

Welcome to Baltimore, Hon!

ENJOY THE OFFERINGS OF “CHARM CITY” WHILE ATTENDING ASEE’S ANNUAL CONFERENCE.

By Bo Smolka

The weathered docks, the faded wharf signage, the pleasure boats bobbing in the harbor tell the story: Baltimore has always had a strong connection to water.

With its access to the Patapsco River, and, by extension, the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean, Baltimore emerged as a port city in the 1700s. Traders used the port to move flour, wheat, and tobacco from inland farms as well as oysters and crabs from local waters.

The British saw the strategic importance of the city. After burning the Capitol in August 1814, the British army focused on what was then the nation’s third-largest city. Baltimore rebuffed the advance, withstanding a 25-hour assault on its Fort McHenry.

Watching the onslaught from a ship in the harbor was a young American lawyer, Francis Scott Key, who had been negotiating the release of an American held by the British. Inspired by the sight of his country’s flag still flying at dawn after a fierce night of fighting, he wrote the words to “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which in 1931 became the national anthem.

By the mid-1900s, Baltimore was a leader in industry, with its Fairfield shipyard producing World War II Liberty ships. By the 1960s, the Bethlehem Steel mill had become the largest in the world. The mill closed in 2012, but the Port of Baltimore remains one of the busiest in the country.

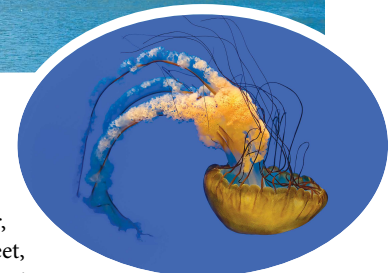
Many of the working docks and warehouses had been torn down and replaced by waterfront hotels, shops, and condominiums by the 1980s, when the Inner Harbor became the nexus of the city’s tourism business. The area includes the convention center, so it’s the logical focal point for those attending ASEE’s 2023 Annual Conference and Exposition.

WATER WORKS

Like any shoreline, Baltimore’s continues to evolve. The shopping complex known as Harborplace is in the midst of a sale, hence the vacant merchant spaces inside. Prime shopping and dining for now has shifted to the Harbor East area, accessible by the Baltimore Waterfront



National Aquarium



Promenade, a brick walkway that hugs the harbor for about seven miles (with a few construction-related detours).

The Baltimore Visitor Center, along the promenade on Light Street, is a good starting point for information, and practically next door is the Maryland Science Center, featuring three floors of exhibits, an IMAX theater, and a planetarium. Conference attendees who have traveled with children might appreciate Port Discovery Children’s Museum, a couple of blocks north of the harbor.

One of Baltimore’s most iconic buildings is the National Aquarium, with its glass-paned pyramid roof designed to invoke the sails on a boat. Inside, blacktip reef sharks, rays, and tropical fish swim in a simulated Indo-Pacific reef. Other exhibits feature sharks, dolphins, and jellyfish, while birds, poison dart frogs, and an elusive sloth occupy a tropical rainforest under that roof.

From the aquarium, look out on the harbor and you might see locals paddling with the Canton Kayak Club, students taking a class led by the Downtown Sailing Center, or tourists in pedal-powered Chessie dragon boats (a nod to the sea monster said to live in the Chesapeake Bay).



The most imposing vessel in the harbor, though, is the three-masted USS *Constellation*, which predates the Civil War and is the last sail-only warship built by the US Navy. As anyone walking near the ship at noon will quickly learn, yes, the cannon still works. A ticket to tour the *Constellation* also grants access to other historic ships nearby, including a Coast Guard cutter that outlasted the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the USS *Torsk* submarine.

Downtown Baltimore is accessible from both the airport and the train station by a light rail line, with a stop at the convention center, and Inner Harbor attractions are walkable from there. The single Metro line is fairly impractical to visitors, and ride-sharing might be the best way to get around.

For a fun trip around the harbor, ride the water taxi, which runs daily loops during the summer. The free Harbor Connector boat also crisscrosses the harbor at various points, but it operates only during working hours and primarily caters to commuters.

One water taxi line makes round trips to Fort McHenry (weekends only), about a 10-minute drive from the convention center. The visitors center offers exhibits and a short film documenting the Battle of Baltimore, and, for a fee, you can step inside the fort's brick walls for a more detailed look.

A mile-long walkway rings the fort; benches along the route, and the sweeping lawn, might be the best picnic spots in the city. Visible from the fort is the 1.6-mile-long Francis Scott Key Bridge, part of the Baltimore Beltway. Its main span of 1,200 feet is the third-longest continuous-truss bridge span in the world.

