

# Maxwell Hall Park Interpretive Plan

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Acquired by the Charles County Commissioners in 2007, Maxwell Hall Park consists of almost 700 acres of land along the east side of the Patuxent River and its major tributary, Swanson Creek. Combined with the land owned by the State of Maryland (DNR) which borders Indian Creek to the south, there are over 1000 acres of protected land along Charles County's Patuxent River peninsula. Anchored by the colonial port town of Benedict, this area is remarkably well-preserved and truly unique. This pristine portion of the scenic Patuxent offers residents and visitors a unique opportunity to experience a truly historic landscape which has remained relatively unchanged for centuries.

In 2011, the Charles County Historic Preservation Commission established a goal of developing an interpretive plan for Maxwell Hall Park in order to prepare for the commemoration of the War of 1812 in Maryland. To this end, limited funding was provided by the Maryland Heritage Area Authority. AECOM, who had recently completed the Benedict Waterfront Village Revitalization Plan for Charles County in early 2012, was contracted to spearhead the effort. Kathryn Smith of History Matters worked as a subcontractor to guide historical research and develop preliminary recommendations.

Little was known about the history of today's Maxwell Hall Park property during the War of 1812. Therefore, in order to more fully develop an interpretive plan, additional research was necessary. Research priorities were established to include ownership and use during the War of 1812 era and an overall context for the surrounding area during the period. While additional primary research was not supported by the project budget, several interested individuals including local historians and researchers, members of the historic preservation commission and staff, offered to assist in assembling available information. What follows is a preliminary research report to be used to further the interpretation at Maxwell Hall Park. Many thanks to Franklin A. Robinson, Jr., Ralph Eshelman and George Howard Post for their support and contributions.

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# Maxwell Hall Park

## War of 1812 Interpretive Resources

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# Charles County's Patuxent in 1814

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Today, the Maxwell Hall property in eastern Charles County includes over six hundred acres and is used as an equestrian park with an extensive trail network and waterfront access to Charles County's portion of the Patuxent River. The property includes to the north, the historic residence known as Maxwell Hall (CH-196 NR) as well as a portion of the 487 acres historically associated with it; and the previously undocumented historic Charles Somerset Smith Farm to the south.

Most of what we know about the site's history comes from architectural investigations associated with Maxwell Hall, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. In light of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War of 1812, and the park's proximity to the village of Benedict, where 4,370 troops landed for the invasion of Washington, the park property, including both Maxwell Hall and the Smith Farm, present new and compelling interpretive possibilities. With hundreds of acres of pristine farm and forestland, and a wide range of historic and archaeological resources, Maxwell Hall Park has the potential to tell a powerful story about Charles County during this difficult time in our young nation's history – how the everyday lives of our citizen's were impacted by the War and of the cultural landscape that they inhabited.

## Charles County's Patuxent Peninsula

Charles County includes a relatively small portion of the lower Patuxent River shoreline which it shares with Calvert, St. Mary's, and Prince George's County. The area includes several miles of shoreline bounded by Swanson Creek to the north and Indian Creek to the south. The colonial port town of Benedict first established in 1683, anchors the surrounding agricultural landscape. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century this landscape was dominated by expansive, fertile bottomlands along the river. These prime agricultural properties were divided into a small number of large prosperous farms by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consisting of 500-1000 acres, these farms would have been extensively cultivated and highly visible from the Patuxent River. Conversely, with much less forest cover than exists today, the river valley would have been highly visible from the ridges where many of the more prominent homes were situated.

During the War of 1812 Maxwell Hall, at the mouth of Swanson Creek, was one of the northernmost farms that comprised the Patuxent peninsula in Charles County. Just below Maxwell Hall was the Smith Farm, owned by Charles Somerset Smith (III), and further south was the Clement Dorsey farm. These plantations included agricultural fields along the river bottom with the dwellings and domestic outbuildings set upon the ridge, usually on a prominent knoll.

These plantations were connected to the village of Benedict by water, but also by a historic road that diverged from the main road (MD 231) at or near the current entrance to Serenity Farm. This road followed the base of the ridge north from the village crossing Smith's Creek before moving up along the ridge above Swanson Creek. Bieneke map of the British encampment and James Wilkinson's 1816 map of the Benedict region both show this road, portions of which survive today as Teague's Point Road. The

Beienke map indicates that pickets were placed across the road during the invasion in August 1814. Although the paved portion of Teague's Point Road now ends at the entrance to the Smith Farm property, traces of the remaining portion of the historic roadbed are visible today inside the Park property and can be discerned on modern topographic maps. The road appears in USGS topographic maps as late as 1910. Shortly after, the creek crossing between Serenity Farm and Smith Farm was likely destroyed or abandoned.

While this appears to have been a secondary, local road, Benedict was part of a larger national road network that connected major centers of commerce. Maryland 231 was an established stage coach route by 1814 which followed higher ground at the top of the ridge between Swanson and Indian Creeks. Patuxent City was a major crossroads. Following west led to the County seat of Port Tobacco, and turning north followed the road to Washington. Turning northward, the road to Washington crossed the headwaters of Swanson Creek. This was the route, described by rear Admiral Cockburn as "*a high Road between the two Places [Benedict and Washington] which tho' hilly is good*", used by British troops during the invasion of Washington in August 1814. Today it is commemorated as part of the Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail and Byway.

Additional archival and archaeological research should explore the agricultural use of these Patuxent River plantations, as well as the location of homesites and the arrangement of accessory buildings.

## Maxwell's Seat<sup>2</sup>

Prior to public acquisition, most past research efforts focused on the historic dwelling and its original owner George Maxwell who resided there with his family from the 1760s until his death in 1777.<sup>3</sup>

Maxwell patented the 487 acre property in 1768, and was responsible for the construction of the surviving historic structure that we know today as Maxwell Hall.

An advertisement for the sale of Maxwell's Seat in 1788 gives us one of our earliest descriptions of how the plantation may have appeared to the invading British during the turbulent summer of 1814.

*Containing 500 acres of land, pleasantly situated on the River Patuxent, two miles above Benedict. There are on the premises a large orchard of the finest fruit trees, a large and commodious dwelling-house, kitchen, carriage house, with other necessary buildings.*<sup>4</sup>

An inventory of his estate taken in 1779 provides extensive information on Maxwell's personal estate which included 17 slaves, household furnishings, and the contents of his store.<sup>5</sup> Animals included horses, cattle, sheep and hogs.

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<sup>1</sup> Rear Admiral George Cockburn to Vice Admiral Sir Alexander F.J. Cochrane, July 17, 1814, Papers of Admiral George Cockburn, Container 10, Vol. 38, pp. 183-95 (Reel 6), Library of Congress.

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive discussion of Maxwell Hall architectural significance and its history during Maxwell's tenure see Richard Rivoire's Homeplaces: Traditional Domestic Architecture in Charles County, Southern Maryland Studies Center. La Plata, MD, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> After his death in 1777, Maxwell's Seat remained in the possession of his heirs until 1788.

<sup>4</sup> Maryland Journal, October 28, 1788. The home of the recently deceased merchant George Maxwell would be sold with several improved lots in the Town of Benedict including the Town's tobacco warehouse.

## Maxwell Hall and the Keech Family During the War of 1812

During the War of 1812, Maxwell's Seat was owned by the Keech family. On November 28<sup>th</sup> 1812, Philemon Keech, formerly of St. Mary's County, entered into a deed of mortgage with John Rouse Adams of Loudon County, VA to acquire the 487 ½ acres of property known as Maxwell's Seat for the cost of 1000 pounds.<sup>5</sup> Presumably, Keech made Maxwell's Seat his home with his wife Rachael and their growing family.

