

The Changing City: Ridgely's Delight: How Much For History?

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Ridgely's Delight:

How Much For History?

By JAMES D. DILTS

The play could be written about any large city on the east coast. The scenery is simple and the cast is small, calling for:

An aged but architecturally and historically valuable house, built in 1795 or thereabouts. It is in a decaying neighborhood where many of the buildings are boarded up or vandalized or both. Yet the house has not lost its dignity and the neighborhood has the potential for rehabilitation. In fact, if one looks carefully, he can see it beginning.

Act I: As the curtain rises, we see, gathered in front of the house, a group of people. One of them speaks:

Preservationist, member of a group trying to rehabilitate the area (they are emotional and somewhat disorganized): "You can't tear this house down."

Real estate developer, member of a syndicate that wants to see a gas station built on the site (they have God, and perhaps more important at the moment, the law on their side): "This is private property and you're a trespasser and if you don't leave I'll have you arrested." The bulldozers creep closer but at the last minute the injunction arrives and the house is spared.

Act II: The scene shifts first to one downtown courtroom, then another, as lawyers plead the cases of the parties in the dispute.

Act III (about a month later): The house is knocked down anyway.

Story Begins Earlier

Such a confrontation actually did take place early in February in front of 615 Washington boulevard, one of the finest Eighteenth Century houses in the city. But that was near the end of the story. It begins about four and a half years earlier.

That was when Walton and Louise White and seven of their eight children moved from Howard Park in northwest Baltimore into a house down the street from 615. Mr. White is an insurance agent and Mrs. White is in real estate. It took them some time to decide to move to Washington boulevard but they finally couldn't resist the house any longer.

It is about as old as the one that was knocked down. That one (615) was supposedly a station on the underground rail road. In any case, a tunnel connected the two buildings. The Whites are now trying to excavate it. Inside their house they have already uncovered a fireplace the size of a roltop desk. Out in back, where a second-story balcony on what was presumably the old servants' quarters overlooks the yard and a large tree, they are putting in flower beds. Further back is another section of the house, once occupied by a pants factory. It died during the Depression.

The White's rent the first floor to an artist; on the second, their teen-age son

sometimes plays basketball in a 58-foot room.

The Whites' neighborhood is an old section of the city, mostly built before 1840 but it has grown shabby through years of neglect by absentee landlords and poor tenants.

The area was also threatened with a ramp of the East-West expressway, according to Clement R. Mercaldo, one of four partners and the attorney for Ten Downing Enterprises, a real estate investment firm that had its own plans for the neighborhood.

One of the Ten Downing partners owned a house near 615 Washington boulevard. Mr. Mercaldo claims they had been thinking of the corner where the house stood as a good site for a gas station as far back as the time the Whites were moving into the neighborhood, but were held up only by the city's indecision on the expressway route. (The corner in question is at Greene street, the heavily-traveled entrance to the Baltimore-Washington parkway.)

Ignorant of each other's plans, the two groups went about their business for the next few years. Mrs. White took an active interest in the neighborhood. For a time, she edited a bi-weekly local newspaper, "The Pigtown Post." (Pigtown derives its name from the days when the livestock was driven through the streets to the stockyards; according to Mrs. White it is actually further west than their area.)

The Pigtown Post ran out of news and Mrs. White turned her attention to an improvement association which was organized in the effort to save the Babe Ruth house on nearby Emory street. They called it the Ridgely's Delight Improvement Association, Ridgely's Delight being the title of the original land grant and a more suitable name for a neighborhood they hoped would attract new residents.

Some new people did move to Ridgely's Delight and started to restore the homes. Then last fall the Ten Downing organization began to acquire property for the gas station. By that time, Mobil Oil had become interested in the property.

The two groups met each other formally at a hearing before the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals. The board must approve new gas stations even when they are to be built in areas already zoned for second commercial as this one was. "It was a disheartening experience," said Mrs. White. One of the board members slept through most of the proceedings.

Mobil States Plans

The Ridgely's Delight group appeared with their lawyer, Donald G. McIntosh. Mr. Mercaldo represented Ten Downing Enterprises. The proceedings started with Mobil spokesmen. One said the gas station was to consist of a one-story masonry and steel service building (in a style the company calls "Pegasus") with three pump islands, floodlights and a 7 by 19 foot sign, and that it would probably be a 24-hour operation. He said the

nearest gas station was half a mile away.

Mr. McIntosh said a couple of gas stations closer to the corner had gone out of business recently but he didn't really make the point. The Ridgely's Delight group also missed in their endeavor to show that a church stood within a 300 foot radius of the proposed station, which is prohibited by the zoning ordinance. Their first candidate was the Church of Man which had opened across the street in October. The other was the St. John's Gospel Tabernacle on South Greene street. It had been in existence for some 14 years but the Board restricted its definition of churches to those that had tax exemptions and nobody knew for sure whether these did.

