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.

Interview with Frank Knott
Date of Interview: February 27, 2008
Interviewer: John Schwallenberg
Transcriber: John J. Schwallenberg

Schwallenberg: For the record could you state your full name.

Knott: Francis J. Knott

Schwallenberg: Thank You. And you're agreeable to this interview.

Knott: Yes I am.

Schwallenberg: OK**.** Mr. Knott what was your situation in the late 1960's around sixty-seven, sixty-eight? How old were you? Where did you live, go to school, work things of that nature?

Knott: Nineteen sixty-seven, sixty-eight I was a between my junior and senior year at Loyola College. And I was had transferred to the night school and was working fulltime for Henry A. Knott Remodeling Company.

Schwallenberg: Where did you live at the time? Were you on campus or…

Knott: No, Loyola College then wasn't a residential college.

Schwallenberg: Oh!

Knott: It was all commuter and I lived at the corner of Charles and Coldspring right across the street.

Schwallenberg: Oh wow! OK. Where did you do most of your shopping during that time?

Knott: Where did I do most of my shopping during that time? Probably on York Road, in the Govans area.

Schwallenberg: OK. Before the riots occurred, what types of interactions did you have with people of other races?

Knott: Significant. I was -- my brother and I had started an organization called Loyola Students for Social Action. At Loyola College which today is their major outreach program into the city and we had four hundred college students working in the inner city, working with adult literacy, with scouting programs. So we were in the city almost every day of every week working with people various races, mostly people of poverty.

Schwallenberg: Were any of your classmates different races?

Knott: Yes. Absolutely.

Schwallenberg: OK.

Knott: Hispanic, African-American, Asain.

Schwallenberg: What about where you were employed. Were there people of other races at work?

Knott: Yes very diverse. Family always had a diverse workforce.

Schwallenberg: OK good. How would you describe the racial mood in the city around the time or the riots or just before the riots?

Knott: Tense. Depended where you were. Neighborhoods were pretty separated at that time. You had middle income, segregated, you know, African-American communities; you had middle and upper income white communities; you had communities in poverty, both white and black in the city. But they were fairly segregated at that point in time. I guess that's how I would describe it.

Schwallenberg: Was there a sense that something might happen? That it needed just a spark or something or…

Knott: I mean, I spent a lot of time in the inner city and I, you know, there was tension. I…There are people today that say yes; but I not convinced back then any of us knew that something as significant was going to happen as happened. With the riots I don't … I'm convinced that if people could have predicted they would have been able, they probably would have chosen to do something about it.

Schwallenberg: Was there…You being white going down into black communities was there any sense of you being an outsider or a spy on anything of that nature or were you pretty well welcomed.

Knott: No. The thing that I found that most communities were very open and accepting of people. Especially if you were there treating people with dignity and looked to them as equals regardless of their income level. So I didn't see um I… In some cases I felt more welcome and safe in lower income communities than I often did in wealthier communities where people didn't look out for you. One of the things I learned when working in the inner city of Baltimore is that people who valued others would essentially give anything to protect that: People that they value. So I think that was a pretty good lesson to learn.

Schwallenberg: Oh wow.

Knott: At a very young age.

Schwallenberg: What do you remember about the assassination of Martin Luther King?

Knott: I, I remember being shocked. I remember wondering what was going to happen. That a person who was such an incredible leader and that offered such promise and hope was being murdered. And I thought that, you know, tensions certainly were going to get worse. And so, you know, my recollection of it was that there were a number of us that were concerned beyond the event itself; but what the event was going to trigger and a lot of disappointment. Because I, you know, was concerned that we were going to be in an age after that where people would lose heart and believe that the system of laws and justice weren't really working for them and that they would resort to other, other means.

Schwallenberg: How did you hear specifically about the assassination? Was it television, radio?

Knott: I think it was first radio, if I remember correctly. A long time ago.

Schwallenberg: Well yeah I understand. How did you here about the riots starting?

Knott: Well I had a very interesting perspective because I was, we were heavily involved in West and East Baltimore with hundreds of students so and we were very involved with civil rights leaders. So we were almost from the moment it started we were on the phone and were literally working with civil rights leaders in the streets trying to get people that we knew off the streets. At the same time I was also working and it was our company was actually employed be insurance companies to access buildings that were damaged. So I was also seeing it from that perspective. And I'd also just been admitted to the National Guard so we were because we had not gone through basic training we weren't deployed. But we were meeting with people in the Guard about what their experiences were. So I had a rather interesting perspective from both a company that was actually evaluating these properties and watching the damage that was being done, as well as working in the inner city trying to get people off the streets and who we had known for a long time and um. And felt that the political leaders were really handling it in an extremely poor way. They probably accelerated the conflagration rather than dissipating it.

