

Neighborhood Spotlight: Otterbein

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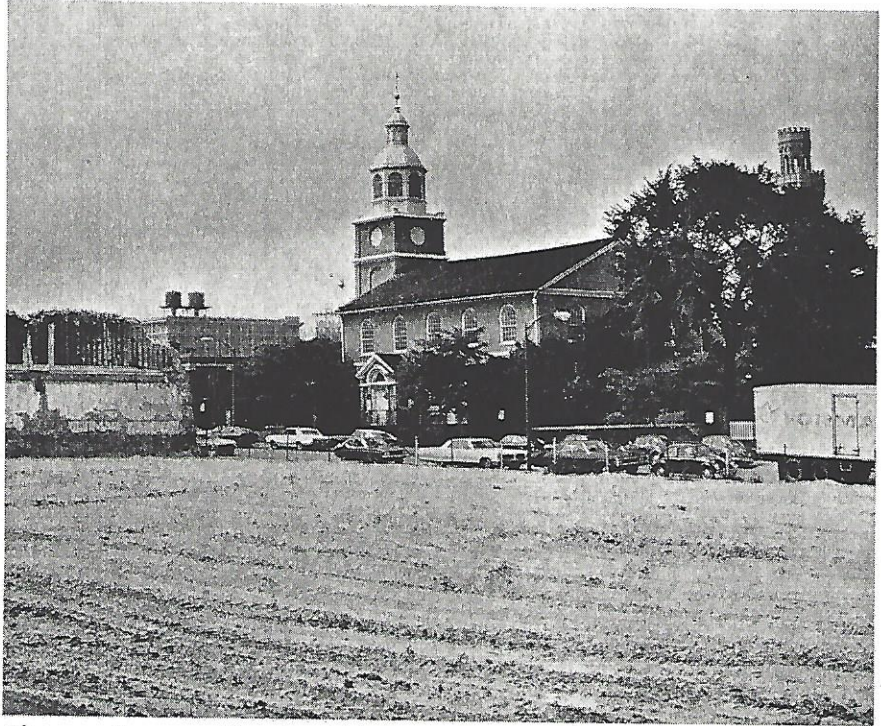
Encompassing most of the western portion of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Otterbein is one of the oldest sections of Baltimore, with a rich and varied history typical of many inner city areas. However, it is not its past for which it is noted, but rather for its present and future, perhaps best exemplified by its Urban Homesteading Program — the so-called "dollar houses" — for which Baltimore has received international acclaim.

Even the name "Otterbein," rich in the history of Baltimore, has only recently been applied to the area. At the inception of the homesteading program, the name "Otterbein" was given to the area adjoining the Old Otterbein Church, which was constructed in 1785 and is the oldest church still standing in the City of Baltimore.

Otterbein lies nestled between the Inner Harbor to the east, Camden Yards to the west, the Convention Center to the north, and Montgomery Street to the south. It is a solely residential neighborhood, close in location but remote in character from the busy commercial area surrounding it.

When the City condemned the properties in the early 1970's, Otterbein was essentially a slum. A freeway originally was planned through the area, but when the location of the freeway was moved, it was decided the Otterbein houses would be razed, and new housing would be erected on the land.

However, responding to the protests of numerous preservation groups and individuals, the City reconsidered and, in 1975, decided to offer the houses to the public for one dollar each, with the stipulation that each purchaser renovate and subsequently live in the house. The program was a huge success. More than 800 people applied for the 100 single family houses (multi-family



The area is named for the Old Otterbein Church, which was built in 1785 and is the oldest existing church in the City.

houses being awarded later), and winners were selected by lottery in the summer of 1975. Today virtually all of the properties have been renovated and are occupied.

The land was owned originally by John Eager, Jr., grandfather of John Eager Howard. Sharp Street is one of the oldest streets in the City and is shown in a 1781 lithograph, at which time the rest of Otterbein was a rural wooded area.

