

baltimore row houses of the early nineteenth century

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“This Town,” wrote a traveler in 1793 of Baltimore, “is built chiefly of brick. Its Houses are 3-Story—join [ed] together—are wide, & the Town appears to be better and more handsomely built than Philadelphia.”¹ Despite a New Yorker’s condescension toward Philadelphia, he was perceptive enough to bracket the brick architecture of Baltimore with that of the next large coastal city to the north. The material, brick, was not only common and traditional in both places, but its use was reinforced by regulations against fire hazards. He grasped also the importance of the row house as a feature of the cityscape, an observation to be repeated often by later travelers.

Although row housing has antecedents as old as pharaonic Egypt, it acquired a predominant if much ignored importance in the rapid growth of cities during the early industrial age. Baltimore is still characterized as the city of brick rows of the early nineteenth century, with white marble steps scrubbed daily by industrious housewives. For the historian of American culture the rows of the middle decades and the third quarter of the century have another significance. While often retaining the marble stoop in Baltimore, the uniform brownstone front prevailed up and down the coast and far inland. This row housing gave rise to the term “brown decades” that not only names the period, but intimates a whole culture and life style. By the end of the century the row house designer was seeking individuality through stylistic novelty and even differentiation of the units within a block. But with the rising costs of urban land and construction, only the affluent real estate speculator could afford to build row houses, and the upper middle class and wealthy to live in them, while the poor and lower middle class had to be satisfied with tenements. Rather than a sequential history of the type, however, this study is cross-sectional, concentrating on a number of rows built during a period of less than fifteen years, and is concerned with some features relating the row house

