A History of the Sandy Spring Museum Property

The Native American Presence

More than 10,000 years ago, nomadic bands of Native Americans, following big game herds across the Alleghenies, found in the Patuxent River watershed a vibrant ecosystem that provided boundless sustenance. Old growth forests thick with all manner of animals—deer, bear, fox, otter, beaver—covered the gently rolling hills. Water teemed with fish. Groves of fruit and nut trees spread in the dales. Those early Native Americans made the river and its tributaries their hunting and gathering grounds. They tracked game through the woods of Sandy Spring, following centuries-old game trails. Their footpaths became trade routes among the various area tribes, including a broad trail running along Parr’s Ridge, from the Patuxent westward and through the museum property—the beginning of Route 108.

The early Native American presence in Sandy Spring finds reflection in a Clovis point, a stone spearhead nearly 9,000 years old found on the “Bloomfield” farm on Bentley Road—a section of which is now the museum property. J. Thomas Scharf, in his 1876 History of Western Maryland, noted that “arrow heads and a few rude culinary utensils have been turned up in the fields” of Sandy Spring.

By 1000 AD, tribes of Native Americans had settled into small agricultural villages dotting the Patuxent River, from the Bay northward, distinguished by “long houses” or large communal dwellings set beside small fields growing foods indigenous to the New World. Maize (American corn) was grown among beans (primarily Lima beans) and cooked together in a dish that, in the Native American Algonquin language, was called “succotash.”

Early explorers noted the existence of “a great many Indian Cabins & Tents” in the upper reaches of the Patuxent as late as the 1690s. However, their presence was seen by the Southern Maryland white plantation owners as a threat to the expansion of their own holdings into the wilds of the Sandy Spring area. Consequently, Richard Snowden, a wealthy Quaker and a privileged, influential figure in colonial affairs, helped to push through the Maryland assembly an act for the outfitting of small bands of armed rangers, formed to patrol the frontier from the Patapsco to the Potomac, ostensibly to quell any hostilities on the part of the Native Americans. What few friendly Native tribes that remained in the area—the Piscataway, Mattowoman and Chapticoe, “our Indians” as the General Assembly called them—found pressure growing from either side, from the frontier plantations to the east and warring tribes to the west. In 1696, the Seneca tribe, regarded as fierce fighters, attempted to mount an attack on the frontier plantations and sought to enlist the Maryland tribes to join them in war. Noted the Maryland Assembly, “The Warr Cap of the Senecors ask’d our Emperor [of the Piscataway] which side he
would begin at, he reply'd and said it was all a Case to him for one side [the English] drove him from his home and the other side has Robbed him of his Corn and goods.”

Tensions between whites and Native Americans intensified that year, exacerbated by “the occasion of the late murther comitted upon Mr Stodarts Negro Boy at the Eastern Branch of potomack in prince Georges County.” Fearing retribution, the Native Americans acted by “deserting theire forts and withdrawing themselves unto the mountains.”

No violence ensued, and by the end of the next year the Rangers could report that “we have not met nor seen any Indians these twelve months.” As a result, it was determined by the Assembly that, “it being thought Unessasary to keep [the Rangers] at the Garrison now for their [sic] is a peace & no fear of any French or other Indians attacking those parts besides the Return of the Piscattoway Indians” the Rangers would be dismissed and disbanded.

With the peace secured, the way was paved for the unfettered expansion of plantations west of the Patuxent. By the early 18th century, the Native Americans, who had occupied the land for centuries, were pushed farther inland, into the unbroken forests that extended into Western Maryland, beyond the Alleghenies.

The Arrival of the Planters

By the beginning of the 18th century, the white planters from Southern Maryland had arrived in a Sandy Spring area cleared of the perceived threat posed by the Native Americans. Land in the area was the currency of the Lord Proprietors, the Calvert family, who controlled all the unclaimed land in the colony and doled out portions in “patents” that entitled the bearer to ownership of the property. Wealthier white planters sent surveyors to the area, following the old Native American trails, to measure out tens of thousands of acres of unclaimed land – including the museum property, had from the proprietors almost for the asking.

