

# BALTIMORE

## CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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### All Invited to Reopen Revered Peale Museum for Nov. 3 Reception

The Baltimore City Historical Society, with the cooperation of Mayor Martin O'Malley and the City Council, will hold its Second Annual Mayor's Reception on Sunday, November 3, from noon to 2 p.m. at the storied but lately shuttered Peale Museum to honor the current and recent mayors of Baltimore and the honorary chairpersons of the Society, and to present the first annual Baltimore City History Honors.

At 189, the Peale on Holliday Street near Lexington is the nation's original building designed as a museum. Baltimorean Robert Cary Long was the architect and artist Rembrandt Peale was his client. It later served as City Hall and became the Municipal Museum in 1931, evolving to become the redoubt of the city's heritage. But it closed with the collapse, for lack of operating funds, of the Baltimore City Life Museums in 1997. Baltimore became Maryland's only jurisdiction without its own historical society. Also to be honored at the reception are former members and supporters of the Peale and City Life Museums.

The Baltimore City Historical Society



Maryland Historical Society

*Peale long closed but not forgotten.*

was organized to fill the void and is working to accomplish that with a web site, a Newsletter, historical clippings archive, meetings featuring the City's historical resources, and an eventually all-embracing collection of books on Baltimore. The Maryland Historical Society, which is the repository of the Peale collection, has actively supported BCHS and provides office space.

Mayor Martin O'Malley and former Mayor Kurt Schmoke are expected to attend the reception, along with the honorary trustees, Dr. Calvin Burnett, who is president of Coppin State College, and Dr. H. Mebane Turner, who retired from the presidency of the University of Baltimore this year. The president of BCHS is retired Judge John Carroll Byrnes.

The history honorees are retiring state Senate Majority Leader Clarence W. Blount, for his more than three decades in that public service, and Sun columnists Edward Gunts, Jacques Kelly and Fred Rasmussen, along with Sam Lacy of the Afro-American, for their efforts to keep Baltimore's history alive in the years since the closing of the Peale.

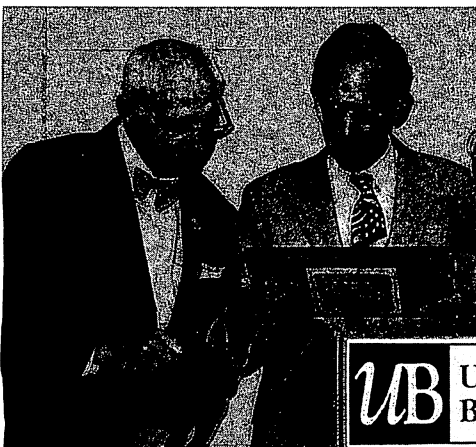
Closing of the Peale came as a blow to the agency dedicated to defending the city's past, the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation, or CHAP. At the time, Baltimore was celebrating the bicen-

ennial of incorporation as a city. Since then, CHAP has sought a means of returning to use this building, which was one of the initial landmarks that the agency cited upon its own founding nearly 40 years ago. CHAP is hoping it might relocate there from its nearby office at 417 East Fayette Street. A principal barrier to reuse remains lack of handicapped accessibility.

This year easily illustrates, by anniversaries alone, the utility of a vigilant historical society. For example, it is the 250th birthday of Sam Smith, who was Maryland's leading citizen in the early 1800s and commander-in-chief of its troops in the Battle of Baltimore in 1814. This year also is the 200th anniversary one of the city's architectural treasures, Homewood House at the entry to Johns Hopkins University on N. Charles St. It was built by Charles Carroll of Carrollton for his son and is now a Museum and a National Historic Landmark. Its design has inspired that of Hopkins' Homewood campus. An exhibition, "Building Homewood: Vision for a Villa," is offering through Dec. 29 the results of recent research on how and of what the building was constructed. Visitor information is available at 410 516-8639 or [www.jhu.edu/historichouses](http://www.jhu.edu/historichouses)

The Nov. 3 reception at the Peale is an opportunity for those who care about the City's future to step forward again for its past. It is further an opportunity to honor those who supported The Peale and Baltimore City Life Museums. BCHS is pleased to announce sponsorship of the event by the Baltimore Gas and Electric Co./Constellation, which traces its origins to gas lighting initiated at the Peale.