Little is currently known about Philemon Keech (c. 1780-1826) prior to his moving to Charles County in 1812. Keech first appears in the historic record in 1806 where he is listed in St. Mary's County as a witness along with Samuel Keech for the will of George Davis. The 1810 census of St. Mary's County identifies Keech as the head of household along with his wife Rachael (c. 1787-1843), an unidentified male between the ages of 16-26, and 10 slaves.

Rachael was probably also from St. Mary's County and was likely the daughter of Isaac Smoot who lived on what is now known as Whitely Hall (SM-226)<sup>7</sup>. As heir, Philemon Keech acquired the Isaac Smoot property in 1826. Whitely Hall was located near All Faith's Church in Huntersville, south of Golden Beach along St. Mary's portion of the Patuxent River drainage. The farm was known as Price's Rest and Truman's Lodge prior to 1841.

Philemon Keech (c. 1780-1826) would have been in his early 30s at the time of the War of 1812.<sup>8</sup> Rachael (c. 1787-1843) would have been approximately 27. Together, Rachael and Philemon had a total of five known children, although only three survived to adulthood. Their children included: James Edward (1811-1851), Philemon E. (d. 1847), Jane E., Ann (1814-1825), and John Alexander (1817-1825). Keech's family was growing during the War of 1812. Just prior to purchasing Maxwell Hall, a son James Edward was born in 1811 and in the year of the British invasion (1814), daughter Ann was born.

Philemon Keech served briefly as a private in the 1st Regiment (Hawkins') Maryland Militia during the War of 1812<sup>9</sup>. His service roll records that he served only from August 11-17 1814, for a total of 7 days. Interestingly, this precedes the date of the British invasion (August 19<sup>th</sup>) by just a few days. Further research is necessary to gain a better understanding of his service in the Maryland Militia.

Philemon Keech died twelve years after the War, at the age of 46. We do not know where he is buried. The inventory of his estate taken in 1833 reveals a great deal about the farming operation at that time and may provide insight into its operation during wartime. Maxwell Hall was clearly a tobacco plantation and tobacco far surpassed the value of any other agricultural product. However, the farm included a variety of other agricultural crops and livestock. These probably provided for the Keech family, the

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<sup>5</sup> Charles County Inventories 1777-1785 p 346-353 in <http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/index.php>

<sup>6</sup> Liber IB 10/174; 10/250. Note the original deed 10/174 is missing but is referenced in the mortgage release IB 12/432.

<sup>7</sup> Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties. Whitely Hall (SM-226) <http://www.mdihp.net/>

<sup>8</sup> Although his date of birth is not known, from the 1810 census we can estimate that Keech was born between 1765-1784. His wife Rachael was born around 1787.

<sup>9</sup> National Archives: M602, Roll box 115; Roll 602.

overseer and the twenty eight slaves indentified in the inventory. Livestock included several horses, oxen, cattle, sheep, hogs and pigs, turkeys and geese. The farm produced corn, bacon and beef, and had on hand a large amount of salted herring.

Previous accounts have claimed that Keech was a merchant. Indeed he did own property in Patuxent City (Foxe's Race). He did not own property in the village of Benedict. His inventory lists quite a few debts owed to him. A close analysis of this inventory may confirm his commercial interests, however, to date a search of newspaper accounts and land records have failed to provide documentation of his commercial pursuits. Future research on the Keech family should include contacting the St. Mary's County Historical Society to establish St. Mary's County family connections and property ownership. St. Mary's County Equity Records, if they exist may hold additional information on the estate of Philemon Keech.<sup>10</sup>

### **African Americans at Maxwell Hall**

Using the 1826 estate inventory of Philemon Keech as well as the 1820 census, we can approximate the identities of some of the enslaved African Americans who were likely living at Maxwell Hall in 1814. What follows is based on an interpretation of these documents. The 1826 inventory provides the names and ages of slaves owned by Philemon Keech at the time of his death. To estimate the names and ages of those living on the farm in 1814, simple subtraction of twelve years was used to estimate the Maxwell Hall community at that time. This was cross checked with the 1820 census counts for the number of slaves and generally appears to be consistent. Below is a guideline to begin interpretation of the African American community at Maxwell Hall, however, please note that this method is interpretive only and may not account for additional members of the community that could have been living on the farm but not recognized in the 1826 inventory for a variety of reasons such as death, separate ownership, or flight. Therefore, the following information should be used to start the discussion and should be followed by additional research on Maxwell Hall's African American community in 1814.

The oldest known individuals believed to have been living on the property as slaves were Leandor (28) and Winny (26). Leandor and Winny may have been married and may have been the parents of some of the younger children identified below. Leandor was a carpenter. Teenage children living at Maxwell Hall include Letty (16), Moses (14), and Harry (13). There were also several children under the age of 9 including Dick (9), Charles (8), Matilda (8), John (5), Nelly (3) and Eliza (2). The 1810 census identifies Philemon Keech, then living in St. Mary's County, as owning ten slaves. Only five of those identified in 1820/1826 would have been living in 1810. Therefore, based on the 1810 census five individuals are unaccounted for. Some of those individuals may have been present at Maxwell Hall in 1814.<sup>11</sup>

Future research should closely analyze existing estate records of the extended Keech family to determine additional possible African American residents at Maxwell Hall in 1814. Also, future efforts should concentrate on assembling general information and specific accounts of African American during

<sup>10</sup> An ad in the National Intelligencer(Washington D.C.) dated April 11, 1839 references a court case from the march term 1839, where the real estate of Philemon Keech was to sold. XXVII 8161 4 April 11, 1839.

<sup>11</sup> Charles County Inventories 1825-1829, October Term 1826 pg. 259; Inventories 1829-1833, April Term pg. 456.

the war. We know from officer's correspondence that African Americans provided information to the British. We also know from newspaper accounts that many along the Patuxent fled from the area, taking their slaves along with them. These accounts should be collected. Additional sources should be identified and assembled to provide a more complete understanding of the role of African Americans during the War of 1812. These may include records of the Corp. of Colonial Marines and war claims records for plantation owners. Contact other organizations conducting similar work including Sotterley Plantation.

## The Keech Family after the War

Philemon Keech bought and sold several additional properties in Charles County between 1820 and 1832. At the time of the Maxwell Hall acquisition the Keech's sold to Fielder Greer 100 acres of improved *land on the east side of the coach road* known as Foxes Race. For reasons still unclear, the contract was voided three years later when the Keech's reclaimed ownership of the property in 1816. After Philemon's death, Rachael sold the property to William Burch Parker in 1833.<sup>12</sup>

In 1815 Philemon and Rachael Keech along with Henry Gill sold a property known as Thompson's Hope in Charles County to Solomon Bussard which he [Bussard] currently occupied. Thompson's Hope consisted of 172 acres and was described as being previously the home of Josias Smoot.

An additional property acquired by Philemon Keech in 1820 was Oak Springs which was comprised of 271 acres known formerly as Two Friends and Sothoron's Discovery and formerly the home of John Sothoron.<sup>13</sup> James Edward eventually acquired Oak Springs, the former Sothoron home. According to Rachael's will, she also owned land in Morgan County, VA at the time of her death.

Two of Keech's children, John Alexander and Ann, died in 1825 before reaching adulthood. Their obituary appears in the Salem Gazette of February 4, 1825 and reads:

*"At Maxwell Hall, Charles County, MD on the 18<sup>th</sup> ult. John Alexander Keech, aged about 8 years; and at Waverley, Prince George's County, MD on the 26<sup>th</sup> ult. Ann Keech, in the 11<sup>th</sup> year of her age. The above were both the children of Philemon Keech, Esq".*<sup>14</sup>

Philemon Keech died by 1826 at the age of about 45. His wife Rachael survived for almost twenty years but never remarried. Rachael continued to live at Maxwell Hall until her death in April 1843<sup>15</sup>. Maxwell Hall continued to be farmed with the help of an overseer that received a percentage of the agricultural yield. The African American community at Maxwell Hall also continued to grow.

