

# Order and Disorder

## 1789–1801

Visitors to Baltimore in the 1790s were impressed with the bustle of shipping and construction and recounted its impressive growth. The town doubled its population. Its merchants totted up record exports, pooled large capitals, and pulled down their storehouses to build greater. The houses numbered more than 3,000. Creeping up the hills and over the additions, the town extended a rough-woven fabric, a nubbly, thick-piled rug spreading over the gravels and bedrock. Nearly all dwellings were two stories high, with gabled shingled roofs, and chimneys on the kitchens and back buildings, as well as on the houses. Cobbled streets and dirt lanes formed the pattern, still in three distinct parts, and there were no significant monuments or monumental buildings to dominate the whole.

But without much outward change, the people of Baltimore in this decade began to see themselves as a city. Editors in their columns and merchants in their correspondence began to refer to Baltimore as a city rather than a town, and in 1796 it was incorporated by an act of the legislature. This transformation of the mind and the law in the 1790s was critical to the monumental conception of the years after 1800. The Baltimore of the '90s was still a brutal frontier boom town in an economy of slavery, yet some urban or civilizing process was under way. The sap was running that would make possible a cultural blossoming about 1820.

What makes a city? It can be looked at from two vantage points—from the outside, in its relation to the world, and from the inside, in its internal order and disorder. From either viewpoint one can see a transformation of Baltimore.

### A Place on the Map

In the 1790s Baltimore became a knot in the world's web of shipping, finance, and communications. The world system was knitted together and dominated by Britain, France, and Holland, rivals in industrial take-off. Americans, thanks to their new sovereignty and federal constitution, were able to break into international trade, capture the middleman profits of other nations' wars, market American agricultural products despite the long costly hauls, and develop a ship-building industry. For Baltimore, the most important market was the West Indies, still the theater of naval warfare and commercial rivalry among France, Spain, and Britain. Not only was Baltimore well situated, but the momentum

was there. Baltimore schooners were designed for hide and seek. The sailing experience and marketing connections of Baltimore ship captains, merchants, and insurance brokers provided a powerful edge in the West Indian market. But new markets were swiftly developed and abandoned, fortunes were touched and lost, in the kaleidoscope of trade.

Robert Oliver was a prime example of the talents required: a willingness to calculate dramatic risks and to roll with the punches. He started small, as a young immigrant with no capital, handling linens on commission from Belfast. During the 1790s he extended himself into new fields on his own account: he shipped tobacco to Lorient and flour to Brest, and imported coffee from Santo Domingo and reexported it to Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Leghorn, and Bremen. In spite of several losses to British capture and then several to French capture, wartime profits were grand, and Oliver's biographer estimates he was worth a quarter of a million dollars by 1797, when he began sending ships (at least fifteen) to Batavia to bring back coffee or sugar. Some stopped at Lisbon for wines. He also speculated in the medium of exchange (for instance, Spanish dollars and bank notes) as well as the goods, and earned freights on the vessels. He shared joint ventures with other Baltimore merchants, especially Robert Gilmor, Jeremiah Yellott (worth half a million dollars), and Henry Thompson. Oliver's operations, like those of Alexander Brown, illustrate the premium placed on the best possible intelligence system and shrewd appraisal of character. They still included family members as agents, but had strategic relationships with merchant bankers in London, Amsterdam, and Bremen. Oliver once sent a vessel out to intercept his earlier cargoes for Batavia and redirect them to a more profitable market.

Men like Oliver made no sharp distinction between politics, law, and economics. Their morality appears to have been one of honor among thieves. For example, Baltimore merchants were incensed to learn in January 1797 of the injustice done to Isaac McKim. McKim had sold his outbound cargo in a French port (against French law), bought coffee in Jérémie (British), was then captured by a French privateer, carried into a French port, and there condemned "without a hearing." Soon after, under an American embargo forbidding trade with French ports, including the West Indian colonial ports, Oliver wrote a shipowner: "we were obliged to give Bond at our Custom House to the amount of your vessel and cargo that she would not during her intended voyage go to any French Port. But we presume She is at liberty after landing her cargo at any neutral Island to take it on board again & go where she pleases."<sup>1</sup>

The expansion of trade and the high-risk multinational operations placed enormous strains on the financial system. New institutions of banking and insurance were created in Baltimore. In 1789 the Bank of Maryland was formed, in 1792 a branch of the United States Bank was established, and in 1797 the Bank of Baltimore was organized on a much larger scale by merchants who felt that the Bank of Maryland catered only to one circle.

The psychological impact of the new profits and far-flung connections was immense. At least half the population of the town was tied directly into the commercial sector—commission merchants, shopkeepers, and peddlers. They

were hungry for information. The number of printers, publishers, and booksellers rose from four or five to at least nineteen, a rate of increase greater than Philadelphia, New York, or Boston. The number of newspapers increased in the decade from two to six. They carried primarily foreign news except when Congress or the legislature was in session. They recounted revolutions in the West Indies and atrocities in Ireland; curious details of the geography and history of distant places like Mocha suddenly connected with Baltimore. Baltimore was vulnerable to bank failures in Hamburg and the financial ups and downs of the Spanish crown, as well as French naval courts and East Indian prices. This vulnerability, or at least the keen awareness of it, is a peculiarly urban phenomenon. The inner circle of merchants was most sensitive to it, and they made communications their highest priority. They organized an exchange and a circulating library, and patronized European-style coffeehouses. About three hundred merchants subscribed to Captain David Porter's new observatory on Federal Hill, which ran up the owner's flag when a ship was sighted coming up the bay. This relatively small group of people developed their ability to cope, to maneuver, to exercise control. They became accustomed to decision, risk, and a sense of self-determination. They were operating on a stage much larger than the state of Maryland.

