

HISTORY OF EASTON, MARYLAND

The Town of Easton seems to have received its official beginning from an Act of the Assembly of the Province of Maryland dated November 4, 1710. The Act was entitled, "An Act for the Building of a Court House for Talbot County, at Armstrong's Old Field near Pitt's Bridge". Pitt's Bridge crossed a stream forming the headwaters of the Tred Avon or Third Haven River. It was located at a point where North Washington Street crosses this stream, now enclosed in culverts, north of the Talbottown Shopping Center, and passes under the Electric Plant property.

Prior to this date, the Court had met at York, a small settlement north of Dover Bridge. The Court decided that this location was not convenient to all sections of the County and, in order to change the location, the above Act of the Assembly was passed.

As a result of this Act, two acres of land were purchased from Philemon Armstrong, at a cost of 5,000 pounds of tobacco, the currency of the times. Upon this tract, the same plot upon which the present Talbot County Court House now stands, the Court House, a brick building 20 x 30 feet, was erected at a cost of 115,000 pounds of tobacco. The Courts of the County were held in this building from 1712 until 1794. A Tavern to accommodate those who attended Court was one of the first buildings erected; stores and dwellings followed. The village was then known as Talbot Court House.

These were not the first buildings in the area. The frame meeting house of the Society of Friends was built between 1682 and 1684. Undoubtedly some homes were built nearby.

This Court House building continued to be used until the State Legislature, at its first Session after the adoption of the State Constitution in 1777, authorized the General Court, the forerunner of the present Court of Appeals, to sit alternately on the Western Shore and on the Eastern Shore at "Talbot Court House in Talbot County". To care for the needs of the General Court, the Legislature in 1789 enacted "An Act for the building of a Court House in Talbot County for the Accommodation of the General Court for the Eastern Shore and the County of Talbot". The building thus provided, built at a cost of £3000 sterling, paid by the State and County, was completed in 1794, and still serves as the seat of the County Courts. Its use by the General Court and the Court of Appeals has long since been discontinued. It is, however, after many remodelings, the last being in 1958, still used by the United States District Court which customarily sits in Baltimore.

On March 12, 1785, the Legislature passed an Act to erect the Town in Talbot County, and a Commission headed by Jeremiah Banning, was appointed to purchase land and "Lay it Out in the Best and most convenient manner into lots not exceeding

one-half acre each". This Act also authorized the Commission to survey the land and lay out the streets as well as name them. The name of the Town was to be known as "Talbot". In 1788 another Act of the Legislature changed the name to "Easton". It is not definitely known why this change was made. Some writers believe that the Town was first known as "East Town" or "East Capital", as it was the seat of State Government of the Eastern Shore and from this later became Easton.

In 1790 the Legislature provided for the election of five Commissioners to whom was entrusted the administration of the Town. The Commission was charged with the preservation of order, the maintenance of the roadways in passable condition, keeping open the drainage ditches, providing plank foot walks where necessary and making and enforcing such regulations as were needed for the preservation of the peace and welfare of the Community.

The powers of the Commission were rather limited and it appears that at times it almost ceased to function. This may account for the fact that some of the streets of the Town as originally laid out have been encroached upon to such an extent by the abutting property owners. Dover Street, which was laid out at a uniform width, is one example; Magazine Alley, originally provided vehicular passage but has now become a narrow pedestrian walkway. Prior to 1906, Easton was a village with unpaved streets, which had to be crossed at the corners where plank crossings were provided. Electricity for streets and homes had been provided since 1887. The electric service, however, was discontinued at midnight, causing late visitors to scurry home before the old carbon globes gradually died out as the Town Clock struck the hour of midnight. After midnight, the only lights about the Town were half a dozen gas jet lamps encased in square glass lanterns set on top of wooden poles.

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In 1906 the Legislature authorized a new Charter setting up the Mayor and Council form of government. Martin M. Higgins was elected as the first Mayor and served for six years, or a total of three terms.

Under Mayor Higgins, Easton developed rapidly into a modern municipality. In 1911, Easton was a pioneer in Maryland in constructing a complete municipal sewerage system. In 1912 the main residential and business streets were paved. In 1914 the Town purchased and began operation of a municipal water system, and in the same year commenced the operation of a municipal electric plant. In 1922 the Town purchased and commenced operating a local gas plant. Since that time, it has been

one of the few municipalities in the United States which owns and operates all of the public utilities: electric, gas, water and sewer.

Successive, forward thinking and civic minded administrations of the Town Government have continued the development of the municipality. The electric plant is a modern, up to date, electric generating facility which has continued to keep ahead of the increasing demand for electrical service. From its modest beginning of one unit generating 150 kW of electricity, the plant, including a new generating unit about to be purchased, has a maximum generating capacity of 19,870 kW. This utility provides some revenue to the Town, employment of its citizens, and electricity to its customers at one of the lowest rates available in the area. The gas utility is also being continuously expanded and is now furnishing natural gas to its customers. The water system, as well, is constantly keeping abreast of the demands. A new one million gallon storage tank has recently been constructed adding its capacity to the existing two storage tanks. Easton was the first municipality in the State of Maryland to provide for sewage treatment by means of the lagoon system, which has been used as a model by many other municipalities in the East.

In 1961 the citizens of Easton approved the construction of a new Fire House, to be financed by a bond issue to be in the amount of \$350,000.00. Many other improvements have also been financed through bond issues but the Town has continued to maintain an excellent rating for its bonds and for many years has been successful in keeping its tax rate at \$1.00, despite the rising cost of services provided.

The Charter and Ordinances of Easton were last codified and printed in one volume during the administration of F. Hall Wrightson in 1941. The many changes which have taken place since that date have rendered this re-codification necessary.

On behalf of the Mayor and Council, I wish to express our sincere appreciation to Charles S. Rhyne and the Staff of the National Institute of Municipal Law Officers, especially Brice W. Rhyne, Edward D. Coxen, Carl P. Fisher, as well as to L. Clark Ewing, Town Attorney and William H. Corkran, Jr., Town Engineer, for the many hours which they have devoted to this project.

Sherwood M. Hubbard, Mayor