Street and U.S. 301, there is still a quiet air about the town. La Plata portrays a cross-section of a small village which has matured in the twentieth century. Its architecture is varied and interesting and tells the story of changing life-styles in the last eight decades.

The arts are represented by the Port Tobacco Players, who have found a home in the old Charles Theatre on main street next door to a pleasant local drug store. Church choirs, amateur musicals and dramatics in the schools fill the need for artistic achievement.

Social life is typical of one's stereotyped idea of southern hospitality. Public-spirited men and women contribute their energies in community oriented organizations such as the Lions, the Rotary, the Volunteer Fire Department, the Rescue Squad, local church groups, charitable drives, in Parks and Recreation activities at the local schools, or at nearby Wills Park on St. Mary's Avenue.

Education, foremost in the progress of America, has a unique story in La Plata. Beginning soon after the Civil War in a two-room school, destroyed by a tornado in 1926, and a private school endowed by Maurice J. McDonough, a peddler from Pomfret, it has progressed to one modern public high school, the Gwynn Center for special education, Spring Dell for the retarded child, the Milton M. Somers Middle School, now housed in the 1964 La Plata High School Building, and a model elementary pod whose facade displays the well-known name of Walter Mitchell. A consolidated parochial school on Route 6 replaced the old McDonough Institute and bears the name of Archbishop Neale, an early leader of the Baltimore Archdiocese.

The main offices of the Board of Education are housed in the first Physicians Memorial Hospital and in government buildings on the old Radio Station Property which has been annexed by the town.

La Plata was one of the earliest and smallest towns to be incorporated in Maryland. Its certificate of incorporation was issued in 1888 with the first president or mayor being Thomas Owen. Seventeen mayors have succeeded him and familiar names like Matthews, Mudd, Sasscer, Farrall, Hawkins, Clagett, Cochrane, Hawthorne, Tilghman and our present Mayor Victor Bowling are engraved on a plaque in the Town Hall. In the twenties and thirties, town business was conducted in a large clapboard building with an A roof which contained a spacious hall above and lawyers' offices and a cobbler below. It served as a gathering place for social functions and later as the local movie theatre. Located on the site of the present Charles Theatre, it burned in 1940. The town offices were then moved three times, first to the Mitchell Building (now Steffens), second, to the Court House and last to quarters in Shorty's Restaurant, now demolished to provide room for Martin's modern service station. The present Town Hall was constructed in 1962, a snug traditional Williamsburg style building designed by Frederick Tilp. Bearing the prestigious location of 100 Washington Avenue, the town center operates with John Newman as Town Manager, and a Mayor and Council whose size will be changed in 1981 from three to five members. Various commissions such as Planning, Parks, and Recreation, Beautification, the Board of Election Supervisors, the Board of Zoning Appeals, and the Farmers' Market Commission regulate the town government. From the Town Hall too, the Town officials manage the water, sanitation, lighting, street maintenance, and police.

The town is protected in case of emergency by a vigorous Volunteer Fire Department begun in the 20's, the Charles County Rescue Squad, 24 hour police protection and transportation by helicopter for the seriously ill to the nearest shock trauma center.

La Plata and surrounding Charles County have contributed much to the area's historical heritage this century as is evidenced by its being chosen as an official Bicentennial Com-