Schwallenberg: Can you give an example where you think that?

Knott: I think that Spiro Agnew was the classic example: That the day that he called all the civil rights leaders into the offices down on Preston Street, where people had been out virtually forty-eight hours trying to get people in and working their butts off trying to get people off the streets. And he sat there and just, having done nothing himself. Had just castigated every single one of those people, showed them no respect whatsoever. Did not ask for their help, told them what they were going to do treated them as if they were his servants or his minions. And, I think, set the, set the process back significantly. And probably, also set his political career on course to get into national office. But at the expense of a lot individuals, probably some lives and a lot of damaged property.

Schwallenberg: Were you present at the event where he was chastising?

Knott: Yes.

Schwallenberg: OK. Did you walk out on it or you stayed for the whole thing and listened?

Knott: I walked out with some other people.

Schwallenberg: OK.

Knott: Stayed long enough to know that I didn't want to hear anymore.

Schwallenberg: What were they saying as they were leaving, the people? What were they saying about…

Knott: I think most people were in shock. They, they just couldn't believe that people were um that… That had been that committed, that involved, trying to reduce violence, that a political leader in the midst of such a crisis would act as an incendiary. I mean I think people just walked out in disbelief. They, they…Some people just couldn't talk. They just didn't know what to say.

Schwallenberg: What were the expectations going into the meeting? What did what were people thinking that was going to happen?

Knott: I mean, again, it was a long time ago.

Schwallenberg: Yeah I understand.

Knott: But I think that, as I recall, the expectation that this was going to be a meeting where the Governor was going to sit down with people who had connections in these communities and was going to try to work out a plan where we would to try to find a way to reduce the violence. And instead, you know, just the opposite happened.

Schwallenberg: How do you feel D'Alesandro handled things from, from his position?

Knott: I, my perspective on that is that I think he invested…Most people felt that he had personally invested his whole being in trying to resolve this and um whatever efforts he he was making were just being um maybe created a null and void situation between the Governor's actions and what the Mayor was trying to do. So I would say that everybody was in unknown territory, there was no road map to try, to try…Nobody had ever experienced this before.

Schwallenberg: Right, right.

Knott: And, you know, I'd say that he had an excellent relationship with the people and I think…Wasn't George Gelston, the um

Schwallenberg: Ahh,hum.

Knott: The commander of the National Guard and I think he had…Gelston, I, think, George Gelston had an incredible relationship with the community and I, think, did an amazing job. And, I think, he also worked well with, with D'Alesandro. And I don't think you could have found a more committed person. I know that it took a great toll personally on the mayor. From that point forward probably one of the reasons he didn't run for office again.

Schwallenberg: How did you, how did you hear about the riots starting, getting started? Do you recall?

Knott: I think it was phone calls. Phone calls from people we had been working with in the city. And then we turned on the news and began to see what was going on. Then we got involved, almost immediately, in trying to figure out how to help stem the tide.

Schwallenberg: In, in an interview with Mayor D'Alesandro and it may of been in another interview or two, he had mentioned that there was a strong belief if they could have, if things would have held out until Sunday when the ministers could have talked to their congregations and churches and things that this could have been avoided. What are your feelings on that or your thoughts?

Knott: I know that, that was a feeling I just don't know. I mean, I think there certainly the ministers had a huge, huge influence on the overall population. And if there could have been, you know…If wishes were fishes you know.

Schwallenberg: Right, right.

Knott: Hindsight is always twenty-twenty. But, you know, that wasn't in the cards, from what I could see.

Schwallenberg: Did you watch any television coverage or anything of the riots or were you too involved in…?

Knott: I didn't have time to watch television. I was trying to…I'm sure I saw some newscasts but I was more concentrated on what um…I mean, I did see repeat coverage of the Governor's fine words. But I, I don't recall T. V. coverage per se because I was so involved. Both working to try to get people off plus we were getting, from a company stand point, we getting called by every insurance company in town trying to deal with the properties that they, that were damaged.

