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Author

Felstein, Lisa M.

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BOOK REVIEW

The City as Suburb: A History of Northeast Baltimore Since 1660, Updated Edition

by Eric L. Holcomb
2008, Center for American Places, Columbia College, Chicago. 270p.

By Lisa M. Feldstein

Eric Holcomb is a planner who specializes in historic preservation in Baltimore, and his love for and expertise in his discipline shine in this difficult-to-categorize work. Divided into three parts, the book looks at Northeast Baltimore before there was a place called Baltimore, the middle period during which the area was tied to yet separate from the city, and the modern era, when Northeast Baltimore is part of the city itself.

The reader is offered a meticulous history of the area prior to European settlement. beginning with a brief natural history. The Indian tribes of the region treated this specific area as a "demilitarized zone," and one of the first Europeans, John Smith, found the rocky, hilly terrain less than ideal. Over time, however, farmers settled the land, providing the growing city of Baltimore with fresh produce. During the first part of the nineteenth century, truck farms gave way to the grand estates of Baltimore's wealthy merchants, and by the end of that century, the estates were morphing into middle-class streetcar suburbs. During the twentieth century, Northeast Baltimore became part of the city of Baltimore, a suburb no more.

The author utilizes Johann Van Thunen's model of the *Isolated State* to describe the relationship between Northeast Baltimore and the city itself in the middle phase. The first and third sections of the book do not rest upon a published model; the former is an historical treatment, the latter, a detailed and contextual discussion of the fate of many streetcar suburbs in the twentieth century.

Holcomb relates the story of Northeast Baltimore in exhaustive detail. The difficulty with his approach is that it is unclear what the book is supposed to be, and who is the intended audience. It is a meticulously researched history, yet focuses too much on geography, landscape and issues of planning to be a history text. It lacks the rigor of a geography text (never, for example, defining Northeast Baltimore). Planners will be disappointed to find that the city-suburb relationship is not probed with an analytical eye. Cultural landscapists will also be disappointed, for while Holcomb provides very thick description, he does not offer the precision necessary for depth of understanding.

Simultaneous to this lack of focus is the difficulty of a too-precise focus; who, exactly, is the audience for a book that is exclusively about Northeast Baltimore? A resident or history buff may find it of interest, yet it is too textbook-like in its style and structure to entice the casual reader. At the same time, it is hard to imagine an academic use for a textbook with so narrow a geographic focus and without broader insights to offer.

Although well written and meticulously researched, this book fails to be more than the book the author wanted to write about a subject clearly dear to him. Textbook or text? History, planning, geography? Case study or monograph? The only clear classification is that this is a good book in search of an audience.