



**Greater Baltimore
Urban League**

*Empowering Communities.
Changing Lives.*

The Orchard Street Church

Nestled in its Seton Hill neighborhood, the city's oldest standing structure built by African-Americans remains a staple in the community. The Orchard Street Church dates its earliest history back to 1825. Truman Pratt, then a freeman, but born a slave in March 1775 at Hild's Light, near Hope Chapel, started a prayer meeting, most likely in a dwelling. Pratt was not an ordained minister, but actively conducted church affairs for more than forty years. The original Orchard Street Church structure dates back to 1837, with subsequent additions in 1853 and 1865 as the congregation grew. The church was founded and organized by Truman Pratt, Basil Hall, and Cyrus Moore, all free Black men. City records cite the "Orchard Chapel" property as being deeded to Pratt, Hall, and Moore in September 1839. The building itself was erected by slaves and black freedmen who worked by torchlight in the night.

While its exact role is not certain, tunnels under the church were long associated with the Underground Railroad, and the Orchard Street Church was reportedly a stop on Harriet Tubman's passage to freedom. Archeology completed during the church's restoration in 1992 uncovered one such space associated with the Underground Railroad, which has been made accessible by stairway. The tunnel under the Orchard Street Church is located near Pratt Street, where slaves were sold directly from the ships at the harbor, and lead to the old Mount Royal Station.

The Orchard Street Church was recognized as a separate Methodist church in the 1840's. The church shared the services of rotating Black ministers who served under the appointment from White ministers of the older Methodist-Episcopal Black congregations such as Sharp Street and Dallas Street, now known as Centennial, Ashbury and John Wesley. Pre-abolition, two prominent ministers were shared. William Watkins, a famed abolitionist-teacher of national eminence, and John Fortie, a teacher and businessman of considerable wealth and prestige. In 1848, John Fortie was among Black ministers who asked that Black congregations be given full charge of their churches. During the Civil War, this reorganization of the Methodist Episcopal Church occurred, and the Orchard Street Methodist Church would be able to oversee its own congregation. Both "zealous and Godly" while being a slave, Pratt proved his temperament was better suited for freedom. He ran away from his owner, John Roy, around 1814. Pratt became a seaman for several years, and shipped out of Boston, but soon he desired to return to Baltimore. Upon his return, he twice attempted to purchase freedom from his owner, and eventually succeeded. At the Methodists' Washington Conference of 1876, Pratt was honored. In the last few years of his life he was acclaimed by his fellow Methodists until his death in 1877, at the venerable age of 102.

Reverend R. H. Robinson was the pastor of Orchard Street Church in 1876. He had been described as an efficient leader who had previously represented the Fifth District of the General Conference on the Board of Church Extension, the only Black so honored. Robinson's fall from grace came while he engaged in political activities with Democrats which, at the time, was seen as being in league with an avowed enemy of the race. But the formal charges brought up against him had nothing to do with politics. He was said to have made disrespectful commentary from the pulpit about the ladies of the church, used profane language, and had police interrupt worship services. His efforts were in hopes of securing a



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political appointment for his sons, but because he represented the church, a public notice was supplied to Morning Herald newspaper by James A. Harris, Jr., a leading member of the Orchard Street Church. Harris declared that Orchard Street Church has “never interfered with politics, but the prayer of its members is for the success of the Republican Party, to which they adhere to at all times and places. They know nothing else but to sustain the cause of Republicanism- the cause of liberty and light.” Even after proper chastising from the church, the congregation walked out of the sanctuary when Robinson tried to resume the pulpit, and he was made to leave before a riot broke out.

The church’s longest known leader, from 1896 to 1915, was Reverend John A. Holmes, the Vice President of the Baltimore Steamboat Company. Holmes opened up the churches doors to the community at large. The church hosted the Colored Sunday School Union of Baltimore meetings, the first commencement of the Nurses Training School of Provident Hospital, and the Empty Stocking Club, a Christmas gifts delivery event for the community’s poor, started by Mrs. Eliza Jane Cummings. Holmes was very active in maintaining the standards of the city and the neighborhood in which it stood. His dedication to the neighborhood’s preservation was well-noted when he testifies before the Board of Liquor License Commissioners, to protest the excessive number of saloons along Pennsylvania Avenue. He fervently exclaimed in front of 500 supporters that the saloons create an environment morally detrimental and physically dangerous to neighborhood children of the Druid Hill Avenue School.

Even amid early trials, Orchard Street Church would be the worship affiliation of some of the Black luster in Baltimore. Alexander Hemsley, possibly the most successful undertaker in the city, was very active in the establishment of the benevolent societies, such as the Odd Fellows, Masons, and Good Samaritans. One of the founders of the Aged Men and Women’s Home and suffrage leader in the city, Mrs. Eliza Jane Cummings, was closely allied with the church. To her credit, the success of her son, Harry S. Cummings, added recognition to their family, the church, and the community when he became Black councilman in Baltimore. Also, and not in any small part, Harry T. Pratt, grandson of Truman Pratt, was a prominent leader in the Baltimore and Black business community. His participation in forming the Law and Order League and his election to the National League of Businessmen, an organization formed by Booker T. Washington, among his countless efforts to lessen crimes against Blacks and strengthen the Black business community, has solidified his place in not only the Orchard Street Church’s history, but Baltimore’s as well.

In 1975, the church obtained listing on the National Register of Historic Places as one of the earliest African Methodist Episcopal churches. It is also listed as a landmark by the Baltimore City Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation, and noted for its Romanesque style and Gothic window on the northeastern façade. It was in 1992 that it became home to the Greater Baltimore Urban League (GBUL). Dedicated to furthering its mission of civil service and advocacy, and unwilling to allow the historic venue any further deterioration, GBUL launched a massive effort to open the doors of the church to the community once again.

Since the GBUL assumed the space, the church has been given a new life based on old ideals of community empowerment. Although it no longer functions as a Sunday meeting place, it delivers a great service to the Baltimore community at large. The League has long maintained its mission of helping African-Americans and other minorities



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succeed in Baltimore's mainstream. From its home base of Orchard Street Church, the GBUL has created programs and partnerships that reach every corner of the city. GBUL runs a collaborative youth leadership development project called the Saturday Leadership Program and is a leading partner in Baltimore's College Access Consortium, a team of like-minded leaders in education dedicated to reducing Baltimore's academic achievement gaps. The volunteer auxiliaries, the Greater Baltimore Leadership Association and the GBUL Guild, organize community service programs and collaborate with numerous charitable organizations every year. The Greater Baltimore Urban League is represented on key boards, committees and working groups directly affecting the lives of Baltimore citizens. These include the Baltimore Education Research Consortium, the Central Maryland Transit Alliance, and the Prevent and Deter Violent Crime Working Group. In addition to its community commitments, GBUL maintains its historical commitment to the church. The League hosts historical tours, reenactments, and living history presentations that bring the church's story to life for hundreds of students, tourists, and history enthusiasts. The Orchard Street Church is a living community center, housing the Greater Baltimore Urban League administrative offices, program space, and community meeting space.