

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

[Return to the Otterbein History Page](#)

Public Schools in the Neighborhood

by David Safier

The Otterbein neighborhood had two public schools in use into the 1960s and 1970s — three if you count the school on Sharp north of Henrietta.

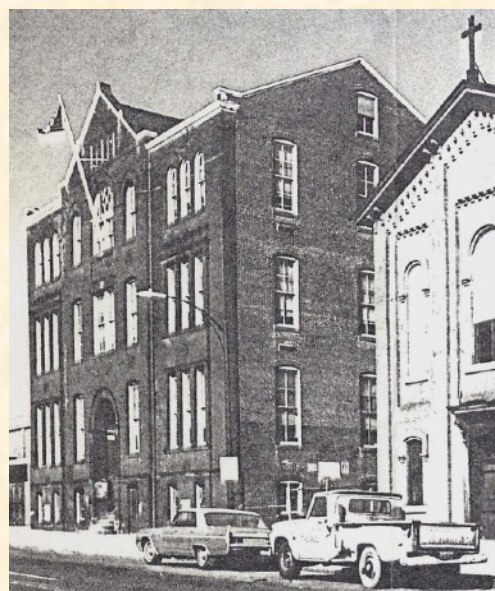
The northeast corner of Hanover and Lee Streets was home to Baltimore's Public School Number 4. Built in 1834, it was the fourth public school in the city. It was built in the "Grecian Temple" style and served the neighborhood children until it was replaced by a newer building in 1895.

In 1854 a school was built on Hill Street near Sharp. The student population of P.S. 4 had outgrown the building, so the younger children, ages 4 through 8, were taught in the school on Hill Street and the older children, 9 to 14, remained at the school on Hanover and Lee. The Hill Street school extended the entire width of what is now York Street Park and through the area occupied by 130, 132 and 134 Hill St.

Both schools were demolished when the empty homes in what is now Otterbein were sold for a dollar in the 1970s. They were replaced with townhouses.



P. S. 4 in 1890 on the northeast corner of Hanover and Lee



Harvey Johnson Jr. High on Hill, 1960s

P.S. 4 on the Corner of Hanover and Lee

P.S.4 was about 80 feet long and 50 feet wide. It took up the same space on Hanover as the current building on that site and was about 2/3s as long on the Lee Street side. Originally it had one classroom which took up the entire first floor for the boys and another on the ground floor for the girls. Each classroom could hold as many as 250 students ranging in age from 4 to 14 year olds, with a single teacher at the helm.

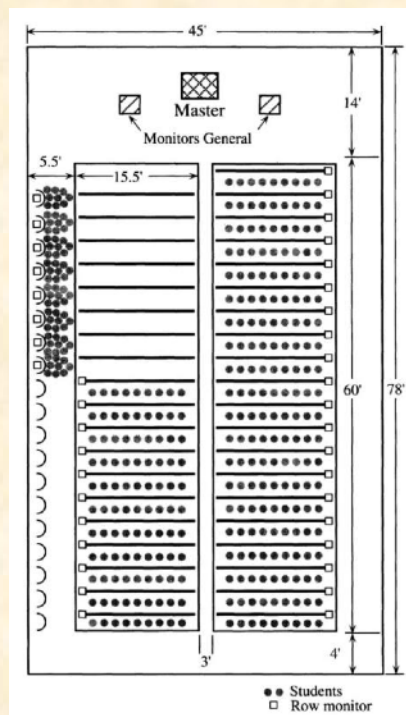
HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

The Monitorial System

How did one teacher manage more than a hundred students at a time? They used a version of the English Monitorial System, which was created to teach poor children with as little expense as possible. The room had rows and rows of desks running the width of the school. The floor slanted upward toward the back so the teacher could view the entire class from an elevated platform at the front of the room. Student “monitors” were placed at the end of the rows to take charge of a group of students. The monitors took their instructions from the teacher. As you can imagine, there was not much individual instruction going on.

The diagram at right shows how the original Baltimore classrooms were laid out.

The Monitorial System was abandoned by Baltimore’s schools in 1839, six years after P.S. 4 opened its doors. A divider was built to separate each large room into two smaller classrooms with one teacher in each room. Even then, teachers had to deal with more students than today’s educators can imagine.