Proceeds from the Annual Reception will help fund BCHS public education efforts. Tickets are \$30 in advance and \$35 at the door. They can be purchased by calling or writing the Baltimore City Historical Society, 201 W. Monument Street, Baltimore MD 21201, 410 685-3750. ext. 379 or e-mailing [bchs@mdhs.org](mailto:bchs@mdhs.org)



By Walter Edward Leon

*Retired University of Baltimore President and BCHS Trustee Turner has a look at gift Baltimore print proffered by Society President Byrnes at the University in June.*

# Frederick Douglass Catches Hold With Current Generations



Richard Hunt  
Douglass

Baltimore's reading assignment this summer, assigned by the Enoch Pratt Free Library, was the autobiographical "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave." Visitors to the Fells Point neighborhood are taking tours of the sites where the young slave and later abolitionist lived and

worked a century and a half ago. They can also look at the five row houses that he built in his late years on Strawberry Alley, now Dallas Street. Long obscured, the fiery orator is making a comeback.

Among the occasional tour guides is Frederick Douglass IV, who bears close resemblance to his ancestor. He has said: "I've always been haunted by Fells Point. I was drawn there even before I got into the history of my great-great-grandfather. I have a sense of his presence there. When people live very intense lives in a place, some part of them remains there." He was quoted by Baltimore writer Tom Chalkley, whose articles in *City Paper* and *American Legacy* have helped revive interest in Douglass.

Born on the Eastern Shore in 1818, the then Frederick Bailey came to Fells Point at age 8, worked in shipyards, attended church and learned to read during a 10-year stay (interrupted by a two-year forced return to the Eastern Shore). The life here that he approvingly describes was akin to that of the city's numerous free blacks but he chafed for freedom and escaped to the north in 1838, disguised as a sailor on a train out of Baltimore. There he took up the abolitionist cause in oratory and in print and did not return to his roots until near the end of the Civil War.

Douglass visited often after that, eventually buying property on what is now the 500 block of S. Dallas Street to build, in 1891, five houses for sale to low-income blacks. He spoke at commencement of Baltimore's Colored High School in 1894, died the next year in his Anacostia home and was buried in Rochester, N.Y.

The Preservation Society of Fells Point and Federal Hill is sponsor of the Douglass "Path to Freedom" walking tours that depart the Visitor Center on Anne Street near the harbor on the second Saturday of each month. A feature with a future for the walkers is the site of one of the shipyards at which he worked, at Philpot Street and the harbor on

the west side of Fells Point.

The Living Classrooms Foundation is developing the Frederick Douglass-Isaac Myers Maritime Park on the adjacent waterfront. Meyers, a black ship's caulker, founded the Chesapeake Marine Railway and Drydock Company there just after the Civil War. Living Classrooms is rebuilding "Sugar House" warehouse, overlooking the Inner Harbor, in a park setting for training programs aimed at inner city youth. It is to include a drydock for sailing craft.

African American history has a new venue, too, in The Eubie Blake National Jazz Museum at 857 N. Howard Street, which offers a swinging account of the late, long-lived Baltimore ragtime piano player and song writer. He had a large hand and tapping foot in the Broadway show *Shuffle Along* and his song credits include "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Memories of You." The son of slaves, Blake died at 100 in 1983.

A focus of concern for the Baltimore City Historical Society is a veritable ledger of the past, the downtrodden Mount Auburn Cemetery in the far south of the city, where thousands of blacks have been buried since the days of slavery, including major civil rights figures.

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## By the Books, Society Records City's History

By James D. Dilts

What is a Baltimore book and why does the Baltimore City Historical Society want it? We'll get to that, but as Damon Runyon said, a story goes with it.

With the creation of the Peabody and Pratt libraries and The Johns Hopkins University and medical institutions Baltimore indeed became the city that reads. Now, largely due to their presence, Baltimore has added considerably to its already distinguished list of poets and scholars.

Edger Allen Poe, inventor of the detective story and the science fiction tale, and "one of the most brilliant and original writers in American literature," is a good place to start a discussion of the Baltimore book. When he moved here at age 18 and presented himself to the Baltimore literati, William Wirt and John Pendleton Kennedy, it is not reported that he got a dinner, but they did guide his early poetry and fiction into print.

Kennedy, a Baltimore native, wrote several novels; Vernon Parrington places him at the beginning of the plantation tradition in American letters. Seven years after Kennedy's "Rob of the Bowl", his best work, appeared, another Marylander, who learned to read in Baltimore and saw plantation life from a different perspective, published (in 1845), "The Narrative of the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave",

written by himself. Frank Shivers calls it "the best non-fiction book written by a Maryland black, and the chief slave narrative in American literature."

