

JOHNS HOPKINS MAGAZINE

Roland Park: one of America's first garden suburbs, and built for whites only

Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson / Fall 2014

Posted in *Politics+Society*

Tagged *urban planning, suburbia, roland park, history of baltimore, roland park company*





[VIEW GALLERY »](#)

In 1893, Edward H. Bouton, the general manager of a fledgling real estate enterprise in Baltimore, took up an urgent matter with his lawyers. Bouton was at the helm of a new development called Roland Park, a major project to tame 100 undeveloped acres north of the city into a lush enclave for prosperous homeowners. Roland Park would go on to become one of the nation's first and foremost garden suburbs. But with the land still freshly tilled and the houses yet to be completed, Bouton worried about the future homeowners. He wrote to the law firm of Schmucker & Whitelock asking whether he could legally put language into the property deeds limiting who might buy and occupy a home in Roland Park.

His lawyers replied in October after a protracted silence. They apologized for the delay but explained that they had needed time owing to the "novelty" of Bouton's inquiry. This was uncharted territory. "You have asked our opinion as to whether or not your Company can legally insert a provision in deeds to purchasers of its lots of land at Roland Park," the lawyers wrote, "that the title thereto shall at no time be conveyed to negroes or persons of African descent, or be used or occupied by such persons."

Bouton wanted to know if he could legally keep black

people out of Roland Park.

In July of 2010, Paige Glotzer, a doctoral candidate in history at Johns Hopkins, discovered Bouton's correspondence with Schmucker & Whitelock in a nondescript box in the Milton S. Eisenhower Library. The letter was part of a new archive that had arrived at the Special Collections Department earlier that year from Cornell University. The archive contained the complete records of the Roland Park Company, one of the country's earliest developers of planned communities. Incorporated in 1891, RPC would not only develop Roland Park, but also the wealthy and bucolic neighborhoods of Guilford and Homeland, all of which edge the Johns Hopkins Homewood campus. RPC became nationally known for employing progressive ideas, like building what is arguably the country's first planned shopping center in 1896 in Roland Park, and for hiring the best designers of the time, including famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. Roland Park, Guilford, and Homeland were the neighborhoods of choice for Baltimore society when they were built in 1891, 1913, and 1924, respectively. They continue to thrive and house some of Baltimore's finest examples of historic architecture and landscape design.

Glotzer was one of the first people at Hopkins to access this trove of papers. She had before her a mammoth collection that included more than 320 boxes filled to bursting with documents dating as far back as 1865, plus 3,000 photographs and more than 30,000 architectural drawings. What she found in that letter, and what she continues to unearth through rigorous research of the collection, is some of the earliest documentation of a burgeoning practice tying property ownership in the United

States to deeded restrictions. "I'd never seen something that was such an explicit primary document," Glotzer says of Bouton's correspondence with his lawyers.

In their reply to Bouton, the lawyers advised against excluding African-Americans from buying a home in Roland Park. It could be, they wrote, a violation of the 14th Amendment and an embarrassment to the company as it excluded "a whole race of people, who are in Maryland numbered by the thousands." That didn't keep Bouton and his staff from employing other methods to meet their objectives. By 1912, Bouton and the Roland Park Company would push the legal limit and include blatant deed restrictions against African-Americans in Guilford. In an era marked by Jim Crow laws and fears over public health and immigration, the Roland Park Company became a pioneer in selling planned communities for their safety, their incorporation of nature, and, above all else, their homogeneity. The company promoted the notion that the most desirable place to live should be exclusionary.

Roland park was not the first American garden suburb. That honor is usually awarded to New Jersey's Llewellyn Park, founded in 1857. Roland Park, however, is among the most influential. What RPC fostered in these singular developments in Baltimore would blossom into a national standard for valuing, developing, and segregating housing. RPC's rigorous implementation of deeds, covenants, and restrictions, and its advocacy of those practices at the national level, illuminates how the company helped shape housing policy. Here in the RPC archive

are the taproots of a rising suburbia. There is also a frank account of the bigotry that informed real estate development in America. "Roland Park Company did not operate in a bubble," Glotzer says.

