

The Politics of Urban Expansion: Baltimore and the Sewerage Question, 1859-1905

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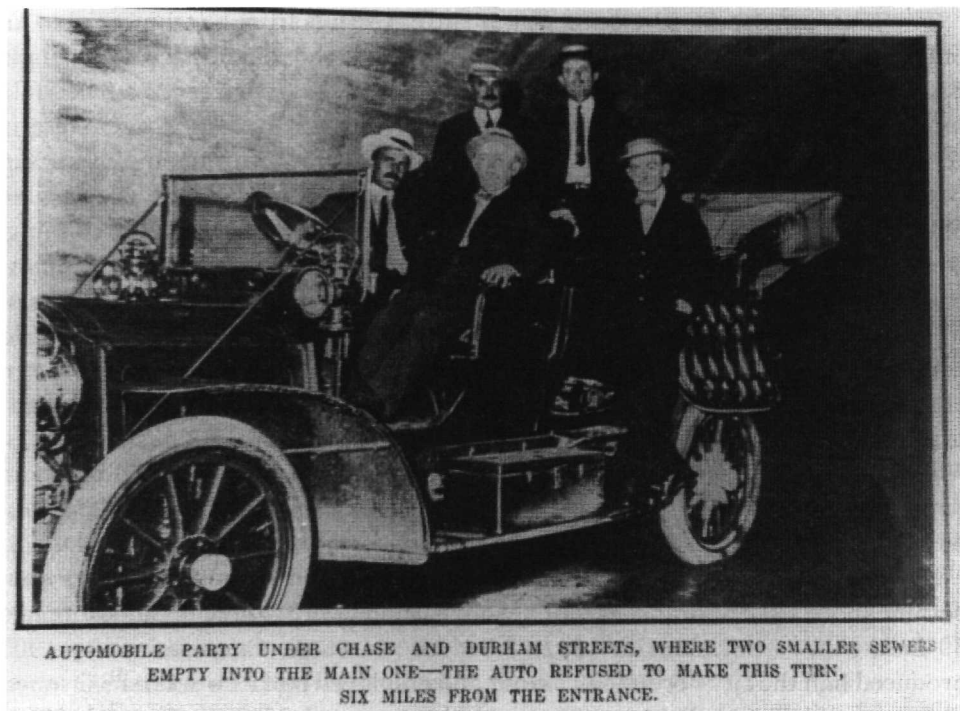
In the spring of 1905 Baltimoreans took part in one of their greatest public debates. Voters considered three referenda for improvement of the city's built environment, the most important and expensive of which permitted a \$10 million bond issue to build a municipal sewer system.¹ The campaign marked a period of sudden public activity, highlighted by the downtown rebuilding efforts that followed the Great Fire of February 1904. Politicians and neighborhood associations held public rallies. Newspapers described complicated financing schemes and printed pieces explaining "What It Means to Women." Ministers exhorted their congregations. Many landlords and managers ordered tenants and workers to vote for the loans. No major organization publicly opposed the referenda. Senator Isador Raynor, a powerful figure in the city's Democratic Party, declared that:

If these loans are rejected we cut loose from every progressive city in the Union and proclaim not only to our own people, but to every stranger who visits our gates and has business interests in our midst, that we have reached a stage of completion and that we do not propose to take a single step that will improve our environment or promote our success.²

All the referenda carried, the sewerage measure winning by the largest margin, 37,177 to 25,253. Within months Mayor E. Clay Timanus appointed a commission that decided on a plan of dual and connected sewers, one for storm water and one for human and industrial wastes, and began planning a sewage treatment plant on the Back River. Over the next eleven years, as the system took shape underground, city officials posed for group pictures with automobiles and buggies inside huge drain pipes. Visitors came from all over the world to inspect not only the emerging "city beneath the city" but also Baltimore's up-to-date sewerage plant.

The enthusiasm of 1905 was a stark contrast to the city's sluggish movement on sewers the previous four decades. Almost every major city in the world had built a comprehensive waste disposal system, but Baltimore balked.³ At a time when

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Automobile Party Under Chase and Durham Streets, Where Two Smaller Sewers Empty into the Main One—the Auto Refused to Make this Turn, Six Miles from the Entrance, photograph by Mrs. Sadie Miller for an article “In the Sewers of Baltimore.” (Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly, 16 September 1909.)

economic expansion required cities to offer businesses modern infrastructure, Baltimore rejected proposals for a city-wide system by three public commissions (in 1859, 1881, and 1897) and one private philanthropy (1893). It is a puzzle why Baltimore, a famously resourceful community in the early nineteenth century, later proved so sluggish on so important a civic issue.



As the twentieth century approached, explosive growth in population and economic production put pressure on Baltimore to improve its infrastructure—including construction of a city-wide sewerage system. Baltimore’s position on the strategic Chesapeake Bay and the construction of railroads to key American midwestern markets already positioned the city to import and export raw materials and finished products to markets as varied as South America, Western Europe, and the American South and Midwest, as well as the rest of Maryland. Baltimore improved from the fifth to the third most active foreign trade center in the United States between 1870 and 1900 with an increase in commerce from \$33 million to \$130 million.⁴

The most important development was the city's shift from a commercial to an industrial economy. Between 1870 and 1900, although it did not develop a single dominant industry like Detroit or Pittsburgh, Baltimore experienced a three-fold increase in the number of manufacturing interests and factory workers, and a six-fold increase in capital investment.⁵ By 1890 manufacturing employed 38.6 percent of the labor force, and the value of manufactured goods exceeded the value of foreign trade for the first time.⁶ Baltimore became a national leader in clothing, particularly men's shirts, as well as iron and steel production.⁷ The size of enterprises and the amount of resources they used grew dramatically. The number of workers employed at an average firm increased from about twelve to twenty-two between 1880 and 1900. H. Sonneborn and Company, a clothing manufacturer, employed 2,500 workers in an eight-floor building in 1902, while two other shirt manufacturers employed a total of 2,600 workers. The Sparrows Point steel works, with four blast furnaces, a Bessemer plant, rail mill, and steel shipbuilding plant, employed 2,000 workers. Matthai, Ingram and Company, a tinware plant, employed 1,200 workers, as did the Martin Wagner Company, a canning concern.⁸

Baltimore previously thrived on home-grown, relatively immobile industries but became more a site of branches for enormous, mobile firms. While Baltimore had 39 industrial corporations in 1881, it had 200 in 1895. Corporations by 1905 produced half the city's economic output and employed half its workers.⁹ Over an eighteen-month period in 1898-99 marked by economic boom and speculation, a host of national firms took over Baltimore firms. Baltimore's financial system shifted also from small, neighborhood concerns to large city-wide firms. In the years after the Civil War, Baltimore boasted 1,600 neighborhood building associations with an average capitalization of \$100,000 to \$200,000. Only 15 of 710 association officials were affiliated in any way with the city's major banks. As the century passed, a small number of the associations gained hegemony over the home-financing business; by the 1904-14 period, six associations accounted for half of the residential financing.¹⁰

In short, Baltimore was becoming part of a national and even international economy. The city had to compete with other cities to attract and retain capital, and one way to do this was to provide municipal services like a sewerage system. Businessmen told civic leaders they would not locate in Baltimore until sewage and other improvements were made in the city's physical plant.¹¹ The *Baltimore Sun* captured the urgency of attracting outside businesses:

Baltimore now wants outside capital to be critical, for she knows that...an underlying bond or a strong investment is not lessened in value by reason of speculative manipulators.... Baltimore knows she has something to offer capital that she is not afraid of.... Baltimore wants more influential business connections....¹²

This civic appeal at once took a defensive and an aggressive posture; it suggested a certain awareness of Baltimore's growing dependency within the new national economy.

