



Sunday afternoon on Webster Avenue near Francis St. in the Hill District, 1951.

PITTSBURGH'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS, 1900-1920

by Scott Smith and Steven Manaker,
with the assistance of Dean Chester and Tom Taylor

BETWEEN 1900 and 1920, northern industrial centers experienced a dramatic increase in their black populations. This increase had a number of causes: in the South, crop failures and racial violence; in the North, economic growth and a cut-off of European immigration during World War I. The combination sent a wave of black migrants from rural areas in the South to industrial cities in the North. Among the sending states, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana figured prominently; among the receiving cities, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh predominated. One of its most decisive effects was to transform the composition of northern urban neighborhoods, increasing racial segregation and spawning the modern ghetto.

Before the migration, Pittsburgh had been a city in which blacks were so comparatively few that, according to one author, they made relatively little economic or cultural impact.¹ In 1900, there were 10,357 African-Americans living in Pittsburgh; by 1920, the black population had more than doubled, and it grew to 37,725 in 1930.

A limited yet revealing look at how this residential transformation occurred in Pittsburgh can be gleaned from the handwritten pages of the 1920 federal census. In 1993, shortly after the census became available, graduate students in Professor Laurence Glasco's Graduate Seminar in Quantitative Historical Methods at the University of Pittsburgh gathered information on a 5 percent random sample of Pittsburgh's black residents.² From the limited information available we recreated the family structure and background as well as the economic and occupational status of each person in our sample. To get a more comprehensive view of each neighborhood we recorded the same information for their next-door neighbors and neighbors five houses away.³ This information was supplemented by a similar sample drawn by another group of graduate students from the 1900 census.⁴ The following essay will focus on the 1920 census, with occasional references to the 1900 materials.

One of our first findings was that blacks did not constitute a majority of any city neighborhood, though perhaps this is not surprising, since blacks made up only 6 percent of the overall city's population. The Hill District accounted for a third of the city's total black population, but even there, in the neighborhood with the highest concentration of African-Americans at the time, blacks did not constitute a majority. In 1920, about one in three of the Upper Hill's residents was black, and in the Lower Hill the ratio was only one in five.

A second finding was that blacks were not a homogeneous group. Indeed, an 1899 study of blacks in Philadelphia by W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out long ago that it is a mistake to regard African-Americans as all alike.⁵ At the very least, blacks differed in terms of how long they had lived in the city, and in terms of the regions from which they had migrated. Like Du Bois before them, the authors of a 1982 study, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh 1900-1960*, also see the heterogeneity of black migrants as central to understanding their neighborhoods.⁶

Our data does not allow us to ascertain the date blacks arrived in Pittsburgh, but it does indicate where black migrants from various states tended to congregate. Pittsburgh's African-American migrants came overwhelmingly from the South. Our census samples show that in 1900, 74 percent of black Pittsburghers had been born in the South, a figure which increased to 81 percent in 1920. Over the same period, the percentage of Pittsburgh's blacks born in Pennsylvania decreased from 17 percent to 8 percent. Du Bois had worried that so many of Philadelphia's blacks were non-natives "whose transformation forms a pressing series of social problems."⁷ Even if one does not agree fully with Du Bois' assessment, Pittsburgh's 92 percent figure for non-Pennsylvanian blacks in 1920 signifies a relatively new and dynamic ethnic culture emerging.

Our third finding was that black neighborhoods were diverse, with migrants from different states tending to settle in different neighborhoods. Sometimes these reflected social class differences. In *Lives of Their Own*, for example, the authors emphasize that blacks born in the deep South tended to be less educated and possess fewer industrial skills than blacks from the upper South.⁸ Du Bois makes less of the deep South/upper South dichotomy, tending to characterize all migrants as a source of social problems: "The new [black] immigrants usually settle in pretty well defined localities in or near the slums, and thus get the worst possible introduction to city life."⁹

Migrants from the deep South, mostly Georgia and Alabama, tended to settle in Pittsburgh's inner-city neighborhoods known for their lack of amenities and social stability. Eight out of 10 blacks born in the deep South lived in the inner-city neighborhoods of Hill District and Lawrenceville, while less than one in 10 resided in the East End neighborhoods of East Liberty, Homewood, and Shadyside. In contrast, blacks from the upper South, born largely in Virginia and Maryland, were dispersed more widely around the city — about two in 10 resided in the East End neighborhoods.

