

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

[Return to the Otterbein History Page](#)

The Opportunity Of A Lifetime

by Joe Levy

When Steve Stegner began looking for a house to buy in Baltimore, his number one priority was “convenience in getting to work.” The Otterbein dollar house program was getting a fair amount of attention locally and he quickly became interested. The location was certainly right, just a few blocks south of his office.

Steve was one of the hundreds of people who participated in the city-sponsored May 1975 walk around the fenced-off homestead to select what would turn out to be his residence for the next 44 years. He settled on 133 W. Hill St in part because it wasn't too large and had a high and dry basement. As the application process moved forward, it wasn't attracting as much interest as some others. Improving your odds is a good thing when you can only sign up for one property.

When the initial selections were made in August 1975, some properties had 20 or more applicants, but 133 W. Hill only had 6 people in the mix. Steve was very disappointed to learn his bid was unsuccessful and someone else got the property. But that winning prospective

Otterbeiner backed out rather quickly, having perhaps gained a fuller understanding of the reality of the undertaking. The property was offered again and this time there were just 3 submissions. Steve remembers how happy he was on that evening in October when the number on the ping pong ball picked from the rotating basket was his.



In the beginning, 133 W. Hill when Steve's name was drawn.

Steve's History

Steve and his 3 sisters grew up in Colorado, where his father taught biology in Denver public schools. In the early 60s, the family moved east where dad taught Science Education at the University of Delaware. A main theme was Only one Earth, which became a lifelong sentiment of Steve's as well. Meanwhile Steve's mother raised him and his 3 younger siblings. She picked up a talent for selling real estate in the late '60s and '70s and did well enough to help finance dad's expensive passion for boating, acquired after moving east and friends introduced him to the beauties of Chesapeake Bay. He took to restoring a vintage Dawn wooden 48 ft. motor cruiser (with a lot of help from Steve) and piloting it with the family and friends around Chesapeake Bay and as far away as Montreal and Florida.

When it came time for college, Steve's selection process was pretty easy: The U of D! It had strong engineering schools, classes were located close to the Stegner house so he could live at

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

home, and tuition was priced very attractively for in-state residents. After graduating, Steve worked a year in structural design engineering in Pottstown, PA before returning to Delaware for study this time focused in the area of water resources. He graduated with his Masters of Civil Engineering in 1972. A job offer from US Army Corps of Engineers in Baltimore followed and Steve began work in its Planning Division as a member of the Chesapeake Bay Study team. This was a multiyear study of the Bay and its associated social, economic and environmental processes and resources. It included a hydraulic model of the Bay, which modelled freshwater inflows from the Bay's drainage area and the resultant salinity variations in the Bay. The study was a landmark review used to guide future management of the watershed.

Steve first lived in a small apartment in Northeast Baltimore, taking the number 15 bus to his downtown office. He later moved to an apartment in the 800 block of Park Ave in Mt Vernon. In true Smaltimore fashion, Steve and I discovered when we sat down for this article that we lived on the same block for several months before he moved to Otterbein in February 1979. And now we live across the street from each other! In more Smaltimore news we both worked for the Corps of Engineers downtown for most of the 1980's. I was in HR and Steve not far down the hall in Planning. We were surprised to recognize each other one day soon after I joined him on Hill St in 1997.

Choosing a Contractor

Shortly after being awarded the house, Steve set out on the project to make it his home. A homestead association had been formed and architectural design standards adopted to guide the renovations. The City offered financing for renovations in Otterbein at a rate of 7% (a good deal at the time!) to a maximum loan of \$37,500. Steve had an architect make up drawings for his Hill St.



First floor front room, Nov. 1975, now the dining room

project. He selected a contractor who had worked on the Stirling St dollar houses, Baltimore's first concentrated dollar house homesteading neighborhood near Gay St and Route 40, in 1974. But as they proceeded, Steve and the contractor soon realized they had very divergent ideas about how to deal with many things. Steve took advantage of the City's arbitration process, set up in anticipation of such potential issues between homesteaders and contractors. With an able, street smart lawyer, he managed to get the contract voided.

He then turned to a young, up and coming guy named Bill Streuver, who was beginning to restore homes a few blocks to the south near Cross St Market. This proved to be a very wise choice. Bill had recently graduated from Brown University with an urban studies major. Along with his brother and college roommate, he formed a development company. Ted Rouse, son of legendary developer James Rouse, later became a partner. A newspaper article from May, 1977

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

notes a degree of skepticism with regard to the impact of the young Mr. Streuver's efforts. South Baltimore was at that time the almost exclusive domain of working class, decidedly unpretentious residents. A South Baltimore community leader stated "I don't want us to be a block after block of smug, middle class homeowners." No, we can't have that! I can assure you that Steve is not smug. He may be middle class. It's interesting to note that some of these tensions conveyed in this quote continue on to this day on the Peninsula.

Streuver Brothers, Eccles and Rouse was an urban visionary company that was a major factor in changing Baltimore's landscape. They pushed for creation of the Downtown Partnership and Waterfront Partnership, put the winking Mr Boh atop the former National Bohemian Brewery, and developed significant projects such as The Can Co in Canton and Tide Point in the former Proctor and Gamble complex in Locust Point.