A large share of craftsmen were also dependent on the commercial sector—either on the demand for ships and shipfitting or on the consumption of luxury goods and services by the merchant elite. During the “undeclared war” with France (from 1794) the demand for private vessels and government naval vessels generated unprecedented activity on Fells Point. The United States had the *Constellation*, the *Montezuma*, the *Baltimore*, and the *Patapsco* built or fitted out, along with smaller gunboats. The number of craftsmen and apprentices increased. Numerous ropewalks were established.

The cosmopolitanism of Baltimore was enhanced not only by its long lines of trade and communications, but by the transfusion of new blood. The doubling of the population must be attributed chiefly to immigration. A low ratio of females to males—only 85 to 100 among whites in the town in 1800—is characteristic of pioneering, mobile, and turbulent populations. The cultural backgrounds and skills of the immigrants provide clues to the cultural growth of the city.

Immigrants continued to come from the British Isles, particularly Ireland, but their numbers are difficult to estimate, as they were quickly assimilated. Many stayed but a short time, or merely passed through. For example, a boatload of Welsh immigrants was bought and sold by a Welsh tavern keeper on Fells Point, and transported by the flour wagoners for resale and resettlement as agricultural laborers three hundred miles inland.<sup>2</sup> A hundred Irish “redemptioners” were advertised for sale from the vessel, at Spear's wharf. They had fourteen days to arrange a bargain for years of labor service, to an employer who would pay the shipowner ten guineas for passage. The short-lived sugar-house imported workmen from London. Advertised runaways and jailbreakers included an Irish hairdresser and an Irish apprentice who played the flute, two

seamen who spoke in Scotch dialect, two English convicts, a blacksmith, and a wagoner.

Germans continued to arrive, directly as indentured servants and indirectly from smaller settlements in Pennsylvania. Samuel Sower began publishing English and German books in Baltimore, and opened a type foundry. Dieter Cunz estimates that at least 10 percent of the households in Baltimore were German, on the basis of unmistakably German names in the directory of 1796.<sup>3</sup> They continued to enter skilled crafts and trades, particularly as brewers, bakers, soap and sugar boilers, and workers in metals, leather, and wood. They represented half the membership of the Manufacturing Society founded in 1789. The German Society was active in checking on conditions in arriving immigrant ships. Toward the end of the decade, the revival of trade in tobacco led to renewed ties with Bremen merchants and banking houses.

Unique in the 1790s was a potent French influence. The number of French immigrants was substantial, produced by events in France and the French colony of Santo Domingo. Their cultural impact was more substantial yet. At precisely the moment when John Carroll went to England to be consecrated as the first Catholic bishop of the United States—shepherd of perhaps fourteen Jesuit mission priests and a widely scattered flock—the Sulpician order was expelled from France in the wake of the French Revolution, and its superior, Father Nagot, went to England. The meeting of Father Carroll and Father Nagot represents the seepage of French Catholic tradition into the lives of Catholics in England and Maryland. John Carroll, like many other sons of the original land patent families, had been educated at Saint Omer (Flanders) and the Jesuit college at Liège. Carroll invited Father Nagot to found a seminary in Baltimore. The priests secured the money and began arriving in 1792. Carroll selected a site, the One-Mile Tavern just beyond the edge of town on the Hookstown Road (Pennsylvania Avenue), convenient as a choir and chapter for his episcopal seat, St. Peter's Church. Over the next generation Saint Mary's Seminary became a vital force in the development of education and the consolidation of Baltimore as the center of Catholic publishing and administration in the United States. The Catholic population of Baltimore was about a thousand in 1785 and ten thousand in 1815.<sup>4</sup> This would amount to as much as a third of the population. Many of the German immigrants were Catholics, and Father Carroll's invitation to a German priest to serve them resulted in an internal conflict over Father Reuter's demand for a German school, a German catechism, and a German bishop. Even in its first stages, the plan to build a cathedral worthy of the center of Catholic America was a symbolic step toward the vision of Baltimore as a city. A site was acquired in 1795 bounded by Granby, Exeter, Queen, and Stiles streets, on Philpot's Hill, a fast-growing and respectable neighborhood, convenient to all three sections—the point, the town, and Oldtown.

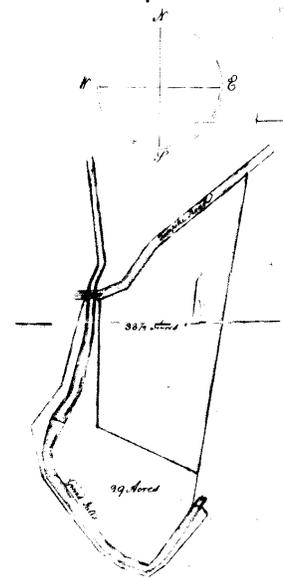
Meanwhile, hundreds of French settlers were arriving from Santo Domingo (Haiti). Refugees from bloody revolutions in Cape François escaped in a fleet of vessels that limped into Baltimore in July 1793.<sup>5</sup> Over two weeks fifty-three ships brought 1000 whites and 500 people of color and blacks. A Baltimore

committee had raised \$12,000 for their relief, and four hundred persons were being housed with private families. The outpouring of assistance to "our distressed French brethren" was magnificent. So was the impact. Such numbers would amount to a 10 percent increase in the town's population in one fell swoop. Not all stayed: some proceeded to France, some to Philadelphia. More continued to come in subsequent upheavals (notably 1796 and 1804), and some came from Philadelphia—such as the shipbuilder Despeaux—in order to retain their slaves. There were, in addition, an unknown number of emigrés from France itself. In 1804 there were perhaps 5 percent French households in the city.<sup>6</sup>

