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# HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## Mondawmin

### The Mystery in its Name

John McGrain



*(Left) Mondawmin. The late Michael Trostel, Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA), and of Trostel & Pearre architecture in Baltimore, produced and provided this drawing to the author. The small figure of a six-foot man at the right demonstrates the ample proportions of the Mondawmin mansion. (Courtesy John McGrain.)*

*(Right) An engraved book plate from the more than 1,700 volume library of the original owner of the Mondawmin mansion, Dr. Patrick Macaulay. The book plate reveals not only the name of the estate but also a pattern of decorative corn or maize tassels that are linked to the legend of the Ojibawa corn deity, Mondawmin. (Courtesy John McGrain.)*



THE CITIZENS OF  
BALTIMORE COUNTY

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Mondawmin estate on Liberty Heights Avenue near Park Circle was privately owned and surrounded by green board fencing running along the main highway. It was also surrounded by garish billboards, one with traveling neon red arrows advertising Arrow Beer. If you were traveling by on the trolley cars you might have experienced an ocean of fresh air coming out of the landscaped estate, especially if you had just passed through row-house Baltimore. Kids could peep in to the property through the gaps between the fence's boards, usually from Gwynns Falls Parkway. There was an old house there and it once belonged to the Browns, descendants of the famous banker of the early 19th century, Alex Brown.<sup>1</sup> Later, in 1955, Mondawmin was developed into a shopping center that flourished for a while, until it went into decline as its neighbors gradually became too poor to support its upscale stores.

Occasionally an author has written that the name, Mondawmin, was lifted from a poem written by the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, titled, "The Song of Hiawatha."<sup>2</sup> Authors have also claimed that Longfellow himself once visited the estate and suggested its place name.<sup>3</sup> But those explanations cannot be accurate because its name was listed in both newspapers and documents many years before Longfellow published his poem in 1855, and years before Longfellow's own diary explicitly declared his research into Native American history and culture.

### The Mondawmin Property & Home

The land on which Mondawmin was built was in Baltimore County and part of a 350-acre colonial survey named *Hab Nab at a Venture*, made in colonial times. Nicholas Rogers gave it the estate name of *Auctentoroly* for a family property in Scotland. The 1798 tax list of Middlesex Hundred spelled it "Octin Torely." At that time, Rogers had a brick barn and a few log houses.<sup>4</sup>

The grand home later built at Mondawmin was constructed for Dr. Patrick Macaulay in or about 1841, some 85 feet wide by 42 deep. Its architect is unknown, but the author and revered architect Michael Trostel argued the home was similar to

local Greek Revival villas designed by Robert Cary Long, Jr., a noted 19<sup>th</sup> century Baltimore architect.<sup>5</sup> The editors of *The Architecture of Baltimore: An Illustrated History* quoted Trostel saying that the house was set on a high basement and its façade combined "neoclassical elements, such as advancing and receding planes."<sup>6</sup> In other words, it was a rather formal house and its brickwork was designed to create interesting effects as the sunlight shifted through the day. Trostel even argued that the entrance gates of the estate were similar to gates that Robert Long designed for the Lloyd Street Synagogue, the Mt. Calvary P. E. Church and the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church.

As early as 1841 the Assessors Field Book of Baltimore County Election District No. 3 listed the tax value for the "Mondawmin" property; and again, after Macaulay's death in June of 1849, trustees advertised the "Mondawmin" property for sale in the *Baltimore Sun*, September 14, 1849.

The property did not sell at that time, which is why a few months later another advertisement by the trustees appeared in the *Sun* on May 3, 1850. The following day, on May 4, 1850, trustee Joseph J. Speed conveyed the property to George Brown, son of the famed investment banker, Alex Brown.<sup>7</sup>

The trustees were acting under a decree in the chancery case titled *Margaret Thornburg v. Elizabeth Macauley et al.* (1849). The deed reveals that Macaulay's property was heavily mortgaged and that he had acquired various parcels of the tract named 'Auctentorly' in 1841 from Lloyd N. Rogers. (Rogers also owned the vast estate Baltimore City acquired in 1860 to develop Druid Hill Park.) The May 3, 1850, *Baltimore Republican & Argus* reported that George Brown, listed as an "Esq.," paid \$41,000 for the Mondawmin mansion and grounds at private sale, before the public auction scheduled for May 14, 1850.

