

JAMES O'HARA'S LANDHOLDINGS IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY

CHARLES SHETLER¹

JAMES O'HARA's contributions to the post-Revolutionary development of Pittsburgh have been examined by many writers who have studied this era of the Gateway to the West. O'Hara was at Fort Pitt as an Indian trader, the traditional entree to fame and fortune on the frontier, within a year after his coming to America. From 1784 until his death in 1819, he was increasingly involved in the business, industrial, and political affairs of the town.

The emphasis in most sketches of O'Hara's life has been on his army career and his promotion of manufactories. We know something of his work as quartermaster-general of the army, as an army contractor, and of his economic activities in glass, the salt trade, tanning and milling, brewing, shipbuilding, and iron manufacturing. But a study of his landholdings reveals another, less well-known, phase of his manifold points of contact with the early history of Pittsburgh.

In O'Hara's obituary it was said that through the introduction of his glass, brewery, and other businesses, and in the buildings he erected, he "almost created a city himself."² His landholdings were an integral part of this creation during his lifetime, and they continued to be a factor in the growth of Pittsburgh after his death. O'Hara invested over \$58,500 in land and buildings in Allegheny County alone.³ This amount probably approaches the sums that he invested in all his other business enterprises, and it has certainly produced revenues far surpassing all his other interests combined. O'Hara's "first love," the Pittsburgh

1 Mr. Shetler is Curator of the West Virginia Collection at West Virginia University, Morgantown. This article is based on his master's thesis, submitted to the University of Pittsburgh in 1949, on the subject, "The Evolution of the O'Hara-Schenley Properties in Allegheny County to 1880."—*Ed.*

2 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, December 21, 1819.

3 Westmoreland County Deed Books, 1773-1897, *passim*; Allegheny County Deed Books, 1788-1880, *passim*. This figure includes neither the \$11,539.24 which O'Hara paid for Craig's interest in the glassworks and the farm on which it was located (Allegheny County Deed Book, 12:308), nor the \$5,000 paid for the brewery and land in 1805 (Allegheny County Deed Book, 13:221). The value of the land, apart from the buildings, equipment, and stock, is not set forth in these deeds.

Glassworks, passed out of the family's control shortly after his death.⁴ And there has been no evidence to show that any of his enterprises except land were financially rewarding to his heirs for any period of time. But by 1903 the Schenley properties, only one of the three huge estates created out of O'Hara's landholdings, were estimated to be worth between thirty and fifty million dollars.⁵ For over one hundred thirty years, six generations or more of his heirs in America and England have realized substantial incomes from the lands bought at the head of the Ohio by this Irish immigrant.

It is virtually impossible to locate and establish O'Hara's holdings in their entirety. His claims and purchases were distributed over at least three states, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Indiana.⁶ His Pennsylvania lands included lots and acreage in the counties of Allegheny, Westmoreland, Crawford, Armstrong, and Berks.⁷ There are only vague descriptions of the areas included in the deeds for many of these conveyances—a practice which furnished grist for the mills of countless land title lawyers in the nineteenth century. Even town lots are not always determinable because lot numbers were sometimes not given. In other cases deeds were not entered in the public records. And often many years elapsed between the making of a deed and its recording. For example, the last grant of Penn lands in the Manor of Pittsburgh recorded in Allegheny County was in March, 1869. This was for a deed dated May 3, 1786.⁸ In many accounts of O'Hara's life it is noted that his first land purchase in Pittsburgh was a tract of four hundred acres on Coalpit Run, bought in November, 1773.⁹ But there is no record of this deed being recorded in either Westmoreland or Allegheny County during O'Hara's lifetime. However, from the sources available we can get an accurate picture of the extent of his holdings in Allegheny County and of their disposition.

O'Hara's interest in land has always been overshadowed by his other enterprises. Although his land operations have not been emphasized, they were recognized by Dahlinger, who credits him with owning more

4 Dorothy Daniel, "The First Glasshouse West of the Alleghenies," *ante*, 32:113 (September-December, 1949).

5 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, November 6, 1903, January 17, 1904.