Perhaps even more than increased economic activity, the sheer rise in population boosted Baltimore's demand for services such as water and sewerage. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the city's population stood at around 25,000. But a 25 percent growth rate per decade changed the city's makeup. By 1905 600,000 persons lived in Baltimore, and civic leaders expected a population of one million in the early twentieth century.

A quantitative analysis of Baltimore between 1900 and 1930 shows a strong correlation between population levels and the city's operating expenditures. The study says in part: "As citizens had more money to spend, the demand for certain items, including urban services, increased. Over the years the growth of expenditures did exceed population growth...."¹³ As Baltimoreans increased disposable income, they were more willing to spend lavishly on bathing facilities and water closets, which increased waste water.

In its early years, when wells and other local sources supplied the city's water needs, Baltimore used three to five gallons of water daily per capita. But with the introduction of piped-in water, usage skyrocketed so that by 1890 the city used ninety-four gallons per capita each day.¹⁴ Water use became more or less automatic and unconscious. Water and wastes make up the "metabolism" of modern cities, with industries accounting for one-half of the inputs and outputs.¹⁵ As the city relied more on large-scale industry, wastes multiplied.¹⁶

The city expanded its water supply with the construction of the \$4 million Gunpowder facility in 1881, the \$1.5 million Lake Clifton reservoir in 1886, and the \$2 million Annex System in 1894. In the boom years of 1866-73 production of garbage, dirt, and sewage increased by 40 percent.¹⁷ In the five-year period starting in 1900, the city issued 288,858 permits for cesspool cleaning, as well as an increasing number of rebukes to businesses and residents for failing to dispose of wastes properly.¹⁸ In the absence of storm sewers, winter runoff into streets and alleys froze, creating more frequent and urgent reports of ice blocking the city's 430 miles of streets and 115 miles of alleys. Ice blocks impeded the movement of business vehicles and firemen trying to get to the scenes of blazes.¹⁹

Increased population density put pressures on the city's land. With a population of 434,439 in 1890, Baltimore had a density of 14,739 people per square mile with an average 92,537 people per square mile in its densest ward. One indicator of the growing demand for real estate was the decline in vacant buildings from 8,000 to 2,872 in the three years before the successful 1905 referendum. Another indication is the rise in mortgages from 6,301 in 1904 to 9,649 in 1905.²⁰

Land values skyrocketed, making the land-intensive cesspool system increasingly inefficient. In some areas—near the new railways, for example—real estate prices trebled and quadrupled in a matter of a few years.²¹ One important mark of the city's increasing land values is the construction of skyscrapers, which reveal the pressure to squeeze every bit of use out of a parcel of land. In 1907 Baltimore had twenty-seven seven-story buildings and twenty-four buildings of eight or more floors; the average in the rest of the city was between two and three stories.²² Adding to all the more or less "natural" increases in land values, the reconstruction

of the downtown area destroyed by the 1904 fire almost doubled the value of that property from \$13 million to \$25 million.²³

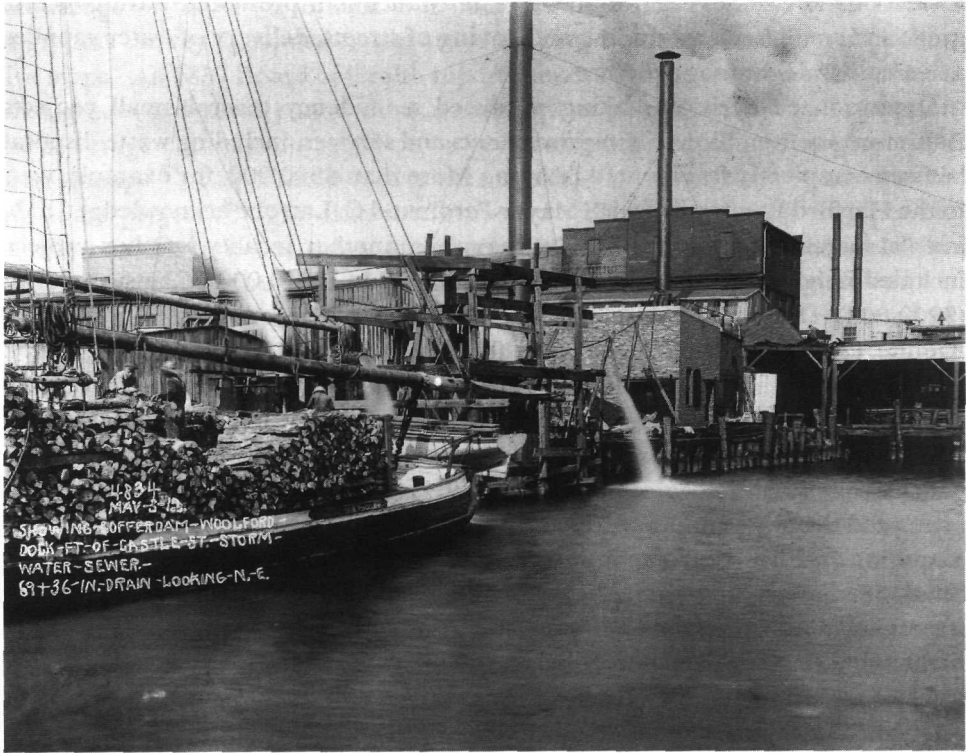
The cesspool system exacerbated the land-use inefficiencies and confusion.²⁴ Under this system, almost all property owners sacrificed part of their plots to cesspools. The city health commissioner estimated that the cesspools took up more than fifty acres of land, rendering useless as much surrounding space. The city government was deluged with frequent, urgent reports of basements severely damaged by cesspool overflows and leakages. Cesspools allowed wastes to "percolate into the subsoil, there to exercise deleterious effects upon our health," Mayor Thomas G. Hayes lamented in 1901.²⁵ Such ill treatment of valuable property did not make sense; it raised the cost of conducting business in the center of the city, which for a variety of agglomeration and transportation reasons, was still extremely important. The city's territorial limits also argued for city-wide sewers. Travel distances for nightsoil disposal grew larger and larger as the city expanded. Transportation costs were to become more and more prohibitive.

