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## *Early County Commissioner Meetings & The Formation of the State Association of County Commissioners of Maryland (1932-1951)*

The year was 1932: the country was deep in the Great Depression, Albert C. Ritchie lost his second bid for president, Roosevelt pledged “a new deal for the American people,” and Marylanders were driving all the way around the Chesapeake Bay to get to the Eastern Shore. And, for the first time in State history, County Commissioners from both shores of Maryland began to realize the potential power of their unified efforts upon local legislation.

As early as 1932, County Commissioners from both shores of Maryland began to convene on a fairly regular basis. Frederick County Board of Commissioners meeting minutes that year contained brief notes about a “conference of County Commissioners held in Annapolis,” and made mention over the next few years of a “Western Shore Commissioners’ Association” and an “Eastern Shore Commissioners’ Association,” as well as several all-jurisdictional meetings in Annapolis. The first of these notations referenced a letter that had been mailed to Western Shore counties inviting county commissioners to meet with the Frederick County Board of Commissioners on October 28, 1932 in Frederick. There is no record of why Frederick County officials held the meeting, or what was discussed on October 28; however, given the desperate economic state of the nation in 1932, it is not surprising that the Western counties should have sought to work together through one of the worst years of the Depression.

The following month, all Maryland County Commissioners, except those representing Charles and Harford counties, attended the aforementioned conference in Annapolis. The objective of the meeting was to discuss the “means of receiving revenue from the State for school purposes” and “to consider the counties sharing in part of the four per cent per gallon on gasoline tax.” The commissioners present passed two motions at that meeting. The group voted to support “reducing the school tax to 30 cents per \$100 for school purposes so that all the counties of the State share in the equalization fund.” The group also voted to support that a “portion of the State gasoline tax be allocated... to be used by... several counties for county road purposes.” The meeting was to be followed in two weeks by another conference in Annapolis, but research is inconclusive as to whether that meeting actually took place.

Future meetings were also noted in the Frederick County Commissioners’ meeting minutes. Frederick County Commissioner John W. Grove attended a meeting of the Eastern Shore County Commissioners on April 16, 1934. This meeting is of particular importance to this history, since it suggests that regional meetings of county commissioners were possibly being held on the Eastern Shore as well as in the West, though no Eastern Shore records are available to confirm this. Two years later, on October 19, 1936, the Frederick County commissioners and clerk attended a meeting of “the Association of the Eastern and Western Shores” in Cambridge. When the Western Shore County Commissioners Association met the following year on February 4, 1937, six counties were represented. By this time the minutes occasionally included brief descriptions of the issues discussed

and the resolutions passed at the commissioners' meetings; on February 4<sup>th</sup> the Board of Commissioners dealt with General Public Assistance Funding for the County Welfare Board.

At this point the Frederick County records become sketchy as they are handwritten and the clerk's writing is, at times, completely illegible. The Commissioners attended the Western Shore County Commissioners Association meeting at the Francis Scott Key Hotel in Frederick on January 16, 1943. The records also reported that the Commissioners were invited to attend a February 3, 1944 meeting in Baltimore City with all county commissioners in the State. In Annapolis on March 4, 1944, County Commissioners met again to discuss a proposed Teachers' Bonus Bill. The counties wanted the State to pay for the bonus, rather than carrying the burden themselves during a period of economic struggle. State Senator John B. Funk and the members of State legislature met with the group at that gathering to discuss the proposal.

Frederick County Commissioner U. Grant Hooper, who served his county for five terms from 1934 to 1954, was president of the Western Shore Commissioners' Association. In the Board minutes, it was noted that Commissioner Hooper met with the Executive Committee of the Western Shore Commissioners Association in Westminster on March 5, 1945 to discuss "pending legislation relating to schools, jails, etc." No further details regarding that legislation are given in the minutes.

Maryland County Commissioners met at Carvel Hall in Annapolis on February 10, 1947 and a "favorable discussion was held on a 2% sales tax and flat auto license tax." When the State sales tax was instituted July 1, 1947, it was the first sales tax in Maryland's history. It was noted in the minutes of the Carvel Hall meeting that, "unanimous opposition was voiced to a pending House Bill to give the State tax commissioner authority to fix salaries of supervisors of assessments and assessors."

Also recorded in the Frederick County Commissioners' meeting minutes are a December 17, 1949 Western Shore Commissioners' Association meeting at the Francis Scott Key Hotel, and a meeting of both the Eastern and Western Shore Commissioners on April 10, 1951 in Frederick.

Unfortunately, no minutes from any of these Eastern and/or Western Shore meetings exist to provide insight on how and when the concept of a unified State Association was first discussed. It is clear that Frederick County played a substantial role as Frederick County Commissioner U. Grant Hooper was elected to serve as the Association's first President in 1951 and was re-elected to a second term the following year. It is also clear that by September 1951 Maryland County Commissioners, with their frequent, often well-attended meetings, had laid the foundation for what would one day become the Maryland Association of Counties.