

# The Great Pepper Hill Raid of 1955:

## The Bar Raid that Broke the Baltimore Police

By Ben Egerman  
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On Saturday, October 1st, 1955, a little after 11PM, the Baltimore Police Department's vice squad entered the Pepper Hill Club—the city's main gay bar at the time—and arrested everyone inside. Their stated reason for the arrests was overcrowding and “evidence of homosexuality” at the bar. It was, according to the *Baltimore Sun*, the largest nightclub raid in the city's history as 162 people were arrested and brought to the city jail.<sup>1</sup>

The raid didn't go as the police might have expected. In a raucous trial where the head of the vice squad complained that arrestees “seem to regard this whole incident as a great big joke,” an incensed judge dropped the charges against all but five defendants, saying police lacked cause to arrest patrons for being at the bar. Within days, police had been condemned by one of Baltimore's delegates to the State Assembly and by another judge, who said that “police had no right to enter a public place and make a mass arrest” and dismissed the charges against the remaining defendants.<sup>2</sup>

The raid accelerated concerns and criticisms of the BPD's vice squad as corrupt, overbroad, and repeatedly violating Baltimoreans' civil liberties. Police leadership rushed to enact a planned reorganization of the department that abolished the vice squad and promised to investigate officers connected to bribes. A few months later, Baltimore's delegation to the State Assembly ‘invited’ the police Commissioner and the leadership of the vice squad to answer questions at the State Capital and describe what “steps must be taken to insure [sic] that such a raid will not happen again.”<sup>3</sup>

The rash of investigations that followed would wind up costing the police chief and many of the officers involved their jobs, and put the sergeant who led the raid behind bars. For the city's gays (well, some of them—more on that in a bit), the aftermath of the raid was nothing less than a sea change, as police retreated from mass raids of gay and lesbian bars for the next decade. As

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<sup>1</sup> “Raid on night club brings 162 arrests.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 3 October 1955, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Makarovich, Michal. *Oral History conducted March 20, 1993. Interview subject: David Lehman*. p. 26; “4th District legislator raps mass arrests at night club.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 4 October 1955, p. 36.; “Judge hits police in club raid.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 23 November 1955, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> “Hepbron warns force against covering for organized crime.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 12 October 1955, p. 1; “Pepper Hill hearing due: police ‘invited’ to Annapolis to explain raid.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 2 February 1956, p. 8

one former patron put it, “Everything that you can do in a gay bar these days stems from that arrest, because when all those people were thrown out of being convicted a new era began.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Bar:

**“The Pepper Hill was *the* gay bar in Baltimore City for approximately 16 years.” -Bob Eckert<sup>5</sup>**

From its opening in 1953 until shortly before its closing in 1969, the Pepper Hill Club was Baltimore’s largest and most popular gay bar, and the center of gay social life for a large segment of the city’s gay community. Located on the outskirts of “the Block,” the city’s still-running vice district, it was hardly inconspicuous, being noted in ‘vice reports’ commissioned by the US military as a ‘homo hangout’ from 1959 onwards.<sup>6</sup> While not the city’s oldest gay bar during this period (the Senator Bar, on Howard street, had been open several years earlier), its size and popularity was unmatched until more bars began opening in the 1960s. And yet, this popularity was only for a certain part of the city’s gay and lesbian communities:

**“ I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was a racist bar. It didn’t allow any black people in.” -Jim Becker<sup>7</sup>**

It is certainly unsurprising that when the Pepper Hill Club opened in the early 1950s that it, like most of the city’s white bars and restaurants, refused to serve Black patrons. But as the Civil Rights movement found success in challenging segregation both in Baltimore and nationwide through disruptive public pressure campaigns, the Pepper Hill stubbornly held on. In fact, even after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 outlawed explicit racial discrimination, a bar started by the bartenders of the Pepper Hill Club was sued and found guilty by the state for its policy of refusing to serve food to Black patrons.<sup>8</sup> Once again, they had plenty of company: such policies were common, and the segregation of the city’s bars was a reality for decades. Yet,

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<sup>4</sup> “Big police shakeup is developing.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 5 November 1957, p. 40.; “Ex-Police to be tried.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 3 October 1959, p. 18.; “Hepbron dies; former police head.” *The Sun*, 29 March 1979, p. C1. Makarovich, Michal. *Oral history conducted November 4, 1992. Interview subjects: Duane Schline, Bob Eckert, Reg Diffenderfer*. p. 37

<sup>5</sup> (Makarovich, 1992. p. 9)

<sup>6</sup> American Social Health Association. “Commercialized Prostitution Conditions in Baltimore, Maryland and environs (Fort Meade) (Bainbridge Naval Base).” Baltimore Studies Archives, University of Baltimore, June 1959, [https://archivesspace.ubalt.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/2358](https://archivesspace.ubalt.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/2358).

