

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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## Southwest Sharp and Lee: Otterbein's Historic Corner

by **David Safier**

The corner of Southwest Sharp and Lee. That's where it all began for the Otterbein neighborhood, where the first piece of land was acquired for the purpose of building a house and where the oldest house in the neighborhood stands. You could even say it's where things began West Baltimore south of Pratt Street.

When you follow the history of the corner of Sharp and Lee from its beginnings in the late 1700s to the present, you are taking a tour through the history of the Otterbein area. It includes every kind of person who lived in the neighborhood. Rich people. Working class people. Free Black people. Enslaved Black people. Immigrants. Renters. Boarders. It includes the commercial establishments you could find in the neighborhood: grocery stores, drug stores, taverns, clothing stores and boarding houses. The corner followed the neighborhood's economic fortunes as well, from the early rush to build houses to the growing ties to the Inner Harbor, the overcrowding, the increasing poverty and the gradual deterioration to slum-like conditions.

The historic houses on Sharp and Lee nearly disappeared when the city condemned the area to the wrecking ball in the name of urban renewal, but a last minute reprieve saved them, turning the condemned buildings into Dollar Houses which adventurous souls bought, then spent money, time and effort to renovate, creating the neighborhood today's residents are justly proud of.

The corner of Sharp and Lee is Otterbein writ small. Understand its history, and you understand the neighborhood.

### The First Lease: 1783

In 1783 a 31 year old John Eager Howard returned to Baltimore from the Revolutionary War a decorated hero. Five years later he would become Maryland's governor, then a state senator, then a U.S. senator, but on his return from the war Howard had more immediate family business to attend to. The Howard family was one of the major landholders in Baltimore, and when his father Cornelius died three years earlier, John was left to manage the family property.

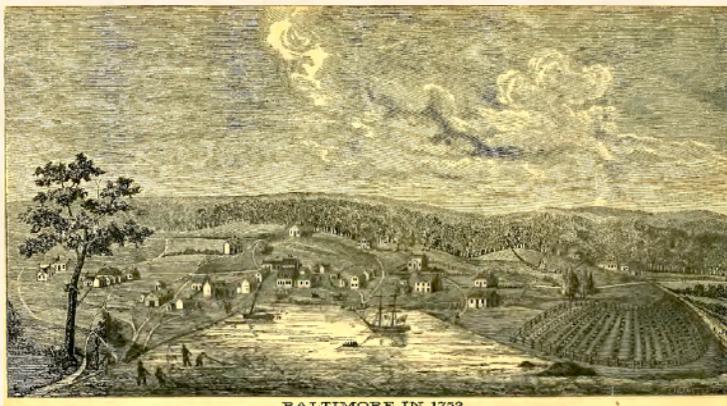
Baltimore was at the beginnings of a growth spurt. In 1783 the city was a compact, fish-shaped collection of houses and businesses located inside the boundaries of today's downtown with a population of 13,000. In less than two decades, the city's population would double, then double again by 1810. By 1830 Baltimore's population reached 80,000, making it the second largest city in the nation.



**John Eager Howard**

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Much of the land owned by the Howard family was undeveloped, including the portions immediately west and south of today's Inner Harbor, so John Eager Howard decided to take advantage of the situation and turn the undeveloped land into homes for people pouring into the city looking for jobs and business opportunities. It was a



**A not-very-accurate sketch of Baltimore in 1752**

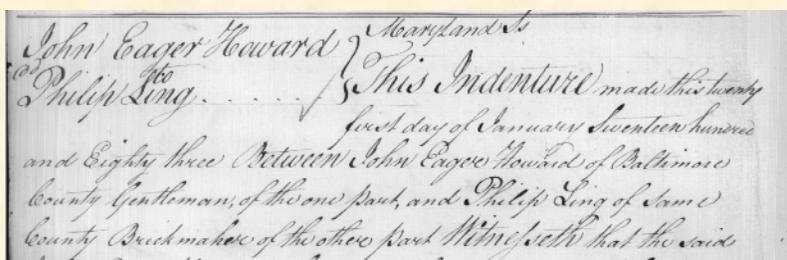
prime location for development. The waterways bordering his land, which would become today's Inner Harbor, were becoming an important hub of economic activity, with docks reaching into the water for ships to load and unload their wares. To grow and flourish, the waterfront businesses needed workers living within easy walking distance.

Build houses, Howard understood, and the people were sure to come.

John Eager Howard was a land owner, not a builder, so instead of developing the property himself, he decided to make his land available to others. He named the area Howard's Addition, created a street grid, divided the land into individual plots, each big enough for one large house or a number of smaller houses, then put the parcels up for lease.

