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Coastal Plain Forests—Colonial and Modern
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Fact and legend have been combined to give many of us a somewhat mystical story of our early forest wealth. Authentic records there are, of course, which enable us to picture a little to our satisfaction how these forests appeared to the voyager from across the Atlantic, but even some of these smack more of 17th century press agent tactics fostered by an ambitious trading company, than a sincere effort to record in an impartial way, the facts about our original forests.

Often the writer has tried to picture, as he cruised through stands of pine on old fields with the corn rows plainly visible, or through dense bramble and greenbrier of second growth hardwood forests, just what forest growth greeted the first Maryland colonists, as the "Ark" and the "Dove," under the Lord Baron of Baltimore, first sailed to Potomac River shores. It was with especial interest, therefore, that he read excerpts regarding trees and woodlands from narratives of early Maryland preserved in the archives of the Maryland Historical Society. Discounting the very evident enthusiasm of the writers of these excerpts in their zeal to induce more colonists to come to Maryland, there is, nevertheless, much of value to the forester who tries to look through existing forest types, to the forest growth that once covered all.

Writes one enthusiast, in 1633, "The country is, for the most part, thickly wooded. There are a great many hickory trees, and oaks so straight and tall that beams, sixty feet long and two and one half feet wide, can be made of them. The cypress trees also grow to a height of 90 feet, before they have any branches, and three men with arms extended can barely reach around their trunks. There are plenty of mulberry trees to feed silk worms. There are alder, ash and chestnut trees,
as large as those which grow in Spain, Italy and France; and cedars equalling those which Libanus boasts of.

"Why should I speak of the pine, laurel, fir, sassafras and other trees, with various kinds besides, which yield balsam and fragrant gum? Trees useful in every way, for building, ship-building, for making planks, pitch, tar, turpentine, perfumes and plasters. The woods moreover are passable, not filled with thorns or undergrowth, but arranged by nature for pasture for animals, and for affording pleasure to man."

Today, the mulberry is rarely found; and the chestnut of course, has but lately disappeared. We are at somewhat of a loss to determine just what tree was erroneously called a fir. No fir trees have ever been known to grow within Maryland's coastal plain, and our colonial enthusiast has clearly identified the pine. Isolated hemlock groves are reported to have once occurred in this region, but they are nowhere to be found today, yet it may be that hemlock was mistaken for fir.

Another colonial enthusiast, in 1634, wrote "—and then on March 3 we came into Chesapeake Bay, at the mouth of Patomake (Potomac). This baye is the most delightful water I ever sae, between two sweet landes, with a channell 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 fathoms deep, some ten leagues broad, at times of year full of fish, yet it doth yield to Patomake, where we have made St. Gregories (St Georges). This is the sweetest and greatest river I have ever seen, so that the Thames is but a little finger to it. There are noe marshes or swamps about it, but solid firme ground, with great variety of woode, not choked up with under-shrubs, but commonly so farre distant from each other as a coach and four horses may travel without molestation.

"I will end therefore with the soyle, which is excellent so that we cannot sett down a foot, but tread on strawberries, raspries, fallen mulberries, acchorns, walnutts, saxafras, etc. and these in the wildest woods.— All is high woods except where the Indians have cleared for corne. It abounds with delicate springs, which are our best drinks. Birds diversely feathered there are infinite, as eagles, swans, hernes, geese, bitters, ducks, partridges, read, blew, partly coloured, and the like, by which
will appear, the place abounds not alone with profit but also with pleasure."

With the clearing of land for farming, the "delicate" springs disappeared; the broad, short creeks silted up into marshland, so that where the ships of the colonists once loaded and unloaded in protected coves, the muskrat now builds his home of mud and sticks. New forests of pine have time and again become established on old fields, to yield in turn to hard-

Undisturbed soil and moisture conditions have favored the continuous reproduction of pure cedar stands in swamps where giant cedars were first found by American colonists.

woods, and these again to clearing for agriculture; and now, not even a trace of the original forests of three centuries ago remain, although over fifty percent of the land is forested.

What about river swampland forests, where land was never cleared for agriculture? Might we not expect to find here at least a continuity in the type of original forest? Such forest types were rather extensive along the upper reaches of the
estuary rivers, but even under these conditions, nature appears to have almost entirely remolded her forest forms.

As late as 1880, there remained along one coastal plain river an extensive tract of pure, virgin southern white cedar, of great age. In that year, the cedar was clear cut, and the following year, a severe fire burned through the swamp. Numerous huge stumps are the only evidences today that southern white clear cedar ever grew on this land. In its place there is a magnificent young forest consisting of an even mixture of sweet gum and loblolly pine—straight, clean boled trees, growing vigor-
ously, and promising much for the day when it shall be harvested.

Merely a stage in forest succession, you say? But wait. Dig below the old cedar stumps. What is this sound mass we strike? Slowly we push back the soggy, decaying forest mold, until we discern the outlines of a fallen forest giant. We strike an axe into it, and find it sound. We remove a chip from it—but no—it is not white cedar. It is cypress—bald cypress. We continue our explorations further, and more and more buried cypress trees are located—a whole forest of them, buried for ages under a forest of cedar, which has so recently yielded to a forest of pine and gum.

We are not the first to discover these hidden cypress trees. A hundred years ago woodsmen mined cypress for shingles, and thousands of trees are still preserved in their watery graves.

A chapter in ecology for foresters? Yes, a most valuable one. What forester, 50 years hence, after the last cedar stumps have rotted away, would ever suspect the successions which have taken place in the past five hundred years?

The old has made way for the new. Fire and the axe have joined to efface the forest of colonial days. New forests, differing greatly from the old in kinds of dominant trees, as well as in size, are the raw material with which the modern forester must work. He is the better prepared to do his work effectively, if he is well informed of the forest types which originally prevailed where the new is growing.