

Mobtown U.S.A.: Baltimore



SPECIAL ISSUE Early Cities of the Americas

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A curious handbill circulated in Baltimore during September 1835. This “EARNEST AND DIRECT APPEAL” chastised city residents *“who vainly claim to be considered Orderly.”* Indeed, an afternoon stroll through town revealed shocking scenes of lawbreaking and moral apathy: merchants and storekeepers blocked sidewalks with crates and boxes, housekeepers dumped kitchen waste in the streets, and dog owners allowed their canines to bark all night at the expense of neighbors’ sleep. When upright citizens perpetrated or tolerated such behavior, outright anarchy could not be far behind. “To obtain that admiration which is due to the *Monumental and Picturesque City*,” the handbill’s author concluded, “nothing is wanting but more attention to—ORDER.”

A month earlier, the ruins of Baltimore’s finest homes were smoldering, an armed militia patrolled city streets, and a dozen men had been shot in three nights of rioting. Obstructed sidewalks and barking dogs were the least of

Baltimore's problems! As out-of-place as September's handbill might seem, its author saw an obvious connection between littering and rioting: why would the "ignorant" respect the law if their social superiors flaunted it with impunity? Prohibiting men from riding their horses too rapidly along city streets and prohibiting the dispossessed from looting the homes of the rich—these were parts of the same project, a project common to the fastest growing cities of the early republic. Places like Baltimore strove to create bourgeois tranquility but faced deeper social disorder that no municipal traffic regulation could alleviate. Baltimore might gain the admiration of other cities for its refined public spaces and orderly streets, but it was just as likely that Baltimore would earn scorn as *Mobtown*.

Although the tension between order and disorder was not unique to the first decades of the nineteenth century, scholars have interpreted much of this era's history around these poles. The democratization of electoral politics, the proliferation of competing religious sects, and a new boom-and-bust economy unmoored individuals, families, and communities from previous forms of hierarchy, gender structures, and class relations. Rapid economic development spurred social mobility and the growth of cities, where strangers brushed shoulders across lines of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Rather than the foundations of good order, democracy and capitalism augured disorder and dislocation in the early republic. It fell to a new middle class to impose its own notions of order upon urban spaces and urban residents. This struggle pit women against men, whites against blacks, native-born against immigrants, the saved against the damned, democrats against aristocrats, and the economically ascendant against the downwardly mobile.



Fig. 1. Baltimore in 1832, from Fielding Lucas, *Picture of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1832). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

There is no better city than Baltimore for watching this drama unfold, because unlike the other urban centers of the new nation (Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston), Baltimore had no meaningful colonial past to shape its institutions or people. By the time of the riots in 1835, Baltimore had little more than fifty years of existence as a city. Those five decades had provided

enough time to build an urban infrastructure, to create functioning institutions, and even to erect the nation's first monuments to the veterans of the War of 1812 and to George Washington. But it wasn't close to enough time to anchor Baltimore against the forces of disorder endemic to the first decades of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 2. The Washington Monument, from Fielding Lucas, *Picture of Baltimore*. Baltimore's other nickname was "The Monumental City" thanks to its tributes to George Washington and to the heroes of the 1814 defense of the city. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The settlement on the Patapsco River began as Baltimore Town in 1729, but its next thirty years were marked primarily by "battle[s] with the frogs and mosquitoes whose proper territory it had invaded." Although the population reached six thousand by the American Revolution, Baltimore's strategic, economic, and political irrelevance saved it from British occupation or blockade. The 1780s and 1790s marked the crucial decades of Baltimore's development. Situated inland near the mouth of the Susquehanna River, protected by the Chesapeake Bay, and within close sailing distance to the West Indies, Baltimore blossomed in tandem with the grain economy of Maryland and Pennsylvania. Baltimore's millers and merchants linked backcountry farmers to an Atlantic market that showed an insatiable appetite for American produce. "Baltimore has the most rapid growth of any town in the U.S.," ruled the future jurist James Kent when he passed through the city in 1793. Thanks to its "hot Bed growth," Baltimore gained its municipal independence in 1797 and trailed only New York and Philadelphia in population. By 1820, the city's population would stand at 63,000—more than twice as large as any other city below the Mason-Dixon line.



