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East Baltimore: Tradition and Transition. A Documentary Photography Project  
(Photo Essay)

# East Baltimore: Tradition and Transition. A Documentary Photography Project.\*

Linda G. Rich, Joan Clark Netherwood, and Elinor B. Cahn

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*Linda G. Rich received an M.F.A. in art from the University of Wisconsin, in 1975. She taught photography at The Maryland Institute, College of Art, in Baltimore, where she conceived the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project. Her work is in the permanent collections of The Center for Creative Photography, in Tucson; the Art Institute of Chicago; and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. At present she is working as a photographer in southern California.*

*Joan Clark Netherwood received a B.F.A. degree from The Maryland Institute, College of Art, in 1977. Her photographs have been published and exhibited nationally and are held in the permanent collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Library of Congress, and many private collections. She was one of twenty-two photographers selected to work on a photographic survey of the State of Maryland during 1980. She is currently a freelance photographer working in Maryland.*

*Elinor B. Cahn is a native of Baltimore and attended The Maryland Institute, College of Art, to study photography, at age 50, after raising a family. Her photographs are part of the permanent collection at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Library of Congress, and numerous other museums and private collections. She is currently studying with the noted photographer/teacher Lisette Model in New York and continues independent work as a documentary photographer.*

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\*The text of this photo essay is from *Neighborhood: A State of Mind* and is reprinted by permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

## Introduction

In 1975 I moved to Maryland to accept a teaching position at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, in Baltimore. On one of my first excursions in Baltimore I was taken to view the "I Am an American Day" parade, East Baltimore's annual tribute to patriotism and politics. As I chased marching band after marching band through many of East Baltimore's neighborhoods, I passed long blocks of pristinely maintained row houses. I was fascinated by the white marble steps that adorn the front entrances, the scenic, painted window screens, and the lace-curtained front windows, which are individualized by the presence of religious icons, American flags, greeting cards, and flower arrangements—clues to the lives of the people who live inside. Never before had I encountered an urban community so densely built upon. Yet it appeared so livable, so inviting. The valued traditions of its people were evident everywhere: pride in home-ownership, close family ties, hard work, and religious devotion. These people and their neighborhoods continued to be a part of my thoughts long after the day of the parade.

It wasn't until I was teaching a course in social documentary photography a year later that these impressions began to be molded into what became the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project. Joan C. Netherwood and Elinor B. Cahn were students in that class. As a class project, the three of us decided to make a portrait of the neighborhoods of East Baltimore. Our intent was to photograph the people, to enter their lives, and to see them as they see themselves.

We began by contacting the clergy at a few of the nearly 100 churches in East Baltimore. In a community with such a strong religious identity, an introduction by a neighborhood religious leader meant easier acceptance of us by the parishioners. Gradually we began to be invited to bingo luncheons, exercise classes, holiday parties, graduation ceremonies, first communions, sauerbraten suppers, and neighborhood tours. We attended as many meetings of community associations and met as many community leaders as possible. We patronized local shops and markets, describing our project and asking to make photographs. During the semester we realized that we had discovered a very special quality of life in East Baltimore. When the course ended we chose to continue the project independent of the classroom. Our lives and the project merged.

Through months of observing, talking, interviewing, and photographing, our concept of the project broadened into an exploration of what constitutes a neighborhood, not as a geographical but as a moral and social concept. There would be images of buildings and places, but our emphasis would be on the people: at home, on the street, at work, in the bars, celebrating holidays, in church, at play, getting married, christening their newborn, and burying their dead.



To keep our East Baltimore neighbors abreast of our progress, we gave photographs to our subjects and mounted many "in progress" exhibitions. We arranged to show a selection of our photographs at seven East Baltimore churches, keying the exhibitions to church events and the pictures to the people of the particular parish. These church exhibits were so warmly received that neighbors "borrowed" photographs, returning them after proudly showing them to friends and family.

We also sponsored four formal exhibitions and concurrent lecture programs. The exhibits included historic photographs of East Baltimore, excerpts from the taped interviews, and our own photographs. Many of our finest historic photographs came from the family archives of the people we were photographing. The lecture programs provided an overview of the scope of documentary photography. The purpose of the exhibitions and lectures was to relate our photographs to the history, culture, and social concerns of East Baltimore and to create for the residents a clearer sense of the richness of their lives.

We were most gratified when hundreds of East Baltimoreans, photography enthusiasts, and members of the greater community came to see each exhibit and hear the lecture programs. East Baltimoreans further participated in these events by preparing home-baked ethnic specialties for the opening receptions. Neighbors stood by photographs of themselves, proudly bringing them to life—a clear sign that our project had become a meaningful one in the community.

We owe the success of this project to good fortune, good timing, hard work, many volunteers, and generous financial support. Its completion is a testimonial to the power of positive thinking. We are honored that the residents of East Baltimore so openly and warmly have shared their lives with us.

*Linda G. Rich*  
Project Director

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The following quotations have been taken from individually taped interviews with both past and present residents of East Baltimore.