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<sup>12</sup>Land Records of Charles County, Liber IB 10 folio 274; Liber IB 11 folio 281; Liber 20 folio 522.

<sup>13</sup>Land records of Charles County, Liber IB 13 folio 139; Liber IB 13 folio 352

<sup>14</sup>Death Notices. Salem Gazette. February 4, 1825. 3:10. P. 3 America's Historical Newspapers 1690-1922. June 10, 2007.

<sup>15</sup>Burial April 22, 1843. Special Collections Maryland State Archives. Trinity Church Collection Register No. 3 1830-1850 p. 38.

In her will Rachael devised Maxwell Hall, being the home on which she now resides, to son Philemon E. Keech. In June 1845, a deed of trust was recorded to satisfy Philemon E. Keech's debt of \$1295.00 to Francis Neale and James Lockett trading as Neal and Lockett in Baltimore City. The debt was cleared the following year, however in 1847 Keech sold Maxwell Hall to Maria P. Morton.<sup>16</sup> Philemon E. Keech died shortly after and was buried on March 18, 1847.<sup>17</sup>

Philemon and Rachael's only daughter to survive to adulthood was Jane E. Keech. She married Dr. Benjamin F. Johns between 1837 and 1840.<sup>18</sup> On the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1837, Jane E. Keech, Benjamin T. Johns and Rachael Keech entered into a marriage contract which transferred Jane E. Keech's interest in both real and personal property belonging to the Keech family to her mother Rachael. Johns resided in Prince Georges County.

Rachael is buried at Trinity Parish, Old Fields near Patuxent City with her son Philemon E. Keech. James E. Keech is buried at Dent's Palace in Dentsville along with his wife Martha A. Dent Keech, and their infant child Laura.

## **The Charles Somerset Smith Farm – Preliminary findings**

Much less is currently known about the Smith Farm which today, encompasses the southern portion of the Maxwell Hall Park Property. This portion of the park includes the main access for equestrian users and the most accessible section of Patuxent River shoreline. However, preliminary research reveals that like Maxwell Hall to the north, this property too has a compelling, if not yet understood story which holds the potential to enrich our experience of the Patuxent peninsula. The information compiled below is intended to provide a basis for interpretation and for further archaeological and archival investigations.

The property south of Maxwell Hall was also part of Calverton Manor and was associated with the Smith Family for centuries. The property first came under the ownership of Col. Richard Smith but it was his son Charles Somerset Smith I (1698-1738) that is believed to have first occupied the Smith Farm.<sup>19</sup> The family home was established around 1730 on the north side of St. Nicholas, later renamed Smith's Creek. Among his children were twins Richard and Charles Somerset. Charles Somerset Smith (I) died at the age of forty, when his twin sons were only five years old. By will, Smith (I) divided the farm equally between the twins with Charles Somerset Smith (II) receiving the portion to the north and Richard receiving the portion to the south.<sup>20</sup> Richard received the portion to the south which includes today's

<sup>16</sup> Land records of Charles County, Liber WM 1 folio 395; Liber WM 2 folio 130; WM 2 folio 196

<sup>17</sup> Burial April 22, 1843. Special Collections Maryland State Archives. Trinity Church Collection Register No. 3 1830-1850 p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> See marriage agreement, land records of Charles County, Liber IB 22 folio 939; Liber IB 24 folio 57.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Davis Reno "Charles Somerset Smith, Hero of the Alamo" in St. Mary's Families. November 2003. & Franklin A. Robinson, Jr. Draft Serenity Farm, Chain of Title, 1739-1966.

<sup>20</sup> Charles County Will Book Liber AC 4 folio 87. February 1738/39.



Serenity Farm. However, Richard died prior to 1739, leaving his portion of the farm to his twin brother Charles Somerset Smith II (1733-1781).

Charles Somerset Smith II (1733-1781) assumed the farm when he entered adulthood in the late 1740s. In 1768, at the age of 35 he married Ann Hynes, daughter of Joseph Hynes. Together Charles and Ann had several children including Walter, Margaret, Mary, Henry Arundel and Charles Somerset (III).<sup>21</sup>

Charles (II) died in 1781 at the age of 48, leaving the northern portion with the “old family dwelling” of the farm to his son Charles Somerset Smith III (1770-1831) and the southern portion “where my present dwelling house now stands” to Henry Arundel Smith (d. 1809). Charles Somerset Smith III was 11 at the time of his father’s death. Charles (II) will also recognizes Margaret Selwood and her daughter Elizabeth Selwood. Margaret Selwood was probably a domestic servant. Although their precise relationship with Smith is not clear, Margaret is well provided for in his will including the use of his dwelling houses until Charles and Henry arrive at twenty-one. The will also recommends that the executors employ her to take care of the children, houses and other affairs.<sup>22</sup>

During the War of 1812, the Smith Farm and the old family dwelling was owned by Charles Somerset Smith III (1770-1831). Around 1795, Smith married Ann Sothoron, the daughter of Henry Greenfield Sothoron and they settled into the old family dwelling referred to in the will of Charles’ father. Some accounts refer to this ancestral home as “Mt. Arundel” although the name has not been found in any primary documents to date.<sup>23</sup>

Together, Charles and Ann had several children before the War of 1812 including Sarah Mary (1795-1834), Richard, John (1796-1825), Arundel (1801- after 1850), Charles Somerset IV (1806-1836), and Margaret (1812-1844). Daughter Eleanor was born around the time of the War and son Mortimer was born after the War. (1817-c. 1855). Two of the sons: Richard and John, may have been old enough to participate in the Maryland Militia, although service records have not been searched for the Smith family to date. Just before the War, their daughter Sarah Mary Smith had married Dr. William Bruce Locke in 1810. Services records have not yet been searched for Dr. Bruce.<sup>24</sup>

For reasons still unclear, in the spring of 1814, Charles Somerset Smith III was prepared to sell his ancestral property and he had printed an advertisement in the Daily National Intelligencer for several consecutive weeks in May. The ad ran just one month before British raids in the Patuxent River began, and provides an excellent glimpse of how the farm would have appeared on the eve of War.

Smith’s Farm, consisting of 600 acres, was described as being one of the “*best farms on the Patuxent River... two-thirds of which was first-rate river bottom in a high state of cultivation, producing 5-7 bushels of corn per acre... The residue was wavy highland with productive wood and timber.*” Eight to ten acres were reserved as meadowland.

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<sup>21</sup> Reno.

<sup>22</sup> Charles County Will Book Liber AF 7 folio 640-643, June Court 1781. Robinson in “Serenity Farm.”

<sup>23</sup> Reno.

<sup>24</sup> Reno.

Smith's dwelling was described as "roomy and comfortable, with piazzas on each side, in good repair". Outbuildings included a kitchen, dairy, smoke-house, ice-house, carriage-house, and poultry-house. The house lot was enclosed with a post and rail fence and the yard included Lombardy and American popular trees as well as locust and mulberry trees. Adjoining this is a "commodious falling garden well paled". The farmyard includes a corn-house, stables, chop-room, and wagon house; a two story frame barn, 40 x 24, with plank floor, and two cow-houses 60 x 14 feet each. There is also an overseer's house with two rooms and a brick chimney and five quarters sufficient for the accommodation of 30 slaves. Finally the property included a large well-established apple and peach orchard.<sup>25</sup>

Some accounts claim that the dwelling, known as Mt. Arundel, was burned by the British during the march on Washington. Margaret Fresco in *Doctors of St. Mary's County, 1634-1900* stated:

*The family saw the British sail up the Patuxent River to Benedict, landing there before proceeding to the nation's Capital to burn it. The British officers landed and called on Charles Somerset Smith. He received them and served them wine to which croton oil had been added. The officers became ill which detained them at Benedict. Meanwhile, Mr. Smith moved his family out of harm's way and he then proceeded to Washington to warn the city. After the British had won the battle of Bladensburg, and burned the Capital and the White House, they marched back to Benedict to their ships. Before sailing, they set fire to 'Mt. Arundel', the lovely old home of Charles Somerset Smith."*<sup>26</sup>

If true, the account would suggest that the home was destroyed, however, this is inconsistent with information found in Smith's will which refers to a "new part of my dwelling house" and "the remainder of the house". Presumably, the remainder of the house was the "old family dwelling" described in his father's will. At some point after 1814, Charles built an addition to the old family dwelling. The addition is in his will as "the new part of my dwelling comprising 2 rooms and a passage below and two rooms above". The description reflects a typical side-passage plan that was very popular in Charles County after 1820.<sup>27</sup>

At the time of his death in 1831, Charles Somerset Smith owned approximately 40 slaves. In his will, the names of each are identified but not their age. He emancipated two of his slaves: Margaret and her daughter Martha.

