

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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## History of the Church Condos on Hill Street

by **David Safier**

Over the years, the Otterbein neighborhood has housed six different religious denominations at three locations. The church and synagogue sites on Lee Street and Hanover Street were bulldozed during the early dollar house years, but the building at 120 West Hill Street now known as the Church Condos is still standing, looking much like it did when it was built in 1872. It was the only church inside the neighborhood boundaries dedicated to serving the Black community.



**Church Condos on Hill Street**

## From Methodist Episcopal to Catholic

The church was originally built for the Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church South in 1872, but the congregation didn't stay long. Three years later it moved to a church on Greene Street and German (now Redwood) Street, where the University of Maryland medical complex is today. For a number of years the Hill Street building was occupied by the Salvation Army.

The building was purchased by the Josephite Fathers, an organization inside the Catholic Church dedicated to serving the Black community. In 1883 St. Monica's Catholic Church opened, the second Black parish in Baltimore. The church's namesake, Saint Monica, was a Black woman born in Algeria in the 4th century who is best known as the mother of St. Augustine, the renowned church scholar whose teachings and writings were a major influence on the development of the Church.

The parsonage where the priest lived was across the street at 109 West Hill Street. The church had White pastors until 1911 when Reverend J. Henry Dorsey, who came from a prominent Black family in Baltimore, was appointed to the position. At the time he was one of four Black priests in the U.S. and the only one serving in the southern part of the country.

The lack of Black Catholic priests was a source of controversy in Baltimore at the time. A group of Catholics calling themselves The Insurgents, which included Reverend Dorsey's brother, demanded, in their words, "that young colored men be given the same opportunity in the same way as other Catholics to be trained for the Catholic Priesthood."

## St. Monica's School

St. Monica's ran a parochial school. I couldn't find the exact year it began, but I do know it was operating in the early 1900s with between 100 and 150 students.

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In 1908 the Baltimore Sun wrote about a confirmation for 27 children at St. Monica's which indicated that the church had a large, active congregation. According to the article, when Cardinal Gibbons arrived at the church for the confirmation, "He was met by a throng of people that reached almost to Sharp Street. When he entered the church every seat had been taken and many were standing." A few years later when the church's pastor died, congregants filled the church and 300 more people were outside.

## The Church Moved. The School Stayed.

Though St. Monica's Church seemed to be thriving, in 1923 it moved to Henrietta and Eutaw Streets, a site that is now part of the parking lot between the baseball and football stadiums. St. Monica's School continued to use the Hill Street building at least until the 1950s and possibly longer. The students were taught by the Oblate Sisters of Providence which was established in Baltimore in the early 19th century and was, according to their website, "the first successful Roman Catholic sisterhood in the world established by women of African descent." The Sisters commuted to the school from their convent on Chase Street until 1943 when they opened a new convent in a renovated house at 4 West Hill Street, a few houses west of Charles Street. It was probably a coincidence that the new convent was next door to the Rodfe Zedek Jewish Synagogue.

Hill Street between Hanover and Sharp was also home to another school: "Colored School 106." Originally it was built to educate White students but changed to a school for Black students in the early 1900s. The parochial and public schools were half a block apart in their early years, but when the public school expanded to become a junior high, they were next to each other, taking up most of the north side of the block on Hill Street.

While the two schools on Hill Street served Black children, two schools a block north on Lee Street served White children, creating a separate-but-unequal illustration of segregation in the neighborhood. Beginning in 1915, St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church was on West Lee Street between Hanover and Sharp. Behind it in what is now Concert Park was the church's parochial school. I can't say for certain the students were all White, but White students were undoubtedly the vast majority. A half block away on the corner of Lee and Hanover was a public school that was all White until the 1950s when school desegregation arrived in Baltimore.

Sometime between the 1950s and the 1960s, St. Monica's School closed. As you can see in the photo, the building was used as an auto body shop. The building you see next to it is the public junior high school, which was demolished as part of the renovation of the neighborhood in the 1970s and 1980s, replaced by the Otterbein Court homes and York Street Park. The church building became the Church Condos.