Skipping quickly ahead to the golden age (for me anyway), that of H. L. Mencken, whose career in journalism was as unique and influential as Poe's in fiction, we can mention several top-ranked Baltimore authors. They include Upton Sinclair, a native Socialist novelist and muckraker; James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett, both Maryland-born and Baltimore-trained, writers of film noir novels; John Dos Passos, sometime resident, whose "U. S. A." Alfred Kazin called "the first great national epic;" and F. Scott Fitzgerald, another midwesterner who wrote "Tender is the Night" here. Mencken published Fitzgerald's first story in *The Smart Set*, as well as the early efforts of the Harlem Renaissance writers and the rest of the modernists.

The above are Baltimore books and they are just the beginning. A Baltimore book is a book about Baltimore or by a Baltimore author. History, biography, fiction and poetry, art, architecture, and music, memoirs and reminiscences, guidebooks, journals, and pamphlets are being sought for the Baltimore Book Collection. John Carroll Byrnes, BCHS president, came up with the idea to collect Baltimore books and made the first donation -- his own collection.

The collection, now housed at the Maryland Historical Society, consists of about 300 books and articles and some 350 issues of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*. A cataloging system is being designed and a permanent home for the BBC is being explored so that it will be accessible to the public. Its distinction from the major collections of Baltimore books at the Maryland Historical Society and the Enoch Pratt Free Library will be its environment. Having all of the histories of Baltimore or all of the titles of a single Baltimore author gathered on the same shelf will itself be inspiring and create a critical mass to generate future literary endeavor.

Most of the books at present are contemporary, so gifts of the nineteenth century classics of local history, important periodicals, neighborhood histories, and Baltimore City Directories would be especially welcome. Donations of individual books can be mailed to: Mary Warfield, Baltimore City Historical Society, c/o Maryland Historical Society, 201 W. Monument St. Baltimore, MD 21201. The BCHS can also appraise and pick up collections. Call 410-685-3750, ext. 379.

*Dilts writes on Baltimore's railroads and architecture. His BCHS books committee is looking for a volunteer cataloger with computer skills. Reach Dilts through the Society.*

## Timely Programs Keep History Alive

The Baltimore City Historical Society schedules four public programs each year, and they travel the circuit of historical sites here. The first this year was at the Maryland Historical Society on March 20. Sun columnist Dan Rodricks was much applauded for his observations on "Baltimore History--Lite."

On June 26, at the University of Baltimore, the home of much historical material pertaining to the City, retiring University President Mebane Turner was honored for his contributions to Baltimore history, both as president and as friend. The University houses and displays an extensive collection of Baltimore historical prints. Dr. Turner introduced Dr. Jessica Elfenbein and Thomas Hollowak, founding leaders of the University's Center for Regional and Baltimore studies.

The third public event will be the Annual Mayor's Reception at The Peale Museum on November 3, and on November 13, at 5 p.m., the final program of this year will focus on historic Mid-Town--featuring a tour of the Roman Catholic Basilica, with a focus on plans for its restoration.

Jerry Hynson, chair of the BCHS Program Committee, announced tentative plans for 2003. They include, in addition to the annual Mayor's Reception; a visit to the City archives, being arranged by Council Member John Cain; and a program focused on the City's African-American history.

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## President's Report

It is an honor to be the first president of The Baltimore City Historical Society and to make this first Annual Report. I am happy to say that the Society is sound--in spirit, in action and in the bank. The Executive Committee, consisting of the corporate officers and all active committee chairpersons, has well managed this fledgling organization. We have focused on organizational matters: surveying member opinions about direction and priorities, organizing committees, planning General Membership programs into 2003 and developing a data base. In the course of this we have:

- Created a web site to answer the question, Who Has What about the City's history.
- Begun the Baltimore Book Collection to assemble copies of every book about Baltimore now in print.
- Developed strong and supportive relationships with Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation, our excellent museum community and academic institutions, the Maryland Historical Society (our headquarters host on Monument Street), The Enoch Pratt Free Library's Maryland Department, the City Archives, Maryland Genealogical Society and our neighboring historical societies.
- Revived the important traditional archival resource of clippings from Baltimore area journals and newspapers.

