

**Testimony**

**Room 2154 Rayburn House Office Building**

**“Historic Preservation of the Peopling of America”**

**prepared by Ellen von Karajan**

**Executive Director, Society for the Preservation of Federal Hill and Fell’s Point, Inc.**

**Board Member, Baltimore Immigration Project**

**May 20, 2004**

Good afternoon, Chairman Mark Souder and Members of the Government Reform Committee’s Subcommittee on Criminal, Drug Policy and Human Resource,

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you this afternoon: I am

Sadly, just two days ago the Preservation Society was forced to appear before a judge to secure a temporary restraining order to halt the demolition of a series of buildings very important to Baltimore’s immigration history – the family home and creamery of Julius Wills, German immigrant and dairyman. The buildings are structurally sound, but they are idiosyncratic – they do not fit the mold of what City officials think of as “historic” – and they certainly did not belong to an important man, only a working man.

The demolition restraining order was granted because City officials felt these buildings were so UNIMPORTANT that the City didn’t follow their own internal procedures before they issued the demolition permit.

But that’s what Fell’s Point is, and that IS what is historically important about it --- it IS a maritime **workingman’s** community.

Why are the properties of the workingman important to us as Americans? Ron Zimmerman, founder of the Baltimore Immigration Project and a Locust Point resident who has been trying for 10 years to create programs to honor Baltimore’s immigration and settlement history, may say it best in the letter he wrote to ask for an adaptive reuse of these buildings, rather than a demolition. Let me read you a few excerpts from the attached letter. . . Reference Letter of April 15, 2004.

April 15, 2004

Mr. William Ruppert  
9654-A Belair Road  
Baltimore, MD 21236

Dear Mr. Ruppert,

I am a man of German descent and my family first set foot on American soil right here in Baltimore. My wife’s people are Irish and they did too. Both of our families were poor as dirt, but they worked hard and like so many others, they believed in American freedom and opportunity and they made something of themselves and then made contributions to the character and growth of the City and the country.

For the last ten years, I have been working on a program to honor and record the story of Baltimore’s immigrant founding families before what these people did to get us started in America gets lost in time and space forever. First, I was just going to work with Locust Point where the big immigration depots were in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Then Baltimore was sometimes second only to Ellis Island as a port of entry, though not so many people know this.

But then I learned more about the earlier history of immigration in Fell’s Point and about how, so many times, people got right off the boat, took the ferry over to Fell’s Point and went to work in the yards and canneries over there. So now I want to tell the story of the families who settled

there too, after they came in at Locust Point, and the contributions these people made to our city and what we value about being Americans.

So when I heard there was a plan to demolish the home and the business of Mr. Julius Wills who came to America from Germany in 1897 as a humble fisherman, it made me very sad indeed. Sure, he was no George Washington, but just an ordinary man who worked his way up to building a dairy plant right in the heart of Fell's Point. Then three generations of his sons ran the business, father to son --- a page right out of the "American dream" storybook. By which I mean that this kind of opportunity was one of the reason that millions of people came to America.

He was ordinary but what he did was to bring sweet nourishing milk and even ice cream to a part of the City that was poor and stinking and overcrowded and lacking in any kind of clean fun beyond our imagination. The City didn't even get around to putting public water or public sanitation in Fell's Point until the 1930s, so you can imagine it was pretty bad. Not to mention, most of the liquid that flowed in Fell's Point, prohibition or not -- was not milk. It was still a sailor's town, filled with flophouses and barrooms, and its housing stock was so degraded that it became the natural place for the worst-off of the newly arrived immigrant families to settle.

Wills brought jobs bottling and delivering milk so men could feed their families even during the Great Depression. He brought something wholesome and nurturing to a place that was dirty and depressed. And Wills had some imagination and some aspirations as well as good business skills. He knew that nurturing people and bringing them milk and jobs was important, so he had a building designed and built in 1927 that had some dignity and decoration and a lot of aspiration. He was a success, that dairy building said, and if he could do it, so could you, no matter how hard life was or how bad the neighborhood was there on the waterfront in Fell's Point.

