

Maryland's rich gambling history includes raids, slots before their time

Maryland centuries-old love affair with the bet



The horses in the 150th Preakness Stakes at Pimlico Race Course take the first turn as Umberto Rispoli riding #2 Journalism would go on to win. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)



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The email ad promised local poker aficionados the chance to win a \$12,000 purse and a trip to Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut to play for even bigger money.

But on a November night 20 years ago, city police swarmed a refurbished warehouse in South Baltimore, shut the game down and charged 80 players with illegal gambling. Authorities seized \$25,655 in cash, 16,020 poker chips, and 141 decks of cards. Plus, an untold number of boxes of booze.

The raid is part of Maryland's gambling lore. It's a long, quirky history that extends to the era of George Washington (he attended 18th-century horse races in Maryland) and includes mini casinos of questionable legality in fire and rescue halls, as well as slots that were ahead of their time in Southern Maryland.

A few years ago, state-funded researchers posed a question to a sampling of Maryland adults: "Have you ever gambled in your lifetime?" The result: 90.4% said yes.

The assumption might be that the high figure is due to the state's voracious appetite for online sports betting, which has been booming since apps began taking wagers in 2022 and is expected to surge with the opening of a new NFL season.

The truth is, Maryland has had a long gambling culture, even before many betting activities were legal statewide.

In Prince George's County, the Las Vegas casino nights at the volunteer fire and rescue departments, senior centers, and Boys and Girls Clubs caught the ire of former Governor Parris Glendening, who was opposed to gambling when he served as county executive from 1982 to 1994.

During his tenure in the county, Internal Revenue Service agents raided these 'charity casinos because of allegations that professional gamblers were skimming millions of dollars and engaging in shady activities. In one case, two people were convicted of tax evasion and falsifying documents in connection with skimming over \$1 million in the early 1990s.

“When I was county executive, there were a number of abuses and complaints and very real concerns,” Glendening told The Baltimore Sun. “It moved from friendly neighborhood, local fire station operations to things that became widespread and completely unregulated... There was a thought that things were getting out of hand.”

The county did tighten the “unregulated community-based gambling activities,” he said. Slowly, Glendening said his opposition to gambling has evolved over time.

“I think the general consensus is that the casinos in Maryland, for example, are honest,” he said. “They’re closely regulated and a significant portion of revenues goes to the state. This is a part of modern America that people want.”

Marylanders always have a craving for gambling

The statewide gambling participation figure was almost as high (89.7%) in 2010 as today, according to surveys by the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling. And that was eight years before the Supreme Court struck down a federal law preventing states from offering sports wagering. It was also before casinos opened in the Baltimore and Washington areas beginning in 2012.

It all started, at least on a large scale, with horse racing.

“Horse racing in Maryland dates back to pre-colonial days,” said Alan Rifkin, longtime outside counsel for the Maryland Jockey Club, which was founded in 1743 and oversees the state’s thoroughbred horse racing.

“It was a large part of the Southern Maryland tradition, and also in northern Baltimore County, and it blossomed around colonial times with the advent of the Maryland Jockey Club,” Rifkin said.

Letters to and from Washington, the president until 1797, indicate his attendance at Maryland races and his interest in breeding horses.

Pimlico, the home of the Preakness Stakes, which is being rebuilt, opened in 1870. But two popular racecourses existed in Baltimore before then. One was at Whetstone Point, now Locust Point, in southern Baltimore, according to the National Archives. The other was located at what is now Pine Street and Lexington Market.

Long before the first of the state's six casinos, Hollywood Casino Perryville, opened in 2010, casino-style games were available in some Maryland homes and social clubs. Even when most gambling was illegal, fire and rescue halls sometimes used the games to raise funds.

For years, there have also been illegal, offshore betting sites available to Marylanders and others who want to wager online on sports or casino games.

The difference between the current era and the period before legal apps and casinos is “access and proximity,” which makes it much easier for Marylanders to bet, said Will Hinman, a peer recovery specialist with the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling.

“The other huge difference is we didn't advertise gambling when it was illegal. Now we are seeing all these free play (promotional) offers,” he said.

In Southern Maryland, slot machines, winked at by the authorities for years, were legalized in the late 1940s so that the counties of Charles, Calvert, St. Mary's and Anne Arundel could tap into the ample proceeds.

Back then, lights flashed and bells rang as tourists hit jackpots on the Waldorf Restaurant's oak-paneled slot machines in Charles County.

The Waldorf vied with the Stardust, the Desert Inn, the Wigwam and other mini casinos for tourist business along a glowing Vegas-style strip of U.S. 301, then a major north-south route.

Pressure from religious groups and the news media, along with worries about organized crime and corruption, led the General Assembly to phase out the machines over five years, beginning in 1963.

The Waldorf's heyday officially ended at midnight on a summer night in 1968, when General Manager Dino Cotsonis yelled "That's it, that's all" through a microphone, and employees draped red and gold tablecloths over the machines. "Slots Given Last Grasp," read the headline in The Baltimore Sun.

Have a news tip? Contact Jeff Barker at jebarker@baltsun.com

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