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FEATURE

# A City on a Hill

How One Neighborhood Reflects the Challenges of Baltimore Life

By Eileen Murphy



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Part one of a series.

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JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

When Victory Swift and her husband, Mark Clark, looked at buying a house in Reservoir Hill last July, they were charmed by the neighborhood, with its historic homes and central location. The couple's daughter, a college student and he works for U-Haul--found an affordable three-story rowhouse and did extensive renovations before moving in with their seven children in October. Five months later, Swift stands in her immaculate living room and wonders aloud what happened to the neighborhood they visited last summer.

"They must have gotten everybody to agree to sell their houses that month," Swift says, remembering how pleasant Reservoir Hill looked in contrast to their old Pimlico neighborhood. She didn't know then about the neighborhood's split personality. "When we came here, there were no drug dealers, no trash."

That was then, this is now. Swift is furious about the way her neighborhood looks. She's angry about the trash piled up in the alleys and the litter that sails through the windy streets. This is a woman who won first prize for her home in a cleanup contest sponsored by the *Afro-American* newspaper during the 1980s; in her new neighborhood she once saw "a rat drag a whole bag--not a piece of trash, but a whole bag--across the street to a vacant house and squash it into a crack."

Swift belongs to the squeaky-wheel school of citizenship--she's called the city Department of Public Works "endlessly" about the trash, and recently hooked up with one of the neighborhood association's subcommittees. ("If there's a committee for sanitation, why does it still look like that?" she asked before attending her first meeting.) She recognizes the reasons for the problem--not enough trash cans, no rear egress on some rental properties, lack of enforcement by the authorities. She's done everything a responsible homeowner would do, but still it's not enough. Now, out of desperation, she and her daughter are thinking of starting their own foundation to work on sanitation in the neighborhood, starting with twice-a-month cleanups.

Welcome to Reservoir Hill, a historic



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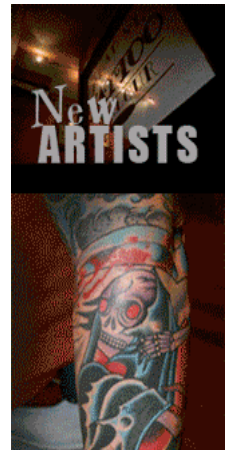
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neighborhood that inspires devotion and frustration in just about everyone who lives there. The physical neighborhood is full of both beauty and decay, and the community is rife with divisions--there are 16 neighborhood groups and block clubs under the umbrella of the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council. Everyday life pits homeowners against absentee landlords, those with resources against those without, the edges of the neighborhood against the middle.

Take, for example, the Mayor's Healthy Neighborhood Initiative, a program that marries private investment and public funds to help struggling but surviving neighborhoods make the sort of improvements that will encourage new home-ownership. Last October two community groups, Bolton-Park Neighbors and the Historic Mount Royal District prepared a proposal and earned (in the name of Reservoir Hill) a shared spot in the program. For Reservoir Hill, the improvements will mean enhancing the "gateway" to the neighborhood--two full blocks of Park Avenue--by improving street lighting, putting up new railings on the stoops of houses, and providing window boxes. The participants also hope

to purchase and resell two vacant houses.

But that's not how most residents would spend \$300,000 improving the neighborhood. Such cosmetic enhancements are the point of the Healthy Neighborhoods Program, but given Reservoir Hill's plethora of vacant properties, open-air drug market, the community's estimated 95 percent poverty rate, the ubiquitous trash problem, and lack of an in-neighborhood grocery or pharmacy, installing window boxes may seem like applying a Band-Aid to a gunshot wound.

Everyone in the community talks about the trash; most people worry about crime in one form or another. But some residents experience Reservoir Hill as an idyllic setting where neighbors walk each other's dogs, run next door for a cup of sugar, and hold Christmas parties well into January because everyone wants an opportunity to play host. Elizabeth Schaaf, who has lived on Reservoir Street since 1985, enjoys the neighborhood's "built-in warmth." She relishes snow days as an opportunity for neighbors to work together and share one another's company. While Schaaf worries about the vacant houses, she says, "there are no houses for sale in our neighborhood."

