

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

Remembering the Homesteaders of Otterbein

by Jacques Kelly for The Baltimore Sun

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A recent article about a million-dollar price on a West Lee Street rowhouse reminded me of the autumn of 1974, when I became a participant in neighborhood advocacy journalism. My article ran Nov. 1, 1974, in the old News American and detailed how the city was reconsidering the fate of dozens of early 19th-century homes that were scheduled to be torn down for temporary City Fair parking.

The Lee Street house, in what is known today as the Otterbein neighborhood, was then a vacant shell, a derelict piece of city-owned real estate. It, along with dozens nearby, sat vacant. They had been condemned as part of Inner Harbor West urban renewal clearance. An interstate highway was planned to plow through too.

Lee, Sharp, Hanover, Hill, York and Barre streets, as well as a little thoroughfare called Welcome Alley, are squarely on the edge of downtown but were not so well known in 1974. My late father, Joe Kelly, a South Baltimore native, knew these streets well and often used them as shortcuts. His vehicular paths through Baltimore were legendary.

On one of these trips, he piloted the family Dodge Dart Swinger along West Lee Street. I was a passenger and spotted an amazing collection of fine Baltimore rowhouses, a kind of lost neighborhood alongside Camden Station and the then-developing Inner Harbor. This ramshackle neighborhood stood in a kind of splendid isolation because so many surrounding industrial buildings, and an old school, had been recently razed.

The homes were once a thriving Baltimore neighborhood. Its local Roman Catholic Church, St. Joseph's on Lee Street, was home to the largest parish in Baltimore. That was about 1850.

In 1974, Baltimore was on something of a roll with its "dollar house" homesteading program, wherein 19th-century homes, in shabby but salvageable condition, were brought back to life by persons who basically gave up a year of their own lives to supervise a loving renovation. They paid a token \$1 and assumed the responsibility to repair. The housing restoration industry was then in its infancy. Finding a good general contractor was tough. The term "sweat equity" was tossed about a good bit.

As a reporter, I had covered the comeback of Stirling Street in the Oldtown renewal area. An entire street was renovated by a remarkable group of urban homesteaders. It was obvious that this model, with whole groups of persons, working independently on their own homes but in concert to create a neighborhood, was a winner. I made contacts with Baltimore housing officials, including housing commissioner Robert C. Embry Jr. and his staff, among whom were Roger Windsor and Jane Shipley. The plan was also heavily backed by Barbara Hoff and her staff at the Commission for Historic and Architectural Preservation.

The housing department officials initially told me to be patient about expanding the homesteading program to the neighborhood I had named in print: Otterbein, after the 1785 church that was about the only well-known landmark in the area.

"We think it's an important area, worthy of looking" into, said Embry in the initial 1974 article. Embry had secured the support of Mayor William Donald Schaefer, who made homesteading a pet project. By January 1975, I could report, "House-Hunters Flood New Homestead Area," and "Would-Be Homesteaders Rush To Buy Old Otterbein Houses for \$1."

What then happened amazed me. There were so many takers for the houses that the city's housing department held a lottery of pre-qualified persons. The city made good on its plans and hired Cy Paumier, a Columbia-based landscape designer, to create a master plan that saved all the neighborhood's pre-existing alleys and paths. The ancient paving stones and granite curbs stayed in a parklike setting that the years have blessed.

I walked along West Lee Street this week, careful to not trip over the mature tree roots that now pop through the brick sidewalks. I spotted a small monument to the homesteaders who gave a chunk of their lives to make Otterbein a reality. They deserve that marker stone.