In 1716, surveyors for John Bradford, a wealthy planter from Prince George’s County, followed the trails from Laurel to Sandy Spring and, coming upon a wide expanse of virgin land, laid claim to a tract he would call “Charley Forrest,” a 1,230-acre patent of new land that included the northern portion of the museum property. The tract was named, perhaps, for Charles Calvert, the fifth Baron Baltimore of England and the 23-year-old proprietary governor of the Province of Maryland, who granted the patent in 1719. The tract of land began “at a bounded red oak and a bounded Spanish oak standing by a large heap of great stones.”

Three years later, in 1722, Bradford would patent an adjoining piece of land, a 1,470-acre tract he called “Addition to Charles [sic] Forrest.” The boundary line for the two tracts ran through the museum property, the northern section a part of “Charley Forrest,” the road-facing section part of “Addition to Charles Forrest.”

James Brooke and “Charley Forrest”
John Bradford died in 1726, heavily indebted to the London merchants Hyde & Sons. Consequently, his 20,000-acre estate was partitioned and sold. In 1728, Bradford’s son, John, conveyed 889 acres of “Charley Forrest” to James Brooke of Prince George’s County.

Brooke, 24 years old at the time, was buying land in the Sandy Spring area on the advice of his guardian, Richard Snowden, who had armed the rangers two decades earlier to clear the way for settlement. Snowden, a wealthy Anne Arundel County planter, industrialist and slave trader had been amassing land in the Sandy Spring area himself.

Brooke’s abusive home life led him to the frontier. “My dear honored mother unhappily married Capt. Richard Smith who ruined her life and proved unkind to us her poor fatherless children,” Brooke later recalled. “I then applied to Prince George’s County Court and chose Richard Snowden of Anne Arundel County for my guardian. When he came to know how I was abused he advised to me to sell all lands I had in those parts [Southern Maryland] and buy where I now dwell [Sandy Spring].”

Where the Quaker James Brooke lived was on his section of “Charley Forrest,” in a simple log and frame dwelling located along modern-day Brooke Road – the plantation’s original farm lane. Brooke had married Richard Snowden’s daughter, Deborah, in 1725. She was fifteen years old and stayed behind in the comfortable confines of the Snowden manor near Laurel until Brooke had established his foothold in Sandy Spring – a new plantation, hewn out of the ancient woods by the enslaved first brought to the area by James Brooke.

*The African Americans of Charley Forrest Plantation*

In 1728, James Brooke brought his wife to their new home, traveling on horseback through the forest trails – the so-called “roads” in the early 18th century being little more than narrow tracks through the woods, wide enough to permit little more than the passage of horses. Frontier guides would charge settlers to guide their train of packhorses into the western realms.

By 1730, James and Deborah had fully settled into their new home built among the tall pines and hardwoods. It was the start of a profitable plantation made possible only by Brooke’s enslaved blacks. At their peak, Brooke had enslaved more than twenty men and woman at the Charley Forrest plantation. Undoubtedly, the enslaved built the Brooke family home, notching and stacking logs and splitting shingles for the roof. To the enslaved fell the arduous task of downing the tall trees, pulling stumps, plowing virgin lands, clearing fields for planting, bringing in the first harvest – Brooke was one of the first planters in the area to switch from tobacco to wheat farming -- and hauling the plantation’s products to market.

No one knows the names of the blacks who built the Charley Forrest plantation. Brooke never manumitted the enslaved during his lifetime or by direction of his will; no enumeration of...
the enslaved by names has been found. In inventories of area enslavers where the names of the enslaved are indeed mentioned, most often they are by first name only – Anglo-Saxon names given to the enslaved to replaced their African names. Richard Snowden’s inventories, taken at the time of his death in 1763, lists the enslaved by first name among his personal property, their names found between the estimated prices of a tea kettle and a stock horse.

