The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called "Baltimore'68: Riots and Rebirth," a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a website and a library traveling exhibit.

Your potential participation in an oral history project would contribute to the very foundation of this project – the memories of Baltimoreans who lived through the riots and saw the changes that came about in response to them. Your life story can fill in the limited knowledge we learn from newspaper accounts and the television footage.

If you choose to participate in the project you would be interviewed by students from the University of Baltimore. They will ask you questions, but your memories will determine the direction of the interviews.

If you agree to serve as an oral history informant in this project, you will meet with a team of undergraduate students. The students will take a still photograph of you. In addition, if you have a photo of yourself in or around 1968, we would greatly appreciate it if we could borrow it, scan it, and return it. We would reserve the rights to reproduce those photos and use them on the website, conferences, exhibit or publications.

The students may conduct the interviews at a location of your choice, or you may meet them at the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library for your interviews. During the interviews, your recollections will be recorded in two forms: audio and video. The students will be responsible for operating the equipment. You can expect the interviews to last for a minimum of 30 minutes each.

Sometimes talking about events that occurred decades ago will unearth forgotten memories. Undoubtedly, some of those remembrances will be negative. We greatly appreciate your willingness to take the risk of exploring a potentially painful past so that your life experiences will be recorded.

After the interviews the students will transcribe your oral history. They will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review before the transcription is published. The transcription, video and audio records will be archived in the Langsdale Library Special Collections and will be accessible to the public. Your name will be attached to these documents. The University of Baltimore may use your image and/or your words in any future documentaries, exhibits, conferences or publications. Participants in the oral history project agree to waive their confidentiality.

If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name published with your reminiscences

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 410-837-5296. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor
History and Community Studies
The University of Baltimore

I have read and understand the information provided above, and consent to participate in the study. I have also been given a copy of the informed consent for my records.

Theodore B Gamblatt 12/20/07

Participant Signature Date

Theodore B Gamblatt

Participant Printed Name

Interview with Theodore P. Cornblatt
December 20, 2007; University of Baltimore
Interviewer: Duane Howard and John Schwallenberg
Transcriber: Duane Howard

Howard: For the record, can you state your name, please?

Cornblatt: My formal name is Theodore P. Cornblatt.

Howard: And your age?

Cornblatt: Age sixty-four, going on sixty-five.

Howard: In the year 1968 you would have been...

Cornblatt: I would have been about... Twenty-five.

Howard: Can you describe your growing up, being twenty-five and living in Baltimore. Are you from Baltimore and what part of town?

Cornblatt: Where did I live? I lived in… I guess the Forest Park area, in Forest Park near Windsor Mill Road.

Howard: What kind of stuff did you do in the neighborhood that you lived at?

Cornblatt: It was an apartment development at the time, near Kernan Hospital, actually.

Howard: Were you working at that time?

Cornblatt: Yeah, I was an attorney. I was a young lawyer.

Howard: Can you describe the type of work that you did back then?

Cornblatt: I worked at the law firm called Smith, Somerville, and Case, which was one of the major law firms in Baltimore City. I was a trial lawyer.

Howard: Getting back to your neighborhood - Forest Park - describe the climate as far as the make-up of people, backgrounds and those types of things?

Cornblatt: I lived in a sort of subsidized apartment development for low income people. There were mainly a lot of students who lived there. There were people who were just starting out in their professions, so those were the kind of people that were there.

Howard: Were there people of different ethnic backgrounds that resided there?

Cornblatt: They were mostly white people, maybe a few black, but not that many—mostly whites.

Howard: As far as the social life, things you liked to do in the area—cultural things like museums – when you weren't working, what type of things did you like to do?

Cornblatt: Well, I was a young father.s I had one child at that time who would have been two years old, almost two years old. And my wife was pregnant with our second child at that time. So we would spend time with our family most of the time.

Howard: So…people of your own age, background and ethnicity?

Cornblatt: Very much, the people in our area were young, married couples starting their families and beginning their professions.

Howard: I'm trying to get a sense of interactions with other races or cultures, that type of thing

that you might have had.