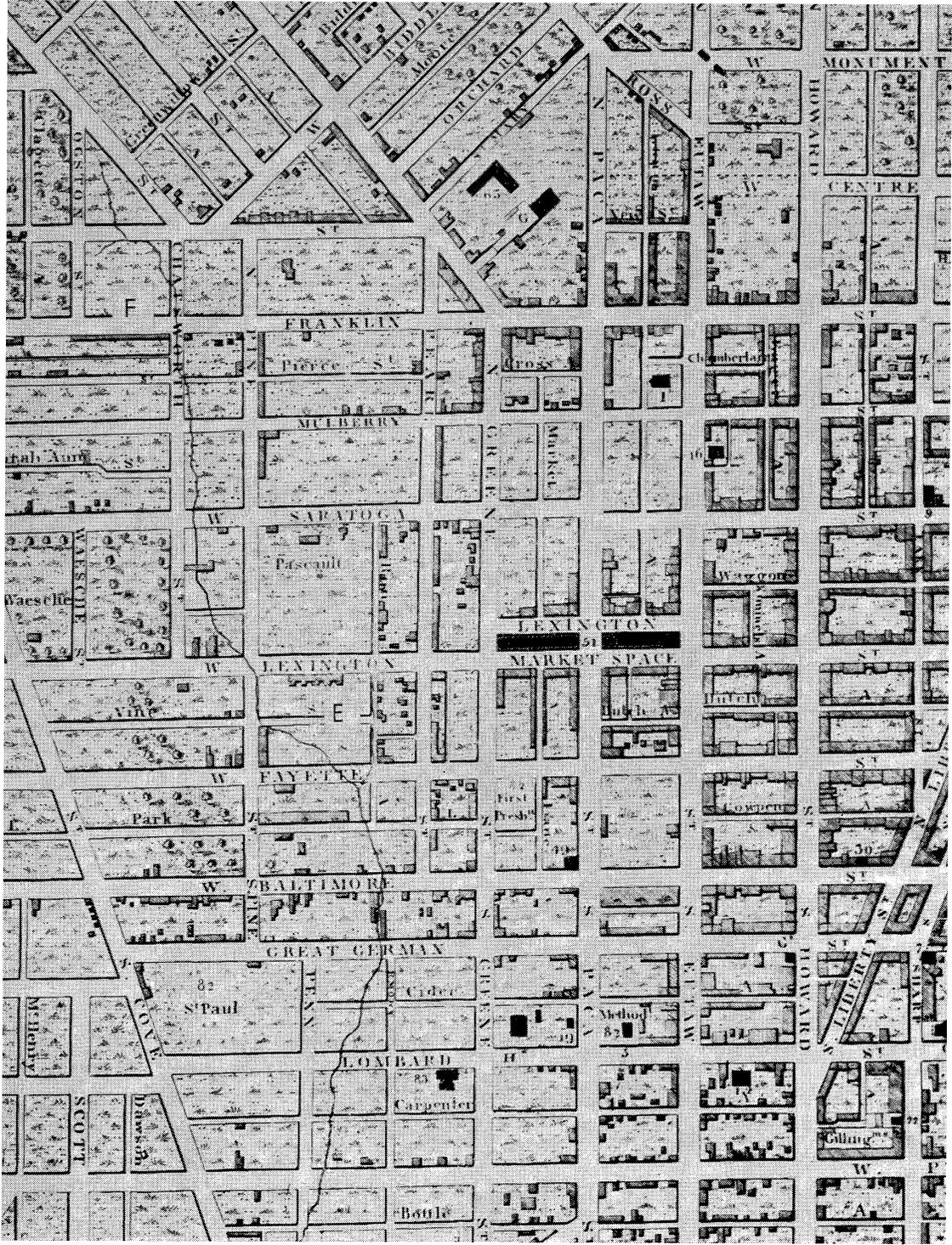


Figure One: DETAIL FROM THOMAS POPPLETON'S **PLAN OF THE CITY OF BALTIMORE** (1823). The letters give the locations of row houses discussed in the text. E, Pascault Row; F, Franklin Row.



Figure Two: **DETAIL FROM POPPLETON'S PLAN.** This illustration and the one opposite, adjacent sections of the **Plan**, represent the heart of the city. A, O'Donnell houses; B, Carroll houses; C, Sinclair houses; D, Waterloo Row; G, Hamilton Street houses.

to the social and economic context of the early nineteenth century, a time characterized by the activities of the merchant and mechanic rather than the financier.

The idea of row housing came to Philadelphia from England in the seventeenth century, to provide both living quarters for an expanding population, and a uniformity of design that showed a concern for a regular beauty in the urban setting. The designer thought in terms of large blocks rather than so many separate and individual small parts. By the late eighteenth century the type was firmly established in Baltimore, and Thomas Poppleton's *Plan of the City of Baltimore*, of 1823, shows that rows played a prominent part as the city fanned outward from the harbor area (Figures One, Two). The city participated in the general urban expansion of the Federal years, doubling or tripling its population each decade. The great demand for dwellings was satisfied most rapidly by the row, and most profitably, too, for they were generally built on speculation. Another influential factor in the acceptance of the type was the Baltimore practice of ground rental.² Although the buildings were sold for immediate profit, the landowner retained title to the ground for which he then received a regular annual rent. Row housing, rather than isolated structures, led to greater subdivision of the property and a correspondingly greater number of rental fees.

A major document for rows of the early nineteenth century is the *Record of Surveys* of the Baltimore Equitable Society.³ As soon as a building was completed, the builder or owner secured insurance to protect himself against the very common hazard of loss by fire. Although architects are not named and sketches of buildings are not included, the *Surveys* (a series of descriptions and evaluations by the insurance agent) provides a wealth of specific information on dates, dimensions, values and ownership. The estate of John O'Donnell, for example, by January 30, 1810, constructed a row of six three-story units of brick (Figure Two, A) on Commerce Street between Pratt and Water Streets (*Surveys*, Volume A, 289-290). Measuring about twenty-five feet in front and thirty-six feet deep and having a backbuilding with the kitchen, each unit was valued at \$3,000. On the west side of the street the estate built two similar units.⁴ Before 1860 the Equitable Society's policies were renewable every seven years, but these buildings never reappeared as a group in the possession of the estate or of any other single owner. The obvious inference is that this construction was undertaken for immediate sale and increased rentals from the land retained by the estate.

