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Author(s): Henry Chandlee Forman

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## THE ST. MARY'S CITY "CASTLE," PREDECESSOR OF THE WILLIAMSBURG "PALACE"

By HENRY CHANDLEE FORMAN, *Comer Professor of Fine Arts,  
Wesleyan College*

The recent discovery of the ruins of the Governor's Castle, first known as St. Peter's, lying within Maryland's olden capital of St. Mary's, invites a revision of the known chronology of early American architecture. Heretofore, teachers and students of art have talked in general terms about an early "farmhouse" or "cottage" colonial type of building commonly existing in the seventeenth century in the American Colonies. This conception should be altered in view of what is now known about the Governor's Castle, described below at length for the first time.

By means of a research grant awarded in 1940 by the American Council of Learned Societies, Washington, the writer used the experience gained while directing excavations of Jamestown foundations for the government, to conduct explorations on the site of the Governor's Castle, a place in St. Mary's City long known to tradition. Until digging was commenced on September 6, 1940, no one in our own generation knew what had been the size, shape or orientation of this vast pile, built originally far back from the steep river bluffs. There was nothing above ground to convey a single indication of what kind of structure the Castle had been. By means of exploratory trenches in the ground, the brick foundation was finally located in the middle of a tobacco field. After the main outlines of the cellar had been uncovered, it was found that more than eleven and a half thousand cubic feet of dirt and débris lay inside the basement. The writer's reconstruction drawings (Figs. 1, 2 and 3) are based fundamentally upon a study of this cellar and of old descriptions of the building. From this study it is now possible to visualize with some degree of certainty the original appearance of the mansion.<sup>1</sup>

It is a rare thing to find in the period of the early settlements a building which was equally significant from both an historic and an architectural standpoint. In the first place, it should be recognized that the Castle was the most historic house of early Maryland since it served as the home of Lord Baltimore, who was the Lord Proprietor of that Province, as well as the domicile of the first Royal Governors. Besides, the Castle possessed, as far as is known, the largest floor area of any residence built by Englishmen on the shores of the New World by the end of the year 1639.

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<sup>1</sup> The drawings of the Castle are, of course, subject to further discoveries.