Our energetic Membership Committee is reaching out to the community, including at major festivals of the City. Academic historians have been very supportive and a special place has been made for them in the Society--The Baltimore Historian Council. Our Newsletter will be an important clearinghouse for news of Baltimore City history issues such as the futures of the Mencken House, "The Peale," and the Carroll Mansion on Lombard Street. We support important local initiatives such as Judge Tom and Joyce Ward's Irish Shrine immigrant houses on Lemmon Street, the Underground Railroad project, the restoration of Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Tom Coates' timely commemoration of the 250th anniversary of General Sam Smith, the 175th anniversary of the B&O Railroad, and the Maryland Historical Society's planned remembrance of the Baltimore Fire.

A distinguished Board of Trustees has been formed to give guidance to this Society. Dr. Mebane Turner, former president of the University of Baltimore and Dr. Calvin Burnett, former president of Coppin State College, will co-chair that Board. Our former Mayors and the current Mayor are the Honorary Chairpersons. I thank all of them, and our officers and committees, for this good start in our first active year.

Mayor Martin O'Malley graciously hosted our First General Membership Meeting and Reception at City Hall in May of last year. The Mayor has been very cooperative in conversations about the future of the former Peale Museum and we are very excited to have been given the opportunity to return to that historic building for a Brunch and Reception on Nov. 3. We are hopeful that everyone with an interest in the City's history, particularly those who gave so much of themselves to The Peale and Baltimore City Life Museums, will attend, and help The Baltimore City Historical Society develop a fund for its future. If you were a member of BCL please contact us at [baltimorecityhistoricalsociety@msn.com](mailto:baltimorecityhistoricalsociety@msn.com) We want to give special tribute to you on Nov. 3.

Since the demise of the Peale and Baltimore City Life Museums, Baltimore has been the only jurisdiction in Maryland without its own historical society. With the establishment of the Baltimore City Historical Society, you have changed that. Please consider accepting election to an office, board position or committee chair and contact me at our office at the Maryland Historical Society, 201 W. Monument Street, Baltimore MD 21202 or by e-mail at [bchs@mdhs.org](mailto:bchs@mdhs.org) Thank you for the opportunity to serve Baltimore City history.

# Mencken's Words Live; House Ailing

By Robert Thieblot

Friends of the H.L. Mencken House

Henry Louis Mencken was born in Baltimore in 1880 and he died here in 1956. Though dead now nearly 50 years, he is anything but forgotten. The Sunday Sun of July 7, 2002, contains a long article, by Theo Lipman, comparing Mencken with Murray Kempton and Russell Baker. While he calls Mencken a bully, not sympathizing with his politics, he nevertheless awards him the palm as America's greatest columnist. This is no mere boasting by one Sunpaper man about another. Mencken even now has a national reputation and is quoted frequently. Another biography, by Marion Rogers, is in process; the search engine Google lists 272,000 references to him.

None of this should be a surprise. 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 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.

Last fall, The Friends of the H.L. Mencken House incorporated to restore the house and reopen it to the public as a museum. Gifts are tax-deductible. Membership is \$40 a year. Benefits include bulletins, a voice in the Friends' affairs and a bumper sticker--which would have bemused the acerbic skeptic. The Friends' address is 733 Martin Drive, Catonsville MD 21229-1116. Website [www.menckenhouse.org](http://www.menckenhouse.org)

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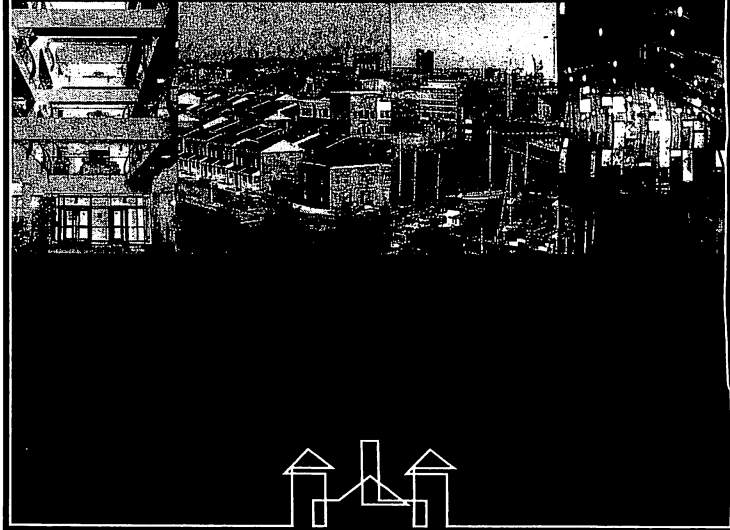
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