In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Pittsburgh was undergoing the changes and growth of a new era. World War I brought prosperity. The city's mills operated at full capacity, and shopkeepers benefited from the full employment. With industrial prosperity, Pittsburgh's population grew. From 1900 to 1920, the population in the city increased by 76.2 percent. Consequently, the need for housing was critical, but the flat lands along and between the rivers had long been established residential areas. The only land that remained was the surrounding hillsides. A challenge lay before Pittsburgh building contractors: how could they use this available hillside property for residential construction? This challenge was met by Thomas A. Watkins with the construction of the Watkins community and the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel in the eastern ward of Squirrel Hill.

In 1920, Thomas Watkins purchased a large tract of land, an entire hillside, from the Mellon family. To him, the land appeared to be the ideal location for an urban residential community of grand proportions, where one could reside, go to market, and enjoy entertainment facilities. He sought to establish the kind of neighborhood that would attract the professional, literary, art, musical, and sports figures of Pittsburgh. It would be a place that would appeal to those "requiring dignity and attractiveness in environment with accessibility." He aspired to build a city within a city.

The Squirrel Hill development choice was excellent. In 1917 a group of concerned Squirrel Hill residents crowded into the Colfax School auditorium to discuss the future of their community. They feared that the growth of the community was being checked because of inadequate streetcar service, the lack of proper fire and police protection, and insufficient lighting facilities. After much discussion, the

Joanne B. Moore, a native Washingtonian, received her B.A. from West Virginia University and M.A. from Duquesne University. She is the Curatorial Assistant at "Clayton," the Frick family mansion in Point Breeze.—Editor

2 Pittsburgh Gazette-Times, July 27, 1924.
Squirrel Hill Board of Trade was founded with the purpose of “protecting, fostering and encouraging the commercial and municipal interests of the City of Pittsburgh, particularly that portion known as Squirrel Hill.” 3 The board immediately made long-range plans to improve the area through road repairs and expansion, the building of a new school, and the encouragement of new business and residential development. Thomas Watkins was a member of this board which was successful in widening Forbes Avenue, Murray Avenue, and Beechwood Boulevard. When the Boulevard of the Allies was opened to Schenley Park, the Squirrel Hill area was connected to the downtown. Watkins knew the area was ripe for development.

A community development on such a grand scale was a challenge in an era of residential construction that heretofore had been characterized almost exclusively by the rapid rise of apartment units. Robert W. Sexton, in his book *American Apartments, Hotels, and Apartment Hotels*, summed up the design attitude of the era:

> The greatest obstacle in the design of any multidwelling house is brought about by certain demands made by owners who see their building only as a means of accumulating wealth. Ceiling height means nothing to them; rather the fact that more stories mean more rentable space.
> The fact that a hotel or an apartment house is accepted as being one of the best designed structures in that part of the country in which it is located should be of far greater advertising value than the fact that there is a bath for every room or that one may live, sleep, and eat in a one room apartment.4

Sexton felt that while multifamily dwellings lacked the principal foundations upon which the home was founded, privacy and individuality, they did offer a new type of home where convenience was the principal characteristic. However, Sexton also felt that convenience had little respect for art, and the big problem for architects of the day was “to merge art and convenience with service.” 5 “[The apartment building] offers an unusual opportunity for those who are lending their efforts in evolving a distinctive American style.” 6 It was, indeed, an unusual opportunity, one which Thomas Watkins had no intention of letting pass, and one which he approached with his characteristic determination.

Thomas Alfred Watkins was born in Wednesbury, England, in

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3 *Proceedings of the Squirrel Hill Board of Trade, 1923-1924* (Pittsburgh, 1924), 13.
5 Ibid., 28.
6 Ibid., 29.
1861. In the middle 1870s he, along with his father, Arthur, and his brother, Charles, arrived in Brooklyn, New York. After one year, the Watkins family relocated in Millvale near Pittsburgh, where his father founded the Arthur Watkins Food Products Company, assisted by his son Thomas. Young Thomas did not have any of the advantages of an early formal education but spent much time in self-education. Eventually, he left his father's business and obtained a position with the Keystone Bridge Works, then a part of the Carnegie Steel Company. He then established a stand at Allegheny Market selling pickles and fruit. In 1880 he married Martha Bigham and together they raised five children in Pittsburgh's East End.