Notice I say Howard put the parcels up for lease, not for sale. Like many other Baltimore land owners, Howard chose to lease his land for a yearly "ground rent" rather than sell it outright. The leases were for 99 years. So long as people paid their rent each year, the land was theirs to build on and use as they wished, and they owned everything they built. When they decided to sell, the buyers paid them for the value of the houses and anything else built on the property, then assumed responsibility for the yearly ground rent owed to the Howard family.

In 1783 Howard leased the first plot of land in his South Baltimore holdings to Philip Ling. The parcel took up a full city block starting at the southwest corner of Sharp and Lee, continuing south to York



**1783 Lease between John Eager Howard and Philip Ling**

Street (then called Busy Alley — more on the name change later) and west to Howard Street. The yearly rent for the property was 50 pounds, about \$5,000 in today's dollars.

Howard included one important stipulation in Ling's contract. Ling was required to build "a good and substantial dwelling house on the premises" within six years of the sale or pay a yearly fine. Savvy businessman that he was, Howard understood he would attract more investors if they saw houses already built in the area.

## The Land Parcels Sold Quickly

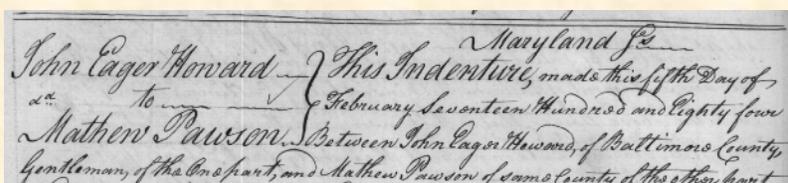
By the end of that first year Howard had leased seven more parcels, some in the area around Sharp and Lee, others around Montgomery Street near the water's edge. By the end of

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1784 he added close to 20 new parcels to the list. In two years Howard leased more than half the land he owned in the area.

The people who leased Howard's land divided into two basic groups. The first group was made up of speculators who planned to build houses for rent or sale, not live in them. Philip Ling was likely a speculator; I found no indication he ever lived on the property he leased. The second group built houses for themselves to live in, sometimes also building income-producing houses for rent or sale on the rest of the property.

Matthew Pawson, a shipmaster and merchant, belonged to the second group. In 1784 he leased the land on the southeast corner of Sharp and Lee across the street from



**1784 Lease between John Eager Howard and Matthew Pawson**

Philip Ling's property, where 137 West Lee stands today. Pawson's lease cost him 18 pounds a year, about \$1,650 in today's dollars. His contract also included the stipulation that he build a house on the property or pay a yearly fine.

I found indications that a house was built on the Pawson property a few years after he leased it, but the records are short on details, so I can't be certain. I do know that the property passed through a number of hands over the next twenty years. Then in 1805, Benjamin Berry leased the property. The Berry family held onto it for the next 80 years.

The sketch at right shows the house built on the property around the time Benjamin Berry acquired it. Though a number of houses had already been built nearby, this is the oldest house still standing in the neighborhood so far as I can tell. There may be some old foundations and walls that predate it, but if so, they no longer retain the architectural integrity of the original structures.



**Sketch of the original house at the SE corner of Lee and Sharp**

The Benjamin Berry House, on the other hand, survives mostly intact. If you compare the current house at 137 West Lee to the sketch, you can tell by its size as well as the placement of windows, doors and chimneys that it retains the basic shape and structure of the original, though significant additions have been made over the years.

Though the Benjamin Berry House is likely the oldest still standing in the Otterbein neighborhood, it is by no means the oldest in the general area. That honor goes to a few houses on Montgomery Street which date back as far as 1783 and 1787.

## The Berry Family Moves In

Benjamin Berry was a member of a large family which had lived in Maryland since the early 1700s. A few years after Benjamin leased the Pawson property in 1805, his brothers John and Thomas acquired parcels of land on the west side of the street, meaning the three brothers rented or owned most of the property near the corner of Lee on both sides of Sharp Street.

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The Berry family were brick makers, one of six such families in Baltimore. Making brick was an important industry in the city for good reason: the abundance of clay in the city's soil. You can't tell from looking at today's grass-covered Federal Hill, for instance, but it is basically one large mound of clay. The first European to write about it was Captain John Smith (whose life, according to legend, was saved when Pocohantas pleaded with her father to spare his life) in 1608. Smith described it as "a great red bank of clay flanking a natural harbor basin." Over the centuries, the hill was mined for its clay and sand, leaving it honey-combed with a maze of shafts and tunnels which have been the cause of sinkholes and cave-ins over the years.

