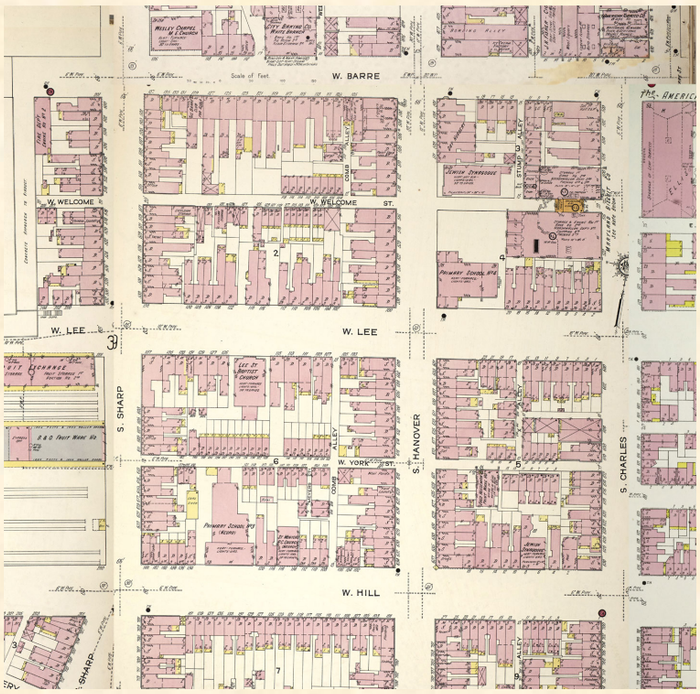
Return to the Otterbein History Page

The Neighborhood in 1910

by David Safier

The map at right is what our neighborhood looked like in 1914. I combined information from the map with census records from 1910 to get a sense of what the area was like a hundred and ten years ago.



From the 1914 Sanborn map of Baltimore

Today's "dollar homes" looked much like they do today — from the outside, anyway. They were surrounded by similar houses which have been knocked down, along with as a number of stores, churches and schools. The social and economic status of the people living here and the amenities to be found in the area were dramatically different from what they are today.

A quick overview. The area had many more people living in it than it does today. It was also more diverse, with a mixture of residents who were Black and White, immigrant and native born, speaking many different languages and observing a number of religious faiths. A large majority of people were renters, not owners, and they worked at jobs requiring little or no education. Most families had enough income to cover food, rent, clothing, and little more. It was a walking neighborhood where people could shop and worship, and young people could attend primary school, within a few blocks of their homes.

During this time, journalists and social reformers emphasized the poverty and squalor of neighborhoods like this and seemed to forget they were filled with real people who lives aren't defined simply by their low incomes and crowded living conditions.

In July, 1910, the Baltimore Sun wrote this about the area:

> "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."

The passage is simultaneously caring and patronizing. It expresses concern for the residents' living conditions on the one hand and refers to them as "poor creatures," not human beings, on the other. When you read and listen to first hand accounts from people who lived in areas like this in the early 20th century, you gain a fuller picture of their lives. They acknowledge

their crowded conditions and poverty, but they also describe their lives as rich and complex, containing the joys and sorrows which are part of the human condition.

I bring this up because the census data I am using includes lots of information about everyone living in the area — names, addresses, ages, races, marital status, countries of origin, employment and more — but the facts and figures don't capture the humanity of the people living here. They were more than data points. That's worth keeping in mind as you read the information I present below.

Taking a Look at the Neighborhood

The area I looked at runs east-to-west from Charles Street to Sharp Street, and north-to-south from Barre Street to Hill Street. The census includes all the people who lived here at the time, but it doesn't describe the area's amenities. To get a sense of the whole neighborhood, I looked at the detailed 1914 Sanborn map of Baltimore created for fire insurance companies. A small version of the map is at the top of the story. Follow the link to see a larger version if you want to look through the neighborhood building by building.