Schwallenberg: You talked about the properties that were damaged. What can you tell me about that?

Knott: It was very interesting. People thought that there was a randomness to the damage and what I found from....and I originally thought that until a number of insurance companies asked us to do an assessment with other contractors of what was really going on and what properties were damaged. And what was striking to me was that, although it may have started randomly, once it got going it was very clear that there were certain targets that I would say were retribution targets. And the three most damaged properties were: the corner dry cleaner, the corner grocery store and liquor stores and in that order. I think well… I think it was in that order. And when we began to look at having been heavily involved in the inner city, I was very much aware of the complaints consistently in poverty populations that the dry cleaners in those areas were taking laundry in. People would pay for their laundry on lay a way plans. If they didn't make the lay a way plan in thirty days, even if they were ninety percent paid, they'd sell the laundry. You know they'd and, you know, the liquor stores is where you'd cash your check the bank, instead of using the bank, which there weren't many of. And they were taking egregious percentages of people's pay checks. And the corner grocery stores were charging, you know, they'd give you credit but then they'd charge you these unbelievable interest rates. Twenty five cents on a dollar worth of goods and three dollars worth of goods and you just never got ahead. So there was a lot of usury going on in all three of those. I found it fascinating that they were hit, but yet you go in some neighborhoods where, where properties were significantly damaged and in the midst of those you would find a property totally, totally clean. Not one brick out of place; not one window broken. And our family business had a…One of our headquarters was located right in around 24th and Greenmount and a huge, huge two story glass windows. Not one piece of glass was touched. Every building around us was. And there was a…we discovered that had been a cordon of neighborhood people that had protected the building. But the company had an incredible relationship with that community. People worked for the company; people looked out for the property. You know they had a very tight relationship. I found very interesting going throughout the city was that where people treated others with respect those community people, even when people from the outside were rioting, would protect those people that looked out, that respected them and took care of them. So there was, there was some interesting value decisions being made by people on the street.

Schwallenberg: Did those businesses necessarily, like in your case, a cordon of people protected your building. That a lot of them, from what I've seen or talked to people, had "Soul Brother" and things on their windows or something as a, as a saying: Don't mess with this building it's OK. Was that always the case or some cases they just…the community just knew?

Knott: The community just knew. I mean there …I would say that the likelihood was if you had a good relationship with the community your building was…the chances of your building in good shape were pretty good. That was my experience.

Schwallenberg: Did any of the community, after that, talk about why they picked on certain buildings or just from…

Knott: As we went from throughout the city it became very clear in our work, you know, on the ground in community organization that as the crowd, although the crowds weren't… there was no organized effort, that I could see, or any of the people we were working with, see that had, you know, that premeditated what they were going to do. It was very clear that in the heat of the moment people knew in their minds who the enemy was. That had messed with them for years and, and kept them down under their feet and they just decided who they were going to get back at.

Schwallenberg: Did you survey all areas that were affected or were just on the Eastside or Westside?

Knott: Both sides: East and West Baltimore and the patterns were the same.

Schwallenberg: What were your impressions of the neighborhoods that were affected besides that which was the big thing? Any other impressions that you had?

Knott: Well I mean you had…there was a distinct difference between the East and Westside. Eastside being…had more stable family situations where the Westside didn't. It had been more migratory whereas the Eastside was more people who had traditionally been in Baltimore, even had worked for generations for families who had lived in the East Baltimore area before they had moved out to other areas. So there was a big difference between East and Westside that way. There weren't as many solid roots on the Westside as the Eastside. And so my sense was, and I don't recall now but my sense was at that time…My recollection is that there was much more broad based damage on the Westside than the Eastside but that may be just a perception I have. It's been so long I haven't looked at so.

Schwallenberg: Right, understandable. There…from what we've seen there seems to be, the one area of the city that, that wasn't hit that was a largely lower, middle income black community: Cherry Hill was not hit very hard, if at all really, one or two incidents. Is there any thoughts on why you think it may have been that that area was kind of spared any?

Knott: I think first of all geographically it's isolated. It's separated so it may it very hard to spread. You know, the people would have to go across bridges, you know, and…

Schwallenberg: Right.