Much more elaborate was the row of three three-story brick buildings (Figure Two, B) raised in 1810 by Charles Carroll of Carrollton on the north side of King George (later Water, now Lombard) Street near Jones Falls⁵ (*Surveys*, Volume B, 84). With a front of twenty-eight feet and a depth of forty feet, accompanied by large backbuildings, each was insured on November 20th for \$7,500 and was obviously intended for a wealthier clientele. Indeed, a mid-eighteenth century Georgian taste persisted in

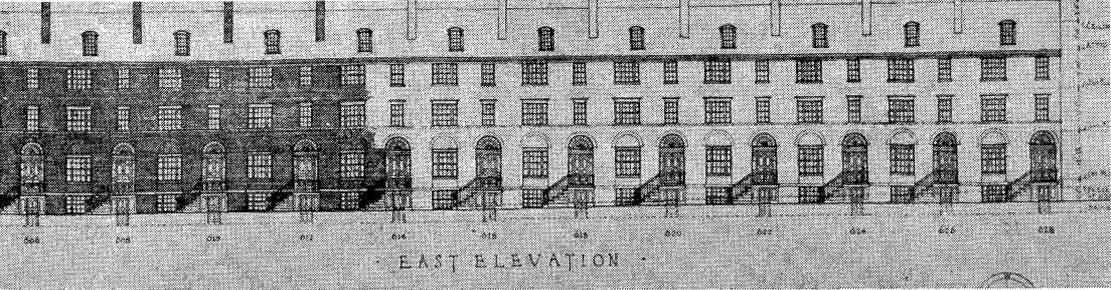


Figure Three: WATERLOO ROW, by Robert Mills, 1817-1819 (drawing by G. P. Schott; courtesy Historic American Buildings Survey).

the window openings topped, not by a one-piece lintel, but by diagonally cut stones forming a flat arch with an elaborated keystone in the center. In 1820 Carroll reinsured one of these dwellings (*Surveys*, Volume F, 117) and a few years later transferred it to his daughter, Mary Caton. When she insured it in 1826 its value had dropped some \$800 (*Surveys*, Volume H, 352-353). From these examples, and others could be added, it is clear that rows in Baltimore were speculative undertakings, built for sale rather than rental. Carroll erred in building very expensive row houses. Anyone who could afford \$7,500 for a dwelling probably preferred to build his own detached structure, or at least sought a different neighborhood, away from the as yet unchanneled Jones Falls.

A few years later, however, and in another section of the city, expensive attached housing did succeed. In May 1815 the carpenter-architect John Sinclair petitioned the City for the grading of St. Paul's Lane at Pleasant Street.⁶ By December 1, 1817, a row of seven four-story dwellings (Figure Two, C) was raised. Measuring twenty-seven by forty-one feet, of brick with slate roofs and fire walls, they were valued at \$8,250 each and, it is

