

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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## Beginnings of the Otterbein and Sharp-Leadenhall Neighborhoods

by David Safier

If you want to learn about the origins of the Otterbein and Sharp-Leadenhall neighborhoods, you have to begin at the intersection of Pratt and Sharp streets. Today the area is home to the Convention Center, the U.S. Courthouse and a few hotels, but at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, it was filled with homes and churches.



Otterbein Neighborhood 1815, from the UMBC map

## Early Residents

In the last decades of the 1700s and into the 1800s, the vicinity around Sharp and Pratt was a community with Free Black and Quaker residents. In the ensuing decades the Free Black population would grow and move south toward Montgomery Street and into what is now the Sharp-Leadenhall neighborhood. The Quakers would gradually leave the area.

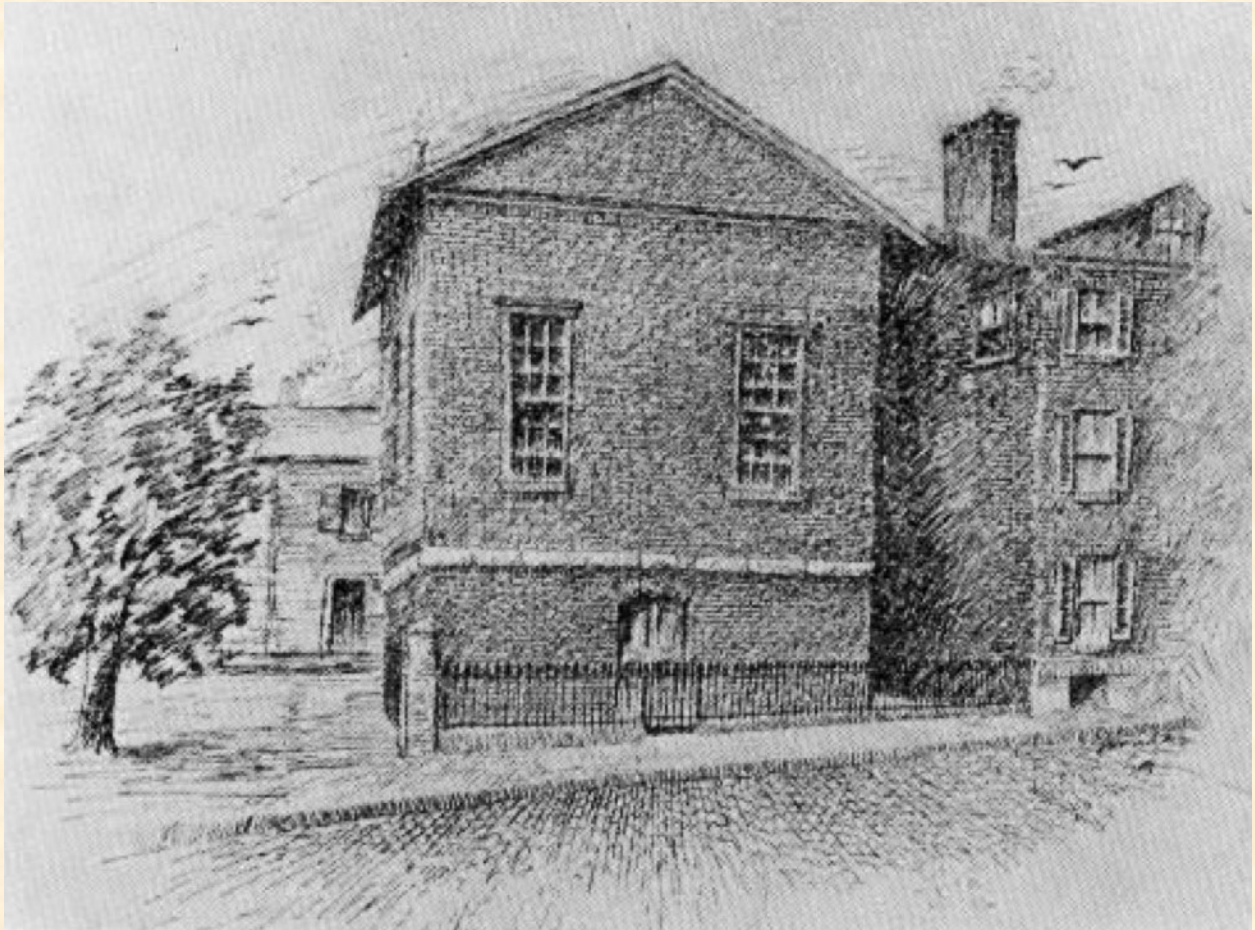
Quakers tended to be against the institution of slavery, and those in this area were no exception. They helped found the Baltimore Abolitionist Society in 1789 along with people of other faiths, including members of the Otterbein German Evangelical Reformed Church and the First Baptist Church.

Quakers Elisha Tyson and James Carey, members of the Abolitionist Society who lived on either side of Sharp Street north of Pratt, believed African Americans should have a permanent school. James Carey set aside a parcel of land between Lombard and Pratt to house the school. In 1797 the African Academy of Baltimore opened. It was the first school for Free Blacks in the South.