That's because Schaaf and many Reservoir Hill residents consider "the neighborhood" to be the three to six blocks surrounding their home. When Linda Day Clark talks about "the neighborhood," she means the blocks of Linden Avenue that face John Eager Howard Elementary School. For Quentin Moseley and Stephanie Garmey, "the neighborhood" extends from their Bolton Street home to Mount Royal Terrace, three blocks away. That's the reason there are 16 community organizations here. For most residents, the geographical boundaries of Reservoir Hill are arbitrary lines drawn by some urban planner. Where they live, and the blocks immediately surrounding them, are "the neighborhood."

But such distinctions don't reflect the totality of Reservoir Hill. Jay Fisher owns a beautiful and stylish home on Park Avenue, but he admits that he's sometimes embarrassed to have friends see where he lives because of the surrounding squalor. Bill Lee, a Eutaw Place homeowner, acknowledges that outsiders see the *whole* neighborhood, and what they see affects everything from property values to the likelihood of attracting commercial investors. "I'd love to have nice businesses here--a bagel shop, a 7-Eleven, a place to have a beer," he says. "Anyone who does a study of the neighborhood sees that we don't have the clientele."

Like many of his neighbors, Lee loves the neighborhood for its racial diversity, its stunning architecture, the promise of its oft-touted potential. But when he balances those attractions against the piles of trash and the drug trade and the crumbling buildings, he sees the big picture. "We live in poverty here," Lee says.

Throughout this year, *City Paper* will look at Reservoir Hill as a microcosm of Baltimore City. The neighborhood boasts the sort of internal resources that should ensure its success--quality housing stock, a central and accessible location, historic properties, committed and active residents--but it has not been able to overcome urban flight, absentee landlords, and ever-present poverty. What role has city government played in addressing the problems? How have the neighborhood's residents managed their common concerns? We'll

seek answers to these questions throughout this series, finding them in the stories of people who live in this community. Reservoir Hill throws the problems of urban life into high relief, allowing us to examine, issue by issue, what happens when a Baltimore neighborhood drops off the radar.

Today's Reservoir Hill is bordered on the south by West North Avenue, on the east by Mount Royal Terrace and Interstate 83, on the west by Madison Avenue, and on the north by Cloverdale Avenue and Druid Hill Park. The neighborhood's physical boundaries have shifted over the years, with bordering blocks being absorbed into other communities. At various times, portions of the larger neighborhood have been considered to be part of Sugar Hill, Madison, Druid Heights, Mount Royal, and Eutaw Place, among other designations. Even the neighborhood's appellation hasn't been consistent; the name Reservoir Hill came into usage in the late '60s.

According to *The People of Reservoir Hill*, a 1971 book by Sara Hartman, the land that is now Reservoir Hill was part of a much larger plot originally owned by Charles Carroll, a Maryland signer of the Declaration of Independence. In 1789, Carroll sold some of his property to Dr. Solomon Birkhead. The physician, who had a primary residence on Calvert Street, built Mount Royal, a summer estate that encompassed all of what is now Reservoir Hill.

Birkhead's grandson gave the city land at the eastern edge of the family's property in 1860. Roderick Ryon reports in his 1993 book *West Baltimore Neighborhoods: Sketches of Their History, 1840-1960*. His goal was to prompt development, and he did: A B&O Railroad station and the reservoir that gives the neighborhood its name sprang up along what is now Mount Royal Terrace.

A number of Baltimore families bought Reservoir Hill property for country estates during the 1800s. Businesspeople Chauncey Brooks and William Callow owned property there, and neighborhood streets now bear their names. Robert Whitelock built an estate on Madison Avenue and provided a road to allow tenant farmers to pass through his property. The road, now named for him, neatly bisects present-day Reservoir Hill.