Baltimore in the 19th century was a complicated, industrializing city. A combination of immigration and burgeoning commerce more than tripled the population between 1820 and 1860. Municipal services failed to keep pace. Open sewers and privies overflowed with waste. Horse stables, tanneries, and slaughterhouses contributed to the *mélange* of horrifying smells. Police duties were often relegated to loosely formed groups of inexperienced volunteers who were more often bullies than peacekeepers. An article that appeared in 1852 in the *Baltimore County Advocate* disparaged the state of the city. "Outrage and rowdyism appear to be on the increase in Baltimore," the editors wrote. "The people of Baltimore are drowning out their existence by breathing the impure air of the city."

By 1900, more than 600,000 immigrants had landed in Baltimore. Many stayed. City neighborhoods experienced a sudden influx of foreigners. Xenophobia fueled a kind of pack mentality. People who had lived in economically diverse neighborhoods now looked to live in more homogeneous enclaves. In his book *Crowning the Gravelly Hill: A History of the Roland Park-Guilford-Homeland District* (Maclay & Associates, 1988), James F. Waesche notes, "The later 19th century saw the various socioeconomic elements separate, rearrange themselves, then congeal into kindred clusters."

For a time, only the wealthiest of Baltimore society could escape to a country retreat. But soon the

increasing commerce of the city padded the wallets of a new class of businessmen: clerks and merchants, lawyers and manufacturers. By the dawn of the 20th century, this prosperity fed a hunger for a new kind of housing, a countrified year-round home close enough to commute to work via new public infrastructure like trolley lines, but away from the grime of urban living. They wanted what historian Peter J. Schmitt called the Arcadian myth. "The back-to-nature movement shifted from being a luxury of the rich to a preoccupation of an urban middle class," Schmitt wrote in his book *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

The burgeoning middle class in Baltimore looked north, away from the filth and muck of the workaday city to the sylvan hills beyond. It was on just such a bucolic hill that the community of Roland Park was born in 1891 with the purchase of 100 acres.

Bouton worked to turn the wild, undulating hills and woods into a residential respite of natural calm and order. He did this through both design and governance. For the former, he insisted on staid and considerate architecture. The homes were designed in the English Tudor, Georgian, and Regency styles, as well as the then-new British Arts and Crafts style. Bouton hired landscape architects, including Olmsted, to develop a layout that abandoned the city grid. Roland Park streets followed the natural crests and turns of the topography. When possible, developers left mature trees in place. They landscaped to look natural, not formal. Bouton was heavily involved in every decision, down to suggesting what kinds of trees and flowers should be planted. Strict regulations on housing placement and

architectural style enforced a pastoral aesthetic. This back-to-nature model would come to be known as the garden suburb and would be replicated across the country. Roland Park was not a gated community, but it created boundaries. Covenants dictated that houses cost above a certain price, ensuring that only the right people could buy in. RPC planted high hedges to block access from neighboring black communities. Later, in its Guilford project, the company made sure that new curving neighborhood streets rarely intersected with existing roads, thus hindering access from the city's more modest adjacent neighborhoods. (Originally county property, the land used for Roland Park, Guilford, and Homeland would be annexed by the city in 1918.)

Early advertisements for Roland Park promoted its health and safety versus the grime of the city. One asked, "Are you satisfied to always breathe the city atmosphere of smells, dust and decaying filth?" Concerns about urban pollution were not new, Glotzer says. But "the Roland Park Company sold total year-round separation as a benefit of suburban life, which was novel for the time." To achieve this separation, Bouton instituted rigorous land-use controls. Property deeds attached to each sale ensured that a lot would be strictly residential. You can see in these early documents a desire to exorcise that "decaying filth" of urban life. The contracts excluded everything from breweries and stables to slaughterhouses, fowl yards, cement mills, even candlemaking.

By 1912, these deeds finally included Bouton's provision, listed under a subheading called Nuisances: "At no time shall the land included in said tract or any part thereof, or any building erected

thereon, be occupied by any negro or person of negro extraction. This prohibition, however, is not intended to include occupancy by a negro domestic servant." If you were black, you could work in these neighborhoods, but you could not live there.

