

BALTIMORE GASLIGHT

Newsletter of the Baltimore City Historical Society

Volume 19, Number 1

Winter 2020

To the Members of Baltimore City Historical Society:

The BCHS Board of Directors

On December 5, 2019 the Baltimore City Historical Society's Board of Directors voted to end its current membership system in favor of shifting to a supporter-based funding model. With the retirement of two long-time, devoted board members, it was seen as time to abandon our outdated and cumbersome membership management system. This was a difficult decision; but we believe that this change will allow us to redirect our energy towards greater community involvement. We hope that our faithful members will help in this transition by becoming "supporters" and we ask that you continue to attend our events, engage in conversations on social media, and give financially to support our endeavor of sharing Baltimore's history. You are our audience and our storytellers and it is only with you that we can

successfully continue our mission of *Preserving & Telling Baltimore's Stories*.

The BCHS will continue to issue its *Baltimore Gaslight* newsletter, as well as offer free programming, including our [Baltimore History Evenings](#) (beginning January 16, 2020 (see article in this issue)). We hope to expand our outreach with additional social events and welcome your suggestions. To continue our mission, we still need your support and all donations will continue to be fully tax-deductible. We are kicking off our annual fundraising in 2020 with our \$20 for '20 campaign (see information in this issue). Also, please keep an eye out for other opportunities to support and participate with BCHS through our new electronic newsletter, website (baltimorecityhistoricalsociety.org), and Facebook page ([Baltimore](#)

[History-Baltimore City Historical Society](#)). Donors may use PayPal, credit card, or mail checks to the BCHS, c/o Maryland Historical Society, 201 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, MD 21201.

In the past, some of our members made combined payments to include membership with the Maryland Historical Society, an option, which will be discontinued. Those who wish to continue membership with the MdHS should contact Dulainey Peterson at dpeterson@mdhs.org. Please don't hesitate to email the BCHS board with your questions or comments at admin@baltimorecityhistoricalsociety.org. We would like to express our deepest appreciation for your past and ongoing support and thank you for your understanding. *(Continued on Page 2)*

The Baltimore History Evenings Ask Us to Look at Baltimore, Past & Present

Michael S. Franch, Coordinator
Baltimore History Evenings

We're about to begin our 12th Baltimore History Evening season. We've sought to provide a gathering place for the audience interested in Baltimore history and for researchers—from senior scholars to young folks just starting out—to come together and share their interest in Baltimore history in a format designed to encourage interchange. We do this because Baltimore history is important, but also because these evenings are fun.

One of the pleasures of the series has been presentations on more recent topics—recent meaning in the last 60 years or so—when actual participants were in the room, such as four African American tennis pioneers who participated in the 1948 integrated tennis match in Druid Hill Park, the crowd of radical women who were on the scene in 1970s Baltimore, and the people who bravely came together to create

the institutions that gave structure to the Baltimore gay community.

We like to joke about "Smalltimore," and in many respects Baltimore is a small town. But it is also "Walltimore." Our historical lens reveals that not only people in the past but we ourselves are often walled off and unaware of the lives of our fellow Baltimoreans. There not only have been but undoubtedly still are whole communities separated from us not only by time but by our lack of awareness. For example, I was surprised to learn from Nichole King's 2012 presentation on industrial South Baltimore that some Baltimoreans did not have indoor plumbing until the mid-1970s.

Our historical awareness compels us to ask, who are the people that we are unaware of today—or perhaps are aware of

but whom we depreciate—who are contributing to the life of modern Baltimore? We saw this in the 2019 presentation on Hazel Dickens and the Appalachian migration to Baltimore. Many Baltimoreans looked down on these "hillbillies," but today we celebrate their contributions to American music.

Clearly, I think these Evenings promote a better understanding of our history. That's important. But I think what brings people back year after year is that they are fascinating, informative, sometimes controversial, always get the mind working, and offer a fun evening with interesting people. Some of the interesting people you'll hear about have been dead for a long time, but most of them are alive and sitting with you in the VLP. Interesting talks, interesting people. All yours, without charge. *(Continued on Page 5)*

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 "Baltimore History – Baltimore City Historical Society"

...MEMBERS OF BCHS

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

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 2019-2020**

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- Allison Seyler
- Joe Stewart
- Savannah M. Wood ■

**From the BCHS
 President**

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph. D.

