

Following in the Footsteps of the Maryland Dove

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

June 17, 2022



Figure 1: Saint Clements Island

It was a joyous day on March 25, 1634 when the Ark and the Dove landed at Saint Clements Island on the Potomac River, carrying the first European settlers to Maryland. Commencing from the Isle of Wight, England, these two ships completed an arduous 123-day transatlantic voyage covering roughly 4,000 miles. The 400-ton capacity Ark carried about 140 colonists, their equipment, and supplies, while the 40-ton capacity Dove transported cargo and was later used for coastal sailing, exploring, and trading in the New World.

Wanting to see the island where “Maryland’s first ships” landed, I launched my standup paddleboard (SUP) from [Paul Ellis Landing](#), paddling first to Bullock and Saint Catherine islands, and then venturing to Saint Clements Island. It was a 10-mile-long round trip that could have been shortened to five miles had I instead paid a small fee, launched from one of the marinas on Saint Patrick Creek, and paddled directly to Saint Clements Island. But it was a gorgeous day and I was wanting to take the scenic route.



*Figure 2: Green heron on Saint Catherine Island*

Saint Clements Island, or Blackistone Island, as it was called for nearly 200 years, is only accessible by boat, but for those without watercraft, a [water taxi](#) provides shuttle service between [Saint Clement's Island Museum](#) and the island.

Circumnavigating the island, I saw a 2008 replica of the historic Blackistone Island Lighthouse. The original was built in 1851 and destroyed by fire in 1956.



*Figure 3: Blackistone Island Lighthouse replica*

I landed my SUP at a beach on the south side of the island and headed ashore to explore [Saint Clements Island State Park](#), which encompasses the island. I walked to the lighthouse and rang the bell in the adjacent structure. The original bell tower was built in 1888 and held a 1000-pound bell which served as a warning system for ships during inclement weather.



*Figure 4: Ringing the bell at Saint Clements Island*

About two months after arriving, the Ark returned to England while the Dove continued supporting the settlers until August 1635, when it too set sail for England...but it never arrived and is presumed lost at sea. Fortunately, historians have learned much about similar ships of this era and passed this knowledge onto skilled craftsmen who have worked hard to keep the Dove's memory alive by building two representations – in 1978 and a new one in 2021.

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In 1978, Dorchester County boatbuilder Jim Richardson and a team of workers completed the first modern Maryland Dove, designed by William A. Baker as a dockside exhibit. Precise information was not available to create a replica so this pinnacle, a small ship used for trading and exploring, is considered a representation.

In 2021, I boarded the 1978 Dove in [Historic Saint Mary's City](#), Maryland's first European settlement and capital. I've been on much larger and more impressive tall ships, but what made touring the 1978 Dove so special was that we got to go below decks, see the berthing area, and get real hands-on experience by doing things like pumping the bilge pump. Our guide, a historic interpreter, told us that the ship was aging and in need of significant restoration. But such repairs were very costly and it would be cheaper to build another Dove...an endeavor that had already begun in 2019 at the [Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum](#).



Figure 5: The 1978 Maryland Dove



Figure 6: The 1978 Maryland Dove

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The second modern Dove was painstakingly designed by naval architect Iver Franzen and built over the next three years by skilled shipwrights at the museum, located in Saint Michaels, about 44 miles north of Saint Mary's City or 81 miles if traveling by boat. In many ways, it was similar to the previous Dove, but with updated historic information, this Dove promised to be a more accurate representation.

On March 28, 2022, the roughly 94,000-pound 2022 Dove was lowered into the Miles River via crane, making it the largest vessel launched in Saint Michaels since 1904. Exactly two months later, I launched my SUP from the town's [public boat launch](#) and paddled about a quarter of a mile to the ship, which was moored on the south side of the museum and beautifully illuminated by the morning sun.



*Figure 7: The 2022 Maryland Dove*



*Figure 8: The 2022 Maryland Dove*



Paddling a little further east to see the port side of the 2022 Dove, I had a nice view of the [1879 Hooper Strait Lighthouse](#) and Point Lookout Bell Tower. Similar to the bell tower on Saint Clements Island, the Point Lookout Bell Tower held a 1,100-pound bell whose massive size ensured its sound could be heard over long distances to guide sailors through the fog.



*Figure 9: 1879 Hooper Strait Lighthouse*

Back on land, I entered the museum grounds to attend the Maryland Dove Dock Party where food, drinks, and live music kept the event festive. Bill Gates, captain of the 1978 Dove, spoke about the history of the original Dove and invited the public to come out and see the 2022 Dove when it arrives in Saint Mary's City at the end of August 2022. Throughout the day, shipwrights spoke to curious visitors about rigging and the construction process.

I also attended the museum's Dove Tales exhibition which examines the sources that reveal the history, construction, and cultural significance of the various Dove ships. Located in the Steamboat Building at the north end of the museum, this exhibit is open through the end of 2022.

At the museum Corn Crib, I saw the Dove Rigging Shop, where rigging similar to that used on the 2022 Dove was on display. The old-style nautical equipment, hardware, and tools used to craft them will surely be of interest to sailors, seamen, and naval historians.



*Figure 10: Dove Rigging Shop at the museum's Corn Crib*



Figure 11: Block and tackle in the Dove Rigging Shop

On March 25, 1903, exactly 269 years after the Ark and Dove landed at Saint Clements Island, which some call “Maryland’s Plymouth Rock,” Maryland Day was officially recognized when the State Board of Education designated it as a day to be devoted towards the study of Maryland history. For some students, it is hard to get motivated about history by just reading about it. But by invoking one’s sense of sight, sound, and touch, education becomes more active, tangible, and stimulating. Landing at Saint Clements Island and visiting the two modern Dove ships brought out the inner child in me, and transported me back to a time when learning was exciting and fun.

For more information see

[Maryland Dove – History](#)

[American Antiquarian Society – The Ark and the Dove Ancestral Ships of Maryland](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources – St. Clements Island State Park](#)

[Lighthouse Friends – Blackistone Island \(Replica\) Lighthouse](#)

[The Maryland Dove at Historic Saint Mary’s City](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum – Tag Archives: Dove](#)

[The Historical Marker Database – Point Lookout Fog Bell Tower](#)

[What is Maryland Day?](#)