



Vegas

on the Potomac

SLOTS IN MARYLAND? IT WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST TIME...



Courtesy, Southern Maryland Studies Center, College of Southern Maryland.

BY HOLLY LEWIS MADDUX

This article is based partly on research and interviews conducted by historian Susan Schaffer in her dissertation, "Slot Machines in Charles County Maryland: 1910-1968" (1983, The College of Southern Maryland).

Richard Long was born in 1937, and although he grew up in Washington, DC, he spent at least a few weeks of each summer with his grandparents in Waldorf. At the time, Waldorf was a sleepy crossroads at the junction of Leonardtown and Old Washington roads in Charles County—just a speck of small-town life in a vast sea of tobacco, corn, and wheat fields.

Downtown Waldorf consisted of a drugstore, a movie theater, a service station, a tavern, and an A & P grocery, where Richard accompanied his grandmother when she shopped. He recalled that there were slot machines at the grocery, just inside the front door by the carts, and that he and his grandmother frequently stopped on their way out to give them a spin.

As a matter of fact, Long remembered, there were at least a few slots in nearly every business establishment in Waldorf in the 1940s. Curley's Tavern, at the junction of Route 925 and Action Lane, had them, and when Long tagged along with his parents when they went there to "water the horses" after dinner on Sunday afternoons, they supplied him with a handful of pennies. "They would give you 10 pennies to keep you quiet. 'Here, take these 10 pennies and go play the machines. I want to drink my beer. Scat!' they'd say. It was a good babysitter. Ten pennies in those days went a long way," Long recounted.

In the first half of the 1900s, the citizens of Charles County cut their teeth on slots. The machines would not be officially legal until 1949, but long before that, they were just about everywhere that folks might end up with some change. In addition to groceries and taverns, slots could be found in restaurants, barber shops, gas stations—even Laundromats.

But according to Long and other old-timers, the presence of the machines prior to their legalization was somewhat benign. Long remembered that, though his parents played the slots before they were legal, they weren't yet avid players. It wasn't until after slots' legalization and the establishment of glitzy nightclubs to house them that his parents "got real interested." William Berry, who also lived in Charles County at the time, concurred: "People didn't go out of their way to play the slots before they were legal, it was just an occasional amusement for most folks."

Slot machines had seeped into Charles County from the waters of the Potomac River—literally. There, riverboats with slots on board had plied the waters as early as the 1920s. These boats were not only an important mode of transportation between Washington and southern Maryland, they were a recreational attraction.



William Roberts, 74, once fixed and maintained old slot machines in Charles County. Today, his home is a repository of the county's former life as a gambling destination, which includes slot machines of the era.

A typical pleasure cruise in the 1920s and 1930s originated at Washington's Seventh Street Pier and made its way downriver, stopping first at historic Mount Vernon and then heading across the river to the Maryland side for lighter amusements at Marshall Hall. Marshall Hall had been a popular Charles County recreation site since the 1880s, when jousting tournaments were held there. By the 1920s, it was an amusement park complete with rides, a picnic area, and a restaurant that drew enormous crowds.

Capitalizing on the popularity of riverboat slot machines, the operators of Marshall Hall had, in the 1920s, installed a few machines in a shack on the pier that serviced the boats. Eventually, "a few machines in a shack" became a far more pronounced attraction: "Happy Land at Marshall Hall"—an inland pavilion—featured more than 150 slot machines, including penny machines that were of a height and configuration perfectly suited to children. Slots were popular at other riverside parks as well, including Cedar Point Park at Morgantown, and Chapel Point, a small amusement park featuring slots and other diversions, which was owned by an order of Jesuits.

It has been surmised that slot machines got an easy foothold in Charles County, in spite of their illegality, in part because residents were predominantly Catholic

and Anglican, and both denominations maintained a "live and let live" attitude toward gambling. Additionally, there was a precedence in Charles County for ignoring laws when compliance was economically disadvantageous: During Prohibition, many an otherwise upstanding Charles County citizen supplemented a dwindling farming income by producing and then importing alcohol to nearby Washington, DC.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, roadhouses and small taverns proliferated, and along with them the slot machines that had been so popular at the amusement parks along the river. In fact, it was well into the 1940s before citizens began to be concerned about the illegality of the devices. Their introspection regarding the matter was inspired by observations made in the national media.

Business Week, for example, ran an article in 1944 which reported that a newly required federal revenue stamp for slot machines had enabled a polling of their numbers. It said that while Nevada, which was the only state in the U.S. where slots were explicitly legal, had 1,016 slot machines, Charles County, where they were not legal, had 2,039 machines. Charles County law enforcement officers "shut their eyes to the games in private clubs, taverns, and public amusement places," the article stated.

Though slots continued to proliferate, there was a newfound cautiousness with regard to them. In Waldorf and La Plata, owners of the establishments that judges were known to frequent began to push their slots into backrooms; at the Three Owl Inn in Waldorf, a lookout was posted to alert managers to the arrival of the sheriff, at which time a trap door in the recess of a wall was slammed shut, effectively hiding the slots.

Finally, in 1948, the Charles County Grand Jury issued a report on gambling that concluded that since the law prohibiting it was not being enforced, the county might as well go ahead and legalize it, so as to reap some revenue from licensing fees. Not surprisingly, a storm of resistance formed.