Watkins's interest in real estate and building began in the 1880s with the construction of two houses in the Millvale area. He moved on to construction in Highland Park, and, in 1911, he began building in the Squirrel Hill area. By the end of his career, Watkins was responsible for the construction of nearly five thousand homes. His final endeavor, and what was described as the "culmination of his life," was the construction of the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel. It was here that Watkins successfully challenged the old standards of housing construction.

The entire community included eleven five-family apartment houses; one six-family apartment house; four fourteen-family apartment houses; six four-family apartment houses; twenty-four two-family apartment houses; one 148-unit family apartment hotel; one five-story garage; eight stores in the apartment hotel; and one bowling alley with twenty-four duck pin lanes and snack bar. There was also an 800-seat theater with dance hall. It was bounded by Morrowfield Avenue, Murray Avenue, Forward Avenue, and Shady Avenue, included Sunapee Way and Alderson Street, and created Maeburn Road. The cost of the development, exclusive of the apartment hotel, was close to $3.5 million. (Fig. 1)

Ira King Watkins, youngest son of Thomas Watkins and later manager of the apartment hotel, was instrumental in the planning and design of the community. Watkins stated his feelings modestly but proudly:

There is not much to tell about the design, we just got together and figured it out, my brother [Clarence], my Pop and myself. We had an architect, Dwyer, to help us out and I helped him.

We had to make use of the terrain. Maeburn Road was a big hill, and we

7 Interview: Winifred Haggart, Feb. 14, 1981.
Figure 1. "The Hill," along Murray Avenue, showing the Morrowfield under construction. (From a collection of Morrowfield photographs given to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania by Miss Winifred Haggart. All illustrations are from that collection.)
could have a heating plant for the whole shooting match. The stone dug out for the heating plant we used for the foundations of the Maeburn Road apartments.9

The mass of stone that lay under the Maeburn Road hill could have been a costly obstacle. However, the Watkinses were able to use this stone to their advantage. Not only did the stone provide building foundations but it also eliminated the need for deep excavation, as shallow cuts were made in the rock in one section of the building to provide cellar space. Foundation costs were greatly reduced as a building constructed on solid rock does not require expensive footings. The stone also provided aggregate for the concrete.

Each apartment building was rigged of skeleton steel purchased from the Levinson Steel Company and engineered by Cecil N. Haggart, Watkins’s son-in-law. The steel work consisted of riveted columns and girders with the intervening spaces filled with reinforced concrete beams and hollow tile. The outer walls were of brick and white glazed terra cotta, with decorative balusters completing the Italianate theme.

Watkins insisted on using modern and quality construction materials such as yellow pine joists and studs. The more than eleven miles of brass, cast iron, and galvanized piping were carefully selected to fit specific needs. The insulation which lined the interior walls placed the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel and the entire Watkins community among the first fireproof residences in Pittsburgh. The detailed attention and “particular pains” paid to quality and comfort made one contemporary builder note that “only good workmanship has been used throughout.” 10

The Watkins community had two features particularly unique in residential communities of the 1920s: central refrigeration and heating. The iceman never visited the apartments, and food spoilage was a thing of the past as each apartment came equipped with a refrigerator. The refrigeration system had a carbon dioxide machine cooling brine. The brine was circulated by pumps through the building. The ice compartment in each refrigerator was fitted with a coil which cooled the brine to the required temperature. Ira Watkins recalled:

Frigidaires were just starting to come in a little bit, so we couldn’t buy them. So we had to pipe the stuff all the way through. Boy, was that a headache! We had to have special valves made where we could let the stuff go through but still turn it off into each refrigerator. The Homestead Valve people made a special valve for us to do that.