Monitorial system diagram for Baltimore schools

Examination Day

Schools of the time held Examination Days, which were not so much tests of students’ knowledge as they were public showcases so parents and neighbors could see their children in school. In July, 1842, the Sun ran a series of articles, one for each “examination” in the city’s schools. The July 28 article was devoted to P.S. 4. Below are two excerpts from the article.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS.—Primary school No. 4, under the control of Messrs. J. H. Falconer, A. M., principal, and John Coulter, assistant, at the corner of Hanover and Lee streets, took place yesterday forenoon in the presence of as many ladies and gentlemen as the house could well accommodate. The male department consists of one hundred and ninety scholars. In the winter season it is much larger. Many parents, not so much for want of means as because they cannot spare the valuable services of their children, are obliged to retain them at home during the summer. It would be well if this could be avoided. Parents should remember the importance of education to their sons; they should especially recollect the impossibility of acquiring such an education as can be procured now, fifty years ago. By the present system, a boy can go to the ultimate point of improvement in the High School, at an expense of \$4 per annum. Such an opportunity should be embraced at almost any sacrifice, since these schools have now an established reputation not only for the excellence of their preceptors, but for the efficiency of the system pursued in them.

These and other remarks being terminated, the company retired to the basement, to attend the exercises of the female department consisting of 150 young ladies under the superintendance of Mrs. Henrietta King, principal, and her accomplished and intelligent daughter, Miss Henrietta Elizabeth King, assistant. The copy-books of the young ladies were carefully examined as most singularly fair specimens of penmanship. In this respect, every thing we have seen in the other schools, is at an immeasurable distance; and we would advise the rest, instead of being angry at the distinction, to go and do likewise. The junior class in arithmetic next lead off—Miss Mary Ann Crangle standing above the rest and giving out the questions.—The reading was well done, with the exception of too great a uniformity in the rise and fall of the voice, which, we fancy, may be remedied. This defect was the more observable, because the ladies read separately. The senior class in arithmetic was then exercised.

“The male department consists of one hundred and ninety scholars,” the article tells us. “In the winter season it is much larger.” The cost per student was “\$4 per annum.” That comes to about \$135 in today’s

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

dollars, which was a large sum for many families, especially if they were sending more than one child to school.

The article details the exercises of “the female department consisting of 150 young ladies under the superintendence of Mrs. Henrietta King, principal, and her accomplished and intelligent daughter, Miss Henrietta Elizabeth King, assistant.” The students’ copy-books were inspected for the quality of their penmanship, after which the girls went through some carefully rehearsed drills to show off their knowledge:

“The senior class in arithmetic was then exercised. The sum was an intricate one in practice. Miss Priscilla Dickinson performed the operation on the board, while Miss Elizabeth Crangle pointed to the figures—the whole class conducting the problem from beginning to conclusion. It was much admired.”

The article in the Sun gives us a look inside a 19th century schoolroom on Examination Day, but if you want to read a more thorough and thoroughly enjoyable depiction of the spectacle, go to Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer*, Chapter XXI, in which a marginally competent schoolmaster wielded his “rod and ferule” on students with abandon and a number of students give presentations. It ends in characteristic Twain fashion with a student prank on the schoolmaster.

The only photo I could find of the newer building on Hanover and Lee built in 1895 is from an aerial view of the neighborhood, which is why it is so grainy. When it closed in the 1960s it was called General Henry Lee Junior High. A playground was built on the north side of the school stretching to Welcome Alley, and a building which had housed a Jewish synagogue to the north of Welcome Alley was used as a cafeteria, gymnasium and extra classroom space.



General Henry Lee Jr. High, 1950s or 1960s

White School, “Colored School”

Originally the school on Hanover and Lee was for whites only, as were all public schools in Baltimore until 1869 when the city opened the first “colored schools” to serve Black children. The school continued to be segregated until the 1950s when desegregation crept into the school system. An article in the Sun in September, 1954, states “At the Junior High school No. 72, Hanover and Lee Sts., where two colored mathematics teachers were assigned, the all-white student body had little concern for their color.” In reality, Baltimore’s schools of the time remained mostly segregated.

In the early 1900s, the school on Hill Street was turned into a school for Black children, “Colored School 106.” It began as a grammar school, then became a junior high in 1926, later named Harvey Johnson Junior High after a pastor at the Union Baptist Church who lived in the Druid Hill neighborhood and was a civil rights activist. It remained open until the 1970s.

Turning older school buildings which had served white children into “colored schools” without renovating or modernizing them was a regular occurrence in the Baltimore School District. An article in the Afro-American newspaper in 1940 commented on the deplorable state of many of the city’s schools for Black students including the school on Hill Street which it said was one of the “antiquated buildings which house colored school children daily.”

A photo of the Harvey Johnson Junior High graduating class of 1955 was featured in the Afro-American on June 21, 1955.

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN



HARVEY JOHNSON GRADS—Some 56 pupils who received their diplomas from the Harvey Johnson Junior High School last week are shown here with their parents and friends in Leadenhall Baptist Church, where commencement exercises were held.

Seventeen of the graduates were honor students. Eight received special scholarships and awards. Featured at the commencement was a drama, "No Victory without Labor," presented by members of the graduating class.