For more than a century, hundreds of people called this patch of East Baltimore home. Now the 900 block of North Bradford Street is about to be ripped down as a city with 17,000 boarded-up buildings lays waste to its blight and its history.

The nine rowhouses a few blocks from Johns Hopkins Hospital stood for more than a century, through waves of immigration, two world wars, the upending of the city’s economy and a shift in its racial makeup.

The arched windows along the 900 block of North Bradford Street reflected both the boom and the decline of a great American city: the prosperous midcentury, when all nine households could afford the Formstone that covered their brick fronts; the tumult of 1968, when
residents could smell the smoke from nearby riots; the white flight that would open the street to African Americans and the drug wars that would drive many of them away.

Since it was built on an old brickyard in 1905 by the “two-story king of East Baltimore,” hundreds of people have called the block home.

But only one of them was there to see that history end.

Mable Olds, 69, the last resident of 936 N. Bradford, was on hand to see the government-paid excavator roll up to the house where she — and many mothers before her — had raised her family.

“I don’t know,” Olds said on a sunny summer morning, standing by the manhole cover that had been home plate when her son played baseball on the narrow street. “I just don’t know about tearing down good houses.”

She was not the only one uncertain about the intentional destruction she was about to witness. Baltimore, like Detroit and other aging American cities plagued by abandoned housing, is spending millions of dollars tearing out blighted pieces of itself in the hope that, like a pruned tree, the rest of the city will bloom.

As Maryland’s largest city has dwindled from a peak population of 950,000 in 1950 to about 620,000 today, the receding tide has left behind 17,000 boarded-up houses and buildings, unoccupied, unwanted and unstable. They are scattered throughout the city, with major concentrations on the east side, as well as in battered West Baltimore, where 25-year-old Freddie Gray’s death from an injury suffered in police custody triggered riots in 2015.
Some of the vacant houses are brick hulks, roofless and irreparable, in such danger of collapse that the city keeps a demolition crew on standby 24 hours a day. But many are structurally sound, artifacts of Baltimore’s rich history and the craftsmanship of its earlier days.

City planners hope the demolitions will give a boost to its struggling, often crime-plagued communities. Others are skeptical or downright suspicious.

“I hope it’s not just to move black people out,” Olds said.

That’s a common fear in a neighborhood where Hopkins, a world-renowned and ever-expanding hospital, has just built a public charter school a block away and where millennials moving into rehabbed rowhouses play with their pets on a grassy, demolition-created field.

“People need houses, not dog parks,” declared Olds’s son, Barak Olds, who said the hospital has long been open about its desire to remake the area.

“When I was a kid, they used to have a model of the whole neighborhood at Hopkins, how they wanted it to look,” he said. “This is the fruition of that plan.”
A panoramic view of the houses on Baltimore’s North Bradford Street slated for demolition. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Barak Olds takes a last look around the house he grew up in. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Mabel Olds
Mable Olds raised her 44-year-old son and two daughters at 936 N. Bradford while working shifts at a laundry plant. She moved into the 760-square-foot rowhouse in 1974, bought it in 1978 for $4,000 and lived in it until there were only three other homes still occupied on the block.

Olds was the last owner. The first was Lewis Crossont, a German American glass-factory worker who paid about $800 for the house in 1906 and moved in with his wife and sister. In the decades between, a factory foreman, barrelmaker and house painter made No. 936 home.

“So many families here,” Olds said quietly. The glittered and glued letters C-H-L-O-E-E were still stuck on her granddaughter’s bedroom wall.

A workman took up a fire hose, ready to spray down the demo dust. He grew up four blocks away from Bradford. Another worker, ready to stack salvaged bricks on a pallet, had an aunt who lived across the street. These were not strangers taking down the neighborhood.

“Oh, I knew Miss Emma very well before she went to the nursing home,” said Jerome “Reds” Banks, pointing at one of the houses as he got ready to climb into the cab of his Hitachi excavator and knock it down. “She was a good friend of my mother’s.”

Across the street, as he waited in the shade to load his dump truck with the 10 tons of debris each house would produce, “Big Mike” Saunders, 59, remembered his own mother. She cleaned stoops on these streets for seven hours a day, going door to door with a bucket and a can of Ajax.

He described the end of the milkman era and the bags of furnace coal you had to shove through basement windows. He learned to make sausage from the Polish butchers in the market, hunkered down during the riots and saw his black neighbors begin to move out when drugs came and crime soared in the 1990s.

“I seen this whole neighborhood change, man,” Saunders said.
A diesel engine revved to life across the street. Saunders leaned back on a stoop. He was going to watch it change some more.

