Annapolis at a Glance . . .

From its first settlement by Europeans in 1650 until now, 363 years later, Annapolis has charmed residents and visitors with its gently rolling land, meandering creeks, and immediate access to the Chesapeake Bay, our country’s largest estuary. Early on, the Bay and its tributaries assured easy transportation and abundant seafood. Later it gave the city its only real industry: the packing of oysters harvested from nearby waters and shipped across the growing United States to nourish diners at fashionable Chicago restaurants and settlers heading West on wagon trains and railroads. Today, the Severn River and its creeks shelter thousands of recreational watercraft—power and sail, cruising and racing—whose owners consider Annapolis either their homeport of choice or a favored stop on their maritime travels.

Three levels of government—state, county, and municipal—have sustained the city’s economy for more than 300 years. Annapolis owes its name, honoring England’s Princess (later Queen) Anne, and its design to royal governor Francis Nicholson, who moved the capital of Maryland from St. Mary’s City, in Southern Maryland, to a tiny town on the Severn in 1695. Annapolis is the county seat of Anne Arundel County and thus the site of county business. The city’s charter dates from 1708; it is the oldest incorporated city in Maryland. In 1845, the fourth level of government arrived in the city with the establishment of the new naval officers’ school. The United States Naval Academy has been an important part of the city’s commercial and civic life since that time.
Maryland’s State House, the oldest continually used state capitol in the nation, dates from 1772, although its distinctive dome was not completed until 1788. Currently the Old Senate Chamber is being restored to its appearance when Congress met there in 1783–1784 to receive the resignation of George Washington as commander-in-chief of the army and to ratify the Treaty of Paris, ending the Revolution.

The built environment of today’s central, historic district dates almost entirely from the 18th and 19th centuries. Eighteenth-century homes, funded by wealthy planters and constructed by craftsmen and laborers drawn from the city’s racially and culturally diverse population, stand today as witness to the city’s preRevolutionary “Golden Age.” Buildings of the 19th century, generally less grand, express the commercial yearnings of Annapolis businessmen as they attempted to compete with the much larger and more successful Baltimore City just up the Bay.
A few of the outstanding homes of the 18th century are now maintained as house museums. Among them is the William Paca House on Prince George Street. Paca was an attorney, legislator, and judge, and one of the four Marylanders who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. He began this house in 1763 and lived here until his wife’s death in 1774.

Behind the house is a carefully maintained garden similar to the one Paca designed in the late 1760s. More information on this restored architectural gem and its lovely garden, both of which are open to the public for tours, can be found here on the Historic Annapolis website.
Samuel Chase, another local attorney, legislator, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, began this impressive home in 1769 but ran out of money before it was much more than a shell. Chase sold it to Edward Lloyd, whose wealth was more significant, and Lloyd completed the interior in grand style. Famed architect and craftsman William Buckland is credited with the interior finish work.

Across the street from Chase-Lloyd House is the home designed by architect William Buckland for a young Anne Arundel County tobacco planter named Matthias Hammond. This glorious example of the art of Italian Andrea Palladio was built in 1774 by Buckland and the craftsmen in his nearby shop. For reasons not clear today, Hammond never lived in the house.
Recognition of the bound laborers who contributed to the city’s buildings and lifestyle can be found along the head of the City Dock and across the circle at the Historic Annapolis Museum at 99 Main Street.

The Kunta Kinte plaque contains these words:

“To commemorate the arrival in this harbor of Kunta Kinte, immortalized by Alex Haley in *Roots*, and to all others who came to these shores in bondage and who by their toil, character and ceaseless struggle for freedom have helped to make these United States.”

More information on the memorials along the dock can be found at the Kunta Kinte–Alex Haley Foundation website.

Most of the bound laborers in Annapolis were British: either emigrants who voluntarily indentured themselves to pay the cost of their passage to the new world or convicts who chose deportation to America instead of death.

Black slave or white servant, many of these men, women, and children attempted to escape to freedom. Only a very few made it. Some of their stories are told in the exhibit “Freedom Bound, Runaways of the Chesapeake” on display now at the Historic Annapolis Museum at 99 Main Street.

For a virtual exhibit of Maryland’s African-American population, see “The Legacy of Slavery in Maryland” online from the Maryland State Archives.

This is a marvelous resource for anyone interested in the records that tell the stories of Africans and their descendants in Maryland through the centuries. Continually updated, this is an important work of the State Archives.
The Banneker-Douglass Museum, located in the old Mt. Moriah AME Church building and a new addition adjoining it, is Maryland’s official museum of African American History and Culture. It contains more of the “Freedom Bound” exhibit as well as other stories of the black experience in Maryland and artifacts from archaeological explorations in Annapolis.

Following the American Revolution, Annapolis was eclipsed in economic activity, political clout, and population by Baltimore City. Annapolitans did their best to attract new businesses, but for more than half a century they had little luck. Then, in 1845, Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft chose Annapolis as the location of the navy’s new shore-based school for officers. The United States Naval Academy—its students, faculty, and staff—has been an important part of the Annapolis community since then. Today, the academy and other naval facilities cover a substantial amount of land adjacent to the historic district and along both shores of the Severn River.
If you visit, please be alert to the security measures listed on the Academy’s websites.

Of special interest to visitors is the excellent naval Museum, located in Preble Hall on Maryland Avenue just a block inside Gate 3.

From April until November of 2013, the Naval Academy features a unique exhibit of the War of 1812 collections of Mr. William I. Koch and the Academy’s Museum in Mahan Hall, just a block farther down Maryland Avenue from Preble Hall.

The contributions of academy personnel to city life are many and continue to this day. Among the more famous local Academy personalities was Lt. Charles A. Zimmermann, conductor of the USNA Band for almost thirty years and author of “Anchors Aweigh.” Zimmermann and his wife lived in town in a marvel of Queen Anne Victorian architecture. Recently restored by the congregation of the neighboring First Presbyterian Church, this George Barber–designed house arrived in pieces by train from Knoxville, Tennessee, for assembly on site in the 1890s.

Annapolis is fortunate to have not one, but two celebrated institutions of higher education. When the United States Naval School arrived in 1845, the city’s other college was already well into middle age. Founded in 1784 by Maryland’s General Assembly, St. John’s College was originally supposed to be the western-shore half of a University of Maryland. The eastern-shore half would be Washington College in Chestertown, founded just two years earlier. State financing dried up almost immediately, and the university idea was dropped.

For many years in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries, St. John’s was a military school. But in 1937, Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan envisioned it as an offshoot of the famed University of Chicago Great Books program, and turned the college in a new direction. Today the liberal arts school has campuses in Annapolis and Santa Fe, New Mexico, both offering the same broad interdisciplinary curriculum based on the important works of western civilization.

The Annapolis campus gathers round an imposing eighteenth-century structure, McDowell Hall, begun in 1745 as a home for Maryland governors, but left unfinished and offered to the school at its establishment. Joining McDowell Hall are other buildings from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries; the most recent, a dormitory near College Creek, opened in January 2006.
The school’s library, on the corner of College Avenue and St. John’s Street, was built in 1934–35 by the State of Maryland as a Hall of Records to house the public records from the province’s first years to the present. Those public records, now known as the Maryland State Archives, were moved to a new building, across College Creek, in 1986, and St John’s converted the interior of the old Hall to the modern Greenfield Library.

A few recent publications about Annapolis:


Building the James Brice House, 1767–1774, by Orlando Ridout IV (Friends of the Maryland State Archives, 2013)