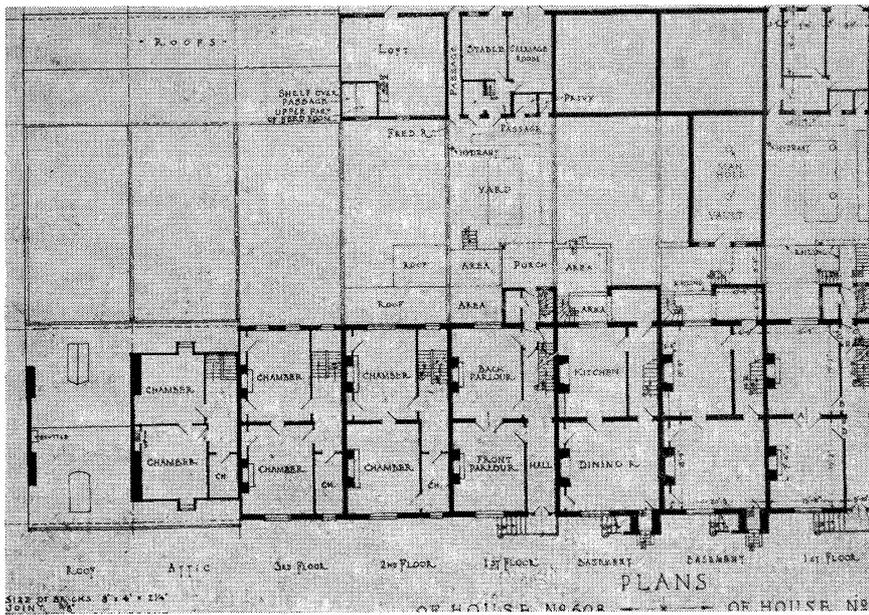


Figure Four: PLAN OF WATERLOO ROW HOUSES (drawing by G. P. Schott; courtesy Historic American Buildings Survey).



Figure Five: PASCAULT ROW, 1819(?)–1822 (courtesy Historic American Buildings Survey).

noted, were “well-finished” inside (*Surveys*, Volume 4, 394). They must have sold well as the original owners, who never occupied the houses, did not renew the insurance. Those first owners, in fact, were artisans, and none was a wealthy man. The first house, at the southeast corner of St. Paul’s Lane and Pleasant Street, was owned by the bricklayer Walter Athey; the next three houses south belonged in sequence to a carpenter, Herman Neimeyers (or “Neimyer” according to the directory), to the stonemason partners Frederick Baughman and Elias Hore, and to the lumber merchant Joseph Turner, Jr.; Sinclair owned the last three. Clearly the building of this row was a joint undertaking by men in the building trades, none of whom could afford such a venture by himself. They pooled their materials, skills and capital, each emerging with a house, the sale of which provided the return on his investment. Sinclair, as owner of the land, carpenter, architect and entrepreneur, received a triple share. These buildings stood until St. Paul’s Lane was enlarged some years ago.

A similar accommodation underlay the construction of the famous Waterloo Row (Figures Two, D; Three; Four) on Calvert Street, designed by Robert Mills.⁷ On March 19, 1817, as president of the Baltimore Water Company, Mills requested the City Commissioners to grade Calvert Street between John and Centre Streets. This was done, for a month later Mills requested the street be paved.⁸ These were necessary precautions as many streets shown so clearly on the *Plan* existed only in the minds of the commissioners and the mapmaker. No building could be constructed without such preparations. Two years later, on May 25, 1819, the twelve houses, each about twenty-three by forty-two feet, were insured (*Surveys*,

Volume E, 230-233). The first three from Centre and the last toward John, valued at \$12,000 each, were owned by the stonemason William Steuart (or "Stuart" and "Stewart"), the bricklayer James Hind ("Hindes" according to the directory), the carpenter John Reddy (or "Ready") and finally by the architect of the block, Robert Mills. Of the intervening eight dwellings, valued at \$10,500 each, two belonged to the Water Company, owner of the land, and one each to other artisans and suppliers of lumber, paint, hardware and plaster. Completed at a time of financial depression and rather far from the center of the city, Waterloo Row did not attract buyers, and the entrepreneurs felt some losses as a result of the difficulties arising from the depression of 1819. Perhaps the barrenness of these facades, without ornament except for the blunt geometry of the openings—drastic manifestations of the incipient Greek Revival—repelled the very class that could afford to buy such expensive homes. Before severing connections with Baltimore, Mills had the Water Company acquire the Row in January, 1822, at a lower value than was set originally. Most of the houses suffered extensive alterations before the Row was demolished in 1967; two first-floor rooms, doorway, hall and staircase were salvaged and now are handsomely installed in the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Lewis Pascault, who had recently sold some of his property, caught the speculation fever and built the row still bearing his name, eight houses (Figures One, E; Five) on the south side of West Lexington Street.⁹ On April 2, 1822, the first three were completed and insured (*Surveys*, Volume F, 298). Three stories high and quite large, twenty-eight feet wide by forty-five feet deep and with two sizable backbuildings, they were valued at \$6,000 each. On October 1, the next four, identical in every way, were insured (*Surveys*, Volume G, 37). With the return of prosperity and the