In 1776, the Friends sent an emissary, Isaac Jackson, to Sandy Spring to discover the disposition of the enslaved among the Quaker planters. As the talk of freedom and revolution swirled among the white planters, the Friends as a denomination finally — after a century -- had come to see slavery as abhorrent, and exhorted its members to cease the practice. As for James Brooke, Jackson noted, “Old James Brooke has above twenty [slaves] but gives no satisfaction in any respect about his slaves nor about anything else, he is of such a sullen disposition.” Brooke was eventually excommunicated for his resistance to freeing the enslaved and was denied burial in the Friends graveyard, -- situated on land that Brooke himself had conveyed to the Quaker community.

By the 1730s, Brooke’s brother-in-law, Richard Thomas, as well had come to Sandy Spring with his bride, another daughter of Richard Snowden, and had established his plantation on a tract he called “Cherry Grove,” along present-day New Hampshire Avenue south of Ashton. Noted Jackson, “Richard Thomas has about fifty [slaves] he owns. It is not right to keep them in slavery but says he doesn’t see his way clear to do anything towards releasing them. His wife pretty much of the same disposition of her husband but there is some hopes of some of the children.”

Thomas's brother, Samuel, as well had married a daughter of Richard Snowden and had come to the area to establish his home, with an unknown number of enslaved in tow. Brooke and the two Thomas brothers became among the first white planters to set down roots in the Sandy Spring area – three white planters and their families living amidst nearly a hundred enslaved black men, women and children.

It is uncertain where the enslaved of Sandy Spring originated. Perhaps the father-in-law, Richard Snowden, gave the men and women to his three daughters at their marriage, to get them started in establishing a plantation based on enslavement. Perhaps Snowden sold the enslaved to his sons-in-law. Snowden himself was a large enslaver and a human trafficker. In 1729, Snowden and his partners, Daniel Dulany and Peter Hume, advertised in the Maryland Gazette the arrival of his ship “in South River, with about Two Hundred choice Slaves,” which Snowden offered for sale at the Annapolis docks.

The Brooke Family Expands Its Holdings

James and Deborah’s first child, James, was born in 1730 at the Charley Forrest plantation. The son, who became a tanner and currier, was an enslaver himself, yet, unlike his
father, manumitted the enslaved during his short lifetime (he died at the age of 37). In 1757, Brooke Jr. recorded a “certificate of freedom” for “Negro Nero,” freeing him from enslavement and giving him “sundry goods” and one hundred pounds sterling to begin his new life. Further, James Jr. declared, “I do further desire that the said Negro may pass & repass Deal & Trade as other freemen do without molestation or hindrance for the same manner as if he the said Negro Nero never had been a Slave.”

Over the years, James Brooke Sr. would not only add to his family, but to his land holdings. He invested in huge swaths of land across the county, including an additional portion of “Addition to Charles Forrest” adjoining his home farm – covering part of the southern section of the museum property. By the mid-eighteenth century, Brooke’s land covered more than 20,000 acres, stretching westward for miles, eventually running from the Patuxent River to Big Seneca Creek and encompassing the present-day villages of Laytonsville, Olney, Brookeville, Sandy Spring and Ashton.

In 1737, James established a milling enterprise along the Hawlings River, down in the valley, north of the museum property. His “Famous Biscuit Factory” turned out “middling” bread – coarsely ground wheat mixed with bran -- brown bread and biscuits, sold “fine flour’ ground at his adjacent mill and even offered “conveniences for bolting” or sifting flour or meal.

Brooke and his fellow early planters pressed the Maryland assembly to recognize the significance of the road through Sandy Spring, both to travel and commerce, and by the mid-18th century the old Native American trail had become a colony-supported road, eventually widened to accommodate wagon traffic. Today’s Route 108 was informally referred to as “the Baltimore road,” primitive and rutted but wide enough for Brooke and the small but growing community of Sandy Spring residents to haul their products to markets via ox-drawn wagons.