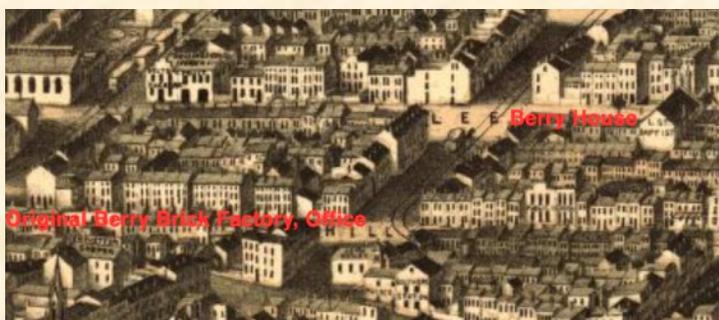


Portion of an 1803 painting of Federal Hill

But the richest areas for brick making weren't in the Federal Hill area. They were a mile to the west where large deposits of clay from the Patapsco River and the Chesapeake Bay could be found. During the 19th century as many as ten brick making businesses were clustered together within a few blocks of each other in the area, near today's Carroll Park.

The Berry's didn't manufacture the red brick we see when we walk and drive through so much of the city, earning Baltimore the nickname, "The City of Bricks." The Berry's specialized in making fire bricks used to line the insides of furnaces and smelters. It was a far more precise, demanding process since each brick had to be shaped to exact measurements to assure a tight fit and be able to withstand intense heat. Before the Berry's, fire brick had to be imported from England. Because they made it locally, the Berry family could sell it for half the going price.

The Berry brothers didn't locate their operations near the other brick makers. They set up shop closer to home, just a few blocks south of their residences on Sharp and Lee Streets. They purchased a triangular plot of land on the southwest corner of Sharp and Hill, the spot where a large old elm tree stands today. At the time, houses hadn't been built that far south on Sharp, so their brick manufacturing site was on previously undeveloped land.



The location of the Berry House and original brick factory



The brick factory location today



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Thomas — had twelve enslaved people between them, and their mother, Elizabeth, who lived with Benjamin, had four more, making a total of sixteen.

History too often treats enslaved people as anonymous pieces of property instead of human beings deserving of individual attention. The best I can do to correct that misconception here is to list the names, ages and estimated monetary value of all 16 enslaved people kept by the Berry family. Starting with the youngest, they were:

Ben, age 5: \$10.  
Nance, age 7: \$20.  
Elsey, age 10: \$40.  
Kitty, age 14, \$80.  
Patty, age 16: \$80.  
William, age 17: \$125.  
Isaac, age 19: \$125.  
Jacob, age 21: \$125.  
Henry, age 22: \$125.  
Joe, age 28: \$125.  
Ned, age 28: \$125.  
Perry, age 28: \$125.  
Nelly, age 35: \$80.  
John, age 37: \$125.  
Peter, age 38: \$125.  
Philip, age 40: \$125.

Over recent decades, historians have done extensive research into the institution of slavery, revealing a great deal of information about the importance of the institution to the young nation, not only as a source of labor but as a source of wealth for their owners and for the country as a whole. The Berry family is a case in point. Enslaved people made up a significant portion of the family's personal wealth. According to tax records, the estimated monetary value of the people enslaved by Benjamin, John and Thomas Berry was \$1,100 in 1815 dollars. Between the three brothers, they also owned seven parcels of land with a total monetary value of \$2,400. That means almost a third of the brothers' personal wealth was in the form of the human beings they were allowed to claim ownership for as a result of the institution of slavery.

## **A Rich and Poor, Black and White Neighborhood**

The Berry family was well off financially, but that didn't mean the area near the corner of Sharp and Lee was a wealthy enclave. Far from it. Many of their neighbors made their money as laborers, craftspeople, grocers, accountants, mariners, harness makers and other occupations common in 19th century Baltimore. The area was racially mixed as well, with a significant number of Free Black people living and working alongside White people in the neighborhood.

Social and economic diversity of this kind was common in cities before automobiles and mass transportation changed the distance people could travel easily. Baltimore was a walking city throughout most of its history. That meant everything people needed to live their day-to-day lives, like the goods sold in grocery and dry goods stores, had to be located nearby. People also needed carpenters, shoe makers and doctors as well as skilled and unskilled laborers living and working in the community. Their places of work had to be within walking distance as well.

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A grocery store was located on the corner of Sharp and Barre, a block north of the Berry family's homes, and there may have been another grocery even closer at the corner of Welcome Alley. The buildings functioned as both businesses and homes, with the stores occupying the front portion of the house and the family living behind and above the stores. That was true for craftspeople who lived on that stretch of Sharp Street as well. The shoe maker's workshop down the street, for instance, would occupy the front area of the house, where neighbors could walk in and buy a new pair of shoes or have a current pair repaired, while the shoe maker's family lived in the rest of the house.