But before all of that, Bill Streuver, and especially his hands-on point man, Cobber Eccles, helped Steve turn a dilapidated formstone row house into a little slice of urban paradise. Steve also benefitted greatly from his time as dad's helper back in Colorado where his father had rehabbed old houses and Steve was often by his side. Nevertheless, many years later when his dad came to visit the ongoing project to help Steve install a rehabbed stair railing, he viewed the array of incomplete wiring, plumbing, HVAC, kitchen, baths, trim, painting, etc., and amicably inquired "Do you know what you're doing?" Sadly, Steve's father passed away in August, 1979, six months after Steve moved in. Steve thinks his dad was proud of him for tackling the Hill St house, which was a tough job and unlike anything his dad ever needed or wanted to try.

Steve describes himself during the rehab period as being very challenged but also determined. He was also excited about being an urban pioneer, working alongside other like-minded neighbors to turn the neighborhood around and be an integral part of a city on the rise. Baltimore, especially the downtown area, was undergoing a significant transformation. Steve viewed the Otterbein Homesteading Program as the opportunity of a lifetime.

Demolition, Then Renovation

To keep the cost of the project at \$37,500, Steve agreed to undertake all of the interior demolition himself, and managed it only with the help of a good friend. He recalls building a debris chute and taking wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of plaster, lath and other material out behind his house, where a community debris pile had already begun in what is now the park between Hill and Hughes



This may provide a new appreciation of what the homesteaders had ahead of them

Streets. The pile eventually became 8 or 10 ft. tall and maybe 100 ft. long. He had to build ramps to continue to transport the debris to the ever rapidly growing top of the mounds. The City

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

eventually brought in gigantic dump trucks to haul off the mountain of debris, but left a clear message that from that time on, homesteaders were responsible for their own demolition debris removal!

Engaging in more self-help, he and a group of buddies removed the formstone from the front of the house. Unfortunately, the exposed brick couldn't be salvaged and the façade had to be rebuilt. One of the 2 chimney stacks were also taken down, making valuable room on every level. Steve also cut and installed all door and baseboard trim, and did all the interior and exterior painting. Meanwhile the City was creating a new urban landscape for Otterbein and things were pretty torn up all around him. Trolley tracks had to be excavated from Hill St., for example. Steve recalls having to literally walk the plank to get in and out of the house during sidewalk construction. Two items from a March 1978 punch list, two and a half years after taking possession, tell you all you need to know about the joys of rehabbing a 100+ year old house. The first reads "sealing of cracks which admit a large volume of water when it rains" and the second "electric dryer must be properly vented – 4th try." Steve describes the renovation process as a lot of work but also (in hindsight) a lot of fun.



Rehab crew on break, with Steve on the right.

Steve Moves In

Steve had praise for several City officials involved in the dollar house program, including Roger Winston who headed the program for the Department of Housing and Community Development. He also gives much credit to his fellow homesteaders, who banded together to help each other by sharing experiences and lessons learned, sponsoring social gatherings, as well as mini-construction seminars, e.g., why you need and how to install a double cylinder deadbolt lock. Some residents took an early leadership role. Among those Steve cited were Jan Paul Miller, the first OCA President (subject of a future profile) and Henry Fostel, an architect, who Steve recalls as having great sway with local officials as the liaison with the city and its contractor on the rebuild of Otterbein sidewalks and streets. Henry was able to show that brick sidewalks could be constructed at a comparable cost to the brushed pebble concrete sidewalks that were proposed. Similarly our period lighting was not originally specified, but was adopted partially if not completely because of homesteaders such as Henry.

Three years and four months after hearing his number called off a ping pong ball, Steve moved into his new home. He has a great interest in decorative arts and over the years has put together quite a collection. One of the benefits of my interview with Steve was to see and learn about his bowls, pots, coffee mugs, sculptures, paintings and weavings. In fact, this is much more than a hobby. Steve took advantage of an early retirement offer and left federal service in 1999.

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

But well before then his interest in art and antiques had led to managing a stall in The Antique Warehouse at 1300, formerly at Jackson St and Key Highway. He had long thought about this as a post-retirement activity and in April 2000 opened the business he still runs today, 20th Century Gallery. It specializes in pottery, studio ceramics and decorative objects, as well as paintings and prints, and is on Antique Row at 825 N Howard St. Check it out!

It's all too easy after almost 50 years to lose sight of the multitude of issues the homesteaders had to deal with. Turning what in most cases was not much more than the shell of a house into a livable dwelling was challenging, stressful and time-consuming enough. These folks had full time jobs after all. But additional important matters required their attention. Among them were the exterior design guidelines, off street parking (angled or parallel/create lots in open spaces?), park design and development of the park maintenance agreement with the city, location of I-395, weighing in on nearby development like the Convention Center and the land that would become new townhouses and condos, as well as the future of the Allon Building, now the site of the Waterplace Condos at 123 W. Barre St.

Steve still has the letter he wrote to the city about interstate highways in urban neighborhoods. He was clearly ahead of his time on the subject of urban planning and pedestrian friendly cities. He cited the need for a “new perspective” instead of “concrete behemoths carrying its endless and seemingly timeless rush of mechanized humanity through the community.” Steve advocated for greater pedestrian access with walkways and green spaces. Because of the activism of Steve and other Baltimoreans like him, Federal Hill and Fells Point were saved from being dissected by an interstate and the west Sharp St sidewalk is not the I-395 shoulder.

It could have easily been overwhelming. But fortunately for us these individuals had vision, foresight, and were determined to see this through and get both the big and small things right. They made Otterbein the amazing neighborhood we all know and love.