Richard Thomas and the Birth of “Bloomingdale”

Over the years, Brooke enlarged his house to accommodate his seven children and two granddaughters, Deborah and Elizabeth, whom he had taken in after the death of his eldest son in 1767, and continued to amass land in the area. At his death in 1784 at Charley Forrest, Brooke’s expansive estate – now more than 33,000 acres – descended to his heirs, including his two granddaughters, to whom he left one-sixth of his property. Years would pass before the division between the heirs was settled. Sections were sold off, with brother-in-law Richard Thomas of Cherry Grove acquiring the museum property and the surrounding acreage of “Charley Forrest” and “Addition to Charles Forrest.” Brooke Sr.’s enslaved were divided among his children, Roger Brooke IV, Basil Brooke, Richard Brooke and Elizabeth Brooke.

Richard Thomas was one of the area’s largest enslavers, at one point with more than 60 men, women and children living in quarters built around the Sandy Spring area, with the enslaved working portions of Thomas’s extensive holdings. The Annals of Sandy Spring noted
that people around town referred to him as “Marse Dickey,” a nickname derived from his being “master” of dozens of enslaved, a role for which he was well known.

Along Bentley Road, north of the museum, Thomas built a house for his overseer, tasked with keeping watch on Thomas’ enslaved laborers who worked the fields of the Charley Forrest plantation. The property was cleared from the overseer’s house out to the Sandy Spring road, through the museum lot. Thomas named the property “Bloomingdale,” inspired perhaps by the profusion of native flowers spreading through the lush valleys.

**Toward Ending Slavery**

Thomas died in 1806; by his will he manumitted all his slaves. Adults were freed on the spot; Maryland law required that males beneath the age of twenty and females under eighteen would receive complete freedom at the age of majority. Forty-four of Thomas’ under-aged and elderly slaves were divided among members of the Brookeville community.

Three years after his death, the division of Thomas’ property – including the museum, the surrounding acreage and his enslaved -- was finalized. “Bloomingdale,” the former overseer’s home, went to daughter Henrietta, wife of Caleb Bentley of Brookeville, whom she married in 1807. It was Bentley’s second marriage, his first wife, Sarah, having died two years earlier. Even though she owned as many as six slaves before her marriage to Bentley, Henrietta, perhaps moved by the Friends’ declaration of slavery as morally wrong, manumitted all six of her slaves in 1801; Bentley, who owned at least two slaves himself, manumitted his in 1815. By 1820, most of the Quakers in the Sandy Spring area had manumitted the enslaved. The newly freed blacks built their homes around the area, including along the old “Charley Forrest” plantation road – the current Brooke Road – with the men working as laborers on area farms, the women doing domestic work for white planters.

**Caleb and Henrietta Bentley**

Caleb and Henrietta Bentley made their home in Brookeville, in a house made famous during the War of 1812, when the couple provided safe harbor to President James Madison and his entourage fleeing the burning of Washington by the British in 1814. While the nation’s capital burned, American troops, led by General William H. Winder, were tramping across the museum property, beating a hasty retreat through Sandy Spring, east to Snell's Bridge over the Patuxent (at the spot of the current Route 108 bridge). The disorganized troops gathered at the bridge, bivouacking for the night. The next day the troop headed north along Route 108, toward Baltimore – the suspected next target of British attack.

Caleb Bentley was a man of immense business acumen and civic engagement, involved in a myriad of enterprises throughout the area during his lifetime, from general stores to
sprawling mill villages. Over the first half of the 19th century, Caleb amassed a fortune, buying and selling land throughout Maryland and the District of Columbia, investing in local business and public works projects, and establishing commercial enterprises – he opened Sandy Spring’s first general store in 1818. Yet, despite the Quaker abhorrence of slavery, Bentley himself was involved in the sale of African Americans, acting several times as a lender or co-signer on loans for Montgomery County residents meant specifically for the purchase of slaves.