You can see evidence of the old shops in the form of glass storefronts on at least three houses on Sharp between Barre and Hill. That's because the people who bought the houses for a dollar in the 1970s were required to preserve the historical integrity of the neighborhood, which meant leaving the glassed-in commercial fronts of their homes intact. Casual passersby today might think they could open the front door of one of these houses and walk into an active business, only to find themselves in the middle of someone's living room.

People whose livelihoods centered on the thriving Inner Harbor had to live close by as well. The workers who loaded and unloaded the cargo-laden ships and made just enough to scrape by needed to live a few blocks from the water so they could walk to work. So did more affluent business owners and managers. The result was an economically mixed neighborhood with a diverse assortment of people living close to one another.



**A storefront house on Sharp Street**

## Small Houses, Large Houses, Alley Houses

The different types of houses on Sharp Street, Lee Street and the rest of historic Otterbein reflect the economic diversity of the neighborhood. Some houses have less than a thousand square feet of living space, originally built for people living on low incomes, while others belonging to wealthier residents are as large as 4,500 square feet.

Most houses in the Otterbein neighborhood fit one of three architectural styles, all of which can be found in many older neighborhoods throughout the city: the smaller Federal style houses with two full stories and a sloping-roofed attic built between the late 1700s and about 1850, and the larger three story houses built in the Grecian or Italianate styles between 1840 and the 1860s.

The Benjamin Berry House is an exception to the rule, however. It was custom designed and built to serve the specific needs of its wealthy owners.

The smallest houses in the neighborhood are those located on narrow alley streets. Most of them are built in one of the three house styles found in the rest of the neighborhood, but on a smaller scale. That meant they could be rented for less, making them suitable for the lowest income workers in the area.

Though Welcome Alley is the only alley street in the neighborhood that still retains its original name and some of its original houses, there are actually three alley streets in the

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Otterbein neighborhood. York and Hughes are alleys as well, as can be seen from their narrow streets. The houses that once lined those two streets were similar to those still found on Welcome Alley, but they were torn down over the years, and the street names were changed. York Street was originally known as Busy Alley. Hughes Street was originally Honey Alley.

## **Black and White Residents Lived Near One Another**

Residents of the houses on the blocks near the corner of Sharp and Lee were racially mixed as well as economically diverse, with White and free Black residents living close by one another, but as with most aspects of this country's troubled racial history, the story is complicated.

Baltimore had the largest Free Black population in the country in the early 1800s. In the late 1700s, before many houses were built south of Pratt Street, there was a vibrant, well established free Black community north of Pratt Street near Sharp Street. The neighborhood was home to the Sharp Street United Methodist Church between Pratt and Conway Streets, which is known as the Mother Church of Black Methodists in Maryland. The same site housed the African Academy, the first school for Free Black children in the South.

Free Black residents moved to the areas south of Pratt Street at the same time White residents did, and for the same reasons. They wanted to take advantage of job opportunities along the growing Inner Harbor.

When Free Black people moved into what is now the Otterbein neighborhood, they tended to live on the alley streets for the simple reason that the only employment opportunities available to most of them were the lowest paying jobs, which meant the smaller-sized alley houses were what they could afford.

At the time, people lived on a given city block more due to their occupation and income than their race, so poor Black and White people lived together on the alley streets. That changed over the years as White workers were able to advance to better paying jobs while Black workers were denied the necessary training and advancement opportunities. Over the next few decades, White people who had been living in alley houses could afford to move, so residents of the alley streets gradually became predominantly, then exclusively Black.

## **Immigration Changes the Neighborhood**

Baltimore's population continued to grow, nearly tripling from 80,000 in 1830 to 212,000 in 1860. However, the city did not build enough new housing to keep up with the increased demand. As a result more people had to be crowded into the city's existing living spaces.

The crowding was due to increased population pressure, both from people moving to Baltimore from outlying areas and from the influx of European immigrants arriving in Baltimore. From 1830 to 1860 the largest portion of the immigrants came from Germany and Ireland. Most of them arrived with little in the way of money, possessions or marketable skills, so they were forced to crowd too many people into too little living space to keep their housing costs in line with their meager incomes.

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Today's Otterbein and Federal Hill areas were becoming more crowded along with the rest of the city. At the time, few houses had been built south of Cross and West Streets — development of those areas would come decades later — so the newcomers to South Baltimore had to crowd into the existing housing. The best way for the owners of the houses to make room for more people was to divide houses that had been single family dwellings into two, three or four separate living units. Some houses began listing themselves as boarding houses as well, meaning the residents could get meals as well as lodging.