Knott: …across the water and everything to get there. Secondly it was a very contained community and so most of the people live in Cherry Hill even the businesses in Cherry Hill were people from the black community that were, you know, the leaders there the church leaders: all them were part of that community. So I would say that the Cherry Hill area was both. Its preservation was or lack of damage was the result of it's isolation from the rest of the city and its makeup. That the people who ran Cherry Hill were the people who lived there whereas in these other parts of the city the people who ran those parts of the city didn't really live there. The people who really controlled the assets in the other

parts of the city they were people from outside and coming in to just, you know, generate their revenue.

Schwallenberg: Did you see any violence during the time? Physical violence?

Knott: Other than pushing and shoving, no I didn't. I didn't, you know the people were running down the street but I didn't see any people being beat up or whatever.

Schwallenberg: Any arrests? You see them arresting people?

Knott: Yeah, the police were pretty, pretty out there and they, they were, they were being pretty aggressive about who they were arresting. So, I mean, I although they certainly weren't doing it the way other cities were at that time. I'd say Baltimore stood out in its… in compared to other cities in how reserved it was and how they dealt with people who were breaking the law.

Schwallenberg: Yeah we had looked at Newark in 1967 and twenty six people had been killed. Which is very terrible obviously and Baltimore it was bad it was six people. But it's still….and Baltimore being a lot bigger than Newark…

Knott: Right

Schwallenberg: …to only have six…

Knott: That's right.

Schwallenberg: ….was. What do you, how do you think the National Guard handled themselves and the military?

Knott: They seemed, I mean, I…They seemed to handle themselves pretty well and I'd say that's the result of George Gelston. I mean, I think, that George Gelston was a very savvy street wise commander. And, I mean, I can remember working with him, you know, even after the riots and he could, he could go down and have a drink with key civil rights leaders and key, you know, even some of the more radical groups. And, you know, they could be demonstrating and, you know. They um….I'll never forget: It was…I forget when this was but there was a big demonstration around Horizon House on Calvert Street and… this is after the riots, I'm sure. But I think he was Police Commissioner, and they were going to do that create a ruckus and stop traffic and all Gelston did was… George he just diverted traffic around, away from the Horizon House. And at the end of the day when the ruckus didn't occur he went and had a coffee with the guys, a beer after it was all over with, with the people who set the demonstration up. I mean, you know, and they said: Well I guess you got us. You know the… But he had, he just had an incredible understanding of, of how to deal with these situations. So I think that his leadership played a huge role in the way the police, well the way, later with the police but how the National Guard operated. I'm not…I will tell you that there were a lot of my friends who didn't feel that they were well trained for this that they weren't sure what

they were supposed to do. But I don't think any National Guard troops were really trained for this kind of duty.

Schwallenberg: How did, how did your life and activities those things you were doing change after the riots? Or did they change?

Knott: Well I, I really don't think they changed that much. Well, I mean, I got married we were more committed than ever to making sure that the neighborhoods we lived in integrated. We came very committed to trying to have our family involved in making sure neighborhoods were able to lift themselves up and became very active. So I'd say, you know, the commitments and activities that we had before the riots were just more intense after the riots. They didn't get dissuaded. They just… I think that we became more committed to what was needed to make sure something like that didn't happen again.

Schwallenberg: Did any of the black folks treat you differently after that?

Knott: Not at all. I mean I think that, I mean, unless you're talking about people like Rap Brown or… There were certainly, you know the Panthers, the Black Panthers and people like that and CORE and people like that just wanted to radicalize everything. But for the most part, you know, black community leaders were extremely respectful and appreciative of people who wanted to work in partnership with them to solve problems. and treated them as peers as we hoped that they would treat us. So I'd say that…I mean to this day I, you know there are people whose who are sons and daughters of some of the civil rights leaders who I worked with when I was eighteen, nineteen years old and, you know, we talk about those circumstances. As a matter of fact, I sit on boards with some of them. So I don't see….The major change I see in, in Baltimore and other cities is before the riots there was a huge, huge focus and commitment on educational excellence in the schools in the city in the black community and the number of civil rights leaders and people with higher, you know, higher education degrees making sure that families were focused in that area. You know, for some reason, in this city and many others, that whole, across this country, the focus on the value of education, in my view has been lost. I'm not sure why and it's across the country broadly. It's just not in, you know, the black community; it's across the board. I'm not sure what that has to…I don't think that has anything to do with the riots. It has to do with what has happened over the last thirty, forty years. The way people look at economies.

Schwallenberg: How do you think the city in general has changed?

