

THE PUSH TO SAVE READ'S

Gunts, Edward

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ABSTRACT

Preservationists say the Read's building, which is now city-owned and boarded up, should be saved as landmark. Because the Read's sit-in occurred five years before a more famous lunch counter protest at an F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro, N.C. - which provided a model for peaceful protests around the country - the Read's building is more than just a piece of Baltimore history, civil rights leaders say.

FULL TEXT

In January 1955, Morgan State College students staged an impromptu sit-in at the lunch counter of the Read's drugstore at Howard and Lexington streets in Baltimore, demanding that African-Americans be served.

Their protest, along with others at local Read's stores, worked: That month, the retail chain began serving all patrons, black and white, at all of its 37 Baltimore-area lunch counters. But the students' victory has been largely overlooked in the annals of U.S. civil rights history, in part because it was not photographed or widely reported by the mainstream news media.

More than 55 years later, the Read's protest is getting more attention than it ever did in 1955, as local preservationists and civil rights leaders wage yet another battle, this time to save the building where the protesters took a stand - by taking a seat.

An out-of-town developer wants to raze the vacant building and other structures on the block to make way for a \$150 million project called Lexington Square. That has sparked new interest in the building and the role it played in desegregation. City and state agencies have held public hearings about the building. A preservation group, Baltimore Heritage, has been leading tours of the block.

Radio talk-show hosts have devoted air time to discussing the sit-in. And the 1955 event and Baltimore's civil rights heritage will be discussed today at a forum at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, part of the museum's Black History Month celebrations.

On Saturday, students from City Neighbors Charter School in Northeast Baltimore will picket the Read's site to urge that the building be preserved. Peter French, a social studies teacher, is organizing the event as part of a class project on civil disobedience during the Jim Crow era. He said the Read's controversy gives educators a rare chance to teach students how local protesters used peaceful measures to change discriminatory practices.

"This is history that our students in Baltimore aren't generally aware of," French said. "They are very familiar with the national civil rights movement - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. But things that happened right here they aren't aware of."

French said the Read's sit-in is a "perfect metaphor" for how easily information about the local civil rights movement

can be lost. "If we let the Read's drugstore go down," he said, "we're going to let all this history disappear."

The Read's discussion is valuable because it sheds light on a period of civil rights activity before King came to national prominence and the media began paying attention to the issue, said David Taft Terry, executive director of the Reginald F. Lewis museum. In the 1950s, lunch counters were among the only locations where blacks and whites mingled in public, he said.

"When you talk about shared public space, it was the lunch counters and the restaurants and the movie theaters," Terry said. "And it was the success of the sit-ins that opened these lunch counters" to African-Americans.

The public debate over Read's also shows how U.S. values have changed when it comes to what is considered historic and worth preserving, he said. "For many years, preservationists focused on the middle and upper class," Terry said. "It's only recently that we've begun to unpack our memories and think about things differently."

Preservationists say the Read's building, which is now city-owned and boarded up, should be saved as landmark.

Because the Read's sit-in occurred five years before a more famous lunch counter protest at an F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro, N.C. - which provided a model for peaceful protests around the country - the Read's building is more than just a piece of Baltimore history, civil rights leaders say. "It's a national treasure," said local law professor Larry Gibson.

The Read's building is "a symbol of what African-Americans went through" in the 1950s, said Donald Patterson, a 1956 Morgan State graduate who remembers the downtown sit-in.

"No African-American could eat there. What we went through for today's youngsters to eat at McDonald's or any other place was a tremendous hardship. We were called all kinds of names and everything else. We have to keep some of these symbols alive in the city. We cannot forget what happened then."

Helena Hicks, who sits on Baltimore's Commission on Historical and Architectural Preservation, will appear at the Reginald F. Lewis museum symposium to discuss her participation in the 1955 Read's sit-in. Now 76 and retired after working as an administrator for the city and state, Hicks still remembers how the event unfolded.

A Morgan State student, Hicks was waiting for a bus at Howard and Lexington streets with six to eight other students headed to the campus, now Morgan State University. It was shortly after noon and the students were cold and hungry.

African-American students at that time could "go into Read's and buy a pack of cigarettes or a pack of gum," Hicks said. "But you couldn't buy a cup of coffee or tea or anything."

It was one year after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which led to the desegregation of U.S. public schools, and talk of civil rights was ubiquitous. "We felt like we needed to keep the ball rolling," Hicks said.

While the students waited for the bus, a plan took shape: They would go inside to the drugstore's lunch counter, which served only whites. "We just thought, 'We're going to go in and sit down and see what happens,'" Hicks said.

She said the students entered Read's and headed for the first-floor lunch counter, where they took seats to indicate

they wanted service. Right away, the store's manager approached and said the students would not be served, in keeping with Read's policy, warning he would call the police if they didn't leave, according to Hicks.

