

CULTURAL RESOURCES REVIEW IN CALVERT COUNTY, MARYLAND

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Calvert County, Maryland is a peninsula, nine miles at its widest and 45 miles long, bounded on the west by the Patuxent River and on the east by the Chesapeake Bay. The river and bay meet at the southern tip of the county. Creeks, some wide and deep, dissect the land on both sides. Calvert County contains 140,000 acres and is the smallest geographic jurisdiction in the state, with the exception of Baltimore City. Humans have lived at least 12,000 years in the region; over 500 archaeological sites have been recorded in Calvert County, though no comprehensive, systematic survey has ever been done. The Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties, consisting mostly of historic structures, currently has more than 1,300 entries for the county and includes a wide range of site types. The county's population is approximately 85,000.

Evolution of Preservation Planning

The population remained nearly stable from after the Civil War until the mid-twentieth century. Agriculture—principally tobacco—was the mainstay of the economy until the third quarter of the last century. Since the 1970s, the population has trebled and the pressures to develop the countryside, on one hand, and to preserve it, on the other, have intensified. To meet the challenge, planning began in earnest in the 1970s. In the comprehensive plan of the 1980s, historic preservation had its own chapter, and preserving landmark structures was seen as key to ensuring an enduring sense of identity. By the 1997 plan, the role of historic preservation was explicit. Local cultural heritage—including archaeology, oral history, tobacco barns, vernacular houses, steamboat landings, and oyster boats—was presented to new residents as the essential Calvert County that they should come to know, understand, and cherish. Planners used heritage as a tool to promote sustainability and a sense of place. In the 2004 plan, cultural heritage and environmental resources are seen as inextricably linked.

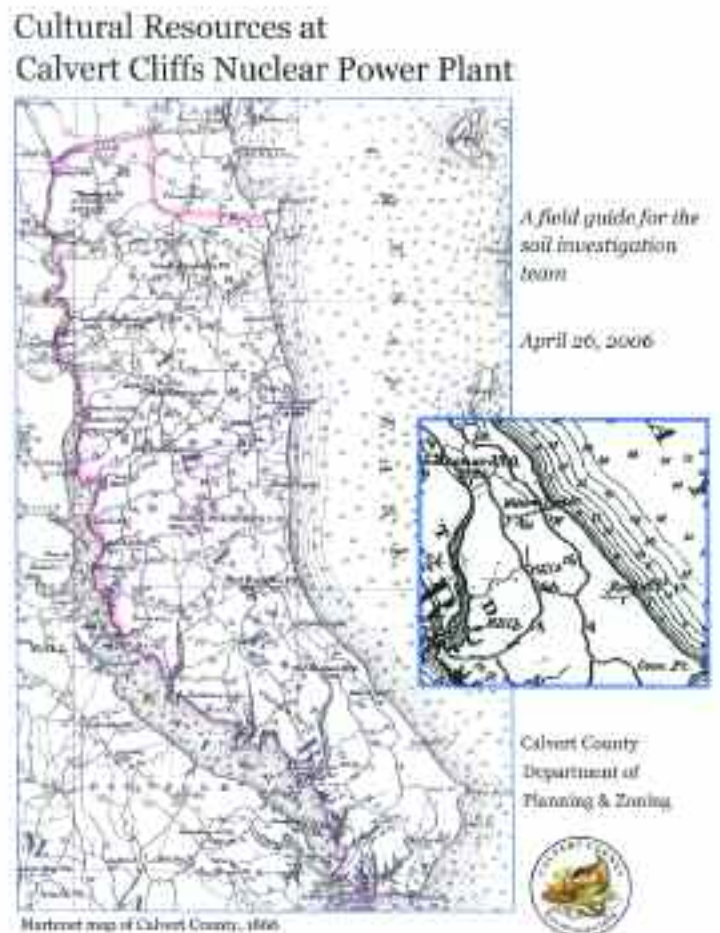


Figure 1: Constellation Energy's feasibility study for the siting of a third and fourth nuclear reactor at Calvert Cliffs did not trigger compliance archaeology at the federal or state level, although actual construction would, of course. Concerned about what might be overlooked in hundreds of test borings, a crash-course in artifact identification was created and, with the cooperation of Constellation and its partners, offered to the field teams who agreed to identify and collect according to bore-test location numbers. The photo shows the cover of the 12-page booklet furnished to every member of the drilling and soil testing crew.



