



**Historic St. Mary's City
Fort to 400 Commission**

ANNUAL REPORT

As required by § 9-3301 Senate Bill 946

Respectfully submitted to the General Assembly of Maryland by
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Maryland Department of Commerce, Office of Tourism Development
Secretary Harry Coker, Jr., Department of Commerce

401 East Pratt Street

Baltimore, MD 21202

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Maryland

Wes Moore, Governor | Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor

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Mission

The plan to commemorate the first non-native settlers to arrive in Maryland in 1634 formally began in the 2021 General Assembly Session with the passage of CHs 687/688, Acts of 2021 – Historic St. Mary’s City Fort to 400 Commission.

The Commission would provide leadership for and coordinate economic development opportunities in and around St. Mary’s City to promote the region for future generations. Assisted by the Maryland Historical Trust and the State Archives, the Office of Tourism and Film with the Maryland Department of Commerce provides staff to the Commission.

Members

Nineteen members constitute the Commission. The Governor appoints five members, and the Senate President and House Speaker each appoint two members. One member each represents the Commission on African American History and Culture; the Commission on Indian Affairs; the Historic St. Mary’s City Commission, the Maryland Rediscovery 400 Initiative; and St. Mary’s College of Maryland. Five members serve ex officio.

Authorization for the Commission ends September 30, 2035.

The Commission was appointed by Governor Larry Hogan, including the naming of Brian Norris, Owner, Cherry Cover Hospitality Management as Chair of the Fort to 400 Commission.

The Chair’s duties include and are not limited to:

- Sponsor Recruitment and Development
- Stewardship and Visitor Experiences
- Education and Curriculum
- Program and Events
- Transportation and Capital Infrastructure
- Communication and Marketing
- Operations and Management

Duties of the Commission include and are not limited to:

- Coordinate the planning and implementation of the activities and events
- Promote the identification, documentation and preservation of historical and cultural resources related to the founding of Maryland
- Assist in promoting, improving and developing existing educational and interpretive institutions, sites and museums related to the founding
- Develop a model social studies curriculum on the founding
- Promote nationally and internationally the commemoration of the founding
- Ensure activities, events, and products that provide lasting value and benefits
- Secure the support and financial resources needed to implement the activities and events of the Commission

- Provide leadership for and coordinate economic opportunities in and around St. Mary's
- Perform other actions necessary to carry out the purposes of the Commission

2025 Meetings

The Commission convened for two official meetings virtually during the 2025 calendar year as mandated by the statute. The first meeting was held on Wednesday, January 15, 2025 and the second was held on Friday, March 21, 2025.

2025 meeting minutes are attached in the Appendices of this report.

Upon the resignation of Mr. Brian Norris as Chair of the Commission, effective October 1, 2025, Commission staff from the Maryland Department of Commerce recommend the following actions be taken on behalf of the Commission.

ACTION	EXECUTION	COMMERCE RECOMMENDATION
Create 501c to manage fundraising and execute all activities around the celebration of Historic St. Mary's City and Maryland in general.	The action to identify and form a 501C organization is stalled.	<p>Use the Maryland 250 Commission as a case study to move the Fort to 400 Commission forward and create a logical succession plan for the Maryland 250 Commission which sunsets in 2027 into the Fort to 400 Commission which sunsets in 2035.</p> <p>By doing so, the following actions should be taken.</p> <p>I. Hire an Executive Director to lead the Commission through forming the 501c or alternative financial partner (see below), creating committees, and writing a strategic plan to successfully implement deliverables through 2034.</p> <p>II. As with the Maryland 250 Commission, work with the Attorney General to find a fiscal sponsor which is an established non-profit that will manage the finances of other public projects or non-profits not yet finalized.</p>

		III. Present the recommendation of Commission's new strategy and structure to the Governor's office as background for appointing a new Chair.
Discuss staffing for the Commission.	Recruitment for an Administrative Coordinator by the Maryland Department of Commerce will align with the creation of the 501c organization.	The statute designates that the Department of Commerce receive staffing assistance from the Maryland Historic Trust and the Maryland State Archives. Therefore, escalate the Administrative Coordinator position to an Executive Director position that physically resides with the Maryland Historic Trust which is where the Maryland 250 Commission resides. This will allow the new Executive Director to create working relationships with the Executive Director of the Maryland 250 Commission as well as all three managing agencies.
Formation of Committees	The Commission decided to create several Committees including Development and Sponsor Relations, Resource Stewardship, Visitor Experience, Education, Curriculum, Events, Transportation and Capital Infrastructure, Marketing, Operations and Management. As of the submission of this report, a limited number of committee chairs and members have been identified but have not yet been invited to participate.	Pause identifying members of the Committees until the Executive Director is hired and can lead the process.
Chair Brian Norris nominated Commissioner Dr. Julie Schablitsky, Maryland	Commissioners unanimously approved Dr. Schablitsky as Co-Chair of the Commission during the	Chair Norris resigned in October 2025. Recommend appointing the new Chair in Q1 2026 and allow him/her to establish the meeting cadence for the rest of the year.