And then there was the Benjamin Berry House.

Benjamin Berry died in 1833. His mother Elizabeth, the last member of the Berry family to live there, remained in the house until her death in 1839. The family continued to own the house until 1885, but they turned it into a rental property.

The Benjamin Berry House is much larger than the houses around it, so it could be cut up into more rental units than its neighbors. The house was divided into eight units and sometimes had more than twenty residents. The heads of households listed in the 1864 city directory included two carpenters, a printer, a harness maker, a cabinet maker, a deputy marshal and a pharmacist. The pharmacist listed the house as his place of business as well as his residence, meaning the front part of the Berry house began to be used as a store for the first time. It remained a pharmacy through the first decades of the 20th century when it was replaced by other commercial enterprises.

A few years later, the house was listed as a boarding house as well.

Not surprisingly the trend toward cutting up houses into smaller living units was taking place in the smaller houses on Welcome Alley as well. Some of them were divided into as many as five units.

The neighborhood was changing, and not for the better. As often happens in the decades after houses are built, the neighborhood was showing its age. Between overcrowding and the physical deterioration of some of the properties due to neglect of their owners, it was becoming a more impoverished, less desirable place to live. Many of the wealthier residents moved to more affluent locations, adding their previously well kept homes to the list of houses being subdivided, rented and, in many cases, neglected.

## Another Wave of Immigration

Three years after the Civil War ended in 1865, Locust Point, a few miles southeast of today's Otterbein area, became Baltimore's main port of entry for European immigrants, second only to Ellis Island in the number of immigrants who passed through its doors. Many of the new arrivals walked straight onto waiting B&O railroad cars and headed for destinations out of state. Others ferried across the Inner Harbor to the Fells Point and Canton areas. And many of the arriving immigrants chose to take the two



The Locust Point pier, late 1800s

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mile journey northwest to our area.

The new wave of immigrants were mostly Eastern European, from countries like Russia, Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, bringing with them languages, cultures and religions which significantly altered the ethnic and cultural makeup of the city. And once again, the city's population doubled, reaching 434,000 in 1890.

The immigrants continued their steady arrival at Locust Point through the first decade of the 20th century until the flow of immigrants was halted by the beginning of World War I.

The 1910 census provides detailed information about everyone who lived in our area: addresses, ages, races, countries of origin, occupations and more. The houses on the blocks which make up the historic Otterbein neighborhood held about 2,500 people with the population divided neatly into thirds. A third of the area's residents were Black and born in the U.S., a third were White and born in the U.S., and a third were White immigrants born abroad. However, the number of actual immigrants understates the size of the immigrant community, since many of those born in the U.S. were first generation Americans whose parents came during earlier waves of immigration. A more accurate representation would be that closer to two-thirds of the White population in the area were either immigrants or first generation Americans.

This wave of immigration brought a sizable Jewish population to our area for the first time in its history. Small numbers of Jews had been in Baltimore since the 1700s, and during the early decades of the 19th century a sizable number of Jews from Germany lived in the Lombard Street area east of the Inner Harbor, which is now known as Little Italy. The majority of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who passed through Locust Point gravitated to the established Jewish area, but others, mostly those from Lithuania, decided to settle here. Even more specifically most of them came from the town of Taurage. The immigrants from that city were so prominent in the area, Baltimore's greater Jewish community often referred to their synagogue on Hanover just north of Welcome Alley as the Tavriger Schul (the Taurage Synagogue) rather than its actual name, Anshe Emunah.



**Anshe Emunah Synagogue, Hanover Street**

By the first decade of the 20th century, our area had two synagogues within a few blocks of one another, Anshe Emunah on Hanover and Rolfe Tzedek on Hill Street between Hanover and Charles. At their height, they had well over a thousand congregants between them.

The neighborhood also had two Roman Catholic churches, one serving a Black congregation and the other a White congregation, and a Methodist Episcopal Church. Residents could also attend an African Methodist Episcopal Church, a United Brethren Church, two Lutheran Churches and a Baptist Church within easy walking distance.

The concentration of immigrants and Black residents in the area is a clear indication that it was among the poorest in the city. New immigrants tend to enter the country at the bottom of the economic ladder, and our shameful racial history has denied Black people equal opportunity to advance economically.

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The immigrant population often lived in homes adjacent to their countrymen and women, usually living in overcrowded rooms of houses which had been cut up into separate apartments. Most of the Black population was concentrated in the small alley street houses, which were cut up into even smaller units to crowd in as many residents as possible.