John Eager Howard later inherited the land, subdivided it in the late 1770's, and began selling it. The earliest residents and businesses were all related to the port — coopers, chandlers, captains, ship's carpenters, etc. At that time, the harbor extended to Charles Street, and Lee Street extended to the Lee Street Wharf, a center of port activity.

Matthew Pawson (a ship's captain

and sea merchant) purchased two lots from John Eager Howard and constructed a house at what is now W. Lee Street. This house appears on a 1792 map and is the oldest house in Otterbein. In 1792, there were four other houses in Otterbein owned by Captain Pawson and rented to tenants — one on Barre Street and three on York Alley. Hill Street was still a farm and was owned by James McHenry, who later constructed a cooper shop at the corner of Sharp and Hill, and a blacksmith shop and stable at the corner of Hill and Hanover.

In the late 1700's, three brothers, John, Horatio and Benjamin Berry, moved to Baltimore and settled in Otterbein. Benjamin was a brick-maker and established a brickyard on Hill Street. He and John also were members of the First Branch of the

THIS TREE IS BEHIND 113/115 W. HILL
Otterbein



By the early 1970's, Otterbein was condemned. In 1975 the City reconsidered and sold the dilapidated homes for \$1 each.

City Council (the equivalent of today's House of Delegates). Benjamin built a house at 137 W. Lee Street in 1805, which also is still standing today, and is the second oldest house in Otterbein.

By 1805, there were 10 houses in the neighborhood. In 1806, the residents petitioned for, and received, a water pump, one of the first in the City. Seven people, including John

Eager Howard, were assessed a portion of the cost of the pump, which the City placed at the corner of Sharp and Lee Streets.

By the mid-1820's, there were approximately 25 houses in Otterbein. In the 1830's, the neighborhood proximity to the railroad caused a dramatic increase in population, and by 1860, buildings had been constructed on virtually every lot.

Early residents included Moses Sheppard and Enoch Pratt.

Dr. Matthew Donavin, who married one of Benjamin Berry's granddaughters, founded a drug company on Lee Street. He was a member of the First Branch of the City Council until 1877, when he became a member of the Second Branch (equivalent to the Senate), and was one of the prime movers to make Federal Hill a park.

Until the 1860's, Otterbein was still primarily an English neighborhood. In the 1860's, German immigrants began moving into the area and by the 1880's, it was almost exclusively German.

In the late 1800's, several members of the Bank family lived in Otterbein. Charles Bank (grandfather of Joseph A. Bank) lived at 610 S. Hanover Street. His manufacturing company, Charles Bank Clothing Company, was located at 103 W. Hill Street. Charles Bank's daughter and son-in-law (who later took the Bank family name) lived at 612 S. Hanover Street. They raised nine children there, one of whom was Joseph A. Bank, the clothier.

By 1910, cottage industry (factories in houses) was common. There were also several doctors' offices in Otterbein at that time, as well as a drug store at the corner of Lee and Hanover Streets, a tailor and a chocolate factory. At that time, Otterbein had many small businesses and shops. The shops are no longer in existence, but the storefronts remain today, having been restored to their original character.

Through 1920, Otterbein was still considered to be a very fine neighborhood. In the 1920's and 1930's, its location between the two major forms of transportation (the port and the railroad) had a huge impact on the neighborhood, and by the 1940's, the neighborhood had begun to decline seriously. Homes were no longer owner-occupied,

