

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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Anthony Bourdain Slept Here

by David Safier

In 1983 a New York restaurateur decided to open a restaurant in Baltimore's Inner Harbor. He found a space in the Harborplace pavilion near the intersection of Sharp and Pratt and named it Gianni's. He hired a tall, skinny 27 year old New York chef to run the kitchen, a then-unknown guy named Anthony Bourdain, known as "Chef Tony" to his kitchen staff.

Bourdain wrote about his time in Baltimore in the 2000 book, *Kitchen Confidential*, which created his national reputation and led to his raconteur/food critic television series which turned him into a household name. In the book Bourdain made it clear he wasn't happy during his short stay in the city. One problem was, the restaurant didn't have many customers. Another was, he didn't like Baltimore. He summed up his disdain in a two word paragraph in the book: "Baltimore sucks."

Bourdain was living rent free in a townhouse walking distance from the restaurant, right here in Otterbein, and he didn't like it any more than he liked the city. This is how he described it in the book:

I was brought over to the official residence of visiting dignitaries from New York: a three-story townhouse, brand-new but built to look old, in the center of a fake historical district. It was pretty swank: wall-to-wall carpeting, four bathrooms, vast dining room, living room and top floor studio. The only problem was, there was no furniture. A bare futon lay in the middle of the floor on the third story, a pathetic black and white TV with coat-hanger antenna the only offered amusement. The spacious kitchen contained only some calcified rice cakes. The only other sign that anyone had ever lived there was a lone chef's jacket on a hanger in one of the closets — like an artifact, evidence of an ancient astronaut who'd been here before me.

Which house in Otterbein was he describing? All we know for sure from his description is, it was not one of the restored, historic dollar houses since he says it was a brand-new townhouse.

Crowd Sourcing the Answer

I put the question to neighbors on the Otterbein Community Association's Facebook page. Various addresses were mentioned as possibilities, but one stood out: the townhouse at 519-521 South Hanover on the northeast corner of Lee. It has three stories and four bathrooms, which fits Bourdain's description. And its owner in 1983 makes the place a perfect fit.

The townhouse was owned by Brice Phillips. He had built a seafood empire starting with a small restaurant in Ocean City in 1956. In the 1980s he owned a restaurant, Phillips Seafood, in the Harborplace pavilion on Sharp Street, next to the pavilion that housed Gianni's where

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Bourdain worked (When Phillips died in 2011, his restaurant moved to the Power Plant complex on the northeast side of the harbor where it still stands).

Otterbein resident Richard Gorman, who lived in the neighborhood at the time, recalled, “The house on the northeast corner of Hanover and Lee had a push button lock on the front door. All day long workers from Phillips Crab House came and went.” Remember that “lone chef’s jacket on a hanger in one of the closets” Bourdain mentioned? It was undoubtedly left by someone from Phillips’ restaurant who lived there earlier. Most likely, the owner of Gianni’s made a deal with Phillips to let some of his restaurant crew stay in the townhouse as well.

A second confirmation came from Otterbein resident Jennifer Morse Boyer, who wrote that she had a chance encounter with Bourdain on the top of Federal Hill in 2009 when he was filming a Baltimore segment for his show, “No Reservations.” According to Boyer, “I vaguely recall him telling me he lived in Otterbein on Lee Street in one of the houses built in the 80’s. I suspect it was one of the ones on the corner of S. Hanover.”

Though I’m missing a first-hand account from someone who saw Bourdain walk into the townhouse, I find the circumstantial evidence overwhelming: when Bourdain worked in Baltimore, he hung his chef’s hat in the townhouse on the northeast corner of Hanover and Lee.



519-521 South Hanover

Bourdain Learned to Appreciate Baltimore

Bourdain said later that he revised his opinion of Baltimore for the better. According to a 2019 article in the Baltimore Sun, his change of heart came when he was working on scripts for the HBO series, “Treme,” which aired in 2010 and was created by David Simon, the Baltimorean who also created “The Wire.”

Bourdain said. “I don’t love it for the reasons you want me to love Baltimore. I happen to love Baltimore because David Simon taught me to love Baltimore.”

Nathan Stambaugh, who grew up in the Baltimore area and was a friend of Bourdain’s, also talked about Bourdain’s new-found appreciation of Baltimore, according to the same Sun article. “[Bourdain] said ‘I look at things a lot different now than when I worked there. Baltimore has some of the nicest people I ever met and the realest people I ever met.’”