Department of Transportation, to be official Co-Chair of the Commission.	February 19, 2025, meeting.	
Two official meetings were held in CY 2025 as mandated by the statute.	Meetings were held in February and March 2025. As of the submission of this report, no additional meetings have been scheduled.	Once the new Chair is appointed, at least two meetings will be scheduled in CY 2026.

Closing Statement

A Commission meeting will be held in January 2026, to inform Commissioners about the Chair's resignation and steps to reinvigorate the Commission moving forward. A job description for a new Executive Director of the Fort to 400 Commission will be written, approved and posted in early 2026. When the position is filled, the new Executive Director will schedule all 2026 meetings, meet individually with each Commissioner, and create both a strategic plan for the Commission's remaining duration.

APPENDIX A

FORT TO 400 COMMISSION MEMBERS:

- Brian K. Norris, Chair (chosen by Governor) - *resigned October 2025*
- Appointed by Governor: Michael R. Alderson, Jr.; Mary A. Harms; Barbara A. Ives; Dr. Tuajuanda C. Jordan; Julian Blacklock Wills III.
- Appointed by Senate President: John D. (Jack) Bailey; Arthur Ellis.
- Appointed by House Speaker: Brian M. Crosby; Marc A. Korman.
- Representing Historic St. Mary's City Commission: Dr. John L. Seidel, Executive Director
- Representing Maryland Rediscovery 400 Initiative: Lucille Walker, Executive Director, Destination Southern Maryland
- Representing Commission on African American History & Culture: Chanel Compton, Executive Director, Banneker-Douglass Museum
- Representing Maryland Department of Transportation: Dr. Julie Schablitsky, Chief of the Cultural Resources Division
- Representing Maryland Historical Trust, Maryland Department of Planning: Elizabeth Hughes, Director/State Historic Preservation Officer
- Representing Commission on Indian Affairs: one vacancy
- Hilary Dailey, Tourism Program Specialist, Calvert County Department of Economic Development
- Ashley Chenault, Chief of Tourism, Explore Charles County

Commerce Staff Support:

Cynthia D. Miller, Director, Strategic Partnerships and PR, Maryland Office of Tourism Development

Appendix B



Historic St. Mary's City Fort to 400 Commission

MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, January 15

12:00 Noon - 2:00 p.m.

Virtual via Google Meets

MEMBERS PRESENT

Brian Norris, Chair
Blackie Willis
Christine Vigorito
Barbara Ives
Julie M. Schablitsky, Ph.D.
David Taylor
Craig Sewall

Channel Compton
Elizabeth Hughes
Maryann Harms

COMMERCE STAFF:

Liz Fitzsimmons, Managing Director
Marci Ross, Tourism Development

I. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Brian Norris called for a motion to call the meeting to order. Motion made and Seconded.

• **Review Duties of the Commission**

Staff member Liz Fitzsimmons provided the duties as outlined in the House Bill 1364, which are:

- a. Coordinate the planning and implementation of the activities and events
- b. Promote the identification, documentation and preservation of historical and cultural resources related to the founding of Maryland
- c. Assist promoting, improving and developing existing educational and interpretive institutions, sites and museums related to the founding
- d. Develop a model social studies curriculum on the founding
- e. Promote domestically and internationally the commemoration of the founding
- f. Ensure activities, events, and products that provide lasting value and benefit
- g. Secure support and financial resources to implement the activities and events of the commission
- h. Provide leadership for and coordinate economic opportunities in and around St. Mary's
- i. Perform other actions necessary to carry out the purposes of the commission

• **Vote on Mission and Vision Statements:**

MISSION

The Fort to 400 Commission commemorates Maryland's history, culture, and people through collaborative initiatives focused on religious freedom, human conscience, and spirit. These myriad partnerships create opportunities to share multi-cultural narratives through statewide programs.

There was discussion on the mission; especially centered around the words human conscience. The original group of Dr. Julie Schablitsky, and Ms. Barbara Ives will come together and offer a revamped mission statement that incorporates the input of the commission.

No vote taken.

VISION

The Fort to 400 Commission acknowledges all aspects of our history through the support of diverse projects benefiting Marylanders and the traveling public. These inclusive, far reaching, and innovative opportunities will intellectually stimulate and economically secure a living legacy for future Marylanders.

Vote taken and approved.

- **Update on 501 (not for profit):**

Mr. Brian Norris and Mr. Blackie Willis discussed the status of the application for the 501 c3. The paperwork is nearly complete but requires three directors, who cannot be on the commission. Various commission members offered thoughts as to who should be contacted to serve on the not for profit.

- **Update on personnel**

Ms. Fitzsimmons stated that the Office of Tourism will once again post for the position of Commission Communications Coordinator. She reported that each of the last two solicitations did not produce any qualified candidates.