As prosperity grew with industrial development, the city's wealthy residents moved north from downtown, and the Mount Royal area was divided and further subdivided to make room for the new tide of well-to-do residents. In 1860, Lloyd Rogers, a wealthy landowner who held an estate adjacent to Mount Royal, sold the property to the city, which used the land to create the public Druid Hill Park. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Baltimore grew from being a port city to being a commercial and industrial center, and white businesspeople moved uptown to put some privileged distance between themselves and their work.

The houses they built were unlike the practical rowhouses being constructed elsewhere in the city. These houses, although built in side-by-side rows like those in working-class neighborhoods, reflected the newly acquired wealth of their owners. According to Ryon's account, "Blocks contained broad twenty-two-foot houses, three to four stories high, not narrow, gable-topped houses of one or one-and-one-half stories. [H]omes here were bedecked with ornate streetfront exteriors. Showy cornices projected from stylish mansard roofs, and fancy and expensive terra cotta facing covered streetfront facades. Exterior stairways held stone balusters. To exude a sense of grandeur even in blocks of row homes, massive, rough-hewn, stone-covered bases of the edifices and rounded arches surrounded entryways. Gates and walls were made of brick."

The neighborhood became a haven for wealthy Jews during the 1880s, as Jewish businesspeople and their families continued their northward emigration from East Baltimore. They settled along Eutaw Place, an elegant strip that runs through present-day Bolton Hill and Reservoir Hill. In his book *Jewish Baltimore*, published last year, Gilbert Sandler writes, "Newcomers were of the merchant and professional class, families who had enjoyed economic success and were now moving out of East and West Baltimore and up the ladder of the American dream. By the turn of the century the Jewish families whose standing and wealth created the aura of elegance associated with a Eutaw Place address were well ensconced there."

Besides the large three- and four-story homes that defined the neighborhood, Eutaw Place boasted five stylish, upscale apartment buildings--the Esplanade, the Emersonian, Temple Gardens, the Marlborough, and the Riviera. The Marlborough was once the home of Etta and Claribel Cone, the wealthy sisters whose impressive art collection is housed today at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Sandler notes that the residents were mostly German Jews, and they "founded their own separate society," which included a social organization known as the Phoenix Club, a country club, and a funeral home. The Hechts and the Hutzlers, the families behind two of Baltimore's best-known department stores, lived and socialized within this tight-knit community. According to the historical directory *Synagogues, Temples, and Congregations of Maryland*, Reservoir Hill has been home to at least nine different Jewish houses of worship since 1891.

But as Sandler notes, the neighborhood's identity as a Jewish enclave began to shift in the 1930s and was gone altogether by the 1960s. Sandler blames "the acute housing needs

created by World War II (which were satisfied in part by cutting the Eutaw Place mansions into many separate apartments)," among other forces.

Those other forces may have included the creation of public housing in adjacent neighborhoods and an explosion of rental properties within Reservoir Hill itself. According to *West Baltimore Neighborhoods*, the city demolished some of the 19th-century homes south and west of Reservoir Hill in the 1930s to make room for public housing. African-American workers--mostly domestics and blue-collar laborers--moved into the neighborhood. Meanwhile, the growing defense industry brought thousands of new workers to Baltimore, and they needed places to sleep. Speculators snapped up the enormous homes in Reservoir Hill and divided them into apartments. Ryon describes the transformation: "[R]ow homes were converted into flats, sometimes several apartments on a floor, with ceilings lowered and floors linoleumed. Housing codes allowed six apartments within a standard three-story row house, eight and nine households sharing single three-story row homes."

The new housing patterns meant that the neighborhood's population multiplied while the physical space remained the same. That led to problems with overcrowding and a wave of middle-class flight to other urban neighborhoods and the newly minted suburbs. Home-ownership fell; the number of absentee landlords grew. According to 1979 article in *The Sun*, the population density increased as neighboring Bolton Hill became fashionable: "Many residents, mostly black, were pushed out of rented apartments and houses in Bolton Hill during the fifties and sixties to relocate in crowded apartments above North Avenue in Reservoir Hill."

