

Greenbury Point:

The Interplay of History and Ecology

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History tells the story of human experience, which in large measure includes decisions based on environmental circumstances. Those choices change the environment and thus guide future decisions. Exploring the relationship between history as we traditionally understand it in an ecological context promises to broaden our definition of history and sharpen our approach to environmental problems. Greenbury Point near Annapolis offers an example of how natural conditions helped to shape Maryland history and in turn how historical decisions have dictated present ecological conditions.

In 1649 a group of Puritans set sail from Nansemond, Virginia, to establish the third settlement in Maryland on the peninsula now called Greenbury Point. Religious persecution led by the Anglican Governor Berkeley forced the Puritans to flee to Maryland where Lord Baltimore offered them any site they desired north of St. Mary's City, the successful Catholic settlement that had been established in 1634. More than religious tolerance inspired Baltimore's generosity. He feared the burgeoning Protestant population's reaction if he did not offer their radical brethren a sanctuary, and there was the pragmatic need for settlers to exploit the riches of the colony. For their part, the Puritans were confronted with the major problem of choosing a site that best met their survival needs as defined by their experiences in Nansemond. Specific geographic features guided their search and the subsequent selection of a new settlement location.

The Puritans leaving Virginia were familiar with the temperate climate and abundant resources of the tidewater region. The Chesapeake Bay was bountiful and the land was easily converted to production of the major agricultural crops of the period. What the migrants now required was an unoccupied, protected area where these resources could be easily exploited.

The lower Eastern Shore of Maryland is a low-lying region surrounded by vast acres of marshes and swamps which make the higher interior uplands difficult of access. The upper Eastern Shore's best location—with well-drained fertile soils within a reasonable distance of St. Mary's City and the mouth of the Chesapeake—had already been settled by William Claiborne in 1631. Tidal

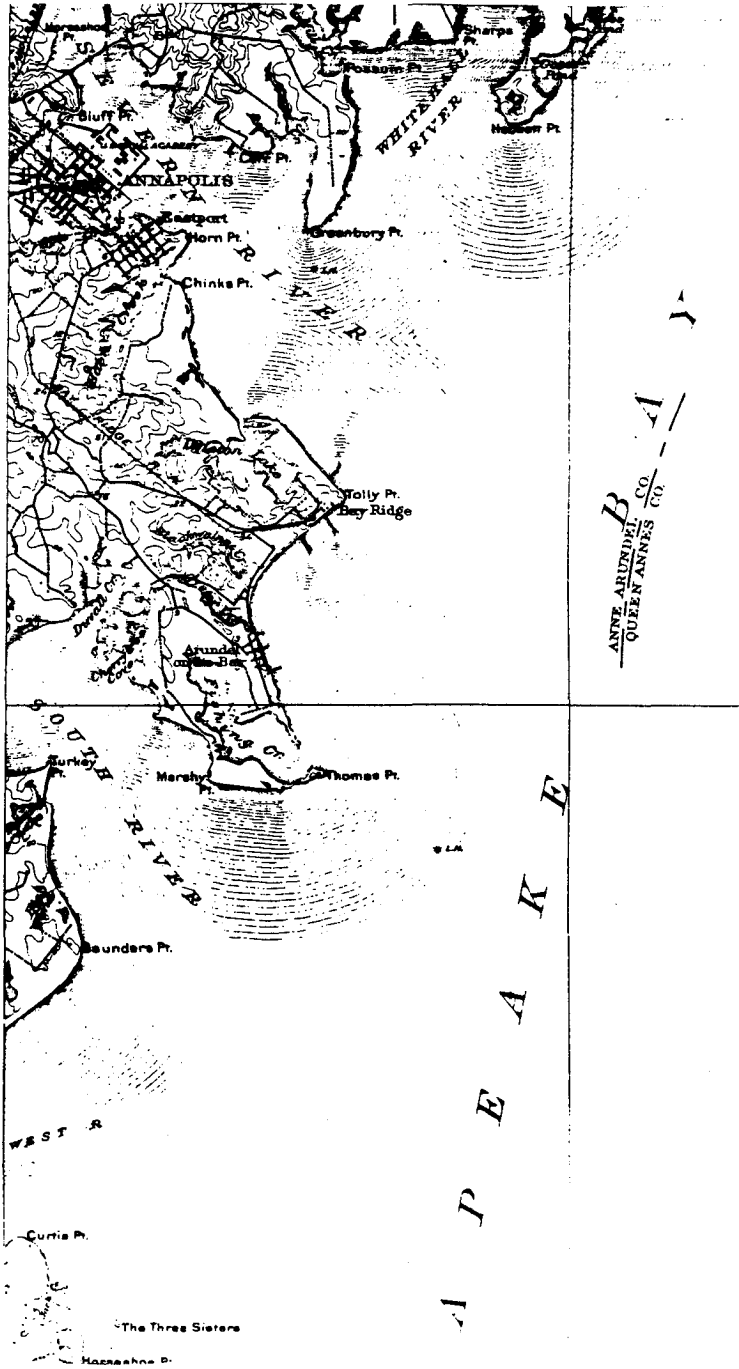
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marshes or steep embankments precluded harborage on the Western Shore, in areas sufficiently removed from St. Mary's City, as far north as the southern boundary of modern Anne Arundel County. The western shore at mid-Bay was the first available location that provided abundant aquatic resources, fertile soil, and safe harborage close to deep-water shipping lanes. This site also placed the Puritans close to Claiborne's settlement on Kent Island where Protestant troops could quickly consolidate if threatened.²