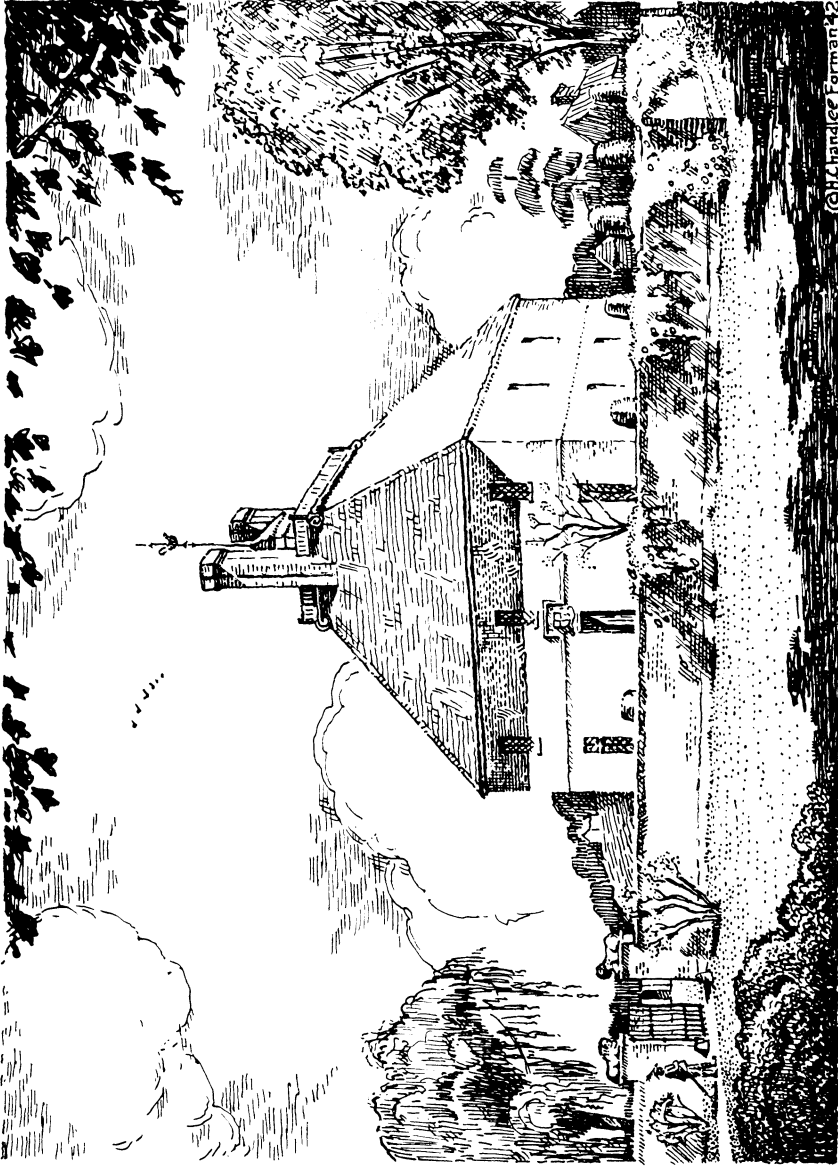


Fig. 1—The Governor's Castle, Built in 1659 in St. Mary's City.

It was the largest house of its time in the Colonies. The only larger, contemporary known structure was Harvard College, which was built of wood and completed some five years after the Castle.<sup>2</sup> In the third place, the floor plan of the Castle is unique. There is no other floor scheme of the period in this country even remotely resembling it. Finally, because of certain similarities between them, the Governor's Castle in its external aspect seems to have set the style approximately—or perhaps formed the prototype—of the great Governor's Palace in Williamsburg, which was completed between 1713 and 1720, some seventy-four years later.

The story of the Castle begins more than three centuries ago, when Sir John Harvey was constructing at Jamestown what was to be the first State house in Virginia, and the Second Lord Baltimore, Cecil Calvert, was founding the Colony of Maryland. The full flavor of those early days has disappeared. At any rate, among the outstanding settlers who came to St. Mary's City in Maryland was one Thomas Cornwaleys, a man whose relative of the same name surrendered at Yorktown about a century and a half later. Thomas Cornwaleys was the premier statesman of Maryland, and he it was who wrote that security of conscience was the first condition which he expected from the government of that Province. In April, 1638, four years after the first settling of St. Mary's City, Cornwaleys advised that he was constructing "of A house toe put my head in, of sawn Timber framed A story and half hygh . . ."<sup>3</sup> By May, 1640—two years later—he was using another abode, the "Brick house" on St. Peter's Freehold, a structure which was then described as having been "lately set up."<sup>4</sup> Now the "Brick house" was definitely the mansion called St. Peter's, or the Governor's Castle, the subject of this sketch. Thus, it appears that the Castle was completed either in the latter part of 1639, or in the first four months of 1640, and that it was begun in late 1638, because it must have taken more than a year to build.

When Thomas Cornwaleys in 1659 sailed home to England,

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<sup>2</sup> Harvard College or "The Old College" was larger in area than the Governor's Castle and was commenced a few months earlier. Ground had been broken and considerable work had been done on Harvard by the summer of 1638; but it was not completed until about 1644, five years after the Castle. If a building date is reckoned by date of completion, then the Castle was built about five years before Harvard. S. E. Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College* (Cambridge, 1935), 272.

<sup>3</sup> Calvert Papers, no. 1, p. 174. Letter dated April 6, 1638.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Cornwaleys patented "St. Peter's Freehold," St. Mary's City, in 1639 or 1640. St. Mary's Rent Rolls, 1639 to 1659, Annapolis. On May 29, 1640, reference was made to "the Brick house now used by Capt. Thomas Cornwalles Esq." Liber, AB & H, folio 80, Annapolis. On June 5, 1640, there is entered another reference, the "brick house lately set up by Capt. Thomas Cornwaleys Esq." Liber 1, folio 67.