<sup>7</sup> Egerman, Ben. *Oral history conducted July 21, 2022. Interview subjects: Jim Becker*.

<sup>8</sup> “Bias case is lost by eating place: Monument St. restaurant ruled guilty by state.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 10 February 1966, p. C20.

while some cities have a history of gay establishments rejecting segregation, Baltimore's story was quite the opposite.

There certainly were Black gay and lesbian bars during the 1950s and 1960s. These bars, however, tended to be short-lived affairs, and were quite often only attracting a gay or lesbian crowd after certain hours or only on certain days. Although reports such as those requested by the military sometimes made note of them, as one did of Tillie's in East Baltimore in 1943, sadly the names of the vast majority of these bars and the story of what they meant to Black queer people at the time appear to be lost to history.<sup>9</sup>

**"It was like the closet door—even though I didn't know the word closet—just blew right off the hinges that very night. I walked in there and I knew that my life had, I mean, seriously, I knew that my life had changed." -Jim Becker<sup>10</sup>**

It's hard to overstate the meaning of spaces like the Pepper Hill Club to gays and lesbians during the mid-20th century. Historians Jeffrey Escoffier and Christopher Mitchel describe bars at this time as locations where one could be open and create a shared culture, with its own politics and forms of resistance, with other queer people in a 'quasi-public' space, adding, "For gay men, they were the only alternative to ephemeral spaces that were almost completely sexual and devoid of social interaction. For lesbians, bars represented vital gathering places, since women's access to non-domestic space was often restricted by law and by custom."<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that in interviews, patrons mentioned that about a quarter of the bar's customers were women, most of whom were lesbians.

These spaces created a venue where the usual rules of gender and sexuality could be suspended and one could revel in one's own and others' queerness. From the musicians—first a gay piano player performing sing-a-longs of classic showtunes, later a lesbian rockabilly trio—to the decor, to the mannerisms of patrons, the Pepper Hill Club was awash in queerness and campiness. For those like Jim, quoted above, who had never known spaces existed where they could be unguarded in their queerness, walking into a gay bar was nothing short of a revelation.

## The Leadup:

**"We all assumed it was some sort of new regime and they wanted to make a statement: 'wow, big raid.'" - David Lehman<sup>12</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> American Social Hygiene Association. "Commercialized Prostitution Conditions in Baltimore, Maryland." Baltimore Studies Archives, University of Baltimore, October 1943, [https://archivesspace.ubalt.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/2357](https://archivesspace.ubalt.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/2357).

<sup>10</sup> (Egerman, 2022)

<sup>11</sup> Escoffier, Jeffrey, and Christopher Mitchel. "Bars and the Queer Economy." OUT History, 19 June 2017, <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/queering-the-economy/essay>. Accessed 15 May 2025.

<sup>12</sup> (Makarovich, 1993. p. 21)

By the time of the Pepper Hill raid, 1955 had already been a banner year for BPD repression against queer people. On New Year's Eve, police raided a private party at the house of a Black city public school teacher, finding him, his white partner, and an interracial group of about a dozen other men "dancing together and kissing," arresting all of them. Two men, both professors at an HBCU in Delaware, had their charges dropped, but lost their jobs anyway. Nine others were convicted.<sup>13</sup>

Following coverage of that raid, a "concerned citizen" left police an anonymous tip on a group of young Black men, aged 17-22, who were hosting similar 'all-male' parties in West Baltimore. One of these parties was raided, and a dozen young men charged with sodomy and perverted sex practices. The young men had all attended the same high school and called themselves "the Friendship Club."<sup>14</sup>

While these raids are notable for taking place at private residences, the more common and frequent forms of police repression were also ongoing: in 1953, police raided a smaller gay bar, Paul's Tavern, and arrested 19 people, after which its liquor license was suspended for a month. That same year, police made a sting of men cruising in the bathroom of the central Enoch Pratt Free Library.<sup>15</sup>

These raids weren't confined to the city's queer population, either. Throughout the period, police frequently made arrests at the many strip clubs on "The Block" for indecent performances and other 'morals charges.' They also targeted the seedier bookstores in the district, testing their ability to arrest those selling pornographic materials. At a time where the suburban, heterosexual nuclear family was being idealized to the point of worship, suppressing the seedier, sexually forward, and immoral aspects of life in Baltimore City was high on the BPD's priority list.<sup>16</sup>

### **"Most From Washington"**

This was not, however, the only reason for the police's aggressive moves against queers in the mid-1950s—if local attitudes treated repressing 'sexual deviants' as a matter of civic pride, national headlines elevated it to a matter of national security. These events all took place at the height of the Lavender Scare, the period of intense surveillance and repression of gays and lesbians in the federal government, and its imprint is clear.