Richard Thomas Bentley and Community Growth

Aside from a short period of time in the 1830s when the family lived in Georgetown, Henrietta and Caleb Bentley spent their time in Brookeville, with the “Bloomingdale” property and overseer’s house occupied by a succession of tenants and finally, by 1842, their eldest son, Richard Thomas Bentley. Born in Brookeville in 1819, Richard Bentley married Edith Dawson Needles in 1842; the two raised eight children at “Bloomingdale”.

In the 1850s, at the entrance to his farm lane, enslaved men rented out by their enslavers were working on the old Baltimore road, packing ground, laying wooden planks and chipped stone to transform the road into a modern turnpike. Constructed and maintained by the Union Turnpike Company, organized in 1849, the Sandy Spring turnpike formed part of a network of privately maintained, smooth and rut-free roads created by the company, beginning with the building of the turnpike from Washington to Brookeville (today’s Georgia Avenue.). The old Native American trail in Sandy Spring was widened and straightened past the museum property. Tollhouses in Olney and Ashton collected fees for travelling on the pike; on average, the pikes spreading throughout Montgomery County charged 25 cents for coach or stage with two horses and four wheels and 12 ½ cents per score of sheep or hogs, among other fees for livestock and vehicles.

The Bentleys Improve the Land

Upon Caleb’s death in July of 1851, Henrietta Bentley inherited $5,000 of her late husband's wealth, with the rest being willed to her children and grandchildren. By this time, Henrietta was no longer living in Brookeville, but had relocated to “Bloomingdale,” to live with her son, Richard.

Richard Bentley, like his father, became a leading figure in the community. He renamed the “Bloomingdale” estate “Bloomfield,” and, with the labor of the free blacks who were gradually increasing in the area, turned it into a model farm, leading Bentley to become one of the founders of the Farmer’s Club in 1844, a society dedicated to modern agricultural practices. He continued the business at the Sandy Spring store. He banded together with other community leaders to create the Savings Institution of Sandy Spring in 1848, of which Bentley
was a director. From 1883 until 1889 he served as president of the Mutual Fire Insurance Company, founded in Sandy Spring.

Henrietta, who died in 1860 at “Bloomfield,” willed all of her property to her son, Richard. Fields of wheat, grazing livestock, market gardens filled with vegetables and orchards of fruit trees covered the land, the farm products intended for wholesalers in Baltimore and Washington. Loaded wagons from the Bentley farm creaked past the museum property, down the turnpike. Secretively, the enslaved escaping bondage crept past the museum property, headed for “Bloomfield”; the Bentley family home reportedly served as a stop along the Underground Railroad. In the Annals of Sandy Spring, a journal of town goings-on that began publication in the 19th century, long-time resident Rebecca Miller recalled the story of how Richard Bentley was reading late one night when he heard a noise at a window. He saw a familiar black face, a man he knew to be a slave on a nearby farm. When Bentley opened the door, the man asked, “Mr. Bentley, can you please point me out the North Star?” For many slaves, it was a celestial guide to freedom.

During the Civil War, Union soldiers would march and Confederate raiders would gallop past the museum property – and scores of cattle and hogs would clatter down the Sandy Spring turnpike, with area farmers supplying meat on the hoof to the Union camps spread throughout the county.

John C. and Cornelia Bentley and “Oakleigh”

In 1882, Richard T. Bentley’s son, John C. Bentley, married Cornelia Hallowell and, as a wedding gift, Richard built the house “Oakleigh” for the newlyweds on a section adjoining the “Bloomfield” estate – “leigh” being Old English for “clearing in the forest.” An 1882 Mutual Fire Insurance Policy described the house as a “new 2-1/2-story frame dwelling measuring 40 x 17 feet and having a two-story wing measuring 20 x 17 feet.” The policy notes that the dwelling was then occupied by John C. Bentley. The museum property formed part of the farm that the father bestowed on the son.

During his life, and like his father and grandfather, John C. Bentley was an active member of the Sandy Spring community: a director of the Savings Institution, a member of the Montgomery County Agricultural Society and the Farmers’ Club and, for his civic mindedness, elected to the Maryland House of Delegates in 1912. The museum property eventually became a conspicuous part of the “Oakleigh” estate, with its open land stretching along the farm lane – today’s Bentley Road -- to the homestead’s front yard.