In 2019, the Baltimore City Historical Society marked its 20th anniversary. This milestone was certainly a cause for celebration, but it also brought about transitions. Mary Jane Arnold and Don Torres, two of our most devoted members, stepped down from the board. Their retirement from weekly administrative duties left our all-volunteer organization with a daunting challenge – how could we manage membership without them? We approached this problem on a systems level by trying to streamline our processes: we moved from a cumbersome database tied to a single desktop computer to Google Docs available from multiple locations on the cloud; we chose MailChimp as our communications tool and initiated a once-a month digest to our mailing lists.

In another major decision, the BCHS Board voted at its December, 2019, meeting to move from functioning as a membership organization to a sponsorship model. This change better reflects the realities of an organization that offers all of its programming free to the public, whether they are members or not. Your experience with BCHS will not change due to this shift: you will continue to receive the *Gaslight*, and you can attend Baltimore History Evenings, the History Honors event and our annual meeting free-of-charge. We hope you will continue your support of BCHS, no longer as a member, but as a sponsor of this organization, dedicated to preserving and telling Baltimore’s stories. ■

**From the Desk
 of the Chairman
 of the Board**

Edward C. Papenfuse, Ph. D.

As we approach the coming decade with less than 2020 vision, let us first look back at the accomplishments of the year gone by that provide us with a glimpse of what we can look forward to in the future. It has been a pleasure to watch the youthful enthusiasm and exceptionally devoted work of the BCHS Board in 2019.

When I first joined the Board, we relied heavily on a handful of devoted volunteers who did all the work from membership to organizing events. While a number have continued to do so, they have been joined by others who have given us a new web site, a revived and well-edited newsletter, and a vision for membership and financial management that bodes well for the coming year. In addition, the annual events have become vibrant celebrations of those who have enriched Baltimore City History, while the presentations at the Village Learning Center continue to educate and enlighten, and we effectively communicate with an ever-widening audience through Facebook.

As to the future, it is my hope that we will continue the good work of the past year and look to strengthening our efforts to preserve and make accessible the records of the past through active support of the local archival institutions from the Baltimore Industrial Museum to the Baltimore City Archives. Without those collecting efforts and the parallel efforts to provide as much of the city’s history on line, our ability to mine and understand our past would be severely constrained and increasingly without substance, replaced by fluff and fakery instead of insight and meaning.

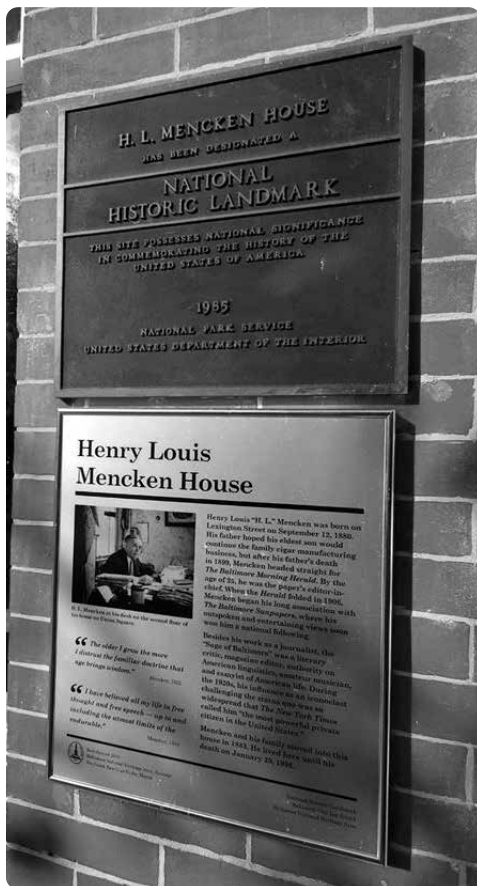
As to my personal interests, I will be helping as I can, the effort to preserve and make accessible the virtual reconstruction of a major African American graveyard, Laurel Cemetery (Belair Road at Elmley Avenue), about which you will learn more forthcoming in these pages, This is an unparalleled volunteer effort to resurrect the lives of perhaps 25,000 African American residents of the City who contributed so much to our history, but whose intended final resting place was desecrated and obliterated by developers. With the help of the volunteers, the life stories of the interred and their contributions to the City’s past will be told online and in a site memorial, keeping alive the memories of their accomplishments in ways that it is hoped will be both instructional and in keeping with our mission to provide an all-inclusive history of Baltimore City. ■

