Farmlands
Teri L. Rising

An article in The Sun on 30 November 2009 by Mary Gail Hare reported plans by the Baltimore County Board of Education to demolish one of the two remaining buildings of the Farmlands estate in Catonsville. The stone carriage house is described as one of the oldest in the county, currently being used as a maintenance shed for Catonsville High School. While the other building, a stone tenant house, has been placed on the Baltimore County Final Landmark List, the school board opposes doing the same for the carriage house. A group of Catonsville residents is trying to save the building and proposed renovating it for a meeting space or living classroom. David Wiseman is quoted as saying “It’s a landmark and has to be maintained. It can be made useful for the high school and the community. Ultimately, this is the citizens’ own property...We can’t keep tearing down our history.” In early 2010, the County Council will decide whether to give the carriage house landmark status, thus giving the building some protection.
What remains of the original Farmlands estate, including a carriage house and gardener’s cottage, is located in the First Election District on the campus of Catonsville High School at 421 Bloomsbury Avenue, 21228. The original brick manor house was erected by Hammond Dorsey sometime between 1817 and 1819 and then sold to Henry Vernon Somerville in 1820 after the death of his wife. Somerville named the estate “Bloomsbury;” Gustav Lurman later acquired it in 1848. Lurman changed the name of the property to “Farmlands” and it remained in the family until the property was purchased by Baltimore County in 1948 from the estate of Frances Lurman. Most of the farm’s buildings, including the house, were subsequently demolished. A gardener’s cottage and carriage house remain.

Only later, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, did Catonsville acquire its reputation as an upper-class seasonal community. At the turn-of-the-century, the village of Catonsville became a popular place for the construction of summer homes due to the proximity of the railroad and electric streetcars. These provided convenient transportation to and from Baltimore City for many businessmen and families that called Catonsville home during the summer.

The Village of Catonsville

Catonsville began as a small town in Baltimore County with a good location due to its proximity to Baltimore City and the mills on the Patapsco River. The name, "Catonsville," is derived from Richard Caton, who developed the first plot of land on the north and south sides of the Frederick Turnpike. Catonsville was originally called “Catonville,” before the “s” was added sometime in the 1830’s.¹

The turnpike had been designated by the State of Maryland in 1804 as one of the first private pikes, and it became the location where one could find most of the main businesses serving the village.² Catonsville was a popular stop for stagecoaches in the mid-19th century due to the fact it was the last stop before facing the long descent into the Patapsco River Valley.³ The village grew, and by the 1850’s Catonsville was becoming known for its educational institutions, including the Mount de Sales Academy and St. Timothy’s Hall.⁴

---

¹ Source: Historical Society of Baltimore County’s History Trails, Winter 2009-2010,
² Source: Historical Society of Baltimore County’s History Trails, Winter 2009-2010,
³ Source: Historical Society of Baltimore County’s History Trails, Winter 2009-2010,
⁴ Source: Historical Society of Baltimore County’s History Trails, Winter 2009-2010,

---

St. Timothy’s Hall. Image courtesy of BCPL Legacy Web, reference #24764025. This engraved vignette derived from Robert Taylor’s 1857 Map of the City and County of Baltimore, Maryland from Actual Surveys.

In conjunction with its schools, the Baltimore and Catonsville Passenger Railway also strongly affected future development. Before the railway was constructed, transportation between Baltimore and Catonsville consisted of a rough, bumpy ride and high tolls. Although the Frederick Turnpike Company was initially reluctant to employ steam-powered engines, instead of the more traditional horse cars, on the proposed railway, an agreement was reached in 1861. It was still an expensive prospect as the turnpike company was leery of the use of steam engines and expected damages to the turnpike road due to the construction of the rails. The turnpike company levied extra fees on the passenger railway company, including an extra $900.00 per year, and an additional $150.00 for every mile west of Rolling Road. Due to the high price, the railway extended only as far west as the Terminal Hotel; stagecoaches completed the trip between Catonsville and Ellicott City until 1900.

Subsequent improvements to Catonsville included a local newspaper, called the *Argus*, gas service, a health officer, and a combined police and fire station.