6 Allegheny County Deed Book, 81:631.

7 *Pennsylvania Archives*, third series, 26:302.

8 Allegheny County Deed Book, 242:49.

9 See, for example, Mary Carson Darlington, *Fort Pitt and Letters from the Frontier*, 218 (Pittsburgh, 1892).

real estate than any other resident of Pittsburgh and Allegheny in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Because of the magnitude of his business interests in Pittsburgh it has been suggested that his landholdings were built up through the profits from these interests.¹¹ This may have been true to a certain extent in the later years. But an analysis of O'Hara's business interests in the years in which he was buying land, and the percentage of total purchases made in each year, shows that the majority of his total holdings was acquired before his industrial and business undertakings in the city were well under way.

O'Hara was engaged in some capacity in the supply services of the army for over twenty-five years. Following his Revolutionary War service he continued his relationship with the army from 1783 to 1802. In July, 1783, he resigned his commission as assistant quartermaster-general to become an army contractor. This phase of contracting lasted until April, 1792, when he was appointed quartermaster-general by Washington to assist General Anthony Wayne in the campaigns against the Northwest Indians. After four years he resigned this commission, and in the summer of 1796 he again began contracting for army supplies,¹² terminating this last phase of his relationship with the army in 1802.¹³

O'Hara bought real estate continuously from 1785 through 1818, the year before his death. In this thirty-four-year period there were ninety deeds recorded in his name in Westmoreland and Allegheny counties for land purchases in Allegheny County. But it was during these years of service in the army quartermaster department and as an army contractor that over sixty per cent of his Allegheny County deeds were executed.¹⁴ Although well over half his real estate had been purchased by 1800, his business and industrial establishments, for which he is best known, were only in their infancy. The O'Hara-Craig glassworks did not go into significant production until 1797,¹⁵ and it was

10 Charles W. Dahlinger, *Pittsburgh, a Sketch of Its Early Social Life*, 107 (New York, 1916).

11 Mrs. S. Kussart, "One Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Mrs. Mary E. Schenley," *ante*, 9:211 (October, 1926).

12 Darlington, *Fort Pitt*, 211, 215.

13 *Dictionary of American Biography*, 14:3.

14 Westmoreland and Allegheny County Deed Books, 1785-1819, *passim*.

15 Daniel, "First Glasshouse," 100.

not until 1804 that O'Hara acquired sole ownership of the factory.¹⁶ His first brewing business was not planned until 1798, and the Pittsburgh Point Brewery was not established until 1803. Notice of ship-building in O'Hara's yards does not come until 1804.¹⁷ Thus it appears unlikely that the profits from his business and industrial undertakings contributed materially to his capital for land buying.

An analysis of O'Hara's holdings by the geographical locations set forth in the deeds shows twelve areas of ownership in Allegheny County. These deeds conveyed to him, in whole or in part, a total of 160 town lots, 41 outlots, and slightly over 2,411 acres of outlying farm lands which were to become, in a few years, valuable urban property in Pittsburgh and Allegheny.

The town lots were purchased in the following developed tracts in the county: the Woods Plan, the Reserve Tract opposite Pittsburgh, the town of Allegheny, the Coal Hill Plan, and the Borough of Pittsburgh. Outlots were bought in most of these same plans. Acreage purchases were recorded in Pitt Township, Pittsburgh Manor, Versailles Township, St. Clair Township, Allegheny County, and along Streets Run. A map showing O'Hara's holdings of lots in the Woods Plan of Pittsburgh accompanies this account, and a chart of the amounts of property he acquired here and in the other areas is appended below.



Most of O'Hara's holdings were not purchased in the first instance from the Penns. Of the 122 lots or parts of lots bought by the general in the Woods Plan, 41 were deeded by the Proprietors. Acquired in a like manner were three outlots in the Woods Plan which totaled 52 acres, 237 perches. Only one tract of farm acreage seems to have been bought from the Penns. This was 55 acres in St. Clair Township. The other Penn deed to O'Hara was for three lots in the Coal Hill Plan. The above lots and farm lands were deeded to O'Hara in a total of ten conveyances for a consideration of £681.15.9.

