

100 DUNDALK 1917 YEARS 2017



Celebrating 100 Years Since the Development of Historic Dundalk

Early Industrial Expansion and the Dundalk, Ireland Connection

In 1887 a steel mill was established on Sparrows Point by the Pennsylvania Steel company.¹ Prior to this, Southeastern Baltimore County had been largely rural. The presence of industry prompted the extension of a rail line from Baltimore City to serve the mill in 1889. In 1894, the Henry McShane Manufacturing Company established an iron and brass foundry and a freight station (neither of which remains) along this rail line just south of the present-day Dundalk National Register Historic District. McShane named the station “Dundalk” in honor of his birthplace in Ireland.²

In 1916, Bethlehem Steel Company acquired the Sparrows Point mill during a period of rapid expansion that included the first munitions and steel plate orders with the start of World War I two years earlier. According to the company they were now the “second largest steel organization in the world.” Owning Sparrows Point “doubled the corporation’s pig iron and steel capacity, provided a needed tidewater facility, and also gave Bethlehem its fifth shipyard. As a result, the corporation also could claim to be the biggest shipbuilding concern in America.”³

Attracting an Expanding Workforce: The Impetus for a Town in 1917

Bethlehem Steel chartered the Dundalk Company on May 4, 1917 for the purpose of purchasing 1,000 acres north of the Dundalk Station.⁴ This land was purchased for the construction of housing to enable the Steel Company’s expanding workforce to live closer to the mill, reducing commute times and absenteeism, while also avoiding the plant’s noise and pollution.⁵ In 1917, the mill employed 8,000 men, 5,000 of whom were commuting from Baltimore City. Compared to commutes from Highlandtown (the nearest



housing in the City) to Sparrows Point where fares were 10 cents each way, fares were just 5 cents from the Dundalk Company’s development. Probably another reason for the Steel Company’s pursuit of better living conditions for their workers was the turnover, dissatisfaction, and labor unrest associated with the “company town” model employed with the housing offered right at Sparrows Point. There, the company leased the housing to its employees, owned the power generation and water supplies, and grew the food sold in the company store.⁶

A “Garden City” Town Plan

Through the Dundalk Company, Bethlehem Steel sought to build a different kind of working class community of the highest quality. Manager Edward H. Bouton had 25 years of experience managing the development of Baltimore’s exclusive “romantic suburb,” Roland Park. Bouton had also been manager for 3 years of Forest Hills Gardens in New York, a model community planned by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. in 1912 to demonstrate concepts of comprehensive “garden city” style planning. Dundalk’s road layout was a collaboration of Charles Wellford Leavitt and Grosvenor Atterbury, who was chief architect at Forest Hills Gardens, and a planner of several industrial towns. Serving as chief architect for the Dundalk Company was Baltimorean Edward L. Palmer. Palmer worked with Bouton in Roland Park.



Roland Park at left, Dundalk Historic District at right.



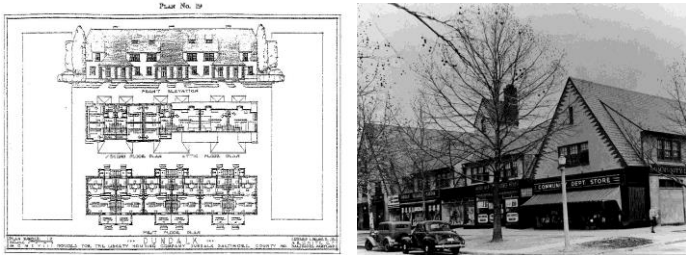
Influences from Roland Park and Forest Hills Gardens can be seen in Dundalk’s Tudor-revival stucco homes and its hierarchy of wider and narrower street widths to manage local and through traffic.⁷ Bouton implemented restrictive covenants in the upscale Baltimore neighborhoods of Roland Park, Guilford, and Homeland to limit building forms, conflicting land uses like industry, and the people who could live there. Similar covenants were used in Dundalk, though Palmer had envisioned a range of housing types “occupied by all classes of workmen” and “for different nationalities, including negroes.” Unlike most grid developments which made no provision for stores or parks, the Dundalk town center provided space for shops, offices, a community hall, transportation, recreation, and a school. Lots were also set aside for churches. Beyond, were farms and industry.⁸

World War I and Housing War Workers

The United States entered World War I in April 1917. Demand for ships and the need to house war workers spiked, but the ability of the private market to provide housing stagnated due to price inflation, scarcity of building materials, and concerns about the postwar value of homes built during wartime inflation. The just-launched Dundalk plans were stalled.