Increased manufacturing, population, and density contributed to a health crisis in the city. Concerns about public health contributed to the sewerage debate. National efforts to quarantine people with communicable diseases, in fact, spurred the creation of the 1893 Baltimore Sewerage Commission.²⁶ Health officials had difficulty sorting out the variables that contributed to respiratory diseases, especially in an era that gave credence to the unfounded "gas theory" of disease. But outbreaks of disease regularly resulted in renewed calls for a cleaner city. Baltimore experienced three major smallpox epidemics. Some 700 people died of smallpox in 1864, 600 in 1872, and 1,100 in 1882 and 1883. As late as 1915, intestinal disease was rampant in the city's low-elevation areas and in the narrow streets and alleys where the poor lived.²⁷ Baltimore was notorious for its smells, especially during the hot and humid summer days, and increasing numbers of civic leaders warned of the health evils the city was inviting with its poor system of waste disposal.

Baltimore was the site of a great deal of health-related activity. The Johns Hopkins Hospital, founded in 1889, initiated major research and treatment efforts for typhoid and other communicable diseases. Speaking in 1897 of the city's failed efforts to get approval for a sewer system, the prominent physician William Osler said plaintively: "The penalties of cruel neglect have been paid for 1896, the roll of victims for 1897 is near complete, the sacrifices will number again above 200. We cannot save the predestined ones in 1898, but what of the succeeding years?"²⁸



Baltimore's governmental and electoral systems did not respond to the need for a major city-wide project. The city government lacked the fiscal capacity, technical expertise, and social vision for large projects. The government was organized along geographic rather than functional lines, and the mayor rarely succeeded in spurring the city council to action on behalf of the whole city. The Democratic



The coffer dam and storm-water/sewer drain at the foot of Castle Street, Canton; in the foreground heavily-laden lumber schooners await unloading. Photograph by Alfred Waldeck, 1912. (Courtesy Baltimore Public Works Museum.)

Party machine exploited the city government's fragmentation to serve its own petty needs. The government was a feudal system of neighborhood fiefdoms, with all the attendant material selfishness and jealousy.

When the city approved a new charter in 1898, the local government finally gained coherence. The new system gave the mayor significant power over the council. Just as important, agencies operated along functional lines that allowed experts to develop and implement large-scale projects. Once the city developed a more rational, bureaucratic government and overcame narrow geographic and interest-group barriers, the decision to sewer the city became a matter of time.

Before the new charter, however, Baltimore's political system was captive to parochial interests. Between 1880 and 1895 the Democratic organizations of Arthur Pue Gorman and Isaac Freeman Rasin dominated Maryland and Baltimore politics. The city council conducted municipal business; it responded to an array of issues of interest to the wards, which fell under machine control. Where a modern Baltimorean brings his concerns to a city agency with purview over a specific governmental function, the nineteenth-century Baltimorean brought his concerns to his council member. No city administrator coordinated projects with

a view of the city's overall interests. The councilman promoted ward concerns great and small, such as grading and paving of streets, delivery of water supplies, and small-scale drainage projects.

Decentralized decision-making produced a tendency toward small projects. Baltimore spent millions on improvements and services, including waste disposal, but in a completely fragmented fashion. More than \$600,000, for example, went to the Harford Run sewer which Mayor Ferdinand C. Latrobe acknowledged to be just "a successful transfer of this nuisance to another locality." Other projects included neighborhood sewers for Schroeder's Run (\$240,000), Chatsworth Run (\$200,000), Druid Hill Avenue (\$150,000), Alluvian Street (\$140,000), Arlington Avenue (\$60,000), Light Street (\$51,000), and Ogler's Run (\$35,000). Mayor Hodges argued that a city-wide system was "impractical" but did not hesitate to ask the council for \$1 million for incremental improvements in a single year.²⁹ The city developed waste-disposal policy in a reactive rather than planned way. Emergencies such as overflows of drain pipes and cesspools and extensive soil damage prompted the city to approve, on an ad-hoc basis, plans for construction and then extension and diversion of many drain pipes.³⁰ The council and city commissioner acted on thousands of requests involving neighborhood drains and cesspools, streets and alleys, pipes and mains, grading and toting of wastes, water closets and night-soil dumping. The parochialism was so strong that the city first envisioned a set of eight sewerage systems rather than a single comprehensive system. A report of the first city sewerage commission, in 1862, did not even consider the benefits of a comprehensive public system.

Building a city-wide system depended on a rational organization of city offices that Baltimore was just beginning to develop. The city council held sway over major political decisions. The council usually followed the general budget plan set by its ways and means committee, but then "supplemented [that budget] in the interval between adoption of the budget and the close of the fiscal year by the passage of special appropriations bills."³¹ By the end of a fiscal year, a budget burst through its own limits with an array of fragmented, parochial programs.

The overload of the city council eventually enabled the gradual development of a more rational system. The council started to feed citizen demands for physical projects to the city commissioner, who became an unofficial director of public works and attempted some coordinated planning. With the 1882 appointment of specialized assistants and the later geographic division of responsibilities, the city commissioner became a policy initiator. The increasing use of governmental commissions and outside bodies like the Municipal Arts Society improved the planning and coordination of large civic projects. But until the complete overhaul of the city government structure with the new charter, large-scale projects such as the sewage system failed to attract attention and expertise.

Uncertainty about questions of management, maintenance, financing, and medical research marked the debate over sewers. Between 1880 and 1892 Mayor Latrobe tried and failed to create a special department of public works to supervise planning and construction. Planning a city-wide system based on gravity required

knowledge of the city's terrain. But until the twentieth century, when the Topographic Survey Commission canvassed the city, Baltimore had no comprehensive maps. An 1857 Board of Health report stated: "No one can now tell the forms, sizes, grades of descent, connections, nor directions of the sewers."³² At one point, the sewerage commission relied on "a gentleman who consented to give up his private map."³³ City officials used crude maps drawn without scale when considering some projects.³⁴ The situation worsened with private laying of pipes and shoddy reconstruction of ripped-up streets. When business and political leaders planned reconstruction of the downtown area after the Great Fire, confusion and conflict ensued about land ownership and how the tangle of underground infrastructure affected public-private relations.³⁵

Fiscal crisis undermined the drive for a city-wide sewer system. Because of growing urban needs like streets, water, police, fire protection, schools, and parks, as well as the patronage practices of the city council, Baltimore's budget was often in the red. The city's floating or short-term debt varied wildly in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, with a low of \$29,000 and a high of \$1.38 million. The floating debt rose from \$82,000 in 1892 to \$473,000 in 1893, \$1.1 million in 1894, \$1.3 million in 1895, and \$1.4 million in 1897. In 1880 Baltimore allocated 24 percent of its operating budget to interest payments; by 1899, the interest payments took up 11 percent of the budget. The city took out a \$1.6 million loan in 1898 just to cover debts; the floating debt became so large that the city had to refinance it with long-term loans four additional times. The onetime Baltimore mayor and comptroller, Joshua Vansant, said: "It cannot be said that the financial system which brings about such results is erroneous, because system has no part or lot in it."³⁶ Baltimore's faulty budget practices included inadequate tax analyses, appropriation of funds after the budget passed, overestimation of municipal receipts, and "rolling over" debts.