never to return, the Castle probably stood vacant in its St. Peter's field until Chancellor Philip Calvert, that uncle of the Lord Proprietary for whom William Penn had a word of praise, obtained in 1664 a new patent for the property.<sup>5</sup> The Proprietary régime at the Castle lasted exactly twenty years. During the tenure of the Chancellor, the spacious pile was spoken of as "The Chancellor's House at St. Peter's."<sup>6</sup> In 1682 he died "seized of St. Peter's without issue,"<sup>7</sup> and the estate descended to his heir-at-law and nephew, Charles Calvert, that colorful Third Baron of Baltimore who resided in Maryland with all the state of a king in a small kingdom. Like Cornwaleys, the Third Baron departed for England (1684), never to return. Again the dwelling must have stood on its green sward untenanted.

While he served as first Royal Governor of Maryland (1691-3), Sir Lionel Copley is believed to have resided at the Castle; and this belief is further strengthened by a reference in 1692 citing "the Governor's house at St. Peter's."<sup>8</sup> Sir Lionel was buried in 1693 near the present ivy-covered Trinity Church in St. Mary's, and the very same year Sir Edmund Andros "descended" upon the town and proclaimed himself governor. He, too, seems to have been a transient dweller at the Castle or "Governor's House," where he kept a hoard of eighteen barrels of gunpowder.<sup>9</sup>

When he later became Governor of Virginia, Sir Edmund Andros was criticized for his activities in Maryland, such as stealing money from the Treasury in St. Mary's City. In connection with his high-handed seizure of that Province, his enemies brought out a skeleton from his closet by telling a story—not a pretty tale by any means—about an event which took place in the Governor's Castle. It developed that certain American Indians were so "mad" with Andros' "obscure and unsincere way of talking and acting, that they perfectly hate[d] him." "One of the Indian Kings in the year 1693," so ran the tale, "came to wait upon him at his house; and after a long conversation with him whereat the Indian appeared to be exceeding uneasy, he [the Indian] came into the Governour's kitchen, and finding a Case-knife upon the dresser, immediately cut his own throat therewith, and dyed."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> St. Peter's, 150 acres, patented October 7, 1664, to Philip Calvert, Esq. Liber 6, folio 280, Annapolis.

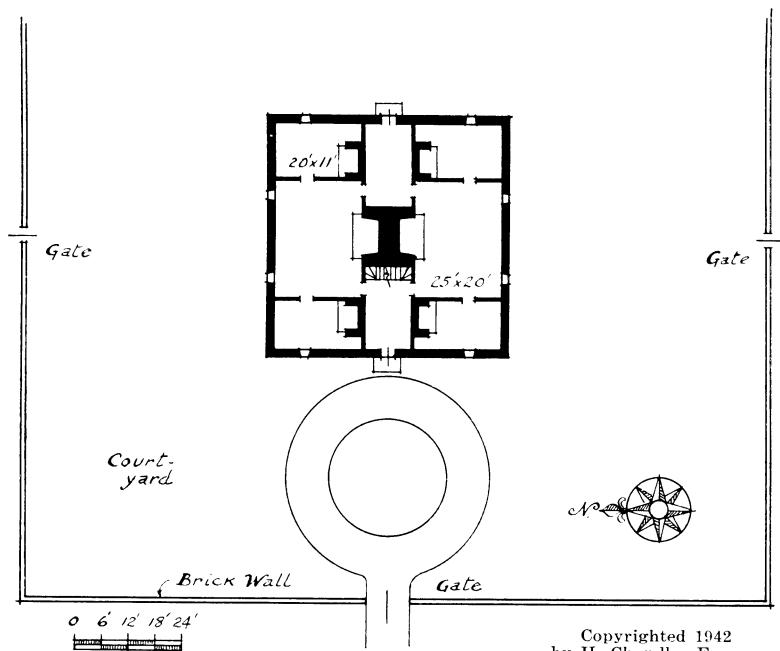
<sup>6</sup> *Archives of Maryland*, XV, 250.

<sup>7</sup> Liber PL5, folio 638, Annapolis.

<sup>8</sup> *Archives of Maryland*, VIII, 382.