**Video: Dismantling a Baltimore block, brick by brick**

It is estimated that there are 17,000 vacant houses in Baltimore. The city is tearing down some of them, but what does that mean for the history of these places and the people who once lived in them?

When the 900 block of North Bradford Street was built in 1905, Baltimore was growing. It was the sixth-biggest city in America, and the great wave of European immigration was still depositing Poles, Germans, Italians and others in ethnic enclaves all over the city.

A good many Czechs — then described as Austro-Bohemians on census documents — gathered in “Little Bohemia” north of Patterson Park, where a young builder named Frank Novak was putting up
rowhouses fast enough to earn the “two-story king” moniker. He built the homes on North Bradford for about $700 each, with bricks produced around the corner on Eager Street and lumber brought up by ship from Georgia and North Carolina.

They were “alley houses,” just 10 feet wide with shallow window arches and wooden stoops, and their three tiny bedrooms were crammed with big families like the Mifkovics.

Peter Mifkovic, a young laborer who came over from a village just north of Bratislava in what is now Slovakia in 1905, and his new wife, Agnes, moved into 930 N. Bradford, where all six of their children grew up. The house was a boisterous gathering place for the next half-century as the Mifkovic children married into German, Italian and Irish families.
“It was a league of nations around that dining-room table,” remembered Mary Mifkovic, 91, who lives in a suburban retirement community. She was married for 62 years to Ed, the youngest Mifkovic boy, who was born in 1923 in one of the upstairs bedrooms.

The two met at Martin Aviation, the airplane manufacturer where both worked just after World War II. Ed’s mother, who never learned much English, worked at a tomato cannery. One sister worked in a textile plant, two others for McCormick, all downtown factories.

But after the war, Ed and Mary Mifkovic joined the growing migration to the suburbs.

“Everybody was sold on the idea that you wanted to live in an environment with grass and trees and new schools,” said Francis O’Neill, a Baltimore historian at the Maryland Historical Society. “They built new roads making it feasible to commute back to the factories, but then the factories began to move out, too.”
A contagion of blight

In a growing city, a vacant house is an asset. In a shrinking one, it is a menace. The empty yard becomes a dump; plywood sheets do little to keep out squatters, drug dealers, prostitutes and arsonists. Fires started in abandoned buildings cause hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage and kill 45 people a year, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Baltimore's housing market clusters

This map was developed by the city to help address where to allocate resources to improve deteriorating neighborhood conditions. The stressed clusters contain the highest vacancy rates, low home ownership and significant population decline in the past decade.

Note: median sales prices from 2012-2014

Sources: Baltimore City Planning Department, Baltimore Housing, and the Reinvestment Fund

THE WASHINGTON POST
Worse, blight is contagious. An abandoned house saps the property value of its neighbors and can trigger more decay.

“People start to lose faith in the block,” said Alan Mallach, an economist at the Center for Community Progress and the former housing director of Trenton, N.J. “People begin to care less. Those who can think about moving.”

The country’s inventory of abandoned homes grew by more than 4.5 million between 2000 and 2010, fueled by the foreclosure crisis. Rust Belt mayors, confronted with neighborhoods that looked like deserted movie sets, started talking less about growth and more about “right-sizing.”

Akron and Toledo, Ohio; Flint, Mich.; Buffalo and other cities began demolishing vacant structures as an alternative to managing them. Detroit has torn down almost 11,000 using more than $580 million from the federal government’s Hardest Hit Fund, a program targeting the states most stricken by foreclosures.

The promise of demolition is twofold. It eliminates the hazards associated with abandoned buildings and boosts the values of the houses that are left. It also creates green space — sometimes urban gardens, sometimes weedy lots.

Mallach has been bullish on demolition, touting its potential in an influential 2012 Brookings Institution report. He cites two recent studies that show healthy effects in Detroit and Cleveland. In Detroit, researchers found that each house that was knocked down boosted the value of nearby properties by more than 4 percent.
But as more cities tear down more houses, he has become less certain. Neighborhoods that are largely intact can clearly benefit from having the vacant structures pruned out, he said. But sometimes, the bulldozers leave too many holes in the community fabric.

“In some cases, demolishing a lot of houses might be removing that neighborhood’s chance to revive in the future,” he said. “There’s still a lot of ambivalence about it.”

Baltimore, still struggling to recover from the chaos and soaring crime that followed Gray’s death, has spent about $40 million laying siege to blighted neighborhoods since 2012. Approximately 500 rowhouses were knocked down in 2016, about the same pace as the previous year. Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R) has pledged $74 million in state money. It would take about $500 million to clear away all of the boarded-up properties.

