THE OLD WILKINS HOUSE
HARTLEY G. FLEMING

. . . In 1922, Henry Borntraeger and a few others were considering buying and restoring the Wilkins house but gave up the idea upon the advice of a builder whom they had requested to estimate the cost of the project. He reported that decades of neglect had left it more of a ruin than appeared at first glance and refused to make any estimate, saying that water had undermined parts of the foundation, that there were several large cracks in the brick walls, and that the main roof and heavy portico were close to collapse from dry rot.

The house had stood open and abandoned for many years. It was played in by Sterrett schoolchildren, including me, and slept in by hoboes, and yet most of the glass was intact, and much of it original, as could be inferred from the slightly distorted appearance of things seen through it. (This, I think, reflects very favorably on the good order and respect for property of the times.)

The original white and gold paneling of the large, high-ceilinged drawing room was still in place, although cracked and discolored. On a wall in the kitchen was a row of six small, clapper-type call bells sized for forming a musical scale. They were mounted individually on spiral springs and had been rung by wires which ran over pulleys under the second story floor boards to bell pulls in the various rooms.

In the enclosed picture, the small wing on the left was the kitchen, connected by a small pantry with round windows, to a formal dining room (first two french windows). The next five windows lighted the large drawing room which was connected by another round-windowed passageway to a small room with a fireplace. Upstairs, the master bedroom was in the center, under the portico, and there were smaller bedrooms on each side.

The back of the house, with the carriage entrance, was unimpressive, for the main roof sloped from front to back like a shed, making the back wall a couple of feet lower in height than the front, and resulting in small, square second story windows. The center entrance door was quite plain and may not have been the original. It led to a small, square reception hall and stairwell.

The stables were some distance to the left of the house and were

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Mr. Fleming, who moved to California from Pittsburgh in 1934, has been in correspondence with Mr. Robert Alberts, secretary of the Society, and with Mr. Richard Linder regarding his recollections of people and places in the Pittsburgh area.—Editor
placed at the foot of a steep terrace which had shrubbery on top so that they could not be seen from the house. Similar outbuildings to the right of the house were alleged to have been slave quarters, but no trace of these existed in my time. (These hidden outbuildings, the use of round and french windows in the house, and the four columned portico opening upon a lawn suggest familiarity by the architect with Jefferson's Monticello.)

It was said that the original gateway to the Wilkins estate was not on Reynolds Street, which did not then exist, but on Penn Avenue opposite the site of Greenlawn and that this driveway was used without change when the Woodwell house was built about 1880 (?). In support of this, it was noted that the large trees flanking the driveway (in 1910) were obviously older than the house.

Mr. Linder, in his letter, also mentions a building on the Westinghouse property which "looked like a small stable" and "stood until recent times." I can assure him that it was indeed a small stable, for I kept a car in it in 1917, a few years after Mr. Westinghouse died. I rented it from the caretaker who was then living with his family in the main house. At that time there was also another and much larger stable on the place.

I have only a vague recollection of Mr. Westinghouse's private railroad siding and overpass. I think both disappeared about 1910 or 1911 when the grade of the main line of the railway was changed in connection with the elimination of grade crossings in the area. The overpass then became a tunnel lined with white tile.

As for Mr. Linder's belief that some of the "non-millionaire" houses are still standing, I feel sure that they are and probably some of the millionaires too. Except for the Beechwood Boulevard group, there were only three real showplaces in the neighborhood, those of Heinz, Armstrong, and Westinghouse. The rest of the millionaires' homes were large by today's standards, and some had a quiet elegance about them, but they were not ostentatious. Frick and Horne had large grounds, but most did not. Peacock built his showplace later, on North Highland Avenue, and Lovejoy went broke while building his on his hilltop above South Braddock Avenue.

In case you are wondering what motivates me to write all this, I think it is because I enjoy it. I also hope that it may be useful to put down some of these things "before the colors fade." This is first-hand, on-the-spot information, except for the items on the Wilkins slave quarters and Penn Avenue gateway which are based on neighborhood folklore of the time.