An even longer bridge can be found about 45 minutes southeast. The five-mile-long William Preston Lane Jr. Memorial Bridge, known locally as the Bay Bridge, carries traffic over the Chesapeake Bay. On summer weekends, backups can last miles as beachgoers head toward Ocean City, Maryland, and the Delaware beaches of Bethany, Dewey, and Rehoboth about two hours east of the bridge.

For a closer beach fix, Sandy Point State Park sits at the base of the Bay Bridge near Annapolis, a worthy day trip in itself. Shops, restaurants, and 200-year-old houses line streets that fan out from the state capitol building like spokes on a wheel. Annapolis is also home to future nuclear and aeronautical engineers studying at the US Naval Academy.

STEM GROWTH

Baltimore has long been a hub of science and engineering, with a dozen universities in or near the city. The University of Maryland hospital, medical, and law schools are in Baltimore, though the state's flagship undergraduate campus is about 30 miles south in College Park. (University of Maryland President and former Dean of Engineering Darryll Pines will give the Annual Conference's Monday, June 26, plenary.)

Johns Hopkins University's main campus in the northern part of the city is at the forefront of AI and robotics—especially medical

robotics, a logical tie-in with the university's world-renowned hospital on the east side. Last year, the Smart Tissue Autonomous Robot designed by Johns Hopkins researchers performed a first-of-its-kind laparoscopic surgery on the soft tissue of a pig.

The Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab (APL), a research and development facility about 20 miles south in Laurel, was the outfit behind NASA's Double Asteroid Redirection Test, in which a spacecraft proved the world's first planetary defense capability by altering the orbit of the Dimorphos asteroid in a process known as kinetic impact. APL also hosts after-school and summer programming for middle- and high school students to explore possible STEM careers.

In the city's northeast, Morgan State University, one of the nation's leading historically Black colleges and universities, boasts a larger percentage of alumni in STEM-related jobs (17%) than any other university in the state.

Baltimore has had a complicated—at times, tortured—history regarding race. The hit TV series *The Wire*, created by former *Baltimore Sun* reporter David Simon, spotlighted racial dynamics generated by decades of discrimination in housing and other areas. Tensions boiled over in 2015 after Freddie Gray, a Black man, suffered fatal spinal cord injuries in police custody. Protests turned into unrest.

An in-depth look at the Black experience in Maryland can be found just east of the Inner Harbor at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. And the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, in east Baltimore, has long been considered an underrated gem. Located in the Oliver neighborhood, the museum illustrates a truth about this place known as Charm City: To see its soul, you need to venture away from the Inner Harbor and into its neighborhoods, which feature marble-stooped rowhouses, colorful murals, parks, museums, and a multitude of food offerings.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES

Baltimore's neighborhoods developed as Germans and Irish escaping violence and famine began to arrive in the mid-1800s, followed by more immigrants—Poles, Ukrainians, Italians, Greeks, and others. Southern African Americans moved north during the Great Migration hoping to find work in the shipyards, mills, canneries, or garment factories that established the city's blue-collar psyche. More recently, southeast Baltimore has become a fusion of Greek and Hispanic culture and cuisine.

Little Italy, just east of the Inner Harbor, continues to be a vibrant enclave that has produced politicians as well as pasta; former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the daughter of three-term Baltimore mayor Thomas D'Alesandro, grew up here. Walk along Stiles Street and you might observe bocce matches on the public courts. Little Italy also holds a sweet spot in the city's dining scene, with several top-tier restaurants and Vaccaro's pastry shop.

In Harbor East, chef Cindy Wolf, a nine-time James Beard finalist for best chef in the mid-Atlantic, runs the exquisite Charleston—but if that's out of your budget, fear not. Baltimore has an underappreciated, versatile dining scene.

Chef Steve Chu was a Beard nominee this past year with his Asian fusion spot Ekiben—now with three Baltimore locations—and the city boasts a wide range of restaurants begging to be sampled. They include the Ambassador Dining Room (Indian) and Cypriana (Cypriot) near the Johns Hopkins campus, Samos (Greek) in Greektown east of the harbor, and the Helmand (Afghani) along a dining-rich corridor of

Charles Street. The Helmand is owned by Qayum Karzai, the brother of Afghanistan's former president, Hamid Karzai.

Numerous restaurants line the streets of Federal Hill and Fells Point, hubs of Baltimore nightlife. Along cobblestoned Thames Street, The Horse You Came In On occupies a building that dates to 1775 and bills itself as America's oldest continuously operating saloon. It is believed to be one of the last places Edgar Allan Poe visited before he died. (Poe fans can also hit the Baltimore house he lived in, about two miles west of the Inner Harbor, which is now a museum.)

