

Developer's records: a blast from north Baltimore's past

Roland Park Company archives now at Johns Hopkins University

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"\$4,420 will buy an 80-foot lot in a central location in GUILFORD."

The offer is made in a yellowed, 1913 advertisement in the old Baltimore News. The seller was the Roland Park Company, a turn-of-the-century developer of Roland Park, Guilford, Homeland and Northwood. The ad is part of a vast collection of Roland Park Company papers -- everything from pencil-drawn house designs to plat maps, house contracts and letters from companies trying to sell the Roland Park Company appliances and home furnishings.

Since 1968, the Roland Park Company collection -- which complements the collection of Roland Park Civic League

records at the University of Baltimore -- has been housed in the unlikely location of Cornell University, in Ithaca, N.Y.

Now, after 42 years, the collection is back in Maryland, in Special Collections at Johns Hopkins University's Sheridan Libraries.

The collection is being stored at a warehouse in Laurel. Records can be transferred to the Homewood campus on 24 hours notice, said Cynthia Requardt, the William Kurrelmeyer curator of special collections.

"I haven't gone through it all," she said.

That will be the job of a Hopkins graduate student in the history department, who is interested in the history of 20th-century housing, Requardt said.

The grad student will spend several semesters perusing historical documents such as schematics, drawings on onionskin paper, correspondence and photographs of houses.

The goal is to "understand the place of the company" in the history of communities it developed, Requardt said.

The Roland Park Company began developing Roland Park in 1891 and was a force in north Baltimore development for more than 60 years before shutting down in 1959. Nine years later, the records -- including thousands of letters, ledgers, reports, scrapbooks, photographs, drawings, plot and plat maps, landscaping layouts, building maps, street and utility layouts, and contracts -- were given to Cornell, which had just started an urban studies program.

Requardt said it was her idea to bring the collection back to Baltimore. The idea grew out of a joint project by Hopkins and Towson University to survey collections of noted Baltimore architects. Hopkins already had

the collection of Laurence Hall Fowler, who built many houses in Roland Park, Homeland and Guilford.

When Requardt first saw the Roland Park Company records at Cornell in fall of 2009, some of the papers had dust and rodent droppings on them.

"But they were in reasonably good condition," she said.

The collection is already generating interest from the public in the communities that the Roland Park Company developed.

Requardt said she has been fielding calls from community groups wanting information for their newsletters, and residents asking, "Do you have (records of) my house?"

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