Mr. Mercaldo then called one of his partners in Ten Downing, Isadore Kostinsky, and ran him through his paces. They pointed out the inconvenience of an existing gas station at Paca and Pratt streets, established that the houses then standing on the proposed site were "pretty bad" and said there were already a lot of commercial establishments in the area anyway.

Mr. McIntosh tried to intervene: "Gentlemen I really do apologize but I really learned to love this city and . . ."

Mr. Cuccia (a board member): "You love the city but let's get this case over with. We've got another one waiting."

Mr. McIntosh finally put himself on as a witness: "I own buildings in that area, because I do love the city of Baltimore and I saw these old buildings which could have been beautiful being destroyed by neglect . . . I decided . . . I would buy buildings. I would restore them, I would try to do something for the city . . . This one or two blocks . . . has historical significance . . ."

Mr. Cuccia: "Mr. McIntosh, let's not go back into history . . . Let's talk about the gas station period."

Mr. McIntosh's Buildings

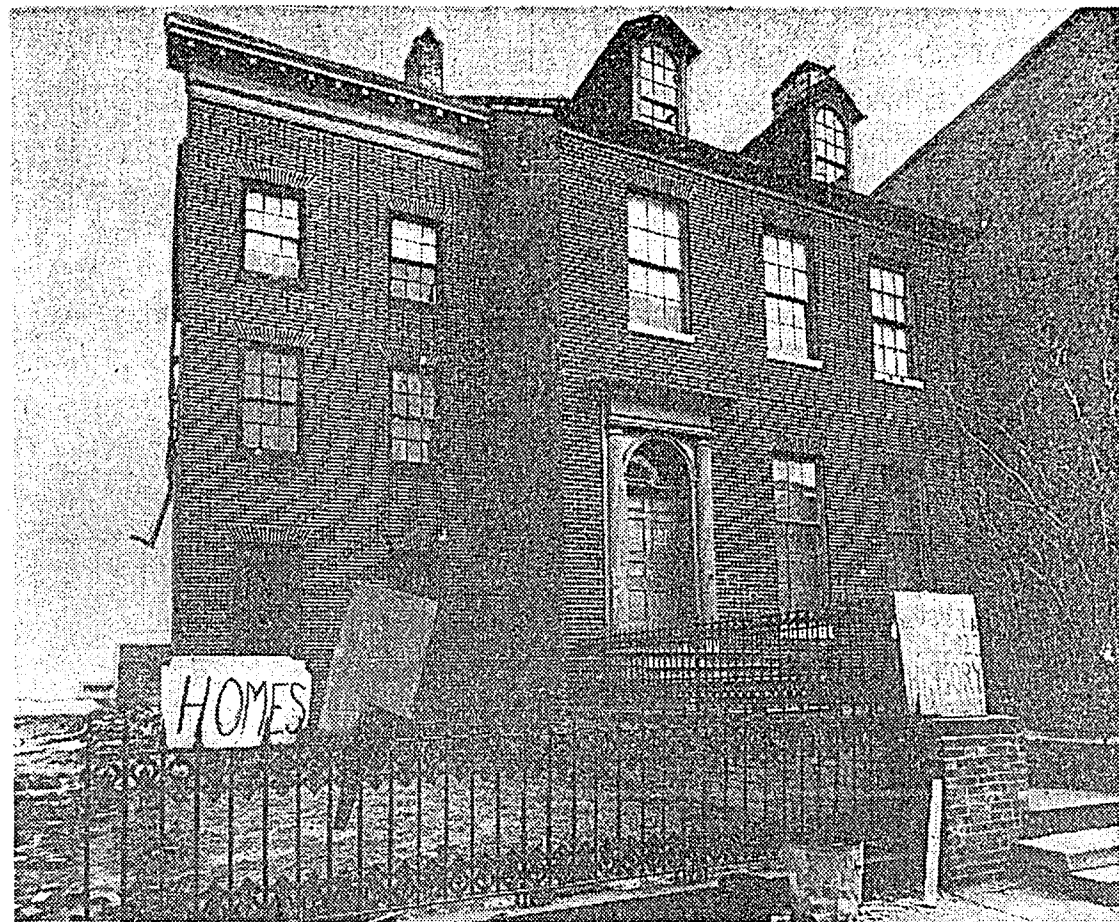
Mr. Mercaldo asked Mr. McIntosh what buildings he owned and he told him.

Q. What do you intend to do with them?

A. Renovate them decently, so that decent people who do not make a great deal of money can have a decent place to live.

Mr. Hofferbert (a board member): "We're not interested in the social conditions of society."