Since walking was the principal mode of transportation, the neighborhood included places where people could shop, attend school, worship and have fun. Residents had access to 5 saloons, 3 churches, 2 synagogues, 2 primary schools, 1 day nursery, 1 ice cream parlor, 1 bowling alley, 2 laundries, 2 paint shops, 1 plumbing store, 1 drug store, 1 dispensary and 1 undertaker in the immediate neighborhood. That list doesn't include the 68 houses designated as stores. Most of them were not used for that purpose at any given time, but many offered an assortment of food, fabric, clothes and services for their customers.

A more complete shopping experience could be found two blocks north on Camden Street where people could spend their money at the half-block-square Hanover Public Market and the shops surrounding the market along Camden, Hanover and Sharp.

Who Lived In the Neighborhood?

The neighborhood was densely populated; 2,200 people living in 300 houses. That comes to about seven people per house. However, that number is misleading. Two or three people lived at some addresses, while other addresses housed 10 people or more.

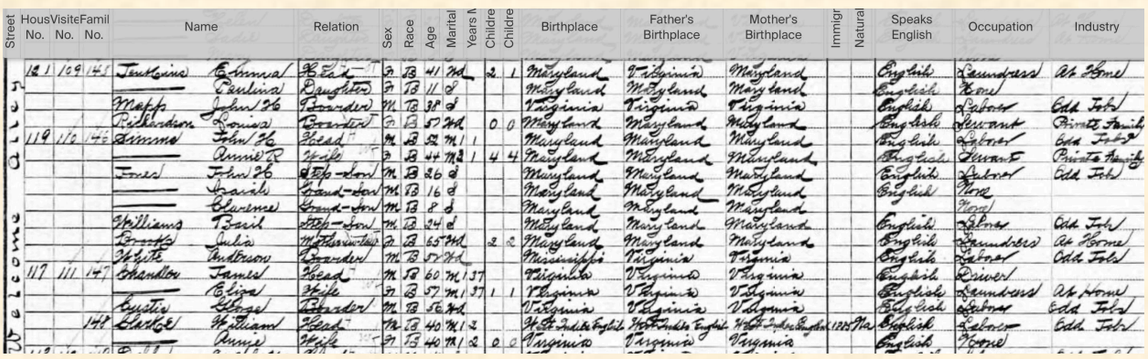
At some addresses the entire house was occupied by one family while others had two or three families living under the same roof. Crowded as the houses often were, many families took in boarders to supplement their incomes. The neighborhood also had a few boarding houses with as many as 20 occupants.

When you look at the overall racial makeup of the neighborhood, it appears to be racially mixed, with 75 percent White and 25 percent Black residents, but a closer, block-by-block look shows that most Black and White residents lived in different areas.

Most of the Black residents lived on three streets: the two alley streets — Welcome Alley and York Street — and Hill Street between Hanover and Sharp. The rest of the neighborhood was mostly White. The racial segregation continued in the two primary schools. The school at the

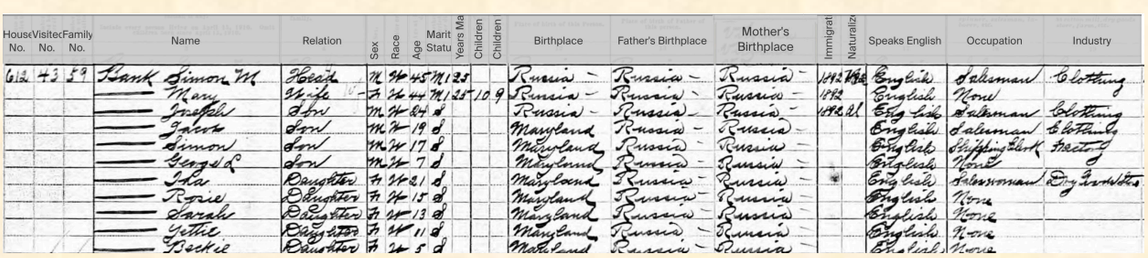
corner of Hanover and Lee was for White children; the school on the north side of Hill near Sharp was for Black children.