According to the same article, Reservoir Hill resident Roscoe Herring organized the Neighborhood Action Group in 1966 to work on poor housing conditions and overcrowding. Two years later, the neighborhood was swept up in the riots following the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; Whitelock Street was particularly hard hit by the violence.

The Rev. Tom Composto, a Catholic priest, was living at the St. Francis Neighborhood Center on Whitelock Street in 1968. He was attending a retreat in Annapolis at the start of the riots but quickly returned to the neighborhood. He and a handful of fellow Jesuits tried to help residents. (One former resident recalls that the National Guard set up camp in Druid Hill Park.) "We were the only ones the authorities would let in," Composto says. "We gave out food--peanut butter, bread, and powdered milk." Composto and others date the decline of Whitelock and the larger neighborhood to the time of the riots. Buildings burned and institutions left Reservoir Hill. Composto says the St. Francis center, where he still lives, was "the only place that stayed here after the riots."

In 1972, the city's Department of Housing and Community Development officially christened the neighborhood "Reservoir Hill" and designated it an urban-renewal area, targeted for redevelopment. By 1973, various forms of public funding flowed through the neighborhood; according to *The Sun*, 6,600 of Reservoir Hill's 10,500 residents at the time received welfare, Social Security, some other form of federal aid, or a combination of the above. Beginning in 1974, the neighborhood began receiving annual federal funds, which would continue for the next seven years, thanks to the neighborhood being designated a recipient for community development block grants.

During the '70s and early '80s, a new wave of optimistic homesteaders flooded the neighborhood. Many were young couples with the time and energy to rebuild a home in exchange for interest rates that dropped as low as 3 percent. They were ready to commit to the city. Mary Jane and John O'Brien bought their Madison Avenue house in 1980 and changed it from a six-unit apartment building to a single-family home with a third-floor rental apartment. By the terms of their mortgage, the O'Briens "had to live there three years and finish renovations so that it was livable within 18 months," John O'Brien says.

During the early years, the O'Briens enjoyed being part of a movement. "There were gatherings at people's houses where everyone was in their painting clothes," Mary Jane O'Brien recalls.

The couple bought their home from Judy Morris, a fellow homesteader and real-estate agent who had a dream for Reservoir Hill. During the '70s Morris and her husband bought 27 houses on Madison Avenue. They bought multifamily dwellings and got the city to reduce the buildings' zoning status to allow only single-family homes (with the possibility of a rental apartment). They performed small repairs and then sold the houses to people interested in renovating and living in the homes. "We were trying to improve the neighborhood," Morris says. "Everyone who bought a house from us got a fence out front and new front doors."

Morris was a booster for the entire neighborhood. Nell Stanley, a staffer for then-Mayor William Donald Schaefer, led Sunday bus tours of the city, and Morris would open her Eutaw Place home for Stanley's tourists. "Eighty people would walk through my house," Morris says. During one such stop, she claims, all of the visitors made use of her bathroom.

Despite such good will, the revitalization that Morris and others planned and hoped for never fully materialized. "One resident, who began restoring his property in 1973, described the

Reservoir Hill story during the seventies as 'a recovery that's never quite come together,' *The Sun* reported in a 1979 story. "It's great on the outside," he said, "but the core is rotten with 700 vacant, substandard or shell buildings. The city doesn't give this area much priority."

Most of the people in the 1970s renovation wave left Reservoir Hill during the '80s and '90s. "A lot of people left after five years," Mary Jane O'Brien says. "Some people got tired of their cars being broken into, stolen," her husband adds. And political changes put the kibosh on the back-to-the-city movement. President Reagan cut federal funds for all those low-interest mortgages, and Mayor Schaefer was replaced by Kurt Schmoke, whose administration "didn't worry much about neighborhoods," Mary Jane O'Brien says.