Fig. 3. Centre Market, from Fielding Lucas, *Picture of Baltimore*. Middle-class reformers feared the indiscriminate mixing of men, women, and children-free and enslaved-at Baltimore's Centre Market. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The leading chronicler of Baltimore's rise was Hezekiah Niles, editor of the national newspaper of record, his *Weekly Register*. "There is not to be found, perhaps, in the history of any country, certainly not in that of the United States, an instance of such rapidity of growth and improvement as has been manifested in the city of Baltimore," he exclaimed in 1812. In the years since the American Revolution, Niles continued, Baltimore had moved "from absolute insignificance, to a degree of commercial importance which has brought down

upon it, the envy and jealousy of all the great cities of the union." Niles reported that many city residents could recall when "cornfields and the native forests" stood downtown. Now, Niles noted at the end of the 1810s, "new streets, lanes, and alleys are opened, paved and built upon before one half of the people seem to know anything about them."

Like other boosters, Niles described Baltimore's growth in the passive voice: the number of houses built, the miles of track laid, the tally of barrels shipped. Of course, new roads and houses did not magically appear—and to some extent, that was the problem. The labor to create a commercial emporium required thousands of workers, who made Baltimore one of the new nation's most diverse, plebeian—and in the eyes of some, disorderly—cities. Baltimore's population nearly doubled with every census not because of a huge migration of merchants, but rather with the arrival of men and women whose digging and paving made streets passable, whose carting brought goods to the waterfront, whose caulking readied ships for Atlantic voyages, and whose sewing, scrubbing, and serving kept better-off households clothed and fed. Niles estimated that one-fifth of the city's 1816 population had arrived within the previous twelve months. Perhaps only one in twenty of the city's adult residents had been born there. "Our manners are not fixed, as in the elder cities," Niles lamented. "There is little of that paternal or family influence, which, in older places constitutes a powerful bond of union, affection, and order," observed another commentator in 1812.

The riots that gripped the city in the summer of 1812 offered a case in point. An attempt to punish an antiwar Federalist newspaper editor soon turned into the worst bloodbath seen in any city in the early republic. The defenders of the *Federal Republican* shot several of their attackers, before being lodged in the city jail for their own protection. The enraged crowd stormed the jail and killed Revolutionary War general James Lingán. General "Light Horse" Harry Lee was beaten and left for dead. Whereas the early stages of the riot conformed to what historian Paul Gilje has called the "Anglo-American mob tradition," the jailhouse attack revealed the breakdown of the careful and scripted dance that usually took place between the crowd and civic officials. Rioters did not limit themselves to the destruction of property, nor did they deferentially accept the calming words of the mayor. Instead of burning their targets in effigy, the mob actually set one of its victims on fire. The militia eventually restored order, but Baltimore's reputation had suffered serious damage. Massachusetts patrician Leverett Saltonstall fumed that his brother Nathaniel lived "in a place which is without government." Editors in Philadelphia heaped abuse on Baltimore as "the headquarters of mobocracy" and "a new Sodom." The *Boston Repertory* observed that Baltimore "contains a more various and mixed population than any other city in the U. States . . . made up of adventurers from other parts of this country, of foreigners, FUGITIVES OF JUSTICE, the OUTCASTS OF SOCIETY AND THE DISGRACE OF IT."