Other than one Black family from the West Indies, Black family members were born in the U.S. Most were from Maryland, but a significant number were born in Virginia, and a few were born in other states.



Census record for 117, 119 and 121 Welcome Alley

The White families were almost evenly divided between immigrants and native born. (A note: I only looked at the heads of households to decide if families were from the U.S. or elsewhere, since many of the children of immigrants were born here.) By far the largest number of immigrants came from Russia, a total of about 80 families, which accounted for two-thirds of the total immigrant population. They began arriving in the U.S. in 1885 and were still arriving in 1910. The census indicates they were mostly Jewish, and other sources I have read indicate that most of them originated in what is now Lithuania. The next largest group of immigrants, 20 families, came from Germany, followed by people from Italy and the British Isles with 10 families each. A handful of others came from France, Greece, Hungary and Turkey. Most of the non-Russian immigrants came to the U.S. after 1885, though a few arrived in the U.S. as early as 1850.



Census record for the Bank family at 612 Hanover, including Joseph Bank who would later create the Jos A Bank chain of clothing stores.

The period from 1900 to 1920 likely marked the high point for the number of immigrants living in the area. Fells Point was the main port of entry until 1850, when the landing point for immigrants shifted to Locust Point near Fort McHenry. Between 1868 and 1914 a million people took their first steps in the U.S. at Locust Point. The B&O railroad carried large numbers of them to cities outside of Baltimore, and others headed to a variety of locations around the city, but a significant number gathered their family and their belongings together and walked a few blocks north to settle here.

World War I brought the flow of immigration from Europe to a standstill, and laws passed in the 1920s restricted immigration. Meanwhile, when immigrants living in this area grew

more prosperous, they moved to more expensive areas of the city. Often it was their children who climbed the economic ladder through education and entrepreneurship, moved away and brought their parents with them to live nearby. That meant the number of immigrants and their families living in this area declined steadily from the 1920s on.

In the White areas, even when more than one family lived at one address, each house tended to have either American born residents or immigrants from one country. However, most blocks included both immigrant and native born White families, with two exceptions. Charles Street from Lee to Hill was a mixture of Russian and Black families, and one Chinese family. That may have been because Charles Street was a commercial area catering to Black and Russian customers, with the owners of the establishments living over their places of business, though there may have been other reasons. The other instance was Lee Street from Hanover to Sharp which was exclusively White and American born except for one corner house. I have no idea whether that homogeneous grouping was intentional or happened by chance.

Of the 300 houses in the neighborhood, only 40 were occupied by their owners. The other 260 homes were rented.

How Were People Employed?

Most of the people living in the area had jobs which required little or no education, with the exception of a few teachers, ministers and rabbis. It was a low income, working class neighborhood. People who were doctors, lawyers, college professors, social workers and journalists lived elsewhere.

Job possibilities for Black workers were limited. Most often, the occupation of the men was listed in the census record as "Laborer/Odd jobs," with some Black men listed as stevedores, servants and cooks. Most Black women were listed as laundresses, servants and cooks if an occupation was listed.

The jobs listed for White men were more varied: merchants, salespeople, tailors, machine operators, factory workers, bakers, barbers and saloon keepers, among others. When women's occupations were named, they were often seamstresses working at home or in a clothing factory, and occasionally merchants or keepers of boarding houses.

Some Observations

This 1910 snapshot of what is now the Otterbein neighborhood is a picture of an area in transition. The old 19th century homes had been turned into rentals for low wage workers and their families, and they housed a population that was in a state of flux.

I already mentioned that the population of immigrants increased continually from the 1860s, then decreased in the 1910s and 1920s. Though I have not yet looked at the census records for the decades before and after 1910 in any detail, I think it's likely I would find a regular turnover in the native born Black and White population. They were not bound to the area by ownership, so they could move fairly easily from one place to another if they lost their jobs or found better employment elsewhere. It is likely that the type of jobs people held changed as the city as the country changed.

It will take research into more census records, maps and other sources to learn more about how the area changed over the years.