Although the attempted incorporation of the town failed, the Catonsville Improvement Association was formed in 1887 and lobbied county officials to address local needs. Gustav Lurman’s son, Gustav Lurman, Jr., served as the first president of the association. Together the group sought to improve Catonsville with niceties, including the construction of sidewalks and creative landscaping. A new narrow gauge commuter and freight railroad, called the Catonsville Short Line, was formed in 1883, and as the quality of services grew, so did new construction. Developments including Eden Terrace, Oak Forrest Park and Ten Hills were built to attract affluent buyers who were looking for a comfortable summer residence in a healthy environment. As transportation options proliferated through the expansion of the streetcar lines, many subdivision communities were carved out of large estates for the purpose of year round living. The new subdivisions provided more affordable housing to appeal to a wider range of buyers. 6

**Mr. Dorsey’s Farm**

The land on which the carriage house is situated was once part of a sprawling estate of over six hundred acres. It was carved out of a much larger tract of land owned by Caleb Dorsey, and later his descendants. Mordecai Moore patented the original tract called “Moore’s Morning Choice” in 1695. Caleb Dorsey Jr. built the Dorsey family home called “Belmont” in 1738. (The Belmont estate, located in Elkridge, is now owned, and for sale, by Howard County Community College). His son Edward “Iron-Head Ned” Dorsey inherited part of his estate upon his father’s death, including Belmont. After his death at the age of 41 in 1799, it was divided up among Edward’s heirs.

However, a dispute among the heirs occurred, and in 1815 the Chancery Court of Maryland settled the case and awarded Edward’s son Hammond Dorsey land that included tracts called “Taylor’s Forest (The Forest)” and “Dorsey’s Adventure.” Hammond’s sister Priscilla Dorsey Hanson inherited Belmont, which would leave Hammond with the task of establishing a farm and home so that he might marry. He married Miss Elizabeth Pickering from Massachusetts on August 12, 1816. Elizabeth’s father, Colonel Timothy Pickering, was involved in Congressional business in Washington and often visited at Belmont when he traveled from his home in New England. In an effort to satisfy his future bride’s father, Hammond
invited Pickering to Baltimore so that he might see his situation. In a letter to his wife, Pickering remarks, “I must stay a day or two at and near Baltimore, that I may have an opportunity to see Mr. Dorsey’s farm, the situation intended for his house, and generally, his arrangements on his farm.” After the wedding, Hammond and Elizabeth lived for a time at Belmont.

Hammond’s residence was completed sometime between the spring of 1817 and the winter of 1819. Her father writes his wife that he had visited with their daughter at her new residence in February of 1819. “Mr. Dorsey’s house is roomy and very convenient. It presents from its elevated site an uncommonly fine prospect of great extent. Having, in repeated conversations, become better acquainted with him, I am able to pronounce him possessed of an excellent understanding…He is also attentive to the management of his farm.”

Tragically, Elizabeth died of fever in August of 1819, leaving behind an infant daughter. Hammond took the child and moved to Belmont where she could be cared for until the Pickering family came for her. Hammond Dorsey sold several hundreds of acres of the land he inherited to Henry Vernon Somerville on October 6, 1820, although an official record of the conveyance was never filed by Hammond or his representatives after his death on February 7th, 1823. There did not appear to be a dispute over the existence of the contract but a note in the record stated “no deed has yet (unreadable) from the said Hammond Dorsey or his representatives there being still owing to the representatives of said Dorsey an account of the purchase money contracted to be paid for said land.”

The Somervilles’ Bloomsbury

Henry Vernon Somerville was born on March 12, 1792 into a very prominent family from Saint Mary’s County, Maryland. His father was Captain William Somerville who owned “Mulberry Fields,” which was a large plantation. His father also owned other tracts of land, one of which was called “Bloomsbury” after which Henry named his own estate. Henry’s brother, Colonel William Clarke Somerville, briefly owned Sotterley Plantation in Saint Mary’s County and later purchased Stratford Hall from “Black Horse Harry” Lee. He was said to have won Sotterley through a dice game although other accounts said his step-nephew, George Plater, actually sold it to him for $29,000. Henry Somerville married Rebecca Tiernan on December 26, 1815. Rebecca was the daughter of Luke Tiernan, a prominent Baltimore merchant, who was engaged in the early importing of goods from Europe.