### Lives of Work

In the old standards of America, plumes over smokestacks meant jobs for people. **James Bready**

The packing houses was where all the people who didn't understand English worked. They knew what a penny was and what a nickel was, and that's what they got paid—a few pennies for a bucket of tomatoes. And in the late evening my mother used to come home, put her pennies and nickels on the table and count 'em. A lot of those pennies and nickels had tomato seeds on them and they smelled so good, like Little Italy. **Frank Krajewski**

They used to have canneries (in Canton) that worked all year round. They packed pineapples and they packed peaches. They packed spinach, beans, sweet potatoes, and in the middle of winter, they even packed oysters—steam 'em—and that's where most of our work came from. I shucked many an oyster myself, to help my sister out. Older sister, she used to be capable of steaming a hundred, a hundred twenty-five buckets—a good-size bucket, probably at least a three gallon bucket—in a day's time. "Day" meant to us, well, we never counted the hours. We used to start at 7:00 a.m., then you would have a little break for lunch, and then you'd work until that day's crop was harvested and packed. Never left anything go overnight. **Casimir Pelczynski**

Summers, when we were small kids, my father used to take the whole family down to Anne Arundel County, where we lived in a shanty and we'd sleep on straw with heavy canvas covers. We worked on a farm. We kids were the pickers and our father was the row boss. It was a hard job, but I tell ya, everybody was happy.

Well my mother would get up about 4:00 in the morning and she would have hot coffee for us. We would just wipe our eyes off with water and we would drink hot coffee and then we would go to the fields. By that time it was a little lighter that you could see strawberries, but oh, was it cold. It was, you know, that dew, and it was so cold, it was wet, and when you were hungry you were eating strawberries for breakfast. **Estelle Figinski**



We used to work in the canneries for about six weeks in the summer after we came back from the farms and after school hours. Why, we didn't go around and go to any drugstore or anything. We came home and took our one shirt off and hung it up nice. Took our one pair of shoes off and then we went to the cannery.

**Casimir Pelczynski**

As children Rob and I, we loved to go camping. When we were eight years old, we bought our own tent. Now we didn't have any three dollars and our people were very poor, our father worked in the shipyard, so we decided that we would raise enough money ourself to buy this tent. A secondhand army tent, three dollars. We decided to make greeting cards, but we had no paper and no cardboard. (As I was handicapped) Rob pushed me up to the print shop up on Patterson Park Avenue in a baby carriage... I can remember this as if it were last week... I only weighed twenty-five pounds when I was eight years old.... (At the print shop) the man looked over the top (of the counter) and said, "What can I do for you fellas?" I said, "Please, sir, do you have any scrap cardboard?" At first he said no but another man was looking over the desk and said not to turn us away. He asked "Boys, what are you going to do with it?" I said, "Sir, I'm going to make Christmas cards." He brought us a box of cutoffs.... Oh, it was paradise, we thought we were in heaven! All colors under the sun, all sizes, little ones, big ones. We went home and began right away to make Christmas cards, valentines, you name it. And we sold them for two cents apiece. We made the envelopes too. That was two cents. We had them on display in the window. It wasn't but two or three weeks we had enough money to get our tent. I still make cards today, but only for myself or on order.... So that is the way we made our pin up money. **Johnny Eck**

In the back of my house here, about three blocks down is Eskay plant... which is a German meat-packing plant. My grandfather worked there. My grandfather lived in this house. He was a meat wrapper there. My mother worked there. When she first started working, she was a sausage stuffer there and linker and worked herself up to being one of the fastest linkers in the plant.

My grandmother was a barmaid at Schenning's Bar. But a barmaid in those days was different than what a barmaid is now. Schenning's Bar, that's where you stopped to cash your paycheck. So my grandmother was in charge of making sure that men got out as soon as possible and home with their paycheck. **Betty Deacon**

When I started working (arabing), I was too poor to have a horse and wagon. I had what you call a "Hoover Cart." It was a baby carriage. You would put a fish box on a baby carriage, lay it on there, and you were in business. I am making one now and I'm going to put a big sign up on it "Hoover Cart in Carter Time." Did you get that? Ain't Carter the President? Hoover was the President then. **Paul W. Watkins**

There were eight children in our family. My father was a tailor and every one of us was weaned on a sewing machine. **Sophie Nardone**

I was sixteen when I went to work in a cigar factory... My first job was learning how to roll cigars, and I was paid five dollars a week for learning. I was a very fast roller; I could roll about 750 cigars a day. **Sophie Rominski**

I graduated from Sacred Heart when I was fourteen years old. One of my friends got me a job at an umbrella place, making umbrellas. I stayed there a year. Then I went to work at the broom factory, and I've been there ever since. **Eugene Nardone**

I was trained by one of my uncles to do shoe repairs. I started when I was about six years old. I started by picking up nails on the floor. **Paul Musotto**

I had two uncles who were barbers, so my brother and I got into barbering—they put us into it. I was a lather boy... and I learned how to shine cuspidors—they days they used to chew tobacco and spit in the cuspidors. So we had to learn from there on, keep the floors and shop clean.