Cornblatt: Not too much at that time, where we lived. As I said, it was primarily a white area.

Howard: So with shopping and things of that nature…Where did you shop at?

Cornblatt: We shopped at…Security Mall was probably the closest place. I don't know, Route 40, Ingleside area. And again at that time it was primarily a white area.

Howard: Didn't venture much into…that was Route 40 but not… the heart of the city?

Cornblatt: Did I go down to the heart of the city? Yeah, I worked in the heart of the city.

Howard: As far as the 1968 assassination of Dr. King, do you remember that? The event itself?

Cornblatt: Oh very well, yes.

Howard: Can you kind of walk me through it—where you were, and how you felt, those type of things?

Cornblatt: Yeah, I was at home, heard it on television. I was absolutely shocked.

Howard: In building up to that, did you have any kind of sense of the Civil Rights Movement and the things of that nature that were going on?

Cornblatt: Oh, sure. I was very aware, absolutely aware because as a lawyer and a law student, I was following the cases that were coming up involving sit -ins and equal rights and the legislation that was proposed for Civil Rights bills - I was pretty familiar with that.

Howard: Could you give me a sense of the culture, the things that were going on. Like you

mentioned the sit –ins…Was this a time of turbulence, a time of change?

Cornblatt: I can remember that there were, in the 60's, quite a lot of turmoil about racial integration. I can remember the marches and protests outside Gwynn Oak Park. My own rabbi was there and he was arrested for protesting. I can remember picketing at some of the restaurants. I mean it was pretty prevalent around. That was probably in the early part of the 60's, though, not so much, well in Leakin Park, but not much later.

Howard: As far as the Vietnam War, those type of things were going on too, that fed into that culture and tension and turmoil locally?

Cornblatt: Yeah it did. It did. 1968 was a time of a lot of protests about the war. And of course the Democratic Convention happened that summer where there was all kinds of, you know, rioting about the war. It was a turbulent time.

Howard: But back home, where you lived, were things okay, it wasn't… didn't feed into…?

Cornblatt: Nah, things were pretty peaceful where we were.

Howard: All right, well back to the assassination itself, you said that you were home and heard about it on the news - was there a sense of business as usual or did you feel as though ...

Cornblatt: Well I didn't anticipate that there would be a violent reaction as a result of the assassination. I just thought it was just a horrible crime that had been committed and it would be handled like a crime and that was that—like the Kennedy assassination.

Howard: So there were no uprisings or any disaster or rioting and looting had no—didn't reach your neighborhood or anywhere close to that.

Cornblatt: Oh no. I didn't…At that point nothing had happened in Baltimore. Baltimore was

pretty quiet.

Howard: Can you walk me through your day after the assassination?

Cornblatt: I think the assassination was on a Thursday or Wednesday if I remember correctly. It was before Easter Sunday. Well we all went to work and Thursday and Friday were fairly normal. And it was the following week that things really got bad, I remember that.

Howard: Describe it "getting bad"...

Cornblatt: As I recall it was over the weekend maybe on that Sunday or Monday that the rioting began. I believe that Monday I was scheduled to be at a Worker's Compensation hearing in Prince Frederick, Maryland, which is Calvert County. And I recall we were all discussing whether there would be a hearing because of the turmoil that was going on in Baltimore. The commissioner decided he would go on down there because, you know, in Calvert County there is no reason to cancel any hearings even if the hearings may be cancelled in the city. And…maybe it was…that night or probably the next day on Tuesday, my senior partner whose name was William Somerville, he was an officer of the Baltimore City Bar Association and he was the President of Prison Elect.

It must have been some kind of a… emergency call that went out from the courts to get lawyers to help with handling all the cases that were coming into the court with people being arrested during the riots. So I think it was probably on Tuesday that I—well, the Bar Association of Baltimore City organized lawyers to come help handle these cases, which were coming in by the thousands. So I went over there as one of the volunteers and spent the entire night working in the courthouse. And it was an amazing scene. It was. What I remember is that there were school buses and they were bringing in many curfew violators. And they would be parked outside the Mitchell Courthouse— which is now the Mitchell Courthouse on St. Paul Street, the entrance at St. Paul right near Fayette—and they were just discharging these arrested curfew violators by the hundreds. They would bring them into the courthouse, line them up in the hallway outside the courtrooms, and the judges would be handling these cases all night long.