- **Review of timeline from Virginia 400**

The following dates/structure are the key takeaways from the 400th Anniversary of Jamestown in 2007:

- There was an existing organization that had been formed more than 30 years prior, which was the Jamestown/Yorktown Foundation that administers Jamestown/Yorktown Visitor Center History Museums (akin to the Historic St. Mary's)
- \$48 million in state funding - Virginia was the largest contributor.
- \$400 million in private and public donations/funding for development of infrastructure, museums, and upgrades to existing legacy products.
- Timeline Phases:
 - a. 1996 - 2002 - Planning (10 to 5 years prior to anniversary)
 - b. 2003 - 2006 - Program development (5 to 1 years prior to anniversary)
 - c. 2006 - 2008 - Implementation
 - d. 1998 - Hired the Executive Director
- Working Committees:
 - a. Programs and Events
 - b. Marketing and Finance
 - c. Logistics
- Some of the dollars were generated by a surcharge on renewal or purchase of vehicle registration.

- **Conversation on Maryland 250**

The committee talked about the possible lessons and ability to build upon those lessons and infrastructure for the Fort to 400 Commission.

- **Next meeting:**

February 19, 2025

12 Noon to 2:00 p.m. (Virtual)



Historic St. Mary's City Fort to 400 Commission

MEETING MINUTES

Friday, March 21, 2025

12:00 Noon - 2:00 p.m.

Virtual via Google Meets

MEMBERS PRESENT

Brian Norris, Chair
Blackie Willis
Christine Vigorito
Barbara Ives
Julie M. Schablitsky, Ph.D.
David Taylor
Lucille Walker

Michael Alderson
Elizabeth Hughes
Maryann Harms

COMMERCE STAFF:

Cynthia Miller

I. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Brian Norris called for a motion to call the meeting to order. Motion made and Seconded.

- **Update on Staffing**
 - a. Cynthia Miller discussed the need to rewrite the job description for the Fort to 400 Coordinator position because two failed posting attempts had occurred in 2024.
 - b. The revised job description will be shared with the Commission prior to posting, but it must remain an administrative position per the legislation.
 - c. Julie Schablitsky and Lucille Walker discussed approaching the Governor's office to request that an Executive Director be appointed to lead the Fort to 400 Commission similar to the current Maryland's 250 and the Star Spangled Commission and War of 1812 Commission of years past.
 - d. Julie is going to meet with Michelle Johnson, Executive Director of Maryland's 250, to learn about her position and its creation. She will report out at the next Fort to 400 monthly meeting.
- **Committees Update**
 - a. Julie discussed the spreadsheet she created to capture suggestions for committee members, and asked Commissioners to add any names of individuals they felt would be interested in serving.
 - b. Julie will ask Michelle Johnson, ED of Maryland's 250, if any of her Commission's members would be interested in serving on the Fort to 400 Commission committees.
 - c. Barbara Ives is going to contact Leadership Maryland to see if any of their graduates would be interested in serving on the Fort to 400 committees.
- **Non-Profit Update**
 - a. Brian Norris updated the Commission on his contacting prospective staff for the non-profit.

- i. John Bohannan - declined
 - ii. Dave Bramble - declined but will ask his partner
 - iii. Cohn Resnik - 2 people declined
 - iv. Mike Witson - possible candidate
 - v. Marriott/Choice International - will respond with potential candidates
 - vi. Steve Proctor - Blackie Wills will reach out
- b. Julie spoke with Michelle Johnson (Maryland's 250) about the structure of her organization. They do not have a non-profit, but are affiliated with the University of Maryland.
- c. Elizabeth Hughes shared that Michelle's position falls under agency purview, so her salary does not come out of \$250,000 general fund appropriation. They also have two fellows through the Governor's college internship program (Service Your Option).
- d. The Maryland 250 Commission has little funding from the State, and has used federal ARPA funds and aligned itself with other state funded projects to make progress.
- **State Tourism Budget Discussion**
 - a. Brian asked Cynthia about decisions pertaining to the Maryland Office of Tourism's budget. She responded that though cuts were recommended, no decisions have been made yet.
 - b. Brian shared that data from research companies Post-Star analytics, AirDNA and Collibra showed that beach travel numbers are falling, that 25% of travelers going to New Jersey beaches are from Canada and bookings from Canada are lagging by 93%. Given that Maryland's tax revenue generated by tourism is about \$2.4 billion, he feels we need to market Maryland more than ever, thereby negating the proposal to cut Maryland's tourism budget from \$12.4 million to \$6 million.
 - c. Cynthia thanked him for the support and asked all Commissioners to contact their personal representatives to rally against the proposed tourism budget cut.
- **Update on Presentations**
 - a. The decision was made to postpone presenting to both the Maryland Destination Marketing Association meeting in April, and the Maryland Association of Counties in August.
 - b. Christina Vigorito will reach out to the Governor's office a couple of weeks after Sine Die.
- **Next meeting:**
May 1, 2025
12 Noon to 2:00 p.m. (Virtual)