And so it went, although the board members did give Mrs. White and a few others a brief chance to explain what they were trying to do. "Many of the houses on Washington boulevard are either in complete repair or in the process of being repaired," she said. "We succeeded, after 10 months, in getting the trucks off Washington boulevard. They rattled people's nerves, people's teeth for 40 years . . . We have had trees installed along Washington boulevard. We worked to preserve the Babe Ruth house, with a lot of opposition from people in the city. We have people coming to our area who want to stay. It's the gateway to the city, it's the first thing anybody sees as they



Neighborhood residents put up signs protesting the destruction of the house at 615 Washington Boulevard, circa 1795; it is now a prime gas station site.

come into Baltimore . . . If people continue to encroach upon us, there'll be nothing left."

Even Bip Hodges State Senator William L. Hodges, D., 6th) was moved to eloquence. "This is my home bailiwick," he said. "I'm like a gardener who watches a tree, and the tree is dying. And if these people can generate any new vitality into a dying neighborhood . . . I'm all for them . . . I'm a type of representative when my peoples are in trouble I come there too."

Senator Hodges Backs Down

Having established for his constituents that he was on the job, Senator Hodges then backed down.

Chairman Rubin: "You would be opposed to the erection of a gas station on this corner?"

Senator Hodges: "Well, if it would tend to further deteriorate the neighborhood."

Q. Do you think it would, Senator?

A. I don't know.

Three days later, the Board ruled against the protestors and in favor of the gas station proponents. "The Court of Appeals says we can't deny a gas station arbitrarily," said Mr. Rubin later. "The people preferred not to have a gas station."

They also preferred to appeal the case, but for reasons unexplained, their lawyer, Mr. McIntosh didn't file the appeal until the last minute. They later got another lawyer, in fact a whole series of them and there followed several confusing contretemps in the courts and elsewhere.

In the meantime, Ten Downing Enterprises had almost assembled its real estate package for Mobil Oil. Six properties figured in the transaction: five houses and a vacant corner lot. Ten Downing already owned 609 Washington boulevard, for which they had paid \$6,000 in 1965. Last September, they bought 613 and 617 for \$14,000. In October, the firm bought 611 for \$20,000. In November they bought

the corner lot from the city for \$16,250. The only house they lacked was 615. It was the key both to their gas station deal and to the plans of the Ridgely's Delight Improvement Association.

Sizable Fight Erupts

So a sizable fight erupted over it. Though the appeal of the zoning board's decision had been filed (and is still pending) Leonard J. Kerpelman, attorney for Ridgely's Delight, filed an equity case in Baltimore City Court asking the court to restrain the developers from demolishing the house and thereby "denying us our appeal by bulldozer." (By this time, some of the other properties had already been razed.)

The Ridgely's Delight and Ten Downing groups squared off again; Ridgely's Delight lost again. Mr. Kerpelman decided to try to buy the house himself, after failing to interest preservation societies and private donors in helping out. This failed, too, even though Mr. Kerpelman offered the owner \$30,000 for the house and Ten Downing had offered only \$20,000.

Mr. Kerpelman made a hectic round of phone calls to city officials and personal visits to Appeals Court judges—all to no avail. According to Mr. Kerpelman, City Solicitor George Russell said that the city could see no reason for sparing the house and so, on Saturday, March 14, it came down.

The entrepreneurs were so angered over the delay the preservationists caused them, they wouldn't even allow the woodwork of the house to be salvaged.

There were two primary reasons for sparing the house. The first is that according to William V. Elder curator of Fine Arts at the Baltimore Museum of Art, it was the second finest house of its period in Baltimore (the first being the Captain Steele house on Fells Point.)

But just as important as the house were the hopes of Mrs. White and the others of the Ridgely's Delight Improvement Association for remaking their neighborhood. When the house fell, so did their hopes.

Several questions remain unanswered. One is why, if the house was on the city's proposed landmarks list, the Planning Commission, in December, 1969, approved the plan for the gas station. According to Larry Reich, head of the Planning Department, the landmarks list at that time hadn't been officially adopted by the commission and that therefore there was no reason for looking at the list. (It has since been adopted by the Planning Commission and is now in the City Council. If the ordinance is passed it will save buildings on the list from the fate of 615 Washington boulevard.)

The Zoning Board gave consideration to the Planning Commission's recommendation as it does in all such cases. But why didn't it give consideration to the section of the zoning ordinance that requires it to be aware of "the preservation of cultural and historic landmarks?" Mr. Rubin said he was unfamiliar with that section.

Finally, there seems to be no lack of foundation money to embalm dead communities such as Williamsburg. Why isn't there money to save living ones like Ridgely's Delight?

Money is what it all eventually comes down to. The Ten Downing partners spent roughly \$70,000 acquiring the properties. The razing costs will amount to a few thousand more. It was revealed in court, according to Mr. Kerpelman, that the selling price to Mobil was \$300,000.

The commercial interests won, as they usually do in the cities, simply because nobody has the money or the spirit to compete with them on anywhere near an equal footing. Mrs. White, the neighborhood improvement association, and the preservationists lost. And so, perhaps, did the rest of us.