Then we would start lathering beards, then we would start shaving, then necks, and then we'd start on cutting hair. So that went on, and later on, I became a barber. My mother has a shop near Fells Point and my brother and I used to run it, and we used to work belated hours, especially Saturday night. We'd be between one and two o'clock Saturday night... that's our business. **Adam Glowacki**

And the hours (in the store) were terrible, I mean, you'd get up to open six o'clock in the morning, stay till 10:00 at night, seven days a week. And, well, people didn't want to be on relief. It wasn't the idea of making a lot of money. But it was just the idea that you wouldn't have to depend on anybody, depend on charity. That was the worst thing for people in those days. They'd do anything just as long as they didn't have to ask for charity.

**Isaac Highstein**



Everyone that counted for something in this city of Baltimore started at that broom factory. You'd be surprised. Not the ones that stayed there now like we did, mind you.... Lots of them stayed there long enough to get a start in life. They left there and became something.

**Eugene Nardone**

But that was like going to school for me. I only went to the fifth grade in school but the dime store taught me a lot. I met all kind of people. I had to make sure that I could spell the things that I had to order, and if I couldn't, I looked at the box and made sure that I spelled the words right, and it helped me with a little arithmetic because I had to know. **Martha Lane**

At the time we started the union down there I was president of the union. We wanted to buy Mr. Wey out. Just the employees pitch in enough money to buy him. You know we stuck together that much. It was such a family affair that all these people working all those years at such a small wage in comparison to the other industries around that we were pretty well off as far as feeding ourselves and families and whatnot. It was a steady group. All good workers too. **Eugene Nardone**

The labor union maybe does, to an extent, during working hours what the church does on Sunday hours. And what your patriotic society does also. But, everything is against individualism. It's tribal. You do what everybody before you and after you is supposed to be doing.

**James Bready**

And I had Kevin.... From the time he was two weeks old he used to be brought up to the shop everyday, and he was raised here and he knew the business. When he was nine years old he started getting paid for working — like sweeping the floor and such. He was very interested in the business, and when he graduated from college, we felt maybe he wanted to go out on his own, do something else, but he still wanted to stay here, and he took over, and now he's considered one of the master craftsmen in the granite business as well as marble.

**Veronica Conley**

If I could get someone who would be more reliable, I would let him take over the business and eventually sell it to him. I'd like to see a young person get ahead and keep on. A bakery is really needed here, and we are one of the dying trades. We are really one of the dying trades. **Frank Krajewski**

We are ship chandlers. In the olden days a ship chandler was a person that supplied everything that a ship needed from the captain's wife's dress to anchors and all kinds of ropes and paints and everything. But today it has changed and the captain doesn't have the authority to buy any more. It's all bought by the owners and that has changed the ship chandlery business considerably, with steam ships. But with small tug boats, which we now have more interest than anything else, the captain has full authority to buy.

I have been with the company (Vane Brothers) for sixty years and I come to the office everyday. I have turned the business over to my son as manager and owner. I have been asked when I am retiring, I do not want to retire. This spring my grandson is coming into the business with me. That makes three generations of the Hughes family in the ship chandlery business.

**Charles Hughes, Sr.**





Chris Martin has been making brooms for 50 years at the Atlantic Southwestern Broom Company. *Elinor Cahn*





Paul Watkins has been the stable boss for over 30 years at a Fells Point livery stable. The building has changed very little since it was built in 1833. At one time over 45 horses and wagons were kept here. They were rented to Arabs (fruit and vegetable vendors) and junkies (junkmen). The last 6 horses were sold in January, and the stable is now closed. *Linda Rich*





Rosemary and Raul Marconi in their Italian import shop, Italian Canta, on Lombard Street in Highlandtown. *Joan Netherwood*





Retirement sale at the Highland Candy and Tobacco Co., owned and operated by Oscar and Fannie Feldstein for over 50 years. *Linda Rich*





Adam Glowacki in the barber shop which he has operated for more than 50 years. The shop occupies the former living room of his in-laws' home on "The Avenue." *Elinor Cahn*





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Charles Hughes, Sr., and Charles Hughes, Jr., owners of Vane Brothers, the only remaining waterfront ship chandlery.  
*Linda Rich*





Doc Price has owned and operated this drugstore on O'Donnell Street in Canton for 45 years. *Elinor Cahn*





Stella Foods, owned and operated by the Kostis family for 21 years, features the best-quality imported foods, wines, homemade Italian breads, and Greek pastries in Highlandtown. *Linda Rich*





Tommy's fish stand at the Northeast Market. *Elinor Cahn*





Nan Cotrelle Coiffeurs, a few days before Easter, in Canton.  
Joan Netherwood





Father Nicholai, pastor of a modest Russian Orthodox church which was formerly an Orthodox synagogue in Butcher's Hill.  
*Elinor Cahn*





Edith Massey, South Broadway. *Elinor Cahn*





Bernie Zill, in his antique shop with no name, in the 1700 block of Eastern Avenue. *Joan Netherwood*



Joe Poodles in the pool hall which he has operated for more than 50 years. He is active in the boxers' Hall of Fame. He is a former boxer and the father of a nationally ranked boxer, and he has been given much recognition for his contribution to the boxing profession. Elinor Cahn



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