After purchasing the farm from Hammond Dorsey, Somerville improved the complex and expanded its agricultural production. By 1822, Somerville was also acquiring slaves for his farm, which was evidenced by petitions filed with the State of Maryland for permission to bring slaves into the state. According to census records, by 1830 Henry had 91 slaves at “Bloomsbury.” In addition to agricultural pursuits, Henry was also involved in politics; he tirelessly supported John Quincy Adams and was appointed as a Baltimore County representative for Adams in 1824. He was also a later supporter of Henry Clay’s campaign. The domestic and social life at “Bloomsbury” must have been busy; he and wife Rebecca had 10 children over the course of the next 15 years.

George Tyler Bigelow, tutor to the Somerville children, later remarked about his time at “Bloomsbury,” “A month’s residence in Mr. Somerville’s family has convinced me that I have much reason to congratulate myself on my good fortune. There is much here to contribute to my improvement, as well as comfort and happiness, that I am persuaded no equally advantageous situation, all things considered, could have fallen to my lot.” He goes on to mention, “I have the command of a library of two thousand volumes, collected in Europe, forming one of the most valuable sources of information; I am confident that the society and conversation of Mr. Somerville will be of much use to me.” Bigelow later went on to become a Chief Justice to the Massachusetts Supreme Court.

It seems that Rebecca Somerville also drew many of the lively and interesting guests to “Bloomsbury.” Rebecca’s reputation as a beautiful
and fine lady elicited praise from friends and acquaintances, and also inspired poetry. A friend commented, “she was a woman of perfect manners and her handsome appearance, and kindness and sweetness adorned her position.” She was Catholic and involved in the building of the first Catholic Church in Catonsville. It was named “Saint Agnes” after her daughter Agnes.

Henry Somerville died on August 29th, 1837 at the age of 45 leaving Rebecca with the heavy burden of caring for “Bloomsbury” and her children. An obituary spoke of him as “an affectionate husband and father and kind master, governed by the strictest rules of virtue and the purest affection of the human heart…his love for his country and her institutions were evidenced in his acts as well as his writings.” Rebecca’s grief and seclusion concerned friends and may have ultimately led to her leasing “Bloomsbury” to others so she could spend more time in Baltimore. A letter from family-friend John Pendleton Kennedy in 1839 details his concern for her ill health and isolation. He writes, “You should spend more of your time in Baltimore and amongst friends, who would teach you to forget the cares that I am sure your solitude in the country must painfully increase.” He goes on to say that, “I have too much confidence in your good sense and fortitude to believe that you will not very soon find yourself acquiring your accustomed vigor and alacrity.”

Rebecca leased “Bloomsbury” to George Brown and his wife in 1844 and eventually put the entire estate up for auction in February of 1848. The sales ad details Bloomsbury’s buildings and agricultural yields. “The improvements are of the most substantial kind. The DWELLING is of brick, rough-cast, 80 feet front by 40 feet deep, with porticos in front and rear…The Stable, Carriage-House, and Outbuildings, are of stone and brick and conveniently arranged…The Manager’s House, Quarters, Granary and Dairies, are conveniently situated.” Baltimore businessman Gustav Lurman, Sr. and wife Frances purchased “Bloomsbury” from Somerville in 1848 and renamed it “Farmlands.”

**Farmlands**

Gustav Lurman, Sr. was a merchant who was born in Bremen, Germany and came to the United States in 1835. He married Fannie Lyman Donnell before 1840, and by the time of the Civil War, Lurman had an estate worth $250,000, which also included multiple slaves.

Although the majority of the summer homes and communities were established in the late 19th century, many wealthy Baltimoreans, like the Lurman family, relocated themselves to large estates in Catonsville well before the Civil War. The residents benefited from the country air and were able to easily travel to Baltimore by using their private carriages or the Frederick Road horsecar line. The Lurman family improved the estate with upgrades to the house and grounds and added an expansive garden.
"Large Fountain - Messrs. Dunn and Ring, Holiday street, have just completed a magnificent piece of stone-work, in the shape of a basin for a fountain, intended to ornament the beautiful country seat of Gustavus W. Lurman, Esq., Catonsville, Baltimore County. It measures about twenty-two feet in circumference, and is over three feet deep...A beautiful cast-iron swan will be placed upon a pedestal in the middle of the basin, from whose mouth a stream of nature’s beverage will flow."\(^{38}\)

When Gustav Lurman died on July 8, 1866 his estate was divided among his children and other heirs with his wife as the executrix. A plat of the “Farmlands” estate was drafted and parcels were carved out of the acreage.\(^{39}\) Parcels appear to have been allotted to specific children, and in some cases the children later exchanged their inherited parcels amongst themselves.