<sup>9</sup> On October 16, 1693, in St. Mary's City there were "left in the Governours house 18 whole Barrills in powder." *Archives of Maryland*, XX, 150.

<sup>10</sup> "Documents Relating to the Early History of the College of William and Mary and to the History of the Church in Virginia," contributed by Herbert L. Ganter, in *William and Mary Quarterly*, Second Series, vol. 19, no. 3, July 1939, p. 349.



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Fig. 2—The Floor and Courtyard Plan of the Governor's Castle  
(The staircase and the driveway are conjectural.)

This event happened in 1693, and it would seem bad enough not to be surpassed by any other. Nevertheless, there could have been no worse explosion than that which took place the following year at the Castle. This bulky pile of brick, the proud home of the Baltimores and of the Royal Governors, was blown skyward by the explosion of seventeen kegs of gunpowder stored presumably in the great basement. There is no record who the villains in the case were.

Tradition has it that Sir Francis Nicholson, from 1694 for four years Royal Governor of Maryland, and afterward head of the Virginia Colony and founder of Williamsburg, lived at the Castle in St. Mary's, which in 1694 continued to be known as the "Governor's House." On June 26 of that year an accounting of the "Armes and ammunition at St Maries"<sup>11</sup> was made, and one hundred ninety-two muskets, accompanied by seventeen gunpowder barrels, were found at the Castle.

It does not require too great a stretch of imagination to reason why the Castle was blown up in the first week of October, 1694. One has only to take into consideration the state of high feeling which at that time was coursing through St. Mary's City. It was Francis Nicholson who in this very month of October forced a "must" bill through the Maryland legislature to move away the seat of Provincial government from St. Mary's and to make Annapolis the new capital. The opposition which Nicholson's act encountered was assuredly strong enough to set a spark to the Castle, where the Governor lived. Nicholson was not only transposing a capital, but also striking the death blow to the old Catholic, Proprietary régime which St. Mary's City represented. Where Nicholson was at the time of the explosion is not known, but he lived long enough to name two streets in Williamsburg after himself. On October 9, 1694, there was drawn up "A List of the Armes which were blowne up in the Chancelor's house at St. Maries" (even by that time men could not forget the Chancellor).<sup>12</sup> The inspection revealed that thirty-eight musket barrels were among the "broken Armes found after the blowing up of the Chancelors house." The following year there was another reference to the "Countreys powder . . . burnt in the Great house at St Maryes."<sup>13</sup>

After an active life of fifty-five years, the Governor's Castle, its stalwart walls gradually crumbling for another century and a half, seems to have moved into the realm of forgotten sites. A long time elapsed during which we know exactly nothing about the

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<sup>11</sup> *Archives of Maryland*, XX, 150.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, XX, 308.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, XX, 308.

historic dwelling. It was not until about 1836 that John Pendleton Kennedy, a novelist, visited St. Mary's City, and in his *Rob of the Bowl*<sup>14</sup> left a description of the Castle. "The ample dwelling-house," he depicted, "was a massive building of dark brick, two stories in height, and penetrated by narrow windows." It is perfectly true that in 1639 narrow windows formed the usual embellishments of buildings, and the leaded glass found by the writer in the Castle basement suggests that the structure possessed the usual twenty-inch wide casements. Furthermore, Kennedy described the roof as having been "capped by a wooden balustraded parapet, terminating, at each extremity, in a scroll like the head of a violin, and, in the middle, sustaining an entablature that rose to a summit on which was mounted a weathercock." This is a very detailed description, and must have had some truth in it if it was not wholly correct. The entablature to which Kennedy refers was probably a kind of cupola with mouldings.

According to Bryant and Gay, whose *Popular History of the United States* was published in 1878, the Castle possessed "two stout chimneys about the middle of the house."<sup>15</sup> Unlike those of the Palace in Williamsburg which flanked the balustraded parapet on either side, the two chimneys of the Castle must have risen—at least, so the exigencies of the floor plan required—at the front and the back of the parapet, in such a manner that a traveller approaching the main entrance would be unable to see the rear chimney because of the one in front.