The area had earned the reputation as a slum by this time, as can be seen in a description in a 1910 article in the Baltimore Sun about people who lived in this neighborhood enduring the discomforts of a Baltimore summer: "In crowded tenements, where in a good many instances whole families of from four to ten people live in one room, in the Southern section of the city, there is sorrow and keen disappointment, to say nothing of the terrible suffering from the hot weather and lack of proper nourishment. It is an awful condition for these poor creatures to be in."

Descriptions such as this fall back on familiar stereotypes about poverty, robbing the neighborhood of the social vibrancy which poorer neighborhoods often share, but there was no question that the living conditions in the neighborhood were deplorable. The best many families in the area could hope for was to keep roofs over their heads and food on their tables.

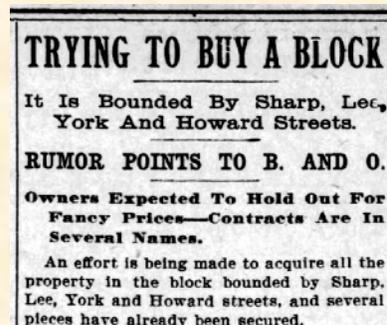
## The Berry House Is Sold

The house on the corner of Lee and Sharp Streets which had been owned by the Berry family since 1805 was sold out of the family in 1885, but it continued to serve the same purpose it had in the decades since the Berry's moved elsewhere, with a store of some kind in the front and renters or boarders living in the rest of the house. The 1910 census lists four families, a total of 23 people, in the house. Two of the heads of household were born in Maryland, a carriage driver and a hat factory worker. The others were a dry goods merchant from Russia and an engraver from Scotland.

In 1917, the space in the front of 137 West Lee which housed the pharmacy was occupied by two tailors who used it to manufacture and sell clothing. One of the tailors was a member of the Bank family that arrived in our neighborhood in 1888. Over the years, the Banks occupied as many as 17 houses in the neighborhood where they lived and made clothing. Joseph A. Bank, who was two years old when he arrived in the U.S., went on to found the Jos. A Bank clothing outlets which today can be found around the country.

## Houses Demolished to Expand Camden Yards

In the first years of 1900, most of the neighborhood houses built between 1805 and the Civil War were still intact. That meant on Sharp Street near Lee, both sides of the street were lined with houses. Then seemingly out of nowhere, homeowners on the west side of Sharp began to get offers for their houses. It didn't take long for rumors to circulate that someone was trying to buy up the block without attracting notice, approaching the owners individually in hopes of purchasing the property as cheaply as possible. The most likely



1905 article in The Sun

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buyer, most people thought, was the B&O railroad which was in the process of expanding the Camden Yards station area. A few years earlier work had begun on the warehouse which today forms the east side of the Camden Yards Baseball Stadium, so it seemed likely the railroad was involved.



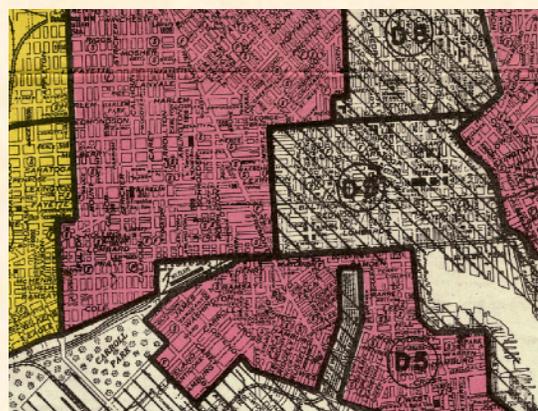
The B&O warehouse under construction, around 1905

The rumors turned out to be true. B&O bought all the houses on the west side of Sharp Street between Lee and Hill, knocked them down and put warehouses and railroad tracks in their place. Some years later they did the same with the west side of Sharp from Lee to Barre, laying tracks where the houses once had been.

Other than the demolition of the homes on the west side of Sharp by the B&O Railroad, the only physical change to the neighborhood over the next few decades was the gradual deterioration of the housing stock due to neglect by their owners.

## The Neighborhood Is “Redlined”

In 1937 at the height of the Depression, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration created maps dividing cities into areas that would be eligible for government insured loans and those which would not be able to take out loans protected by the federal government. These were the infamous “redlining” maps, given the name because the areas considered a bad risk for home loans were colored red. Our neighborhood was given a bottom-of-the-barrel D5 rating because it was considered “hazardous due to its poor housing conditions, influx of undesirable residents, and predicted decline.” It shared the rating with many of the neighborhoods south of Pratt Street.



The 1937 “redline map” in our area

What made the neighborhood “undesirable” according to the federal government? It was the mixture of Black residents and Whites who were either immigrants or first generation Americans. As a result, no one in the neighborhood could get a government insured loan to buy or fix up properties. This created a vicious cycle of disinvestment in the area, deteriorating housing and low levels of home ownership, all of which increased the concentration of poverty.