Charles divided the property in two portions with the north portion including the dwelling descending to his son Richard, and the south portion to his sons Arundell and Mortimer. The will also describes a family burial ground situated upon the north portion of the farm which includes the dwelling.

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<sup>25</sup> Daily National Intelligencer May, 19, 1814. Washington, D.C. The ad also notes that "this part of the Patuxent supplies the markets of Washington and Georgetown with fresh rockfish and oysters".

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Fresco in "Doctor's of St. Mary's County, 1634-1900". Also quoted in Reno.

<sup>27</sup> Charles County Will Book. WBM 15 folio 418. 1831



## MAXWELL HALL PARK INTERPRETIVE PLAN: SERENITY FARM

Franklin A. Robinson, Jr.

Serenity Farm is located on the Patuxent River in Benedict on eastern side of Charles County, Maryland. The property lies north of the town of Benedict along Maryland route 231, the Prince Frederick Road, running between Prince Frederick in Calvert County and Hughesville in Charles County. It is equidistant from Prince Frederick and Hughesville, a distance of approximately seven miles in either direction. The farm is bounded on the north by Smith's Creek (formerly St. Nicholas Creek), the Bluebird Hill and Maxwell Hall properties on the west, route 231 on the south and the Patuxent River on the east. It is approximately 250 acres in size, 222 acres is in a Maryland Agricultural Preservation District.

### EARLY HISTORY

Captain John Smith noted many sites of tribal habitation in this vicinity on his exploration of the Patuxent in 1608. These villages were inhabited by the Patuxent, Assacomoco, Aquintanack and Mattapanient tribes, part of the Algonquian language family of Native Americans. They numbered fewer than 1,000 along the Patuxent according to contemporary accounts. Smith noted native villages on the eastern shore of the Patuxent in Calvert County across from Serenity Farm but none on the farm proper at that time. By 1651, native tribes had been moved to a reservation provided by the colonial government at the head of the Wicomico River.

The European settlement established at Benedict was located at and near previously existing Native American sites. "Indian paths" and "Indian fields" are commonly used as landmarks in the area's early land records. Evidence suggests that natives did indeed inhabit the property at one time with population concentration in the north along the Smith's Creek side. Archeological findings indicate that Native-American habitation on Serenity had pre-dated the villages noted by Smith. In the 1980s at least three fire pits were uncovered when grading was done for the east-west runway now on located on a parcel owned by Thomas Long.<sup>1</sup>

**Interpretive Opportunity:** tie-in with the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Trail that includes the Patuxent.

### THE SMITH and DORSEY ERA, ?-1824

The Smith family came into possession of what is now known as Serenity Farm and the parcel to the north of Serenity Farm once known as the Smith Farm – but now commonly

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<sup>1</sup> Semmes, Raphael, "Aboriginal Maryland, 1603-1689", Maryland Historical Magazine Vol. XXIV, pgs. 195-209; "Relation of 1634", pg. 6.; Items uncovered during construction of the runway were taken to Jefferson Patterson Park and dated to pre-John Smith.

referred to as Maxwell Hall. At what time the creek between the two parcels, St. Nicholas Creek, came to be known as Smith's Creek has not been discovered but doubtless it was during the Smith ownership of both parcels.

*Charles Somerset Smith (1)*: Charles Somerset Smith (1) (1698-1739) son of Captain Richard Smith (?-1714) and Maria Johanna Somerset, Richard's third wife, and the widow of Colonel Lowther. She was the daughter of Charles Somerset of Acton Park, Middlesex, England. He was the grandson of Richard (?-ca. 1690) and Eleanor Smith.<sup>2</sup> He married twice to Jane Crabb, daughter of Thomas Crabb (?-1719/20) and Margaret Smith daughter of William Smith.<sup>3</sup> The Crabbs lived west of the Smith property. Charles wrote his will in "sound and perfect mind" in November 1738. Samuel Parran, Edward Burch, and Theophilus Swift witnessed the will. Charles died in Charles County, testate, in early 1739, his will was probated on 20 February. He was styled as "Captain", and left one-third of his estate to his wife unnamed, after specific bequests, the rest of his personal estate was to be divided equally among his surviving children: Richard, Charles Somerset, Ann wife of Samuel Parran, Dikandia [Dicandia] wife of John Reeder, Jr., Mary, and Jane wife of [unknown] Forbes. He appointed his wife as executor to be overseen by his brother Walter Smith.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Children of Charles Somerset Smith*

**Richard Smith** (1733-dead by 1781) son of Margaret Smith, he was a twin of Charles Somerset Smith (2), his father left him land on the south side of St. Nicholas' Creek without the swampland [this became known as the Dorsey place/farm, later Serenity Farm].<sup>5</sup>

**Charles Somerset Smith (2)** (1733-1781) son of Margaret Smith, he was a twin of Richard Smith, his father left him all lands on the north side of St. Nicholas' Creek "where my dwelling plantation now stands", including all swamp on the creek [this became known as Smith's farm].<sup>6</sup>

**Ann (?-?) wife of Samuel Parran (1717-?) of Calvert County.**<sup>7</sup>

**Dicandia (?-?) wife of John Reeder, Jr. (ca. 1732-1780) of St. Mary's County.**<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Maryland Biographical Dictionary* (MBD), Vol. II, pgs. 748-752. Charles is half-brother to Barbara Smith Holdsworth Mackall (1693-1764) wife of Benjamin Mackall (1675-1761), step-brother to John Rousby (1685-1744).

<sup>3</sup> MBD Vol. II, pg. 675, Reeder, John, Jr.

<sup>4</sup> Will of Charles Somerset Smith (1), Charles County Will Book AC 4, f. 87, signed 17 November 1738, probated 20 February 1738/39, MSA.

<sup>5</sup> MBD Vol. II, pgs. 637-638, Parran, Young.; Will of Charles Somerset Smith (1), Charles County Will Book AC 4, f. 87, signed 17 November 1738, probated 20 February 1738/39, MSA.

<sup>6</sup> MBD Vol. II, pgs. 637-638, Parran, Young.; Will of Charles Somerset Smith (1), Charles County Will Book AC 4, f. 87, signed 17 November 1738, probated 20 February 1738/39, MSA.

<sup>7</sup> MBD Vol. II, pgs. 636-637, Parran, Alexander.