The French contributed many of the techniques and arts of a highly developed country, in particular, scientific, medical, and pharmaceutical advances and an enthusiasm for art and the trappings of culture. Most valuable were the doctors, trained in the clinically most advanced medical schools of the western world, and the several shipbuilders. A much larger number, perhaps a majority, were merchants, traders, and shopkeepers. For the most part, the French immigrants considered themselves "gentlemen," an ambiguous term in America. They were at least a rising bourgeoisie. In contrast to the Germans, whose self-respect and aspirations were frequently founded on their skilled crafts, the French self-respect was based on rubbing shoulders with the elite: they introduced a range of new skills, products, and services sought after by the wealthy. Thanks to them, Baltimore was "a place of many luxuries and no comforts."<sup>7</sup> In 1804 there were French hairdressers, perfumers, booksellers, upholsterers, milliners, goldsmiths, wine merchants, confectioners, cordial distillers, incredible numbers of dancing masters, French teachers, teachers of music, and even a chevalier de sculpture, a miniature limner, and a fencing master.<sup>8</sup> The French themselves provided enough of a market to insure the survival of French bakers and pastry cooks, several market gardeners to produce lettuces, and a Café du Commerce. Lewis Pascault, who had arrived about ten years earlier and was a successful merchant active in assisting the newcomers, arranged immediately to include a French section in the city's circulating library. Bookstores increased their stocks of French books, from Catholic works of piety to the revolutionary thinkers. Because of the timing of their arrival, the French introduced their political and religious ferment. This fostered interpretation of American nationalism in ideological terms.

The introduction of the free "people of color" and slaves of the French was significant for the development of new institutions among blacks, and of a more complicated set of attitudes. In sheer numbers, they may have added 30 percent to the colored population of the town. The impact was even greater in terms of the number of free persons and individuals schooled in the crafts, in reading, and in the Catholic religion. Newspaper advertisements indicate that many French slaves, African born, succeeded in running away soon after their arrival in Baltimore. The French Revolution had not only unleashed the turmoil of a society of slavery in Santo Domingo, but through the Code Noir (1794) had raised again the basic issues of the relations of race, slavery, and republicanism. In Baltimore, Father Dubourg at Saint Mary's Seminary organized regular cate-

The Old Forge Tract, part of Georgia, belonged to Cornelius Howard. In 1797 it was described as "Part of Four Tracts of Land lying in Baltimore County, called Newton, Georgia, Howard's Discovery, and a Tract condemned for a Forge, laid out for James Carroll. Beginning at a Rock marked IC No. 5 and running thence N38°W 4½ perches to Gwinns Falls, then N82½°W 4½ perches to the end of the S by W line of Georgia then bounding on the S by W line of Georgia . . . 155 perches to the Turnpike Road, then bounding on the Turnpike Road the 4 following viz. S50°W 53 perches . . . to highwater mark of the Old Forge Pool . . . up the stream . . . to highwater mark of the Old Forge Pool on the West side of the Falls . . . down the stream, the three following courses . . . to a large Walnut tree . . . to a Post . . . to the Beginning; Containing 62½ Acres of Land more or less."



chism classes for colored children in 1794. In the same year Joseph Townsend and other Quakers and Methodists organized the Sharp Street school for children of free Negroes, "to elevate them from the degraded state into which they had fallen." In a few years Africans took over the management, and it "exceeded every expectation."<sup>9</sup> From among the people of African and French descent were formed a few years later near the seminary a day school and an order of teaching nuns, the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

**I**ncreasingly secure about their place in the sun and playing an ever more exciting role on the world stage, Baltimore's leading citizens had to cope with the internal problems of making a city work. Rapid growth produced problems of a new scale and complexity. Gambling in world trade produced dramatic losses as well as profits, and neither profits nor losses were shared equally. The overall climate of growth and prosperity generated impatience with the poor and the unsuccessful. The sense of mastery and action stimulated criticism of inaction and frustration at the intractable social and environmental problems at home.

The fast-developing city with soaring aspirations was caught in the squeeze of an undeveloped or backward region out on the margin of the world economy. The nation in general, and Maryland in particular, lacked capital, skills, and an adequate institutional framework for collective action. The underdeveloped condition was especially evident in agriculture. Baltimore's trade was based on the export of agricultural products—wheat, flour, and tobacco—and we are long accustomed to the notion that America is a great producer endowed with magnificent soils and climate. Reminiscences of epicurean guests and local gluttons of the late nineteenth century make Baltimore sound like a marvelous food market, and Sunday drives into Baltimore County suggest a rural landscape of horse farms, old stone houses, rolling green pastures, and lush woods. Nothing could be farther from the reality of the 1790s. The population was small, and no care had been lavished on the landscape. Grass and pastures were rare. Most of the forest was cut-over scrub. Slopes like Federal Hill and the bluffs along the streams were bleak and gullied. Isaac Weld described the landscape of the Patapsco valley as barren and depressing. Other travelers remarked upon the bare and untended look of the Maryland countryside along the main road from Havre de Grace into Baltimore and south toward Georgetown.