The selection of the specific location of the Puritan settlement on Green-bury Point, subsequently named Providence, can also be attributed to ecological factors. Much of the terrain surrounding the bay's smaller rivers was marsh and swamp as was the western shore of the largest and deepest tributary, now named the Severn River. In contrast, the peninsula located on the east bank at the mouth of the Severn afforded an ideal location. The soil was rich and well drained, and it supported abundant trees and wildlife. Finfish, shellfish, and waterfowl were plentiful. The peninsula provided a natural corral for livestock and its surrounding shoals secured it from land or sea invasion. The site was within eyeshot of Claiborne's Kent Island settlement with which the Puritans would later conspire to seize control of the colony.

The settlement's rich environment supported Providence's development as a major community in colonial Maryland. The Puritans constructed houses, shops, and meeting houses and allocated plots for agricultural fields. Providence was so successful the colonial assembly accepted two burgesses from Providence and upgraded the settlement's status to the designation of Anne Arundel County in 1650.³ During Oliver Cromwell's rise to power in mother England, the Puritans, led by Richard Bennett and William Claiborne, even seized control of the Maryland colony on July 22, 1654.⁴ Puritan rule was short-lived, lasting only until November 30, 1657. It marked the zenith of Providence.⁵ Shortly thereafter its population began to disperse to other parts of Maryland, not the result of political forces, but because the environment that was so important for Providence's initial success ultimately limited commercial development.

Settlements in the mid- 1600s were of necessity self-sufficient. Their goal was survival, their focus inward. When survival was more or less assured, as evidenced by the availability of export materials, the focus shifted outward. Transportation replaced defensibility as the primary consideration. The colonists in Providence, while increasingly capable of producing goods for trade, encountered difficulty in linking themselves to shipping routes. The shoals immediately surrounding Greenbury Point, while excellent for defense, were not conducive to the establishment of a deep-water port. Similarly, the steep cliffs on the eastern bank of the Severn upriver of Providence, once valued for protection, became an obstacle for loading and unloading cargo. Not surprisingly, environmental factors were key to the placement of the Maryland colony's new economic center and the subsequent decline of Providence. With



Greenbury Point is the site of the seventeenth-century Puritan settlement of Providence. Abundant wildlife, rich soil, and fishing allowed the community to thrive, but features such as steep cliffs and shoals kept Providence from becoming a shipping center. (1904 Geological Survey, United States Department of the Interior.)

the technology of the time, it was a simpler task to create a port by filling the marshes of the Severn's southwestern bank than it was to dredge a channel through the shoals at Greenbury Point. Thus, the economic center was destined to be located at a site other than Providence. This center established on the west bank at the mouth of the Severn River became Annapolis.