Baltimore had the worst of both worlds with its fiscal concerns and need for general improvements. Even though it did not make major improvements, the city "frittered away" millions on minor projects. After one particularly bitter battle between the mayor and the city council over taxes in 1897, mayoral aides complained that "while the Council has succeeded in unnecessarily taxing the people of Baltimore \$381,000, they are no nearer new schools or repaved streets than they were before."³⁷ The same could be said of the sewerage system. It was a common complaint: Baltimore was adept at approving small-scale projects, but terrible at initiating major projects.

In 1899 Mayor Hayes underscored the reluctance to spend large sums on improvements when he proposed using funds from the sale of the Western Maryland Railroad for sewers. After investing \$12 million in the enterprise, the city sold it for \$4.2 million.³⁸ Mayor Hayes in November 1902 urged using the receipts to build sewers: "Can anyone doubt my duty as mayor? I am told by experts—in whose ability to speak I have full confidence—that the system can be built for \$4.2 million. There are no experts, in my humble judgement, in the country more capable...."³⁹ The Hayes plan, however, was out of the question

given the city's repeated rejections of dumping wastes into the Chesapeake Bay, the only method affordable with the receipts from the railroad sale.

The municipal government's subservience to the state government in Annapolis also slowed the drive for a city-wide system. Antagonism is typical of state-local relations in the U.S. From the nation's founding, legislatures have been arenas of often bitter conflict between urban and rural interests. Cities have struggled to gain authority to rule their own affairs. Baltimore's relationship with the Maryland legislature in Annapolis has been stormy; for most of the city's history, for example, the state controlled the police department. During Baltimore's consideration of sewerage systems, the city never had complete control over the issue. Before Baltimore officials could make important decisions on such a large enterprise, they needed approval from Annapolis, and the state legislative process proved tortuous.

The legislature delayed action on sewers several times. In 1902 the Baltimore delegation clashed with other legislators over how much eminent-domain power the city ought to have to build its collection and treatment facilities.⁴⁰ Interest groups like the shellfish industry and labor unions also blocked state approval of a sewer system. The legislature even got involved in the makeup of the sewerage commission—an involvement that was justified on the grounds that some people from other parts of Maryland had a special interest in the city because they owned land there.⁴¹ A newspaper editorial on the eve of the 1905 referendum underscored the difficulty of getting the necessary state and local actors to agree on a large project: "In 1904 it happened that there was a Democratic governor, both houses of the General Assembly were Democratic, and there was a Democratic mayor in Baltimore. It may be many years before this happens again."⁴²



Struggles between the Democratic Party machine and reform organizations set the parameters of city politics in the late 1800s. Baltimore's machine exerted impressive control over elections and patronage, even if it did not have the top-down authority of the Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis machines. The machine-reform battle marked each election, major appointment, major public works project, and negotiation over taxes and budgets. The stakes for the sewer system exceeded the stakes for other projects because of the expense and scale of the project.

Patronage was the big concern of both machine politicians and reformers. The particularistic, divisible awards of jobs and contracts to faithful party members was, of course, the lifeblood of the machine. Until 1895—when the reform candidates of the Republican party handed the Democratic machine its biggest defeat in municipal elections—the machine's patronage extended from the city to the state and federal governments. The unusual longevity of the Baltimore and Maryland machines attested to their ability to work with a wide variety of groups—from

railroad and oyster moguls to humble Irish working stiff who would flock to Rasin's funeral in 1907.⁴³

Machine politics reinforced the decentralized tendencies of the city's government. By organizing voters on the ward level, the machine encouraged politicians and citizens to concentrate on neighborhood rather than city-wide matters. Incrementalism was the way of the machine, as it was of the outdated city government. It was difficult to bring these disparate fiefdoms together for a large, coordinated project.⁴⁴ Winning elections obviously involved some coordination, but the process of getting out the vote and promoting party men was more a collection of local efforts than a single integrated effort. The vision of the whole was missing from the machine.

A number of incidents displayed the machine's strength and solidarity. Democrats in the 1901 state legislature were in perfect accord on the sewer bill that would be defeated by the voters of Baltimore later that year. First the Democrats did not show up in the legislative chambers. Then they marched into the legislative chambers en masse to vote for the bill. The Democrats reportedly backed the bill in Annapolis only because they already had organized its defeat in Baltimore to embarrass Republican Mayor Hayes.⁴⁵ On other occasions the Democrats simply were absent at crucial times, or they would ignore matters like commission nominations. Even after its defeat in 1895, the machine was able to mobilize its apparatus for important elections and votes.⁴⁶ Only when gubernatorial and mayoral candidates pledged in 1903 to support a city-wide sewerage system did the project appear a real possibility.

With the machine's decline after its 1895 electoral defeat—and with the *News* and *Sun* applying anti-machine pressures⁴⁷—both the machine and the reform movement fought to prevent the other from taking over the system. Jealousy over patronage came to the surface during repeated disputes over the makeup of sewerage commissions. At one point the state legislature named the men it wanted to serve on the commission, and at another point it left appointment power to the mayor and council. When the legislature appointed the commission, local politicians, mostly members of the Democratic organization, complained about usurpation of local authority. When the Republican mayor got authority to appoint the commission in 1905, Democrats attacked him for delaying his appointments until after the voter referendum on the \$5 million loan. He maintained, however, that the only way to assure passage of the referendum was to delay his appointments: "To name the commission now would mean its defeat."⁴⁸

The Progressive movement's response to the machine reinforced the city's fragmented politics. In the late 1800s, some thirty improvement associations gained an increasingly strong voice in civic affairs.⁴⁹ The associations, however, organized by neighborhood and pressing parochial concerns, warred with each other over distribution of city resources. The correspondence files of the mayor and council are filled with association requests for help on limited projects like road repairs, park improvements, and drain-pipe and sewer improvements. When the Democratic machine oversaw a series of local projects in the 1880s and 1890s the

associations fought for their fair share and sought to improve their position rather than develop a larger urban vision.⁵⁰ As late as 1905 the Southeast Baltimore Association vowed to fight the city-wide sewerage system unless the city government provided funds for road improvements as an enticement.⁵¹ Movement toward a comprehensive system picked up as these organizations allied with each other and city-wide organizations such as the Municipal Arts Society, Reform League, Real Estate Exchange, and Board of Trade.⁵²

Elections and referenda exacerbated the parochialism of city government. The northern parts of the city—its wealthiest areas—gave the 1905 referendum its strongest support. Ward 11, a fashionable section built around North Charles Street, supported the loan by a 2,370-to-417 vote, and Wards 12 through 16, also well-off, gave strong support as well. The areas dominated for years by the machine, Wards 1, 2, 6, 7, and 10, rejected the referendum. True to the observation by the local journalist Frank Kent that political machines thrive only in areas of low voter turnout,⁵³ the reform-oriented referendum enjoyed the greatest success where vote totals were high.⁵⁴



In addition to the parochial and stubborn political style of the local government and the Democratic party, several interest groups impeded the drive to sewer the city. The major groups objecting to a city-wide sewerage system included the shellfish industry, cesspool interests, businesses opposed to higher taxes, and residents of the annex. In addition, wealthy Baltimoreans who could provide for their own private waste disposal opposed the municipal system.