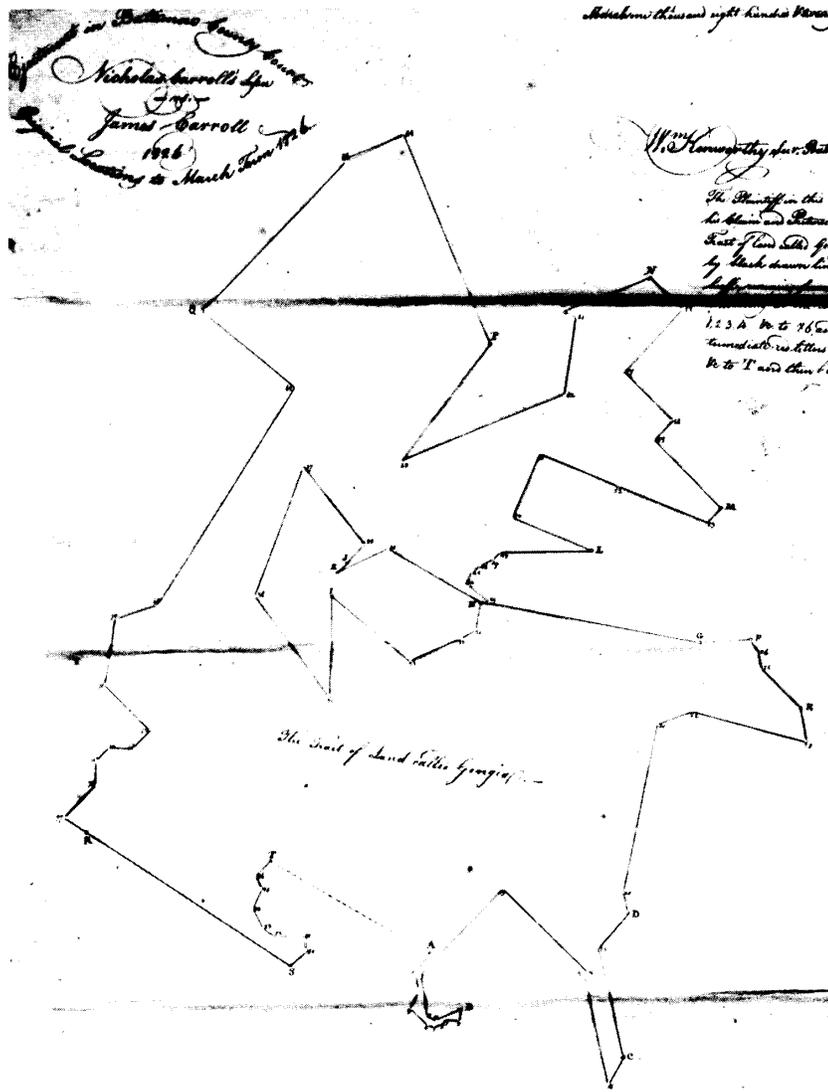
One must be wary of argicultural descriptions written as propaganda to

## Making It Work

lure immigrants, and of some visitors' accounts biased by views of slavery. Most of them looked at the landscape of slavery with horror, although they accepted the slave owner's stereotype of the African as childlike, incompetent, or sub-human. Probably the most honest and complete account of the local agricultural economy was that of a disillusioned Englishman, Richard Parkinson, who leased Orange Hill Farm for a year, on the old Philadelphia Road three miles northeast of town. The fundamental problems, which Parkinson experienced personally and discussed with all the best farmers, were the scarcity of labor and the lack of efficient transport. The transport problem was regarded as a lack of capital, but it came to much the same thing—not enough labor had yet been applied. The transport problem produced the grim limitations of market. All profit in production was eaten away by the cost of getting the goods to a market. "If a man clips wool, there is no market for it. O'Donnel kept sheep only to grow wool for making his negroes' stockings." No farmer dared specialize in a single product, such as turnips, because of the small local market. They raised pigs "as a conveyance" to carry corn to market.

Under these conditions, even the superior and well-capitalized farmers lost money, like Mr. Gough at Perry Hall, Mr. Oliver, and Mr. Gittings. General Ridgely had a farm "of great note" nine miles from Baltimore, with fine race horses. "What enables him is his very extensive iron works." Mr. O'Donnel at Canton, Parkinson's neighbor, had brought between £60,000 and £75,000 from the East Indies into America and "could not live comfortably with it." O'Donnel had manured his land with dung from Baltimore and planted an orchard of red peaches, reckoned superior for making brandy. But after his orchard had grown to bear in great perfection, the profit proved so small, "he suffered the whole go to waste, and his pigs to consume the produce; and, in the winter, rooted up all those fine peach trees, and planted the ground with Indian corn." As O'Donnel had hundreds of acres of unimproved woodland (twenty-five hundred acres all told), the cause, Parkinson observed, could not be for want of land. His investments in Baltimore seem to have been more profitable, as he had wharves and houses "to an immense amount."<sup>10</sup>

Parkinson despaired of the Maryland soils and climate, "there being no spring and autumn, but all winter and summer." He commented on the erosive power of the summer rainstorms and the lightness of the soils, even in the bottomlands. "You cannot plow and harrow fine or deep, or the whole acre moves." He reckoned good only the limestone land, as at The Caves and the Green Spring and Worthington valleys. In fact, certain problems of soil and climate were closely related to the difficulties of transport and labor. For example, it was too hot to make cheese or butter, or to butcher meat. Fish could not be conveyed in summer. Parkinson used to get up at 2 a.m. to take his milk to market, while it was cooler, to French customers who wanted milk good enough to boil without souring. The high costs of transport and labor made it uneconomical to bring manure, plaster, marl, oyster shells, or other fertilizers to the farm, and therefore soil improvement was rare, practiced only by the in-town grower of winter lettuces or by the gentlemen who made their money in trade



The documents of a lawsuit of March 1826 (*Nicholas Carroll's lessee v. James Carroll*) show Georgia and the surrounding areas, which included Gwynns Run, Anthony's Delight, Maiden's Choice, Wells's Chance, Cuckold Maker's Palace, Crowley's Contrivance, Seamore's Adventure, Fox Hall, Brotherly Love, and Rich Neck.

and could afford to lose it in farming. "The cultivation of one's own land, I was sure, would make any man poor."

The underdeveloped economy, paradoxically, has a scarcity of labor but little reward for it. From the viewpoint of employer or farmer, labor is dear, because little is produced per unit of labor. Wages for a mower, for example, were a dollar a day plus meat and a pint of whiskey, but a man could mow only an acre in a day, and the farmer was never sure his contracted laborer would show up at the critical moment. But from the viewpoint of the laborer the return was small. In spite of the apparently high wage, he was poor, as his labor was wanted only for a short season. Small farmers and farm laborers lived on cornmeal johnny-cake, and fed their horses on corn, which made them unfit for work. "They work barefoot, and the children run naked." There were few country churches or country schools. The more versatile, like Parkinson, managed to supplement their income occasionally as brewers, millers, or soap boilers.