Letter to the Editor

In October of 2019, the Baltimore City Historical Society, honored Historian Ralph Clayton for his research, including the book entitled *Cash for Blood: The Baltimore to New Orleans Domestic Slave Trade*. In remarks accepting the award, Clayton recounted that between 1808 and 1861, an estimated twenty-five to thirty thousand slaves were shipped from Baltimore for re-sale throughout the South. While they awaited auction, the victims were kept in slave-pens along Pratt Street by slave trader Austin Woolfolk.

Clayton's research into the slave manifests, stored at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., documented the names of seven thousand slaves shipped from Baltimore to New Orleans. A Baltimore monument in remembrance of these victims of the slave trade seems long overdue. The memorial might be located at one of the sites, from which Confederate War monuments were recently removed.

— Garrett Power ■



DISCOVERING BALTIMORE

H.L. Mencken House & Museum Re-Opens to the Public after a 22-Year Hiatus

The lifelong residence of Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956), iconic journalist, writer, magazine editor, authority on American linguistics, and literary critic, known as the “Sage of Baltimore,” has been restored and refurbished according to written and photo evidence, reflecting its 1940 appearance. The restoration of this City-owned National and Baltimore City historic landmark building was made possible by a generous bequest, received in 2006, by former Mencken Society member, Navy Commander Max E. Hency. The 1.3 million dollar renovation was carried out over the last 9 months by the Azola Building Rehab Company.

Previously operated by the Baltimore City Life Museums from 1984 until 1997, the H.L. Mencken House has been vacant since then, with its furnishings, art works, and artifacts stored at the Maryland Historical Society and other locations. Most of these items have been returned and recently re-installed in the house.

“I am extremely happy and delighted to see the Mencken House renovation completed and the museum re-opened, benefitting not only us, the Society to Preserve H.L. Mencken’s Legacy, which will operate the museum, but also to the City and, specifically, the Union Square community and Baltimore’s visitors experience. By preserving the Mencken house and keeping it accessible to the public, including Mencken scholars, current and future generations will gain a sense of the iconoclastic and influential writer and his legacy” said Brigitte V. Fessenden, Acting Curator of the Mencken House Museum.

The first issue of Baltimore City Historical Society’s newsletter, now called *Baltimore Gaslight*, contained an article by Robert Thieblot of the Friends of the H. L. Mencken House lamenting the condition of the house. In “Mencken’s Words Live, House Ailing,” Thieblot wrote, “...Baltimore’s sage questioned authority, distrusted government, championed liberty. He thought free speech so important that there should be no limit. He



attacked his opponents with gusto in a style recognizably his own, often imitated but rarely with success—pummeling them in an English unadorned by pretense, lucid and enormously funny, using hyperbole often and for comic effect. He thought the appropriate punishment for hypocrisy, cant, arrogance and self-righteousness was scornful laughter. He never suggested it was a matter for the police. The price of liberty, he well understood, was to suffer scoundrels.

“And as human nature never changes, what Mencken had to say in the last century is relevant today. That is why he remains important. As does his house at 1524 Hollins Street on Union Square in west Baltimore, because Mencken and his house had a relationship unique in America for a man of letters. The house was where he was taken as a small child, where he wrote, what he (Continued on Page 4)

...DISCOVERING BALTIMORE

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3)



wrote about, and it was where he died. He said it was as much a part of him as his two hands. Yet it now stands vacant and badly needing repair.”

No longer. After years of dedicated fundraising and work, the Mencken House is restored. Lease agreements have been drawn up between Baltimore City and the Baltimore National Heritage Area Association, Inc. (BNHA), which will occupy the third and part of the second floors of the house as office space and the Society to Preserve H.L. Mencken’s Legacy, Inc., which has curatorial oversight and will operate the museum.