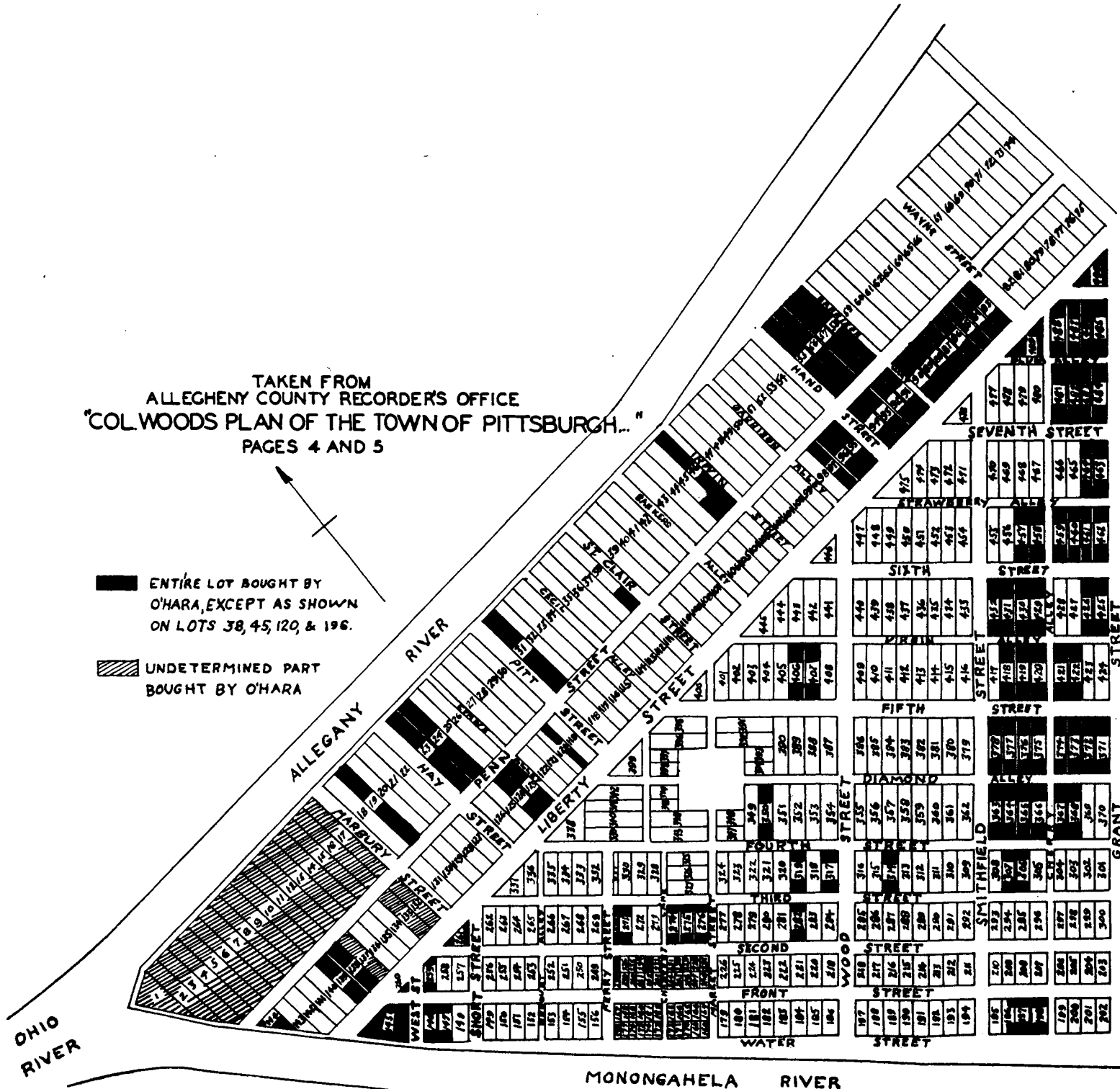
In 1826 the *Pittsburgh Directory* said of James O'Hara: "The General had a happier knack of seeing a few years before him and drawing deductions from the nature of things than any of his contemporaries pos-

16 Allegheny Deed Book, 12:308.

17 Eulalia C. Schramm, "General James O'Hara, Pittsburgh's First Captain of Industry," 77, 78, 81, a master's thesis, 1931, on file at the University of Pittsburgh.