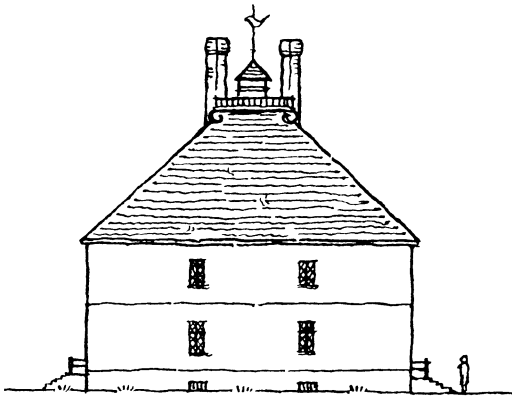
To search for antecedents of the Castle floor plan one has to go back, perforce, to Jacobean styles of architecture in England. The Castle is exactly square, fifty-four feet on a side, with a room of the same size in each of the four corners. Such square-shaped blocks were built in England in the time of James I and are exemplified by Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire (1613), or Clegg Hall, Lancashire (1620).<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, when the great back-to-back fireplaces in the exact middle of the Governor's Castle are noted, it is clear that here is no Jacobean feature, but a pure medieval

<sup>14</sup> *Rob of the Bowl* (1838), 6, 7. See note 11, page 257, *Jamestown and St. Mary's, Buried Cities of Romance* (Baltimore, 1938) by H. C. Forman. The name, "Governor's Castle," first appears in *Rob of the Bowl* and is a colloquial name believed to have originated during the occupancy of the Royal Governors. The following persons owned St. Peter's or a part of St. Peter's in after years: Nicholas Sewall, 1724, who was "well beloved kinsman" of the Proprietary (Liber PL5, folio 638); William Deacon, 1753, 150 acres (Debt Books, St. Mary's Co.); William Hicks of London, 1755, 100 acres (*ibid*); Vernon Hebb; John Mackall, 1783. The site of the Castle is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. J. Spence Howard and Mrs. James Bennett.

<sup>15</sup> Vol. I, p. 505.

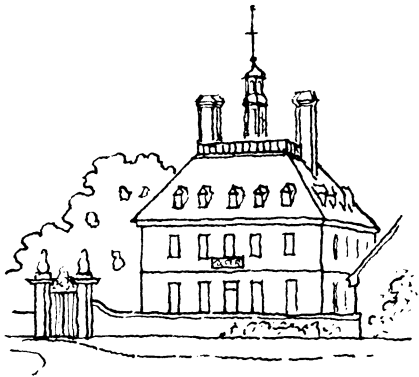
<sup>16</sup> See J. A. Gotch, *Architecture of the Renaissance in England* (London, 1894), I, 26-31.





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*Fig. 3—Side Elevation of the Governor's Castle*



*Fig. 4—The Governor's Palace, Williamsburg*

characteristic. The Castle represents merely a Jacobean graft on the medieval tree.

The mansion which formed the nearest competitor to the Castle in size was the Green Spring, Sir William Berkeley's home, built not earlier than 1642 and hence postdating the Castle. Since the Castle had a floor area of 2,934 square feet, the Green Spring was not "the first great house of the American Colonies,"<sup>17</sup> for it contained but 2,886 square feet, including the small addition at the rear. The Green Spring possessed only "six rooms" against the Castle's twelve, excluding the great basement.

On both floors and basement of the Castle the back-to-back fireplaces, each measuring some ten feet within the span, heated chambers or halls twenty-five feet long by twenty wide (Fig. 2). Also, the corner rooms were no mere alcoves, for each measured twenty feet long by eleven wide and had fireplaces large enough for six-foot logs, as far as the excavations indicate. In one of the corner rooms of the cellar was probably stored the gunpowder for what may be called the gunpowder plot of 1694. In addition to all this space the Castle contained front and rear hallways, broad passageways ten feet wide which formed chambers in themselves. It is possible that the main staircase lay in the front hallway next to the side of the central chimney stack. Even in large houses of the Colonies the small winding staircase was commonly employed in this period.