If it would get a little air bubble in the pipe some place, boy, that would

9 Ibid.
10 Builders’ Age, 1923.
shut the stuff off for a whole group of apartments. That's why it was a pain in the neck, it was always getting bubbles in it and we had to hunt for it.\footnote{11 Interview: I. K. Watkins.}

Regardless of its difficulties, the refrigeration system was a new feature for a multifamily dwelling.

The refrigeration system was powered by the second unique feature of the complex, the central heating plant. This plant, built by Watkins and located under Maeburn Road, also supplied heat and hot water to the buildings on the entire hill. The vapor heating system not only enabled each tenant to regulate the temperature in his respective apartment but also guaranteed enough hot water for cooking, bathing, and cleaning.

It was in the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel, the largest structure in the community, where innovation was king, and the very latest conveniences were standard. From its refrigeration and heating systems to its Murphy in-a-door beds, the Morrowfield was a forerunner in comfort and design. Even the basic principle upon which the building was constructed, that of the apartment hotel, was a new idea for Pittsburgh.

The apartment hotel may best be described as a blend of the luxury of a hotel with the convenience and privacy of an apartment house. It appeals to those who prefer the service of a hotel, but enjoy the suggestion of a permanent homelife which the apartment house has to offer. The Watkinses emphasized this philosophy in their appeal for Morrowfield tenants.

Will you live in the Morrowfield, away from the noise and smoke, yet within 20 minutes of downtown? Will you live in the Morrowfield, Pittsburgh's first and most elegant residential hotel? The enjoyable change in surroundings — the relief from the full responsibilities of a house are as welcome to the tired housewife as the business man who has grown weary of the old routine and craves new quarters — new environment in a magnificent new home. Now is the time to make sure of this happy change — this pleasanter easier mode of living.\footnote{12 Pittsburgh Gazette-Times, July 27, 1924.}

Many of the apartment hotel's construction features were also new. The Morrowfield was one of the earliest buildings to replace the six-and-seven-inch wall partitions with two-inch solid plaster and insulated walls. "This system saved space, was fireproof, and was more solid," \footnote{13 Interview: I. K. Watkins.} Watkins claimed.

Similarly, the flooring in the Morrowfield was one of the latest
construction techniques. "After the floor tiles were in, on top of that we put 1½ inches of a cementlike material that allowed wooden floors to be placed overttop and nails to be driven in and hold. We used oak floors."  

It was not difficult to find the Morrowfield. The several-foot-high letters on the rooftop (now removed) served as a directional. If that was not enough, the building itself, with its eight-story height and full city-block length, towered over everything near it. (Fig. 2)

The interior was far less imposing because of the careful blend of colors and the choices of furnishings. In the lobby, residents and guests registered, picked up their mail, and received their messages from the telephone operator. As the focal point of the main floor, the lobby established the elegance that could be found throughout the Morrowfield. The dark oak floors blended beautifully with the furniture that had been carefully selected by I. K. Watkins to reflect the building's artistic flavor. The furniture had once graced the Thomas Morrison home on North Highland Avenue.

The apartment interiors were also a successful blend of art and convenience. The twelve-foot ceilings created an air of spaciousness and large room size. The decorative mouldings around the ceiling and

Figure 2. The Morrowfield, 1924

14 Ibid.
baseboards added a touch of elegance. The oak flooring complemented the oak wainscoting along the living room walls. The French doors, which separated the living room and dinette, provided privacy and attractiveness for dining. The Murphy in-a-door bed enabled efficiency tenants to make space available for their daily routine and allowed one-bedroom residents an interesting and convenient alternative to two bedrooms. (Fig. 3)

A service closet, located in the main corridor and shared by two apartments, provided storage space for brooms and mops without infringing on apartment space. The closet’s primary entrance was from
the main corridor but it was accessible from the respective apartments through a small door in each kitchen. A ledge on the closet's interior was set aside for refuse which was picked up by a custodian. (Fig. 4)

One Morrowfield resident of forty-seven years recalled:

The building is very well built. I bet it is the best built building in the city. The size is terrific! I like the high ceilings, and the cupboard space is remarkable. We kept the garbage pail in the service closet and a man came after every meal to dump it.  