TAKEN FROM
ALLEGHENY COUNTY RECORDERS' OFFICE
"COL WOODS PLAN OF THE TOWN OF PITTSBURGH..."
PAGES 4 AND 5

-  ENTIRE LOT BOUGHT BY O'HARA, EXCEPT AS SHOWN ON LOTS 38, 45, 120, & 196.
 UNDETERMINED PART BOUGHT BY O'HARA



sessed."¹⁸ The truth of this estimate of O'Hara is illustrated to a marked degree by noting the disposition of his purchases in the Woods Plan. There is evidence that he planned his acquisitions so as to derive the maximum benefit from his lots as the town grew. His real estate was concentrated in strategic areas of the triangle formed by the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers and Grant Street. The great mass of his lots was bought along the outer sides of what was later to become the Golden Triangle. This had two important consequences in the later history of his estate. It secured to him and his heirs the valuable river-front lands, and at the same time his ownership of solid blocks of lots immediately west of Grant Street assured that this property would have to be negotiated for as the business population of the town inched toward the farm lands east of Grant Street, the only possible direction of expansion. Only twenty lots were bought in the interior of the Woods Plan, inside Liberty and Smithfield streets.

At the Point, thirty lots were laid out in the plan in the area bounded by Liberty Street, the Allegheny River, and Marbury Street, the first north-south intersection. O'Hara purchased all or parts of these except for lots 134-136, and 140-143 inclusive. Twenty-nine lots or parts of lots were acquired east of Marbury Street between Liberty Street and the Allegheny River.

The heaviest area of concentration was immediately west of Grant Street. O'Hara bought 47½ of the 94 lots plotted in the twenty-five blocks bounded by the Monongahela River, Smithfield, Liberty, and Grant streets. In the ten-block area between Strawberry Alley and Fourth Street, he purchased 31 of the 40 lots surveyed. This is equivalent to about 77 per cent of the present-day area bounded by the First English Lutheran Church, the Grant Building, the Old Post Office, and Gimbels.

O'Hara's family grew along with his business interests and his landholdings. Six children were born to him and Mary Carson, but only three of them lived to share in the vast estate left by the general. These children were destined to marry into other leading families in the town, or to create new ones. The surviving children who shared in the division of their father's estate were Richard Butler, Elizabeth Febiger, and Mary Carson. Richard Butler married Mary Fitzsimmons, and their

18 Samuel Jones, *Pittsburgh in the Year 1826*, 69 (Pittsburgh, 1826).

daughter, Mary Carson, married William McCullough Darlington, a lawyer and scholar whose library of twenty thousand volumes forms the basis of the Darlington Memorial Library of the University of Pittsburgh. Elizabeth Febiger O'Hara married Harmar Denny, son of Ebenezer Denny, the first mayor of Pittsburgh. The descendants of the eight surviving children of this marriage made up the heirs of the Denny estate, the second to be created out of O'Hara's landholdings. The third great estate was formed by the marriage of Mary Carson, O'Hara's youngest daughter, to William Croghan, Jr., of Kentucky, in 1821. It was their child, Mary Elizabeth, the granddaughter of James O'Hara, who married and eloped with Captain Edward W. H. Schenley, and who transferred to England the ownership of what was to be the largest share of O'Hara's properties in Allegheny County.

O'Hara died on December 21, 1819, at the age of sixty-seven. He was survived by the three children cited above, and by his wife, who died on April 8, 1834, at the age of seventy-three.¹⁹ His will, drawn up three months before his death, sets forth his wishes in the disposition of his estate.²⁰ The will was dated September 15, 1819. The executors appointed were Mary O'Hara, the testator's surviving wife, Harmar Denny, Dennis S. Scully, James Ross, and James R. Butler. Mary O'Hara and the three children were the sole beneficiaries under the will.