The mission of the Society to Preserve H.L. Mencken’s Legacy, Inc. is to inform and educate a diverse local and national audience about the life and writings of Henry Louis Mencken in the City of Baltimore, by preserving his home and office, and by offering exhibits and programs that highlight Mencken’s legacy. For more information please see www.menckenhous.org or contact the Acting Curator, Brigitte Fessenden at brigittefessenden@comcast.net. ■

Baltimore Gaslight

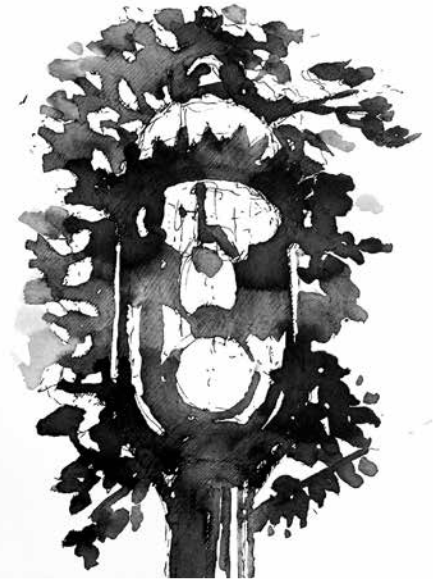
In May of 2001, the first general membership meeting and reception of the Baltimore City Historical Society was held in City Hall, hosted by Mayor Martin O’Malley. The newsletter of the Baltimore City Historical Society started the following year with the first issue appearing in the autumn of 2002, edited by Lewis H. Diuguid, a former correspondent for the *Washington Post*.

Though we now associate the name *Baltimore Gaslight* inextricably with the newsletter of the BCHS, remarkably, for the first six years of its existence, the newsletter did not have a name and simply bore a masthead with the name of the organization. During that time, there were repeated appeals for suggestions of names. In “Enlightening Name for the Newsletter,” in the spring issue of 2008, Editor Lewis Diuguid described the breakthrough in finding a name and the name’s significance for Baltimore, as follows, “The Society’s Board, the Newsletter’s staff, and responsive members, but one, stumbled for six years over founding Chairman John C. Byrnes admonition to come up with a proper name for this semiannual publication. Martha M. Yeager, a widow at Charlestown in Catonsville, had the answer: *Baltimore Gaslight*. Evoking a last-century image at once soft yet suffusing, the title also reaches back to the now-shuttered icon of the Society, the Peale Museum... The city’s winsome glass-bowled gas street lights trace immediately to Rembrandt Peale, who built this country’s first museum here in 1814. Two years later he lit it with gas—an innovation he had witnessed in London. His was the first in Baltimore, by all accounts. Whether this was the first gaslight in the country is widely disputed, as is the question of who had the first gas streetlight. In 1817 Peale helped form a company eventually to become Baltimore Gas and Electric that installed this city’s first streetlight nearby – at Holliday and Baltimore Streets. A classic city gaslight glows there today, a memorial to the flickering lamps that gave way to utilitarian electrification after World War II...”

Lewis Diuguid edited the newsletter for fourteen years, from 2002 through the fall issue of 2015. He created the format and standards of the newsletter

and, through it, helped to establish the organization’s presence in Baltimore. The *Gaslight* has subsequently been edited by Ed Papenfuse, from the fall of 2015 through the fall of 2016; Joe Stewart, from the fall of 2017 through the winter of 2018; and Catherine Evans, since the spring of 2019. Issues of the newsletter/*Baltimore Gaslight* have appeared every year since its inception, with most years having two issues, several having three, and others only one. The current issue is the 37th in the series.

Most of the issues of the *Baltimore Gaslight* can be viewed on the website of the BCHS (www.baltimorecityhistoricalsociety.org). Click on “Resources” and then “Baltimore Gaslight.” The few missing issues will be added this year. We will also be adding a “Directory of Contents,” so researchers can view the contents of all the issues in one place and then go directly to the issue of interest.



The image accompanying this article is of the first gas light street lamp in the United States, located at the northwest corner of the intersection of N. Holliday and E. Baltimore Streets. It is believed that the pole is original, while the fixture itself has been replaced over the years. The sketch is by Jerome C. Gray, AIA, Recording Secretary of the BCHS Board. This and many other of his sketches of Baltimore can be viewed on Instagram at [jcgarch](https://www.instagram.com/jcgarch). ■

...BALTIMORE HISTORY EVENINGS (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Baltimore History Evenings 2020

Baltimore Places & People

7:00–9:00 p.m.