Howard: So you were representing the people who were coming in? Or you were…?

Cornblatt: I was representing the people coming in, yeah.

Howard: How was it interesting that they were…I can imagine it was probably chaotic and a lot of panic.

Cornblatt: It was extremely chaotic, extremely chaotic. The courts were overwhelmed, no doubt about that. But we did our best— I think the police officers were writing their reports as they went along. I think I remember seeing officers scribbling their reports right in the hallways of the courtroom and then I think they would give one to me and I would go find the fellow I was supposed to represent, talk to him for a few minutes, and off we went into the courtroom. The judge would hear the case. It was sort of a perfunctory kind of thing. I suppose if the person was out on the street after a certain time he was a curfew violator, and that was that. So there wasn't much to it. And I think the judge that I recall being before was Judge Anselm Sodaro, who was, I think, later the Chief Judge of the Court, I don't think he was Chief Judge at that time. But he was giving people some jail-time, I think like, 30 days…occasionally 60 days for something of aggravated circumstances. And then, I think after the jails got loaded, there wasn't any room. So people were getting probation after that.

Howard: So it was to their advantage to come to be tried later on, then sooner, as far as getting jail time….

Cornblatt: No, actually they were in probation. If they behaved themselves, that would be it. Nothing more to it. Like I said, we went all night long. And at that time I believe the National Guard was in place. In fact, I'm sure they were cause we had passes from the National Guard to get through the roadblocks to get back and forth.

We may have finished up like four o'clock in the morning and heading home, I recall a roadblock at the corner of maybe Fayette and Liberty Streets something like that, where we had

to show our passes. And you could hear gunfire in the background. So it was a pretty wild time. I also should mention I was… my office building was located at the 1 Charles Center Building on the seventeenth floor and I could look out the window of my office and right down to Lexington Street towards Johns Hopkins Hospital and fires were everywhere. And they were just burning because nobody was fighting the fires. The firemen were getting shot at and they weren't going to go out there so they were just letting it burn. So you could see, you know, smoke, fires all over the place, it was just unbelievable.

Howard: John, at this point would you like to jump in for any questions?

Schwallenberg: Oh yeah, just a couple of things. I'd like to go back to a few things. In your law firm, were there…There was the Maryland Bar and the Monumental Bar and all those kinds of things, were there any blacks in your law firm, say in the mid 60's? Or, when did you start seeing a little integration in the law firm?

Cornblatt: We had black lawyers, we certainly had black employees. File-clerks and perhaps secretaries at that time. I know we didn't have a lawyer maybe until the 70's who was a black man. We may have had some law clerks somewhere along the line there, but we eventually had a few black people.

Schwallenberg: In 1968, you didn't have any at that time?

Cornblatt: No. I don't believe we did.

Schwallenberg: Describe if you could, you had mentioned Gwynn Oak and some of the other Civil Rights things that you were involved in at that time?

Cornblatt: I wasn't involved, I was aware of it, saw it.

Schwallenberg: Okay. You said you had done some restaurants, were you just aware of it or did

you do protesting? Or sit-ins?

Cornblatt: No, I didn't protest myself. I can recall going to a place called Mandall Ballows on Reisterstown Road near Rogers Avenue and seeing black people protesting the fact that they were not being allowed in to sit in the restaurant. And I recall, of course, reading in the newspapers about the various protests that were going on around the city.

Schwallenberg: Did your firm take up any of their cases or anything like that?

Cornblatt: No, we didn't do that kind of work.

Schwallenberg: Referring to the curfew violations, did you anything at the Civic Center or was it all at the Courthouse?

Cornblatt: All at the Courthouse.

Schwallenberg: The Judge that you mentioned, how do you spell his name? Sordano?

Cornblatt: Sodaro. S - O - D - A - R – O, I think it is.