Pennsylvania-born blacks resembled those from the upper South in that they too were more likely than deep southerners to

live outside the inner city, especially in neighborhoods associated with the black middle class such as East Liberty and Homewood.¹⁰ Half lived in the East End, and a third on the North Side, but fewer than one in four Pennsylvania-born blacks resided in the Hill District and Lawrenceville combined. Specifically, neither the Hill District nor Lawrenceville recorded more than 12 percent of their residents as Pennsylvania natives, while East Liberty, Homewood-Brushton and Shadyside all exceeded this figure, with Shadyside approaching 20 percent.

One of the most notable findings of this investigation is that, even in the Hill District, blacks lived in clusters but not in anything that resembled the modern ghetto. Typically, blacks lived next door to blacks but with a white neighbor five doors away in 1920. The only exceptions to this were affluent Shadyside, where blacks typically lived closer to whites, and the upper Hill, where in contrast, most blacks had black neighbors even five houses away.¹¹

African-Americans living in the East End not only were more likely than other blacks to be born in the Upper South and Pennsylvania, they also were more likely to have white neighbors. In Homewood, one in three had white next-door neighbors. The majority of neighbors five houses away were also white, which is to be expected considering the high density of whites in this area. In this respect, the North Side resembled the East End more than the inner city, for over a third of black North Side residents had white next-door neighbors and two thirds had white neighbors within five houses.

The absence of segregated, ghetto-like housing was a continuation of earlier patterns. In 1900, in the Hill District, well over a third of all blacks had white next-door neighbors, and in the East End nearly two-thirds lived next door to whites. And in her 1909 study of black Pittsburgh, Helen Tucker noted the existence of “Negro streets,” but not of whole black areas: “very often a row of from three to four houses will be found in which Negroes are living, while the rest of the street is filled with white people.”¹²

Another distinctive aspect of inner-city black neighborhoods such as the Hill District and Lawrenceville was the prevalence of European immigrants. Tucker observed in 1909 that the Hill District “was given over to Negroes and European immigrants,”¹³ especially Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. In the Lower Hill, most blacks had white neighbors living five houses away, and nine out of 10 of those were foreign-born.

In the East End, most blacks had white neighbors, too, but these whites tended to be native-born Pennsylvanians — in Homewood, half of whites living next door to blacks were native Pennsylvanians, while in Shadyside and East Liberty, natives were the vast majority. On the North Side, race and place of birth of neighbors was again similar to that of the East End; depending on the neighborhood, between one-fifth and two-thirds of black families had white next door neighbors and between one-third and three-quarters had white neighbors five houses away.

Family statistics provide yet another reflection of the African-American community in Pittsburgh. Both Du Bois and Abraham Epstein noted that in the early 20th century, African-Americans in

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had very small families.¹⁴ The 1920 census supports their observations: the average black family in Pittsburgh had only 3.11 members, including parents and children.

But while black families throughout the city were small, neighborhood variations in family size did exist. Lawrenceville and Homewood had the largest families, 3.6 and 3.7 family members respectively. Families in the Upper Hill averaged 3.4 members, while families in the Lower Hill, economically the poorest neighborhood, were the smallest, averaging only 2.6 members. Families in the Lower Hill also had the fewest children, 0.79 per family against 1.29 for the city as a whole.