Figure 2: Monitoring of development projects, although often tedious and at odd hours, has yielded important information. In this photo, the hoe is excavating for a sewer along a public road to serve a new office building. The hoe has just uncovered the base of a brick foundation 10 feet below grade, where the man is standing. The profile along the road revealed two or three earlier roads, the first made with tar and chip around 1923, at more than 9 feet below the present surface.

The county commissioners established a Historic District Commission (HDC) in 1974, staffed by the Department of Planning and Zoning. In this mostly rural county, “district” is a misnomer; properties designated under the ordinance would more appropriately be termed “landmarks.” There are now 78 properties so designated, ranging from vernacular houses on small lots to an eighteenth-century farm of more than 300 acres. In the 1990s, the historic district ordinance was amended to include archaeology explicitly. The HDC reviews all development projects, whether they involve a designated property or not.

In addition to the historic district ordinance, two of the seven town-center zoning ordinances and the multifamily and townhouse ordinance may require archaeology, with the finding of high potential in a project area. A recent effort to extend an archaeological requirement countywide for all commercial developments and all residential subdivisions of five lots or more fizzled. The HDC is working to introduce it as a text amendment to the zoning ordinance.

County Preservation Procedures

All projects undertaken by the county are subject to archaeological requirements. When archaeology is required at the local level, the scope of work is written by the historic preservation planner specifying investigation that meets state guidelines.

Calvert County subdivision regulations allow for the evaluation of cultural resources but equivocate on the responsibility to protect, preserve, or mitigate adverse effects. Until this year, if staff and the HDC recommended the retention of a historic structure on a subdivision, and the planning commission

required it, it would still be possible for a developer to “burn his way out of” the requirement. In practice, a bond may now be set for restoration of historic structures that are required to be retained in subdivisions. Should a developer fail to meet the requirement, the forfeited amount could be applied to a preservation fund for other projects. The applicability of bonding under the subdivision regulations for recommended avoidance or mitigation of archaeological resources is being explored.

The county may get involved when the state requires compliance archaeology, under wetlands permits, for example. In practice, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) refers the property owner to the county. The historic preservation planner then writes the scopes of work and reviews proposals, if requested, and consults with the SHPO in reviewing the project. When the compliance projects are roads, the State Highway Administration (SHA) has its own process. The county is invited to comment and may share information, but does not prepare scopes or review the work.

Documentation, protection, and oversight activities may occur that are not otherwise authorized by the county code or zoning ordinance. One example is review of demolition permits on all structures 50 years or older. This practice was initiated when a historic barn was intentionally demolished under a permit to burn debris. Demolition review provided the opportunity to identify and preserve the oldest-known one-room school for African Americans in the county, as well as many other previously unrecorded resources. The process is potentially a powerful way to inform citizens about the history of their properties and the benefits of participating in a preservation program.

Educating the Public

Public education is the most effective tool for site protection and promotion of archaeology. Calvert County planning at present has one full-time archaeologist assigned to cultural resources. For all the archaeology that cannot be required, some basic documentation gets done with volunteers and interns. Certified local government grants have funded cultural documentation projects to produce books and videos celebrating local history. These efforts and countless PowerPoint presentations to civic organizations, schools, and teacher in-services help to establish legitimacy for the stewardship of material culture on and under the landscape in Calvert County. When the public values and expects its adopted history—its identity—to be preserved and interpreted, the regulatory authority might be anticipated to follow. We are hopeful.



Figure 3: A fieldstone chimney marks the site of a post-Civil-War-era, African-American domestic site, rediscovered during the course of a subdivision review. Thanks to an adequate public facilities ordinance, the lot on which it stands will not be developed for at least two years. The developer is enthusiastic about making the site available for study. The challenge to make that happen comes to the county historic preservation program.