The children received no direct grants of real estate or personal property at the time of O'Hara's death. Rather, an estate in trust was created for each of these legatees. Separate devises in the will conveyed lands and buildings to the trustees and their successors, who were directed to manage each of the estates to provide for the support and maintenance of each of the children and their heirs. Provision was made for the division of any estate that was voided by the death of a legatee.

The estate created for Richard Butler differed from that of the daughters'. It was binding during the son's lifetime, and any direct conveyance of property was to be made only to his children, if any. The trustees were empowered, on the other hand, to make direct settlements of property on the daughters. They could, "at any time as their best

19 Darlington, *Fort Pitt*, 218.

20 O'Hara's will is recorded in Allegheny County Will Books 2:190 and 3:623. These records are illegible in many places. All references to the will in this article are based on a true copy of the will in the possession of the Lawyers Title Company Agency, Pittsburgh.

judgment may direct . . . settle and convey the whole of the said real estate [in the manner] as may to them appear advisable."

There were seven main provisions in the will. The second, third, and fourth clauses set up estates in trust for the children. The fifth clause provided for the support of Mary O'Hara. The sixth enumerated property that was to be conveyed to Elizabeth and Mary by the trustees "at such time and by such deed of entailment, limitations and restrictions or strict settlement as they may think advisable." The seventh was a residuary clause by which all the residue of the estate remaining after the accomplishment of the above provisions was to be divided into 50 shares, 15 of which were to go to each daughter, and 20 to the surviving wife.

Contrary to what has generally been held regarding the settlement of O'Hara's estate, there was not an absolutely equal division of property among the three children. It is apparent from an examination of each of the trusts that in quantity, at least, the daughters were favored over the son, and that Mary received the larger share of the daughters' inheritance.

The second clause of the will enumerated the property conveyed to the trustees to be held for Richard Butler O'Hara:²¹

1 Tract number 10 in Cunningham's District, Indiana Township, containing 220 acres, adjoining the lands of James Ross and the estate of the late General Wilkins.

2 Two outlots, numbers 136 and 137, Ross Township, in the Reserve Tract opposite Pittsburgh.

3 A two-story brick house situate on Water Street between Smithfield Street and Cherry Alley, with the ground attached to the same, extending back to Front Street.

4 A two-story brick house situate on Third Street between Smithfield Street and Cherry Alley with the ground attached to the same, extending through to Fourth Street.

5 A two-story house with the ground thereto attached, situate on West Front and Liberty Streets in Pittsburgh.

²¹ The exact descriptions of the properties are given here, but for clarity and uniformity the wording does not always follow that in the will.

A greater amount of property was held in trust for Elizabeth Febiger O'Hara by the third clause of the will:

1 Two brick houses at the corner of Market Street and Second Street and the ground on which they stand, extending the same width of the respective houses through from Market Street and O'Hara Alley.

2 Two brick houses at the corner of Market and Third Streets and the ground on which they stand, extending the same width of the respective houses through from Market Street and O'Hara Alley.

3 A brick house at the corner of Grant and Second Streets on lot number 60 in O'Hara's addition to Pittsburgh, with the ground on which it stands, and extending the width of the house through from Second to Front Street, with all the buildings thereon.

4 Two outlots, numbers 1 and 5, containing 35 acres, in the plan of outlots surveyed by Colonel Woods.

5 The glassworks on the southwest side of the Monongahela River opposite Pittsburgh with all the lots, lands, tenements, buildings, utensils and improvements belonging and with the same.

6 The mills on Saw Mill Run and the lands belonging thereto.

7 All the lands, tenements, and hereditaments in St. Clair Township, Allegheny County.

8 The farm called "Springfield" on the Allegheny River, containing 319 acres, adjoining the Manor line, being the same formerly held by Thomas Smallman.

By the sixth section of the will, the following property was also settled on Elizabeth O'Hara. This land was not held in the above trust, and it was to be conveyed to her at such time as the executors might choose:

1 Outlots numbered 264, 265, 267, and 275 in the Reserve Tract on the north side of the Allegheny River opposite Pittsburgh.