The Maryland Historical Society houses the printed catalog of the 1850 auction listing all the moveable property. Every book in the estate is itemized by name. Included are the following: *Book of the North American Indians*, McKenny's *History of the Indian Tribes of North America with Biog, Sketches and anecdotes from the Indian Gallery in the War Department at Washington embellished with five color portraits*, and four large folio

volumes. There was a book on cottage architecture and 48 volumes of the famed Waverly Novels.

The auction catalog also reveals the estate had a horse power threshing machine, a milk house, barn, stable, and carriage house. Also, “1 pair of fine bay horses... very kind and gentle in harness.”

Later, the entire neighborhood around Mondawmin was taken within the limits of Baltimore City during the city’s annexation of county land in 1888.

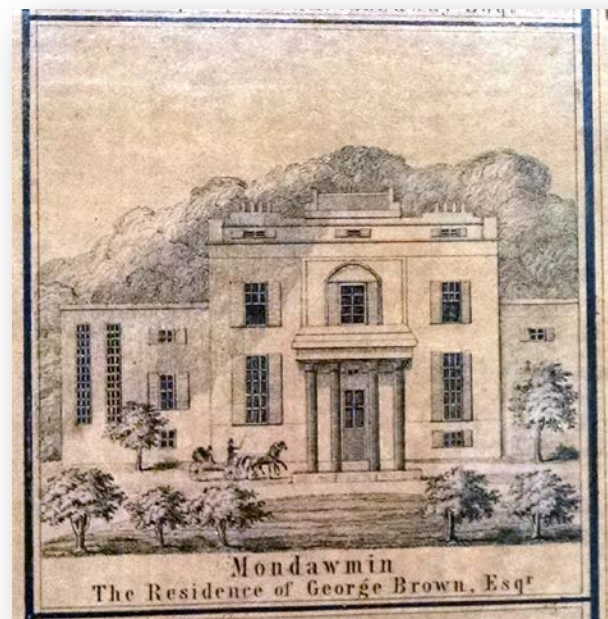
### The Estate Name

The oft-repeated story in the history of the Alex Brown banking house citing Longfellow as the inspiration for the estate’s name<sup>8</sup> is additionally discredited given that there is no evidence Longfellow visited Baltimore, much less visited Mondawmin or suggested its name to Macaulay. Biographies and time lines of Longfellow’s career do not report any visits to the South, to Baltimore or to Washington.

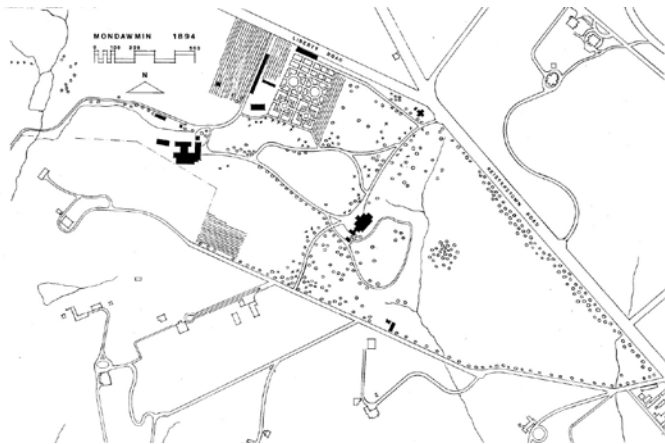
A likely scenario is that Longfellow acquired his story of Mondawmin, the god or demi-god sent by the Great Spirit to give maize to humanity, from earlier writings of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, an American geographer, geologist, and ethnologist. Longfellow drew heavily on Schoolcraft’s writings about Indian customs and legends. Perhaps the estate’s founder, Macaulay, did too, given his interest in American Indians according to his library. Schoolcraft published an account of Hiawatha in his 1847 book titled, *Notes on the Iroquois*, and conceivably the story was in his 1839 book series titled *Algic Researches*.