Schwallenberg: Okay, thank you.

Cornblatt: He was my judge, but other judges were working that night as far as I know.

Schwallenberg: Right. I can imagine.

Cornblatt: The court was going full blast.

Howard: Want to get back towards the events of the riots, things that affected your neighborhood. And you said that there was no National Guard, business as usual?

Cornblatt: No effect. I might add that I do know, did know some people who lived in the inner city, and had stores in the inner city and their property, their stores were destroyed by fire. And I represented at least one of those people in trying to get some kind of compensation from the city because there was a theory, I think, that the city could have done more to protect them. It must have been thousands of those kind of claims that were out there because I recall that the docket, I mean, the Baltimore City Court had a docket, which by itself was just for these kinds of cases. They called it, "The Riot Cases." It was a big book with all the cases in it. And nothing came of it, as far as I know. In any event, it was a huge number of claims.

Schwallenberg: Did your client, I guess you could say, did he get any insurance out of it? Did the insurance pay him anything for it?

Cornblatt: He may have had some insurance coverage but I don't believe that he had enough. He certainly suffered financially.

Schwallenberg: Was he ever able to rebuild?

Cornblatt: No he didn't. I think where he— his place was actually torn down and made into a little, like a 'pocket park' or a vacant lot. It was at 21st Street near Guilford [Avenue] as I recall.

Schwallenberg: Did you represent anybody else in similar cases?

Cornblatt: No, that's the only one I actually represented. I probably spoke to some people about it—You know, what happened to them but other than that I didn't.

Schwallenberg: Can you share the name of the business?

Cornblatt: The man's name was Harry Becker and it was a nice little grocery store, a little neighborhood grocery store.

Schwallenberg: Was it totally wiped out?

Cornblatt: Yeah and he lived there too. He lived on top of the store.

Schwallenberg: Did he have his family there with him, too?

Cornblatt: By that time his family had, his kids were grown up; and they had grown up in that neighborhood. But they were all married and left by that time. His wife was there and it was, you know, an extremely hard time for him.

Schwallenberg: I can imagine.

Howard: Is there anything that you want to say about the King assassination overall as far as the events there, looking back at it now, forty years?

Cornblatt: Oh God, it was a horrible event, it was just a terrible thing. And I don't know whether we would have, people would have anticipated the kind of violent reaction that occurred…Just a horrible murder.

Howard: Were you aware of other things that were going on nationwide as far as riots and violence that was going on in the other cities?

Cornblatt: Oh, sure because I think there was riots in Detroit the year before. Am I right?

Schwallenberg and Howard: Yes.

Cornblatt: It was…I guess maybe we should have anticipated there would have been a riot because the situation was quite volatile. The Watts Riots occurred earlier, I think…

Schwallenberg: ’65, I think.

Cornblatt: ‘65. And Detroit was ’67. So you know, we had quite a lot of turmoil around the country and something such as the assassination of Dr. King could have triggered it pretty easily. I’m not sure anybody really anticipated it was gonna happen, but it did.

Schwallenberg: What did you think of the handling of the riots by Baltimore City Police and the government officials?

Cornblatt: Well, I thought they could have done a better job protecting firefighters. I don’t know that so many…if so much property would have been destroyed if they could have somehow protected the firemen. But maybe it just wasn’t possible to do that. Because there was so much going on in the city and obviously the police were overwhelmed that the National Guard wasn’t enough and they had to call in the Airborne. I remember the Airborne being camped out in Druid Hill Park. I never saw them on the streets, I did see the National Guard and they would be carrying guns but they had their ammunition sort of pinned to their shirts. Their guns were not loaded. They were ready to load ‘em if they had to.

Schwallenberg: How could you tell the difference between the regular Army and the National Guard?

Cornblatt: I probably couldn’t tell the difference. I just remember that the National Guard was the ones that was on the street and the Airborne was there in reserve camped out in front of the Mansion House in Druid Hill Park.

Howard: At any time during the riots did you ever have a fear factor and if you could, could you describe that?