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<sup>13</sup> "9 On Trial in Vice Case." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 19 January 1955, p. 9.; "Two Professors win freedom." *Afro American* [Washington, DC], 22 January 1955, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> "'The Friendship Club,' all-male teen-age sex group, smashed." *Afro-American* [Baltimore, MD], 5 February 1955, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> "71 Arrested in two raids by vice squad." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 19 January 1953, p. 26.; "Liquor Permit is Suspended." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 28 April 1953, p. 13.; "2 Sentenced on Sex Charge." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 16 January 1953, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> "3 Held for Jury on Show Charge: \$1,000 Bail Set for Two Dancers, Tavern Owner." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 27 January 1955, p. 36.; "Publication Test Case Dismissed." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 4 May 1955, p. S27.

In his book of the same title, historian David K Johnson explains that the moral panic of the Lavender Scare went hand-in-hand with the anticommunist Red Scare being spearheaded by Senator Joe McCarthy at the same time. The rationale behind this, as explained in the 1950 report “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government,” was that because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, queer government employees were susceptible to blackmail, and Soviet spies would therefore threaten to ‘out’ them unless they divulged state secrets. Despite there being no evidence of this ever happening, gays and lesbians in government were labelled as ‘security risks’ as federal agencies, local police, and the military expended no small amount of time trying to catch their gay and lesbian employees so they could be fired. These agencies would frequently proudly and publicly announce the firings to the US Congress and the press as evidence of how seriously they took the threat of Communism.<sup>17</sup>

For about five years prior to the Pepper Hill Raid, stories approvingly reporting on these mass firings and supporting the repression of queer government workers were a regular feature in city newspapers, and the police clearly tapped into this moral panic to justify their actions. As soon as the raid had occurred, a police spokesman claimed that the majority of arrestees were from Washington, DC. Despite arrest records showing this to be categorically false, the implication was clear when the spokesman stated that these DC gays were coming to Baltimore to avoid being found out by the police and government investigators there.<sup>18</sup>

## The Raid:

One Saturday night in 1955, a 22-year-old art student named David Lehman wound up, as he often did on weekends, at his favorite bar. It was an exciting night—he had spotted in the crowd a classmate, Roger, who he adored due to his talent as an artist, his offbeat sense of humor, and of course, his looks, David later describing him as “tall and very exotic looking.” He settled in next to his crush and started a conversation. Roger was talking about his love of dogs and David, in the grand tradition of such encounters, was skillfully pretending to share this interest. Despite having now knowledge or interest in the subject, he peppered Roger with questions and pretended to be engrossed in Roger’s answers. From all descriptions, it seemed like a normal night out at the bar. What David didn’t know was that large numbers of police were massing outside.

As he continued feigning interest in different breeds of dogs, David started noticing that the bar had suddenly gotten more crowded. Soon after, he spotted two men with cameras climbing on tables in opposite corners of the room. As they started taking photos and their flashes started going off, patrons initially reacted with a characteristic response: camping it up. Acting as if

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson, David K. *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. University of Chicago Press, 2023.; United States, Senate, Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments. *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government: Interim Report*. U.S. Government Publishing Office, 15 December, 1950. 81st Congress. 2nd Session.

<sup>18</sup> (“Raid on night club brings 162 arrests” 32)

they were being photographed on the red carpet, some posed for the cameras, while other patrons told them to hold the photos until after their interview with the press.

It didn't take long, though, for people to realize something was up, and the atmosphere in the bar changed. According to David, "people were getting restless, and there was sort of a semi panic, and all of the sudden there were policemen, and they said nobody could get out, and we wondered what the hell was going on? Was the place burning or something?"<sup>19</sup>

Of course, it was not burning. According to police, they had sent two plainclothes officers in earlier in the night, and after they reported seeing "evidence of homosexuality," decided to raid the place. In reality, the raid was almost certainly premeditated based on the sheer scale of police resources mobilized: as patrons were pulled outside, they were met with a crowd of spectators (many who had been en route to the club before it was raided), a blocked-off street, five police cruisers, and six paddy wagons.