Parkinson had refused an offer from George Washington for a farm at Mount Vernon, because he did not want to become involved in "the management of negroes," even though he considered the blacks expert at farm work, and much the best market men as well. It was not, therefore, a lack of capabilities that made slavery economically unworkable, but the system of incentives and the market limitations on all agriculture.

In every calculation made of the cultivation and produce it appears plainly that, if there be anything got, it is pinched out of the negro. . . . The idea of the negroes is, that as they work and raise all, they have a right to consume all. . . . "Massa does not work—overseer does not work."<sup>11</sup>

Of Ridgely and Carroll, the richest men in Maryland, he says, apparently quoting Washington, "What did their riches consist in? land and negroes? he compared them to dust and ashes."<sup>12</sup>

Parkinson's basic experience in farming—the high cost of transportation and of skilled and motivated labor, and the devastating effects of these scarcities on the marketability of farm products—applied also to manufacturing. Craftsmen took young boys and indentured servants as apprentices and helpers. Millers and weavers took young immigrants to board in their households. There was scarcely any take-home pay, and the working and living conditions depended on the temperament of the master. Slave labor was utilized in the iron works and brickmaking at outlying sites, but was even less appropriate to craft enterprise in town than to mixed farming. It became common in Baltimore at this time to hire out one's slaves on terms or to allow them to hire themselves out. They might also board out. The ambiguous status—free, slave for a term of years or for life, and slave but free to hire out—may account for the confusion of numbers in the local census. In 1800 blacks were a fifth of the town's population, and as many as half reported themselves as free persons. The ambiguities had bitter consequences, and state law presumed that all blacks were slaves unless they could prove otherwise.<sup>13</sup> Slaves were sometimes able to buy their freedom or negotiate a term of years, but sustaining such a right was difficult because they could not testify against a master or other white person. Such a case is mentioned in the biography of one of Maryland's star lawyers. In 1793 Nathan Harris had sold Cato to Jesse Harris for £65. At the end of seven years at the latest, Cato was to be freed, but Nathan "repossessed" him and sold him to a third person. Hearing this, Jesse recorded manumission papers, and Cato petitioned the courts. He was finally freed, it appears, in 1808.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of such injustices, Elisha Tyson, a Friend, retired from managing his merchant flour mills and devoted himself to the civil rights of blacks. He formed a society "to protect the colored population of this state in the enjoyment of their legal privileges."<sup>15</sup> Backers included some slave owners. The Protection Society obtained legal counsel, for example, for two Indian boys, aged ten and thirteen, who had been enslaved and brought to Baltimore about 1798.<sup>16</sup> Tyson was also the driving force behind the Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, composed of "all the most respectable class in Baltimore." In 1789 the young William Pinkney led their first legislative battle to repeal

the laws forbidding owners from freeing their slaves. "Are we not equally guilty? They strewed around the seeds of slavery; we cherish and sustain the growth."<sup>17</sup> Slave owners argued that freeing slaves would impoverish their heirs and render slaves turbulent, disobedient, and unruly. In 1796 the society's seventh legislative battle was successful in restoring the legal right to free one's slaves.

The great environmental hazards in this period were fire and yellow fever. Like the sufferings of the poor, these hazards were seasonal. As the seasons revolved, the threats waxed and waned. They influenced the physical growth of the town.

Fires were most feared in winter, but many other anxieties were translated into the fear of fire as a result of carelessness or reprisal. A stable burned due to the neglect of two boys with a candle, catching rats. A fourteen-year-old slave girl who set fire to her master's house said she was persuaded by a wench who belonged to his brother.<sup>18</sup> A fire in Light Street in December 1796 spread from a doctor's surgery, consumed the Methodist church and its new college, the tavern opposite, and a row of warehouses insured by the Baltimore Equitable Society. The society had to levy an extra assessment on its membership to pay for rebuilding; it then took the lead in introducing legislation and fire insurance rates calculated to favor slate roofs and parapet walls.<sup>19</sup> A person was designated to salvage and take custody of property at fires. A new fire company was formed, a new engine was acquired at Fells Point, and all the companies were ordered to meet and set rules and regulations.

Yellow fever was a late summer and autumn threat, severe in 1794 (344 deaths), 1797 (545 deaths), 1799, and 1800. Yellow fever determined that Baltimore Town, not Fells Point, would become the growth area and residential location of the wealthy and influential. In 1794 Moreau de Saint Méry, a French observer from Santo Domingo on his way to Philadelphia, admired the site and activity in Fells Point and took an optimistic view of its future: "The Point, its buildings much more modern than those of Baltimore, is increasing prodigiously." He remarked on the yellow fever, already bad on the point in 1793: "An interest stronger than love of life, however, anchors there all who believe the promises of fortune rather than the threats of inexorable death."<sup>20</sup> By 1800 his positive expectation was no longer expressed. The yellow fever had been dreadful several years in succession. "The disease, rising from the rank of a bilious, to that of a yellow fever, mounted its chariot of death, and spread dismay and mourning wherever it appeared."<sup>21</sup>

Baltimore's doctors debated the causes. They never accepted the principle of contagion, which implied quarantine and the total cessation of trade. The spread of the fever was attributed to local putrefaction and the gasses given off and carried by the wind. Dr. Davidge said, "The seeds of the remittent bilious and yellow fever are produced in putrid vegetable and stagnant water, and are quickened by heat and dryness."<sup>22</sup> The facts and the theories were brought out when a newspaper printed a letter from young Dr. Nathaniel Potter to a colleague in Philadelphia. He described the terror in Fells Point, and the local disadvantages that might explain it. He claimed that half the inhabitants were