The state's oyster industry might have had enough clout by itself to block approval of any sewage system that dumped wastes into the Chesapeake Bay. All of the early sewer proposals called for such dumping, which the shellfish industry feared would kill their crops. Only after the General Assembly passed legislation in 1903, prohibiting bay dumping, could pro-sewer forces develop a coalition broad enough to promote sewers.

The oyster industry in the late 1800s was an important but declining part of Baltimore's economy. The industry employed some 50,000 workers and produced millions of dollars worth of produce. Deciding whether the city could release wastes into the Chesapeake was, with the possible exception of fiscal and tax concerns, the most frequent sticking point in sewer debates. The 1902 legislature haggled over two bills whose only difference was whether sewage could be dumped in just the south side or both the north and south sides of the Patapsco River.⁵⁵ Each time a commission recommended a system based on "dilution," or dumping, the oyster industry initiated protracted debates about the repercussions. Claims and counterclaims about possible damage to the oysters' safety were supplemented with reams of statistics and testimony from scientists.⁵⁶ The oyster interests in 1903 successfully lobbied the assembly to forbid dumping wastes into natural waters. Mayor Ferdinand Latrobe summed up the sentiments of the confusing



Bracing and manhole construction for storm drains and sewers. Photograph by Alfred Waldeck, 1907. (Courtesy Baltimore Public Works Museum.)

debate: “Personally I hardly think that the sewage would injure the oysters and fish. But a dog might as well be useless as have a bad name, and if the people who buy oysters were to hear that Baltimore is dumping [sewage],...it would absolutely ruin our oyster and fish trade.”⁵⁷

A nascent ecology movement complemented the shellfish interests. Environmentalists expressed concerns about the dangers of dumping sewage and pointed to possibilities of recycling. C. A. Leas, a Baltimore physician, pleaded passionately for recycling wastes. “Solemn is the obligation,” Leas said, to reuse wastes in an ecological fashion rather than simply flush away and forget about the problems of contemporary life. Night soil and garbage, he added, offer “the most valuable manurial properties.” Nothing was fundamentally wrong with the cesspool system, he argued; the problem was the city’s failure to regulate it.⁵⁸ Baltimoreans showed that they could gather wastes in an orderly fashion. The garbage system—with carts that separated garbage according to possible later uses—was, in fact, a model for other cities.

Baltimoreans listened to authorities like Leas because of the health problems of sewered cities. Chicago and Boston suffered devastating outbreaks of typhoid fever. Baltimoreans expressed suspicions about sewer systems. One reader wrote to the *Sun*: “The Almighty God is to be especially thanked for delivering us from pestilence.’ What pestilence—from the product of the sewers: Typhoid, diarrhea, scarlet fever, smallpox, and the other diseases concomitant with sewers? Yes.”⁵⁹

Some held out hope that Baltimore would never need sewers, that somehow technology might enable the city to avoid the expense and risks of a city-wide system.

The firms that cleaned cesspools and carted away the wastes also had a stake in the old system.⁶⁰ Chief among the excavators—who went from house to house with wagons to collect the wastes—was the Odorless Excavating Apparatus Company, O.E.A., the Baltimore firm that received a patent for the pumping apparatus and enjoyed a near monopoly on the business from the city council. O.E.A. employed hundreds of workers at low wages to collect the wastes for disposal or sale on the periphery of the city.⁶¹ The O.E.A.'s leadership included George Padgett, member of a leading family in Democratic politics.⁶² The number of permits issued to clean these wells rose from 50,168 to 63,491 between 1899 and 1901, undoubtedly an understatement of the financial stake of the old cesspool system. By the time Baltimore finally approved the sewerage system, it had 90,000 cesspools. The expenditures generated by these vaults included not only waste collection, but also initial construction.⁶³

The excavating interests were also connected with another large Baltimore business—the fertilizer industry. “Night soil”—the euphemism for cesspool wastes—was never vital to the industry, but it still provided a livelihood for some. Isaac Freeman Rasin had an interest in the business because of his brother's fertilizer firm, J. W. L. Rasin and Company.⁶⁴

Several other interest groups decided whether to support sewerage construction strictly on the basis of taxes. Business and real estate interests argued that any sewerage system dependent on property taxes or other charges would be tantamount to “double taxation” and would raise rents, impose hardships on the owners of modest dwellings, discourage outside businesses from coming into Baltimore, and strangle businesses already in the city. Property owners argued that the system's main purpose was public well-being, not the improvement of property values. In 1904 the Real Estate Exchange adopted a resolution stating: “This exchange is opposed to, and will do all in its power to defeat, both in the Legislature and before the people, any bill that charges...sewer rentals.”⁶⁵ Businessmen argued that Baltimore could not attract outside investment unless it maintained or reduced its tax rate. Since the business elite was central to Baltimore progressivism, civic improvements had to fall within the confines of its anti-tax sentiment.⁶⁶

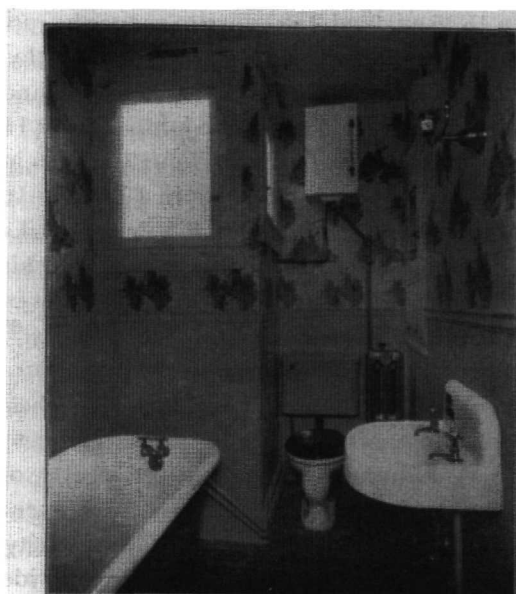
Baltimore's tax rate during the twenty-five years before the sewerage approval was steady but higher than that of other cities like New York and Philadelphia. It was, therefore, a constant concern; at no time did it fall low enough to ease the concern of business-conscious citizens. While Baltimore hovered around a tax rate of \$2 per assessed valuation of \$100, other cities held their taxes lower due to state limitations. New Orleans, St. Louis, and Kansas City, for example, had rates of \$1. Philadelphia had a rate of \$1.85; Cleveland taxed at the \$1.85 level; and New York City taxed at the \$1.92 rate.⁶⁷