Figure Six: FRANKLIN ROW, completed 1823.

westward movement of the population, they must have sold well, for the last house toward Pine Street was off his hands even before Pascault had occasion to insure it.¹⁰ Contemporary taste certainly approved of the unusually tall columns flanking the doors, and the higher ceilings that separated the windows sufficiently to permit the insertion of ornamental panels on the facade. This slender elegance derived from the slim, tall proportions made fashionable by Robert and James Adam in the third quarter of the previous century, and it became a characteristic of the Federal style. Recently acquired by the University of Maryland, this Row is undergoing restoration to become student housing on the downtown campus.

A climax in row housing, for this early period at least, was reached in the spring of 1823. On May 1, H. Peters insured his Franklin Row (Figures One, F; Six), a group of twenty-two dwellings on the south side of Franklin Street between Chatsworth (now Myrtle Avenue) and Ogston Streets (*Surveys*, Volume G, 142-144). All were small, thirty feet deep and fifteen to nineteen feet wide, the first nine having two stories above a high basement and the balance three stories. Rather than firewalls on each unit, the builder cut corners to keep the price down; the first set of nine houses had such a wall at either end, while the rest were grouped in twos and threes by full brick firewalls. At \$750 each, they undoubtedly sold well despite their considerable distance from the center of town, for Peters built for the most rapidly expanding segment of the population. Although most of the units have undergone alteration, the whole row still stands but faces demolition in a few years when Franklin Street, part of Route 40, is widened.

Many other blocks on the Poppleton map are clearly row houses. On Hamilton Street, for example, between Charles and Cathedral Streets, stands a row of five houses (Figures Two, G; Seven) constructed by the carpenter-architect Robert Cary Long I, after the summer of 1817.¹¹ With two stories above a high basement, four have survived with minor changes, while the fifth has been altered above the basement level and raised one story. They exemplify the London house plan of two rooms, hall and staircase contained within the over-all rectangle compactly arranged with a winding staircase rising at the end of a short hall leading from the entry. A significant error in Poppleton's representation of this row—the houses never received the indicated backbuildings—suggests that the row was still under construction in 1822 when the map was compiled. By 1823 Long himself occupied one of these houses, living there until his death ten years later.¹² Undoubtedly this row was insured by the Baltimore Fire Insurance Company of which Long was a founder and director.

The types of plan employed in these row houses apparently were not determined by the value of the structure.¹³ Both the cheapest and the most expensive, Franklin and Waterloo Rows (and also the Sinclair and the Hamilton Street houses), used the London house plan. Waterloo Row was rather elaborate, having a hall running the full length of the house



Figure Seven: HAMILTON STREET HOUSES, by Robert Cary Long I, 1817(?) - 1823(?) (courtesy The Peale Museum, Baltimore).

with the fine staircase rising in two parallel flights; additional stairs rose from the basement to the first floor in the court and small brick structure at the rear of the house. With the addition of backbuildings the Town house plan evolved, and again the prices of the houses showed a wide range. Advantages of this type, aside from the greater amount of space, included the separate staircase rising the full height of the building, additional outdoor sitting area in the balconies, and, with the removal of the kitchen from the basement, a greater safety and lower insurance rates. The very small house, with one room to a floor and with or without backbuildings, was rare in Baltimore. The London and Town house types, on the other hand, have continued through the city's history almost to the present.

The two-room main block provided more house for the investment and at the same time insured some light and air for every room, as did the series of backbuildings. When the basement kitchen was partially underground, the problem of light and air became most critical. Occasional references in insurance records to a separate stair structure to the kitchen suggest recourse to the expedient practiced in Philadelphia, a light well sunk beside the kitchen wall.¹⁴ The most elaborate solution to this prob-

lem appeared in Waterloo Row, and Mills not only was familiar with Philadelphia but had constructed rows in that city.¹⁵ Outside the kitchen door were two paved areas on different levels, one covered by a shed roof and the other open. Stairs connected these courts with the porch and the back entrance to the main floor, and railings on all levels provided a safety measure.