## The Population Changes

The U.S. limited the number of immigrants who could enter the country after World War I, so the flood of immigrants who arrived on our shores from Europe in the 19th and the early 20th centuries slowed to a trickle. Meanwhile, the fortunes of many of the immigrants who settled here before World War I improved over the years, so they and their children could afford to move to nicer neighborhoods.

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The Jewish population provides a good example of how the area's population changed. The two synagogues in the neighborhood where over a thousand congregants worshipped in the early 20th century closed their doors by the 1950s for lack of membership. Anshe Emunah on Hanover Street, the larger of the two, had only 60 remaining members.

In the 1950s the neighborhood still had a mixture of Black and White residents, but they mostly lived separately. The houses on Lee and Barre streets had mainly White residents, Welcome Alley was exclusively Black, and the houses south of Lee Street had mainly Black residents.

## Plans For an Expressway and Urban Renewal

An expressway taking the I-95 highway through Baltimore was inevitable. The only question was where it should go. A number of plans were proposed and rejected, until the planners settled on a route in 1964 between Montgomery and Henrietta Streets which continued through the Federal Hill neighborhood, cutting a slice off the top of Federal Hill before it crossed the Inner Harbor and landed in the area where Harbor East is today. If the plan had been adopted, the Sharp-Leadenhall neighborhood would have been destroyed, the Federal Hill neighborhood would have been cut to pieces and an unsightly highway would have cut across the harbor. Today's thriving Harbor East area would never have come into existence.

The plans were eventually abandoned, and the expressway route was moved south to the Locust Point area and through the Fort McHenry tunnel. But a great deal of damage had already been done. Houses in the Sharp-Leadenhall neighborhood were demolished in preparation for the expressway that never happened, meaning the people who lived in those houses had to relocate. A number of them moved into what is now the Otterbein neighborhood.

While plans were being made for an expressway through the city, Baltimore was also working on plans for an urban revival, to turn the city into something more modern and attractive than it was. One of the prime targets for an upgrade was the Inner Harbor. If the waterfront could be transformed into an attractive destination for tourists and Baltimore residents, city leaders reasoned, it would bring people and money to the city's core area and reverse Baltimore's downward slide. And the planned revitalization wouldn't stop at the water's edge. It would level all the old, deteriorating houses west of the Inner Harbor and replace them with new condos and apartments.



**The 1964 plans for an expressway and the Inner Harbor area in a Baltimore Sun article. The current Otterbein neighborhood is circled.**

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To modernize the area west of the Inner Harbor, the city bought the existing housing, condemned it and moved the current residents out. Only then could the city knock everything down and rebuild the area from scratch. Among the residents sent packing were people who had recently relocated from the Sharp-Leadenhall area.

The houses set for condemnation needed to be appraised so the city could determine how much to pay their owners. The appraisal of 137 Lee describes the delapidated condition of the house. The first floor, which at different times held a pharmacy, a retail clothing store and a lunch counter, stood empty. Many of the rooms were empty as well. The two rented rooms on the second floor went for \$7 and \$18 a week. The condition of the house was “terrible with poor maintenance by tenants and owner, raw garbage in hall, rats in first floor, etc.” The city determined that the house and property were worth \$7,000.

When the city bought the former Benjamin Berry House and sent the current residents packing, it was in poor shape, but it was mostly intact. As it awaited the wrecking ball it deteriorated further. Most of the glass windows were gone, the front door was boarded up and a chain link fence was erected around the property to keep trespassers and vandals away. The same was true of the houses on Sharp Street to the north of Lee. They were windowless, character-less houses waiting to be torn down.

Meanwhile, the area from the Inner Harbor all the way to the east side of Hanover Street had been reduced to rubble, and the last remaining stretch of housing from Hanover to Sharp, today’s Historic Otterbein neighborhood, was next on the list. However, due to a combination of the tireless efforts of people who protested the removal of the houses and the city running low on funds for the project, the houses were saved. The city decided to sell them for a dollar each to people who were willing to renovate them.

In 1975, potential buyers stoured the neighborhood. If they were interested in buying one of the dollar houses, they filled out an application. The response was large enough that most of the houses had more than one interested buyer, so the city held a drawing in August.

The Benjamin Berry House, 137 West Lee, went to Mike Peach, and he became one of the new owners who invested money, time and sweat equity in making his house not just livable but an attractive addition to the city’s housing stock. The four photos below show 137 West Lee in various stages of repair and renovation.

