

We have a problem with vacants in Baltimore. What is a vacant? It might be a narrow two-story rowhouse built in the 1910s - bank-owned but intact. It might a half-collapsed 1870s mansion, four stories of grand Italianate interior piling up in the basement. Baltimore is estimated to hold around 16,000 vacant properties -- mostly attached rowhouses built before WWII.

Visitors to Baltimore won't find vacant houses in every neighborhood. In the largely white area of Hampden, Remington and Medfield, less than 1% homes are vacant -- around sixty buildings. In the West Baltimore neighborhoods of Sandtown-Winchester and Harlem Park, over one-third of residential properties are vacant -- more than 2,000 buildings.

It was there in Sandtown where a six Baltimore police officers arrested Freddie Gray on April 12. A week later, Gray's death from injuries suffered in police custody sparked my city's continuing protests against police violence. Residents marched and organized, others attacked local storefronts and burned police cars, prompting the Mayor to impose a citywide curfew and the Governor to bring in National Guard troops. Journalists from across the nation descended on Baltimore to write about the so-called "riots" and ask the question: what's the problem with Baltimore? How did the city get to be so poor, so violent and so segregated? Why does Baltimore have so many vacant houses?

Despite the confident explanations offered by local and national commentators, these are not easy questions to answer. Even when people in Baltimore try to explain our "vacant house problem," often our answers are incomplete at best and misleading at worst.

A professor at Johns Hopkins University might bring up the \$1.5 billion loss for Bethlehem Steel in 1982 -- a watershed moment in a decade that lost thousands of "good jobs" to neoliberalism and globalization.

A neighborhood activist in Druid Heights might point back to the unrest that rocked the city after the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King -- leaving a legacy of vacant lots and vacant buildings.

A retiree living in Columbia who grew up shopping at downtown department stores may sadly recall when O'Neil's closed the day after Christmas in 1955.

An amateur urban planner on Facebook might talk about how the city's population peaked around 1 million in 1950 before falling more than a third to 620,961 people in 2010.

Limited as they are, each of these stories has power to shape public policy around vacant housing. Do we invest in tearing houses down or fixing them up? Can demolition really solve Baltimore's vacant house problem? Can historic preservation?

The recent Blight as Politics Symposium at the University of Michigan pushed scholars to question just-so stories of "blight" and vacancy noting how, with few exceptions:

"discussions of 'blight' have proceeded in dehistoricized and depoliticized contexts oriented around narrow technical parameters, as if 'blight' was an easily defined and objective phenomenon instead of the spatial residue of racism and segregation, deindustrialization, disinvestment..."

Baltimore's vacant houses -- an iconic symbol of the city's poverty and violence -- appeared before 1982, before 1968, and before 1950. As early as 1880, the Baltimore City Police Department attempted to monitor and mitigate the "vacant house problem" in the city's wealthy suburbs. In 1910, observers in Baltimore called vacant houses "a growing evil," a source of "common alarm." In 1932, one prominent local architect declared that the rowhouse had no potential for "modern and reasonably attractive" use; Baltimore's "dying areas" would be forced into a "hopeless future competition" with the suburbs. Vacant

houses have demolished, wrecked, salvaged, policed, stigmatized, preserved, and occupied. Vacant houses break hearts and neighborhoods .

Today, I'll talk about significance of demolition in the 1800s, the rise of metal theft from vacant homes in the late 1800s, and the relationship of segregation to vacant housing in the early 1910s. In my research and writing on this topic, I hope to uncover new approaches for how preservation should engage with the challenge of vacant houses and the underlying issues of racism, regional growth, and inequality.

Concerns over population loss and vacant housing in Baltimore date back nearly two centuries. Reflecting on the state of the city after the Panic of 1819, local newspaper publisher Hezekiah Niles wrote:

“because of the want of employment in those years, [there was a] consequent removal of the people, to the north, south, east and west.”

Then writing in 1831, Niles boasted that Baltimore had recovered from the severe depression: “There is hardly a house unoccupied, though a very large number was built the last season.”

With capital from men like Niles, and labor from recent immigrants, enslaved Africans and free blacks, Baltimore grew quickly - a veritable Silicon Valley of antebellum America. The city more than doubled in population between 1830 and 1850. As the city grew, property-owners tore down hundreds of old homes to make way for new warehouses and commercial buildings around the harbor.

In May 1847, the *National Intelligencer* reported on a rare demolition "deemed worthy of notice," writing:

“workmen are now engaged tearing down the very oldest house in Baltimore; to erect in its stead an elegant new warehouse. [...] Daguerreotype, sketches, and other drawings were taken of it, to preserve as relics, prior to its demolition.”

In a later example from January 1891, locals gathered at the scene of Tusculum, a former suburban mansion fondly remembered by the group as the host of a vibrant arts and poetry society several decades prior. The crowd watched the “quaint but pretentious little building of classic architecture” demolished “before the march of modern improvement.” They snatched up fragments of “mantel-pieces and bits of its woodwork [...] for souvenirs.” Despite the building’s neglect, Tusculum still occupied immediately prior to the demolition by a “family of colored people” who likely had little power to protest their eviction. It seems unlikely they participated in the day’s hunt for mementoes.