And yet, these resources were inadequate for the scale of the arrest. The paddy wagons made multiple stops—a total of 24 trips overall—as patrons were pulled out of the club and sent to be processed and jailed for the night. The Central police station didn't have enough space for the large number of arrestees, and people wound up being jailed in cramped quarters there and at multiple other police stations across the city. Numerous police had to help with the processing and jailing, as the regular officers handling this were overwhelmed. In an age of mass incarceration and mass arrests it may be difficult to comprehend, but the sudden arrest of over 160 people had stretched the resources of the BPD to their absolute limit.<sup>20</sup>

David wound up crowded into a jail cell at the Central station, along with Roger and another man. As the panic and shock wore off, the three men were "nervous, and shaky, and fidgety, and we were all wondering – we had all night to talk about what do you think is going to happen to us?" Mostly, David hoped their names wouldn't be published the next day: printing the names of people arrested in bar raids and other antigay arrests was often standard practice and could lead to arrestees losing their jobs, their family, and not infrequently led people to commit suicide. It was likely the sheer scale of the arrests that prevented papers from doing so after the Pepper Hill Club raid, with the *Sun* opting to only list the names of the owners and bartenders. None of the men got much sleep that night; there were no beds in the cell.<sup>21</sup>

When David had hoped to spend the night with his tall, hunky, dog-loving classmate a few hours earlier, this probably wasn't what he had in mind.

## The Courtroom:

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<sup>19</sup> (Makarovich, 1992, p. 17-18)

<sup>20</sup> ("Raid on night club brings 162 arrests")

<sup>21</sup> (Makarovich, 1992, p. 19)

The extent to which BPD resources were taxed to their limit can be seen in the police's highly unusual action of calling in a judge to hear the 162 cases on a Sunday, rather than waiting until the regularly scheduled court sessions on Monday. And so, Magistrate Meyer M. Cardin (coincidentally, the father of former Senator Ben Cardin) came in to hear the cases early on Sunday morning.

Although the *Sun* article only mentions "several outbursts in court," David's words offer far more detail and prove the point mentioned earlier about gay bars being places where cultures of resistance were nurtured. As it would appear, hauling all the Pepper Hill Club's patrons to court, they brought some of the club's atmosphere along with them. According to David, gays were camping it up while the trial was ongoing, with some strutting in like drag queens down the central aisle and others mocking police as they testified, all while a group of lesbian arrestees were shouting down the cops from the hallway. When one cop—who David describes as an "ugly, fat, red-faced dick"—said that someone had "touched his privates," someone shouted, "who would bother?" to laughter and applause. The word he repeatedly uses to describe the scene is "outrageous." Sergeant Hyman Goldstein, the lead raider, put it differently when he complained that "the majority of these people seem to regard this whole incident as a great big joke." Ultimately, it was only the threat of disorderly conduct charges that quieted things down.

The magistrate's frustration with the police was immediately apparent. As they presented the charges, the first two defendants nervously pled guilty, after which all other defendants pled not guilty, at which point Cardin returned to the first two and offered them a chance to (and suggested that they) change their plea, which they did. When police showed him the photos they had taken as evidence, he remarked that he saw no evidence of a crime, only of 'a crowd having a good time on a Saturday night.' He noted that the only other evidence consisted of a single cop claiming someone (who he could not identify) had touched his leg and that he had seen men (who he again could not identify) holding hands and kissing. He was offended that he would be pulled into a courtroom on a Sunday for something he saw as a waste of both public resources and his time and told them as much. Cardin, addressing the police, said that the raid was unjustified, that there was no reason to bring these charges, and as David put it, "this is ridiculous, what have you done?" He then dismissed the charges against everyone except five individuals who the BPD claimed had assaulted police or resisted arrest.

Embarrassed and frustrated, Sergeant Goldstein told newspapers that he planned on bringing the owners to the city Grand Jury on charges of "operating a disorderly house," a decision that would only worsen the crisis the raid threw the police into.<sup>22</sup>

## The Backlash:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 22-25; ("Raid on night club brings 162 arrests")

## **“The Police Did It the Wrong Way”**

The backlash to the police’s actions at the Pepper Hill was swift and severe. The Monday after the raid, a State Delegate from the city denounced the police, charging that Sergeant Goldstein had unilaterally appointed himself the arbiter of community morals. He stated that “decent, straight-thinking Baltimoreans had hoped police mass raids were a thing of the past.” Very quickly, a police official assured Robinson and the press that this was not in line with department policy.