His son, Gustav Lurman, Jr., constructed a new house on property he inherited using the Wilson and Wilson architectural firm. He named his house “Bloomsbury” which was a reference to the original estate named by Somerville.\(^{40}\) Son Theodor Lurman lived at “Farmlands” until at least 1880. Theodor's mother, Fannie, died on March 15, 1885.\(^{41}\) Shortly after, he married Nannie Tilghman.
She occupied the property and maintained the house and gardens until it was sold in 1948 to Baltimore County for use as Catonsville High School. The deed included stipulations that outlined provisions for the perpetual care and maintenance of the trees and shrubs as well as a residency for the family of the caretaker and his heirs in the stone tenant cottage. In addition to the cottage, the carriage house remains standing and is currently used as a maintenance building. The Lurman Woodlands Theater, an outdoor community amphitheater, was created on the Catonsville High School campus in 1992. It continues to be a popular venue for concerts and theater performances.

---

**The Author**

Teri L. Rising is the Historic Preservation Planner in the Baltimore County Office of Planning. Teri may be reached at trising@baltimorecountymd.gov or by writing to the Historical Society of Baltimore County.

---

**Notes**

3 Orser and Arnold, *Catonsville 1880 to 1940*, 15.
5 Ibid., 168-171.
6 Ibid., 304-307.
7 Cleora Barnes Thompson, *Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form “Belmont - Moore’s Morning Choice” HO-43*, (Maryland Historical Trust: n.d.), Section 8, 2.
8 Thompson, *Maryland Inventory*, 2.
9 Baltimore County Land & Will Records, Baltimore County Courthouse, Towson, MD: TK 284:183.
10 *Salem Gazette*, August 13, 1816.
13 Ibid., 317-8.
14 *Baltimore Patriot*, August 14, 1819, 2.
16 Baltimore County Land & Will Records, Baltimore County Courthouse, Towson, MD: TK 284:183.
18 *Baltimore Patriot*, April 28, 1831, 3.
20 Frederick Philip Steff, *Eat, Drink and Be Merry in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 226.
22 *Baltimore Patriot*, December 27, 1815, 2.
23 Maryland State Archives, *The Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland*,}
United States Federal Census, Maryland, Baltimore County, Election District 1, 1830, 40.


George B. Chase, Memoir of the Hon George Tyler Bigelow, LL.D.- Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1890), 463-4.


Charles Bernard Tiernan, The Tiernan Family in Maryland (The University of Wisconsin - Madison Gallery McCann, 1898), 46-7.

Tierman, The Tiernan, 66.

Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser, September 4, 1837, 2.

Tierman, The Tiernan, 49.

Baltimore County Land & Will Records, Baltimore County Courthouse, Towson, MD: TK 342:518.

Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore Sun Historical Archive, Baltimore, Maryland, February 21, 1848, 3.

Baltimore County Land & Will Records, Baltimore County Courthouse, Towson, MD: AWB 398:71.


United States Federal Census, 1860, Election District 1, 293.

Orser, Arnold, Catonsville 1880 to 1940, 21-5.

Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore Sun Historical Archive, Baltimore, Maryland, September 9, 1850.


Orser, Arnold, Catonsville 1880 to 1940, 54.

Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore Sun Historical Archive, Baltimore, Maryland, March 16, 1885.

Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore Sun Historical Archive, Baltimore, Maryland, June 24, 1885.


Baltimore County Land & Will Records, Baltimore County Courthouse, Towson, MD: JWS 153:223.

Kenneth Short, Maryland Historical Trust Inventory Form for State Historic Sites Survey: “Farmlands,” BA-2427, January 24, 2003, Section 8, 2.

Orser, Arnold, Catonsville 1880 to 1940, 59.