2 Town lots numbered 70, 71, 101, 102, and 105 in the town of Allegheny.

Mary O'Hara's share of the estate was established in the trust described in the fourth clause, in addition to the lands held by the executors outside the trust:

1 Seven lots in Pittsburgh, numbered 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, and 490.

2 Seventeen lots at the Point, numbered 1-17 inclusive, with the brewery and all buildings and improvements thereon.

3 Lot numbered 144, City of Pittsburgh.

4 Part of "Manor Farm," of 84 acres, adjoining Springfield and the Manor line.

5 "Smithfield" tract, 170 acres, Pitt Township.

6 "Mount Airy" tract, 374 acres, Pitt Township.

7 Tract of 20 acres, Pitt Township, situate at the mouth of Four Mile Run.

8 The other brick house situate on lot numbered 60 in O'Hara's addition to Pittsburgh.

9 The residue of lots numbered 60, 61, 62, and 63 not devised to Elizabeth, with all the buildings and improvements on the same.

10 That portion of O'Hara's ground beyond Try Street adjoining lands of Andrew Watson, Anthony Beelen and Try Street.

11 The two contiguous brick houses on Market Street in Pittsburgh and the ground on which they stand, extending the same width throughout from Market Street to O'Hara Alley; being the two central houses in O'Hara's block of brick buildings extending along Market Street from Second to Third Street.

In addition to the above eleven parcels, the executors were directed to convey to Mary O'Hara, at their discretion, the following properties in the Reserve Tract in Allegheny:

1 Outlots numbered 140, 141, 142, 144, and 145.

2 Town lots numbered 25, 28, 29, 31, and 32.

Mary O'Hara was bequeathed the homestead on Water Street and other properties as follows:

Lots numbered 146, 147, and part of 145, with all the buildings and improvements thereon . . . together with all the household furniture . . . also the carriages and horses, and all the turnpike and bridge and bank stock of every description; and all the rents, issues, and profits of the land tenements and hereditaments not herein specially devised to the children, until the same shall be finally disposed of by the executors.

In addition, the surviving wife was to receive a yearly income of \$3,000, which was to be paid out of the rents and profits accruing from the above bequest. If the income from these sources failed to amount to \$3,000, the difference was to be made up out of the residuary fund.

The trustees were authorized to make leases on the unimproved portions of the properties in the trusts in return for the payments of ground rents. Such leases were not to exceed twenty-one years. An accounting of the execution of the trusts was to be kept by the trustees and a report made to the Orphans Court of Allegheny County once yearly. Provision was made to terminate the trusts by having the trustees submit a report to the Orphans Court showing all their proceedings during the life of the trust, and obtaining the Court's approval after having rendered the interested parties an accounting.

Taken from almost any point of view, O'Hara's real estate holdings have been important in the history of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. The total amount of money he spent on land was a significant investment sum for one individual in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The lots and acreage which he chose to buy were so located that they were of ever increasing value as the frontier town evolved into an industrial metropolis. His purchases of almost 25 per cent of the town lots in the Woods Plan foreshadowed the subsequent ownership of his holdings by his heirs, which affected Pittsburgh's development, for good and for ill, for over a century. Even as he was Pittsburgh's initial industrialist, so was he the city's first great landholder.

APPENDIX

This table shows the lots and acreage, and their geographical locations, bought by James O'Hara as recorded in the deed books of Westmoreland and Allegheny counties.

	Number of lots	Number of outlots	Outlot acreage	Acreage in unde- veloped tracts
Woods Plan	122	4	109A 417P	
Reserve Tract				
Opposite Pittsburgh	13	20	200A	
Town of Allegheny	11	17	170A	
Coal Hill	6			
Borough of Pittsburgh ...	8			
Pittsburgh Manor				221A 274P
Pitt Township				1191A 118P
Allegheny County				416A 168P
St. Clair Township				368A 301P
Versailles Township				14A 54P
Streets Run				200A
Total	160	41	479A 417P	2411A 35P