In 1802, the Baltimore African American Methodists bought the land from Carey and used it for the African Academy and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Elisha Tyson was a wealthy merchant. When he retired in 1817, he began the Baltimore Protection Society, which worked to keep free African Americans living in Baltimore from being

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**The original Sharp Street Methodist Episcopal Church**

kidnapped and sold into slavery. One incident featured in a book written in 1842 demonstrates Tyson's courage and commitment to the cause he espoused.

A poor woman had been seized by the agents of Woolfolk, the notorious Maryland slave dealer, and was carried along the street in which Elisha Tyson lived. When they arrived opposite his house, she demanded to see "Father Tyson." A crowd collected about the party, and she so far moved their pity, that they insisted that her wish should be complied with. One of the men hereupon went to inform his employer, who galloped off, pistol in hand, and found Elisha Tyson standing at his own door. Woolfolk with an oath declared he would "send him to hell for interfering with his property." Elisha Tyson coolly exposed his breast, telling him he dared not shoot, and that he (Woolfolk) "was in hell already, though he did not know it." An investigation followed; the poor woman was proved to be illegally detained, and was set at liberty.

Though there is no direct evidence that Baltimore was part of the Underground Railroad which helped people escape from slavery, historians believe the Sharp Street area was one of the places enslaved people were hidden as they traveled north to freedom. Elisha Tyson's name is mentioned as being part of those efforts as early as 1801.

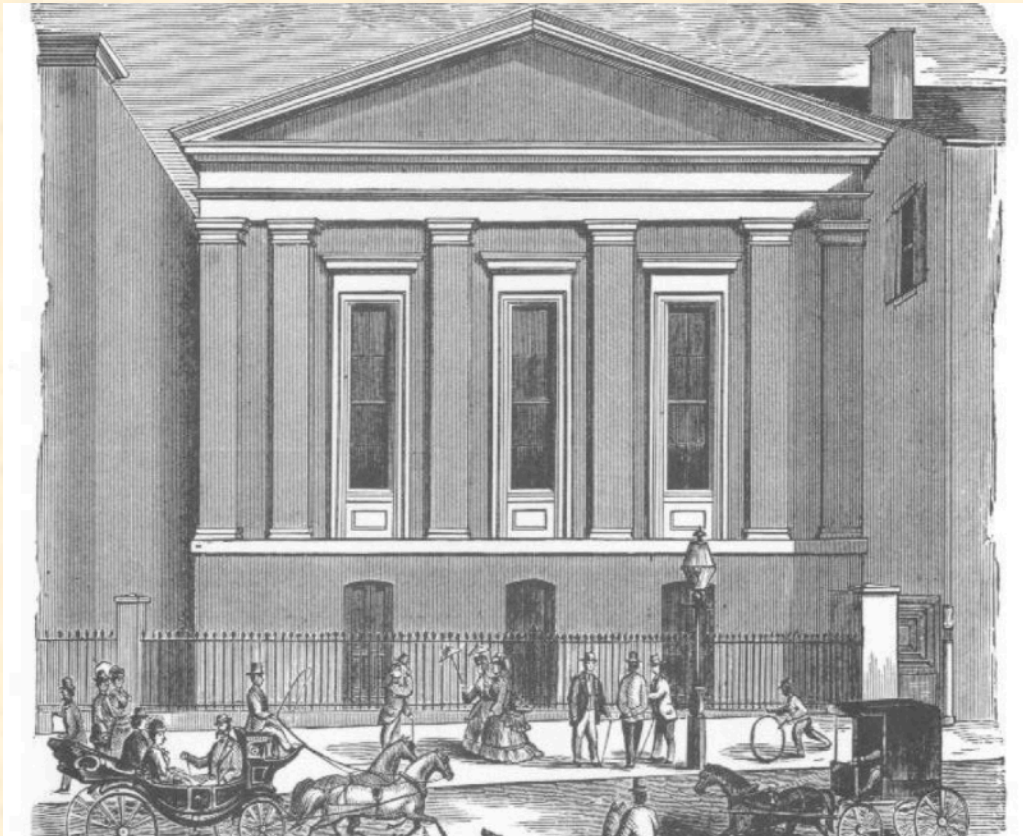
One of the earliest teachers at the African Academy was Daniel Coker. He escaped from a Maryland plantation, moved to New York and then to Baltimore where his supporters put together enough money to buy his freedom in 1801. Through his preaching and writing, Coker became a leader of the city's African American Methodist Community. In 1820 Coker was one of a group of African Americans who left the U.S. to settle in Sierra Leone in Africa, where he remained until he died in 1846.

The Methodist Church supported its African American members and was against slavery, but as was true of the history of racial relations in the U.S. from colonial to modern times, the

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Methodist leadership did not support full racial equality within the Church. In 1784, the Church decided it would excommunicate anyone who owned slaves and did not free them, but three years later, the Church withdrew the rule. It was difficult for African Americans to become ordained Methodist preachers, which meant that the Sharp Street Church remained under white authority. As a result, some African American Methodists formed the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The Sharp Street Church remained within the Methodist Episcopal Church, but some of its members left to join the Bethel AME Church in another part of the city.

The Sharp Street Church replaced its original building in 1860. The new building served the congregation until 1898 when it moved to Dolphin and Etting Streets, its current location.



**The Sharp Street Methodist Episcopal Church, 1860**

[Read more on the OCA website about some of the Black speakers and writers who worshipped and preached in the area.](#)