I'm not much on architecture, and sure this dairy is no beauty queen, but when it's the only record that's left of a man's blood, sweat and tears, isn't that something to be honored and kept for posterity? Especially, if it will sell --- and maybe it wouldn't anywhere else ---but in Fell's Point it's not like the rest of the city or the county. People actually like to live and work in those kinds of buildings just because they are not the tradition anywhere else. And this is very much to your advantage, in my opinion and I am a realtor. The home of Wills is something that would sell very readily, just as is.

So it's these Wills buildings that I respectfully ask you not to destroy because they are all we have left as a monument to the energy and achievement of an ordinary family man trying to make his way in America. Also, to have an original immigrant home and the family business he built right next door to each other is so rare I don't think there is another example of it -- even in Fell's Point. There's lots where they lived on one floor and had the shop on the street level, but nothing like the Wills. The Immigration project wants to put markers there, to put them on the walking tours for tourists, to tell this story, to honor the memory of these Wills whose story is so like that of my father's and maybe yours as well.

Fell's Point people changed the world and changed the course of history ---some with daring-do and audacity (like the privateers), and some in ways that were plain and basic, like Mr. Wills, with milk and ice cream.

Please help me honor the memory of both by working with us to find a way to develop those buildings without bulldozing them. I know the people in Fell's Point will be grateful and so will the Board of the Baltimore Immigration Project and our many supporters and funders. Also, the Mayor is looking to recruit lots of new immigrants in our very own time to help build the City's strength and population back up again. How we treat the memory of the immigrants of the past, and the lessons they teach us and the new Americans --- well, these Wills buildings are more important that you would ever think just to look at them.

I'd like to meet with you to talk about this more, and also to find out if there is anyway I can help you out.

Sincerely,

Ronald Zimmerman, Sr.  
Founder, Baltimore Immigration Project  
Ellis Island of Baltimore Foundation

cc: Mayor Martin O'Malley  
Michael Olesker  
Fell's Point Task Force

enc.

In closing, we thank this honorable body for convening an investigative hearing on "Historic Preservation of the Peopling of America" and for inviting our testimony today. Plainly, this relatively recent part of our American experience is not afforded the importance it deserves either as a scholarly topic or as a subject worthy of preservation. As presented in our written testimony, The Baltimore Immigration project has great plans for programs, for family reunions, for family genealogical research. But these plans depend on having important historic immigration and settlement properties intact, and that's where the Preservation Society --- and today's hearing, comes into play.

We must join together to educate ourselves and our children, and our city officials before it is too late. We must say, this, too, is what it means to be an American. This, too, is an important part of our history. We owe this much to our fathers and mothers, and grandfathers and grandmothers ---- and to our children and grandchildren.

#### WRITTEN STATEMENT – BALTIMORE IMMIGRATION PROJECT

### **Baltimore Immigration Project**

**BACKGROUND AND NEED:** All that we value about being American we owe to the grandfathers and grandmothers and their fathers and mothers who came here to become citizens of the City and the State or to travel westward to settle the nation. Over a million of our forefathers and mothers first set foot on American soil in Baltimore. *Yet there is not so much as a single historic marker to commemorate those who chose this place as the gateway to their new life in America.*

Almost nothing is written about immigration in our State, except a single chapter-length article by historian Dean Esslinger in *Forgotten Doors: the other ports of entry to the United States* (Philadelphia: Balch Institute Press, 1988).

As we prepare to celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Port of Baltimore, we realize that the history of Baltimore's Port of Entry is, in many ways, the history of America itself. Beginning in 1706, and continuing through the early 19<sup>th</sup>

century, the city served as a leading site for the importation of African slaves. Baltimore's participation in the slave trade reached its peak at the same time that the city emerged as a regional commercial metropolis. After the slave trade was legally abolished in 1808, Baltimore became one of the largest ports of entry into the United States for northern and eastern Europeans as well.

