



Built to Last

No. 2

Monument Square & the Battle Monument

(1805 & after, Maximilian Godefroy & others, architects)

Excerpt from the full report written by Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., for HABS

Originally known as “Courthouse Square,” Monument Square was the site of Baltimore’s first public buildings—a courthouse and jail, built in 1768. In 1805, the city erected a more substantial, brick courthouse on the site of the current courthouse (built 1894-1900), indicating that by the turn of the nineteenth century the square was firmly established as the functional center of civic life. The construction of the Battle Monument in 1815-25 to commemorate the soldiers who had died in the Battle of North Point during the War of 1812 underscored the square’s importance as a symbol of civic identity and pride. The Battle Monument, together with the Washington Monument in nearby Mount Vernon Place, prompted President John Quincy Adams to refer to Baltimore in 1827 as “the monumental city.”



Monument Square & the Battle Monument, bird’s-eye view from the southeast. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.

Monument Square stands near the southwest corner of a 510-acre property that was deeded by a series of crown warrants to Thomas Cole in 1668. The property passed within the year to James Todd who, in 1701, sold the property to Charles Carroll. This Charles Carroll, with his brother Daniel, petitioned the Maryland Assembly in 1729 for the right to sell 60 one-acre lots within this land by subscription through a privately-held development corporation called The Baltimore Company. Governor Calvert signed the agreement allowing the laying out of a town in the midst of Cole’s Harbor in August 1729.

Around 1730, the inhabitants of Baltimore erected a wooden stockade around the original 60-acre charter. It was built and maintained by prominent property owners by subscription and, as it faced land-

ward, appears to have been erected to discourage Native American incursions. Perhaps because no raid was attempted against the settlement, the wooden fence was plundered within a few years for firewood. The future location of the courthouse, on a high bluff well within the perimeter stockade, may well have been recognized as one of the most secure spots within the settlement.

By 1752, the village still counted only twenty-five houses, one church and two taverns. But waves of immigrants and successful trade led to the passage, in 1768, of a bill removing the county courthouse and jail from Joppa Town to within the town limits of Baltimore. The

act specified the site at the northern terminus of Calvert Street for a new courthouse and jail. When, in 1784, the building was raised to allow Calvert Street to proceed northward, the open passageway underneath the building was “supplied with stocks, pillory, and whipping-post” in a brutal and literal display of authority.

Gradual annexation of additional lots of land led, in 1796, to the official incorporation of Baltimore as a town. This sign of official recognition elevated the status of the town, its citizens and, by association, its institutions. Within a decade, the elevated courthouse was replaced by a structure that was less novel but perhaps more in keeping with the dignity and striving for gentility that

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Monument Square & the Battle Monument (continued)

characterized the new town of Baltimore at the turn of the 19th century.

Between 1800 and 1816, the population of Baltimore doubled again to 60,000. This increase partly explains the building boom that occurred, especially in the years 1810-16. More than simple need, however, the building boom of this period reflected the increasing social stratification of Baltimore and the desire of its elite to express their status and sophistication through the accoutrements of culture, including architecture.

The courthouse, especially with its walk-through jail, was an obsolete, unsophisticated relic of the frontier town of the previous generation. Not surprisingly, in 1805, construction began on a new, more fashionable courthouse to the northwest of the old one (on the site of the current 1895 courthouse). It was considered "an immense edifice" for its time, thereby reasserting government's status amidst all the fine new buildings of the town.

The 1805 courthouse faced north, not east over the square. In fact, until 1815 and the raising of the Battle Monument, the square *per se* did not exist except as a gap in the street grid where the old courthouse had once straddled Calvert Street. The choice of the old courthouse site for Godefroy's monument was probably at least partly pragmatic: it filled the empty space at the crest of Calvert left by the old courthouse.

By the mid-1820s, the houses near the courthouse were known as an elite residential enclave. By working backward from this period, it seems certain that many of the houses were constructed in this area just after the courthouse was finished. The presence of elite residents may also explain why in 1812, so soon after the new courthouse was completed, a separate jail in another building three blocks west was commissioned.

Following the War of 1812, the commission for a monument to the soldiers who fell in the Battle of

North Point made the Battle Monument Baltimore's first major civic art undertaking (the cornerstone of Baltimore's Washington Monument was not set until four months later, in July 1815). The prominent citizens who lived near the courthouse saw an opportunity not only to honor their war dead, but also to embellish their neighborhood with a Parisian-style sculptural column. James Buchanan, one of the five commissioners appointed to implement the resolution to produce a monument and install it with great fanfare, lived in a townhouse directly facing the site for Maximilian Godefroy's Neo-Classical battle column.

On March 1, 1815, a procession led by a hearse bearing a scale replica of the column deposited an array of military and civic dignitaries on the site of the 1768 courthouse in mid-Calvert Street, where they placed the cornerstone for the Battle Monument. Delays in material shipments meant the column was not completed until 1817. Antonio Capellano's marble statue of the apotheosis of Baltimore was raised into place, 52 feet above the street, in September 1822. City council decided to further embellish the column by adding inscriptions, bas-reliefs and various urns and accoutrements.

The genteel connotations of a Monument Square address surely prompted the building of Barnum's Hotel on the corner of Calvert & Fayette Streets in 1826. Visiting dignitaries such as President John Quincy Adams, celebrities such as actress Sarah Bernhardt and soprano Jenny Lind and writers such as Frances Trollope, Washington Irving and Charles Dickens were provided with state-of-the-art accommodations, overlooking a monument in a piazza, surrounded by the city's most refined persons. Residents of the square at the time of the construction of Barnum's Hotel included monument commissioner James A Buchanan; William Gilmore (brother of prominent art collector and businessman Robert Gilmore, Jr.) and Benjamin Chew Howard (son

of Revolutionary War hero John Eager Howard). Structures adjacent to the square were filled with the offices of the attorneys who pled their cases and filed documents in the courthouse.

The complete report for this structure, including bibliographic citations and references, may be obtained from the Historic American Buildings Survey beginning in September 2002. Copies of this information sheet may be downloaded at no cost from the HABS web site:

www.cr.nps.gov/habs/haer/habs/

During the summer of 2001, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland Historical Trust, in coordination with the City of Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and Preservation Maryland, recorded ten historic buildings and sites within Baltimore's Central Business District through large-format photography and original historical research. The heart of the downtown area and focus of intensive redevelopment efforts, Baltimore's Central Business District is a designated city historic district and home to a diverse array of historic commercial and civic buildings, churches, theaters and other landmarks. Many of them predate the district's Great Fire of 1904 and chronicle Baltimore's rise as a financial, commercial and civic center. This project, resulting in more than 150 photographs by Baltimore photographer James W. Rosenthal for HABS and ten detailed architectural histories by Laurie Ossman, PhD., also a Baltimore resident, grew out of concern about the recent loss of the Merchants & Miners Transportation Company Building at 17 Light Street and other buildings of architectural distinction in Baltimore.

Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Bank of America Building (1929; formerly the Baltimore Trust Company Building), and in function from Old St. Paul's Church (1846) to the Gayety Theatre (1906), the ten landmarks selected for this study illustrate the architectural diversity of the district and the myriad forces that have informed the district's growth and evolution over time. The exhibit, launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month, and the companion walking tour provide a glimpse into the architectural history of Baltimore's Central Business District. It is hoped that the exhibit and brochure will encourage further exploration and preservation of Baltimore's tremendously rich architectural heritage.