Fig. 4. Almshouse, from Fielding Lucas, *Picture of Baltimore*. The elderly and disabled inhabitants of the Baltimore almshouse were outnumbered by the able-bodied poor who performed compulsory labor at the institution. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

That might have been a little strong, but Baltimore's diversity was nonetheless noteworthy. In 1820, Baltimore had the largest African American population of any city in the nation. With 4,357 slaves and 10,326 free blacks, more people of color resided in Baltimore than in New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, or New Orleans. Although African Americans comprised only one-quarter of Baltimore's total population, their numbers constantly drew the attention of travelers coming from northern locales. The majority of black Baltimoreans were free, but Baltimore's hybrid economy witnessed a large number of enslaved men and women living on their own, earning wages, or finishing a term of labor in exchange for a promise of manumission. While people of color had few opportunities to work outside manual labor or domestic service, most jobs in those sectors still fell to members of the city's 75 percent white majority. With white skin offering no immunity from drudgework and with German redemptioners (indentured servants) arriving through the 1810s, the boundary of slavery and freedom blurred further. Baltimore's workers—black and white, male and female, native born and immigrant, enslaved, indentured, and free—shared neighborhoods and meager material circumstances, but differences of race, status, ethnicity, and gender kept the city's laboring population from developing a coherent class identity or political voice.

For Baltimore's elected officials, prominent merchants, and moral reformers (who were often in fact the same people), the bad behavior of their working-class neighbors required much attention. Petitions to the city council complained of black women washing clothes too boisterously in a stream, Irish laborers singing too late into the evening, and unsupervised apprentices, servants, and slaves cursing and gambling in the marketplace. "Boys and Negroes" were frequently implicated together for throwing firecrackers, ripping up trees planted in new gentrified public squares, and although "verging to manhood," bathing nude in Jones Falls. "We have often seen a fine, bright-eyed, intelligent little fellow belonging to this class," noted the artist and lawyer John H. B. Latrobe, "with his cap set jauntily on one side of his head, his arms akimbo, his hands in his pockets, his feet apart, and, with a cigar in his mouth, bandying oaths and obscene jests with full-grown men, as though their equal in years and vice."

By the end of the 1820s, Baltimore leaders had devised several means of stemming disorder. New ordinances banned boys from throwing rocks, female hucksters from selling food door-to-door, and people of color from assembling after curfew. Benevolent societies provided religious schooling to impoverished children, Bibles to their unchurched fathers, and sewing to their underemployed mothers. Groups advocating the colonization of free African Americans to Liberia, the regulation of drinking establishments, and the suppression of

pauperism shared the goal of cleaning up the city.

Reformers in all cities of the early republic sought to stem vice. Where Baltimore truly distinguished itself was in its institutional response to crime and poverty. In 1822—while the city was still in the grips of an economic panic that started three years earlier—Baltimore's poor relief officials terminated almost all cash aid to the needy, and instead required welfare recipients to perform mandatory labor in the almshouse. No other American city had discovered this secret recipe for lowering expenditures: if the poor could only gain relief in the almshouse, the threat of coerced labor would make them unlikely to do so. And those who did enter the almshouse would offset costs by growing food, sewing uniforms, and building cribs and coffins. As a committee of Philadelphia officials noted with admiration, Baltimore was able to "derive an income from that class who are always the greatest burthen." Boston almshouse administrator Artemas Simonds concluded that "a rigid, uniform system toward paupers, like that of Baltimore, doubtless has the effect either of driving the idle, dissolute, vagrant class to other places, or of compelling them to reform their course of life." Equally noteworthy was the Maryland penitentiary, where several hundred men convicted of property crimes funded the entire establishment with the proceeds of their compulsory weaving. By the end of the 1820s, this Baltimore institution was turning a \$10,000 annual profit above its operating expenses.

Although the almshouse did not eliminate poverty any more than the penitentiary did crime, 1820s Baltimore attested to the optimism of a dynamic age. A massive parade celebrated the 1824 visit of Marquis de Lafayette, the French hero of the American Revolution. An even grander affair marked the 1828 groundbreaking of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad—the city's best hope for challenging New York's commercial supremacy. A young newspaperman named William Lloyd Garrison honed his skills at Baltimore's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. A young slave named Frederick Bailey (but soon to be Frederick Douglass) learned to read by bribing Irish children with food on Baltimore's waterfront. Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and William Wirt all garnered presidential nominations in Baltimore during the first national conventions in 1831 and 1832.