A reassessment of real estate values in 1835 enabled Baltimore to reduce its rate from \$4.77 to 66 cents per \$100 of assessed value, but the city eventually settled into a rate of around \$2 annually. The tax rate rose from \$1.76 to \$2 in 1896, and it jumped to \$2.25 in 1898, stayed under \$2 for several years, then jumped to \$2.11 in 1906. The state real estate tax rate was less stable, moving from 17.5 cents in 1876-77 to 30 cents in 1901-03 to 22 cents in 1904 to 16 cents in 1907-10. In opposing a 1901 sewerage initiative, Mayor Latrobe warned that a new tax hike would leave property interests "so slaughtered that the [tax] collector will have his hands full in selling property for taxes." Latrobe claimed that property values in good parts of the city plunged to a fifth of their values of just a few years before.⁶⁸

Property-value fluctuations and arbitrary assessments distorted the policy process. Property owners resisted tax changes for fear they would lose special niches. Confusion resulted from many loopholes in the tax system—breaks given to securities and savings banks, for example—and uncertainty about the legality of assessing easements. For years the wealthy evaded taxes by listing their permanent residence in Baltimore County; no matter how many assets they had in the city, they paid the low county rate. Not until 1914 did the state tax commission provide for uniform state assessments. Before that, state assessments ranged from 10 to 100 percent of actual market value. Before 1896 the city lacked significant authority to assess its own property, and the Appeals Tax Court, the city body with some assessment powers, was criticized for failing to follow accepted standards. Lax tax collection also created confusion: between 1870 and 1896 the percentage of property taxes actually collected ranged between 50 and 75. A wide range of separate levies for highways and bridges, road reconstruction, internal improvements, courts, the poor, and sinking funds also contributed to confusion.⁶⁹

The property-tax system created disincentives for improvements such as sewers because of the doubling or trebling of assessments that inevitably followed the improvements. Baltimore acknowledged the problem when it taxed burnt-district properties at a 20 percent rate in the first year after the area was rebuilt. "Needless to say, whatever the size of the [property-value] increase, the additional tax burden permanently increased carrying costs, while creating no offsetting revenue-producing improvement of the property itself."⁷⁰ Not until the use of systematic zoning policies, starting in 1915, did land-use patterns overcome the tangle of conflicting imperatives involving taxes, depreciation, and mixes of residences and businesses.

One of the interest groups blocking the sewer system was new to the city. In 1888 Baltimore annexed seventeen square miles of surrounding Baltimore County. The city lured county residents with a package that included a low property tax rate and provisions for the construction of roads, parks, and utilities (city and state bosses Isaac Freeman Rasin and Arthur Pue Gorman put the package together).⁷¹ The deal led to uneven development and a strange Alfonse-and-Gaston political relationship between the annex and the rest of the city. On the one hand, the annex's lower tax rate—in conjunction with a lag in the assessment of properties—provided great incentives for private developers to subdivide their vast plots and



THE MODERN COMPACT BATH

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 Note the Convenient Medicine Cabinet
 and Chute for Soiled Clothes. A com-
 pact, convenient and delightful Bath
 Room, ventilated by two openings to air
 shaft—a new and healthful innovation.

“The Modern Compact Bath,” from the E. J. Gallagher Realty Company’s advertising brochure for newly-built rowhouses in the 2900 block of McElderry Street, east Baltimore, ca. 1916. The builder boasted that his new houses were connected to the recently-opened city sewerage system. (Baltimore City Life Museums.)

develop the land.⁷² But the city lagged in its development of the annexed area, largely because of resentment toward the annex residents’ tax breaks. Measures in the state legislature and the courts challenged the deal. Tax-conscious Baltimoreans did not want to develop the annex until annex residents paid a full tax rate. Such reluctance was self-defeating, however, since the annex did not have to pay the full rate until adequate roads were built.

Well-to-do neighborhoods, with access to private sewers and good cesspools, also felt no urgency to build a city-wide system. They afforded cleaning charges easily. Their homes were located in the city’s hilly parts, apart from the foul odors of the open drains, and their cellars did not overflow. As one labor leader stated: “While the larger houses are on larger lots, most of the residences of workers are built upon ground that brings the cesspools much closer to the house.”⁷³ Until the old system’s evils spilled over to wealthy turf, and the economies of an integrated city-wide system became more apparent, the wealthy had no incentive to promote improvement.

Organized labor played a minor part in delaying the sewer system. Whenever proposals for a system percolated, the Federation of Labor insisted on day labor, with its higher hourly wages.⁷⁴ Many politicians feared that labor’s stance would



Construction of a storm drain at Pecks Branch. Photograph by Alfred Waldeck, 1908. (Courtesy Baltimore Public Works Museum.)

doom the 1905 proposal. After the referendum passed, however, city leaders quickly rebuffed the workers and paid the lower scale of wages.



The timing of the 1905 referendum was propitious. By the April vote, Baltimore had a streamlined system of government, an improving fiscal posture, a civic spirit renewed by the efforts to rebuild the downtown after the fire of 1904, and an increasing sense of urgency to compete with other cities for economic development.

Under the new 1898 charter, the mayor gained strong appointment and removal powers. The charter created a Board of Estimates to manage fiscal affairs. The board—comprised of the mayor, two mayoral appointees, the comptroller, and the president of the second branch of the council—was responsible for formulating the budgets of the city's streamlined bureaucracy. The council's powers were limited to reducing expenditures or raising taxes; the charter made the council into a reactive body. The charter also increased the bureaucracy's independence. Now insulated from manipulation, the city bureaucracy had eight departments, with functional divisions within each department. Agencies had the luxury of pursuing projects that made sense to them rationally.⁷⁵

Part and parcel of the new professionalized municipal administration was the emergence of a strong engineering profession and the development of detailed procedures for bidding and oversight. Pro-sewer forces repeatedly assured voters

that the new municipal apparatus would ensure that the job was done professionally, honestly, and efficiently.

The timing was right for Baltimore to take advantage of new construction methods and the lessons of other cities' mistakes in constructing and operating sewer systems. Chicago's disastrous dumping of wastes into Lake Michigan proved to be an important warning to Baltimore. New construction materials like concrete, new engineering processes like filtration treatment of wastes, and better management techniques enabled Baltimore to develop a model system.

Proponents were quick to point out that the city's assumption of a sewerage debt would come just as the city was shedding other financial obligations and gaining new revenues. When in 1916 sewerage payments reached a peak, the city's \$6 million water loan would be paid off. Sewerage proponents also estimated that the new assessments of the property in the burnt district and the annex would increase the city's taxable basis by \$22 million to \$35 million, depending on court resolution of annex tax issues.⁷⁶ The loan payment schedule of seventy-five years stretched the city's obligation so far into the future that Baltimoreans would not bear a noticeably greater burden.⁷⁷

Numerous other public improvements that the city undertook in the aftermath of the 1904 fire enlarged the civic vision of many Baltimoreans. The city's General Improvements Conference in December 1904 demonstrated a new willingness to pursue large projects.⁷⁸ A year after the 1904 fire, the *Sun* published a special edition lauding the civic response to the great disaster. The newspaper account, which included a poetic celebration of Baltimore's rise from "that fiery ordeal," stressed the unprecedented sums of capital investment in what it called "New Baltimore." The city spent \$9 million just for fire rehabilitation. With \$100 million in capital improvements and the city's locational advantages, the newspaper said, "foreign capitalists and heads of manufacturing interests will come to the conclusion that...Baltimore can...yield a large return for capital invested."⁷⁹ Such accounts, repeated again and again in the speeches and in-house publications of improvement associations, industries, and political parties, indicated development of a larger vision of urban politics. For the first time, a \$10 million loan for sewerage seemed modest.

