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Reservoir Hill

by Carleton Jones

Reservoir Hill hangs down the slopes south of Druid Hill Park like an unfinished sentence that ends in a question mark. In the grand old parlance of soap opera, the question is: Can a structurally sound old neighborhood find eventual social happiness when it has an economic profile as unequal, unfair and overbalanced as that of Czarist Russia?

The question is not yet answered. Yet in the decade of the 1970's, people in that compact old area, now entering its

south to North Avenue. The only absolute—and it is not very absolute—is the 1970 census.

What did this sweeping and detailed survey reveal?

"Plenty" is the answer. Reservoir Hill's three census tracts in 1970 were housing just over 14,000 people, 3,500 of whom were school children. The census showed that there were 733 families living below the poverty line and nearly 1,400 families living on less than \$5,000 a year. About 10% of the apartment buildings were vacant, and many were vandalized. Seventy

above \$25,000 per year. About 5,000 people actually had a job. Perhaps more significantly, only 127 people (less than 2%) of adults were college graduates.

The money and brain power totals were about right for a province of British Colonial India back in 1912. But today, nine years after the Census, Reservoir Hill is pulling itself out of its backwardness. Venture capital from Washington is peeking in.

In this City, despite its rampant rebuilding, these huge old townhouses of Reservoir Hill



Photo courtesy of the Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development

100th year as a City housing resource, have been looking at their neighborhood in new ways. Thousands of persons live there without a catch of any sort, the kind of stylish social envelope that halcyons places like Fells Point and Federal Hill. But often, the Reservoir Hill dweller lives in bargain comfort.

To weigh an entire neighborhood is an awesome task even when confined to such a definite territory as Reservoir Hill—from McCulloh Street east to the falls and from the park

housing units had substandard plumbing. Homeownership was at a standstill and there were only 657 homeowners (15%). Those who did own homes found themselves in one of the only deflationary pockets left on the East Coast in 1970. Only twelve houses were valued at more than \$20,000.

In all the rangy rows there were only 214 families living on more than \$15,000 per year, and only 32 on a comfortable living

(dating from 1880 up to 1910 or so) have a long-standing (if fading) inferiority complex. This neighborhood has been a step-sister for well over a generation. Reservoir Hill has suffered long, long waits for any sort of attention. The big write-off came in the mid-1930's, at the height of the "blockbuster" boom, when older homeowners and professional-type tenants were stampeded out of the area with princely mortgage checks from

for office use only

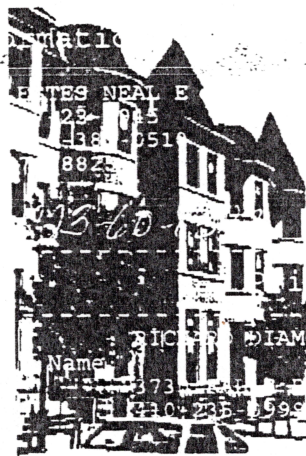


Photo courtesy of the Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development

speculators (of perhaps \$3,500), or merely by an eviction notice. Highway planners slammed into the superbly planned 30-acre punchbowl at North and Mt. Royal Avenues, chewing through public parkland to build the Jones Falls Expressway and thereby wrecking one of the City's handsomest gateways.

With this sort of treatment, it is amazing how much heritage survived on the Hill. In the huge Queen Anne double mansion at Reservoir Street and Mount Royal Terrace, A. Mitchell Palmer, a Democratic heavyweight from Pennsylvania, refused a Presidential nomination that might have broken the 1912 national convention deadlock between Bennett Champ Clark and Woodrow Wilson, thereby helping assure Wilson's election.

From his home in the 2000 block of Park Avenue, famed author/anthologist Christopher Morley used to walk downtown to the old Pratt Library to get the latest Sherlock Holmes mystery. By the time he had walked home, he had finished it, and, sadly, had to wait for months for the next Conan Doyle.

(Mount Royal House, the big

the mansion

stone building at Park and Reservoir, built toward the end of the 18th century and now converted into an attractive multi-purpose center at a cost of nearly \$1 million, was the 19th-century home of the Bond family, longtime legal and social heavyweights, whose most conspicuous ornament was Judge Hugh Lennox Bond, a Baltimore loyalist in the Civil War and friend of the immortal Abraham Lincoln. The Cone sisters, post-Impressionist art patrons of world note, lived for a while on the Terrace and are supposed to have left behind some Henri Matisse drawings in their mansion. People have been looking for them ever since. The

Georgian homes of the 1920's and 1930's on the northeastern corner of the Hill will never again be built in these United States. The craftsmanship here, and on selected older properties (three-inch floor joists, 108-inch windows), is incredibly good.