New possibilities always brought perils, however. Economic opportunities in the expanding city gave many working-class men and women enough money to become bank depositors. But the same opportunities gave financiers the chance to lose these deposits through reckless speculations. That is precisely what happened at the Bank of Maryland in 1834. Once it became known that the bank had issued fifty times more paper money than warranted by its holding in gold and silver, the savings of most small depositors instantly became worthless IOUs. Adding insult to injury, the bank's directors used the collapse to enrich themselves further. In previous years, they had borrowed large sums from the bank. Those loans would come due as the bank attempted to climb out of insolvency. Buying up credit slips from desperate workers for cents on the dollar, the directors quickly accumulated enough paper to meet their obligations. The bank's collapse prevented small depositors from reclaiming their money, but allowed the

directors to repay their own loans with worthless paper. After waiting seventeen months for the directors to open their books, public outrage boiled over in August 1835.

In the name of defrauded workers and widows who had lost their life savings, a mob with "Judge Lynch at its head" targeted the unapologetic directors and defenders of the Bank of Maryland. The rioters championed a moral economy that placed community needs above the inviolability of the free market. After all, the banking scandal mocked the notion that the market could regulate itself in the best interest of all. "This is the most popular mob I have ever witnessed," observed one city resident, "and I have seen several. Many of our most esteemed citizens wink at it—the poor have suffered, they could not get redress through the law, and so they have sought it in their own way, as ruinous as it may be to the interest of our city—the cries of widows and orphans are loud, and they will be answered." The crowd demolished houses, burned furniture, and drove the mayor from office, but before the militia restored order, at least twelve rioters had been shot dead.

In the following months and years, order and disorder continued to vie for supremacy in Baltimore. As the 1835 riots had illustrated—and as the author of the ORDER handbill reminded readers—the misbehavior of the city's best residents proved as threatening to Baltimore's future as the uncontrolled rage of the crowd. The reminder fell on deaf ears. Property holders called for a militarized "City Guard" to "prevent riotous and tumultuous meetings of the lawless and unprincipled, too abundant in every large city." Boys continued to throw rocks and to brawl at the scenes of fires. Enslaved men and women refused to stay put. The same railroad that augured Baltimore's future prosperity carried one Frederick Bailey into freedom and the new last name of Douglass. Baltimore remained the nation's third most populous city at the time of the Civil War, but as the Massachusetts and Pennsylvania soldiers passing through Baltimore to Washington D.C.'s defense in 1861 quickly realized, the epithet *Mobtown* still applied.

Further Reading:

A new anthology contains a number of interesting essays on Baltimore history: *From Mobtown to Charm City: New Perspectives on Baltimore's Past*, edited by Jessica Elfenbein, John R. Breihan, and Thomas L. Hollowak (Baltimore, 2002). The best introduction to the city is Sherry Olson, *Baltimore: The Building of an American City*, second edition, (Baltimore, 1997). For the experiences of enslaved and free African Americans, see T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, 1997); and Christopher Phillips, *Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860* (Urbana, 1997). Amy S. Greenberg's *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Princeton, 1998) devotes much attention to order and disorder in Baltimore, as does William R. Sutton's *Journeyman for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore* (University

Park, Pa., 1998). Frank Towers will soon publish an important study on 1850s Baltimore, tentatively titled *The Coming of the Civil War in the Urban South: Baltimore and the Politics of Free Labor in the Slave States*. Within the next few years, also look for the books emerging from the recent doctoral dissertations on Baltimore in the early republic by Richard Chew, Barbara Wallace, Joshua Civin, and Seth Rockman.

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