Antero Pietila, author of the book *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Ivan R. Dee, 2010), says Roland Park Company set a precedent for Baltimore and beyond. Not only did it restrict how property could be used through a property deed, "they became some of the earliest communities in the nation to bar African-Americans through deeds." Jews would be next. While RPC never explicitly excluded religions in the language of the deeds, it created a system equally effective. Glotzer found that by the late 1920s, the salesman for Roland Park Company used a form for following up on homebuyer leads. The form asked for the name and current address of the potential buyer, and how the salesman learned of the person—through a friend or on the ground, for example. On one such form, a salesman made the note: "Talked to Mr. Robinson today and am sure that he is a Hebrew." At the top of the page is a red stamp, in all caps, reading: "Exclusion File." "The exclusion files included white people who they were not sure would work out. They were possibly OK, but they were in doubt for some reason," Glotzer says. "Whiteness was fungible. Blackness never was."

Bouton's tactics caught the interest of a new breed of planners and developers around the country who reached out for counsel. Glotzer is now mapping this network of national influence through her dissertation research. She points to one letter, for example, written in 1911 by a professor at Columbia

University named George Burdett Ford. He was creating the first comprehensive course on city planning in America and wanted Bouton's input on restrictions because he was "impressed by the splendid work at Roland Park." Ford would go on to be the president of the National Conference on City Planning and the author of New York's zoning laws. Bouton and others at RPC participated in new national real estate groups. One formed in 1914 and convened an event called the Annual Conference of the Development of High-Class Residential Property. Here, developers from around the country shared and refined exclusionary practices. Glotzer found meeting notes where the group discussed "the desirability of Jews as residents" and Bouton is quoted as responding, "We do not sell to Jews. They are undesirable."

One developer who regularly consulted Bouton was an influential real estate magnate in Kansas City, Missouri, named J.C. Nichols. Nichols met Bouton in 1912, and the two corresponded well into the 1940s. Historian William S. Worley has written about Nichols. He began using the RPC archive when it was at Cornell. "When Nichols died in Kansas City, his secretary threw out all his correspondence, but because of this collection, I was able to reconstruct it," Worley says. "Deed restrictions were one of the central things that they talked about in written correspondence and when they would have these meetings of High-Class Residential Property. There was a robust exchange of ideas."

The vast RPC archive shows how the ideas born in Roland Park not only influenced real estate and development practices, but also helped to inform a national housing policy through the U.S.

government. One Roland Park Company employee would go on to helm the Federal Housing Administration, the organization that standardized practices such as redlining, which tied real estate values and loans to race and class. The ripple effects of these now-illegal practices remain today, Glotzer says. "One of the central facets of U.S. housing policy is this notion that certain groups are associated with certain property values. Even to this day, if you take a house and you put it in a neighborhood that is predominantly black, that house will be worth less. Suburban developers played a huge role in trying to promote that notion," she says.

Pietila, who lives in Baltimore, agrees that Roland Park is key to understanding real estate in America. "Roland Park was a trendsetter and Bouton was a national leader in planned garden suburbs," he says. "The reason this archive is so important is because it is the only one that I know of that lets us see, as early as the 1890s, what happens to our thinking and our acceptance of these practices." When Pietila wrote his book *Not in My Neighborhood*, the RPC archive was still at Cornell. "I made the decision not to go up to Ithaca because it was such a voluminous archive and I didn't think I had the time to make that investment in sorting through it," he says. "Now that it's public, and in Baltimore, you can just imagine what future researchers will uncover."

Every year on December 31, the secretaries of the Roland Park Company got a missive to bind that year's correspondence and store it. RPC remained diligent in its paper record keeping, even when phones replaced the need for letters.

Valerie Addonizio took over as the Sheridan Libraries archivist for the collection in 2013 and marvels at the company's meticulous documentation. "I've never seen anything quite like it," she says. "Everything is written down, from the voluminous correspondence of the company directors to the color of the azaleas planted in the yards, to every single listing when a house went on the market."

