

## Article: Battle of the Severn

---

**The Battle of the Severn was a small yet important skirmish toward the end of the English Civil War (1642 - 1655), which pitted Roman Catholics against Protestants. The conflict divided England, and the consequences of the war were felt as far away as the American Colonies, as Catholics and Protestants took sides.**

In 1632, King Charles I signed the Charter of Maryland granting the colony to the Calvert family; Cecil Calvert became Lord Baltimore, the Proprietor of the colony. Calvert envisioned the colony as not only an economic enterprise but also a place where Roman Catholic royalists could escape the religious strife that was prevalent in England at the time. In 1642 when the English Civil War broke out between Roman Catholic Royalists and Protestant Parliamentarians, Calvert became concerned about his proprietary claim and control over his colony. Wanting to appease both sides of the war, Calvert, a Catholic, replaced his acting governor of the colony with William Stone, a Protestant, with the understanding that Stone would help populate his colony and solidify Calvert's claim of ownership. Stone approached a group of nonconformist Puritans (i.e., Protestants) in Virginia and offered them land and guaranteed freedoms in Maryland. In December 1649, the first European settlement in Anne Arundel County was founded by these Puritans on the north shore of the Severn River opposite present-day Annapolis. It was called Providence, and included Puritan and Catholic colonists. As the new colony prospered and expanded, the number of Puritans increased and Catholic numbers decreased. Providence became the place of residence for most of the Commissioners of Parliament, the ruling body in Maryland, dominated by Puritans.

From 1650 through 1695, a series of religious, regional, and political struggles occurred in Maryland. On March 2, 1654, Governor Stone insisted that all citizens take an oath of fidelity to Lord Baltimore. He announced that he would confiscate the lands of all those who did not take the oath within six months. The Puritans of Providence objected to the oath of fidelity and communicated their objections to the Commissioners of Parliament.

Later that Spring, in England, Oliver Cromwell was confirmed as Lord Protector (replacing the monarchy) and declared that all persons must submit to the Commissioners of Parliament. In 1655, Stone, resisting the Commissioners of Parliament as the government of Maryland, commissioned a group of Catholics to seize some arms and ammunition and plan an attack on Providence.

The Providence Puritans established a war council, led by Captain William Fuller, on March 23, 1655. (William Fuller owned until 1662 the property where the skeleton was found.) Two days later, the Battle of the Severn began, fought at the mouth of the Severn River. Stone led the Catholic force, while Fuller led the Puritan Army.



**Figure 1. Horn Point, Maryland c. 1880. (Source : Annapolis Maritime Museum)**

The battle took place at Horn Point, opposite Providence, near Fuller's property. Fuller's forces drove Stone's forces to the end of the point. In less than half an hour, it was all over. The battle involved about 400 men, 19 of whom were killed in battle; four Catholic prisoners of war were executed on-site.



**Figure 2. Re-enactment of the Battle of Severn. (Source: English Civil War Society of America)**

Stone's goal was to reestablish the authority of the Calverts (i.e., Catholics) over Providence (i.e., Puritans), but the Puritans decisively defeated Stone's forces and gained temporary control of the Colony. From the conclusion of the battle to 1657, the Puritans ruled in Maryland. At that point, the Puritans recognized Baltimore's proprietorship and restored religious tolerance between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

**Sources:**

Archives of Maryland, Vol. 0053, Preface 15-16; Vol. 113, Preface 7-8.

Krugler, John D. 2004. *English and Catholic: The Lords Baltimore in the 17th Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

Riley, Elihu Samuel. 1887. *The Ancient City: A History of Annapolis, in Maryland. 1649 - 1887*.



Smithsonian  
National Museum of Natural History

This page is part of the [Smithsonian's The Secret in the Cellar Webcomic](#), an educational resource from the *Written in Bone* exhibition, February 2009 - 2011.