City officials said residents of the affected neighborhoods have been overwhelmingly supportive, including those who have to be relocated.

“We have people saying ‘When are you going to get around to our block?’” said Baltimore Acting Housing Commissioner Michael Braverman.

Bradford, after requests from neighborhood leaders, made it onto the list in 2013.
‘All the white folks were gone’

The block began to shift from white to black during the postwar migration to the suburbs. David Bell, 64, an African American who has lived on the opposite side of the block at 909 N. Bradford for most of his life, can remember when black families and aging immigrants lived side by side. The newcomers called the immigrants “Germans,” no matter where they were born.

“We had an old German man next to us for a long time, used to give us candy,” Bell said. “All the white folks went to St. Wenceslaus [Catholic Church], and the black folks went to Israel Baptist.”

On a hot afternoon the week before the demolition was scheduled, Bell was sitting on a Bradford stoop with another longtime neighborhood resident, Alvin Gentry, 64. A commuter train roared by, close enough to make the pavement quiver.
“We used to walk those tracks before Amtrak came,” Gentry said. “Remember those smoky trains?”

“Yes, I do,” Bell replied.

“My grandmother would beat me for coming out of that tunnel all covered in soot,” Gentry said.

The Bradford of their boyhoods had clean sidewalks and flowers in the alley. Miss Ethel sold candy apples from her dining room and frozen ice pops from her kitchen. Mothers swept their stoops first thing every morning.

Agnes Mifkovic, long widowed and still living at 930 N. Bradford, died in 1968 at 83. She lived to see the riots that year, with the National Guard there telling residents to stay indoors.

Bell spent three years in prison for armed robbery in the 1970s. “When I came out,” he said, “all the white folks were gone.”

Read more

**Johns Hopkins Hospital inspires mistrust and fear in parts of East Baltimore**

** Revealing a Baltimore block’s vibrant past took work and luck.**

**Here’s how we did it.**

Back then, Mable Olds knew everybody on the block and was known by all as “Miss Beekee,” a childhood nickname. Her three children rode bicycles on the street, went barefoot in the alleys and roamed freely.

But by the mid-1980s, drug dealing was growing more common and more blatant.

“You’d hear gunshots all the time,” Barak Olds said. “All. The. Time. Every night.”

One night in the mid-1990s, his family was in the living room when the pop-pop-pops seemed closer than usual. They went out to find a
woman lying dead at the end of the block. “She stayed there for a couple hours,” he recalled.

The groups of men on the corners became more menacing. When a renter moved out, it took longer for a new tenant to move in. By the end of the 1980s, several houses on the block were empty. By the end of the ’90s, some were uninhabitable. When the city listed Mable Olds’s house for demolition in 2013, it was one of only three on the block that was not boarded up.

They offered Olds a renovated rowhouse just around the corner on N. Montford Avenue, a key-for-key swap. Financially, she traded a house with a resale value near zero to one on a block where rehabbed houses like hers have sold for $200,000.

“It’s fine,” she said of her new house, shrugging. She hasn’t put up any of the photographs from No. 936. She’s worried about water stains on the living room ceiling. “There are pigeons in the eaves.”

The city and state contract with multiple firms to demolish houses. But only one does more than knock them down and dump the remains. Details, a branch of the Baltimore nonprofit Humanim, deconstructs them and salvages the material for resale. To do the work, they hire ex-offenders, former addicts and other hard-to-employ residents. Many are from the neighborhood.

“Watch yourself!” cried Ronald Fonce, 45, whose aunt lived a few yards away on Eager Street, as he dropped a window sash from what used to be Olds’s upstairs window. Down came the mattress that a squatter had moved in after Olds had moved out in 2014. On the floor was a can of mixed vegetables, pried opened with a knife.
Bernadette Buckson, 53, was tearing down the plasterboard in the tiny bathroom. Once, pulling down the ceiling in another teardown, $200 in cash floated past her head.

“Somebody hid that a long time ago,” Buckson said.

A recovering addict with an arrest record, Buckson had been turned down for jobs 32 times before being hired by Details. Even if she weren’t grateful for the work, she thinks it’s good to clear away the empty houses.

“I got clean and turned my life around,” Buckson said. “I think change is good.”

Later that morning, a voice called out from No. 920, where the crew was pulling out the heart pine flooring that would soon line the walls of a trendy new Baltimore restaurant called Gnocco. The thick joists were bound for the Exelon headquarters being built at Harbor Point. The bricks would be sent to downtown Washington for the restoration of the historic Carter G. Woodson house.

