Port Tobacco: The town that time forgot

Linda Barnes-Robinson of Rockville displays the key to the reconstructed Port Tobacco Courthouse.

Port Tobacco, MD - In a Hollywood movie, Port Tobacco might have been called The Town That Time Forgot.

It is one of the oldest settlements in early colonial Maryland. During the mid-18th century the former Charles County capital was the second largest port town in the state of Maryland, second only to Annapolis. A destructive fire in 1892 destroyed the second courthouse on the site and the birth of the railroad doomed the old town after the county seat was relocated to La Plata.

And although nearly 9,000 visitors toured the historic site last year, what many discover when they come to Port Tobacco is that the town is still there. Much like historic St. Mary’s City, it lies buried under the surface.

Charles County Government purchased Stagg Hall, circa 1766, standing not far from old recreated courthouse in 2013. The historic structure is now open to tours 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Thursday through Monday, as is the courthouse reconstructed in 1973.

“It’s all about preservation,” said Interpreter Carin Diggle, “That’s what we focus on.”

Port Tobacco boasts an insane amount of history. Father Andrew White, the Jesuit who sailed with the Maryland colonists from the Isle of Wight in 1633-34 befriended the Piscataway Indians living there in the colony’s early years. His account of the voyage of the Ark and Dove is one of the most detailed available.

By the mid-1700s, the town was a thriving port with many houses and businesses lining the streets.

Following the American Revolution, it became the site of a boisterous riot.

“Right after the Revolutionary War, Port Tobacco was a town of mostly merchants,” Diggle noted. “Most of the goods were Scottish or British and no one wanted to buy British goods. The merchants wanted to bring suit and it turned into a riot.”

William Smallwood, whose brigade of Southern Maryland men saved George Washington’s bacon at the Battle of Long Island, warned the rioters with a proclamation that declared, “I here do warn them of the penalties the law has for such offenses.”

During the 1840s, the county’s first newspaper, The Port Tobacco Times, was published by Elijah Wells. Longtime Charles County residents remember The Times-Crescent. That newspaper was originally The Port Tobacco Times. The pro-confederacy publication moved to La Plata when the county seat was relocated.

This summer, volunteers from The Society for the Restoration of Port Tobacco and the Charles County Archaeological Society of Maryland are preparing to unearth the remains of the former town jail. Field surveys revealed the location and according to Julie Simpson of the Port Tobacco Historical Conservancy, the group received a $3,500 grant from the county to clear and interpret the site, which she optimistically hopes will be ready for the public by December. Archaeology at Stagg Hall found 19th century lead type.

What is already standing has more history than you might think. Touring Stagg Hall, you learn about a room of the old home which was dismantled piece by piece, wooden paneled walls, even the floorboards, and reassembled at the Chicago Art Institute in the 1930s.

You also learn about the history of the reconstructed courthouse, which posed a problem for historical architects hoping to recreate the building in 1973. Through research, they were able to find an artist’s rendering of a double hanging at the courthouse in the 19th century, which revealed how the windows looked in the original building of which very few photographs existed.

There is also a small cemetery near the courthouse from a Baptist church that utilized one of the wings from the building which the fire spared.

Port Tobacco might be the town that time forgot, but Charles County has not forgotten, and neither should we.

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