### Perennial Crises

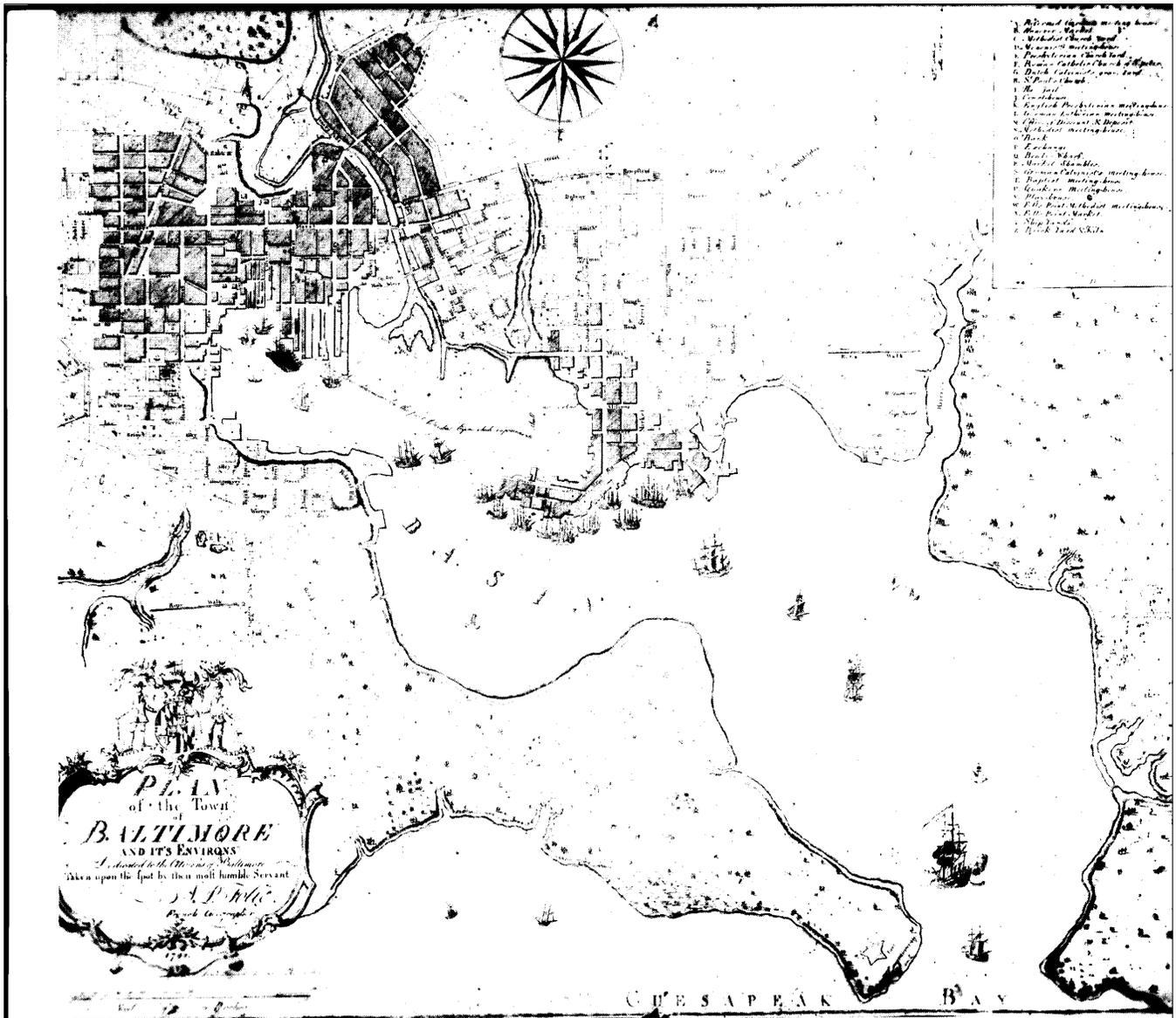
"dead or fled," that people were buried "clandestinely" at night, and that some were infected merely by riding through the narrow, unventilated, unpaved streets.<sup>23</sup> Potter blamed the small wooden houses, "irregularly situated." "There are between the town and the point low fenny grounds, covered with putrifying vegetable substance, as well as certain unfinished wharves . . . where pestilential gasses were continually evolved." The city fathers were incensed at Potter's attack on the board of health: "Their conduct has never been marked by such peculiar vigilance or care, for an indefinite and temporizing policy has ever been their most prominent characteristic."<sup>24</sup> The point was temporarily evacuated. The dangers appear to have guided the merchant class in its gradual abandonment of Fells Point to the working class and its selection of new residential districts on higher ground.

John Hollins and James Buchanan built the first fine residences in Calvert Street north of Baltimore Street, in 1799. New demand favored the healthier hilltops, in particular, the neighborhood of the courthouse and the hills where Lexington Market and the cathedral were later located. Other merchants lived in the Gay Street area just south of Baltimore Street. The epidemics also confirmed the upper class in the tradition of maintaining summer residences or country seats, in the style of the older planters and landed wealth. About this time, Samuel Smith bought Montebello, Robert Oliver bought Green Mount, John Donnell bought Willow Brook, and Robert Gilmor, Sr., Beech Hill. Properties within a range of two or three miles of the city were being subdivided into estates of six to ten acres and advertised as country seats.<sup>25</sup>

Successive catastrophes provided a series of heroic tests for citizens of Baltimore. They intensified the sense of inadequacy of the town's internal initiatives and controls, and probably explain the decision to incorporate, as suggested in the preamble to the charter of 1796:

Whereas it is found by experience, that the good order, health and safety of large Towns and Cities, cannot be preserved, nor the evils and accidents to which they are subject, avoided or remedied, without an internal power competent to establish a police and regulations, fitted to their particular circumstances, wants, and exigencies. . . .<sup>26</sup>

