**Naval Officer Shipping Lists**

The data comes from the surviving records of trade for the Chesapeake. Local customs officials generated these records as a part of the British strategy to enforce the Navigation Acts and channel trade according to mercantilistic tenets. The text below describes the evolution of the Chesapeake customs establishment and the districts it was divided into.

The Chesapeake Customs Establishment

By 1775, the customs establishment in the various Chesapeake ports had grown to three major officials: the collector, the naval officer, and the comptroller. There were also other minor posts such as surveyor, riding surveyor, and, of course, deputies of the three major offices.

Of the three major colonial offices, the collector was the oldest. It was established by the Navigation Act of 1673.[[1]](#footnote-1) The collector was officially responsible for collecting any duties due to the British customs establishment, but his duties also often included collecting an array of provincial duties as well. The authority of the collector was over ships trading in a well-defined district. The collectors were appointed by the Lords of the Treasury, usually on the advice of the Board of Customs Commissioners.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second oldest office was that of the naval officer. His duties were defined by the Navigation Act of 1696.[[3]](#footnote-3) The naval officer was “to take an Acco[un]t of the Arrival of all Ships trading thither with the Ladings and how Navigated and the like of all ships going from the Plantations or from one plantation to another and to take Security (if not given in Great Britain) that all Enumerated Goods be carried to Great Britain or from one plantation to another, and no ship can Load or Unload without the permission of this Officer as well as the Collector.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Additionally, he forwarded lists of the ships entering and clearing from his district, with registration details and descriptions of the cargo, to London. In general, the naval officer was appointed by the Governor, but from the mid-eighteenth century, most Virginia naval officers were Royal patronage appointments.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The imperial reforms of the 1760s changed part of the structure of the customs establishment: it added a third major officer for the larger ports-the Comptrollerand created and American Board of Customs Commissioners to oversee the collectors and comptrollers from Nova Scotia to the Bahamas.[[6]](#footnote-6) The comptrollers were to serve as a check on the collectors. This new customs boards reported directly to the Lords of Treasury.

Although most of the trade of the Chesapeake flowed in and out of its mouth, the bay usually contained at least eleven naval office districts.[[7]](#footnote-7) Virginia was divided into six districts during the eighteenth century, while the number in Maryland varied. Each of these districts generated lists of vessels, and their cargoes, which entered and cleared. The naval officers or their deputies compiled these lists quarterly from 1697 until the end of the colonial period; the colonial governors then transmitted the lists to the Board of Customs, Lords of Treasury, or the Board of Trade.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Naval Officer Shipping Lists usually contained the following information: date of entry or clearance, ship type, ship name, ship build, number of tons, number of guns, number of crewmen, where built, when built, where registered, when registered, a detailed description of the cargo, where bound to/from, where a bond was given, and when a bond was given.

The only change in dating of the NOSLs has been to start the year on January 1. The quarters used were traditional English quarters: Ladyday (ending 25 March, O.S. or 5 April, N.S.), Midsummer (ending 24 June, O.S. or 5 July, N.S.), Michaelmas (ending 29 September, O.S. or 10 October, N.S.), and Christmas (ending 25 December, O.S. or 5 January, N.S.). These quarters are referred to as a, b, c, and d, respectively.

Below is a discussion of both the boundaries of the districts and the nature and quality of Naval Officer Shipping Lists (NOSLs) that survive for each, moving clockwise around the bay from its mouth.

Shipping records from both Maryland and Virginia are extant in the Public Record Office covering the very late 1690s and very early 1700s. These are often records of duties collected, tobacco cleared, and early NOSLs. These early NOSLs varied greatly in form and coverage, reflecting the newness of the office. Because they covered such a short period and were so highly varied, they are not included in the lists below. Their existence, however, is noted in the descriptions of each district. In the Public Record Office, no NOSLs survive for Virginia between the early 1700s and 1725, and only very scattered ones for Maryland after the early 1700s.

Lower District James River (later called Hampton) [Virginia]

The part of the James River below Lyons Creek, which was the 35 lowest miles of the James River, comprised this district. This included both Hampton and Norfolk. There are some records from 1700 to 1706 and generally complete sets of NOSLs from the mid-1720s through the mid-1760s. These are found in CO 5/1441-1450.

Upper District James River [Virginia]

This district covered the part of the James River above Lyons Creek. This encompassed the area of Bermuda Hundred and the colonial capital of Williamsburg. There are some records from 1700 to 1705 and generally complete sets of NOSLs from the mid-1720s through the 1760s. These are found in CO 5/1441-1450. Additional records of clearances from this district are founds in the Virginia Historical Society, “Virginia(Colony). Naval Officer. Upper James River District: Port Book, 1742-1745,” (Mss4V819a6).