Hicks said the students "stayed for a while," conferring about what to do. Most were upperclassmen and didn't want to jeopardize their chances of graduating by being arrested. "At that point in time people could only be pressed so hard," Hicks said. "Pine Street [police] station was three blocks away. ... We could only do so much. ... We had no legal right to be there."

Eventually, the students got up and headed for the door. "We left voluntarily," Hicks said. "We wanted to be served, but we didn't want to go to jail."

The impromptu sit-in had lasted less than half an hour. The peace was not disturbed. No one was arrested. But no one was served, either.

Within days of the downtown sit-in - and after various protests at other Read's branches - the retail chain announced that it was changing its policy.

That change in policy got a one-sentence mention in *The Sun*, on Jan. 18, 1955, in an article about desegregation in the region. A longer article appeared on Jan. 22 in the Afro-American newspaper.

The Rev. Douglas Sands, a minister in Sykesville who graduated from Morgan in 1956, said he didn't take part in the Howard Street sit-in but remembers hearing about it. He said he lived on campus and took part in sit-ins at the Read's lunch counter at Loch Raven Boulevard and Cold Spring Lane, the Read's store closest to the Morgan campus. Students staged frequent sit-ins there, he said, adding that light-skinned black students would be sent in to see if they would be served.

Unlike the more orchestrated student protests of the 1960s, many of the early civil rights demonstrations by students were "spontaneous things, not incidents organized for public consumption," Sands said, noting that other local targets included the Northwood Shopping Center's movie theater and the Arundel ice cream store.

"It was something we did repeatedly," he said of the sit-ins. "It was a way for us to make a protest."

The Lexington Square developers say they were unaware of the Read's building's history until recently. Starting in December, information about the sit-in was disseminated by Baltimore Heritage, a preservation group that has been studying the history of all the buildings around Howard and Lexington streets to make a case for their preservation.

While the sit-in is getting attention now, there is no consensus about how to commemorate what happened. The interior of the former Read's building has deteriorated over the years and no longer contains the lunch counter, stools or any other remnants from 1955.

Joe Nattans, grandson of the former owner of Read's, suggests that the building be redeveloped as a working pharmacy and museum that replicates the store as it was in 1955. He suggests that the second floor contain a drugstore run by the pharmacy school at the University of Maryland or the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, and that the location also feature "site-specific memorabilia and souvenirs."

In a January meeting of Baltimore's urban design and architectural review panel, the Lexington Square development team suggested saving two architectural details and a flagpole from the building - an offer one opponent later

dismissed as a "lollipop" meant to appease preservationists.

M.J. "Jay" Brodie, president of the Baltimore Development Corp., told directors of his board in January that ideas under consideration were to create exhibits at the Reginald F. Lewis museum, the Morgan State University campus and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum. He said the city remains open to other ideas.

Some have suggested that Baltimore's preservation commission, which is scheduled to hold a public hearing on the Lexington Square plan on Feb. 16, designate the Read's building a city landmark to protect it from demolition.

Terry, the museum director, says he is not in a position to recommend what should happen to the building but says he's happy to have the chance to discuss its importance to Baltimore.

"The hardest history to understand is history that happens in your own lifetime, because you don't have the proper perspective," he said.

"This project has been wonderful for the conversation it has started," Terry said. "If you want to understand Baltimore history, the understanding starts at the corner of Howard and Lexington streets."

ed.gunts@baltsun.com

Credit: The Baltimore Sun

Illustration

Photo(s); Caption: 1. &2. The Read Drug and Chemical Building at Howard and Lexington streets in 1934. The sign on the building says "Run Right To Read's." Helena Hicks, above right, took part in the 1955 sit-in at the lunch counter.3. Preservation and civil rights leaders take a walking tour of the Superblock area on the anniversary of the Read's drugstore sit-in.4. Johns Hopkins, the executive director of Baltimore Heritage, leads a tour of the 200 block of W. Lexington St. The building in the background is the former Read's drugstore.

DETAILS

Subject:	Colleges & universities; Historic preservation; Civil rights movements
Location:	Baltimore Maryland; United States--US
Classification:	8360: Real estate; 9190: United States
Publication title:	The Baltimore Sun; Baltimore, Md.
Pages:	n/a
Publication year:	2011
Publication date:	Feb 9, 2011
Section:	BUSINESS

Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Baltimore, Md.
Country of publication:	United States, Baltimore, Md.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	19439504
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	850498257
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/push-save-reads/docview/850498257/se-2?accountid=34685
Copyright:	(Copyright 2011 @ The Baltimore Sun Company)
Last updated:	2021-10-05
Database:	Baltimore Sun

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