Although noted as a civil libertarian, Robinson’s objections were not coming from a particularly friendly attitude towards queer people. Considered an advocate in the State Assembly for those with mental health issues—a category that included queer people until the 1970s—Robinson argued that indiscriminate police repression of this sort was not an appropriate response to “the public problem of massing homosexuals in licensed establishments.” Simply put, he viewed homosexuality as a mental illness to be treated by psychiatrists rather than police.<sup>23</sup>

A month later, Sergeant Goldstein and the BPD made good on their earlier promise and the owners of the Pepper Hill Club, Mort Cohen and Victor Lance, were brought before Judge James Cullen on charges of “operating a disorderly house”—a charge usually made against alleged brothels, although sometimes for other disreputable businesses. After hearing the case, Cullen issued a far more severe ruling against the police than Meyer Cardin had in October, declaring that he believed the police should be “severely condemned” for the raid and saying that their actions negated any court testimony they had given, finding for Cohen and Lance. He suggested the police were lying about the spontaneity of the raid, saying they “intended to make a raid and wholesale arrests before they entered the club,” and instead suggested that police could have “quietly seized upon individual instances of improper conduct in the club.” According to the *Sun*, when the decision was announced, there were loud cheers as dozens of patrons rushed up to congratulate the club owners on their victory.<sup>24</sup>

The following day, the *Sun* ran an editorial agreeing with Cullen’s ruling, entitled “The Police Did It The Wrong Way.” They pointed out, as Cullen did, that the club had been licensed by the State of Maryland, and entering a licensed establishment on its own is not criminal, yet the police had arrested everyone “regardless of their individual conduct.” Instead, they argued that the onus was on the police to warn licensees that they would report ‘problems’ to the Liquor Board, and on the Liquor Board to withdraw licenses so the places could be shut down legally and bureaucratically.

Much like Cullen, the writers of the *Sun* article felt that police should have only arrested individual homosexuals (for being homosexuals) and not everyone in the bar (some of whom might not be homosexuals). They stated that “individual cases of disorderly conduct come within the proper jurisdiction of the police, even if mass arrests in a raid do not.” They followed

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<sup>23</sup> “4th District Legislator Raps Mass Arrests at Night Club.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 4 October 1955, p. 36

<sup>24</sup> “Judge Hits Police in Club Raid.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 23 November 1955, p. 42.



that with a warning: “This should be brought home to those patrons of the club who were present at the trial and seemed to be of the mistaken notion that the acquittal of licensees was something to cheer about.”

Later that week, newspapers quoted the new Police Commissioner, James Hepbron, as agreeing with the judge and promising that such mass arrests would not occur again.<sup>25</sup>

### **A Few Knaves and Rascals**

This response might seem surprising given the cultural and political conservatism of the time, but the Baltimore Police Department faced several crises of confidence during the early 1950s and found themselves under a heightened level of scrutiny. State delegates, led by Jerome Robinson, made it clear that they viewed the raid on the Pepper Hill Club as part of a broader pattern of corruption and of abusing power.

More broadly, the subject of crooked cops in city police departments had been in the popular consciousness for a number of years as a part of a sustained focus on organized crime in American politics and media. In 1950 and 1951, the U.S. Senate held a series of televised hearings where prominent mobsters were brought in to testify, with focuses on gambling, racketeering, and payouts to local politicians and police. One of the Senate hearings concerned organized crime in Maryland, and Senators questioned a number of local bookies and nightclub owners about suspicious payments they had made to police officers.

The same year as those hearings, a Baltimore Grand Jury report accused the police of widespread bribe-taking. It said that multiple police captains had told them that there is no illegal gambling in their districts where such operations were well-known and denied that any police officer had even been *offered* a bribe for years when officers were under investigation for taking them. It issued several recommendations to the Police Commissioner to address the issue by investigating these district captains and their cops. The next Grand Jury report, however, complained that police officers appearing seemed to be working under “a cloud of suspicion that the entire department was being paid off,” and assures the readers that “from that day on the Foreman made it his business to try and restore the morale of many of these men by commending them for meritorious jobs.” Accordingly, there is no more mention of police corruption, and the concerns of the earlier Grand Jury were minimized.<sup>26</sup>

The day before the raid, Hepbron had been forced to reveal that the members of the vice squad were under investigation by a Grand Jury for taking protection money from bookies, nightclub owners, and mob figures. He promised in a front-page article to run an internal investigation into it as well. The day after, the office of the State’s Attorney for Baltimore City confirmed the

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<sup>25</sup> “The Police Did It The Wrong Way.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 24 November 1955, p. 12.; “The Week in Brief.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 27 November 1955, p. A34.

<sup>26</sup> Grand Jury of Baltimore City. “Grand Jury Report: May Term, 1951.” *Baltimore Studies Archive*, University of Baltimore.; Grand Jury of Baltimore City. “Grand Jury Report: September Term, 1951.” *Baltimore Studies Archive*, University of Baltimore.

Grand Jury investigation, and an article noted that the Liquor Board was running an investigation of their own into the subject, focusing on the Block and the area around it, including where Pepper Hill was located.<sup>27</sup>

These concerns were well known to Hepbron, who had only been appointed the city's Commissioner a few months prior to the raid. In his first speech in the role, he had spoken bluntly, stating that while he was proud of the men and women who made up the BPD, "I am not so naive as to believe that among 3,000 persons of whatever calling"—that number being the size of the force—"that you would not find a few knaves and rascals. The Police Department is no exception." Speaking on illegal gambling and organized crime he was even more direct, telling his audience, "You and I know that no sizeable racket can run for long unless some of our police are either too stupid to be law enforcement officers or have succumbed to bribes."<sup>28</sup>

A week after the raid, Commissioner Hepbron announced that he was abolishing the vice squad in a reorganization of the entire police department, and replacing it with a far broader "Rackets Division" to "direct the new, all-out effort to combat organized crime in Baltimore." Under this division, he promised to start a lie-detector unit that would be used in part to question police accused of misconduct. He appointed an inspector with prior FBI experience, Clarence Forrester, to head the department and gave him free rein to staff it with his preferred officers. While Hepbron had made public his plans to reorganize the department, the focus on the vice squad, on corruption, and the speed with which it was rolled out were in part due to the backlash to the raid.<sup>29</sup>

## The Fallout:

### "Ill-fitted by temperament and judgement"

In response to the multiple investigations and public reprimand from judges and political figures, James Hepbron had tried to position himself as a crusader who wanted to root out corruption within an embattled Baltimore Police Department. But the Baltimore delegation to the State Assembly wasn't buying it. In February of 1956, the city's delegates—led by Robinson—voted to "invite" Hepbron, Goldstein, and any other police officer involved to come to Annapolis and explain what steps they've taken to ensure that another raid like the one at the Pepper Hill Club would not happen again. Noting the harsh criticism of the police from judges, another delegate promised that "anyone who knows about the affair" would be brought before them. Delegate Robinson stated that the public needed to know whether disciplinary action had been taken against the officers who ordered and planned the raid.

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<sup>27</sup> "Police Said to Protect Racketeers." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 1 October 1955, p. 1.; "Sodaro, Hepbron to Confer in Police-Racket Inquiry." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 2 October 1955, p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> "Hepbron Aims at 'King Pins.'" *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 20 September 1955, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> "Hepbron Warns Force Against Covering Up For Organized Crime." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 12 October 1955, p. 1.

Unfortunately, whatever hearings may have happened do not seem to have been recorded anywhere. But Robinson's critiques of Hepbron's leadership did not abate. In March of 1956, Robinson condemned Hepbron far more stridently and urged him to quit. Likening him to an SS officer and describing him as "impatient with the Bill of Rights and intolerant of constitutional liberties," Robinson described him as "ill-fitted by temperament and judgement" to be Police Commissioner. In support of this position, he named two particularly egregious actions: one was his announcement that the department would be purchasing wiretapping equipment, whose legality at the time was under debate. The other was the raid on the Pepper Hill Club and Robinson learning that Hyman Goldstein, rather than facing discipline, had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant.<sup>30</sup>

### **"Big Police Shakeup is Developing" -*The Sun*, Nov 5, 1957**

Things only got worse for Hepbron and the BPD from there. Throughout 1957, the activities of the probes into police malfeasance were reported on as nearly every high-ranking officer was brought before the Grand Jury for questioning and tips reporting shakedowns, brutality, and bribe-taking flooded the investigators. As the probe went on, it became clear that it was narrowing in on the Rackets Division and former vice squad members. In October of that year, the Grand Jury returned two indictments of major BPD leadership on grounds of operating protection schemes, planting evidence, instructing officers under them to commit perjury, and being involved in the operation of brothels and other illegal businesses. Those two were Rackets Squad chief Clarence Forrester and his second-in-command, Lieutenant Hyman Goldstein.<sup>31</sup>

In response to the revelation that his hand-picked leader and second-in-command of a department he had personally created had been publicly charged, Commissioner Hepbron for the second time in as many years promised to reorganize the department in "the biggest BPD shakeup in three decades." Already by that time, several officers had been fired and chief investigator Fred L. Ford—one of the highest ranking officers in the force—had been forced into a leave of absence that would eventually result in his forced retirement. Meanwhile, members of the investigation began looking into cases where these officers were involved and assessing whether their conviction relied on false testimony. By the end of the week, four other police officers and leaders in the Rackets Division were suspended from the force, forced to resign, or fired. This included former vice squad sergeant Edward Kirby, a man once described by David Lehman as an "ugly, fat, red-faced dick."<sup>32</sup>

The probe continued through the following year, working its way through the force's leadership, resulting in a number of resignations or firings and several other criminal charges, although

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<sup>30</sup> Smith, Odell M. "Robinson Urges Hepbron to Quit." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 12 March 1957, p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> "City Police Corruption Tips Received." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 6 October 1957, p. 40.; Whiteford, Charles G. "Goldstein And Forrester Presented By Grand Jury." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 26 October 1957, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> Whiteford, Charles G. "Big Police Shakeup Is Developing." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 5 November 1957, p. 40.; "Vice Squad Sergeant Suspended." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 9 November 1957, p. 30.; (Makarovich, 1993).

none as serious as those leveled against Forrester and Goldstein. In the spring of 1958, the two were put on trial, and in June they were both found guilty.<sup>33</sup>

### **“Concepts of policing which are shocking to decent-thinking people”**

With Forrester and Goldstein convicted and the probe wrapping up after voicing the convictions of several dozen people due to falsified evidence, attention once again returned to James Hepbrun in early 1959, in the most public, condemning, and extensive manner than had previously been made. In a wide-ranging statement charging him with “flouting the civil and constitutional rights of the citizens of Baltimore city,” negligence and poor judgement, and “concepts of policing which, because of brutality and insensitivity, are shocking to decent thinking people,” the entire 36-member city delegation to the State Assembly made a formal complaint against Hepbrun and requested the Governor preside over hearings on the matter.

The “statement of facts” against Hepbrun in this complaint contains numerous instances said to justify such charges. The second such case mentioned, under the heading of “Mass Arrests,” is the 1955 raid on the Pepper Hill Club. In this section, the delegates rehashed that almost all arrestees had their charges dismissed and that Judge Cullen had both severely condemned the tactics of police and accused them of lying about whether the raid was planned. Much like in Robinson’s earlier comments, they charged Hepbrun with publicly condemning the raid while privately promoting “Sergeant Goldstein, who led the raid and made the mass arrests” to a high position in his Rackets Squad. It continues to provide a number of other instances of police brutality, planting evidence, and of Hepbrun’s ‘internal investigations’ protecting officers from oversight. The governor agreed and the hearing was scheduled for the next month.<sup>34</sup>

The statements made at this hearing were far more explosive than those in the complaint. Multiple recently fired officers, including Fred Ford and Edgar Kirby, claimed that Hepbrun had been close to Baltimore mafia figures Benny Trotta and Carroll Goldstein and a well-known mafia enforcer from New York City, and had been “influenced” by them, with Ford producing tape recordings he said were of conversations between Trotta and the commissioner. For his part, Hepbrun said these were simply disgruntled former employees trying to blame him for their own corruption, that the tapes were taken out of context, and defended himself in four hours of testimony. The following week was dedicated to cross-examining him on the various other charges laid out in the complaint.<sup>35</sup>

The Governor was far less interested in disciplining or removing Hepbrun than were the Baltimore delegates. After the prosecution had rested, he dropped most of the charges, retaining only those related to warrantless wiretapping, his conduct during the Rackets Division

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<sup>33</sup> Hiltner, George J. “Forrester And Goldstein Convicted In Perjury Case.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 15 June 1958, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> “Full Text of Charges.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 11 February 1959, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Whiteford, Charles G. “Hepbrun Friendly With Figures In Underworld And Influenced By Them, Probe Hearing Is Told.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 15 March 1959, p. 1.; Whiteford, Charles G. “1957 PROBE DEFENDED BY HEPBRON: Commissioner Denies Improper Ties To Ex-Convicts.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 16 May 1959, p. 30.

probe, and his possible associations with mobsters. About a month after the hearing, the Governor issued his ruling, dropping the charges and refusing to fire the commissioner, but saying Hepbron had “committed certain indiscretions” and had shown poor judgement, especially in his contact with Trotta. Effectively finding the commissioner’s actions highly suspect but stating they don’t rise to the level of criminality required for him to remove him from his post, the Governor nonetheless stated that the swarm of investigations and allegations against the BPD had impaired Hepbron’s ability to serve in his position, hinting to Hepbron that he should resign.<sup>36</sup>

Both Hepbron and Robinson claimed that the ruling vindicated their position. Robinson again called for Hepbron to resign, and Hepbron stated his absolute refusal to resign before the end of his six-year term. In 1961, the Governor quickly appointed someone else to the position. Hepbron, just six years prior considered a rising star in Maryland law enforcement, would never work for the government again.<sup>37</sup>

## The Impact:

**“That was the decision that made it okay. For gay people to be in a bar.” -Bob Eckert**

This is the story of the strange set of circumstances around a mid-1950s raid on a Baltimore gay bar that eventually led to nearly every member of police leadership involved fired, resigning in disgrace, pushed out of law enforcement, or put behind bars. There are few others like it, but it fits a broader, long-term pattern of overreach, illegality and harassment by the BPD, followed by intense backlash against them as a result. It is also a story explaining why, after the raid on the Pepper Hill Club, there would not be a gay bar raid in the city of Baltimore for another 12 years.

As far away as Los Angeles, the nascent ‘homophile’ movement took note, reporting on the story excitedly in *ONE* magazine (the first lasting magazine for LGBTQ+ people in the United States, later renamed *The Advocate*). It likely was being discussed among similar nascent activist groups in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington.<sup>38</sup>

For many members of the gay community who had frequented the Pepper Hill Club—again, this being shamefully restricted to only white community members—the impact was well-understood. Some forty years later, interviewing several older men on their experiences going to clubs in the 50s and 60s, one stated with certainty that the Pepper Hill Club was the most important gay bar in Baltimore’s history, arguing, “Everything you can do in a gay bar these

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<sup>36</sup> Whiteford, Charles G. “13 Hepbron Charges Dismissed.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 15 May 1959, p. 48.; Whiteford, Charles G. “Tawes Drops Misconduct Case Against Hepbron as Not Proved, But Refers to 'Poor Judgement'; Police Commissioner Says He Will Not Resign.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 17 June 1959, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Del. Robinson Says Hepbron Should Resign.” *The News* [Cumberland, MD], 18 June 1959, p. 4.; “Hepbron dies; former police head.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 29 March 1979, p. C1.

<sup>38</sup> McIntire, Dal. “Tangents.” *ONE Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 12, 1955, pp. 11-12. *Independent Voices*, JSTOR, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.28041920>.

days stems from that arrest, because when all those people were thrown out of being convicted a new era began.” One of the other men, agreeing, added, “Kind of like Stonewall.”

They go on to state, “that’s when things started to loosen up, after that trial. And people could start acting the way they really felt. They could kiss one another, and a few years after that they could dance with one another.”<sup>39</sup>

Starting in the late 1960s, the city police and liquor board started again to try and crack down on gay bars, first by threatening to pull the liquor licenses of any bar that allowed “female impersonators” as entertainers or patrons, effectively banning drag queens and trans women from Baltimore bars, and followed up upon by a handful of raids by the police. Although it was later struck down as unconstitutional, it had much of its intended effect, quickly forcing owners to comply. However, as in other cities, at the end of the sixties an increasing number of young queer and trans people were willing to resist such raids, culminating in a 1971 mini-riot at Cicero’s Bar where police were forced to retreat under a hail of ashtrays and bottles. That would prove to be the last major bar raid in Baltimore’s history.<sup>40</sup>

On Saturday, October 1st, 1955, a little after 11PM, the Baltimore Police Department’s vice squad entered the Pepper Hill Club and arrested everyone inside. They probably thought this would be an easy win against a hated minority. They probably thought that most of the victims of the raid would be too ashamed to do anything but plead guilty and pay a fine. They probably thought this would take some of the pressure off the department and the vice squad and show how the BPD was upholding the moral fabric of the city.

They thought wrong.

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<sup>39</sup> (Makarovich, 1992. p. 37-38)

<sup>40</sup> “Vice Raiders Arrest 47.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 11 December 1967, p. C22.; “100 Arrested in Cicero Raid: Police Dodge Bottles, Glass in Retreat From Bar.” *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 28 March 1971, p. 17.