

The Century Farm

As farming declines, Southern Maryland is struggling to redefine its identity. Farmers make up only 1.3% of the American labor force and agriculture as a profession has been in steady decline in the United States since 1935, according to *Business Insider*. Rurality seems to go hand-in-hand with farming, but in the United States, it's an industry plagued by the issue of climate change, trade wars, and an increasingly information-based economy (Lepley). More and more people are pursuing different means of subsistence, leaving the tending of crops and livestock behind. Rural life, in such a context, becomes less of a livelihood and more of a lifestyle. As St. Mary's County, a historically rural portion of Maryland, continues to evolve its technology corridor in addition to the naval base and the college, what do these changes look like to someone born and raised in the region?

I spoke to Amye Scrivener, Director of Social Services for Calvert County and a native of the county, about the changes she had seen growing up in the area. She hails from a tobacco farming family with roots stretching back to colonial times. Tobacco was first introduced by colonial settlers, and remained the dominant form of agriculture in Southern Maryland until 2000, when the state bought out tobacco farms to mitigate tobacco consumption as a public health initiative. Scrivener watched the physical landscape shift in the 1980s as Routes 2 and 4 stretched deeper into the county, threading the quiet region to the DC beltway. She remembers driving all the way to Waldorf in Charles County when she was growing up, which was the nearest locale with shops and leisure activities. Since then, she says, the county has strived to bring in growth, noting the white-collar workers who had taken up residence in Calvert and other counties in Southern Maryland and made the daily commute to Washington, D.C. for their jobs. But as an influx of professionals moved into the

area, she explains, an eventual backlash welled up against this trend, with efforts made by the county to limit the suburban and industrial growth happening.

“That’s just kind of been an interesting dynamic over the years,” Scrivener said, “because it was, at first, ‘Growth is good.’ Then all of a sudden: ‘This isn’t what we want. We need it to go back. We’re suburbs; a bedroom community to Washington, DC.’” Scrivener’s assessment, particularly regarding the anxiety around being a “bedroom community” to Washington, D.C., emphasizes the need for the region to possess and maintain a distinctive rural character that sets itself apart from the urban centers of Baltimore, Annapolis, and the nation’s capital.

A large component of Southern Maryland’s rurality is the history that resides mostly in St. Mary’s City, Maryland’s first colony, where the use of the land first transitioned from swaths of forests to flat plots for farming. The study “Change to Urban, Agricultural, and Forested Land in Central and Southern Maryland from 1850-1990” by Janis L. Taylor and William Acevedo provides insight into the history of Southern Maryland through the lens of land use, detailing how tobacco farming originated in Maryland due to an ideal climate and high European demand. These conditions made it a cash crop with which settlers could establish themselves—a tradition which lasted until the beginning of the 21st-century. Agriculture, on the whole, continued to flourish as a means of labor and subsistence until agrarian land use peaked in 1900 at 1.5 million acres. As soil was exhausted and farms were left fallow this agricultural land use declined, and industrialism began to take its place. By the time of Scrivener’s childhood in the 1970s, the extent of agricultural land plummeted to just 518,000 acres. What, then, does it mean to be rural? What aspects of the land had changed, and which still bore the marks of centuries ago?

Scrivener's residence now rests on a fifty-six-acre plot of land that was designated a century farm in 2003, which means a single family has possessed the land for over one hundred years. Her husband's family has now owned the land for 117 years, and the various branches of the family still live adjacent to one another among the swaths of property. I met their extended family when I visited, who stopped by the house on an evening stroll with their baby to invite their neighbors for a bonfire that night.

Beside the two-tiered bungalow farmhouse is a shed with a corrugated tin roof and peeling red paint on its wood plank walls, home to chickens and a rotund golden labrador named Rex. The house lies off of Route 4, and at the turn you take onto the road that approaches their farm is a nondescript shopping center with a Panera, a liquor store, and other chain restaurants. But behind that commercialization lie idyllic houses perched on rolling hilltops that overlook wide skies, interrupted only by the two cooling towers of the Calvert Nuclear Power Plant stretching above the tangled branches of forest.

As part of her explanation of Calvert County's attitude towards growth and its regulation of it, Scrivener described the system by which farmland was either sold to or withheld from developers depending on the county's plans for land use. Farmland is divided into development rights, which farmers can then sell to the county for a certain sum, thus profiting from land that otherwise often lays fallow and unoccupied. Developers can then choose to buy these development rights at the discretion of the county, allowing Calvert to both generate revenue and control growth.

The Scriveners' property, so far, remains undeveloped. Rex wanders the expansive territory, and family members occupy houses perched on hillsides every couple of acres. It strikes me as a place where there is both tight community and space to get lost, if needed. While minimal farming now happens in Scrivener territory, the motifs and symbols

associated with agricultural life—images of livestock and tractors—populate the cabinets, the walls, the refrigerator. It is a place that still very much gestures, at least decoratively, back to a not-so-distant generational past where farming was the family's primary livelihood and subsistence.

When I asked Scrivener which counties she believes have retained the strongest sense of ruralness, she said, "Maybe I'm biased, but I think Calvert has more of the ruralness than the others." She said that Charles was the least rural of the counties, a judgment probably attributed to its greater proximity to Washington, D.C. as the northernmost county of Southern Maryland. She conceded that St. Mary's might equal Calvert County in ruralness, if you looked beyond the technology corridor and into the Mennonite community. And Calvert has seen its fair share of development. Since 1994, the population of Calvert has more than doubled. Taylor and Acevedo's study further supports this growth, indicating that urban land use in Central and Southern Maryland grew by 86,000 acres between 1970 and 1990, which specifically noted "urbanization along the Patuxent River in St. Mary's and Calvert County [...] in the late 20th century." There was also an attendant 71,000-acre decrease in forested land with that increase of urban land use.

In the context of these statistics, the move away from agriculture and the shift towards urban growth is evident, as well as how both agriculture and urban development often necessarily entail a certain environmental cost. The Scriveners' farm stands as a reminder of the rustic past, and the ways in which the American economy and culture have shifted over its century of history, watching as the U.S. moved from a largely agrarian nation to an economy dominated by a post-industrial information landscape. The impulse to both bring development to Calvert County and quell the influx of growth speaks to the complexities of

navigating a present where land preservation and the proliferation of businesses and housing are competing priorities.

This conflict is best exemplified by a recent dispute over proposed changes to zoning policies in the Calvert County Comprehensive plan. In the summer of 2019, the Board of Commissioners proposed to remove the distinction between major and minor town centers, opening up these minor town centers to higher density development and big box stores. In an editorial that appeared that same summer in *The Washington Post*, county residents Michael and Wanda King urged residents to oppose the council's decision removing the distinction. The letter cautions residents that, should the motion pass, "Calvert County is set to be overrun by development," ending with the foreboding assertion that, "Our way of life in Calvert County depends on rejecting these changes."

Despite the dire forewarning, this perspective of development as a force of cultural destruction encapsulates the will of Southern Maryland to maintain a certain ideal of unobtrusive seclusion. The regulation of an impulse to ramp up development maintains the region as a place where a plot of land can remain untouched for a century, preserving a continuity of memory over the ubiquitous anonymity of the big box store and the shopping center.

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