

Sparrows Point – then and now

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) May 26, 2022



I came to Baltimore in 1970 to work at the Regional Planning Council, a predecessor of today's Baltimore Metropolitan Council. My work was as part of a team analyzing the demographic and economic trends shaping the region consisting of Baltimore City and the five surrounding counties.

As part of our studies, we tracked the major employers that played a key role in the regional economy. Standing out above them all was Bethlehem Steel, with its steel mill and associated shipbuilding activities at Sparrows Point in southeast Baltimore County.

At its peak "the Point," as it was known locally, employed an estimated 31,000 workers. In the 1950s, the Sparrows Point facility was the largest steel-producing plant in the world. The mill had produced the steel for ships used in both World Wars; its products became structural elements of iconic architectural and engineering works, including the Empire State Building and the Golden Gate and Chesapeake Bay bridges.

Bethlehem Steel also was responsible for building local communities. Dundalk and Turners Station were developed in response to the need to house the workers at the plant and their families. The steel mill provided solid, middle-class jobs for those willing to take the often-dangerous assignments around the blast furnaces and other parts of the factory.

It was often the case that a worker was there, following in the footsteps of a father, an uncle or other extended family members.

Economic changes

But, as we analyzed the data, we saw that the U.S. economy was moving towards more service sector activity and less goods-producing industries. The domestic steel industry, in particular, was being buffeted by competition from foreign producers.

By the early 1980s I remember attending meetings with the Greater Dundalk Chamber of Commerce to discuss prospects for the Point. Thousands of workers were then on furlough. The question was whether those jobs were coming back. Not all of them did.

Over the years the downward trend continued. By the end of 2002, only 3,300 were still employed at Bethlehem Steel. Ultimately the company filed for bankruptcy. Thousands of retirees lost their pensions and saw their promised health care benefits vanish.

There followed another decade of dizzying transactions, transferring the mill property from one entity to another, that finally, in 2012, led to the end of steelmaking at Sparrows Point.

A new presence

Some years later I attended an open house hosted by the new owners of the real estate, operating under the name of Tradepoint Atlantic. From my vantage point what I saw appeared to be a barren moonscape.

Fast-forwarding to 2022, it's quite a different story. Today the site, still with excellent access to deep-water channels, along with strategic rail and road connections, is home to Tradepoint Atlantic's 3,300-acre global logistics and distribution center. Its more than 20 tenants include Amazon, Under Armour, Home Depot, Floor & Décor, FedEx and Volkswagen.

Among recently announced additions is Niagara Bottling, one of the nation's leading private beverage manufacturers, which will complete a 600,000 square foot manufacturing facility; McCormick & Company's plans for a 1.8-million square foot distribution center; BMW's announced opening of its vehicle distribution center; and United Safety Technology's plans for a \$350 million facility designed to increase healthcare supply chain resiliency and creating a projected 2,000 jobs.

By 2025, Tradepoint Atlantic is estimating that it will have created 17,000 jobs statewide, generating \$3 billion in annual economic activity.

Sparrows Point legacy

Even with all of this recent success, Aaron Tomarchio, senior vice president, corporate affairs for Tradepoint Atlantic, on behalf of his company wants to honor the Sparrows Point legacy, remembering its history as an industrial powerhouse. Working in partnership with the Baltimore Museum of Industry (BMI), Tradepoint Atlantic has created a multi-year endowment to fund the Sparrows Point Legacy Project and create a permanent exhibit to tell the story of "the Point."

That story will be told in an exhibit, "Fire and Shadow: The Rise and Fall of Bethlehem Steel." According to the museum's website, "Fire and Shadow" includes vivid photographs, moving first-person narratives, original artifacts, and an opportunity to explore Bethlehem Steel objects in three dimensions through augmented reality."

The BMI will be hosting a special event on June 5th to mark 10 years since the end of steelmaking at Sparrows Point. Photographer J.M. Giordano will present his collection of images, "Shuttered." The curator of the exhibit, historian Deborah Weiner, will lead a tour of "Fire and Shadow" and there will be a dedication ceremony of the Bethlehem Steel Legacy Garden.

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