FEELING CRABBY

Of course, nearly every menu in Baltimore includes some variation of *Callinectes sapidus*, locally known as the Chesapeake blue crab. By the dozen or by the bushel, the crustaceans are sprinkled with seasoning and steamed to a bright orange. Peppery Old Bay is the most popular seasoning, and Marylanders will put it on popcorn, French fries, chicken wings and, well, just about anything else.

You know you're in a real crab house when tables are set with brown paper tablecloths, a roll of paper towels, and wooden mallets. Don't dress up to eat crabs, and don't expect to use silverware; it's messy business getting to the prized jumbo lump meat just under the shell. But eating steamed crabs is a fun social experience, and if your fingernails don't smell like Old Bay for a couple of days, you probably didn't do it right.

Look into the water along the Inner Harbor promenade on summer days and you just might see a couple of the "beautiful swimmers," as they're known, near one of the pilings.

About two miles west of the convention center, you can try picking fresh steamed crabs at the Captain James Seafood Palace in Fells Point. The restaurant is shaped like a ship and offers a crab deck right on the water.

If you want to start an argument in Baltimore, just ask three people where to get the best crab cake, a broiled or fried concoction featuring lumps of crab meat and, ideally, very little filler to bind it together. Pappas, with three locations, is the favorite of former Baltimore news anchor Oprah Winfrey, and G&M Restaurant near BWI airport draws rave reviews.

Plenty of people vouch for the crab cake at Faidley's Seafood in historic Lexington Market, which originally opened in 1782 and is considered the oldest public market in the nation. Located about eight blocks north of the convention center, Lexington Market this year moved next door into a new, 60,000-square-foot space and will have 50 vendors and food stalls when fully up and running.

SEE AND DO

Cookbook author John Shields also serves a top crab cake at his restaurant, Gertrude's Chesapeake Kitchen, located uptown in the Baltimore Museum of Art. The BMA abuts the Johns Hopkins campus and features a sculpture garden and 95,000 works, including one of the largest collections of French painter Henri Matisse. Best of all: Admission is free. Ditto for the Walters Art Museum, in the Mount Vernon neighborhood. This spring the museum opened an exhibit on art from Asia and the Islamic world.

As the name suggests, Mount Vernon has a connection to George Washington; the 178-foot-tall monument on Charles Street was the

first in the country dedicated to the US president. For a small fee, you can climb its 227 steps for outstanding views of the city.

While in the neighborhood, be sure to stop by the George Peabody Library, located just off the traffic circle. (Hours are limited, so check in advance.) With five floors of ornamental cast-iron balconies under a refurbished skylight, it's easy to see why this so-called cathedral of books is often listed among the most beautiful libraries in the world.

One of the city's other iconic structures is the 1,116-foot-long B&O Warehouse at Camden Yards, home of Major League Baseball's Baltimore Orioles and essentially next door to the convention center. The warehouse had been used as storage space for the B&O Railroad, then was repurposed as an anchor of the Orioles complex, which ushered in a new era of retro ballpark design when it opened in 1992.

If you go to a game—the Orioles are home during the ASEE Annual Conference—look down as you walk along the plaza between the right field fence and the warehouse. Brass baseballs embedded in the concrete show where long home runs have landed. Only one player has hit the warehouse on a fly—Ken Griffey Jr. during the All-Star Game Home Run Derby in 1993. Incidentally, the birthplace of Babe Ruth, now a museum, is just a long fly ball away from the left-field fence.

If you're interested in learning more about the railroad's role in Baltimore's history, the B&O Railroad Museum, with its distinctive roundhouse roof, sits about a mile east of Camden Yards.

GOING GREEN

Another of the city's architectural gems is the pagoda in Patterson Park. The east Baltimore park served as a staging ground for troops before the Battle of Baltimore in 1814 and housed a field hospital during the Civil War. (There's a Civil War museum just east of the aquarium.)

Nowadays, playgrounds, fields, basketball and tennis courts, and a wintertime ice rink draw people to the park year-round, but its most distinctive feature is the four-story pagoda, built in 1891. The Observatory, as it's officially known, is open from noon to 6 p.m. during the summer.

About five miles north of the Inner Harbor is Druid Hill Park, among the largest in the city and adjacent to the Maryland Zoo. The park is in the midst of a major renovation, but hikers and bikers can enjoy the park on the Jones Falls Trail, a 12-mile urban route that runs from the Inner Harbor to the city's northern fringe.

For more ambitious hiking, 40 miles of the Appalachian Trail traverse Maryland about an hour west of Baltimore. Closer to the city, you could head to trails in Gunpowder Falls State Park. On a hot summer day, you might see tubers floating down the Gunpowder River, proving once again that, in this part of a state with more than 3,000 miles of shoreline, the water is never far away.

Bo Smolka is a freelance travel writer based in Baltimore.