These figures support Du Bois’ contention that small families were a black response to economic hardship. The young, unskilled, and transient limited their family size until they could move to a neighborhood better suited for child rearing. An educated guess based on *Lives of Their Own* for Pittsburgh and Du Bois’ findings in Philadelphia would be that blacks with the means moved to the East End, especially Homewood, to raise children. Those who could not do so — or who were tied to laboring jobs near the inner city — may have moved to Lawrenceville, which could explain its larger-than-average families for an inner city neighborhood. Overall, white families were larger than black families, but the same neighborhood differentials existed, suggesting that both white and black families followed similar strategies in limiting family size and in seeking to live in neighborhoods deemed more suitable for raising children.¹⁵

Since survival strategies help define the characteristics of city neighborhoods, we can learn a great deal by examining other methods used in conjunction with limiting family size. It goes without saying that housing (including renting versus home ownership) has always been a problem for working-class people. Home ownership is critical since it also functions as a base for economic development and stability. Glasco stressed its importance when he wrote, “Lack of home ownership increased residential instability and undermined the possibilities for the emergence of a stable working class community.”¹⁶

The census indicates that blacks managed to increase their level of home ownership between 1900 to 1920 from 7 percent to 12 percent. Equally significant, however, is the existence of neighborhood variations in home ownership. The Lower Hill reflected the instability noted by Glasco; its pathetic 2 percent rate of home ownership was 10 percentage points below the African-American overall average. This was not true of the Upper Hill, however, which had a much higher rate of home ownership, one that approximated the city-wide average. The Upper Hill stands out even more if we contrast its 12 percent rate of home ownership with the 2 percent rate of the adjacent Lower Hill and the other inner-city neighborhood, Lawrenceville.

The analyses by Du Bois and in *Lives of Their Own* offer possible explanations for substantial homeownership in Pittsburgh’s largest African-American neighborhood (the Upper Hill), while adjacent black neighborhoods register virtually no ownership at all. According to *Lives of Their Own*, the Upper Hill was one of the few areas where lots were sold to blacks and where blacks could occupy new

housing.¹⁷ Du Bois adds a cultural explanation for blacks buying housing in the inner city — he sees the social and cultural institutions of Philadelphia’s main black neighborhood providing comfort and solidarity to “a race socially ostracized.”¹⁸ The tendency he describes of moving into new areas of the city in groups, rather than individually, may also account for a level of home ownership in Homewood (32 percent) which was nearly three times the sample average. The rental of properties in this area to blacks by pioneer African-American newspaper publisher Robert Vann in 1917 created a space for blacks by starting an exodus of whites from the area, allowing blacks to establish a foothold in the East End.¹⁹ The fact that the North Side came in just behind the Upper Hill in ownership underscores that this too was a stable African-American neighborhood.

The pattern of white home ownership further clarifies the distinctive characteristics of Pittsburgh’s African-American neighborhoods. In both sections of the Hill District, home ownership was substantially higher for whites than for blacks. Given the preponderance of white immigrants in these areas and the substantial gap between white and black home ownership, one may suspect that white immigrants had better access to jobs and credit, or were more adept at entrepreneurial capitalism and hoped to get a foothold in real estate in any neighborhood they could afford. In any case, the relatively high level of black ownership in the Upper Hill (12 percent, compared to only 2 percent in the Lower Hill), and the high level of ownership for white immigrants in this area, suggests that this was not a segregated ghetto or even an area dominated by one ethnic culture. In the East End, the ratio by which whites exceeded blacks in ownership was much less than in the inner city. While white next-door neighbors had higher rates of home ownership, blacks also tended to be above the sample average — and in the case of Homewood substantially above.

Given the economic status of African-Americans in the 1920s, strategies for holding onto housing depended on both access to jobs and the flexibility of living arrangements. Taking in lodgers and relatives to defray rent or mortgage payments was one common solution. The high degree of lodging indicates that for African-Americans this was as much a survival mechanism as a way into the propertied class. This is especially striking in the Lower Hill, where the level of home ownership was negligible but nearly half of the renters took in lodgers; we suspect this was done by renters to supplement the family budget and meet the rental payments. If we look at white neighbors in general, we see a different picture — few white homeowners took in lodgers. Only in the Upper Hill, where the vast majority of whites were immigrants, do we see significant acceptance of lodgers by homeowners.

