

Recent Tales from Baltimore, Maryland: Digging in the Wake of Bulldozers

By Andy Goldfrank

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During this past year, the City of Baltimore undertook the final demolition and site preparation phase of a massive urban renewal project between Pratt, Central, Baltimore and Albermarle Streets in the Jonestown part of the city. After the archaeologists completed their survey work, and during the demolition and site preparation phase, bottle diggers from all over the region descended on the site searching for artifact laden privies. Now the digging is done.

A marked change will become visible in the next few months when the first residents move into new, Victorian-inspired rowhouses off Lombard Street.



These homes are being built where the razed Flag House Courts public housing high-rises once stood. Just steps away is Corned Beef Row which was once a thriving stretch of Jewish delicatessens, butcher shops and bakeries on Lombard Street; this area also will be rebuilt combining retail stores, commercial offices and residences. Recent demolitions have razed most buildings there, except for three remaining corned beef and pastrami emporiums called Attman's, Weiss' and Lenny's.

Few Baltimore neighborhoods have gone through as many transitions as Jonestown, which is bounded by Orleans Street on the north, Pratt Street on the south, Central Avenue on the east and the Jones Falls on the west. Named after the pioneering settler David Jones, Jonestown is one of the oldest parts of Baltimore. Its early residents included Charles

Carroll of Carrollton, residents included Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence; at that time, Jonestown was a residential area for the wealthiest people of the era



who desired a life away from the hustle and bustle (of the ports of Fell's Point and Baltimore Town). From the 1820s onward,

as the city expanded, this neighborhood became a magnet for immigrants. Over time, Jonestown transformed from an Irish-dominated area to largely Jewish and then mostly Italian. By the end of the depression this neighborhood was comprised of poor but working class whites and blacks, and was viewed as an unattractive concentration of poverty by civic leaders. In the early 1950s, the City of Baltimore stepped in to address this perceived problem by razing eleven acres and developing the Flag House Courts. This was one of Baltimore's first attempts to relocate the poor from row-house slums to skyscraper communities, part of a national trend in the 1950s and 60s that we now know only further concentrated and isolated a city's impoverished residents.

The massive Flag House Courts looked down on the tiny Star-Spangled Banner Flag House museum from which the project gets its name. The museum was the home of Mary Young Pickersgill who made the first Star-Spangled Banner that flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 and inspired Francis Scott Key to pen the poem that later became our National Anthem. This housing project over time decayed and became known as the Bird Cage because of the chain link fencing that covered every

open-air balcony and passageway. In 1998, the Housing Authority of Baltimore City and the Flag House Courts were awarded a HOPE VI grant from the federal government in the amount of \$21.5 million, becoming the City's fourth and final public housing high-rise development slated for revitalization.

On February 10, 2001, the process began with the implosion of the former Flag House Courts.

The project's goal is to

create a mixed-use, mixed-income community that will spur new development and redevelopment of the surrounding neighborhood. The new Flag House Courts will contain 183 rental units and 155 homeowner-ship units for a total of 338 housing units including townhouses and apartments. It will also encompass retail shops, a community and youth development center, a small-business center and open green space. Construction began in the late summer of 2003 and is being built in two phases. Phase I includes 124 rental units (79 town houses ranging from 978 to 1490 square feet and five 3-story apartment buildings). Each apartment building will consist of 9 units ranging in size from 768 to 1001 square feet. The remaining 214 units will be built in Phase II and will consist of both rental and home ownership units including 155 garage townhouses and condominium apartments that are expected to sell for up to \$300,000.

Over the course of the last year, local bottle diggers have scrambled to keep up with the fast-paced construction project. Every day buildings were torn down, parking lots peeled back, and foundations exposed. Every day massive earth movers ripped through the remains of old Jonestown and Corned Beef Row scooping the rubble and dirt with mechanical buckets and placing it into dump trucks bound for landfills. The construction crews uncovered many a privy and trash pit; sometimes these crews jumped off their equipment and recovered the bottles and artifacts. More often than not, the task of saving these treasures of Baltimore was left to bottle diggers who hastily secured permission whenever possible. Privies were located



throughout the site but it soon became apparent that many of the structures were built as speculative rowhouses with shared oval outhouses. These brick-lined ovals up to 12 feet in depth were commonplace throughout the site as were wood-lined boxes and hogshead barrel outhouses. A number of round brick outhouses were also excavated. All told I understand that many dozen privies were salvaged by the privy diggers but that hundreds more were hauled off in dump trucks. The best bottles recovered that I heard about included an open pontiled cobalt star ink, pontiled Baltimore embossed sodas and medicines, and a nice historical flask. Pottery and ceramics that could be reconstructed were also recovered by the many diggers; these dated from the late 1700s through to the end of the 1800s.

In the opinion of many privy diggers who tried their luck on the site, the digging was decent but not great. No pits were found that were laden with torpedo sodas, black glass or local stoneware. Nevertheless, all agreed that they were delighted to have had the



opportunity to dig so many outhouses from one particular area and learn more about

Baltimore's past. From my perspective, as I watched the development move along and the digging unfold, this hectic

demolition, hauling and leveling left me with mixed feelings: it was disappointing that more archaeological exploration was not undertaken and that detailed information was lost but it was also heartening to know that bottle diggers salvaged a significant amount of Baltimore's history in the form of bottles, pottery and other relics dating back to the late 1700s.

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For more information on the history of Jonestown, Corned Beef Row and the Flag House Courts, I recommend perusing the following web sites and articles. These were also used as sources for some of the information contained in this article.

Jewish Museum of Maryland: <http://www.jhsm.org/>

Michael Anft, AHalf Staff: Facing the End at Flag House Courts, The City's Last High-Rise Project,@ [Baltimore City Paper](#), December 22, 1999, available online at <http://www.citypaper.com/1999-12-22/feature.html>

David Jackowe, AOld World: Remembering the Glory Days of Deli on Corned Beef Row,@ [Baltimore City Paper](#), February 28, 2001, available online at <http://www.citypaper.com/2001-02-28/eat5.html>

Antero Pietila, ARedevelopment Project Represents Changing Face of Historic Jonestown@ [Baltimore Sun](#), February 17, 2004.