Otterbein

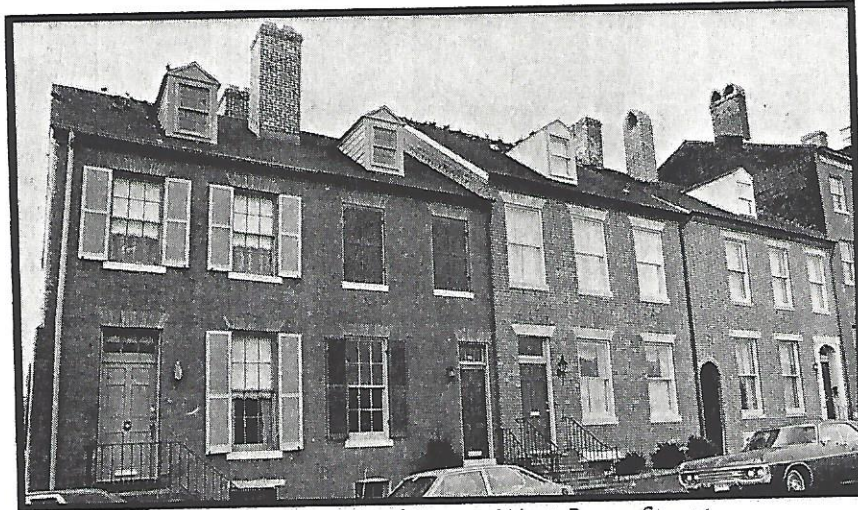


Rising above new townhouses on Sharp Street is Baltimore's main business district.



Hill Street Church, pictured here in 1975, was an auto repair shop for several years. Now the renovated building houses four luxury condominiums.

Otterbein



Renovation complete on West Barre Street.

but were rented and soon became tenements. Absentee landlords did not maintain the properties, and they soon slid into serious disrepair. After 30 or so years of neglect, the City stepped in, beginning an entirely new chapter in the history of Otterbein.

The saga of the urban homesteaders could be said to parallel that of the early settlers, but in miniature. Just as the original residents moved in gradually, so did the homesteaders. The first came in the early fall of 1976, and several others followed shortly thereafter. The following summer only a dozen or so houses were occupied, but by the fall of 1977 more and more families were moving in. The residents initially lived behind gates and barbed wire fences, sharing the land with the rats scurrying over piles of debris.

Otterbein was not the first homesteading program in Baltimore, but nothing on its scale had been attempted before and, as such, it was a learning experience for the City agencies administering it and for the homesteaders themselves. What appeared to many people to be an easy and inexpensive form of home ownership turned out to be anything but that. The one dollar purchase

price was deceptive — renovation being far more expensive and complicated than new construction. Architectural guidelines and restrictions were formulated and were rigorously enforced — by both the City and other homesteaders. As the project got underway, many homesteaders pulled out when they discovered what was involved. Several contractors declared bankruptcy, and many others decided that one renovation was sufficient.

Although when one thinks of Otterbein, it is the dollar houses which immediately come to mind, there is more to Otterbein. The City razed many houses and large buildings which were not conducive to renovation, creating much vacant land. New homes have been constructed here and there throughout the area on major streets to present a uniform facade. Larger structures, such as the Hill Street Church and the Allon Building, are being renovated as condominiums. And on larger tracts of land, entire developments — such as Otterbein Court and Harbor Walk — have been constructed.

But the land is not as congested as it once was — much open space has been retained and today the community is interspersed with parks

and walkways for the residents to enjoy. In addition, the new Federal Reserve Bank on Sharp Street provides a welcome and very attractive buffer between Otterbein and Camden Yards.

Today, Otterbein once again is considered a very fine neighborhood and the residents are not so very different from the original settlers — lawyers, architects, judges, engineers, businessmen, etc. Residents of Otterbein combine the best of both worlds — living in a small cohesive residential community in the midst of a large city. Many residents who work in the downtown area particularly appreciate the convenience of being able to walk to work. With the Inner Harbor only two blocks away, Harborplace, the ethnic festivals and other harbor-related activities are at its doorstep.

Otterbein is one of the largest dollar homesteading communities in the country, and is constantly cited as an example of successful urban renewal. With its aged brick buildings, cobblestone alleys, brick sidewalks, and old fashioned lighting, it certainly must appear not much differently from 150 years ago. □

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New Year's Morning - 1979

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