

# Hampden mural on way out

*But a new one is in the works via grant*

BY BENN RAY

Lisa Harbin was looking for a place to live in Baltimore when she came across the Hampden neighborhood, and with it the old Hampden Hall at the southwest corner of Roland Avenue and 36th Street.

And with Hampden Hall was a colorful mural, 16 feet wide by 24 feet tall, on a crumbling brick wall near the roof.

It was a mish-mash mural, but for Harbin, it was love at first sight.

"The Hampden Hall mural represents the flavor of the neighborhood I was drawn to when I was

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## A mural refrain: out with old, in with new

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figuring out where to live in Baltimore. That's why I bought a house here when I never thought home ownership was important to me at all," said Harbin, 37, a technical writer who moved to the 1200 block of West 40th Street from Greensboro, N.C., in 1998.

"It's an odd duck, this mural," she

turn it into 14 loft-style apartments to open in 2006.

The Hampden Community Council, worried about other redevelopment projects in the community, started a movement to preserve the mural.

The council turned to the organization Hampden Village Main Street, whose stated goal is "to help ensure the long-term econom-



ing, "a historic gem in the heart of Hampden."

But resident Rebecca Abernathy said, "Having something bright and interesting there sets a tone. It tells you something about where you are (and it) suggests you're in an interesting place, somewhere out of the ordinary."

City Paper art critic J. Bowers said the mural is "a visual remnant of an earlier time, before the Avenue



"It's an odd duck, this mural," she said. "It celebrates the bicentennial and war heroes and mass transit. And rainbows. It's quirky but respectful of the hard-working residents of the neighborhood. This kind of mix is what makes Hampden feel like home to me."

Now, the mural faces probable death — and rebirth.

Developers who bought Hampden Hall and are converting it into luxury apartments plan to erase the landmark, saying it's in an advanced state of decay and unsalvageable. Scaffolding went up last week as work crews prepared to power spray and repaint the brick on the building.

### Starting from scratch

But now, it appears that the mural will be repainted from scratch, with a grant from the Baltimore Main Streets program.

Constructed in 1882 as a meeting hall for Union Army veterans of the Civil War, Hampden Hall in recent years was one of the few facilities left untouched by community reinvestment and redevelopment. In the mid-1970s, the city commissioned artist Bob Hieronimus to paint the mural, honoring the neighborhood's two Congressional Medal of Honor winners, Navy Lt. Milton Ricketts and Army Pvt. Carl Sheridan.

Hieronimus went much further, however, using the mural to honor the bicentennial and Baltimore's old streetcars (Hampden had the first one in the nation), as well as the two war veterans.

Earlier this year, area businessmen Bob Geis and Joe Preller purchased the historic structure at 921-931 W 36th St. They plan to

**'It's an odd duck, this mural.'**

*Lisa Harbin,  
Hampden  
resident*

help ensure the long-term economic prosperity of the Hampden commercial district while ensuring the preservation of Hampden's original architectural style."

But that organization, of which Preller and Geis are board members, had its own financial problems, which recently led it to take a year-long hiatus while it tries to raise enough money

to continue as part of the Baltimore Main Streets program.

Meanwhile, community leaders weren't making much headway in their efforts to save the mural. Preller said it was a moot point, anyway.

"The existing mural cannot be restored," he said, "due to the age of the painting and condition of the brick wall."

Preller, president of Preller Properties, said Baltimore City's Office of Promotion and the Arts also assessed the mural and reached the same conclusion.

Preller said he would be willing to pay the cost of removing the mural and preparing the brick surface for another mural, if community groups could raise money to pay Hieronimus or another artist to repaint it.

### Dangerous work

Late last week funding for a repainted mural was secured through the Baltimore Main Streets program, said Tracy Baskerville, a spokeswoman for the Office of Promotion and the Arts. The arts office will administer the \$8,400 grant, Baskerville said.

Hieronimus, 61, said he is looking for a surrogate artist to re-create it.

He remembers how dangerous it was to paint the current mural when he was a lot younger



STAFF PHOTO BY FRANCIS GARDLEF

**This mural on Hampden Hall, at Roland Avenue and 36th Street, was painted in the mid-1970s. A developer who is converting the hall into luxury apartments plans to erase the mural. But a grant from the Baltimore Main Streets program will be used for a new mural on the site.**

"I knew when I worked on that wall (that) it was a dangerous wall. It was in bad shape when I painted on it," he said.

The project also brings back bad personal memories, because the city's tight deadline and anticipated bad weather at the time made it difficult for him to spend time with his dying father.

"When I think of that wall now, I think of the process of losing my father," he said.

Due to the condition of the brick even then, some aspects of the mural were marginally completed, and he knew that the whole

mural would have to be repainted someday to survive, he said.

Preller also proposed an alternative plan in recent weeks — a plaque honoring medal winners Ricketts and Sheridan and mounted on the wall. The idea is endorsed by Sheridan-Hood Post No. 3065 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Sheridan declined to comment for this article and Ricketts couldn't be reached for comment.

Hampden Village Main Street President Tom McGilloway said whatever becomes of the mural, the most important thing is that Preller and Geis are restoring the build-

ing of an earlier time, before the Avenue (as 36th Street is known) became the hipster hangout and commercial boutique haven it is today. It's part of the scenery at this point," she said, "one of those iconic things that lets you know exactly which part of the city you're in."

The mural "was one of the first indications to me that I should stay in Hampden," said resident Erin Mannion, 31, an administrative assistant at John Hopkins University.

Mannion said the mural was part of her attraction to the area.

"Almost seven years and a home purchase later, I still feel the same way," she said.

### Sign of relief

The mural is only one of many accomplishments by Hieronimus in his varied career. The Owings Mills resident hosts the long-running WCBM radio show "21st Century Radio," about the paranormal. He also owns Ruscombe Mansion, a holistic health center in the Cold-spring Newtown area, and is the author of a book about the making of the Beatles' film "Yellow Submarine."

Earlier this year, he organized an event sanctioned by Paul McCartney to raise money for breast cancer research. The Beatle's late wife Linda died of the disease.

And, Hieronimus has painted 30 murals in the area through the years. He said he was shocked to learn only recently that the Hampden mural that he had worked so hard on might be coming down.

"I just don't understand why they didn't call me," Hieronimus said.

He said another of his murals was destroyed in Locust Point during a redevelopment project by Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse. He's relieved he won't have to go through that again.

"It's a hell of an experience to have that happen."