Despite her dedication, Morris left the neighborhood in 1991 when her husband tired of maintaining their enormous home. Although she now lives in Baltimore County and no longer owns any property in the neighborhood, Morris says Reservoir Hill is "still my baby" and that she worries about its future. "It was one of the best times of my life," she says of her Reservoir Hill years. She decries the speculators who buy houses and then "wait for the neighborhood to improve," but she acknowledges that it's hard for anyone--homeowner, developer, real-estate agent--to create change on the scale of an entire neighborhood. "On Madison, I tried to have so much control, and I failed."

Even if Morris had been able to control who owned the houses and what they did with them, no one could control the larger forces that affected the neighborhood. Paul and Glenda Gentner, 26-year inhabitants of Reservoir Hill, moved into the neighborhood at a time when residents held a "roving cocktail party" with a different host every week. During the 1980s, however, the Gentners rented out their house when Paul's work took them overseas. "When we came back from South America, the climate had changed," Glenda Gentner says. In their absence, crack cocaine had become the drug of choice and created an entirely new culture in urban neighborhoods.

"We came back from South America," she says, "and there were no longer older drunks. Now we had hardened drug dealers."

Today Reservoir Hill is strictly a residential community; if you didn't know anyone in the neighborhood, you would have little reason to visit. Over the past 30 years, the neighborhood gradually lost most of its commercial services. Once Reservoir Hill was dotted with drugstore soda fountains and hot-dog stands; today it lacks even a grocery. (When the Super Fresh in nearby Bolton Hill closed on Jan. 27, car-less Reservoir Hill residents lost the only supermarket within walking distance.) In August 1994, the city demolished the homes and stores along the 900 block of Whitelock Street to rid the neighborhood of what a *Sun* story termed "one of the city's busiest drug markets." Although city officials promised to revitalize the area, they didn't have a redevelopment plan in place at the time of the demolition; six years later, the empty lot houses a fenced-off community garden.

Tom Composto and his St. Francis Neighborhood Center were still located on Whitelock when the city mowed down the block. (The center is now on the corner of Whitelock and Linden, in a house once owned by Joseph A. Banks, the founder of the menswear retailer of the same name.) Composto went toe-to-toe with then-Housing Commissioner Daniel Henson over the demolition and the lack of follow-up. "If you plant seeds in a field, you gotta be there to till them," Composto says. So he had an architect draw up a plan for a revitalized Whitelock Street, one that included restaurants and service businesses. He took his plan to the City Council, but nothing came of it. Composto is still angry about the demolition, which he believes left the neighborhood to flounder.

But Reservoir Hill was already in trouble by the time the city demolished the commercial strip. According to a 1996 report commissioned by Reservoir Hill Housing and Outreach through Presbyterian Enterprise, a church-based development group, the neighborhood's population fell 15 percent between 1980 and 1990, to 7,500--more than twice the rate of decline for Baltimore City. (The decline continued at about the same rate through the '90s, to a current population of 6,326, according to Census 2000 figures.)

The community's housing remains its greatest draw and its greatest drawback. People who appreciate history are drawn to Reservoir Hill, where many residents can recite the story of their homes, which are often more than a century old. "Our house used to be a house of ill repute," Glenda Gentner explains of her 115-year-old home. The glass blocks that surround the front door, she says, "were so no one could see politicians" as they came and went. When the Gentners renovated, they were amused to find women's hosiery and gambling chips walled up in the fireplaces.

No matter their charm, though, older homes--especially ones that run as large as 5,000 square feet--are expensive and time-consuming to maintain. The houses in Reservoir Hill seem to invite owners to split up the sizable space into apartments. According to *Reservoir Hill: A Community Profile*, a 1995 report by the Community Development Resource Center of Morgan State University, only 37 percent of the neighborhood's houses are owner-occupied, compared to a citywide average of nearly 50 percent. (Residents estimate the current owner-occupancy figure at somewhere around 20 percent.) Increasing ownership by absentee landlords, the Morgan State report asserts, is "disrupting the stability of the

community . . . reducing the overall value of property in the community, and . . . attracting associated negative influences (i.e., crime, litter, etc.)."