Cornblatt: Yeah. The fear factor I felt was probably going home from the courthouse and hearing the gunfire—that was unsettling to say the least. So, I didn’t know how close the gunfire

was but it was there.

Schwallenberg: Did you watch any of the coverage of the riots on television or anything?

Cornblatt: Oh sure.

Schwallenberg: And what did you think of the coverage?

Cornblatt: Of what?

Schwallenberg: Of the coverage. What'd you think of it? Was it fair and balanced or was it sensationalized, or…?

Cornblatt: You know, it's been so many years I can't remember precisely. Nothing that really jumped out at me as being sensationalized. I just remember they reported the facts which were pretty sensational themselves.

Schwallenberg: Did you see any of the national news that showed Baltimore or any of the other cities?

Cornblatt: I'm sure I did. Yeah. I watched the news regularly. I know I did. I know Baltimore wasn't the only place where this happened.

Schwallenberg: How do you think the riots changed Baltimore?

Cornblatt: Well I'm not certain whether the riots changed Baltimore or the Civil Rights Legislation changed Baltimore, because, you know, Baltimore was a very segregated city at one time. I mean to the point where even department stores were segregated. It was terrible. I went to segregated schools in Baltimore. And I think the Civil Rights Legislation which came about…I believe it was probably in '64, '65, '66, something like that, that part about public

accommodations, that really did change a lot. Because people got to really be integrated at that time. Everything was open. There was none of the separate restroom facilities, there wasn't any separate restaurants, or hotels, that was all open. And that really did change the city.

Schwallenberg: Once that law was passed, was that a quick change or did it... did people kind of…was it a slower…after '64 was it a slow kind of integration?

Cornblatt: I think it was a slow acceptance, it wasn't a slow integration because that was the law –you had to do it. But as far as people getting used to it, the accepting of it, you gotta remember, people here grew up in an entirely segregated society, it was like the Deep South in the sense that, you had public schools which were totally segregated. My wife went to a school called Arlington School on Rogers Avenue and Park Heights Avenue, which was one of the better schools in the city. It was completely white even though one block away— a place called Denmore Avenue, one block or two block, right around the corner, there was a street of black people who had lived there for decades and they were not allowed to go to that Arlington School. They had to have their own little schoolhouse on Denmore Avenue. I remember a little building being there. It was disgraceful. That's up until the 1954 Desegregation Law [Brown v. Board of Education]. And then of course, then I think that school closed and they went to Arlington.

My wife would tell me this, she recalls the first time she went to school with black people and I can too. My elementary school was totally white. And it was only when I got into junior high, now called middle school, that we saw our first black people come in. And it was, it was very peaceful, everybody got along very well. Didn't really have a problem with that. Should've been done many years before.

Howard: So, in the neighborhood that you lived in, you said that at the age of twenty-five that you didn't have that much interaction with other races. Has that changed up or down in the forty years since?

Cornblatt: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. You see black people in all areas of society now, and I think there is a lot of interaction with them. We not be complete in the sense that people still tend to

remain among people they are related to or know best and generally that's their own, their own race but there is not that enforced separation that used to be there.

Howard: Do you think race is a hot button issue as far as being able to talk about or…?

Cornblatt: You mean now?

Howard: Yes.

Cornblatt: It's not as bad as it was.

Howard: What about at the time of the riots?

Cornblatt: At the times of the riots it was a hot button issue? Yes.

Howard: Okay. You don't see like, the dialogue has been easier to talk about or, like, us having this conversation now probably wouldn't have been able to happen or existed at the time of the riots. You know stuff like that was needed in moving forward. In looking forward forty years, do you see us as a society getting closer as far as being able to discuss issues?

Cornblatt: Oh, I think that we are much closer now than we were forty years ago, absolutely. I don't think you have that huge animosity that you had that caused that the Detroit riots, and the Watts riots, and the Baltimore riots. I don't think we have that so much. We still have the difficulty of poverty; you know, but there's a lot of people trying to help that situation. Giving more opportunities to black people. You know, I've, I'm, for example the [Baltimore] Bar Association. We just had a meeting yesterday, at the Baltimore Bar Foundation, and we get requests for grants all the time. And the ones that we granted were the ones that were trying to help the poor people in the city. Such as, a Law Links program. Law Links is a program that brings in poor Inner City people to work in law firms as interns, to let them know what it's like to work in a real firm and encourage them to become professional people, that kind of thing.