It is not the past, however, but the future, that concerns the majority of the neighborhood's people.

Resident blacks are now rounding out a quarter-century in residence in the eastern section of Reservoir Hill. They are grateful for the City's federal money millions that have helped rebuild Callow Avenue, create the neighborhood center, add an attractive two-block fountained park along the Park Avenue median and greatly enlarged the neighborhood's housing potential, especially for the elderly and for large families. Blacks and whites both are impatient. The alert Reservoir Hill Community Association (which, perhaps wisely, excludes absentee landlords from its membership) does a good informational job in the employment and housing areas.

The Hill is actually the scene of one of the first moderately priced co-op housing ventures tried in America since the

turn of the century, and it is also, startlingly, the scene (between Madison and McCullion Streets) of one of the first attempts to adapt solar heating to large-scale townhouse design. Four of the 35 or so homes on Bolton Street have been given the full renewal treatment in the block between Reservoir and Lennox Streets. One-time Colt great Lydell Mitchell did a magnificent restoration of his Reservoir Hill home. Before his departure for San Diego, Mr. Mitchell shared honors with civil rights and anti-war activist Philip Berrigan as the Hill's only genuine national celebrities.

an increase in black income, less substandard housing, an older population (due largely to the doubling in size of Lakeview Towers high-rise complex and higher home price averages. Rent averages will probably not advance dramatically. They have always hovered near the beginning of middle-income housing. Added to its population of welfare families, students, teachers and couples of moderate income, we see a surprising number of people who merely want to capitalize on Reservoir Hill's convenience to the downtown, the north end (via the Jones Falls) or to the

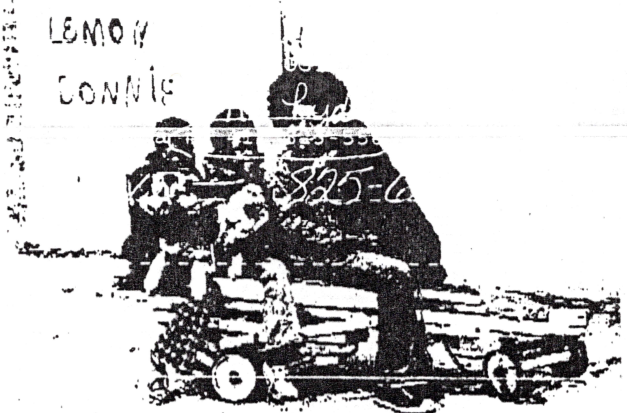


Photo by Gilbert Witten

Linden Avenue is getting renewed attention and Druid Park Lake Drive has been stabilized and is holding its own after multi-million dollar (if uninspired) apartment remodeling.

None of this upgrading is powerfully visible, as it is in places like Stirling Street or Ridgely's Delight.

We will not really know until 1982, when "the taps" finally emerge from the census bureaucracy, what has happened sociologically to Reservoir Hill. However, probably in the cards is a drastic increase in white tenantry and ownership,

sprawling and rapidly glamorizing Mr. Royal "culture corridor" — The Maryland Institute, University of Baltimore, Lyric Theatre and new Symphony Hall project.

There has been a steady feed-off of small-scale developers from Reservoir Hill into the more glamorous Eutaw Place district south of North Avenue and into other locales, once they have pocketed appreciations. Earlier speculators moved from enlightened landlords who kept up Class A properties in the honest belief that low- and moderate-income people deserved a home, down to rip-off ar-

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- 2) USING THE DIAL PAD.

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tists who haven't bought a can of paint or answered a housing notice since 1992. At the same time, 3% subsidized mortgaging means that Reservoir Hill is one of the last strongholds in America of the double, rather than triple, digit mortgage payment. And, the new buyers of multi-family settings are often what the French call "rentiers"—people of modest means who are smart enough to manage their properties and live there, often to the benefit of the renter. Yet evidence exists of the persuasive American philosophy

that it is easier to build new things than fix up the old. Reservoir Hill boasts an outstanding new day school and an elementary school of advanced design. And that same American philosophy continues to make restoration an unglamorous idea for many of the comfortably-fixed American middle class. For them, renewal is still the answer.