<sup>8</sup> MBD Vol. II, pg. 675, Reeder, John, Jr.; MBD Vol. II, pgs. 637-638, Parran, Young.;

**Mary** (?-?)<sup>9</sup>

**Elizabeth** (?-?) daughter of Jane Crabb Smith, she was the wife of **Francis Wilkinson [Jr.]** (?-1739), issue. Her father left her husband Wiltshire Planes adjacent to Zekiah Swamp, also one negro woman called Madam, one mulatto slave Margery, negro boy Cato, negro girl Cate “all now in her possession” as her full share of his estate. Elizabeth later married Young Parran (1711-1772) of Calvert County, issue.<sup>10</sup>

**Jane** (?-?) wife of [unknown] Forbes. She was left thirty shillings current money in her father’s will.<sup>11</sup>

*Charles Somerset Smith (2):* **Charles Somerset Smith (2)** (1733-1781) the son of Charles Somerset Smith (1) and Margaret Smith. He inherited/bought the lands originally left to his twin brother Richard thus reuniting the plantations on both sides of St. Nicholas Creek into one parcel.

Charles wrote his will in November 1780 of “sound mind and memory”. It was witnessed by Joseph Mudd, John Morton, and Edward Anderson. He died in Charles County, testate, leaving five minor children. He does not mention a wife in his will.<sup>12</sup>

*Children of Charles Somerset Smith (2)*

**Walter** (?-?), he was left 1,000 pounds current money to be paid when he reaches twenty-one, to be gotten from sale of livestock with money to be invested, “that after my decease all my negroes stock of cattle, horse, sheep & hogs except such stock as may be sold for the purpose above mentioned shall be kept together on my plantation as usual by my executor . . . unless any of the negroes should misbehave or that my executors should think it more to the advantage of my children that some of the negroes should be sold . . .”. To Walter, negro boy Peter, negro girl Jenny, 1000 pounds current money (exclusive of earlier bequest) and 200 pounds sterling which will be paid to him by Charles and Henry when he attains age twenty-one and not before, he also received “one Cristol stone stock buckle”. Henry to pay Walter 100 pounds sterling.

**Margaret** (?-?) to daughter Margaret, negro girl named Bett and negro boy named Ignatius.

**Mary** (?-?) to daughter Mary, negro girl Susanna, negro boy David, one pair of “bobs” set in gold, one silver snuff box and “one mourning ring I had of my brother Richard Smith”.

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<sup>9</sup> Will of Charles Somerset Smith (1), Charles County Will Book AC 4, f. 87, signed 17 November 1738, probated 20 February 1738/39, MSA.

<sup>10</sup> Will of Charles Somerset Smith (1), Charles County Will Book AC 4, f. 87, 20 February 1738/39, MSA; MBD, pg. 675, Reeder, John, Jr., pgs. 637-638, Parran, Young.

<sup>11</sup> Will of Charles Somerset Smith (1), Charles County Will Book AC 4, f. 87, signed 17 November 1738, probated 20 February 1738/39, MSA.

<sup>12</sup> Will of Charles Somerset Smith (2), Charles County, Will Book AF 7, f. 640-643, signed 17 November 1780, witnesses: Joseph Mudd, John Morton, Edward Anderson, probated 18 June 1781, June Court 1781 (MSA).

**Charles Somerset Smith (3)** to Charles Somerset Smith (3), at age twenty-one, to pay 1000 pounds sterling to Walter, he leaves all the land north of St. Nicholas' Creek "whereon the old family dwelling now stands" together with the "low land of the swamp lying to the eastward of the main road that leads to Benedict Town" (Note: this is the Smith Farm parcel), if Charles dies it is to go to Walter (if Charles has no will), to Henry Arundel if Walter dies, then equally to his two daughters if Walter dies.

**Henry Arundel** (?-1809) to son Henry Arundel Smith, at age twenty-one, all the land on the south side of St. Nicholas' Creek with all the "low land of the swamp lying on the west side of the main road leading to Benedict Town and on which my present dwelling house now stands". If he dies it goes to Walter, if Walter dies then to his two girls. Henry to pay Walter 100 pounds sterling, Henry also gets a gold watch. <sup>13</sup>

**Margaret Selwood**, choice of two negro women, Patience & Cloe, executors to allow Margaret yearly until Charles and Henry are twenty one – 300 lbs. pork, 200 lbs. beef with corn and wheat sufficient for her yearly support, 10 lbs. wool – provided she does not marry, one feather bed and furniture, iron pot, one frying pan, three pewter plates, three small dishes, six knives and forks, walnut table, six "flag" chairs, one young horse and one cow and calf and is allowed the use of his dwelling houses until Charles and Henry arrive at twenty-one, also recommends that the executors employ her to take care of the children, houses, and other house affairs. When Walter reaches twenty-one then Charles and Henry are to provide for Margaret, to **Elizabeth Selwood**, daughter of Margaret Selwood one mare named Jenny Hancock and one cow and calf,

Barnes Purchase bought of Matthew Barnes to be sold,  
Residue of personal estate to be divided among the children share and share alike  
Brother-in-law John Perrie and friend Francis Wheatly are appointed executors and guardians to the children.

*Henry Arundel Smith:* **Henry Arundel Smith** (?-1809) was the son of Charles Somerset Smith (2). The identity of his mother has not been discovered. In 1781, he inherited a parcel of about 600 acres stretching from St. Nicholas' Creek to Benedict. His brother, Charles Somerset Smith (3) owned Smith's farm near Maxwell's Seat on the northern side of Smith's Creek. They are noted in Benedict in the 1790 census. Charles is listed as owning ten slaves and brother Henry was listed as owning fourteen.

Henry qualified as Deputy Clerk of the County Court for Prince George's County in September 1786. <sup>14</sup> Henry married his cousin, Dicandia Smith Ireland (1776-1839), on 3 February 1795. Dicandia was the daughter of John Ireland, a doctor, and Susanna Reeder. Dicandia was named after her maternal grandmother, Dicandia Smith wife of

<sup>13</sup> Witnesses: Joseph Mudd, John Morton, Edward Anderson

Signed 17 November 1780, probated 18 June 1781

Charles County, Will Book AF 7, f. 640-643, June Court 1781.

<sup>14</sup> Van Horn, *Out of the Past*, pg. 202.

John Reeder, Jr. (ca. 1732-1780) of St. Mary's County.<sup>15</sup> If they had any children they did not live to maturity. The Smith's also owned property in neighboring St. Mary's County. Smith was appointed one of the justices of the peace for Charles County in 1793.

When Smith died in 1809 his will was probated in St. Mary's County but he described himself as being, "of Charles County." He and Dicandia were childless so with regard to his Benedict property he devised, "to my said wife Dicandia S. Smith during her natural life all the land whereon I now live – near and adjoining Benedict Leonard Town in Charles County." At her death the property would go to Smith's brother Charles S. Smith.<sup>16</sup>

*William Clement Dorsey and Dicandia Smith Dorsey:* Presumably still living on the Henry Arundel Smith property, **Dicandia married William Clement Dorsey** (1778-1848) of Oaklands, Anne Arundel County in 1812. Clement was a graduate of St. John's College, Annapolis and a successful lawyer. He was also a major in the Maryland Militia 1812-1818. The Benedict property became known in the local vernacular as the "Dorsey farm" or the "Dorsey place."<sup>17</sup> Clement buys Charles Somerset Smith's (3) right to the farm.

The War of 1812 came to the Dorsey farm in 1814. On 15 June 1814 the British raided Benedict and stole the tobacco from the warehouse. They also took a barrel of whiskey that has been poisoned. Clement warned the British about the poisoned whiskey. He had previously talked the British Captain Robert Barrie out of burning the town. On 21 June the British attempted to raid Benedict again and steal the remaining tobacco but are surprised by the Maryland militia and driven off. On 20 August the British land in Benedict with 4,370 troops, they camp on the fields of the Dorsey farm. They march to Washington, D.C. where they burn the capitol, the White House and plunder the city. They return after raiding the city. They burn Mount Arundel the home of Charles Somerset Smith (3). Between 29-30 August the British re-boarded their ships and left Benedict.

