

Walking Tour South (30 min)

- 1 Harford County Courthouse and Square, S Main Street**
Courthouse Square is the hub and heart of Bel Air life that differentiates it from other Harford towns. Bel Air has had a courthouse since 1791. The present building was erected after a fire in 1858 and was enlarged in 1904 and again in 1981.

The square has buildings on either side (West Courtland and Office Streets) that, through adaptive reuse, accommodate banking, legal, civic and commercial interests. Most date from the post-Civil War period with numerous later additions and renovations.

- 2 Bel Air Armory, 37 N Main Street**
The Armory resembles a medieval castle with all the effects needed to make it appear permanent and impregnable. The rusticated exterior, built of Port Deposit granite, features two great octagonal towers with corbels and battlements and between them is a wide segmental-arched portal.

- 3 Bel Air Academy, 24 E Pennsylvania Avenue**
Built in 1814, many important countians attended this school for their classical education. It was originally an unadorned four-bay structure with the door in the far left bay and the indispensable school bell in a lantern on the ridge pole.

- 4 Odd Fellows Lodge (First Presbyterian Church), 21 E Pennsylvania Avenue**
This Greek Revival building was built in 1852 when the style had swept the country (how-to pattern books helped the proliferation), it was the only Greek temple façade design in Bel Air.

- 5 Fulford Cottage, 20 E Fulford Avenue**
The Little Stone House, as it is known, was originally a carriage house or stable and later a soft drink bottling plant; then it served numerous other functions. The date of construction is uncertain with guesses ranging from 1789 to after 1823.

- 6 Van Bibber House, 303 S Main Street**
This building is the oldest in Town still on its original site. Built by John Bull in 1789 in a three-bay, side-hall plan of two stories. The Van Bibber House has functioned as a residence, a female seminary, a Presbyterian manse, a surgery and an office building.

A Brief History of Bel Air, MD

In 1782, Harford Countians voted to move the County seat from "Harford Town" near the present junction of Routes 7 and 136 to Scott's Old Fields, then a plat of 42 lots along today's Main Street. A year later "Old Fields" had been dropped and the tiny hamlet became known as Bel Air, with a grand total of four houses. The Van Bibber House at the corner of Main Street and Fulford Avenue, and the Hays House, moved to Kenmore Avenue in 1960, are Bel Air's sole representatives of the 18th century. By 1810, Bel Air's population had grown to 196 and a jail had been completed on Main Street directly across from the Courthouse.

It is the Courthouse that has been the Town's reason for existence for much of its history. The present day Courthouse was built in 1858 replacing the first one built in 1791 and destroyed by fire. By mid century five roads converged on the Town and, as early as 1830, the Conowingo stage line ran coaches between Baltimore and Philadelphia. In 1841 Bel Air was described as a village of about 25 houses and 6 taverns. It had no paved streets until 1850. Just before the Civil War the Town's population was 148.

The boom in the canning industry was the impetus for much growth in the Town and by 1880 the population stood at 793. In 1874, Bel Air became an incorporated town with a Council Manager form of government which is still retained today.

The Maryland Central Railroad line, the "Ma & Pa", connecting Bel Air with Baltimore and Pennsylvania, opened in 1883 and provided another spurt of growth - residential, industrial and commercial. A hiking trail is now located along a portion of the former train tracks. The Town boundaries grew with the Dallam, Hays and Richardson additions. In 1941, the population stood at 2,000.

After World War II the Town grew rapidly and more recently the Bel Air area has developed as the economic center of Harford County as well as a center of growth in the Baltimore region as a whole. Today the Town's population stands at over 10,000 though Town services are used by a far greater number in the Greater Bel Air area.

For further information about Harford County history and historic preservation in the County, contact The Historical Society of Harford County, Inc. 410-838-7691 or the Harford County Historic Preservation Commission 410-638-3103.

www.BelAirMD.org

Bel Air



HISTORIC WALKING TOURS

Bel Air
MARYLAND

Walking Tour North (60 min)

- 1 Bel Air Methodist Episcopal Church, 20 N Main Street**
Originally constructed in 1888 using a standard catalog plan for Methodist churches, this impressive structure was transferred to the County in 1968 when the congregation moved to S. Main Street.

- 2 Graham Crocker House, 30 N Main Street**
This nicely preserved building's exterior is typical of the houses constructed during the Jacksonian period both in Bel Air and in the nearby countryside. Built circa 1825, it is the third oldest house in town.

- 3 James-Kennedy House, 108 N Bond Street**
Built in 1914, this house is typical of the many shotgun style units in this part of Bel Air. The style got its name because "one could fire a shotgun through all the rooms in a row".