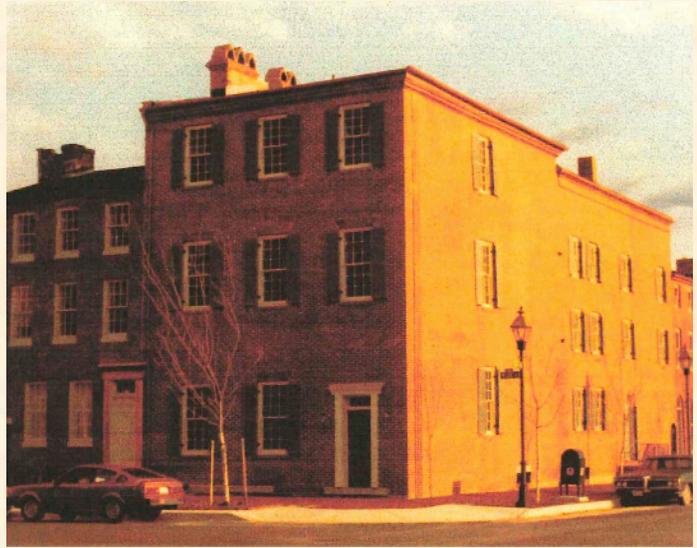
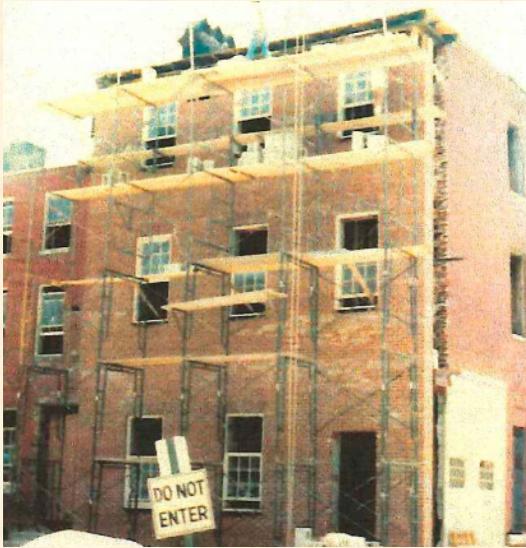
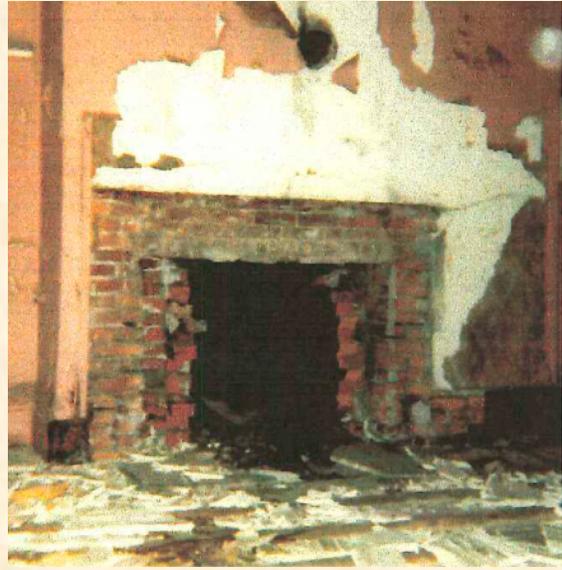
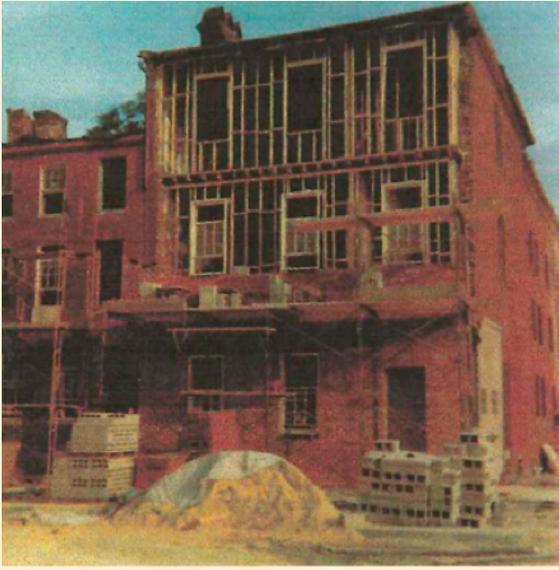


**137 West Lee after it was condemned, waiting to be torn down**



**Sharp Street north of Lee**

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN



Areas in the neighborhood where there were no houses to renovate either had new housing built on them or were converted to pocket parks.

The new homeowners wanted to have a name for their new neighborhood to distinguish it from the other housing being built around it. They decided to use the name of the nearby city landmark, the Otterbein Church, which was a few blocks away and had been on that spot since the 1780s.

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN