

Remaking Baltimore's Waterfront, With a Splash of Whiskey

Square Feet

By MELISSA HOPPERT MAY 16, 2017



BALTIMORE — Rising high above the new Sagamore Spirit distillery in South Baltimore is a white water tower with three maroon diamonds on each side, a nod to the jockey silks of the thoroughbred farm that provides the spring water for the company's rye whiskey.

The distillery, which opened a few weeks ago, is the latest endeavor of the growing business empire of Kevin A. Plank, founder and chief executive of the sportswear company [Under Armour](#). His new enterprises — collectively they are called Plank Industries but nearly all have Sagamore in their names — are reshaping Baltimore's waterfront and restoring luster to Maryland traditions and landmarks.

At the distillery and elsewhere, Mr. Plank, 44, has drawn inspiration from Sagamore Farm, which he purchased in 2007 with the hope of raising horses to compete in [Triple Crown](#) races. On Saturday, the colt Recruiting Ready and the filly Chubby Star will represent Sagamore on the undercard of the 142nd [Preakness Stakes](#).

In March, Mr. Plank's Sagamore Pendry hotel opened not far away in the Recreation Pier building in the Fells Point neighborhood after a roughly \$60 million renovation. That the pier, built in 1914 and vacant since 1999, needed significant structural work mattered little to Mr. Plank. He often gazed at the property from his Under Armour office across the harbor and dreamed about its possibilities.



Sagamore's main house doubles as a horse racing museum, with memorabilia spanning the Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt and Kevin Plank ownership eras. Outside, a "W" flag flies whenever a Sagamore horse picks up a win.



Key's Anthem, the first of a new fleet of water taxis owned by Sagamore Ventures, docking in Fells Point.
Jared Soares for The New York Times

Outside the hotel, a fleet of new water taxis owned by Mr. Plank and modeled after Chesapeake Bay deadrise boats will soon ferry riders to Port Covington, the industrial South Baltimore waterfront area that is undergoing a \$5.5 billion overhaul led by his real estate firm, Sagamore Development.

In September, the Baltimore City Council approved the use of \$660 million in bonds to pay for infrastructure around that mixed-use project, which will include a new Under Armour campus. Under an arrangement called tax-increment financing, the bonds will be repaid through future property taxes generated by the development.

Sagamore is also hoping to receive nearly \$600 million in state and federal investments for a light-rail extension, modifications to Interstate 95, and other improvements.

Many of the efforts from Mr. Plank, a former football player for the University of Maryland who founded Under Armour in 1996, have been greeted with open arms from the community.



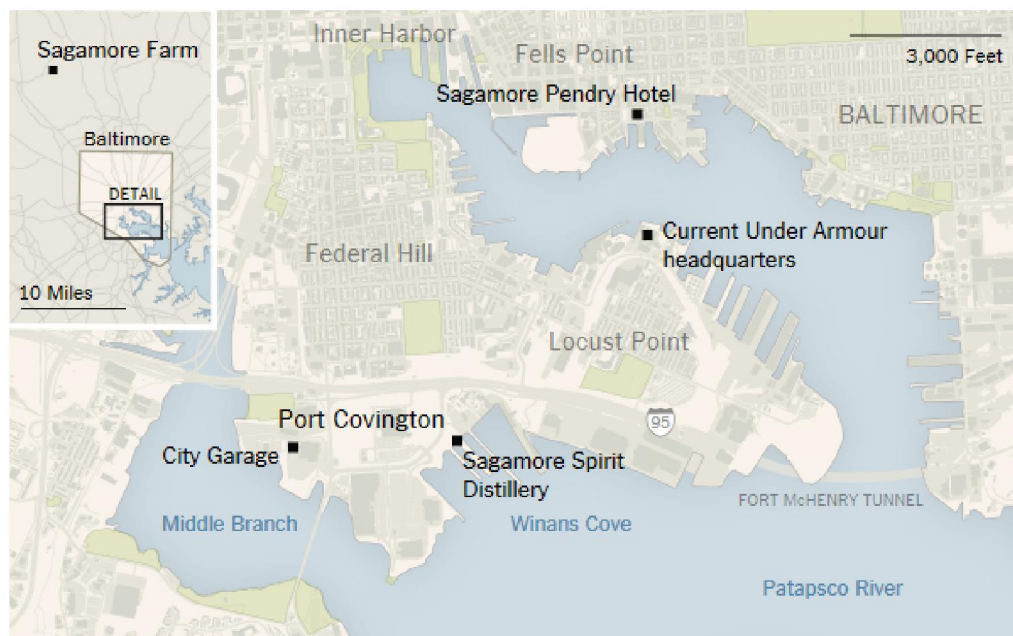
Kevin Plank said he was focused on Under Armour, the sportswear company he founded, and left the day-to-day operations of Plank Industries to his employees. Patrick T. Fallon/Bloomberg

But against the backdrop of all this rejuvenation, Under Armour's stock has fallen about 48 percent in the past 12 months, as the company struggled in the face of a quickly changing retail industry. Its chief financial officer, Chip Molloy, resigned in February. In April, the company reported its first quarterly loss as a public company.

Mr. Plank, responding to questions by email, said he was fully focused on Under Armour and left the day-to-day work of Plank Industries to his employees.

"I am incredibly proud of the Plank Industries team for all that they have built and of the economic impact we have been able to have here in Baltimore," he said.

Some people have raised concerns about the [tax-increment financing deal, the largest in city history](#). Critics say that the subsidy is too big for a business with resources like Mr. Plank's and that the city should focus on more critical needs, like schools. Others questioned whether agreements on compensation and affordable housing were adequate — and why there was no independent analysis of the numbers.



By The New York Times

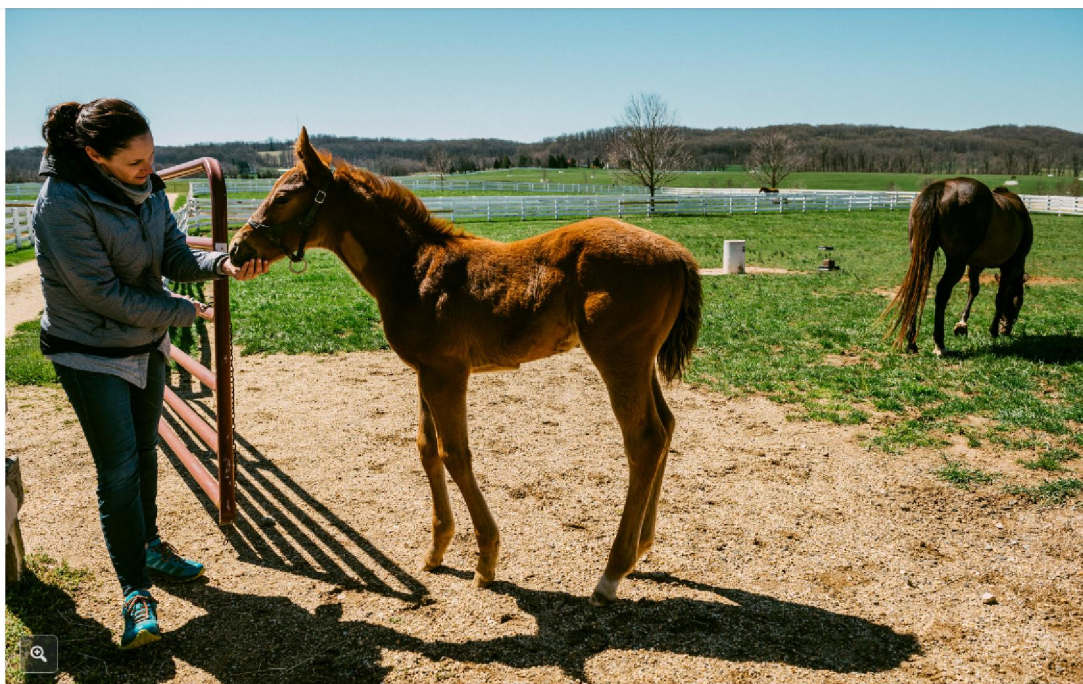
The former councilman Carl Stokes, who ultimately voted in favor of the deal, said he still wondered why his peers were eager to push it through without pursuing that analysis.

“Kevin’s been a good guy for the city of Baltimore, but he himself would not O.K. a deal that he didn’t vet,” he said.

There is no doubt, though, that Mr. Plank has managed to make sweeping changes to the downtown area. And even to those closely involved, it is almost unthinkable that all this development flowed from a horse farm in Glyndon, Md., less than 30 miles to the northwest.

Wanting to jump-start Maryland’s once-flourishing horse racing industry, [Mr. Plank purchased Sagamore Farm](#) and set out to restore it to its heyday under the racing industry titan Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt.

Mr. Plank set a lofty goal for Sagamore — to win a Triple Crown — one that Vanderbilt, [who died in 1999](#), was unable to accomplish, even with Native Dancer, one of the most celebrated horses ever. So far the highlight of Mr. Plank’s ownership is Shared Account’s victory in the \$2 million Breeders’ Cup Filly and Mare Turf in 2010.



Jocelyn Brooks, chief of staff at Sagamore Farm, with Dictate the Tempo and her 2-month-old filly by Friesian Fire. Jared Soares for The New York Times

Sagamore's biggest success may end up being the whiskey business it has spawned.

Approached about putting a vineyard on the farm, Mr. Plank, a whiskey drinker, looked into making the spirit instead. It turned out that Sagamore sat atop a limestone shelf and featured a springhouse built in 1909 that held the kind of calcium-rich water that has nourished Kentucky's famed horses and bourbons for decades.

That he settled on rye was no accident; it was an opportunity to revive another tradition. The Mid-Atlantic States, especially Pennsylvania and Maryland, produced the spirit as early as the 1700s. But production slowed during Prohibition and ended during World War II, allowing blended Canadian rye to dominate the market.

Demand for American whiskey has come roaring back in recent years, including for rye, setting up a nice business opportunity. From 2009 to 2016, rye whiskey volumes sold in the American market have grown 780 percent, to 775,000 cases from 88,000, according to the Distilled Spirits Council.



From left, Patrick Ramplin, Demetrius Williams and Will Novajosky in the processing building of Sagamore Spirit. Jared Soares for The New York Times

Inside the production center of Sagamore Spirit's three-building complex in Port Covington, another three-diamond-stamped beacon greets passers-by: a 40-foot copper column still with a mirror finish that is believed to be the first of its kind.

Asked why the finish was essential, Brian Treacy, president of Sagamore Spirit, channeled Mr. Plank, a childhood friend. "Because it's all about brand," he replied.

Production of Sagamore Spirit Rye began in Indiana in 2012, under a longtime master distiller from Seagrams, Larry Ebersold. It was unveiled at last year's [Preakness](#). On April 10, the crew cooked its first batch in its new home.



A springhouse on Sagamore Farm, built in 1909, holds the calcium-rich water used to make Sagamore Spirit rye whiskey. Jared Soares for The New York Times

"The fact that they have him, and they have a column still, tells me that they are in this to make a lot of whiskey and to be really competitive," David Wondrich, a cocktail historian and author, said of Mr. Ebersold.

In April, with help from Sagamore Spirit, the American Distilling Institute held its conference in Baltimore for the first time. Many attendees visited the distillery, which has

received 13 awards in 11 months.

"It was sort of the look-we-did-it moment," Mr. Treacy said. "The ultimate compliment was when someone from Kentucky would come through and say, 'Great job.'"



Demetrius Williams applying hand-written labels to the cask-strength rye. Sagamore's bottle was modeled on a six-sided bottle with "Baltimore" embossed on the sides from a rye purveyor in the 1800s, William T. Walters, whose art collection is housed in the city's Walters Art Museum.



A portrait of Shared Account, who handed Sagamore its biggest victory under Kevin Plank's ownership, in the \$2 million Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf in 2010. Recruiting Ready, a 3-year-old colt, and Chubby Star, a 3-year-old filly, will represent the farm on the Preakness undercard Saturday.

The Sagamore Pendry is another extension of the brand. Managed by Montage Hotels and Resorts, it is anchored by Rec Pier Chop House, a restaurant run by Andrew Carmellini, the James Beard Award-winning chef, and includes a whiskey bar serving Sagamore Spirit products.

Across the street, Jason Bass and Aaron Jones have a front-row seat to the buzz enveloping the neighborhood. In 2013, Mr. Bass, 37, and Mr. Jones, 29, started Treason Toting Company, a maker of tote bags. With financial help from Sagamore Ventures, which develops and supports local entrepreneurs, they were able to open a store in Fells Point in August.

Since the hotel opened, Mr. Bass said, friends who ordinarily would have driven to Washington for a night out visit the Pendry instead.

“There’s a lot of grit to what Fells Point offers, which is fantastic, but this hotel provides a level of sophistication and gives people a reason to dress up,” Mr. Bass said.



Thames Street in Baltimore as seen from inside the Rec Pier Chop House at the Sagamore Pendry hotel in Fells Point. Jared Soares for The New York Times



One of two indoor tasting rooms in the distillery, which also features an outdoor tasting area. Visitors are shown a video highlighting Maryland's history as a top producer of rye whiskey.



An aging barn, decorated with Maryland and Baltimore flags, is one of the newest additions to the farm. "Because we are so closely tied in brand to Sagamore Spirit, our job is to help them grow," said the Sagamore Racing president, Hunter Rankin, who helps produce a podcast called "Fast Horses, Slow Whiskey."

For about a year, the pair have made their bags at City Garage, a former bus depot that Sagamore Ventures turned into an innovation center in Port Covington. City Garage, the distillery and the first Under Armour building of the relocated campus — called Building 37 in a nod to Mr. Plank's uniform number — are the first new inhabitants of Port Covington. Sagamore Development has estimated that the project will create 26,500 permanent jobs and have a \$4.3 billion annual economic impact once it is completed.

“There's not a lot of people in this area who would reach back or make themselves available in support the way that he has and continues to do,” Mr. Bass said of Mr. Plank.

On the walls of each of the Sagamore Pendry's 128 guest rooms are plaster likenesses of Native Dancer based on his [1954 Time magazine cover](#), a subtle homage to Sagamore Farm and the Vanderbilt scion who put it on the map, much as Mr. Plank and his team are aiming to do for Port Covington.

Asked what Vanderbilt would think of all this, Mr. Treacy replied: “I think he would think it's cool. He sounded like he was a bit of a disrupter and did things his way, and we kind of look at ourselves as disrupters, too.”

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A version of this article appears in print on May 17, 2017, on Page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Baltimore Waterfront's Splashy Remake. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)