

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

[Return to the Otterbein History Page](#)

## The Parkers of 113 W. Lee Street

by Joe Levy

Quentin Parker describes the mid to late 1970's in Otterbein as a time of high energy and enthusiasm. The dollar house homesteading project had been announced and Quentin, who had been looking for a house in the city, was very much interested. Along with hundreds of others, he came to Otterbein on successive weekends in May, 1975 to take part in the scheduled inspection. His plan was to take a close look at the available properties and then decide which, if any, he wanted to purchase. The price was right – one dollar.

The City of Baltimore had decided to build on the success of its Stirling St homesteading project. That 1974 initiative, in Oldtown, was the city's first concentrated dollar house venture. Efforts were underway to redevelop the Inner Harbor and nearby areas. Otterbein was part of Inner Harbor West. Its 19th Century houses were in a state of considerable disrepair. But location, location, location! The potential was clearly there. All that was needed were some intrepid urban pioneers willing to take some risk, work hard, and deal with the inevitable setbacks to turn things around.



**Quentin and his mother Ann on the left about to tour the offerings. The Relocation Office was at 115 W. Lee so the photographer snapped them right in front of what would become their home.**

Quentin had become more familiar with the city having attended law school at the University of Maryland and wanted to buy a home here. He recalls going on bus tours of prospective neighborhoods such as Bolton Hill. He subsequently learned about what was going on in Otterbein and focused his efforts there. He chose 113 W. Lee St because of its prime location in the center of a block filled with historic homes and because it was in much better shape than most. This did not go unnoticed, and that property had the most bids, 62. Quentin still has the original notes from his first visit, including his summary comment – “Good One!” The rules were that you could only select one house, must live in it for 18 months, renovate the exterior in accordance with historic architectural guidelines and interior to meet building codes. There was no requirement to spend any minimum amount of money. Once the number of initial bids per property was released, the prospective homesteaders could make a one-time change to

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

their desired location. Quentin decided to stick with his first choice. About 20 moved on from that house, but the odds were still not in his favor.

Two drawings for the winners were held in the Old Otterbein Church in August, 1975. Ping pong balls, numbered for each of the applicants, were pulled from a metal drum by the head of the Home Ownership Development Agency. Quentin wasn't able to be there in person and found out he had won the right to the house he wanted when a letter arrived in the mail a few days later. He was thrilled! Quentin was still living with his parents in his childhood home in Rosedale, in eastern Baltimore County. His parents were very supportive throughout this entire process. They accompanied him on his first visits to scout the area and supported him throughout the renovation.

And in another family matter of note, in a very happy coincidence urban homesteading was instrumental in Quentin meeting his future wife, Ruth. She had grown up in the DC suburbs in Wheaton, MD and moved to Baltimore to pursue her nursing career. A mutual friend suggested she come to Otterbein one day in 1977 to have a look at the house his friend was restoring. They went on a date to see the hot new movie "Star Wars" and the rest, as they say, is history. Quentin and Ruth married in July, 1980 and moved in to the quasi-finished house at that time. They raised their twin sons, born in 1982, there. And almost 43 years later, we are still very fortunate to have them as neighbors.grateful.

## Five Years to Occupancy

Five years may seem like a long time between ownership selection and occupancy, but there was a tremendous amount of work to be done. Some owners moved in more quickly and others needed additional time. Some owners dropped out as the challenges proved too daunting -- when, for instance, a falling wall tore out joists and subflooring that had already been built. Those homes were then

awarded to others in the queue or new lotteries were initiated.

The Parkers have retained a treasure trove of information on Otterbein from this period, including the 1970's newspaper articles and photos used in this article. The restoration of the neighborhood continually moved forward, but in fits and starts, with numerous obstacles to overcome. The Sun reported in July 1976 that 10% of the homes were under active renovation, with none inhabited. Detailed architectural plans had been submitted for 37 additional homes.

The lottery winners did not immediately take ownership of the homes. They signed an initial lease, with 6 months to begin work and then 18 months to occupy the house. These timelines proved flexible, as progress was not as quick as had been envisioned.