In the preface to the 1890 edition of the *Song of Hiawatha*, the editor quoted Longfellow’s diary where the poet explicitly stated that he had begun research into Indian customs on June 22, 1854, and he intended to weave together their beautiful traditions. Section V of the poem is “Hiawatha’s Fast,” which includes the story of Hiawatha going out into the woods to live without food for several days, and in that weakened condition, he wrestled with the spirit Mondamin [*sic*], as the poet spelled it, for three days, and on the third day, as famished as he was, Hiawatha killed Mondamin, and buried him. From the grave of Mondamin sprung the first

bed of corn plants. Section XIII of the poem is “Blessing the Cornfields,” with numerous mentions of Mondamin. “Sing the mysteries of Mondamin,” said Longfellow. The poet reported that the Indian women and children were responsible for planting the maize, and one requirement was that in the dead of night, the chief’s wife had to walk around the newly planted field without clothing to prevent blights and insect attacks on the crop. This poem was constructed in the choppy rhythm and meter of the Finnish epics although there was no bardic tradition, much less written literature among North American tribes. Of course, there was a great wealth of prose story telling. Longfellow cited Schoolcraft’s writings as his source. Oddly, however, Longfellow scrambled Hiawatha, an Iroquois chief from upstate New York, with the legends of the Objibawa of Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. His poem is probably not read much nowadays given its monotonous rhythm and length, some 226 pages. The best tribute to its Indian protagonist was the crack train out of Chicago, the *Morning Hiawatha*.



Vignette of the Mondawmin estate in the margin of Robert Taylor’s *Map of the City and County of Baltimore, Maryland: From Actual Surveys* (Baltimore: Robert Taylor Publishing, 1857). (Courtesy Historical Society of Baltimore County.)



*Mondawmin 1894. Site plan of the veritable village of structures on the Mondawmin estate by the late Michael Trostel, FAIA, of Trostel and Pearre architecture. Provided to the author by its creator. See page seven for a larger version. (Courtesy John McGrain.)*

### Dr. Patrick Macaulay

John B. Quinn's *Medical Annals of Baltimore from 1608 to 1880* reported that the Doctor was born in Yorktown, Virginia, and attended St. Mary's College in Baltimore, then studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> Francis O'Neill of the Maryland Historical Society found proof that the doctor's father, Alexander Macaulay, was a Virginia tobacco factor (agent) from Glasgow who settled in Yorktown and married well. The doctor also had a brother, another physician, who served in the revolutionary army of Simon Bolivar, and was executed by the Spanish authorities.

Several Baltimore physicians, including Macaulay, signed an advertisement soliciting essays on solving the problem of *Cholera Infantum*; one imprint was found online, reproduced from the *Cambridge Chronicle*, April 2, 1824.

Macaulay also published a pamphlet in 1824 titled *Medical Improvement*, encouraging medical training to consist of making rounds in teaching hospitals, as was already the case in London and in Vienna but apparently not in the United States. It was a Baltimore imprint by Fielding Lucas, Jr., and E. J. Coale.

Macaulay was editor of the *North American*, an occasional publication of short longevity. The paper's full name was *North American, or, Weekly Journal of Politics, Science, and Literature*.

It began publication May 20, 1827; formerly called *The Herald*, it was modeled after the New York *Albion*.

Macaulay served on the very first board of directors of the B & O Railroad. In 1830, he was a city councilman and at various times served in both branches of the council.

Matchett's city directory of 1831 listed Dr. Patrick Macaulay on Lombard Street, between Sharp and Hanover Streets, just ten years before he built Mondawmin.

In 1843, Macaulay had been one of the incorporators of the Baltimore and Liberty Road Turnpike Company, a pay road serving the great estates northwest of the city such as Ashburton and Mondawmin.<sup>10</sup>

The doctor died at age 55 on June 28, 1849.<sup>11</sup> The *Baltimore American* reported that it was a sudden death, not long after Macaulay had been going around his gardens "on the Hookstown Road." The deceased was "a well-known and highly respected citizen."<sup>12</sup>

Thereafter, Macaulay's technical books found their way into the personal library of Johns Hopkins, who, in fact, purchased the entire library from his estate. Macaulay had a large library with at least 1,700 volumes. Ultimately, the books passed to the Johns Hopkins Hospital medical library and the George Peabody Library. Macaulay's book plates included the name of Mondawmin. The motto on the plates read, "Being and to Be," and there was a pattern of corn tassels.<sup>13</sup>

John C. French wrote about Macaulay's career and ideas in a 1953 article noting that his mentor in Philadelphia was Dr. Benjamin Rush.

