

Old Baltimore (18HA30)

The Old Baltimore site (18HA30)—the first County Seat of Baltimore County—is located on the Aberdeen Proving Ground, on the eastern shore of the Bush River on Chilbury Point. The Bush River was the most heavily populated area of Baltimore County in the mid-seventeenth century, so the site was relatively central and accessible for the planters and merchants of the area. In 1674, the Maryland Assembly authorized the construction of a Courthouse at the site, and at least one ordinary was established to provide lodging for individuals who traveled to the town when the court was in session. By 1683, one such establishment was owned by James Phillips, a wealthy planter who had acquired land in the town and was granted the right to run an ordinary at his place of residence.

Baltimore Town, as it was then called, did not have a long tenure as a center of government. As populations gradually grew around the Patapsco River, pressure increased to move the County Seat to a more convenient location. Although some renovations were performed on the Baltimore Town Courthouse in the mid-1690s, records indicate that the area was in decline. By 1712, the County Seat had moved to Joppa Town, but Old Baltimore may have been abandoned as a government center even earlier. In 1773, Baltimore County was subdivided, and its former County Seat at Old Baltimore became a part of Harford County.

Archaeology

Phase I and II excavations were undertaken at Old Baltimore in 1999 by R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates. The site is currently owned by the U.S. Army Garrison, Aberdeen Proving Ground. As a result of the presence of some unexploded ordnance from testing exercises, the survey was limited to a 14-acre area. The archaeologists excavated 242 shovel test pits at 10 m intervals within 200x220 meter area, as well as 40 1x1 meter units in 4 blocks in an area of features and high artifact densities. Remote sensing was used to identify additional features. Fortunately, archaeology revealed that this parcel contained one of the main structures of Baltimore Town—that of James Phillips' ordinary.

Over 17,000 historic artifacts & 23 intact features were revealed by the archaeological work and included a hearth/chimney base, a trash pit/dump, and sheet midden. Postholes and brick foundations indicated the presence of an earth-fast structure with a brick fireplace and possibly a brick end wall. Several pit features full of domestic debris were also located, though more testing is needed to determine the original function of these features. It was hypothesized that two of the large deep features may have been cellars, wells or privies filled with trash at the end of their use life. Artifacts present date the site to c. 1680-1710. This coincides well with Phillips' 1683 ordinary license and the decline of the town. Artifacts also indicate debris from an establishment that provided food and lodging; faunal remains, pipes, ceramic vessels, and other domestic refuse were recovered along with horse-stabling evidence such as harness hardware and a carriage hub. Flotation samples from some features were analyzed by Justine McKnight for paleobotanical remains.