After demolition, the elements of an abandoned building can also be turned into a source of subsistence and survival. The hard times that Hezekiah Niles witnessed in the early 1820s returned again in wake of the Panic of 1893. In February 1895, the *Sun* reported how:

“The demolition of the Old City College building [...] was eagerly watched all day yesterday by a crowd of persons armed with baskets or bags, and anxious to pick from the ruins some bits of wood to add to their scanty store of fuel at home.”

These demolitions - just a few of those “deemed worthy of notice” - are an important reminder of the significant presence of vacant houses in 19th century Baltimore. One resident protested in October 1898:

“Other cities have endeavored to make capital of reports of the very large number of vacant houses in Baltimore, claiming it as an evidence that this city is falling behind.”

The writer continues to highlight a strong resurgence in home building - but, as the next few decades illustrated, strong growth around the edges could paradoxically exacerbate the problem of vacant housing around the city’s core.

Between 1850 and 1880, Baltimore’s population doubled again and new buildings sprawled over the city limits and into “the Belt” - an area of factories and suburban cottages

surrounding the city on all sides. Inadequate sewers and frequent outbreaks of disease encouraged many well-off urban and suburban residents to abandon their homes and leave the city each summer.

This pattern of seasonal vacancy illustrates the challenge of defining a “vacant house.” Whether a property owner leaves their house unoccupied for a month or a year or a decade, when does it become vacant? The persistence and scale of seasonal vacancy between the 1860s and early 1900s, left many homes at risk of metal theft - an illicit form of salvage and demolition - placing a new burden on Baltimore city and county police officers to protect vacant homes on behalf of their absent owners.

A typical case took place in March 1868 when thieves in the night “carried off, undetected, two chandeliers and six brackets valued at \$125” from a vacant dwelling on West Lombard Street. In 1877, a suburban home in northwest Baltimore left standing “vacant for some months” was “entered by vandals and despoiled of nearly all its detachable metal fittings.” The Baltimore *Sun* noted, “Residents of the belt complain that depredations of this kind are frequent.” In 1887, two men were arrested for taking “copper lining in bath-tubs, gas brackets, globes and lead pipe” from “unoccupied houses” in a West Baltimore neighborhood near Fulton avenue.

The police met these new threats with creative responses. In 1877, one officer encouraged property-owners cut “peep-holes” in their back fences “at convenient points for observation... [so] the officers can have a full view of the rear of the premises without climbing over.” In August 1881, the police asked local families to report travel plans to their district police captains creating what is likely the city’s earliest inventory of vacant buildings. That year, the *Sun* reported:

“This summer the exodus from Baltimore has been greater than usual, and there are probably some twelve or thirteen hundred houses vacant, mainly in the north and northwestern sections of the city. The protection of this property is left to the police,

and how to preserve it intact has been a matter of careful consideration by the police authorities.”

Metal theft is an early example of illicit and criminal activity located within and around vacant houses but it is far from the last. In the 1910s and 1920s, police raided illegal stills and gambling halls set up in vacant homes. In the 1930s, officers made mass arrests of "vagrants," those people left homeless and unemployed by the Great Depression, who took shelter in the city's stock of abandoned buildings.

In this way, vacant houses became more than just temporarily unoccupied buildings - they became a threat to public order. A threat that prompted an aggressive response by both the police and elected officials then and now.

A final example from 1910 illustrates the challenge that many people in Baltimore faced as they tried to come to terms with the complex causes of vacant housing.

Some contemporary observers clearly saw how suburban growth helped to drive Baltimore's vacant house problem. But then, and perhaps now, anxiety over high property taxes, worries over diminished property values and the vocal supporters of white supremacy largely defined the terms of the debate.

Baltimore never challenged the enormous public subsidies for suburban growth built into 19th century tax policy and infrastructure development. The city never encouraged more investment in the maintenance of older city neighborhoods - by then occupied largely by recent European immigrants and African Americans. Instead, Baltimore tried to fight vacancy by writing racism into local housing laws and expanding the power of the city to condemn and demolish distressed buildings.

In August 1910, the Baltimore Police board released a “complete census of the number of houses, both vacant and occupied in the city,” undertaken at the request of real estate firm of William Martien & Company. At the time, real estate agent James Cary Martien argued:

“The number of vacant houses in the city is due both to the many dwellings being built in the suburbs and the dilapidated condition of many in Baltimore.”

Martien’s focus on supply and demand neglected to engage for the importance role of racial segregation. In the weeks that followed this publication, a series of letters to the *Sun* responded to the news and attempted to closely link vacant homes to the perceived threat of “negro invasion.”