The historical developments shaped by the region's environment were not without consequence to the ecology and subsequent history of Annapolis and the larger Broadneck peninsula that included Greenbury Point. When an economic center was needed environmental considerations dictated the location. Annapolis was set on a course profoundly different from that of Greenbury Point. In Annapolis the view of land value changed from what the land could produce to what structures it could support. The economics of investment make such a perception of the function of land virtually irreversible; it is axiomatic in land use planning that once built structures are almost inevitably replaced by other structures at a greater density. From an ecological perspective the effects are twofold. First, the natural environment is reduced by direct conversion. Second, anthropogenic impacts on the environment increase. In the Annapolis area the patterns of contemporary urban development and attendant ecological implications trace their origins to the choices made at the time of Providence's settlement.

In contrast, Greenbury Point retained its rural character, and agriculture persisted as the dominant use of land both at the Point and in adjacent areas of the Broadneck peninsula. The only substantial changes were in the acreage under single ownership and the types of crops produced.⁶ New technologies and farming practices provided the way to tend larger fields and the demand for food from the rapidly expanding population of nearby Annapolis made produce a more valuable commodity than either cotton or tobacco. The environmental implications of this land use were much different from that associated with the developing urban center of Annapolis. Agriculture alters ambient ecology in ways that are not so severe or irreversible, and the land remains available and subject to choice in management. Much of Greenbury Point remains in agriculture today as the result of one such choice. In the early 1900s the United States Navy required a large area of protected and undeveloped land for building an advanced communication facility employing radio technology. The Greenbury peninsula once again, as in the time of the Providence colonists, provided an ideal location. The land was purchased in 1909 and the Naval Radio Transmitter Facility was completed in 1918.⁷ During construction of the aerial and underground antennae array the site was superficially disturbed; however, upon completion most of the upland acreage was returned to agriculture. Ironically, the low-lying areas, now called wetlands, which were used as dumping grounds for refuse by Providence's residents and later for dredge spoils from the Annapolis harbor, have been recognized by the navy as having important ecological value. In 1990 the Navy initiated a restoration

effort for these impacted areas. The restoration plan was constructed around the archival information preserved from the first hundred years of colonial occupation. It seems a good choice.

The dynamic relationship between the history of Greenbury Point and its ecology provides additional evidence that history and ecology are woven together to form the fabric of human experience. It is not a coarse fabric. Some relationships between resource availability and human decisions are so obvious that they can be attributed to cause and effect. The environment of Green-bury Point virtually guaranteed its selection as an early settlement site, the initial success of its inhabitants, and ultimately their inability to establish a major economic center. Yet there exists a multitude of more subtle circumstances whose unfolding sheds true insight to historians and ecologists alike. The framework of contemporary environmental issues confronting Annapolis, Greenbury Point, and the Broadneck peninsula was constructed by choices made in the seventeenth century, choices that determined the environmental issues and potential of each area. They are similar to choices still being made today—where to live, where to work, what to do. Perhaps, understanding the intimacy of history and ecology in areas such as Greenbury Point will enable us to make more informed choices for the future.

NOTES

1. J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Maryland: From the Earliest Period to the Present* (3 vols.; Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Tradition Press, 1967), 1:203–206.
2. Alvin Luckenbach, personal communication, May 1992.
3. Scharf, *History of Maryland*, 203.
4. *Ibid.*, 214.
5. *Ibid.*, 228.
6. Land Office Records (Patents), Liber E.I. 2 Folio 499, Maryland State Archives.
7. Officer in Charge, Naval Radio Transmitting Facility, Annapolis, Report to Commanding Officer, Naval Communication Area Master Station LANT, “Secretary of the Navy Natural Resources Conservation Awards,” January 30, 1991, 8.