Opposition to the legalization of slots was led by outspoken Methodist minister Harold Milstead, who formed the Charles County Ministerial Association and gained the support of other Methodist clergy and their parishioners. A small but growing faction of Democrats in the historically Republican county soon joined forces with the opposition.

Judge James C. Mitchell, editor of Waldorf's newspaper, *The Times Crescent*, emerged as an effective spokesman for the cause. He published a series of editorials and political cartoons featuring a character referred to as "Mysterious Mr. X," who depicted slot-machine owners as evil and corrupt, and raised the specter of mob involvement—an allegation that was never substantiated.

The local grange and the PTA jumped on the bandwagon, opposing the slots for what they believed to be their negative impact on family life. On the pro-slots side of the fence sat many Charles County business owners who profited from the presence of the machines in their establishments.

On Friday, May 6, 1949, Maryland Governor William Preston Lane Jr. signed a bill into law that legalized slot machines in Charles County—with the stipulation that a public referendum be held on June 21 of that year to make the decision final. The pro-slots coalition won the referendum by a margin of 939 votes, and slot machines became legal.

With the passing of the legislation, gambling ceased to be in the background of county life. Slots became business—big business. Entrepreneurs flocked to Charles County, formed corporations with local citizens in order to qualify for liquor licenses, and invested large

The Strip eventually became a destination unto itself, a popular vacation spot for gambling aficionados from up and down the East Coast. For many residents of Charles County, however, playing the slot machines ceased to be a mild amusement. Given the snazzy new environment, slots took on a new intensity. Recalled Richard Long, “By then, the slot machines were a fever. Once you start[ed] putting those nickels and dimes in and start[ed] pulling the handle, you just couldn’t stop.”

In the first two weeks of July 1949, slot-machine licensing fees yielded \$17,480 in revenue for Charles County, and the

In the wake of the negative publicity, opposition to slot machines grew and, in 1962, found a voice in David Hume, a Charles County Democrat who ran for governor on an anti-slots platform against incumbent Millard Tawes. Though Hume was unable to defeat Tawes, he did manage to secure the governor’s commitment to outlaw the machines. Thus, following Tawes’ reelection, and upon the reconvening of the state legislature in 1963, slots were declared illegal, and a plan was formulated to phase them out.

On June 30, 1968, after existing legally in Charles County for 19 years,

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amounts of capital in the development of lavish nightclubs—complete with four-star buffets and big-name entertainment—that featured slots.

These clubs were centered along a 15-mile strip of Route 301 around Waldorf, a straightaway that soon took on the monikers “Little Vegas” and “The Strip.” The area bore a marked contrast to the quiet countryside that surrounded it. Richard Long recalled that, “At night, you’d be coming down the road and you’d come out of the country, total darkness, into five miles of neon signs and flashing lights when you hit Waldorf. All these fancy moving electric signs attracted your attention and distracted the driver...at night time it was lit up just like Vegas.”

The clubs had names like The Stardust Inn, The Horseshoe Club, The Desert Inn, The Waldorf Hotel, The Crystal Door, and The Wigwam. They were open 24/7 and drew customers from far and wide. Travelers on Route 301—which in the days before I-95 was the main north-south interstate between New York and Florida—stopped for a meal and a turn at the slots before moving on (unless they opted to make a night of it by lodging at one of the many hotels or motor courts that were wedged between the clubs).

money was put to good use. Within two years, the number of fire companies in the county grew from one to seven; the public library, which had been closed for two years, reopened; and Physicians Memorial Hospital saw many needed improvements. The remaining funds went to tax reductions and school bonds. Revenues from the licensing of slots increased steadily and, by 1963, totaled \$485,961.91—20 percent of Charles County’s total revenues.

But despite the popularity of slots and the economic benefits they brought, there were downsides. Once again, the negatives were brought to the attention of Charles Countians by national media. In 1957 and 1958, *Men’s Adventure* and *Men’s Conquest* magazines ran lurid stories of the Strip in Waldorf. “The people of Charles County make their money from Slots, Sex, and Sin,” one headline screamed. And a particularly lurid description of Charles County’s citizens stated that they were “dirty, drunken, and debauched.”

Though it was clear that the stories contained exaggerations (the magazines were known for their tabloid-style journalism), the people of Charles County were embarrassed and appalled.

thousands of slot machines in establishments throughout the county were forever removed.

It didn’t take long for the glitter of the Strip to fade. All that is left of the glory days of slot machines is the Wigwam, which stands vacant and for sale on the west side of 301. In the back of the building sits an enormous one-story lounge-like structure that spreads into the weeded lot; in the front, a huge aluminum wigwam, in 1950s shades of ocher and turquoise, rises two stories.

Gazing up at the structure, one can imagine what once went on inside: the legendary carved-beef buffet beneath the eaves of the wigwam; women in fur and Chanel No. 5; and men in short-sleeved shirts and skinny ties, cigarettes clenched between their teeth, standing three, four, five deep at the slots.

One can also imagine the sounds: the levers being pulled one after the other, simultaneously and offbeat, over and over; bells ringing and money falling; the whoops of joy and curses of despair; and the calls to the change-makers for more quarters or dimes.

Indeed, one can almost imagine the very *smell* of the money—perpetually being won, lost, won, and lost. ■