Bryant and Gay were almost correct in their depiction (1878) of the "great cellar paved with square red tiles." As a matter of fact, if the two basement areas under the hallways be considered as rooms, then four rooms were floored with eight-by-eight-inch clay tiles, one inch thick, with chamfered edges, and the other four rooms were paved with nine-inch brick. The entire flooring was laid on a soft mud-mortar bed over white sand.

Charred thresholds in the cellar doorways bespeak the great combustion of 1694, but unfortunately much evidence concerning walls and paving has been destroyed in subsequent years. At one or more periods the Castle was turned into a quarry, and entire masonry walls carted away. The Roman Forum, it may be remembered, suffered a like fate.

Kennedy may have been in error in declaring that the Castle had an "arched brick porch which shaded the great hall door," and a "series of arcades, corridors and vestibules" which "served to bring into line a range of auxiliary or subordinate buildings," such as private chapel and banqueting hall. At least, insofar as the recent excavations disclosed, there were no traces in the ground

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<sup>17</sup> T. T. Waterman and J. A. Barrows, *Domestic Colonial Architecture of Tidewater Virginia* (N. Y., 1932), 11.

of dependencies attached to the great square basement. Nevertheless he was wholly correct when he described the "grassy court," shut in by a "sweep of wall," in front of the Castle. "Admission," he declared, "was gained through a heavy iron gate swung between square, stuccoed pillars, each of which was surmounted by a couchant lion carved in stone." No lions have yet come to light, but the brick footings of the courtyard enclosing wall and of the main gateway still survive solid just beneath the top soil. The portal was ten feet wide—wide enough for a coach and four—and lay exactly opposite the principal entrance door of the Castle.<sup>18</sup>

How much influence did the design of the Governor's Castle exert on that of the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg (Fig. 4), only seventy miles away as the crow flies? The resemblances between these dwellings of the Royal Governors are too striking to overlook. There is good reason to believe that the earlier played a kind of godfather to the later edifice, built approximately seventy-four years afterward. Both brick buildings had the steep, hipped roof, the balustraded parapet, the cupola, the two stout chimneys projecting from about the middle of the house. Both were two storeys high and contained a large cellar. The Palace in Williamsburg had the same depth of fifty-four feet as that of the Castle, but was six feet longer in its main façade.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, in the matter of comparative size, there was not a great difference between Castle and Palace—certainly not much when the seventy-four year interval is taken into account. Moreover, both dwellings possessed grassy forecourts with enclosing walls and entered by wide gateways. With due allowance for the difference in architectural styles, which in 1639 were essentially medieval and in 1713 classical Georgian, it does not seem unreasonable to call attention to the hypothesis that in exterior semblance the Governor's Castle in St. Mary's City was the actual prototype of the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg.

How this relationship came about may perhaps be explained historically. Both Andros and Nicholson were familiar with the

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<sup>18</sup> Note on the artifacts: Several fragments of quarrels or diamond panes, 3/32" and 1/16" thick, were found, indicating the use of leaded casement windows at the Castle. Other fragments were a delicate and narrow piece of lead stripping or calme; part of a thirteen-inch H hinge; a strap-hinge with spear-shaped termination; shingle or plain tiles with the customary pair of nail holes; rusty nails, charcoal, plaster, stoneware, clay pipes, lead strips and mortar. For further information see H. C. Forman, *Jamestown and St. Mary's, Buried Cities of Romance* (Baltimore, 1938), especially Chapter VII, and page 237, figure D.

<sup>19</sup> The ballroom wing at the rear of the Palace in Williamsburg was a later addition.

Castle in St. Mary's; each served as Governor of Maryland and Governor of Virginia. In truth, Nicholson had good reason to be familiar with the Castle. He had cause enough to have etched on his mind for a long time the lines of the Maryland *castellum*. When Nicholson laid out the City of Williamsburg in 1699—only five years after the explosion at the Castle—he could not have forgotten that picture. And Nicholson was not recalled from Virginia to England until 1705, *the very year in which the Palace in Williamsburg was ordered to be erected*.

In conclusion, it may be stated that the American aesthetic tradition, which particularly in architecture is most permanently established, is now enriched by our knowledge of the Governor's Castle in old St. Mary's City.

Rivoli, Macon, Georgia.