

St. Clement's Island Birthplace of Maryland 1634

In 1934, to celebrate Maryland's 300th birthday, Governor Albert Ritchie, dedicated a 40-foot commemorative cross recognizing this site as the location where religious toleration in America had its foundation. It stands tall today and welcomes all with the same tribute to the brave colonists who risked their lives to seek an ideal America cherishes today.

Their reasons for leaving England were simple. For the Catholics aboard the Ark and the Dove, it was to escape persecution and being marginalized socially and economically. For Protestants, it was to seek a better life and like their Catholic shipmates, be open to opportunities the New World offered – opportunities that made the risks worthwhile.

George Calvert, a Catholic, was well-regarded by the English court. The King, James I, admired Calvert's diplomatic skills and knighted him, making him Lord Baltimore. To the Protestant King, Calvert's Catholicism was not significant, although Catholics throughout England and its Empire were constrained from practicing their religion openly. Nevertheless, Calvert resigned his royal posts and asked the King for a land grant in the colonies where he, his family and others seeking religious freedom could settle. James I died but his successor, Charles I, acceded to Calvert's request, granting him the land "to the true meridian of the first fountains of the River Pattowmeck." The land would be named for the wife of Charles I, Henrietta Maria.



George Calvert died before he could visit Terra Mariae, or "Mary's Land." His son, Cecil, accepted the charter and made plans for the voyage. Each adult going to Maryland would be granted 100 acres, each child, 50. Indentured servants would receive personal supplies and food.

Cecil's brother, Leonard, led the small group of colonists to the New World. Seventeen Catholic gentlemen signed up to go, along with three Jesuit priests and about 200 others, most of whom were probably Protestants. A small number of women also made the trip. On November 23, 1633, the Ark, a 360-ton ship, and the Dove, a 60-ton pinnace, set sail from Cowes, Isle of Wight, England. The ships entered the Chesapeake Bay on March 3, 1634. They sailed up the Potomac River and landed at an island which they named for St. Clement, patron saint of sailors, on whose feast day they had departed. On March 25, the Catholic passengers assembled at a mass celebrated by Father Andrew White, S.J. – the first Roman Catholic mass in the 13 English-speaking colonies.



George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, had decided before his death that Maryland was not to be a colony just for Catholics, but a place where Christians of different denominations could practice their faith without impediment. The Maryland colony did not recognize any one religion keeping separate those issues of church and state. Religious toleration became the official policy of the Maryland colony, as did recognition of the Native Americans as a separate people with inherent rights. This was extraordinary for the time, as views in the other colonies and the mother country were sharply different. These two progressive pieces of 17th-century policy foreshadowed the provisions of the U. S. Constitution guaranteeing separation of church and state and subsequent laws enacted to protect civil rights.

Since those earliest days, St. Clement's Island lay witness from its vantage point, swept by wind, storms, and tide, to many evolutions. The colonial years saw plantations spring up along the river shores producing an infant tobacco industry and the promise of wealth. From those infant years to well into the 20th, it would inherit

the name of Blackistone Island, as signature to more than 200 years of ownership by the Blackistone family. The Blackistone Lighthouse, built in 1851 by master lighthouse builder John Donahoo, stood on the south end of the island serving Potomac River mariners until it was decommissioned in 1932. The vacant lighthouse was burned by vandals in 1956 and forever lost as an important monument to Potomac River heritage.

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In 1960, the island returned to its original identity as St. Clement's Island later owned and maintained by the State of Maryland as a state park.