The apartments became available in 1924. The furnished ones,

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decorated by the Joseph Horne Company, rented for $250.00 per month and the unfurnished for $150.00.\textsuperscript{16} This charge included utilities, refrigeration, and radio service. For the fee of fifty cents per hour, the management provided extra maid service to the unfurnished apartment residents, while the furnished apartment rents included this fee.

For the resident or guest who did not wish to cook, the Morrowfield Dining Room was available. In 1925, evening dinner was served for $1.25, luncheon for seventy-five cents, and breakfast was a la carte. At its opening, the dining room was under the charge of Mr. and Mrs. Victor E. Herbert, who for the previous eighteen years had been the steward and stewardess at the Pittsburgh Golf Club. A reporter for the Pittsburgh Bulletin Index commented, "This alone attests for the quality of all food service at the Morrowfield Dining Room."\textsuperscript{17} The Watkins family eventually took charge of the dining room, and under the supervision of long-time friend Paul Tamsan, business flourished.

In keeping with his overall desire to have a city within a city, Watkins added two more features. The rooms adjacent to the lobby and dining room in the Morrowfield housed several stores. Fichle's Ice Cream Parlor, a delicatessen, beauty shop, and barber shop were only a few of the businesses available for the tenants' convenience. A new-car showroom attracted the eye of many passersby. A neighboring building contained a bowling alley, theater, and dance hall, providing an evening's entertainment only a short distance away.

One long-time resident recalls:

Living here is like having my own home. The location is ideal. You don't have to go off this block; there is Poli's, the cleaners, the drugstore. It was also convenient for my daughter to go to Taylor Allderdice [High School].\textsuperscript{18}

Of all the convenient features Watkins had for his tenants, he was most proud of the five-story garage. Its unusual construction, built to conform with the irregular contour of the ground, enabled Watkins to use various street-level accesses through the placement of ramps. Ramps were a very new feature to garages rivaling the traditional elevator. Watkins' granddaughter, Winifred Haggart, visited the construction site with her father, Cecil N. Haggart, and grandfather:

We would go and visit the construction site on Sundays. He would stand at the garage and explain how important the ramps were. I could feel how proud he was.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Interview: I. K. Watkins.
\textsuperscript{17} Pittsburgh Bulletin Index, April 1925.
\textsuperscript{18} Interview: S. L.
\textsuperscript{19} Interview: W. Haggart.
Watkins's insistence on having a garage is another example of his excellent foresight. While the automobile was becoming more and more popular, it was still a luxury item. Watkins knew automobiles were becoming permanent and that his residents would probably be among the first to own them. Service in the garage was as important as service in the hotel itself. A vehicle left overnight would be found the next morning with a clean windshield and was delivered to the entrance of the building at no charge.

The tenant who did not own a car or wish to fight city traffic was not neglected. In April 1925, regular coach service, the Morrowfield bus, began providing transportation to the downtown business district. The bus ran on a regular half-hour schedule and, again, was free to tenants and their guests.

The cost to build the Morrowfield, with its luxury and conveniences, was approximately $1.5 million.\(^{20}\) I. K. Watkins, supervisor of labor, gives most of the credit for the successful completion of the building to the workers. (Fig. 5)

We had no trouble getting workers, and they worked for us by the day. They were fine people to work with, very, very good. Boy, we liked to work too. We would work up to eleven, twelve o'clock at night pouring concrete and we'd be back the next morning at a half-past seven. The men got a kick out of it too — not like today. The laborers stayed with us to those hours on just straight time.\(^{21}\)

"Straight time" on the Watkins construction site meant fifty cents per hour for carpenters and $5.50 a day for bricklayers.\(^{22}\) It was quite common to find not only I. K. Watkins but also Thomas Watkins himself assisting in the various construction activities. One contemporary reporter, surveying the Watkins site, noted:

It is steady employment that he offers that makes his jobs attractive, and, besides that, he treats them right. There is a feeling of co-operation amongst the workmen that reminds one of a contented family.\(^{23}\)

Thomas Watkins's death in 1925 prevented him from realizing his true purpose for the community and the Morrowfield. While he witnessed the completion of the construction and proved that a hillside could be suitable for a residence, families and individuals he had hoped to house had not yet come to the area. Fortunately, his sons continued his efforts to attract the "quality" people of Pittsburgh.