Another thing we approve was a grant to help tenets—low income tenets—and the people who were being evicted from their homes to try to help them understand the process and they usually don't have a lawyer and we help donate money for a video to be produced to be shown in the courthouse to these people so they can understand what's going on and help themselves. You know, this is the kind of stuff that we're in to. So, and there's a lot of organizations now, I think that, where whites and blacks are working together to try to make things better. When it comes to these, BLEWS, B-L-E-W-S, you aware of that? Black and Jewish people formed an organization to again, help one another.

Howard: That's what it's all about.

Cornblatt: And I think you had that kind of thing all the way back forty years ago. There's much more of a consciousness that we're all in here together, we all need each other, and we need to work together to make a better society.

Howard: Do you have hope for Baltimore?

Cornblatt: Yes. I do. Sometimes I despair because of the, particularly the drug situation that seems to drag everything down and it's such a difficult problem. And the [Baltimore] Bar Association we did a study some years ago which showed that most of the problems in the city is drug-driven. We were successful in creating a 'Drug Court,' which is for the purpose of getting people into treatment as opposed to just throwing them in jail. It just doesn't work and its really not cost effective. So a lot of things are being done to try to help the situation and make the city better from a racial standpoint. No doubt about that.

Howard: Do you see any parallels between '68 and what's going on now—as far as the Vietnam War, the war in Iraq, those types of things?

Cornblatt: No. I don't think the situation now is not at all like it was in '68. You may have people protesting the war then and now, that's the same thing. But I don't think you have the

racial context that you had then. I don't think we're so much focused on race.

Howard: Okay, well, I'm done. I don't have any other questions… John…?

Schwallenberg: I just want to go back to a couple of quick things. Can you think of any areas in the city that were particularly hard hit by the riots?

Cornblatt: Oh yeah.

Schwallenberg: Can you name a few?

Cornblatt: Sure. Gay Street, for example. I remember driving up Gay Street and saying it looked like a wasteland. It looked like Berlin after the Second World War, you know. Or London after the Blitz—it looked horrible. And there were places around Baltimore that looked pretty bad—West Baltimore, too. I do remember Gay Street—that's what…sticks in my mind.

Schwallenberg: Can you think of anything the city or the state did immediately after the riots to try to help the city get back on its feet?

Cornblatt: I don't know precisely because I just don't remember. I'm sure they tried to do a whole lot. I can't give you any specifics. I just don't know

Schwallenberg: Besides BLEWS, can you think of any other things that came out of that time after the riots that led to healing processes?

Cornblatt: I'm not sure if that [BLEWS] actually came out of that time. I know there's, nowadays we have black churches and Jewish synagogues doing combined programs together. One visits the other in their places of worship conducting joint services together. I'm not sure that was ever done back in those days but things like that are going on. And it's really great.

Schwallenberg: Can you think of anything that we haven't asked you that you think would be somebody twenty years from now reading this interview might find useful in research or just in general?

Cornblatt: I can't think of anything offhand, except I would like to emphasize things are a lot better now than they were at the time of the riots and before, no doubt about that. That things are better. It's so difficult to, for those that did not live it, it's so hard to think what a segregated society is like. I mean, everything was separated. Segregation was everywhere! You couldn't go to the ball game, you know. Or a movie, anywhere. It was all segregation. And we growing up thought, "Well, maybe that's the natural course of things." Which of course, it wasn't. And, nowadays my kids and grandchildren can't conceive of a world that is that way. They all have…they all go to school with black people, Asian people, Hispanic people—you name it. And they think there's no reason that anybody should be separated—they would think it's ridiculous. They would think there was something wrong with us to have allowed that kind of society to exist.

Howard: Okay.

Schwallenberg: Okay, thank you for your time.

Cornblatt: Okay, good. I'm glad I could help.