While such survival strategies were important, the primary source of economic stability was access to jobs. Glasco agrees with Epstein that the economic expansion of World War I created opportunities in the steel mills for blacks, but he argues that employment remained a serious problem.²⁰ Du Bois also contended that blacks were “in competition with well trained,

eager and often ruthless competitors,” and that “[F]amily patterns, neighborhood life and positions within the community all depended upon the ability or inability to secure steady employment.”²¹

Since this study looks at occupations in terms of basic categories, we have only a general indication of what types of jobs the African-American neighborhoods depended on. In the inner city, industrial work — likely dominated by steel — provided a good portion of employment. Half the residents of Lawrenceville worked in this category. If we add general labor, which includes casual day labor, construction work, and unskilled work for public institutions, we include about three-quarters of black workers in Lawrenceville, and over half of those in the Hill District. Domestic work was negligible on the Hill and in the rest of the inner city. Commerce, which seems to have a fairly consistent representation in all wards, is highest proportionally in the Lower Hill. This is most likely the result of the number of small businesses which catered to the transient population — small grocery stores, restaurants, lodging houses, pool halls, cigar stores, and the like. If we look at non-manual employment (which includes public employees, managers, sales people, and professionals), we see that the Hill District had a fair representation, though this might be skewed by the moderate number of professionals, many of whom were neighborhood clergymen.

In the East End neighborhoods, industry was not the dominant employer of African-Americans. In the wealthy neighborhood of Shadyside, domestic work predominated, with a substantial number of blacks working as live-in domestics, chauffeurs, butlers, and other service jobs catering to the well-to-do. In East Liberty and Homewood, domestic work, industrial work, and general labor accounted (together) for 70 percent of residents’ occupations. Homewood had a higher level of non-manual work (professionals and such), which is consistent with other indicators that this was a budding middle-class neighborhood. The occupational structure of the North Side resembled both the East End and the inner city: work available in industry, general labor, and commerce was on a par with the East End neighborhoods, but the very low level of domestic jobs was similar to Lawrenceville. Transportation workers, truckers, railroad workers, porters, and messengers were the mainstay of North Side black employment.

This analysis of the 1920 Pittsburgh census certainly illustrates the need to see Pittsburgh’s African-American community as one which may have faced a common set of social and economic problems, but did so as a collection of distinctly different neighborhoods. Most striking is that the famous Hill District was in fact two different neighborhoods socio-economically. The Lower Hill closely resembled what Du Bois saw as a slum where black immigrants got “the worst possible introduction to city life.” Blacks hoping to raise families avoided the area if possible, leaving it largely to rooming houses which catered to a large population of young, single workers employed in steel, general labor, and other industrial work. A fair amount of entrepreneurial activity was also evident which catered to the transient element.

The Upper Hill, the heart of the black community, was

distinct from its inner-city neighbors in several ways. Its composition was more heavily African-American and it had a higher rate of home ownership and lower dependence on industry and general labor for employment. The Upper Hill had a higher level of transportation jobs, which had a relatively high status in the black community. With an above-average number of children and relatives per household, the Upper Hill was a more stable, family-oriented neighborhood than was the Lower Hill.

The other inner-city ward, Lawrenceville, was unique. Despite its low socioeconomic status it differed from the Lower Hill by being home to a large number of nuclear families, both black and white. Residents of both races were highly dependent on industrial work and manual labor.

The East End neighborhoods represented at least one other type of African-American community. Shadyside, while it had a high degree of live-in domestic work, was not a neighborhood of isolated blacks living in a sea of affluent whites. Even in that neighborhood, about one third of African-Americans had black neighbors, which suggests that it consisted of clusters of blacks living near each other. Blacks in Shadyside also took in lodgers at an average rate, which added to the sense of community. We also found that the high number of blacks engaged in domestic work tended to attract people from the same region (the Upper South), which would also add to a sense of community identity and, given the status attached to non-manual work, perhaps some social exclusivity.

Two other East End neighborhoods, East Liberty and Homewood, were strikingly similar. Blacks in both neighborhoods had a diversified range of jobs, notably general labor, industry, and domestic work. Homewood had more children in the home and a relatively high rate of home ownership — indicators of a black middle-class neighborhood.