- 4 Alice Anne & Williams Streets**
From the last decades of the 19th century into the early 20th, modest utilitarian housing was constructed along this street. Built by workmen for their own living quarters or built for rental properties, they are part of a larger national picture.

- 5 The Wren Box, 304 Williams Street**
This charming Colonial Revival cottage, built in 1917 for Josephine Amos, features stone from Lake Fanny Hill as well as classic Doric columns.

- 6 Liriodendron, 502 W Gordon Street**
Liriodendron was the summer retreat for Hopkins surgeon and noted member of the Big Four, Dr. Howard Kelly and his family. Its ample proportions and high style of design suggest the way of life of the wealthy at the turn of the 20th century.

- 7 The Reckord Mill, 432 Rockspring Avenue**
The Reckord industrial complex, started in 1886, was composed of a mill, an office, a warehouse and a shed. For Bel Air the complex is historically important both in architecture and in economics.

- 8 First Presbyteria Church, 224 N Main Street**
This attractive Gothic Revival church was designed by architect George Archer, a Harford native with a professional practice in Baltimore. The original 1881 structure burned in 1936, but was rebuilt that same year using the original blueprints.

Walking Tour North (60 min)

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- 9 Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Main Street and Broadway**
Wyatt and Nolting, a prominent Baltimore architectural firm, designed the church in 1896. Although it is called Gothic Revival, there is much of the Romanesque in it.
- 10 East Broadway**
This was the tree-lined street where Bel Air families of substance lived and local master builders set a dignified pattern for the residences in the 19th century. We call it Victorian; although there were Queen Anne designs and Colonial Revival features here and there.
- 11 The Proctor House, 54 E Gordon Street**
This is one of the most unusual residences in Town. Built in 1865, it is classified as Carpenter Gothic in style, and features a unique board and batten construction.
- 12 Bel Air Academy, 45 E Gordon Street**
This was the first brick school building in Harford County. The first portion was constructed in 1882 when the original Bel Air Academy was absorbed into the public school system.
- 13 Bel Air Post Office, 143 N Main Street**
Built in 1936 as part of the Roosevelt Administration's WPA efforts to revive the economy during the Depression era, the building now houses the Historical Society of Harford County.
- 14 Hopkins House, 141 N Main Street**
John Thomas Chew Hopkins built this handsome Victorian house for his southern bride in 1879. His wealth and position dictated its large size and original features, and his refined taste prevented any inappropriate ostentation.

Downtown Bel Air Historic Walking Tours



Walking Tour South (30 min)

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- 7 Hays House, 324 Kenmore Avenue**
Built in 1788 by John Bull, and enlarged by Thomas Hays in 1814, this is the oldest house in Bel Air. A portion of the house was moved to its present site in 1960, leaving the 2 story stone ell Hays addition to demolition. It was registered as a National Historic site in 1980 and now serves as a house museum.
- 8 Bel Air Colored High School, 205 Hays Street**
This utilitarian frame structure, partially funded by the Rosenwald Foundation, was built as a grade school in 1924. In 1935, it became Bel Air's high school for African Americans. The building, now owned by Harford County, is used for meetings and display purposes.
- 9 Hanway-Archer-Forwood House, 200 S Main Street**
This Queen Anne style was designed and built in 1901 by Henry D. Hanway, an innkeeper. Similar structures once lined Main Street but were lost in the mid-20th century as the area became a larger commercial center.
- 10 First Aegis Building, 119 S Main Street**
In 1871, the publishers of The Aegis built this structure to meet the needs of its expanding newspaper circulation. The paper operated from this location until 1905 when it moved to a larger building on Courtland Street.
- 11 Office & Courtland Streets**
The buildings lining these streets provided the center point for Bel Air's political, economic and social life; housing lawyers, factors, inns and banks from the Town's earliest days to the present.

Walking Tour South (short)

1. Harford County Courthouse
2. Bel Air Armory
3. Bel Air Academy
4. Odd Fellows Lodge
5. Fulford Cottage
6. Van Bibber House
7. Hays House
8. Bel Air Colored H.S.
9. Hanway House
10. First Aegis Building
11. Office & Courtland Streets

Walking Tour North (long)

1. Bel Air Methodist Episcopal Church
2. Graham Crocker House
3. James-Kennedy House
4. Alice Anne & Williams Street
5. Wren Box
6. Liriodendron
7. Reckord Mill
8. First Presbyterian Church
9. Emmanuel Episcopal Church
10. East Broadway
11. Proctor House
12. Bel Air Academy
13. Bel Air Post Office
14. Hopkins House

“In the end, the character of a civilization is encased in its structures.”

~ Frank Gehry

“We shape our building, thereafter, our buildings shape us.”

~ Winston Churchill