Amy D'Arcy Wetmore noted in a 1906 *Sunday Sun* feature story that Johns Hopkins, a business associate of the doctor, purchased his library. Wetmore also noted that two of his living descendants were Macaulay Birckhead and George Gibson.<sup>14</sup>





*This engraved book plate from Dr. Patrick Macaulay's library of more than 1,700 books shows not only the name of the estate but a pattern of decorative corn or maize tassels that are linked to the legend of the Ojibawa corn deity, Mondawmin. (Courtesy John McGrain.)*

## Descendants

Macaulay owned a family plot at Old Saint Paul's Cemetery in West Baltimore, where he was buried along with his wife Sarah F. Macaulay and apparently some infants or children. His grandson, Patrick Macaulay Birckhead, was also buried there. The doctor's daughter Elizabeth married into the family of Dr. Solomon Birckhead, and she was buried at Old Saint Paul's as well. Dr. Birckhead was a large property owner on Jones Falls, and in 1795 acquired the Mount Royal mansion of the Mount Royal Merchant Mill; the mansion survived into recent times and was long used as the Norwegian Seamen's Home. It was run down in the early 1970s, but then restored by the City as a head start school. The Reservoir Hill Improvement Association also has an office there.

The doctor's daughter, Elizabeth, became the wife of James Birckhead, Jr., in 1850, and the 1867 Wood's directory showed the family at 87 Park Avenue; Mrs. Sarah Macaulay lived with them. The 1870 census enumerated the family at their summer home in Catonsville, and Sarah Macaulay was listed

as 65 years old. The 1879 city directory listed the family business as Birckhead and Reeves, consisting of James Birckhead, Charles Reeves, and P. Macauley Birckhead. Their address was 77 Park Avenue (old style). Mrs. Sarah Macaulay was not listed separately that year. She died the next year at age 87 within the city.<sup>15</sup>

The Birckheads, father and son, were at the present 509 Park Avenue (formerly numbered 77) in the 1887 city directory. The family business was then called Birckhead and Son, an insurance business dealing in policies for fire and marine casualties, located at 108 Chamber of Commerce Building at Commerce and Water streets. Their business consisted of James Birckhead, Jr., and P. Macaulay Birckhead. The elder Birckhead died at the Park Avenue home in early 1895; the obituary mentioned his summer place as Craigie Burn in Catonsville.<sup>16</sup> That property appeared west of Paradise Avenue, bordering on Spring Grove hospital in the 1877 and 1898 county atlases. Craigie Burn was demolished in the late 1950s to build the Baltimore Beltway. The Park Avenue house survives half way between the Enoch Pratt Free Library and the Maryland Historical Society.

Mrs. Elizabeth Macaulay Birckhead died at the Park Avenue house in early 1907. "As a debutante Mrs. Birckhead was known for her beauty. The large house [Mondawmin] was the scene of many notable social gatherings, in which she was a central figure".<sup>17</sup> She had been an active member of Grace Church at Park Avenue and Monument Street, about a block from her town house. Grace Church was the venue of her funeral with burial at Old Saint Paul's Cemetery, West Lombard Street. A sister, Mrs. George S. Gibson, survived her—the mother of Mr. George T. M. Gibson. The younger Gibson was listed in directories as a vocal teacher at 514 Park Avenue.

Patrick Macaulay Birckhead was a resident of Catonsville per the 1920 Society Visiting list in the *Baltimore Blue Book*. One source placed him at 133 Newburg Avenue while another source showed that he lived at 36 Melvin Avenue in 1923. Mrs. Birckhead was listed among the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Enoch Pratt at a reception in 1887. Both Mr. and Mrs. Birckhead were listed in the *Society Blue Book* of 1889-1890. However, Mrs. Birckhead

drops out of records after that, but the *Sun* digital archives have not revealed a death date for her. Birckhead was a member of the Maryland Historical Society, and in 1888 he was a director of the Female House of Refuge. Polk directories of 1907 showed that he was still a principal in Birckhead & Son at that time. His townhouse was 509 Park Avenue. His ancestor Joseph Thornburg gave him the entre to join the Sons of the Revolution; in spite of being a Quaker, Lt. Colonel Thornburg had served as Wagon-Master General of the Continental Army. P. Macauley Birckhead died at Catonsville on October 27, 1924.<sup>18</sup> His Melvin Avenue house is extinct and now part of the grounds of St. Mark's Catholic Church.