The North Side was distinctive. It seemed to have many of the features of the inner-city neighborhoods across the river but at the same time its job base resembled the East End, although it had fewer domestic workers and somewhat more transportation workers. The number of people living in each dwelling was smaller than all neighborhoods except the Lower Hill, yet it had more children per household than the Upper Hill and East Liberty. The most distinguishing feature of the North Side was its well-established black population, which can be seen by the high proportion of Pennsylvania-born blacks, the high rate of home ownership, and relatively few lodgers.

As can be seen from this general and preliminary study, African-American neighborhoods in the first decades of the 20th century were diverse communities. They were not isolated ethnic enclaves, but were vital components of Pittsburgh's multi-ethnic

neighborhoods. Even the Hill District, the heart of Pittsburgh's African-American culture, was actually two somewhat different black communities complemented by a vital mixture of European immigrants and native Pennsylvanians. Further analysis would undoubtedly reveal an even richer and more complex reflection of Pittsburgh's African-American neighborhoods. ❁

¹ M.R. Goldman, "Hill District of Pittsburgh, As I Knew It," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 51, July 1968, 279-295.

² The recording, encoding and computerization of the 1920 census information were done by all four authors.

³ The Pittsburgh Census is organized by wards rather than by neighborhood. Fortunately, for our purposes ward boundaries generally coincide with recognized neighborhoods. Ward 3 comprised what can be called the Lower Hill, extending from Grant Street in the Downtown section eastward to Devilliers Street, near the location of the Hill House Community Center today. Ward 5, which constituted the Upper Hill, extended eastward from Devilliers Street to Neville Street in what today is part of Oakland. Ward 6 took in most of the neighborhood of Lawrenceville, Ward 7 represented Shadyside, and Wards 11 and 12 represented East Liberty and Homewood respectively. Finally, Ward 25 embraced the North Side neighborhood that had been the city of Allegheny. These neighborhoods were the focus of our study because at least 6 percent of their residents were African-American.

⁴ The census material on blacks in 1900 was drawn by four students in Laurence Glasco's 1992 Graduate Seminar in Quantitative Methods — Gerald A. Fichter Jr., Elizabeth Janetta, Joan M. Mohr, and Erik M. Zissu. Their work adds to our analysis of the neighborhoods, but direct comparisons between the two censuses were hampered by differences of focus and methodology of the two research projects.

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (University of Philadelphia Press, 1899), 75. The 1920 federal manuscript census did not enable us to replicate W.E.B. Du Bois' classic study of Philadelphia's African-American community, but Du Bois' work provided us with a useful model.

⁶ John Bodnar, Roger Simon, Michael Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh 1900-1960* (University of Illinois Press, 1982), 1-3.

⁷ Du Bois, op.cit., 80.

⁸ Bodnar, op.cit., 203.

⁹ Du Bois, op.cit., 81.

¹⁰ Steven Sapolsky and Bartholomew Roselli, *Homewood-Brushton: A Century of Community Making* (Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1987) 17; Bodnar, op.cit., 179.

¹¹ In the Lower Hill (Ward 3), 46 percent of dwellings headed by black families had a black neighbor five houses removed. In all other wards the figures are 40 percent or less.

¹² Helen A. Tucker, "The Negroes of Pittsburgh 1907-1908," *Charities and the Commons*, Jan. 3, 1909, 426.

¹³ Tucker, op.cit., 425.

¹⁴ Du Bois, op. cit., 165; Abraham Epstein, *Negro Migrants In Pittsburgh* (University of Pittsburgh, 1917) 18.

¹⁵ We were not able to calculate the size of white families because the sample size in our data was too small.

¹⁶ Laurence Glasco, "Double Burden: The Black Experience In Pittsburgh," *The City at the Point: Essays in the Social History of Pittsburgh*, ed. by Samuel Hays (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 17.

¹⁷ Bodnar, op.cit., 179

¹⁸ Du Bois, op.cit., 296.

¹⁹ Sapolsky and Roselli, op.cit., 17.

²⁰ Glasco, op.cit., 11.

²¹ Bodnar, op.cit., 97, 113.