

Gans Centennial Events in Baltimore, Maryland

By Colleen Aycock

A century after his death, Veterans of Ring 101, citizens of Baltimore, and government officials celebrated the achievements of boxer Joe Gans with various proclamations and three days of events in the boxer's hometown this past August 8-10, 2010.



Earl Savage (former MD boxing commissioner), Colleen Aycock, Darien Gans, Queen and Gene Wagstaff at the Pratt Library.

reflections of Joe Gans, an introduction of all visitors who had come to pay homage to the Baltimorean, and a tribute on saxophone by musician Akilah Bell. All congregational hymns were songs sung at Gans' funeral: "Jesus Lover of My Soul," "Jesus Loves Even Me," and "Nearer My God to Thee." Following the service, Dorothy Dougherty, Church Historian, invited guests to tour the Archival Center at 1205 Etting St. which displays the church's historic papers and artifacts.

Sunday afternoon, the Eubie Blake Center hosted a jazz concert by Chas DePaolo of Bluestopia, a blend of hard rock and blues music. The theme for the event was a "Livication of Joe Gans and Henrietta Vinton Davis." Davis, was freeborn in Baltimore on August 25, 1860 and became a Shakespearean actor and friend of Marcus Garvey.

Monday night I spoke about Gans at the Towson Library on York Rd., and Tuesday night I spoke at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, the oldest public library in the United States. I began research on Gans here in the basement of the Pratt several years ago, so I felt I had come full circle by returning there to share our ongoing research. The thrill of these lecture/book signings comes from meeting interesting people who share some connection with Gans' past. I am never disappointed. At these lectures, I heard stories about Eubie Blake's connection with Gans, met a man who told me about Gans' bouts on the steamboats (which we had not known prior), and met many of the eleven brothers, and their sons, of one of the Gans' clan (it was a male heavy group!) Listening to them, as they sat around a table sharing their stories of their famous uncle, was a historian's dream-come-true. I say "of the Gans' clans" because I heard from the grand-daughter of one of Gans' daughters. Yes, now we can identify Gans' daughter by name and her birth date: Gertrude Gans. While the effort to put together events like the Gans Centennial seems overwhelming at first, the results are spectacular, bringing together people from all corners of the world who can add valuable pieces to Gans' life puzzle.

Tuesday, August 10, was a sad, but glorious day, sunny and Baltimore steamy. Members of the Veteran Boxers Association, Ring 101, hosted the Graveside Centennial Tribute at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Westport, about five miles from the Sharp Street Church. Two veteran boxers have worked throughout the years to maintain the grave, Gene Wagstaff and Earl, “the pearl,” Savage. Former President of Ring 101 Frank Gilbert sought to restore the grave, originally, and Gene and Earl have kept it mowed since. Sadly, these men are no longer capable of maintaining the grave, so it remains to be seen what will happen to it in the future. But today, it is beautiful spot, befitting of the great world icon.



Derrick Pinkney and his brother with the turn-of-the-century hearse. Photo by Bill Tabron, Afro-American, Baltimore.



Earl Savage, Joe Sanchez (President of Ring 101), and Gene Wagstaff at Gans' grave.

Driving his historic hearse carrying a symbolic coffin to its rest at Gans’ grave marker was Derrick Pinkney, dressed in turn-of-the-century wear. (Derrick, who owns Comfort Carriages, donated one of his historic carriages for the event.) A floral wreath by Ring 101 was situated on top of the coffin. Six honorary pall bearers were led by Marvin McDowell of UMAR Boxing, Baltimore and Darien Gans (a definite Gans’ look-alike) from New Jersey.

Boxing trainer Gene Wagstaff opened the ceremony with Scripture from Second Timothy 4:7, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” Pastor Del Hinton of Sharp Street Methodist gave the Invocation. Honorary Officiate the Bishop Joseph Gans of Washington, D.C. , namesake relative of Joe Gans and Overseer of Gospel Union Church of Christ, delivered the Opening Remarks. Ring President Joe R. Sanchez, Sr. presented the floral tribute, Award-winning saxophonist Lou Tibbs played solos “Nearer My God to Thee” and “Amazing Grace,” a member of the Maryland Governor’s office proclaimed the day in Honor of Joe Gans, and Pastor Thomas Jones gave the Closing Prayer.

Following the graveside tribute, a small band of devotees went to Argyle Street (the location of the home of Gans’ mother and where Gans died) to watch as the city placed an honorary (temporary for one year) red street sign on the corner: “Joe Gans Way.” The street is near Perkins Square where H.L. Mencken

once mentioned that a statue of Gans should be erected. In 2008 when I spoke at the Reginald Lewis Museum, no one in the audience knew the whereabouts of Perkins Square, but on a trip this past February, I saw that the square (where Joe Gans was said to have boxed as a boy) had been saved and renamed “Heritage Crossing.”

Afterwards, Ring President Joe Sanchez invited everyone who participated or attended the services to a fish dinner at a nearby restaurant, generously hosting the celebration himself.

It was an awe-inspiring day with so many new friendships made and pieces of information shared. One thing was noticed at the gravesite. The street pointing to Gans’ grave marker was “Nevada Street.” How interesting, in light of the fact that no other street in the area carried a state’s name. “Could that have been named for the famous Goldfield fight?” someone asked. There are still so many mysteries to be solved in this new century.

One thing is certain. If you ever find yourself in Baltimore, you need to visit the historic places of Gans' lifetime. It is possible they won't survive these tough economic times. I recommend: Sharp Street Church and its Archival Center, Etting and Dolphin (410-523-7200), 1114 Etting (the unmarked remains of Gans' boxing gym), Argyle Street (not the new homes but what is left of the original row houses contemporary with Gans), Heritage Crossing, the old Perkins Square, and the pergola under which the young toughs, including Gans, fought, the famous theater in the neighborhood, and finally, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Westport. (Hopefully while there, you will meet Sam Watson, who is called LUKE, who keeps 45 of his relatives' graves and whose grandfather cut the graves with pick and shovel and who stored the bodies during the winter in the cold cellar on site when the ground was frozen. That storage building has lost its roof and is rapidly decaying from when I first saw it.

Hopefully, the centennial events this past August will encourage Baltimoreans to remember their native son. Maybe one day, someone will be generous enough to erect a statue of Joe Gans in the Monumental City.



left Photo: Historic Perkins Square, in old west Baltimore, re-named Heritage Crossing



Upper Photo: Colleen Aycock with "keepers of the graves," Gene Wagstaff left and "Luke" Watson right.



Lower Photo: Honorary Officiate Bishop Joseph Gans from Washington, DC