Yet, at the same time, we have forgotten that the life of the greatest cities has always mixed incomes and races—from ancient Rome through the Crea-

tion of Paris, London and New York. From a balcony in the Palais Bourbon, Philippe D'Orléans could see the revolutionaries hoisting the head of the Princesse de Lamballes on a pike. But he could also see the slums and the masses of Parisian poor.

It is only in America, however, that the challenge is not only a financial but a legal one for racial equality. Reservoir Hill is not a battleground. It is a laboratory, proof that the cities, after all, offer a training ground, an escalator, a horizon

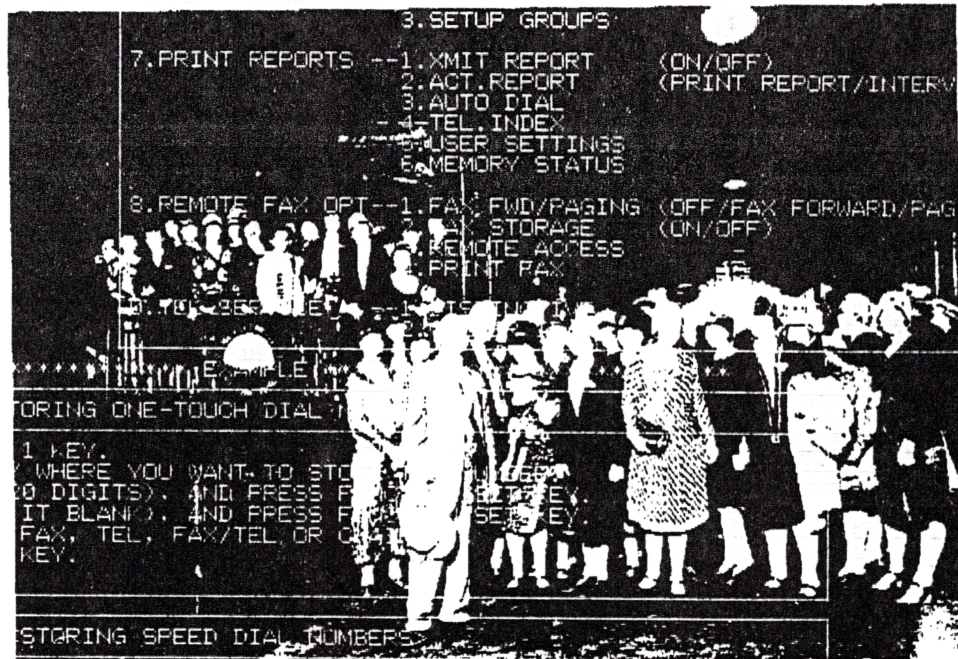
into the better things of life, a trading of talent—black and white.

In Reservoir Hill, the middle-core professional people and technicians are not invading "gentry." They are a natural on-the-scene resource—a positive one of a kind that America must offer to its future in all of its slowly reviving urban cores.

Wealth and prestige left Reservoir Hill 50 years ago. It has taken that long to learn that the only real wealth is help and friendship, and learning to live together as equals.

Mt. Royal Terrace

by James W. Arnold



Re. Rev. Mgr. J.J. Murray's Yellowstone Tour departing Mt. Royal Station.

(Photo courtesy of B & O Railroad Museum.)

The history of Mt. Royal Terrace dates back to 1720, when the land that now includes Mt. Royal Terrace and Reservoir Hill was just surveyed and acquired by Jonathan Hansen, a Pennsylvania Quaker. Hansen named his 340-acre farm "Mt. Royal."

In 1730, the Maryland Colonial Assembly chose a 10-acre tract north of the harbor and

west of the Jones Falls as the site for Baltimore Town. But farther north, the land remained undeveloped until the 1700's. Charles Carroll, Maryland's representative to the Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, bought a large tract of land, including the former Mt. Royal estate, and—in 1789—sold part of it to Dr. Solomon Birkhead as a "summer retreat."

Dr. Birkhead built Mt. Royal Mansion on his new land, which encompassed all of what is now Reservoir Hill. The mansion was later used for the Norwegian Seaman's Home, and currently serves as the Reservoir Hill Multi-Purpose Center, housing much-needed educational and health programs.