After the company shuttered in 1960, its entire collection of papers was shipped to Cornell where it remained, largely untouched, for 40 years. In 2003, when Winston Tabb became the Sheridan Dean of University Libraries, he learned about the Roland Park papers and began the effort of returning the collection to Baltimore. He believed it could be valuable not only to urban historians but also to the general public interested in local architecture. In 2010, officials at Cornell agreed. "A portion of the collection had been processed by Cornell, maybe 100 cubic feet," says Jordon Steele, curator of the Hopkins archives. "That left another 300 cubic feet not processed."

Steele quickly realized that the job required a trained archivist. "This wasn't something that we could do incrementally," he says. "We needed to close the archive for a time and hire a professional." With Glotzer's help, Steele wrote a grant to fund that position, and in March of 2013 Addonizio began making sense of the collection. "My first goal was to understand the company's original arrangement," she says.

In the early years, RPC organized the records in a relatively simple manner using dates and alphabetized last names. But that would later

change. Over the company's history, three different filing systems and two different kinds of records were used, and Addonizio could not locate the company's organizational log, which explained a decades-long practice of filing records by numbers. The key to decoding the company's system was gone. "I looked in every single box and never found it," she says. She equates it to a bank losing the Social Security numbers of its customers. "Databases are perfect tools until you lose the key for how one set of information relates to the other." Addonizio spent weeks trying to decipher the numerical system. "First, I picked a single number and then attempted to find it represented in every single year. I wanted to test whether the numerical system remained consistent. Once I discovered that it was, I picked a few more numbers at random and repeated the process."

That's when she discovered that the company sometimes assigned numbers to topics, sometimes to individuals, sometimes to companies. Nothing was intuitive, but she finally cracked the code after several weeks of meticulous work. "There are over 990 numbers and they are assigned to over 990 people or companies." She has been able to connect some, but not all, of the numerical codes to the people and companies that they represent. "It's an ongoing effort," she says.

After nearly a year of work, Addonizio reduced the number of boxes and created a 424-page finding guide that represents a folder-by-folder inventory of the contents. Correspondence accounts for 89 percent of the collection, and a bulk of that is from Edward Bouton and, later, John M. Marbury, who took over as president of RPC. "These represent the

personal papers of these two men because it's more than just the work that they did as president; it's every piece of personal correspondence as well," Addonizio says. "People who are interested in these two people will not find these papers anywhere else. They are here." For Glotzer, this offers yet another angle into the development of suburbia, which is the topic of her dissertation. "I can see every charity they invested in, that they liked to play golf," Glotzer says. "There is personality here and it helps to fill out the background of their decision making. I can put more threads together."

Addonizio also put into place forms and tools for people interested in learning more about the architecture, or the home they live in. Next, Steele hopes to find funding to help process the thousands of architectural drawings, which have yet to be opened due to the fragile state of the rolled paper. The goal is to have these digitized to make it easy for homeowners to search out details about a specific property. Since the Roland Park Company archive opened to the public in April of this year, it has become the Special Collections most frequently used resource, Steele says, and not just by scholars. "There's been ardent local interest, and that's one of the things that I like about this collection. Historically, there's been a stereotype that special collections are here to serve only this rarefied esteemed scholar. But that's not true. We are an open repository and it's been great to see the range of people coming, from the local enthusiast or property owner, to scholars who have traveled great distances to access this."

Worley is one of those who came a great distance, traveling to Baltimore from Kansas City. He is at

work on another book and the newly organized collection is helping his research. "It is such a useful collection, and the fact that it is now at Johns Hopkins and open to the public means that a lot more people are going to use it," he says. "It's an exciting opportunity because they are going to see and find things that others might miss."

MORE FROM JOHNS HOPKINS MAGAZINE FALL 2014



Going long



Facing the toughest choices



The resilient species

© 2015 Johns Hopkins University. All rights reserved.
Office of Communications / 3910 Keswick Rd., Suite N2600, Baltimore, MD