During the hot and war weary summer of 1814 Dicandia had been pregnant. Dicandia and Clement had a daughter, Susan Reeder Dorsey (1814-1878) born 6 November and in 1817 they have a son, William H. Ireland Dorsey. Both were presumably born at Benedict or if not at Summerseat in St. Mary's County.

Clement purchased Charles Smith's interest in the farm and in July 1824 he sold the entire property to local merchants James (?-1842) and William Morton for \$15,000.

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<sup>15</sup> MBD, pg. 675, Reeder, John, Jr.

<sup>16</sup> Archives of Maryland (AMD), Vol. 72, pgs. 241, 314-315; Will of Henry Arundel Smith, JJ3, f. 192-193, probated 1809, wills of St. Mary's County, Maryland, Maryland State Archives (MSA); Deed, Dorsey to Morton, JB16, f. 33, 14 July 1824, Land Records of Charles County, Maryland MSA; Henry A. Smith issued a marriage license on 3 February 1795 in St. Mary's County to marry Dicandia Smith Ireland daughter of Dr. John Ireland and Susanna Reeder. Cryer, Leona, *Marriages and Deaths in St. Mary's County*, pg. 270 (Cryer).; 1790 Federal Census.; Will of Henry Arundel Smith, St. Mary's County, Will Book JJ 3, f. 192-193.

<sup>17</sup> Dorsey, Clement, *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress, 1774-Present*; Rootsweb Posting by David A. Blocher



They left the Dorsey farm and moved to Summerseat in St. Mary's County. Dicandia had inherited Summerseat from her mother. Charles Somerset Smith formally filed a quit claim deed to the property in 1826.<sup>18</sup>

After the sale of the property, Clement went on to a successful political career as a representative from Maryland to the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first United States congresses. On 19 December 1837, Dicandia and Clement's daughter, Susan, married Sylvester John Costigan, an Irishman. Dicandia and Clement's son, William, died on 20 August 1839. Dicandia soon followed her son into the cemetery at Summerseat and died on 24 October 1839.<sup>19</sup>

In 1840 Dorsey published, *The general public statutory law and public local law of the state of Maryland: from the year 1692 to 1839 inclusive, with annotations thereto, and a copious index.*<sup>20</sup> Clement Dorsey died on 8 August 1846 while holding court in Port Tobacco.

**Interpretive opportunities:** Dorsey's role in the whiskey plot and interaction with the British. Dicandia's view of the ordeal during the summer of 1814 with the British threat and being pregnant. The role of the slave in the War and the offer of freedom from the British.

#### THE MORTON and BOWLING ERA, 1824-1954

In 1826, Charles S. Smith executed a quit claim deed to James and William Morton relinquishing his right to the Dorsey Farm, mentioning that he had sold, "several years ago" his interest in the farm to Clement Dorsey, husband of Dicandia Smith Dorsey his cousin and former sister-in-law.<sup>21</sup>

The Morton's were prosperous merchants and storekeepers in nearby Benedict, Hughesville, and Woodville, now known as Aquasco. James and Maria P. Morton (1808-1876) and their family most likely lived at Maxwell Hall the house at Maxwell's Seat overlooking Swanson's Creek. They were Episcopalians and attended services at St. Mary's Church, St. Paul's Parish, in Woodville. Of their children; Margaret E. (?-1866) married John H. Smoot, Mary Emily married first [?] Middleton and second Benjamin F.

<sup>18</sup> Deed, Dorsey to Morton, IB 16, f. 33, 14 July 1824, Land Records of Charles County, Maryland, MSA; Deed, Smith to Morton, IB 17, f. 176-179, 23 December 1826, Land Records of Charles County, Maryland, MSA.

<sup>19</sup> Dicandia Dorsey d. 24 October 1839, Cryer, pg. 369

<sup>20</sup> Deed, Dorsey to Morton, IB 16, f. 33, 14 July 1824, Land Records of Charles County, Maryland, MSA; Deed, Smith to Morton, IB 17, f. 176-179, 23 December 1826, Land Records of Charles County, Maryland, MSA Dorsey, Clement. *The general public statutory law and public local law of the state of Maryland : from the year 1692 to 1839 inclusive, with annotations thereto, and a copious index.* Baltimore: J. D. Toy, 1840, Maryland State Law Library KFM1230.5.D71/1; Dorsey, Clement, *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress, 1774-Present*; Dicandia Dorsey d. 24 October 1839, Cryer, pg. 369

<sup>21</sup> Charles County Deed Book IB 17, f. 176-179, 23 December 1826.

Bowling; Anna Maria married Thomas B. Estep; Catherine P. (1838-1897) married Dr. George Frederick Adams (1830-1882) of Aquasco, Baltimore, and Charlotte Hall (Catherine died of paralysis in Aquasco); and Susan R. (1831-1911) who wed Mortimer S. Lawrence (1835-1915) of Baltimore in 1868. Their son John C. (1819-1866) remained a bachelor planter. They were slaveholders.<sup>22</sup>

James Morton died in 1842, intestate, and his lands were partitioned among his children in 1851. He leaves a widow, Maria P. Morton, children: John C. [bachelor], Margaret [marries John H. Smoot] Anna M. [marries Thomas B. Estep], Catherine P. [marries Dr. George F. Adams], Susan R. [marries Mortimer S. Lawrence], and Mary E. [marries (1) Middleton (2) Benjamin F. Bowling]. At his death Morton owns thirty-eight slaves.<sup>23</sup>

In 1852, ratification of the petition to divide the land of James Morton signed and recorded. John C. Morton inherits part of the Dorsey Farm, his sister Anna Estep inherits the other portion of the Dorsey Farm.<sup>24</sup> 1858, Thomas and Anna Estep (daughter of James Morton) sell their portion of the Dorsey Farm (250 acres) to Anna's mother Maria P. Morton.<sup>25</sup>

John C. Morton inherited 250 acres of what was known as the "Dorsey place". 1861, Maria Morton sells the Estep portion of the Dorsey Farm to her son John C., the farm grows to 500 acres<sup>26</sup> (the inheritance of Anna Morton Estep who had sold it to her mother in 1858.) In the 1860 census the Mortons were living in the Bryantown census district, Patuxent City post office. Maria was listed as head of household engaged in farming, while her son John was listed as a planter. Daughters Susan and Catherine were still at home and the family had one servant living with them, George Black, a sixteen year old African-American, presumably a slave.<sup>27</sup>

During the War Between the States, Camp Stanton was established on the farm across from the Dorsey Place for the training of African-American troops. John C. Morton died while in Baltimore during May 1866, but was buried at St. Mary's in Woodville. Maria P. Morton died in 1876 - apparently intestate. She is buried at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Aquasco. John Morton's estate was not settled until 1877. The Dorsey farm was valued at \$10,000 for approximately 500 acres. The inventory done after John's death credited the estate with 10,000 lbs. of tobacco, 152 barrels of long

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<sup>22</sup> George William may not be a son of Maria and James Morton; Catherine Morton m. George F. Adams son of Major Benjamin and Sarah Adams at Weston in Prince George's County on 6 November 1866. Cryer, pgs. 5, 219, 329; *Stones and Bones, Cemetery Records of Prince George's County*, pgs. 202-207.; Baltz, Shirley. *Prince George's County, Maryland Marriages & Deaths in Nineteenth Century Newspapers, Volume 1*, pg. 1, Bowie, Maryland. Heritage Books, 1995.; Susan Morton and Mortimer Lawrence m. 15 December 1868.

<sup>23</sup> Charles County Estate Papers, 1843, MSA C651-56, loc 01/08/12/025, MSA.

<sup>24</sup> Charles County Land Commissions, WM 2, f. 90-100, "Thomas B. Estep & Maria his wife & John C. Morton petition for Commission to divide land", MSA.

<sup>25</sup> Charles County Deed Book JS 2, f. 305, 17 May 1858, MSA.