The young Bentley couple lived at “Oakleigh” for only six years, from 1882 until 1888. That year, Richard T. Bentley purchased the neighboring “Cloverly” estate from the heirs of Mary Needles Roberts -- a 43-acre tract of “Bloomfield” which his father, Caleb Bentley, had sold to Benjamin Rush Roberts in 1849. Two weeks after Richard T. Bentley purchased the tract,
he transferred it to his son, John C. Bentley, and the couple moved from “Oakleigh” to the neighboring estate, its centerpiece a stylish Greek Revival brick house built in 1852 by Roberts. A native of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Benjamin Rush Roberts had moved to Sandy Spring because of its “reputation for congenial society and for the longevity of its residents.” In addition to his substantial house, in 1853 Roberts built a novel steam powered grist mill across the road from the museum property. Wagons heavy with threshed wheat rolled down the road, the grain headed for the mill to be ground into flour.

During the early 20th century the property was owned by a succession of Bentleys. While John and Cornelia Bentley lived at “Cloverly,” another son of Richard T. Bentley, Edward Needles Bentley, moved into “Oakleigh.” Edward Bentley lived on the estate until 1894 when, after the death of his mother, he took possession of “Bloomfield.” Then, Edward’s daughter, Mary C. Bentley moved in with her new husband, Frank Pole Robison. Two other couples, just married, made “Oakleigh” their first home: Richard and Olivia Lansdale in 1913 and Francis and Irene Miller in 1915. Perhaps the museum property lay fallow through the succession of tenants.

*Jack and Helen Bentley and a New Ball Game*

On December 27, 1913, John C. Bentley died, formally leaving “Oakleigh” to his son, John Needles Bentley. The will read in part: “Knowing my son, John N. Bentley desires to live in the country and be a farmer, and being desirous to place him in a position that he may do so ... I give and bequeath to my son the farm owned by me called Oakleigh” -- including the museum property.

The old turnpike took a turn toward the modern in 1909, when the importance of the road from Olney to Columbia was recognized by the Maryland State Roads Commission by being designated one of the original state highways. Beginning in 1916, three segments of macadam road were constructed from Olney through Sandy Spring, a road encroaching again on the museum property as the new pavement widened the old pike. Eventually, the modern macadam road would run past the museum property to Snell’s Bridge and across the Patuxent. The old wooden bridge was replaced in 1928 with a concrete arch.

Although desirous of becoming a farmer, John N. Bentley -- better known as Jack -- found his exceptional baseball skills leading him in a different direction. He pitched in the major leagues over parts of nine seasons, from 1913–1916 and 1923–1927, playing for the Washington Senators, New York Giants and Philadelphia Phillies. Jack Bentley and his wife Helen moved often as he played ball up and down the East Coast. The “Oakleigh” property was rented out. Eventually, his playing days over, the *Annals of Sandy Spring* noted that “Jack Bentley remodeled Oakleigh and will move in shortly, the Bealls having moved to Layhill.”
Sandy Spring Museum Appears

On October 24, 1969, John Needles Bentley died, leaving “Oakleigh” to his wife Helen. In 1994, in an act of great generosity, Helen Bentley deeded seven acres of “Oakleigh” - part of the original “Charley Forrest” and “Addition to Charles Forrest” tracts and a section of the old “Bloomfield estate” – to Sandy Spring Museum. The museum property had lain fallow for years. Secondary forest growth gradually covered the property, the trees and underbrush reclaiming the land by 1970.

In 1997 a new building to house Sandy Spring Museum opened - a community resource for exhibits, interpretive presentations and public celebrations of the area’s rich history, culture and diversity. In 2007, an addition to the building opened, housing a research library and a climate-controlled storage facility for the museum’s ever-expanding archives and artifact collection.

Today, the museum continues to add unique features to the property, enlarging its offerings, ushering in ever-new chapters in the land’s notable history.