Baltimore's efforts to rehabilitate the burnt district after the fire involved a good share of bickering, blackmail, and bribery. But in comparison with other fire-ravaged cities like Chicago and Boston, Baltimore was skilled at overcoming local and private barriers. The Burnt District Commission, for example, eventually took over eighty acres of land—which contained hundreds of competing claims of ownership and control—for development.⁸⁰

One additional event improved the timing for the sewerage loans. In 1904 after months of frustration dealing with special interests in the rehabilitation of the burnt district, Mayor Robert McLane committed suicide. Leading Baltimoreans urged speedy passage of all city improvements as a sort of memorial. Interest groups did not suddenly abandon petty claims, but McLane's death produced profound shock

about just how destructive those claims could be. That shock shamed some interests into softening demands during the city-building debates.

The choice Baltimore faced in the 1905 vote—as industrialists, reformers, and allies of the city's political machine all argued—was either retooling for the new industrial era or losing out in the competition for new business investment. One businessman's words were typical of the arguments made on behalf of the system:

We have got to look out for the manufacturing industries. Our commerce is gradually falling off. The coal and grain trade has dropped considerably, and we have almost entirely lost our coffee trade. Now we have got to encourage manufacturers to come to this city, so that we will be able to provide employment for our men. And to do this we must be an up-do-date city in every respect.⁸¹

Mayor Timanus reported that one businessman, upon hearing mention of Baltimore, said: "Oh, yes, that's the place where sewage runs in front of people's houses."⁸²

Baltimore got its sewer system and was able to shake its malodorous image as the city of open sewers. Today, Baltimore's system remains one of the nation's finest. Unlike Chicago and Boston, which still suffer indignities from their early and crude systems, Baltimore acted only after other cities suffered from the mistakes of the "learning curve" of new technologies. Such a strategy is not always wise for cities competing with other cities, but it seems to have served Baltimore well in at least this one area.

NOTES

1. The other referenda asked voter approval for a \$2 million loan for improvements in a recently annexed portion of the city and a \$1 million loan for public parks.

I would like to acknowledge the help and encouragement of several people. Professor Matthew A. Crenson of the Johns Hopkins University suggested the research and offered good academic advice throughout. The late Abel Wolman, also of Hopkins, encouraged me and offered detailed criticism and warm encouragement. Joel A. Tarr of Carnegie-Mellon University and an anonymous reader provided valuable critiques. Special thanks to Rachel Freed.

2. *Baltimore Sun*, 1 April 1905.

3. Baltimore had 44 disconnected miles of sewers at the turn of the century, compared with Chicago (1,529 miles), New York (1,467), Philadelphia (951), Boston (852), St. Louis (522), and Buffalo (434). See Jon Teaforde, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1970-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 220.

4. Charles Hirschfeld, *Baltimore, 1870-1900: Studies in Social History*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in History and Political Science, no. 59 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
7. As a study of eight turn-of-the-century Baltimore communities suggests, the city's isolated areas slowly integrated with the rest of the urban area. Self-contained communities survived, but large industries broadened the spheres of economic activity. One of the city's earliest settlements, appropriately named Oldtown, typified the integration of local communities with the larger urban and national economies. Once an autonomous community of mill workers, skilled artisans, sweat-shop workers, and white-collar workers, by 1900 the community was but a part of the ebb and flow of the rest of the metropolis. A majority of Oldtown's residents commuted to jobs elsewhere in the city, and the area experienced regular residential "invasions" and "successions." Other neighborhoods remained more self-sufficient, but no neighborhood could remain an island. See D. Randall Beirne, "Late Nineteenth-Century Industrial Communities in Baltimore," *Maryland Historian*, 10 (1980): 39-40.
8. Hirschfeld, *Baltimore, 1870-1900*, pp. 46-54.
9. Sherry Olson, *Baltimore: The Building of an American City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 238.
10. Martha J. Vill, "Immigrants and Ownership: Home Mortgage Financing in Baltimore, 1865-1914," in Robert D. Mitchell and Edward K. Muller, eds., *Geographical Perspectives on Maryland's Past* (College Park, Md.: University of Maryland Department of Geography, 1979), p. 157.
11. Olson, *Baltimore*, p. 239.
12. *Sun*, 7 February 1905.
13. Alan Anderson, *The Origin and Resolution of an Urban Crisis: Baltimore, 1890-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 48.
14. Teaford, *Unheralded Triumph*, p. 221. Some figures on water use in later industrial processes provide an idea of just how important the use and disposal of water is for an industrial city. The production of viscose rayon requires 180,000 to 200,000 gallons of water per ton of the product; while rayon requires 250,000 to 400,000 gallons, woolens and worsteds require 140,000 gallons, and rolled steel requires 110 000 gallons; whiskey requires 80,000 per 1,000 gallons of whiskey; and synthetic gas requires 1.05 billion gallons per 1,000 barrels. See Alfred H. Katz and J. S. Fenton, eds., *Health and the Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 94.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
16. Abel Wolman, "The Metabolism of Cities," in *Scientific American, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 158.
17. Olson, *Baltimore*, p. 166.
18. *Sun*, 17 December 1903 and 1 January 1905.
19. *Ibid.*, 15 April 1905. See also the many letters in the City Archives in the two decades before the turn of the century.
20. *Sun*, 21 April 1905; Anderson, *Origin and Resolution of an Urban Crisis*, p. 65; *Annual Report, Real Estate Exchange*, 1905 and 1907.
21. Olson, *Baltimore*, pp. 156, 169-70.