When some residents argued that high property taxes contributed to owners abandoning their homes, a letter from a northwest Baltimore resident (published on August 27 under the name “Pure White”) wrote:

“When a man works and saves and buys a home thinking it will be his shelter in his old age, and wakes up some morning to find he has a negro neighbor, he feels hurt and aggrieved that he has to give up his home, but he moves. [...] **The real estate men—a few of them, not all—are to blame for the vacant houses and with them, lies the remedy.**”

A letter signed by “Justice” appeared on September 2 echoed this sentiment and demanded elected officials protect his neighborhood from “invasion” (and vacant houses) writing:

“There are several vacant houses in the block, and this fear may be the potent cause of non-rental or sale. **Each vacant house is a standing menace to the rest.**”

Another letter, appearing on September 15, distinguished the “temporary” vacancy of the past with the “growing” issue that faced the city:

“The vacant house problem in the city should be one of grave concern at this time to our municipal administrators, to our real estate agents and to those having the

welfare of the city at heart. **It is not a temporary but a growing evil** that is confronting and threatening every owner of property. The number of vacant houses has grown and grown until at last there is **common alarm in the matter**, and justly so...”

Residents like “Pure White” and “Justice” won a victory of sorts on December 20, 1910, when Baltimore Mayor John Barry Mahool signed into law the West Segregation Ordinance, named for the bill’s sponsor, Council Samuel L. West. West represented the northwestern neighborhoods, noted in that year’s police report as having the city’s highest concentration of vacant houses.

The new law was the first city ordinance in the nation to require racially segregated housing. It forbid black residents from moving to designated “white blocks” and white residents from moving to designated “colored blocks.” Maryland courts soon overturned the law as unconstitutional but the legacy of segregated housing endures.

Vacant housing is typically overlooked in Baltimore’s history of segregation but resident accounts demonstrate how it played a critical role in stoking white fears and reinforcing a racialized perception of “blight” in the decades that followed.

In 1914, with the start of World War I, debates over vacant housing retreated as the home building industry ground to near complete halt. During World War II, concern over blight focused on housing “congestion” rather than vacancy but there is evidence of a growing number of uninhabitable buildings. The formal structure of today’s vacant house policies began to take shape between in 1950s and 1970s with the unprecedented demolition of thousands of vacant and occupied houses with millions in public funding. And over the past decade, the scale and scope of issues around vacant houses has only continued to grow.

Baltimore's current debate over what to do about vacant houses in Sandtown is framed by a history of condemnation and demolition, stories about the places we choose to forget, to tear down, and to salvage instead of save. In this way, we can read the history of vacants -- how we talk about them and what we do about them -- as an alternate history of historic preservation itself.

Advocates for historic preservation and community development have struggled to secure public support for substantial reinvestment in historic urban cores. Legacy City leaders from Detroit to Cleveland to Baltimore have retreated from seemingly unattainable goals of regional governance or more generous funding for affordable housing. Instead, we see strategic demolition and "blight elimination" championed as a short-term necessity.

In the past and present, many want to talk about the "vacant house problem" as just that - a problem with a house - physically locating the problem in low-income African American communities; placing the sole responsibility to solve to this problem on those residents; avoiding an honest accounting of the complicity of political and spatial inequality in creating these condition.

Let's all work to make sure the next century offers a new definition of the "vacant house problem" and, perhaps, a new set of solutions.

Notes

These are all passages cut from the above paper. Please ignore!

Perhaps some among the crowd made their home in some of Baltimore's hundreds of vacant houses. In the 1880s, many impoverished travelers - "tramps" - had been found

“sleeping in the brick and limekilns of South and Southwest Baltimore.” A white person with no home could find a place to spend the night at a police station house, but as the *Sun* observed in 1888:

“A notable fact is the small number of colored tramps who call at the station-houses. This is not because there are no colored tramps, but because they are generally badly treated by their white brethren when lodging together.”

This period also saw the emerging concern with the visibility of vacant houses as a symbol of the city’s perceived decline. One letter, published on on March 5, 1912 and signed by “Belle Baltimore,” decried the sight of vacant houses as the city prepared to celebrate the Centennial of the Battle of Baltimore in 1914:

“While we are cleaning house to welcome visitors to Baltimore in June, there is one very offensive spectacle we should strive to remove. It is the sight of so many residences on our best avenues, vacant, dead and decaying houses, with staring, grimy windows covered with signs 'For Rent' or 'For Sale,' like ghastly invitations to a funeral.”

“Belle Baltimore” continued to complain about burdensome taxes required to support the investment in the suburban Annex where “speculative builders” erected “row of these sardine boxes” that make Baltimore “more and more like a model workhouse or prison every year.” The letter concludes with a tone of finality:

“To escape unjust taxation people of means are taking refuge in apartments or in the suburbs.... Does not this state of things savor a little of the knights of the road, who became popular heroes by 'robbing the rich to serve the poor?' One thing is certain: Well-to-do people will shun cities infested by such gentry. Because of it Baltimore is already like a tree rotten at the core.”