

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"William Winchester Monograph"

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By Joe Getty

One of the greatest challenges in researching local history is to find and interpret documents dating from the mid-18th century settlement period of Carroll County. The men and women who explored and settled the wilderness of Piedmont Maryland left few documentary traces of their daily lives.

A new publication released this week by the Historical Society of Carroll County uses 18th century documentation to create a profile of William Winchester, one of Carroll County's most significant early settlers. A Winchester descendant, Emma Shelton, has compiled this documentation in a monograph entitled William Winchester 1711 - 1790.

The early public records filed at the Land Records Office in Annapolis provided an important source of documentary materials for researching the life of William Winchester. The land patents and surveys granted to original land owners in Piedmont Maryland are especially useful.

At the Historical Society of Carroll County, we are fortunate to have the extensive research collection of Dr. Arthur G. Tracey and his daughter Dr. Grace L. Tracey. The Traceys' pioneering research of land patents provided insights about local settlement patterns and the developing economies of agriculture and commerce. They mastered the use of primary source materials to enlighten our knowledge about the people who brought European civilization to Piedmont Maryland.

The Traceys also produced specialized studies about town development in Carroll County. In an essay "The Five Villages that Became a Town," Dr. Grace L. Tracey traced the establishment of the plats that comprised the early configuration of Westminster, including references to the role of William Winchester in founding the community.

The patent records and the land records from Baltimore and Frederick counties provide us with the names of many early settlers and land speculators. They identify the locations of their tracts of land and occasionally provide other references about the people and their daily lives in the 18th century. These documents provide a starting point for researching local families.

Other sources materials for this period are few and far between. It requires untold hours of painstaking research to follow leads in public and private records to learn about the first inhabitants of our communities. Many times, a blind lead proves to be frustrating and fruitless. The few successes provide a true sense of accomplishment to a researcher's perseverance.

I confronted some of these challenges when researching the property "White's Level" for the book *Carroll's Heritage: Essays on the Architecture of a Piedmont Maryland County*. The property contained an early house of a style more typically found in the Tidewater Maryland region. This rare survival of mid-18th century architecture became more fascinating when the land records revealed that it was the property of William Winchester, a well-known figure of Carroll County's history.

No historical tradition survived that placed Winchester's home at "White's Level." In fact, oral and written traditions contradicted my findings by placing Winchester's homestead at other locations in the

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Westminster vicinity. With additional research, it became evident that this house was William Winchester's. But the broader questions about William Winchester and how he lived his life remained unanswered.

To me, it seemed ironic that the mostly widely-known 18th century figure from Carroll County's history turned out to actually be little-known. Our research library receives many requests about William Winchester each year. Yet our understanding about William Winchester's life and family was limited to a few details of his family genealogy.

Thus we were pleased to assist with Emma Shelton's research to discover the history of William Winchester as an 18th century entrepreneur. Beginning with the Historical Society's Tracey collection, she compiled primary source materials about Winchester's early years in England, his indenture to come to America and his land holdings and enterprises in Piedmont Maryland.

Ms. Shelton has uncovered many unknown facts and documents relating to the history of William Winchester, his family and his successful business ventures. From the pages of this book, a picture emerges of a man who embodied the dreams of success in 18th century Carroll County.

This monograph has filled a significant gap in our knowledge of Westminster and Carroll County history. William Winchester, 1711 - 1790 also serves as a model for others researching the history of 18th century individuals in Carroll County and Piedmont Maryland.

"William Winchester, 1711 - 1790" is available as part of the Historical Society's publication program; call (410) 848-6494 for details.

Photo caption: "William Winchester, 1711 - 1790" written by Emma Shelton describes the life of the founder of Westminster and one of Carroll County's 18th century entrepreneurs. This local history book has been published as part of the Historical Society of Carroll County's publication program.