For these European migrants, it was Fort McHenry, rather than the Statue of Liberty, that welcomed them to their new home. Some of these new arrivals stayed in Baltimore. Many more traveled west via the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. In short, Baltimore "developed at the crossroads of the different cultures that have shaped America – part slave, part free; part 'native' white, part immigrant; part southern, part northern, and part midwestern," as historian Harold McDougall so aptly describes. in *Black Baltimore, A New Theory of Community* (Temple University Press).

Unlike New York's Ellis Island, many of the buildings here that once processed and housed these new immigrants, both forced and voluntary, have been torn down or rebuilt. Many others remain, but their history and relationship to immigration have never been documented. Other physical reminders of this history remain in the strong ethnic enclaves within contemporary Baltimore's urban core, but some of these are threatened with gentrification, and once again, there has been no documentation.

For all these reasons, there is a pressing need to record and interpret the diverse histories of Baltimore's immigration history and communities and to present the themes, questions, and interpretive issues raised in a way that is engaging and accessible to the general public.

**MISSION:** The Baltimore Immigration Project’s mission is to introduce and interpret the largely unknown story of immigration here. This will be accomplished in phases, the first of which will focus on Locust Point and the second, on Fell’s Point. The Baltimore Immigration Project will bring together a core group of historians, representatives from across Baltimore’s oldest communities and ethnic aid organizations, and specialists in the fields of digital media and visual arts.

**PROGRAM:** The first phase is the construction of the Immigration Gateway Pavilion building in Locust Point and the adjoining Liberty Garden. Other plans include:

- Creating an online genealogical database to make it easy for people to trace their roots here, in concert with the Church of Latter Day Saints - as Ellis Island - and creating a Family Research Center where people can come to work with genealogy specialists to learn more about their forbears.
- Digitally recreating the Locust Point Immigrant Depot – the largest and most significant physical structure that was built to process “the Great Wave” of immigrants who arrived from 1860-1914 but which was torn down in 1918 due to decay and fire damage – from historical records, architectural data and photographs that have been collected by project historians;
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- Generating a body of scholarly interpretations and companion texts that place the history of Baltimore’s “Great Wave” within the larger context of State, Mid-Atlantic and United States history; and publishing these findings both online and in companion exhibition book;
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- Developing an orientation film and interactive, multi-media website that interpret and bring together the history of Baltimore’s immigrant communities and Port of Entry;
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- Installing a multi-media exhibition called “Connections: Baltimore’s Immigrants Old and New” in the Fell’s Point Visitor Center which is owned, staffed and operated by the Preservation Society of Federal Hill and Fell’s Point, Inc.;
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- Creating a self-guided walking-tour of Baltimore’s historic waterfront that emphasizes the city’s rich and diverse immigration history;
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- Identifying and documenting key historic sites within the waterfront communities, such as the German Immigration House, former slave market, Wills home and creamery, St. Stanislas Church and others, with physical markers and signage.
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- Working with others to publicize this program as widely as possible locally, nationally and internationally.

## **Partners**

### **Academic and Archival Institutions**

University of Maryland, Baltimore County History Department  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County Image Research Center

Johns Hopkins University History Department  
Johns Hopkins University Digital Knowledge Center  
Langsdale Library at the University of Baltimore – archival storage

Church of Latter Day Saints – Genealogical Records

### **Community Organizations**

Locust Point Neighborhood Association  
Fort McHenry Business Association

### **Historic Preservation and Cultural Heritage Organizations**

Society for the Preservation of Federal Hill and Fell's Point, Inc.

### **Ethnic Aid Organizations**

German Society  
Irish Railroad Workers Union  
Polish National Alliance  
Education Based Latino Outreach

### **Public Sector**

Mayor's Office of Community Initiatives  
Maryland Heritage Area Authority  
Baltimore City Heritage Area Association

### **Other Sources of Funds Anticipated**

#### **Federal Funds**

National Endowment for the Humanities, Special Project Grant under the  
“We, The People. . . “ initiative  
Transportation Enhancement Program  
Waterway Access Program  
Chesapeake Bay Gateway  
Preserve America Program

Private Foundations

Corporate Foundations