The Mechanical Society had opposed incorporation in 1789 and again in 1793 "before such bill shall be published and approved by a majority of the citizens." They were afraid Fells Point would be taxed for deepening the basin. They also feared that the legislature would not provide adequate representation or powers for the town. Indeed, it did not. The city, approaching 25,000 people, was given no representation in the assembly, apart from the two already authorized delegates of Baltimore County, of which it was a part. Within the city, authority was divided among the elected mayor and council, the appointed port wardens, and the appointed town commissioners. The unusual fragmentation of Baltimore's local government was already assured. Trustees appointed by the governor managed the poorhouse, but any hard winter was marked by the appearance of "cases of humanity" in the newspapers and ad hoc collections of firewood and food. All farm work was suspended, the laborers and "vagrants" arrived in Baltimore, and the economy provided little employment in manu-



facturing. Class attitudes hardened responses. In 1797, for example, Baltimoreans gave \$1,200 for their poor, where they had easily raised ten times as much for the bourgeois French refugees and again for the genteel victims of a fire in Norfolk.<sup>27</sup>

The early actions of the city government were concerned with sanitation and fire laws—the environmental hazards that required collective action. The private fire companies were subsidized by the city, and frame construction was outlawed. Sanitary policy was more variable. The degree of threat of yellow fever determined the amount of energy directed to collecting garbage, controlling pigs (the scavenger service) and dogs, and supervising the dumping of spoiled cargo or the emptying of privies. The city continued to rely on private individual self-interest to initiate major public improvements. Virtually every act, such as a street condemnation or purchase of property, had to have a special enabling

A. P. Folie published his "Plan of the Town of Baltimore . . ." in 1792. In little more than a decade, the course of the Jones Falls had been shortened, and significant filling and wharf construction constricted the harbor.

act from the state legislature or it could be questioned on grounds of insufficient municipal powers or doubtful jurisdiction.

The major public improvements of the '90s were a continuation of the effort to increase the valuable fringe zone of land and water. There was agreement on the general scheme of building up the perimeter of the basin and making the market space its centerpiece. The channel could accommodate 500-ton ocean vessels, but coastal shipping took on new importance in unifying the nation, and the local trade of the Chesapeake Bay multiplied. A resident of North Point reported passing to Baltimore in 1796 over 5,000 bay craft, nearly ten times the number of ocean-going vessels. To make Centre Market accessible from the west, Fayette Street was opened into Calvert Street, Sharping Street was widened from Gay to South, and Second Street was extended from South Street to the market space. These east-west openings were intended to ease the congestion of Baltimore Street and were related to the development—at long last—of Harrison's Marsh. Dugan and McElderry built 1600-foot matching wharves extending south from the market space. The conception was that of the British docks of Bristol and Liverpool: ranges of three-story brick warehouses fronting on the enclosed water.

Meanwhile, development extended, pier by pier and block by block, darning in the west fringe of the basin. Charles Street was extended across two or three docks by filling between Camden and Barre streets. The legislature authorized filling and wharfing Light Street. A lawsuit records that the tide had originally flowed within one hundred feet of Charles and Pratt streets, but by 1802 most of the filling up was accomplished and a second generation of buildings was already under construction near Pratt and Charles.<sup>28</sup> Pratt was still not a through street, but it had been extended piecemeal and the intent was clear. The old docks (Cheapside and Hollingsworth's), so important in the midcentury development of the port, were decidedly obsolete. They were occupied by flour dealers, tanners and curriers, and paint dealers. Their owners, the Hollingsworths and the Ellicotts, seem to have moved from a progressive to an obstructionist posture. The city had outgrown them.

"Because these piers jut out in the water there are . . . marshes dented with wide inlets, while neighboring wharves are just so many breakwaters. All this gives an air of disorder."<sup>29</sup> That was the perspective of a French emigré passing through Baltimore. He argued for a "strict adherence to alinement." The wharves were symbolic. Order and disorder were a source of deep anxiety in Baltimore, evident in the polarization of class and party. Mechanics demanded a share of the profits reaped in the good years. The carpenters organized, and various strikes occurred in the building trades. A master builder who ordinarily had twenty to fifty men at work with several good teams of horses was "so perplexed by his men . . . as to be compelled to carry bricks and mortar up to the scaffold himself."<sup>30</sup> The mechanics organized a Republican society to lobby for an American navigation act and protective tariffs. Baltimore was moving toward a Republican (Jeffersonian) majority, although Baltimore citizens Samuel Chase and James McHenry were given important posts in the Federalist cabinet and judiciary in 1796. The tumultuous elections of 1798 made a Republican out



*In pursuance of the Commission of the  
 Mayor and City Council of Baltimore, under an act of the  
 Legislature, the situation of the wharves of Baltimore is  
 reported in the Commission, the former level of the water  
 the first wharves by the act of the Legislature, the same  
 the above Survey and Chart of the port of Baltimore  
 according to each ordinance, the method and the  
 different wharves built from grants by the Parliament  
 to the Wharves into the water line, and have been  
 marked the depth and course of the Channel and have also  
 drawn a line of boundary beyond which, in an opinion  
 wharves might not be built, and a survey of the same  
 proceedings are attached to the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore  
 Commission. Given under our hands, at the City of Baltimore  
 this 15<sup>th</sup> day of July 1799.*

*Wm. Sollers  
 J. H. Clarke*

of merchant-congressman Samuel Smith and established a "permanent" Republican majority in Baltimore. These elections were "riotous," and Baltimore's conflict with the Federalist state government hardened into a more or less permanent battle line. Many issues were debated in this partisan context of Baltimore City—unrepresented—in the state of Maryland. Solomon Etting, an active Republican, made his first plea for the civil rights of Jews. The "Jew bill," defeated year after year for thirty years, became an issue symbolic of the oppression of Baltimore, as well as the oppression of Jews and blacks. Baltimore identified with the medieval merchant cities, fighting passionately for certain freedoms—the Jew's right to hold office and serve on juries, the black man's right to remain free unless proved a slave, and the slave owner's right to emancipate his slave.

