



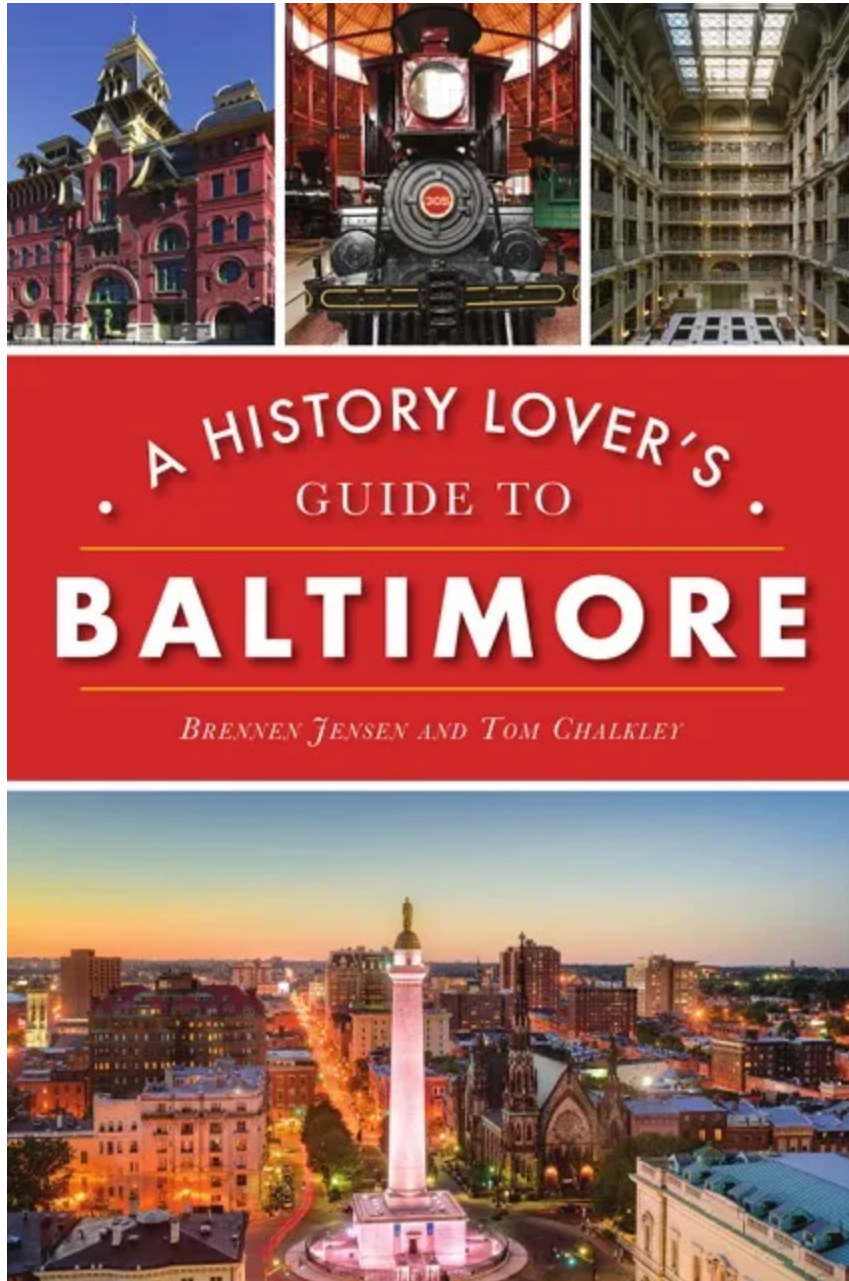
COLUMNS

## Q&A With Brennen Jensen and Tom Chalkley, Authors and Baltimore History Lovers



by Kristina Gaddy  
June 9, 2021

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Brennen Jensen and Tom Chalkley are quick to tell you that they're not *from* Baltimore, which means they weren't born here and didn't go to a Baltimore high school. But Chalkley moved here in the 1970s and Jensen in the late 1980s, and they've been writing about Baltimore for more than 70 years combined. In a way, being "outsiders" has helped them look for interesting stories and not take Baltimore for granted.

In their latest collaboration, *A History Lover's Guide to Baltimore* (The History Press) they use their decades of knowledge and writing about the city to create more than just a guidebook. In concise prose, they take us through hundreds of years of history, tell the stories of almost 200 places in every part of town, and share so many great anecdotes about the city and the people who've called it home at some point in their lives.

Jensen and Chalkley both got their start at the *City Paper* (RIP), where they wrote for the Charmed Life column together with Charles Cohen. The column explored the history that folks might not know—"a deep

dive in a narrow fissure,” as Jensen explained—and wasn’t afraid of dispelling myths and local lore. This book isn’t an extension of the column, but as journalists, they are committed to getting the facts right and presenting Baltimore with “warts and all,” meaning the history that isn’t pretty and sometimes painful, that Chalkley says their editor wanted.