22. Anderson, *Origin and Resolution of an Urban Crisis*, p. 57.
23. *Sun*, 7 February 1905, 21 April 1905.
24. Olson, *Baltimore*, pp. 221-2.
25. *Sun*, 14 January 1901.
26. City Archives, WPA Files, 1893 (99).
27. Olson, *Baltimore*, p. 570.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
29. Mayor's Report, 1883, 1886, 1888; *Sun*, 19 April 1895.
30. City Archives, WPA Files, 1878 (1123), 1885 (544 and 856), 1889 (631), 1894 (64).
31. Jacob H. Hollander, *The Financial History of Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1899), p. 206.
32. Hollander, *Financial History of Baltimore*, p. 213.
33. *Sun*, 21 January 1894.
34. City Archives, WPA Files, 1879 (830).
35. Christine Meisner Rosen, *The Limits of Power: Great Fires and the Process of City Growth in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 292-94.
36. Hirschfeld, *Baltimore, 1870-1900*, p. 37.
37. *Sun*, 9 January 1897.
38. *Ibid.*, 9, 26 September 1902.
39. *Ibid.*, 2 November 1902.
40. *Ibid.*, 21 January 1902.
41. *Ibid.*, 29 March 1902.
42. *Ibid.*, 12 April 1905.
43. Mary Anne Dunn, "The Life of Isaac Freeman Rasin" (M.A. thesis, Catholic University of America, 1949) p. 102.
44. See Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).
45. *Baltimore News*, 18, 20, and 22 January 1901; 20 February 1901; and 6, 8, 26, and 28 March 1901.
46. *Sun*, 28 March 1901; 26 April 1905; 3 May 1905.
47. The *Baltimore News* came into the reform fold when Charles Grasty arrived from Kansas City to become its editor. The *Sun* shifted toward the reform movement when Senator Gorman, the state Democratic party boss, squeezed the *Sun's* owner, George Abell, out of a prominent post in the administration of President Grover Cleveland. See James B. Crooks, *Politics and Progress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), pp. 17-23; and Paul Winchester, *The Men of Maryland Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: Maryland County Press, 1923), p. 75.
48. *Sun*, 29 March 1905.
49. See the *Sun* series on neighborhood associations that was published each Sunday between 1 January 1910 and 10 April 1910.
50. Joseph Arnold, "The Neighborhood and City Hall," *Journal of Urban History* 6 (1979): 11.
51. *Sun*, 21 April 1905.
52. Crooks, *Politics and Progress*, pp. 129-32.

53. Frank R. Kent, *The Great Game of Politics* (New York: Doubleday-Page and Co., 1924), pp. 1-13, 28-40, 46-50.
54. *Sun*, 3 May 1905.
55. *Ibid.*, 21 March 1902.
56. *Ibid.*, 20 November 1887; 10, 28 December 1887.
57. *Ibid.*, 6 January 1902.
58. C. A. Leas, "On the Sanitary Care and Utilization of Refuse in Cities," in Daniel Worster, ed., *American Environmentalism* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), pp. 151-8.
59. *Sun*, 24 November 1903.
60. Conversations with Abel Wolman were helpful for this section.
61. Olson, *Baltimore*, p. 166.
62. Robert Padgett was described in his obituary as part of the machine's "royal family," who formed the city's ruling clique with Rasin, John J. ("Sonny") Mahon, John S. ("Frank") Kelly, and Daniel J. Loden (*Sun*, 11 April 1932). According to one sewer contractor, the cleanup cost for Baltimore's private cesspools in 1902 was \$502,928—and rising.
63. *Sun*, 23 March 1902.
64. Dunn, "Life of Isaac Freeman Rasin," p. 57.
65. *Sun*, 14 January 1904.
66. See the listing of Baltimore's leading progressives and their social backgrounds in Crooks, *Politics and Progress*, pp. 224-36.
67. Teaford, *Unheralded Triumph*, pp. 294-5.
68. *Sun*, 27 March 1901.
69. *Ibid.*, 14 October 1902, 14 January 1905; Hollander, *Financial History of Baltimore*, pp. 261-63, 268-72, 256; *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 16 February 1939.
70. Rosen, *Limits of Power*, p. 17.
71. Joseph Arnold, "Suburban Growth and Municipal Annexation in Baltimore, 1745-1918," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 72 (1978): 114-17. 72. In the twelve years after the 1888 annexation—in which annex residents were required to pay, at most, 60 cents per \$1,000 of land values—the new parts of the city were the site of unprecedented development. Records for development after 1888 are scanty, but there are some good indications of the amount of activity. In 1895, there were 1,025 new improvements and 198 additional improvements in the annex. The next year, there were 1,081 new improvements and 61 additional improvements at a value of \$1.815 million. The numbers of 1897 were 1,286, 50, and \$1.815 million, and the numbers for March to October 1898 were 1,150, 64, and \$1.667 million (*Sun*, 30 December 1899). In addition, a women's college was founded, and streetcar facilities stretched out to all corners of the Annex. Neighborhoods like Walbrook and West Arlington were started, and Waverly and Hampden greatly improved. The private development was so great that talk about further extension of the city boundaries began.
73. *Sun*, 27 April 1 1905. One graphic example of the class indignities was the dumping of night soil on the grounds of the Bay View Asylum—an illegal act that

prompted sustained complaints but only a delayed action. See City Archives, WPA Files, 1879 (769, 1099).

74. *Sun*, 6 March 1901.

75. Gerald MacDonald, "Politics and Public Works: Baltimore Before Progressivism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering, 1985), p. 39.

76. *Sun*, 2 May 1905.

77. The average per-capita cost of building the sewers was \$4, cheaper than cesspool services. For a cost-benefit analysis of public improvements, see Edward H. Meeker, "The Social Rate of Return on Investment in Public Health, 1880-1973," *Journal of Economic History* 34 (1974): 392-421.

78. Crooks, *Politics and Progress*, pp. 145-46.

79. *Sun*, 7 February 1905.

80. Rosen, *Limits of Power*, pp. 271-82, 283, 307.

81. *Sun*, 1 May 1905.

82. *Ibid.*, 29 April 1905.

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CONTENTS ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

The Rise and Fall of Warden John F. Weyler at the Maryland Penitentiary, 1888-1912	245
by <i>Wallace Shugg</i>	
The Politics of Urban Expansion: Baltimore and the Sewerage Question, 1859-1905	270
by <i>Charles C. Euchner</i>	
"Commerce in Souls": Vice, Virtue, and Women's Wage Work in Baltimore, 1900-1915	292
by <i>Pamela Susan Haag</i>	
Research Notes & Maryland Miscellany	309
Gleanings from the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company's Oral History Collection: A Celebration of One Hundred Seventy-Five Years, compiled by <i>John T. King III</i>	
Book Reviews	330
Quarles, <i>Black Mosaic: Essays in Afro-American History and Historiography</i> , by Ira Berlin	
Jordan, <i>Foundations of Representative Government in Maryland, 1632-1715</i> , by Alison G. Olson	
Micklus, ed., <i>The History of the Ancient and Honorable Tuesday Club</i> , by David Curtis Skaggs	
Blakey, <i>General John H. Winder, C.S.A.</i> , by Robert L. Weinberg	
Warren, <i>Then Again . . . Annapolis, 1900-1965</i> , by Charlotte Fletcher	
Watson, <i>Lion in the Lobby: Clarence Mitchell, Jr.'s Struggle for the Passage of Civil Rights Laws</i> , by Joel Roache	
Chowning, <i>Harvesting the Chesapeake: Tools and Traditions</i> , by Paula J. Johnson	
McFadden, ed., <i>Georgetown at Two Hundred: Faculty Reflections on the University's Future</i> , by David Hein	
Hoehling, <i>The Fighting Liberty Ships: A Memoir</i> , by Brian Hope	