York [Virginia]

This district served the York River, including Yorktown. There are some records from 1698 to 1706 and generally complete sets of NOSLs from the mid-1720s through the 1750s, with spotty coverage in the 1760s. These are found in CO 5/1441-1450.

Rappahannock [Virginia]

The Rappahannock River comprised this district, which included Urbanna and Fredericksburg. There are scattered records from 1698 to 1706 and generally complete sets of NOSLs from the mid-1720s through the 1760s. These are found in CO 5/1441-1450.

South Potomac [Virginia]

This district encompassed the south side of the Potomac River. This area included Alexandria. There are some records from 1699 to 1705 and generally complete sets of NOSLs from the mid-1720s through the mid-1760s. These are found in CO 5/1441-1450.

North Potomac [Maryland]

This district included the north side of the Potomac River. The only NOSLs that survive for this district date between 1693 and 1698. These are in CO 5/749. There are also a few surviving revenue records from this district in the Calvert Papers (MS 174) at the Maryland Historical Society and in Naval Officer, General File (S 205) at the Maryland State Archives.

Patuxent [Maryland]

Originally, this Royal Customs Collector’s district covered the whole of Maryland. However, in 1686, it was split into three districts: North Potomac (which covered the boundaries stated above), Pocomoke (which covered the boundaries stated below), and Patuxent (which covered everything else). In 1686, the Collector’s districts (appointed by the Boards of Customs and Treasury) and the Naval Officers districts (appointed by the Governor) were coterminous. Indeed, in eighteenth-century English America, this was generally the case.

A provincial act of 1694, however, split the Patuxent Naval Officer’s district into three new districts: Patuxent (now only comprised of the Patuxent River), Annapolis (around the bay from the mouth of the Patuxent to, but not including, the Chester River), and Oxford (called Williamstadt from 1695-1699; from the Chester River to the Choptank River, inclusive). Thus from 1694 to the end of the colonial period, Maryland had five Naval Officer districts.[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, the Collector’s districts were unchanged by the new Naval Officer districts and remained unchanged until 1752. In that year, James Sterling convinced the Board to Treasury to establish a fourth, new Collector’s District, Chester and Patapsco, which was carved out of the middle of the Patuxent Collector’s district. This encompassed the head of the bay from the Patapsco River to the Chester River and included the growing hamlet of Baltimore.[[10]](#footnote-10) In 1763, the Collector's district was reduced to the Chester River only, and the rest of the area reverted to the Patuxent Collector’s district.

The Public Record Office possesses only a few NOSLs for Patuxent: some from 1695 to 1701, and 1754. These are in CO 5/749-750. However, the Customs Collector’s Book of Entries for the Patuxent district (MdHR 1374, S 204) survives at the Maryland State Archives. This record covers 1745 to 1756, and is subdivided into the three Naval Officer districts which comprised the Collector’s district.

Annapolis [Maryland]

This Naval Officer district comprised the area around the bay from the mouth of the Patuxent to, but not including, the Chester River. This district included Annapolis and Baltimore. Very few NOSLs from Annapolis survive in the Public Record Office; those that do sparsely cover 1696 to 1701, and 1754-1759. These are found in CO 5/749-750. As mentioned in Patuxent above, the Collectors’ Book of Entries survives for 1745 to 1756.

A second set of volumes called Port Books (MS 21), covering 1756-1775, survives in the Maryland Historical Society. These must have been kept by the Annapolis Naval Officer, as there are numerous clearances with bonds having been given at Chester. Thus, these records cover all of the Naval Officer district of Annapolis, including the Collector’s District of Chester and Patapsco, from 1756 to 1775.

Finally, there is another set of Port of Entry Books for Annapolis (MdHR 1372, S 204), covering both entrances and clearances from 1748 to 1759, at the Maryland State Archives. It is not known whether these are Collector’s or Naval Officer’s records; they are most likely Collector’s Records, since they are bound with Oxford port records.

Chester and Patapsco [Maryland]

This was a Collector’s district created in 1752, including the Chester and Patapsco Rivers; by 1766, it was reduced to include only the Chester River. See Annapolis and Patuxen above for fuller discussion. Only one sheet of records survives for this district, covering Christmas Quarter, 1771 imports in Annapolis Port of Entry Record Books (MS 21) at the Maryland Historical Society.

