

# Cross Keys was a village long before the Rouse era

*Frederick N. Rasmussen*

The mention of Cross Keys instantly conjures images of the posh North Baltimore commercial and residential community with its village square that was the dream of visionary developer James W. Rouse.

The planned community, which was heavily influenced by the garden cities of Europe and Edward H. Bouton's Roland Park, was conceived and built in the early 1960s on the site of the Baltimore Country Club's former 68-acre golf course.

It sprawled along the western edge of Falls Road between Coldspring Lane and Northern Parkway, with its southern boundary being marked by two schools, Baltimore Polytechnic Institute and Western High School.

As earthmovers began transforming the topography of the former golf course in 1963, the final paving of the new Jones Falls Expressway was completed, which stimulated further suburbanization of the counties surrounding the city.

But there was another Cross Keys that existed long before Rouse with his planners and architects arrived on the scene.

The original Cross Keys was named after an 18th-century inn that stood on Falls Road, then the Falls Turnpike Road, near Coldspring Lane. The inn provided overnight accommodations while refreshing travelers and draymen whose wagons transported goods to and from Baltimore.

Later, when freight and passenger traffic was diverted from the turnpike to the steam trains of the nearby Baltimore & Susquehanna Railroad, later the Northern Central Railway, the old inn remained as a social center of village life.

"The community surrounding the old hostelry was comprised mostly of African Americans, part of the freeborn settlements that once populated parts of Falls Road, principally at Cross Keys, Mount Washington, Bare Hills and Shawan," writes Jim Holechek, a former Baltimore public relations executive and Cross Keys resident, in his recently published book, *Two Cross Keys Villages*.

Holechek has written a delightful and informative history not only of the two Cross Keys, but also an in-depth, behind-the-scenes profile of the Rouse Company's efforts in building the innovative community.

The African-American settlement, farther out Falls Road in Bare Hills, was founded in the 1820s by

the Rev. James Aquila Scott, son of a freed slave. Scott also founded St. John's Church on Bellona Avenue in Ruxton in 1833.

He died in his pulpit while preaching in 1858 and was buried in a small grave off Falls Road in Bare Hills.

"While the Cross Keys area was once known as West Roland Park, it was listed as Cross Keys Village on early maps," Holechek writes. "Many residents simply called their community 'The Road,' or 'The Falls Road,' with an emphasis on The."

Holechek describes those early Cross Keys homes, which housed laborers who probably worked in the nearby Jones Falls Valley mills, as "clapboard bungalows with their gabled ends facing Falls Road, sandwiched between Coldspring Lane and Hillside Road."

At its height in the late 19th century, according to Holechek, Cross Keys Village was a flourishing hamlet.

In addition to its homes, it boasted two African-American churches, a small hospital, which he describes as "probably a doctor's office," three grocery stores, a dairy, a cafe, a park, White Oak Grove (a picnic grove) and a public school for "colored" children.

"Most of the five hundred people who lived in Cross Keys were African American. In later years, many worked as cooks, butlers chauffeurs, gardeners, domestics, and even salad makers, for the prosperous in Roland Park," he writes. "But some, with years of entrepreneurial spirit and accumulated wealth, ran their own businesses, prospered and sent their children to college and grandchildren into the professions."

The No. 25 streetcar, which arrived in the village at the turn of the last century, gave residents of the community quicker access to the city, jobs and downtown department stores.

Holechek's interviews with residents, both present and former, recall a time of neighborhood friendliness where joys and tragedies were commonly shared and endured.

"We had a lot of fun in Cross Keys," Gertrude Harvey West, whose childhood was spent in the village, told Holechek.

"When I got married in 1952 we moved away, but in 1956 we returned to 4630 (Falls Road) and indoor plumbing. Falls Road was one big family. It really was one big family. Until word came that the city was going to buy up the houses in Cross Keys and tear them down to make room for the new expressway and schools. We were going to have to move. It was sad for a lot of people, particularly the elderly who could find displacement difficult to handle," she said.

What is believed to be the oldest house left standing in the village, from circa 1844, can be seen at 4713 Falls Road, Holechek says.

However, of the 76 houses that once composed the village, only 11 remain. Four others are slated for demolition. The site will be redeveloped with a modern office building.

"Ironically, it may be developed by African Americans. And rightly so, at the hands of a direct descendant of Tobias Scott, whose memory was such an integral part of the village," muses Holechek.

It is Holechek's hope that the home at 4713, which will remain a residence, could "become an historical representative of what used to be, what used to provide the love and respect of a family," he writes.

In the end, Holechek salutes Rouse.

"And the memories of the original 200-year-old Cross Keys Village will always enhance our future. Maybe Jim Rouse actually did know he was naming his urban community after, not just an inn, but a vibrant community of African Americans."