From Icehouse to House
Exhibits: The History Center Building

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It’s fitting that the new home of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania has a rich history itself. The Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional Center is housed in a turn-of-the-century ice warehouse, seven stories of red brick. Its story embodies the changes in Pittsburgh and the world.

The former icehouse is located on Smallman Street between 12th and 13th streets in the Strip District, an area once dense with housing and industry. It was constructed in 1898 for the Chautauqua Lake Ice Co., replacing a nearly identical building destroyed by a disastrous fire in February that year. The fire was the biggest in the city since the Great Fire of 1845, and according to newspaper accounts of the day, it destroyed several buildings and nearby tenements. The warehouse was supplied with ice harvested from frozen Chautauqua Lake in New York: it was shipped by rail to the Strip District warehouse to be distributed by horse-drawn carts to homes and businesses.

The building was constructed with thick brick walls to hold the massive weight of the stored ice. The first floor ceiling is supported by structural steel columns and beams. This technique was combined with a brick barrel-vaulted ceiling, an ancient time-honored method also providing great strength. For the second through the seventh floors, wooden columns were brought in, reportedly from the Pacific Northwest. During the recent renovation, workers counted the growth rings and calculated that the trees dated to 1770.

Ms. Uhl and Ms. Walther completed an architectural and historic study of Pittsburgh’s Strip District to document the History Center’s neighborhood. A small exhibit on the Strip District will be featured in the lobby of the new History Center.
This 1906 view looking northeast (despite the caption) shows the Chautauqua Lake/Consolidated Ice Co. building in the center surrounded by tenements, office buildings, and industries. Just a couple blocks away was Shoenberger's Juniata Iron Mill, established 1824; extending between 14th and 16th streets from Smallman Street to the Allegheny River, the site is now a parking lot.
The distinctive chamfered corner facing northeast allowed train cars to pull inside on a rail spur for unloading. Also to the east, wrapping around the 13th Street side, is Romanesque stone detailing on the first floor and arched windows on the second. These highlighted the stylish offices of the ice firm’s president and office workers (and were occupied in recent years by offices for Adelman Lumber and the Mock Seed companies.) Two walk-in safes are reminders of the days when businesses collected and used large amounts of cash for everyday transactions. A pair of four-story additions were built on the west side with stables for the horses and space for the delivery wagons. A circular ramp once took the horses between floors but was later removed.

Soon after the warehouse was completed, Chautauqua Ice merged with other local ice companies to form the Consolidated Ice Co. As refrigeration technology began allowing Consolidated to make its own ice, the need for ice storage dwindled and the company shifted its emphasis to merchandise storage with the formation of Consolidated Storage in 1907. The company also sold distilled water until 1948, and iced box cars for Strip District food distributors. Of course, Consolidated continued supplying ice to homes, clubs, and downtown hotels for keeping food cold and for primitive air conditioning systems.

In 1950, the company sold the 160,000-square-foot building to Adelman Lumber Co. Fortunately, Consolidated had never removed its records from the building. A walk-in vault was stuffed with Consolidated Ice and Consolidated Storage records. Adelman’s office clerks used these file drawers, disposing of Consolidated’s records as needed, and bit by bit, the legacy of the ice company faded. When the Historical Society purchased the building, the remaining records were transferred to its library and archives in Oakland. Of course, the files have returned to their old home in the Strip, but now in acid-free boxes with inventory lists.

The records include correspondence, financial statements, stock certificates, and other items from the many companies that merged to form Consolidated Ice, including Chautauqua Lake Ice Co., Arctic Ice Co., Conneaut Ice Co., and Diamond Ice Co. One of the most interesting record books lists the names of the company’s horses!

A fascinating building, the renovated icehouse now sits amongst many newer neighbors. It is one block east of the David L. Lawrence Convention Center along the Allegheny River, and a couple blocks west of a growing marina/restaurant complex. It is a block north of the former Pennsylvania Railroad warehouse, which is also scheduled to be remodelled. The old industries have disappeared, though some office buildings and lofts remain. It’s an area full of history, and now, a history museum.