Oxford (called Williamstadt from 1695-1699) [Maryland]

This Naval Officer district covered the area from the Chester River to the Choptank River, inclusive. The Collector’s district was coterminous with the Naval Officer district until 1752, when the Chester River Collector’s district was removed to the newly-created Chester and Patapsco Collector’s district. The few records from this district in the Public Record Office provide spotty coverage of the years from 1695 to 1699. These are in CO 5/749. As mentioned in Patuxent, the Collector’s book of entries survives from 1745 to 1756.

Additionally, there is a small run of port records covering 1742 to 1746 (MdHR 1372, S 204) at the Maryland State Archives. The Maryland Historical Society has Naval Officer records from 1759 to 1773 (MS 638). Since these are Naval Officer records, they were unaffected by the change in Collector’s districts in 1752.

Pocomoke [Maryland]

This district encompassed both bayside and seaside on Maryland's Eastern Shore from the Virginia border, up to, but not including, the Choptank River. It was established by Lord Baltimore in 1676, and was both a Naval Officer and Collectors District. The only NOSLs that survive for this District are from 1689 to 1701. These are found in CO 5/749. Various other revenue records survive in the Calvert Papers (MS 174) at the Maryland Historical Society, and Naval Officer, General File (S 205) at the Maryland State Archives.

Accomack [Virginia]

This district included all of Virginia's Eastern Shore. There are some records from 1699 to 1704, and generally complete sets of NOSLs from the mid-1720s through the mid-1730s, scattered coverage from the mid-1740s through the 1750s, and generally complete sets through the 1760s. These are found in CO 5/1441-1450.

There are two categories of information excluded in these NOSL datasets. First, records of goods being shipped from one Chesapeake district to another are specifically excluded. The information on trade among the Chesapeake districts was scarce, being infrequently recorded. Only goods trading between Maryland and Virginia districts were recorded at all, and there is reason to believe that much of that trade was never recorded. Likewise, trade within a colony was almost never recorded. The second category of information excluded is that on the importation of European Goods from Great Britain. Because duties had been paid on these goods in Britain, and all the necessary details had been recorded there, the entries are often just “Sundry European Goods” or “European Goods per Cocket.”[[11]](#footnote-11) There are almost never any further details on the cargo. Thus, the value of imports into the various Chesapeake districts do not reflect any imported goods from Great Britain.

While all necessary care was taken to make them as accurate as possible, the datasets undoubtedly contain errors. Small quantities of esoteric commodities (cranberries, lobsters, bricks, etc.) were omitted. Likewise, those commodities that were impossible to value (“a parcel of earthenware,” “a parcel of joiners ware,” etc.) were also omitted. These omissions have the greatest effect on the value on imports from other North American colonies, since these goods appear to have reflected a sizable portion of their exports to the Chesapeake.

1. Thomas C. Barrow, *Trade and Empire: The British Customs Service in Colonial America, 1660-1775* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Technically, the Board of Customs Commissioners reported and was under the authority of the Lords of the Treasury. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barrow, 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. C. Carkesse to R. Powys, December 30, 1713. Add. MSS. 22617, fol. 145, British Library as quoted in Barrow, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter V. Bergstrom, “Merchants and Markets: Economic Diversification in Colonial Virginia, 1700-1775,”(Ph.D. diss., University of New Hampshire, 1980), 73-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dora Mae Clark, “The American Board of Customs,” *American Historical Review* 45 (1940): 777-806. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The following discussion is based on information drawn largely from Lester J. Cappon, et al., eds., *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 40, 119; Barrow, 261-272; John J. McCusker, *An Introduction to the Naval Officer Shipping Lists* (in progress), Appendix A; and Donnell M. Owings, *His Lordship’s Patronage: Offices of Profit in Colonial Maryland* (Baltimore, MD: Maryland Historical Society, 1953), 63-67, 92-101, 159-164, and 177-186; together with my own additions and corrections. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For the transmittal requirement, see Leonard Woods Larabee, ed. and comp., *Royal Instructions to British Colonial Governors, 1670-1776* (Washington, DC, 1935; reprint, New York, 1967), 2:775. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Under the Act of 1694, Governor Francis Nicholson established an additional district in Cecil County, apparently for the purpose of collecting duties on liquors coming over land from Philadelphia. This office disappeared by 1754. See Owings, *His Lordship’s Patronage*, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Owings, *His Lordship’s Patronage*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The “Cocket” was simply the name for the customs clearance issued in Britain. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)