Village Learning Place
2521 St. Paul Street

JANUARY 16. Charles B. Duff.

*The Invention of Downtown .
How Baltimore and the Other North
Atlantic Cities Created the Central
Business District.*

Charles B. Duff is President of Jubilee Baltimore and a frequent lecturer on architectural history. He is past president of the Baltimore Architecture Foundation and the author of the recently published *The North Atlantic Cities*.

February 20. Nathan Dennies.

*The Jones Falls Valley: Its People and the
Things They Made.*

Nathan Dennies is the Chair of the Greater Hampden Heritage Alliance, a community historic preservation organization that works to save the stories and places of Hampden and Woodberry. Nathan works for the Baltimore Architecture Foundation and the American Institute of Architects, Baltimore Chapter. He lives in Woodberry.

March 19. Linda G. Morris.

*Cherry Hill: Raising Successful Black
Children in Jim Crow Baltimore.* With
John H. Morris and Sidney Rauls Ellis.

Like many other families, the Morris children and their friends spent formative years in Cherry Hill and went on to successful careers. Her work draws on happy memories, but also solid research on this once idyllic community in segregated Baltimore.

April 16. Ashley Minner.

*The Lumbee Community: Revisiting the
Reservation of Baltimore's Fell's Point.*

Ashley Minner is a community-based visual artist, an enrolled member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, and folklorist and Professor of the Practice in the Department of American Studies at UMBC. She is a contributor to *Baltimore Revisited: Stories of Inequality and Resistance in a U.S. City* (2019).

May 21. Joshua A. Cohen.

*Who lived in your house? Uncovering the
History of a Baltimore Neighborhood.*

Preparing for the centennial of his North Baltimore subdivision on Cloverhill and Canterbury Roads, Josh set out to discover the history of the neighborhood. Using online resources to trace deeds and relations, Josh built family trees for the homeowners of all 84 houses. He gathered extensive biographical details of those first families and made connections with their descendants, who provided personal recollections and photos. Josh will share some of his exciting finds as well as techniques that residents of any neighborhood can use to explore the history of their homes.

June 18.

*Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port
Markers Project.* [In development].

Baltimore was not a major port of entry for enslaved Africans, but it played a large role in the domestic slave trade.



The Village Learning Place:

Home of the Baltimore History Evenings

You can lose a battle but win a war. That's what happened in Charles Village in 1997. The Enoch Pratt Free Library, consolidating library branches, announced it was closing the branch built in 1896 at 2521 St. Paul Street. One of the six original branch libraries, the century-old building was showing wear, and the system said it had to go. Neighbors picketed and protested, and lost the battle.

But they won the war. Charles Village residents came together, formed a new organization called the Village Learning Place (VLP), and developed a professionally staffed community library and then expanded into a host of programs

for community youth and adults. They restored the worn old building into a Victorian gem—but with computers. It is now nationally recognized for excellence.

From the VLP website: The Village Learning Place is an independent non-profit library that houses educational programs, enrichment opportunities, and informational resources for Charles Village and throughout Baltimore City. It is our belief that libraries are not only a repository for books, but also serve as community centers focused on the personal and professional growth of their patrons.

*The mission of the Village Learning Place is to promote literacy, cultural awareness, and lifelong learning through access for all ages to information, resources, and educational programs. The Village Learning Place's vision is to be a model library, a leader in providing high-quality educational programs, enrichment opportunities, and informational resources in Charles Village and throughout Baltimore City. The Village Learning Place will strengthen the surrounding neighborhood by serving as an anchoring institution, a symbol of local pride, and a gathering place for a diverse community. We promote a learning-oriented culture that is friendly, welcoming, and supportive of the success and well-being of every person. The Village Learning Place strives to integrate its core principles, *commitment, compassion, honesty, and patience*, into every level of its operations and throughout each program and service it offers.*

The Village Learning Place comprises two buildings: **2521 St. Paul**, the beautiful Victorian brick building that was one of the original six branches of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library, and **2510 St. Paul**, across the street from 2521 St. Paul Street, that houses permanent classrooms for the Let's Invest in Neighborhood Kids (LINK) after school and summer programs, community rental space, a reading resource room, and additional staff office space. ■





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CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
PRESERVING & TELLING BALTIMORE'S STORIES

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