The first Federal intervention in housing production occurred because of this need to speed up shipbuilding. The United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC) undertook 35 housing projects across the country beginning in 1918. The urgency of the situation for Sparrows Point is evident in the EFC's selection of Dundalk and St. Helena as their sole projects in Maryland.⁹

Stringent EFC program rules prompted Bethlehem Steel to form the Liberty Housing Company on April 24, 1918. Seventy acres were transferred from the Dundalk Company to the Liberty Housing Company for the project, and EFC funds were lent to Bethlehem Steel for construction of 529 single-family houses and two boarding houses, and a portion of the community center. This development was intended to increase the desirability of working at Sparrows Point for more highly-paid mechanics, foremen, and superintendents. The general public was invited to participate in a street-naming competition.¹⁰



Development of St. Helena differed in having a more conventional grid street plan. The EFC purchased land from the Dundalk Company and owned it directly. Unique to St. Helena, the 296 houses constructed in 1918 were not boarding houses, but “convertible homes”. Palmer’s intent was to create a lower-cost form of permanent housing. During the war, each 4-room house, built without a kitchen, would function as a dormitory for single men. A mess hall (demolished in the 1930s) provided meals. After the war, a range and other fittings could be added to meet ongoing workforce needs.¹¹

Postwar Homeownership Opportunities

The Armistice signed November 11, 1918 meant another retooling. In the Spring of 1919, the projects were nearing completion but Congress required that they be sold. Businessman Harry Gilbert purchased the St. Helena houses in August, 1919 from the EFC, established the Liberty Homes Corporation, prepared modifications, and began to market them. In Dundalk, the EFC chose to acquire the homes from the Liberty Housing Company and then sell them to

individual buyers using an appeal that “Uncle Sam Built These Homes Expressly for You!” Bethlehem employees and the Steel company assisted with down payments. “Over half the houses were sold to Bethlehem workers” as a result.

Homes were then offered to the general public. The Dundalk Company acquired many of those remaining from the EFC on behalf of Bethlehem Steel. While Bethlehem’s intent was to market the homes to their employees, the postwar decline in production led to a near shutdown of the plant. EFC moved to foreclose on many buyers, who sought to withhold their mortgage payments from EFC in protest as their homes’ value postwar had plummeted, just as had been feared. In response, the EFC transferred its interests to the Dundalk Mortgage Company, headed by Bouton. The Dundalk Mortgage Company proceeded to acquire everything that had belonged to the Liberty Housing Company including the commercial town center, streets, alleys, etc. Bethlehem Steel remained involved in land development and shaping the look and form of the town for the next 20 years.¹²



¹ This summary of Dundalk’s early history was compiled by Amy Menzer, Ph.D. in 2017. It relies heavily upon the thorough research of Druscilla Null, 1985, “The Development of the Dundalk Historic District, 1890-1985: Evolution of a Planned Industrial Community.” Master’s Thesis, George Washington University. Working with the Dundalk Chamber of Commerce, Null also prepared the application for designation of Dundalk’s National Register Historic District in 1983. We are thankful for her efforts to document and preserve historic Dundalk. Brooks and Rockel, 1979, History of Baltimore County, cited in Druscilla Null, 1985, p. 8.

² Dundalk Then and Now, 1894-1980, cited in Null.

³ Arundel Cotter, The Story of Bethlehem Steel, New York, Moody Magazine and Book Co., 1916, p. 2, 37, as cited in Null, p. 9-10.

⁴ Maryland, Baltimore County Incorporation Record, Liber 6, Folio 213, cited in Null; for Red Rocket streetcar line history: http://northpointstatepark.homestead.com/trolley_history.html

⁵ Memo from Edward L. Palmer, Jr. to Phillip S. Hiss, Chairman, Section of Housing – Advisory Committee, Council of National Defense, October 3, 1917, p. 6, Dundalk-Patapsco Neck Historical Society and Museum (DPNHS).

⁶ Palmer to Hiss, October 3, 1917, p. 2, 3. The streetcar line was extended to Sparrows Point in 1903 according to Null, p. 9.

⁷ Sandra Sparks, “Roland Park,” The Olmstedian, v. 13:1 Fall 2001; Null, p. 16, 22, 25.

⁸ Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson, “Roland Park: one of America’s first garden suburbs, and built for whites only,” Johns Hopkins Magazine, Fall 2014. Palmer to Hiss, p. 10.

⁹ Null, p.37.

¹⁰ Null, p. 41, The Dundalk Company, 1918 Street-Naming competition, archives of the DPNHS.

¹¹ Null, p. 52.

¹² Postwar description based on Null, p. 63 and 67.

Learn more about Dundalk’s History:

Dundalk-Patapsco Neck Historical Society and Museum, 4 Center Pl., 410 284-2331

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