**Pre-renovation view of the rear of 113 W. Lee**



# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

The homesteaders met once or twice a week with city officials to complete the community covenants, including architectural guidelines, which were provided in draft by the City and its contractor. The group debated them and shaped them (not without some disagreements) into the final documents that have served the Otterbein Community Association so well for approaching 50 years. The city sponsored speakers/seminars on topics such as construction, renovation and financing. The opportunity for low (well, low for the late 70's) interest loans of 7.5% for up to \$40,000 were provided.

Every homesteader was provided a document listing the work to be completed with remarkable specificity, including material and labor costs. The list for 113 W Lee, which was built in 1840, was 10 pages long. The Parkers still have it. One item example is "Third floor front bedroom ceiling: remove defective plaster & laths & install ½ " gypsum drywall on 1" x 3" furring strips (75 SF)." Estimated renovations costs totaled \$31,403. The Parkers eventually spent considerably more.

A September 23, 1976 Evening Sun article stated, "Homesteaders in Otterbein who expected dream houses to rise out of the junk they bought from the city for \$1 each haven't given up hope of achieving Utopia." Houses were found to be riddled with termites, and structural deficiencies missed by inspectors pushed up construction costs. Estimates were bare bones to code specifications without extras, like "air conditioning and wall to wall carpeting."

## The Work Begins

But this amazing group of people persevered. A 2/23/77 News American article stated, "Some 20 months into the project the homesteaders can now see the results of their work. The place is congested with contractors' trucks, piles of brick, cement blocks and lumber. This represents the largest preservation project of its type in the country."

Quentin, along with his family and friends, did a lot of work himself, including the demolition of unsalvageable parts of the property. He remembers the horsehair in the plaster as it came apart and a lot of coal dust. At one point, the dust cloud was so thick that someone nearby called the Fire Department. He took a carpentry course at night so that he could do more of the work himself. Self-help has its limits however. Quentin hired an architect and general contractor. The latter went bankrupt and there were a myriad of problems with the subcontractors. These issues were far from unique to 113 W Lee. Problems



**Imagine the possibilities as demolition proceeds!**

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

with contractors were widespread. Some were ill-prepared for the work. Bureaucratic delays and unexpected structural problems were also significant factors.

But difficult times call for creative solutions. Quentin's mother Ann, with no construction background, took over 113 W. Lee acting as general foreman and on site representative. Ann was Quentin and Ruth's eyes and ears and inspector. She fired one subcontractor. But most of them really appreciated her and did really good work for her. Quentin describes her as "very good" and "tough." She did an excellent job! When the Parkers moved in, several rooms were complete. And they kept at it so that the bedrooms and shared bathroom for their expanding family were ready for the birth of their boys two years later.

## Moving I-395 and Other Changes of Plans

A few other fun facts were uncovered while preparing this story. At a meeting in the fall of 1975, Robert Embry, the city's Housing Commissioner, informed the homesteaders that a major highway was going to be built just barely to the west of Sharp St, where the Federal Reserve Bank now stands. They were informed there would be no dissent and that if unhappy they would be allowed to withdraw. The details of this portion of the story will be left for another day, but suffice it to say that there was indeed dissent and the highway (I-395) was moved to its current location. Thank you homesteaders!

Quentin recalls plans for nearby commercial development. A 1976 Sun article he saved discusses concerns about a lack of nearby amenities and plans for a San Francisco Ghiardelli Square type development at Camden Yards with a "neighborhood mall" called Otterbein Depot at Lee and Sharp Sts as a connector to the Camden Yards commercial area. An "underground drive thru filling station" was also planned at Sharp and Barre Sts. It is not clear how the highway figured into these plans. This clearly seems to have preceded plans for Harborplace.

Despite all the challenges presented to our urban pioneers, their enthusiasm, attraction to an urban lifestyle, and vision to see what Otterbein could be carried them through. The Parkers remember the problems. But more importantly, they look back with great fondness on the spirit and camaraderie which developed among their neighbors. They relied on each other for guidance and had many discussions on their common experiences. Neighborhood cookouts began. A community softball team was formed. The expertise individuals brought with them, whether in engineering, finance, construction, etc. was happily passed along. For example, Quentin helped with legal issues and review of documents.

Lots of stress was shared and lots of friendships were made. Quoting a homesteader from one of the Sun articles – "It's kind of exciting! You're creating something." Yes they were. And we current residents are forever grateful.



**ImagineThe Parkers in the living room of their lovely home today.**