Andrew Colletta, a 15-year resident of Reservoir Hill and a real-estate agent with O'Connor, Piper, and Flynn, says houses in the neighborhood sell from several thousand dollars to \$200,000, depending on location and condition. According to information provided by Live Baltimore, a nonprofit organization that promotes urban home-ownership, a house on Reservoir Hill's Brooks Lane sold for \$4,000 last fall; at the other end of the scale, a house on Eutaw Place sold for just under \$250,000 in the spring of 1999.

Colletta considers the main challenge to creating more home-ownership in Reservoir Hill to be the size of the houses: "It's a very diverse neighborhood--economically, socially--but the houses are not so diverse. The houses tend to be very big." The key to affording a home in the neighborhood, he says, is maintaining a single rental property in an otherwise owner-occupied house. "It's a size situation. Having a rental unit in the basement, on the first floor, on the third floor, becomes an economic necessity."

Despite the problem houses in the center of the neighborhood, Colletta says, the Reservoir Hill market remains stable. (Sales figures bear him out: According to Live Baltimore, most Reservoir Hill houses bought and resold in the past decade have maintained or increased in value.) "People are priced out of Bolton Hill, Charles Village . . . Reservoir Hill gets the spillover," Colletta says. "Right now, if you have a renovated townhouse, it's going to sell."

But it isn't going to sell for the kind of money that homesteaders in other parts of the city now get. People who bought in Canton or Federal Hill before the current real-estate boom are reaping the benefits of what turned out to be smart investments. Homeowners in Reservoir Hill have to content themselves with the knowledge that they're getting a lot of house for not much money. Many artists live in the neighborhood, and they are able to put their studios in their homes and save the money they'd normally spend on rent. And families such as Victory Swift's can afford a five-bedroom house with exposed brick walls and a gorgeous wooden staircase and enough space to set up a "classroom" where the youngest children are homeschooled.

But the beauty and size of the homes in Reservoir Hill come with a price. For most urban residents, the reward for dealing with the problems of city life is a sense of community, of convenience. In most Baltimore neighborhoods, regardless of socioeconomic status, residents can enjoy a drink at a corner bar, walk to the grocery store, fill a prescription at the local pharmacy, or just run into neighbors at the post office. In Reservoir Hill there is no shared space for the community, no central location where residents from different parts of the neighborhood, from different social and economic strata can, interact. The few storefront churches are all Sunday-only operations, and the historic Beth Am Synagogue, despite its social involvement in the neighborhood, draws nearly all of its members from outside the community. The most influential churches, Madison Avenue Presbyterian and Corpus Christi Catholic, are both located across North Avenue in Bolton Hill. The two community centers, Corpus Christi and St. Francis, serve as de facto social-service providers rather than neighborhood gathering spots.

That means residents of Reservoir Hill suffer with the problems of urban life without enjoying the advantages. Most end up living in their homes rather than inhabiting the entire neighborhood, creating an insular existence that prevents the neighborhood from overcoming problems that have plagued it for more than 20 years.

It's easy to become entrenched in that insular existence, but most residents say they don't want to shut the rest of Reservoir Hill out. "You have a responsibility to the neighborhood you buy in," Victory Swift says. "I want my children to be raised in a safe, clean community." Even these modest goals can be hard to achieve in this neighborhood--though many of Swift's neighbors, across a broad cultural and economic range, are working every day to make that vision a reality.

Throughout the rest of 2001 *City Paper* will explore Reservoir Hill and the challenges its residents face, examining how the community's problems evolved, why they resist solution, and what it's like to live with them. Next up: sanitation.

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