\(^{20}\) Interview: I. K. Watkins.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Builders' Age, 1923.
I. K. Watkins, then manager of the Morrowfield, decided more publicity was the key. Aware that Cleveland was the host city for stage shows prior to their Pittsburgh engagements, young Watkins sent his half-brother Verner to Cleveland to talk to the managers of the shows. Verner was instructed to offer them three things:

... a bus to meet them at the train; nightly transportation to and from the show; excellent care. You know, we got pretty near every show that came to town and filled the apartments with a very high class of people.²⁴

Watkins fondly recalled a special dinner given in his honor by the cast of the *Gay Temptations*.

They wanted to thank me for being so nice to them. They said most places they go just treat them like dirt. We never, never thought we'd be treated like you have treated us!²⁵

By the middle 1920s, the Morrowfield was firmly established as a fashionable place to reside while in Pittsburgh. Although its construction features were important, there was something else that attracted people to the Morrowfield. The Morrowfield had captured the spirit of the "Roaring Twenties." The era known for its zest for life, flapper styles, cotillions, card parties, and bathtub gin was visible at the Morrowfield. The building was alive with activities at all times.

Especially popular were several small rooms that served as meeting places for residents and guests. Card parties were frequent and, as numerous advertisements suggest, were often organized by local ladies clubs to benefit particular charities. Dining room patrons, already surrounded with fine china, crystal, and silver, were able to enjoy music with their evening meals on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights. It was the lucky bride who was able to have her wedding reception in the Morrowfield Dining Room. The Terrace Grotto, adjacent to the dining room, was a favorite night spot. The terrazzo floor made an excellent setting for dancing and as the room grew in popularity, another floor was built to hold the bands.

The grand ballroom, on the top floor, was the most elegant room in the hotel. It was frequently the site of a debutante ball or special cotillion. Guests took great delight in listening to the local bands as they danced under the large, colored-glass ball twirling high over head. "It was magical!" recalled Winifred Haggart, "watching everyone dancing in their finest clothes." ²⁶

²⁴ Interview: I. K. Watkins.
²⁵ Ibid.
The guests in the Morrowfield also reflected the era. Fanny Brice, Al Jolson, Alfred Lunt, and Lynn Fontanne were but a few of the celebrities that made the Morrowfield their Pittsburgh home. I. K. Watkins’s son, James, remembers that Lynn Fontanne and his mother “became quite good friends.” Other guests included the Marx Brothers, who insisted on staying in the same room. James Watkins recalls that his father was very happy to see them leave. “Pretty much louts and vandals were they,” recalled Watkins. He was referring to an incident in which he remembered a “Steinway or Baldwin piano” being moved into the Marx Brothers’ room. When the piano was returned, “at each end of the keyboard the fine wood had been deeply burnt and scarred from crushed out cigarettes.”

The Morrowfield was also the home base for many of the Pittsburgh Pirates, including Lee Meadows, George Grantham, and Joe Harris, during the regular baseball season. It was an excellent place to acquire an autograph from a favorite player. Winifred Haggart received one from Walter Johnson, a pitcher for the Washington Senators, as he stood under the Morrowfield marquee waiting for the bus. The hotel was the host to the visiting Washington Senators and the Washington press corps, for the homestand of the 1925 World Series. I. K. Watkins remembered:

Boy, that was a headache! The day after the first day they were here, you never knew so many empty quart bottles was in the world as we collected out of their rooms.

The Watkins community and the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel exemplify a unique, new lifestyle in the 1920s in Pittsburgh. Watkins’s eagerness to accept the challenge of developing such a new community reflects the boldness of the era. Thomas Watkins laid the groundwork that would set the standard for private multifamily dwellings in the city. The Morrowfield Apartment Hotel and the Watkins community remain today as a symbol of that era.

28 Ibid.
29 Interview: I. K. Watkins.