<sup>26</sup> Charles County Deed Book JHC 1, f. 463, MSA.

<sup>27</sup> 1860 Federal Census; *Stones and Bones, Cemetery Records of Prince George's County*, pgs. 202-207.

corn and thirty-four barrels of short corn. In the house was a trunk, fourteen law books and a gold watch. The Dorsey farm was inherited by John's two sisters, Catherine and Susan who promptly sold it the Bowling family.<sup>28</sup>

In August 1877, Morton's daughter, Mary E. Bowling (1834-1907), purchased the property from her sisters Catherine Adams and Susan Lawrence for \$6,000.<sup>29</sup> Bowling's husband Benjamin had done business with John Morton and he must have been familiar with the property. Bowling continued to use the property as an investment and tenant farming concern. The Bowling family was a prominent and extensive Charles County family. In 1880, census taker Sylvester Mudd noted on the form when enumerating the Bowling family, "11 children at home enough to ruin any poor man." At that time the children living at home ranged in ages from five to twenty-one. This branch of the Bowling family lived in the 4th district (later changed to the 8<sup>th</sup>) of the county, their post office being Bryantown. Mary died in October 1907, testate.<sup>30</sup> In her will she left the Dorsey farm and seventy acres of woodland in trust to benefit her two single daughters, Marie and Susanna. While the daughters remained single the rents and net income from the property was to go to them. Upon the marriage, or death, of both daughters the trust was to be dissolved and equally divided among the surviving heirs. Neither daughter married but the Dorsey farm provided them with, if not a generous income, one that certainly maintained them well enough to forego settling down with a husband simply to ensure their well-being. The trustees, brothers James (1859-1936) and Harry (1865-1947), successfully managed the farm for their sisters.<sup>31</sup>

When the last of Mary Bowling's single daughters died, there were approximately forty descendants looking to benefit from the dissolution of the trust. With the exception of her son, Joseph B. Bowling, all of Maria Bowling's children were dead. Her grandsons, Harry R. Bowling, had been managing the property since 1941. During that time the average income from the property was between \$2,000-\$6,000 net. He was the lone deponent when testimony was taken in August 1954. The "Dorsey Farm proper" was purchased in February 1954 by Mr. & Mrs. Ralph W. Brown.<sup>32</sup> During this era, after Emancipation the farm was worked mostly with tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

**Interpretive opportunities:** tobacco, slavery, post-Reconstruction era farming, Camp Stanton. The story of the Morton merchants and their mercantile pursuits as well as owning and running a plantation. Female ownership of property. Steamboats and the role of the Patuxent in trade and the tie to Baltimore.

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<sup>28</sup> Inventory of John C. Morton, Charles County Inventories, February Term 1877, inventory taken 16 January 1877, pgs. 423, 429, 434, Charles County estate valued at \$12,029.09.

<sup>29</sup> Charles County Deed Book BGS2, f. 108, 14 August 1877, MSA.

<sup>30</sup> Charles County Will Book CHP 19, f. 326, 14 October 1907, MSA.

<sup>31</sup> Deed Adams and Lawrence to Bowling, BGS2, f. 108, 14 August 1877, Land Records of Charles County, Maryland, MSA; Will of Mary E. Bowling, CHP 19, f. 326, probated 14 October 1907, Will Records of Charles County, La Plata.; 1880 Federal Census, District 8.

<sup>32</sup> Deposition of Harry R. Bowling, 5 August 1954, Bowling vs. Semple, #367A Equity, Charles County Circuit Court Records, La Plata.

THE BROWN and ROBINSON (Serenity Farm) ERA, 1954-current

Ralph A. and Cordelia Brown purchase what is known as, “the Dorsey Farm” from the Bowling estate in 1954.<sup>33</sup> The Browns were from Prince George’s County.

Frank A. (1883-1970) and Elizabeth Bourne Robinson (1892-1976) of Ferndale Farm (formerly known as Potomac Landing), Prince George’s County purchased “the Dorsey Farm” in December 1965. At the time of their purchase the farm had three tenant houses and seven tobacco barns of various sizes and ages, as well as a number of outbuildings. On 21 February 1966, they deeded the farm to their son Franklin A. and his wife Adina Mae Via (1937-1966). Adina named it Serenity Farm.<sup>34</sup>

Franklin continued expanding and improving the farming operation by modern methods and means. At times, he farmed over one thousand acres, both owned and rented in Charles and Prince George’s Counties. An A-frame vacation home was constructed on the property. Adina died on December 14, 1966, after a long illness. She was buried in Trinity Memorial Gardens, Waldorf, Charles County. Frank died 5 February 1970 and was buried at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Baden, Prince George’s County.<sup>35</sup>

The large tobacco barn (the green barn) that had been built by Brown on the hill where the current main residence sits was moved to a new location on the farm in May 1968. Franklin constructed a Quonset style farm shop (1966) and over the years has added sheds, a Butler metal building for hay storage (1975), a potato storage shed, and renovated many of the barns for multiple uses. The barns were painted pastel colors in 1974. In 1981 the last tobacco barn was constructed. The main house was constructed between November 1974 and July 1975.

The Robinson family completed the main family dwelling and moved to Serenity Farm on 14 July 1975. On 17 July 1975 Franklin and his mother Elizabeth sold the remaining acreage of Ferndale Farm deeding it to Brandywine Sand and Gravel, thus ending 131 years of ownership of Ferndale Farm in Prince George’s County by the Robinson family. Elizabeth died on 25 July 1976 and was buried beside her husband in the cemetery at St. Paul’s Church.

In 1981 a state agricultural land preservation district of 222.755 acres was created on the farm. This was the first such district in Charles County and one of the first in the state.

The crops grown on Serenity Farm have been many and varied. The most important historically, and the most lucrative, was tobacco. Since the late 1600s, tobacco

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<sup>33</sup> Charles County Deed Book 114, f. 53, 22 February 1954, Charles County Land Records, La Plata, Maryland.

<sup>34</sup> Charles County Deed Book 179, f. 708, 21 February 1966, Charles County Land Records, La Plata, Maryland.

<sup>35</sup> Franklin married (2) Margaret Walker Lennox (nee Tallen) (1932-2012) 21 August 1970, divorced 1977, no issue; (3) Hiltrud (Ceddie) Harris (nee Sedlacek) (?-2012) 15 July 1978, divorced 1986, no issue; (4) Diedre Gale Merhiage 19 April 1989, divorced 1997, no issue; (5) Remelda Henega Buenavista 13 January 2008, no issue.

was grown on the property and by the late 20th century between 70-80 acres was planted in tobacco each year. After the crop year 2001 the Robinson family took the tobacco buyout program offered by the state of Maryland and ceased growing tobacco. Less than one acre of tobacco is grown now and that only for educational purpose. Rye, Alfalfa hay, corn and soybeans are the predominate crops currently raised here on the farm. In the past, such diverse crops as potatoes, string beans, sorghum, sunflowers and horseradish have been grown here. The livestock currently raised on the farm are sheep, hogs, cattle, Crossback donkeys, goats, emu, and Peruvian Llamas. Horses, mules, and catfish have also been raised. The farm consists of seven family dwellings, six tobacco barns, two livestock barns, one hay barn, greenhouses, the Harvest House (farm store), one private airstrip (Robinson PVR) and three farm ponds.

**Interpretive opportunities:** tobacco and the tobacco buyout, multi-crop farming, movement into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century agro-tourism initiatives. The focus of a family farm in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the changes to Maryland farming in general. The lessened role of the Patuxent in trade.

## SERENITY FARM CHRONOLOGY, 1608-2012

**1608:** John Smith explores the Patuxent River, notes Native-American villages in the vicinity and possibly on Serenity Farm along Smith's Creek.

