RESERVOIR HILL

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

Reservoir Hill began as the summer estate of a wealthy Quaker, Dr. Solomon Birckhead, called Mt. Royal, which was established in 1792. Mt. Royal house, still in use today by the Reservoir Hill community, is a large Queen Anne double mansion, famous for the terraced gardens that went all of the way down to the Jones Falls. The hillside in front to the Mt. Royal Mansion, and what is left of the garden, are tended to now by community residents, who have brought it back to life from the tangle of weeds and neglect of many years.

As Baltimore City grew, prosperous friends and acquaintances purchased lands within Mount Royal for their own country estates. Until the 1830's Reservoir Hill was the home of a few wealthy people - Enoch Pratt Carroll, who opened his wooded spring known as Callow Grove (now paved and built over as Bolton Street) as a picnic ground and source of fresh water; Robert Whitelock, who owned an estate on Madison Ave, cut an easement through his lands for the convenience of local tenant farmers, which is now Whitelock St.; G. W. Gail, founder of American Tobacco, had an notable estate bounded by Eutaw Place, Linden Ave., Ducatel St. and Whitelock St., with "wonderful gardens full of priceless statuary." His land included a pathway which he planted with beautiful Linden trees, known then as Garden Lane. Only a few of these stately trees survive on what is now called Linden Ave.; and Charles and Walter Brooks, who built 'Cloverdale' in about 1838. The 150 acre estate included what is now Brooks Lane.

By the 1840's, skilled immigrants poured into Baltimore, drawn by jobs and the opportunity to own their own homes under an innovative housing development plan called a 'ground-rent' property system. The owners of the land retained the ground rights to the property, while people could purchase the houses that were built on it, paying a yearly "ground rent" to the property owner, thus reducing the housing cost considerably (this system is still in use today, with ground-rents being bought and sold). If the homeowner wished to do so, he had the right to purchase his "ground rent" and own his home completely. Large tracts of land began to be developed around the City for 'row-houses', which were built in strips, sometimes by 2 or 3 different developers. This allowed the developer to maximize his profit on a property; he could build anywhere from 2 or 3 houses to building an entire block. The houses, due to cheap labor and cheap materials coming through the booming City seaport, were largely brick, and built to be affordable to the growing middle-class.

In the Mount Royal estate area, meanwhile, the beautiful estates also were subdivided into upscale housing for the wealthy business class. Many successful business owners and German Jewish merchants and industrialists bought large mansions or huge 4 story (roughly 6-7,000 sq. ft.) Italianate ,Queen Anne style and Renaissance Revival row-houses on upper Eutaw, Madison, and Druid Park Lake Dr., which were close to beautiful Druid Hill Park.. district. Mt. Royal Terrace, a row of 19 extraordinary Queen Anne style row-homes that faced the Mt Royal Reservoir, which were built circa 1885. By 1896 all of the Mt. Royal area, *now called Reservoir Hill*, had been developed with the exception of the Mansion parcel itself.

In 1888 the growing City annexed land for capital improvements. Many of the existing roads were widened and new ones built, including Reservoir St., Madison Ave., Ducatel St., Garden Lane which was widened and renamed Linden Ave, Bolton St.and Park Ave..After the annexation, houses were rapidly built block by block. Many of the houses were 'mid-size'(roughly

3,000 sq. feet) for the wealthier merchant class. On Reservoir St. (and others) houses with hardwood floors, 10-11' ceilings, huge windows, mantles and other beautiful features were popular. A streetcar line was built that connected downtown Baltimore with Druid Hill Park, bringing more and more people to the neighborhood. Many of the older families moved to Roland Park, the Valley and the western suburbs, leaving the large, beautiful houses to be subdivided for more families to use.

In the early 1900's another new addition to Druid Park Lake Dr. became a favorite with prosperous families of Baltimore. The luxury apartment buildings of the Esplanade, the Emerson and Temple Gardens. Such familiar names as Max Hochschild (Hochschild Kohn), Isaac Hamberger (apparel stores), Joel Hutzler and Alexander Hecht (department stores) Nathan Katz (jeweler), and Isaac Hess (shoes) lived in these fashionable modern apartment with their families and servants. They had conveniences never before available, such as electricity and refrigeration.

In the 1920-30's the northeastern corner of Reservoir Hill (at the end of Park Ave.) saw the building of beautiful Georgian homes. Through the 1930's, parts of Reservoir Hill were a predominantly middle-class Jewish community with synagogues, delis, schools and shops. Beth Am synagogue, on Eutaw St., is still a vital and important part of Reservoir Hill.

The advent of World War I and II began the serious decline of Reservoir Hill. Workers from West Virginia and other states poured in to the factories and shipping port of Baltimore. The large homes were again subdivided, this time into boarding houses and homes for the less affluent middle-class. It stabilized somewhat in the 1950's as a middle-class neighborhood, but the flight from the turbulent cities during the 1960's rang it's death-knell as whole parcels of houses were sold for as little as $5000 a house. The houses were cut up into apartments, as many as 5 per house.

In the mid-1960's the City tried an innovative program called Urban Homesteading. Backed by federal monies, a Homesteader could buy a rundown house for $1 by signing a contract to bring the house up to code withing 3 years. Homesteading in an urban neighborhood is not for everyone - the divorce rate was higher than the national average- so one could say that it was a qualified success, but it did introduce the neighborhood to people who fell in love with the architecturally stunning houses and decided to stay. Over the decades since, the City has made sporadic efforts to improve Res Hill, but it has been in the last few years, with the hard work of dedicated residents and a new appreciation of Reservoir Hill's importance by the City, that we have finally started come full circle to a point where Reservoir Hill will once again shine with the singular beauty that this unique neighborhood has.