Baltimore's participation in the affairs of Europe, its desire to project its own image on a backdrop of grand scale, and its ambivalence toward the French Revolution are illustrated by events of the summer of 1797. Hundreds of Baltimoreans trooped out to the pleasure gardens or taverns to celebrate the Fourth of July. At the observatory on Federal Hill, Porter offered fireworks, a 10 p.m. royal salute, a cold collation, and the best of liquors. The proprietors of Gray's gardens at Chatsworth prepared a band of music and illuminated life-size transparent pictures commemorating American independence, the destruction of the

In 1797 the port wardens defined a line beyond which wharves might not extend. This plat shows the valuable character of the point, the interfingering of land and water, and the undeveloped state of the cove on the west and the Canton district on the east.

**ORDER AND DISORDER**

1789–1801

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Bastille, the downfall of monarchy, and universal peace. Bryden, at the Fountain Inn on Light Street, featured an optical machine in which “Buonaparte will be seen, conducted by an angel, and trampling upon tyranny.” The spectacles and festivities recommenced on 14 July, Bastille Day. In September, however, the papers were full of anxiety. An episode of shooting and self-poisoning by laudanum involved several German families. A daring footpad was at large on the road to Ellicott Mills. Negro Lydia was sentenced to be hanged for burning the house of Sophia Allender, and revelations were published daily of a supposed conspiracy of French Negroes to set fire to the town of Charleston. The editor was moved to comment:

All the various enormities of the old world, during its late convulsions, have been more or less felt in the new. The revolutionizing phrenzy, the prostration of all law and order, and the total disregard of everything human and divine. . . . Robberies, murders, and assassinations are now becoming the order of the day.<sup>31</sup>

*Order and Disorder*

Newspaper sources are the *Baltimore Daily Repository*, April–July 1793, the *Baltimore Daily Intelligencer*, October–December 1793, and the *Federal Gazette* and *Baltimore Daily Advertiser*, January 1797.

Also used extensively are: Richard Parkinson, *A Tour in America in 1798, 1799 and 1800*, 2 vols. (London: J. Harding and J. Murray, 1805); Wilbur Coyle, ed., *Records of the City of Baltimore*, vol. 2, *City Commissioners, 1779-1813* (Baltimore: King Bros., 1906); Stuart Weems Bruchey, *Robert Oliver, Merchant of Baltimore, 1783-1819*, Johns Hopkins University Studies 74, no. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956); and Richard H. Townsend, *Diary*, transcribed by Works Progress Administration of Maryland, 1937, in the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Md.

1. Bruchey, *Robert Oliver*, p. 190.
2. Parkinson, *Tour in America*.
3. Cunz, *Maryland Germans*.
4. Peter K. Guilday, *The Life and Times of John Carroll, Archbishop of Baltimore, 1735-1815* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1922).
5. *Baltimore Daily Intelligencer*, 10, 11, 13, 15, and 26 July 1793. More refugees arrived in June 1804.
6. My estimate of French population is based on French names in the city directory of 1804.
7. Parkinson, *Tour in America*.
8. For entertainment, theater, and dance, see Chrystelle T. Bond, "A Chronicle of Dance in Baltimore, 1780-1814," *Dance Perspectives* 66 (Summer 1976): 1-49.
9. Townsend, *Diary*, and *Federal Gazette*, 7 July 1797.
10. Parkinson, *Tour in America*, pp. 75-76, 214.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 456.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 428-29.
13. All Negroes were presumed to be slaves and subject to the slave's legal handicaps until either descent from a free ancestor or manumission according to the law was proved (Paul S. Clarkson and R. Samuel Jett, *Luther Martin of Maryland* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970], p. 165).
14. *Negro Cato v. Howard*, 2 Harris and Johnson (1808), p. 167, as cited in *ibid.*
15. John S. Tyson, *Life of Elisha Tyson, the Philanthropist, by a Citizen of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1825). John S. was Elisha's son. Townsend, *Diary*, confirms Tyson.
16. Protection Society cases were reported in *Niles' Register* and the *Federal Gazette* years later when they reached the Court of Appeals.
17. William Pinckney, speech at age twenty-five, cited in Tyson, *Elisha Tyson*, p. 20.
18. *Federal Gazette*, 23 December 1797. Maps in the Baltimore Courthouse refer to litigation between Edward and Samuel Norwood (*Niles' Register*, 23 November 1833).
19. *Records of the City of Baltimore*, vol. 2. On insurance rates, see *Federal Gazette*, March 1797, and Baltimore City Council journal, 15 February 1836.
20. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Voyage aux Etats-Unis de l'Amérique, 1793-1798*, ed. Stewart L. Mims (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1913), as translated in *Maryland Historical Magazine* 35 (1940): 229. John H. Powell reports the epidemic in Philadelphia and the role of French immigrants from Santo Domingo in doctoring and nursing the population: *Bring out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949).
21. John B. Davidge, *Physical Sketches* (Baltimore: W. Warner, 1814), p. 71.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Dr. Nathaniel Potter, *Federal Gazette*, 13 November 1797.
24. *Ibid.*, 25 November 1797. The epidemic occurred in October.
25. Montebello was built in 1796, and Willow Brook in 1799. Beyond three miles from the city center, subdivisions ran 50 to 100 acres for farms; beyond ten or fifteen miles, 200 to 500 acres, except for mill seats.
26. Griffith, *Annals of Baltimore*, p. 155.
27. Money was raised for Santo Domingo refugees in 1793, and for victims of the Norfolk fire in 1797.

28. On the resurvey at Pratt and Charles streets, see the testimony by George Presbury, 2 July 1810, *Records of the City of Baltimore*, 2: 165-69.
29. Saint-Méry, *Voyages aux Etats-Unis*, p. 227.
30. Parkinson, *Tour in America*.
31. *Federal Gazette*, 2 September 1797.