Yet the problem of access to light and air was created by the builders. Only the speculative urge required the density of row housing. Although the O'Donnell houses were inserted between existing structures, all the others arose in open areas. Except for the Carroll and O'Donnell houses, the entrepreneurs had to petition specifically for the demarcation, grading and paving of the streets before they could begin operations. The streets shown on the Poppleton *Plan* of 1823 were in large part imaginary, excepting only those in the heart of the city, for the map represented the commissioners' projected expansion of the city. Whereas in New York the map of 1807 imposed the deep and narrow lot which favored row housing, in Baltimore the rows preceded the map and the definition of the lot.¹⁶

In addition to the drive for profits, the builders were concerned with the appearance of a block. Since the degree to which a row became an urban ornament depended on the taste and competence of the designer, several different stylistic trends, or levels, became apparent in the small group presented here. The row built by the wealthy merchant Charles Carroll, for example, was *retardataire* in its low and broad Georgian proportions and details; the Federal style of the elegant Pascault Row characterized much better the contemporary mercantile taste; while the Neoclassical severity of Waterloo Row expressed the new and modern point of view of the young architect Mills and his collaborators of the mechanic class. All of these, however, represented an understanding of architecture as a fine art and thus contrasted with Franklin Row and numerous other examples of the work of the artisan steeped in the traditions and techniques of his craft.

Franklin Row, in fact, demonstrates well the kind of design emanating from the mind and hand of the anonymous bricklayer. In a common, long-lived vernacular, it is built up from the basic unit, the brick, in clearly defined blocks. Its rectilinear openings pierce the facade wall sharply and with absolute regularity, having stone sills and lintels that perform structurally and provide a minimal ornamental touch. The whole front has the functional rhythm of a work song.

Just as uniform are the individual units of Waterloo Row, but the trained architect Robert Mills wove variations into a highly disciplined pattern. Every opening, whether arched or squared, was held firmly in place by the water table, string course, and cornice, white horizontals running the full length of the red brick block. The vertical lines, too, were continuous, in both single and triple openings, from basement to roof. Within this taut grid the arched doorways became a syncopation

against the alternating rhythm of the upper facade. The enriched pattern of simple elements, the variety in unity demonstrated the highly creative command of the architect who was to design such Federal works as the Patent Office and the Treasury Building, heroic epics of the Jacksonian period.

John Sinclair and Robert Cary Long I exemplified the upward mobility still common in the early nineteenth century when a bricklayer or carpenter (both men were carpenters) could turn to design and call himself an architect. Long's Hamilton Street houses show this desire for improved status in the attempt to achieve the early Greek Revival "plain style" of Waterloo Row. Yet the row is discontinuous as the horizontals break at the edges of each unit. While the top window hangs from the cornice, the middle one floats uncertainly, and the ground floor is completely dissociated from the upper two-thirds of the front. Long yearned for the precision and clarity of Mills, but in reaching beyond his competence he abandoned even the straightforward expression of the anonymous contractor of Franklin Row.

As is intimated in the preceding discussion, the apparent chaos of styles gives way to orderly distinction when they are related to the socio-political structure and conflict of the time. Apart from the age-old vernacular, two divergent groups are evident: the Georgian and Federal preferences of the merchant class that struggled to retain its position and power, and the plainer, more stripped and forceful statements of the rising mechanics. Long, the carpenter-architect, and Mills, a trained and skilled technician, represented the latter group, whose political victory was achieved in the mid-twenties when the office of mayor was filled successively by a carpenter and a stone mason. Mills, using the title Architect and Engineer, escalated his style to national position as the expression of the new age symbolized by the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828.