Knott: Well from those days, I think it has changed substantially for the better. We have…My wife and I worked for many, many years after that on many, many of the major initiatives on the Inner Harbor and a lot of the neighborhood revitalization programs, the homesteading programs, the weatherization program, workforce training programs. And I think the city, if you step back and look where we were forty years ago the income levels, the number of neighborhoods that have been revitalized throughout the city, the commercial vitality of downtown, the expansion of downtown has been nothing

short of dramatic. So I'd say the city is in much better shape than it was back in those days. And there are certainly major advances that have been made in terms of whose in leadership. All we have to do is look at the city leadership now. And you wouldn't have see that thirty years ago.

Schwallenberg: Can you think of any organizations or community groups that came out of the riots as a direct result or any city initiatives or anything?

Knott: You're really testing my memory now. Well yeah: the City Fair. The City Fair it was absolute…It was felt that….My wife and I wee heavily involved in the origination of that. The City Fair was the most memorable one, I think, because no other city has been able to replicate that. But it was felt that if we could bring neighborhoods together working with each other in a common place that people would have a much better understanding of each other. And the very first City Fair which was in Charles Center, if I recall, was a huge wind that came up and blew the tents down. And it was fascinating to watch. Community, the wealthiest communities and the poorest communities in booths next to each other, helping each other rebuild. And it was just a very, very magic. It was a horrible weekend in terms of weather; but the spirit of that City Fair pointed to the future of what made the City Fair so incredible for so many years. And they're people from all over the country the Urban League and others that have studied that City Fair and tried to figure out how anybody, how we ever pulled it off. But Bob Embry and Mayor Schaefer and um the Hillmans and Sally Michael and a whole Ed Cane and he's no longer around. I mean there's just a huge number of people that were involved in making that happen. And um Don Schaefer, you know, is certainly owed a lot of credit for and D' Alesandro for making sure that happened. And I think Bob Embry was, Bob Embry was I think head of Housing and Community Development at that time. And it's probably the preeminent example, I think, of a very unconventional initiative that really brought communities together. I have believed for a long time that's one of the reasons we did not end up having more problems at similar levels for years to come.

Schwallenberg: Now what was the…how did that or what was the genesis? Was it people just sitting around a table thinking of ways or …?

Knott: Yeah, I mean it was a community, it was a community based idea and I think it emanated out of the Department of Housing and Community Development**.** Sandy Hillman was the key person there. She was on the staff there and she and um Gar and a number of the people around Schaefer that were um that were committed to rebuilding the city and it was very neighborhood based. They basically pulled together a number of us who were involved in. I was heavily involved in the whole Govans community and as my wife was. Ed Kane was from the Govans Community and he became one of the key leaders. And they pulled about thirty of us together to see if we could pull it off. And, and it happened. As a matter of fact a lot of the people who were involved in doing that were the ones around the Harbor Place campaign. So, twenty some years later so.

Schwallenberg: I just want to go back to a couple things just to make sure I've covered everything that um. The Agnew, the Agnew incident with the community leaders you said or did you say you saw again later on television or you saw any coverage of that?

Knott: I saw some coverage of it.

Schwallenberg: How…

Knott: Not much.

Schwallenberg: You think it was balanced and fair from what you could tell?

Knott: I'm not sure could be objective about that because…

Schwallenberg: Right.

Knott: I mean I'm not sure how you could put what he did in a positive light. So I'd say that anything that exposed the Governor for what he did. You know my own attitude is that Governor Agnew should his head should hang in shame forever for what he did that day.

Schwallenberg: Some people had said that they that the report what he was going to say was released before. It was released to the media actually before it even happened. Did you hear anything?

Knott: I don't know. I have no idea.

Schwallenberg: OK. As far as the National Guard. You had said you eventually got into the Guard yourself.

Knott: I was actually admitted into the Guard right around that time. Because I hadn't been through Basic Training we weren't we were not allowed to be deployed.

Schwallenberg: Did they introduce any type of riot training after that to try to…?

Knott: Yes they did.

Schwallenberg: OK. Do you think based on the guys that were involved in the riots did they say the training was kind of realistic and useful to them?

Knott: Don't know that I recall.

Schwallenberg: OK. Is there anything else that I haven't talked about that you think is pertinent?

Knott: Can't think of anything.

Schwallenberg: OK. Good. Thank you for your time.

Knott: OK. You're welcome.