## Conclusions

The precise origin of the Mondawmin property name is still somewhat murky. Certainly Dr. Macaulay, a man of broad interests, knew about the story of Mondawmin from Indian lore, very likely from some publication of Henry Schoolcraft. Exactly what Macaulay knew and when he knew it is a continuing mystery. Perhaps more sources will become available by new methods of searching for data. Source material about Baltimore architects may yet be donated to public collections, digitized and made broadly available online. Afterall, internet based archival research is still in its infancy.

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<sup>1</sup>Jacob Hay, "One Thing Led to Another...There Have Been Many a Change with Changing Times in the 150-Year Enterprise of Alex Brown & Sone," *Sunday Sun Magazine*, April 30, 1950.

<sup>2</sup>William Stump, "Street Signs: Mondawmin," *Sun Magazine*, February 28, 1954; Frank R. Kent and Louis Azrael, *The Story of Alex. Brown & Sons* (Baltimore: The Barton-Gillet Co., 1975), p. 124.

<sup>3</sup>Clayton Coleman Hall, *Baltimore Its History and Its People* (New York: Lewis Historical Pub., 1912), p. 36; Frank R. Kent and Louis Azrael, *The Story of Alex. Brown & Sons* (Baltimore: The Barton-Gillet Co., 1975), p. 124.

<sup>4</sup>Edith Rossiter Bevan, "Druid Hill, Country Seat of the Rogers and Buchanan Families," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 44, (September 1949): 190-199.

<sup>5</sup>Michael J. Trostel, "Baltimore's Lost Country Estate," *Magnolia* 8, no. 1 (Summer 1991): 1.

<sup>6</sup>Frank R. Shivers, Jr. and Mary Ellen Hayward, eds., *The Architecture of Baltimore: An Illustrated History* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 108.

<sup>7</sup>Baltimore City & County Deeds, AWB 435:161.

<sup>8</sup>Frank R. Kent and Louis Azrael, *The Story of Alex. Brown & Sons* (Baltimore: The Barton-Gillet Co., 1975), p. 124; William Stump, "Street Signs: Mondawmin," *Sunday Sun Magazine*, February 28, 1954.

<sup>9</sup>John R. Quinn, *Medical Annals of Baltimore: From 1608 to 1880* (Baltimore: Press of Isaac Friedenwald, 1884), p. 125.

<sup>10</sup>*Laws of Maryland*, Acts of 1843, Chapter 148.

<sup>11</sup>Maryland Historical Society, Diehlman file.

<sup>12</sup>"Sudden Death," *Baltimore American*, June 29, 1849.

<sup>13</sup>John C. French, "Mr. Hopkins and Dr. Macaulay's 'Medical Improvement,'" *Bulletin of Medical History* 27, no. 6, (November- December 1953).

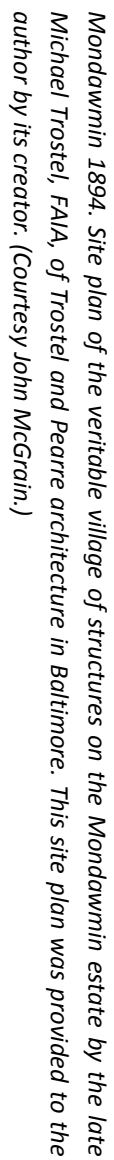
<sup>14</sup>"Some Country Homes of Old-Time Baltimore," *Baltimore Sun*, November 11, 1906.

<sup>15</sup>Baltimore Vital Records, 14:67.

<sup>16</sup>"Obituaries," *Baltimore Sun*, January 18, 1895.

<sup>17</sup>"Obituaries," *Baltimore Sun*, February 6, 1907.

<sup>18</sup>"Obituaries," *Baltimore Sun*, October 28, 1924.



## About the Author

John McGrain was Secretary to the Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission, spent a career as an Historic Planner in the Baltimore County Office of Planning, and was designated the County Historian. McGrain harbors an encyclopedic knowledge of county history, and he has written, published or assisted with innumerable articles and books related to the history and heritage of the Baltimore metropolitan area. Much of the historic property and structure data available at the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties may be attributed to his efforts as well.

-The Editor

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Articles abiding by the *Chicago Manual of Style* Documentary-Note (or Humanities) system will be given priority. A convenient, and abbreviated, guide to Chicago style citations may be found in Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

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