Used in conjunction with insurance and other records, then, the *Plan* of 1823 suggests a terminus for the early stage of Baltimore's urbanization. The municipality had been created only recently, in 1797, but the number of rows shown on the map, both expensive and cheap, large and small, indicates that the type had become a characteristic Baltimorean form by this date. Comparison with the map published by Fielding Lucas in 1836 reveals the high rate of construction of rows in succeeding years. Row houses were a rational architectural response to the social and economic pressures felt in every American city at the time, and in the early nineteenth century they were built by and for several different classes in the urban society. The potential profits, moreover, led architects and artisans to form temporary partnerships so that they too might engage in the expanding market.¹⁷ These were characteristics, however, of the early development of row housing. Further research may well show late examples of each, but an educated guess suggests that the artisan-entrepreneurship and row housing for the lower classes, like the architectural

style of Robert Mills, suffered a significant decline by mid-century in the face of High Victorian taste and wealth.

The University of Iowa

footnotes

It is a privilege and pleasure to make this offering to my colleague Alexander Kern, whose personal mansion of American studies was founded in economics and topped off by his interest in American architecture.

1. James Kent, "A New Yorker in Maryland: 1793 and 1821," *Maryland Historical Magazine* XLVII (1952), 139. For early Baltimore row houses, see Richard H. Howland and Eleanor P. Spencer, *The Architecture of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1953), 14-16, pls. 15-18. See also William John Murtagh, "The Philadelphia Row House," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* XVI, 4 (1957), 8-13; Kenneth Ames, "Robert Mills and the Philadelphia Row House," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* XXVII (1968), 140-46; and Sarah Bradford Landau, "The Row Houses of New York's West Side," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* XXXIV (1975), 19-36.
2. This old English practice was well known in other cities: Montgomery Schuyler, "The Small City House in New York," *Architectural Record* VIII (1899), 359.
3. I am much indebted to Arthur L. Keigler, treasurer of the Baltimore Equitable Society, for permission to use the manuscript *Record of Surveys*, begun in 1806. The volumes are lettered alphabetically, and specific references will be made parenthetically in the text.
4. Four houses on the east side of Commerce Street and one on the west survived until the present century: *Insurance Maps of Baltimore, Maryland*, 4 volumes (New York, 1901-1902), IV, plates 376, 377.
5. One survived into the 1930's and was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey; Howland and Spencer, *Baltimore*, plate 19.
6. *Records of the City of Baltimore: Eastern Precincts Commissioners, 1812-1817; Western Precincts Commissioners, 1810-1817* (Baltimore, 1909), 193-94.
7. H. M. Pierce Gallagher, *Robert Mills* (New York, 1935), 95-96; Howland and Spencer, *Baltimore*, 53, plates 44, 45; Ames, "Robert Mills and the Philadelphia Row House," 144-45. Undoubtedly the combination of financial loss, ownership by the Water Company, and contemporary history led to the punning name Waterloo Row.
8. *Records of the City of Baltimore*, 251-53, 256.
9. As early as 1801, the date of Warner and Hanna's *Plan of the City of Baltimore*, Pascault owned a large tract on the western side of the city, some of which he later advertised for sale: *Baltimore Federal Gazette*, October 12, 1814.
10. Thomas W. Griffith, in *Annals of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1824[-1829]), 250-51, called Waterloo and Pascault Rows "unproductive expenditures" and dated both in 1819, the year the first was completed and the second only possibly started. Although usually reliable, Griffith wrote this passage several years after the event and inserted it as an afterthought. The depression of 1819 had eased greatly by 1822. Pascault Row has been attributed to the architect William F. Small.
11. *Records of the City of Baltimore*, 259, 262.
12. Baltimore County, Maryland, *Wills*, book 14, ff. 299-302.
13. The terminology, London house and Town house types, is adopted from Murtagh, "The Philadelphia Row House," 9-12.
14. Murtagh, "The Philadelphia Row House," 10-11 and note 8.
15. Gallagher, *Robert Mills*, 87-88, 96; Ames, "Robert Mills and the Philadelphia Row House," 140-46.
16. Schuyler, "The Small City House in New York," 359.
17. For John Haviland's participation in a similar project, see Murtagh, "The Philadelphia Row House," 13.