**Pre-1739:** Farm comes under the ownership of the Smith family. Charles Somerset Smith (1) (1698-1739) dies testate [means with a will], styled as "Captain", leaves to son Richard Smith land on the south side of St. Nicholas' Creek without the swampland [this became known as the Dorsey place/farm, later Serenity Farm], Richard Smith sells this property to his brother Charles Somerset Smith (2).

**1781:** Charles Somerset Smith (2) dies testate, leaves five minor children, leaves to his son Henry Arundel Smith, at age twenty-one, all the land on the south side of St. Nicholas' Creek [now Smith's Creek, this is the current Serenity Farm]

**1781-1809:** Owned by Henry Arundel Smith. Smith dies testate in 1809, left to his wife Dicandia Ireland Smith upon his death in 1809, at her death it is to become property of Charles Somerset Smith (3) [her brother-in-law].

**1812:** Dicandia weds Clement Dorsey of Anne Arundel County. Dorsey buys Charles Somerset Smith (3) right in the property.

**1814:** British land 4,370 troops in Benedict and camp on the Dorsey farm before marching on Washington, DC in August 1814. They return after plundering the city of Washington. Dorsey warns the British that some people in Benedict have poisoned barrels of whiskey with arsenic. On their return, they burn Charles Somerset Smith's home, Mount Arundel, north side of Smith's Creek.

**1824:** In July, Dicandia and Clement Dorsey sell the Dorsey farm to Benedict merchants James and William Morton. The Dorsey's move to St. Mary's County and the Morton's take up residence at Maxwell Hall.

**1842:** James Morton dies leaving four daughters, one son and his widow Maria.

**1851:** partition of the land of James Morton, his son John C. Morton inherits part of the Dorsey Farm. John may have built a home on the property along the west side of what is now Bluebird Hill Place but is not resident there year round.

**1858:** Thomas and Anna Estep (daughter of James Morton) sell their portion of the Dorsey Farm (250 acres) to Anna's mother Maria P. Morton.

**1861:** Maria Morton sells the Estep portion of the Dorsey Farm to her son John C., the farm grows to 500 acres.

**1861-1865:** Civil War, Camp Stanton is established on land across the rolling road from the Dorsey Farm to train African-American troops to fight in the Civil War.

**1866:** John C. Morton dies in Baltimore, his estate is divided among his surviving sisters. From this point until the Brown ownership only tenant farmers live on the farm with owners living elsewhere.

**1877:** In August, Catherine Adams and Susan Lawrence sell the Dorsey Farm to their sister Mary E. Bowling.

**1907:** Mary E. Bowling dies leaves farm in trust to her two unmarried daughters.

**1954:** In February, the farm is sold to Ralph and Cordelia Brown of Prince George's County by trustees of Bowling's estate, Mary Bowling's two daughters having died. The Brown's construct their home on the ridge above the farm. They also build one tobacco barn, the green barn.

**1965:** In December, Brown sells the farm (494.75 acres) to Frank and Elizabeth Robinson of Prince George's County.

**1966:** In February, Robinson transfers the property to their son Franklin A. and his wife Adina M. Via Robinson. They name the property Serenity Farm.

**1974-1975:** A new main dwelling house is built on the former site of the green barn.

**1975:** On 14 July the Robinson family move to Serenity.

**1976:** The farm is incorporated in the state of Maryland as Serenity Farm, Inc..

**1980:** The last tobacco barn is built on the farm. A gambrel roof barn.

**1982:** 222 acres are put into the Maryland State Agricultural Land Preservation program.

**2000:** The Robinson family opts to take the tobacco buyout program offered by the state. Tobacco ceases to be grown on Serenity Farm after over three hundred years.

**2008:** A grant is received from Preservation Maryland to restore the yellow barn.

**2009:** The farm receives a Farm Viability Grant from the Southern Maryland Agricultural Commission (SMADC) to build the Harvest House (farm store), renovate the green barn into the Celebrate at Serenity rental venue, and the Museum at Serenity Farm in the blue gambrel roof barn.

**2010:** In October the Harvest House is completed and opened. The formal opening is in November.







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January 11, 2012

Ms. Cathy Thompson  
Community Planning Program Manager  
Department of Planning and Growth Management  
CHARLES COUNTY GOVERNMENT  
200 Baltimore Street  
P. O. Box 2150  
La Plata, Maryland 20646

**RE: Maxwell Hall Interpretive Plan Framework**

Dear Ms. Thompson:

We are pleased to submit the attached recommendations and framework to guide the development of the Maxwell Hall Interpretive Plan.

We look forward to receiving your comments.

Best regards,

David H. Bennett, ASLA LEED AP  
Senior Associate / Project Manager

### Maxwell Hall Interpretive Plan Recommendations

The interpretive plan outline provides the steps necessary for a complete interpretive plan. Emphasis should be placed on determining a "Mission" for the site and establishing its "Period(s) of Significance" from which all of the interpretive elements flow. Factors in determine these are the existing conditions (date of the structures and landscape elements and their physical integrity to certain periods of the site's history) and the significance of the site to local, regional, or national history.

As we understand, the County's goal is to open the site to the public on a temporary basis with an initial focus on the War of 1812. Although the house and farm date to the ownership of George Maxwell, he was no longer the owner in the War of 1812 period (1812-1815). The County should focus research efforts, for now, on the ownership of Philemon Keech, and then later expand research as they decide what the mission and periods of significance of the site should be. It would be useful to outline what is known about Keech and to gather from secondary sources and from local historians some context of the area during the war period. That would allow us to define the themes and stories that could be told as part of the War of 1812 celebrations.

Below are some of our thoughts about interpretation themes:

#### Agriculture Theme Research Questions: Establishing the river/road transportation network.

Was the plantation operating the same in 1812 as 1770?

Did it continue to raise tobacco or had it shifted to grain crops which would change the meaning of the rolling road?

What was the purpose of the farm's own wharf and would it have operated independent of the port and customs functions in Benedict? At any rate, the farm undoubtedly related to Benedict as the closest town.

The interpretive trail between the house and the river is a great idea incorporating the theme of African-American history.

#### War of 1812 Interpretation Ideas & Issues:

- Themes: [Rephrased from subthemes identified in the "Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail Interpretive Plan (NPS, January 2011), pp. 22-25]:
  1. Land & water routes (during the War and throughout its history).
  2. Political & Economic ramifications of the War in the Chesapeake - Effects of the War on Merchants & Farmers.
  3. Personal Effects of the War on the local population (including African Americans).
  4. Benedict as a hub of trade targeted by the British.
- Programs/Events: Hold reenactments on the property. War of 1812 reenactors do a lot of substantive research and can provide first-person and third-person interpretation on life in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Maryland. Usually, military reenactors can put you in touch with civilian

reenactors. They are self-sufficient and usually just need an area large enough for a variety of activities. Reenactments also are one of the largest visitor draws and will introduce the site to a new audience.

- Educational Programs/Partnerships: Involve elementary school students in projects relating to Maxwell Hall and the War of 1812. Work with teachers to develop in-class projects under standards of learning which can culminate in field trips to Maxwell Hall. Teachers can be trained to interpret the site for their students. Since the War of 1812 is particularly important for the next three years, there is more incentive for teachers to put time into developing the classroom lessons. Also, possibly establish a speaker series to highlight aspects of Chesapeake culture & history, for example, boat building, that relates to War of 1812 -- experts like Donald Shomette, Ralph Eshelman, and staff at Calvert Marine Museum.
- Site Accessibility: Develop a small, handicapped parking area (not necessarily paved initially) close to the building while maintaining a larger parking lot elsewhere. Provide drop-off points for visitors.
- Organization: Establish an advisory committee to development the Maxwell Hall site and to guide the development of a full interpretive plan. Recruit volunteers to help with War of 1812 events & programs.

**Maxwell Hall Interpretive Plan**  
January 11, 2011

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