They divided the book into twelve thematic sections that cover everything from the central role of African American history in the city, the city’s industries through the years, to sports, recreation, and architecture. Each section begins with an essay that gives an overview of the topic, but rather than being followed by just a list of historic sites to visit relating to that topic, each location gets its own mini-narrative, and this is where some of the really great anecdotes are. In the blurb about the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, they don’t just tell you what’s in the museum, but explain how Lewis became one of the wealthiest Black men in America. Reading about G. Krug and Son Iron Works and Museum—one of the city’s hidden gems in Chalkley’s opinion—you get the story of a family working in iron for over 150 years, so long that they are now replacing “original Krug-wrought products that have worn out after a century or more of constant use.”

And while they give real outsiders and newcomers tips and answer questions such as how to say Thames or whether Natty Boh is really from Baltimore, the guide is just as much for people who live in Baltimore and want to know more about the city’s history as it is for visitors. This summer and fall, as we begin emerging from our holes like Brood X, grabbing a copy of *A History Lover’s Guide* can make you appreciate the history that is everywhere in Baltimore.



**Baltimore Fishbowl:** Let me start with the obvious question, where did the idea for the book come from?

**Brennen Jensen:** The publisher [The History Press] is doing this series around the country, and they approached me. I realized I couldn't do it by myself, and looked around for a partner, and Tom and I had worked together [on *Charmed Life*, a book based on the *City Paper* columns.]

**Tom Chalkley:** Unlike *Charmed Life*, in this case, we're dealing with stuff that's the opposite, stuff that everybody knows—or they *think* they know.

**BFB:** Speaking of that, in writing about history, there's always the stuff that kind of just gets repeated, and there were some key points where you tried to point out “histories contrary to popular belief.” Was there any intention in trying to set things straight?

**TC:** We didn't set out trying to shoot down myths, but when you encounter them, you want to go below the surface. What I kind of feel, is that a city is so huge and you can take any approach to it, but basically we are

trying to do straight history, and we were interested in factual history, not just repeating myths. And I think that's good for people to know— Baltimore history has a hideous side.

**BJ:** Coming into it, we weren't going to do a fluffy puff piece. History used to be a sleepy topic that was maybe debated on college campuses, but now as our society is doing a re-evaluation of everything, we are actually wading into an area that used to be just a little quiet corner. In the course of writing the book, the information came out from [Johns] Hopkins [University] that maybe Johns Hopkins' family had slaves longer than previously thought and maybe he owned slaves— so we had to include that story, even though it is still being debated.

**BFB:** I love how many stories and anecdotes you were able to pack into the book, how did you decide what would make it into the book, and how much of it came from your decades of reporting and writing about Baltimore?

**TC:** We've been curiosity seekers of Baltimore for a really long time. We started with a brainstorm, and Brennen had the idea of breaking it down into thematic sections. We had a brain storm with this big pile of possibilities, and then there were other stories that neither of us had followed up on. The sections really helped us structure the book, and with each location, we had to ask, "Does it fit into one of these categories?"

**BJ:** It was the funny little stories that were more likely to get cut out (not the War of 1812).

**BFB:** What was the research and writing process like?

**TC:** It was really fun, we just divvied up all of the places based on our areas of specialty and interest. We have a stack of books (listed in the back)— we did use actual books. And visits were big. The big curveball was that all of this happened during the plague. Luckily, I'd done a fair amount of home-town tourism in the last couple of years, which helped.

**BJ:** I started intending to visit all of the places in the blurbs I wrote about—or revisit. I started doing that in the fall [of 2019], and then all of a sudden COVID came. We didn't know if we could get a hold of people, a lot of the museums were shut down. Then last fall, I started visiting places, safety-approved small visits.

**BFB:** Do you guys have any number one favorite Baltimore history spots?

**BJ:** I revisited the Shot Tower, they told me they were working on having visitors go to the top, and a couple months ago, I was able to go up, and unless you are afraid of heights, the view is really cool.

**TC:** I'll put in a plug for the Clifton Mansion, although it's certainly not obscure. What people don't realize is what they've done to it. Civic Works has the lease to the building, and they are transforming it back to what it looked like when Hopkins lived there. It had been the golf club for the city of Baltimore, and there were lockers in there, and it was a scandalous dump. It is kind of half-way restored, and it's just eye-popping. And talk about a view of the city.

**BFB:** Historic places are so tied to historic preservation and restoration, and you all mention so many places that are no longer standing. Is there anywhere that you write about that you are worried will disappear?

**TC:** There certainly are those places...

**BJ:** The Cab Calloway House was torn down while we were writing this book. But it's more about success stories.

**TC:** We can't tell people to go see something that's torn down— I have two books called *Lost Baltimore* for that— but our emphasis was really on places you can go and see and touch. I think if we'd written this 20 years ago, it could have been a different story. In the 60s and 70s, the city was mad for demolition and tore stuff down right and left.

**BJ:** Now, a lot is being preserved and they really are success stories.



**Norris Phillips**

June 10, 2021 at 10:14 am

Sounds like a fun read!



**Gaia Mouse**

July 20, 2021 at 10:10 am

Just found this. Getting the book today!

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