“Max,” the voice called. “Come see this.”

Max Pollock, the Details supervisor and an architectural history buff, came in to find his team looking up at an exposed joist with the words “Rose Bessie” and “Hannamans” painted on the side. The Rose was the coastal ship that delivered milled lumber more than a century ago, Pollock said. Hannamans was a local lumber yard.
A former University of Michigan linebacker with a master’s degree in city design from the London School of Economics, Pollock tears down houses with love. He tracks as much of the history of their builders and residents as he can and blogs about them at BaltimoreBrickByBrick.com.

“He’s got me walking down the street looking at bricks,” Buckson said.

Later that day, Jonathan Todd, a carpenter from the Baltimore suburbs, pulled up. He had never seen the house where his...
grandfather, Ed Mifkovic, was born. But he’d heard the stories, and curiosity finally led him to Google the address.

“This is where they ate dinner,” he marveled, standing for the first and only time in the kitchen of 930 N. Bradford. Some of its floorboards were already gone; the ground was littered with old-fashioned cut nails. “I have a picture of them sitting around the table right here.”

He walked about in silence, amazed to discover his ancestral seat only days before it was to be demolished. “God brought me here,” he said. “He knows I’m sentimental.”

Lewis Crossont, the first resident of Mable Olds’s house at No. 936, also has descendants in the area. His grandson Chester Crossont owns a racing garage in Baltimore County with his two sons.

 Reached by phone, Crossont, 70, said his knowledge of his family history is sketchy. His grandfather started as a furnace tender and worked his whole career in the Carr-Lowrey glass bottle factory. His dad, Ernest Lewis, was born in the house and grew up to be a steelworker at Bethlehem Steel.

Crossont had never heard of North Bradford Street but knew that his father had grown up in East Baltimore. Told the block was going to be demolished, he said, “I’d like to see it.” His family avoids the city, he said, usually passing through only on the way to Ravens games. “Is it safe?”

A few days later, he, his wife and two sons walked into the living room of No. 936. Mable Olds walked in shortly after.

It took a few minutes for the white descendants of the rowhouse’s first owner and its black final owner to feel at ease with one another. But they formed a connection from their common experience raising children, knowing Baltimore and, mostly, sharing the heritage of the petite front room, the cramped kitchen, the narrow stairs.

They talked amid the exposed plaster lathing for nearly an hour, then for half an hour more in the street out front. They hugged each other
goodbye, families linked by an address. An address about to disappear.

Dust and history

On demolition day, after the Bradford houses had been gutted of their valuable wood, “Big Mike” Saunders waited for rubble piles to be loaded. He, too, was ready to believe that those houses were going down to benefit the behemoth hospital down the road.

“You know who’s going to buy these houses now? Hopkins people,” Saunders said. That might be a good thing, he said; doctors and nurses make good neighbors. But still, it’s the hospital getting its way.
The tensions between Hopkins and longtime African American residents is personal for Saunders. He said he is a cousin of Henrietta Lacks, the Baltimorean whose biopsied ovarian cells were cultured by a Hopkins researcher without her consent, forming a line of living cells still used by medical researchers. A best-selling book about Lacks is being turned into a movie by Oprah Winfrey.

“They robbed my family,” Saunders said. “They just do to African Americans in East Baltimore whatever they want to, always have.”

Across the street, the Bradford houses basked in their final morning sun. It wouldn’t take long now. “Reds” Banks, who can demolish more than 100 houses in a busy month — and they are all busy now — worked the long arm of his excavator like a prize fighter. The hose played on the bricks, ready to wet the dust.

The rowhouses that sheltered 111 years of Crossonts, Mifkovics and Oldses shook at the first touch of the machine’s metal teeth. The bricks, last handled in 1905 by the masons who were building a booming city, shifted at the hydraulic bite.

Banks pulled a lever, the bucket clawed at the wall, and, in a cloud of dust and history, they fell, done at last with their century of service to a city and its people.

Jennifer Jenkins contributed to this report.
BALTIMORE, MD - JULY 18: 9-year old Samara Davis, left, carries a handful of souvenir bricks followed by his grandmother Mabel Olds, right, as the final stages, with heavy equipment, of the demolition of the row houses of N. Bradford street, begins on July, 18, 2016 in Baltimore, MD. (Photo by Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

Samara Davis, 9, carries souvenir bricks as the final stages of demolition begin for rowhouses on North Bradford Street in Baltimore. His grandmother, Mable Olds, 69, lived at 936 N. Bradford for decades. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)


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