

*I RECENTLY HAPPENED UPON A CITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION FROM 1903
THANKING A SCIENTIST FOR NAMING A PLANET "PITTSBURGHIA."*

WHERE IS THE **PLANET PITTSBURGHIA** AND WHAT'S TRANSPIRED THERE SINCE 1903?

ZACHARY FALCK, SHADYSIDE

One of thousands of asteroids or "minor planets" in orbit between Mars and Jupiter, Pittsburghia is a fairly unexciting place. Less than 50 miles across, invisible to all but the most committed astronomer, it is a lifeless rock without even one major league sports team.

Still, it has an interesting naming rights story. One of Pittsburgh's oft-forgotten heroes was John Brashear, a South Sider who parlayed a life-long love of astronomy into an internationally respected business building telescopes and other measuring instruments. At the turn of the century, Brashear's state-of-the-art equipment was in observatories in Asia, Europe, and all over the United States.

Among Brashear's more successful designs was the "photographic doublet," which used two cameras to photograph the sky and was far more sensitive than previous telescopic cameras. That sensitivity made it possible to pick out asteroids just a few miles across from hundreds of millions of miles away.

Using Brashear's devices, Dr. Max Wolf of Heidelberg, Germany, discovered hundreds of asteroids, and in honor of the man whose equipment made those discoveries possible, Wolf offered to name two of his asteroids after Brashear and his late wife, Phoebe.

Unfortunately, one of Jupiter's moons was already named Phoebe, and Brashear, with characteristic modesty, declined the honor. (Assuming it's an "honor" to be memorialized with a lifeless world in the middle of nowhere—you'd have to ask the guy Harrisburg was named after.) So in 1903, Wolf decided to name the two planets after Brashear's hometown and its sister city of Allegheny. As Brashear biographers Harriet Gaul and Ruby Eiseman aptly put it, the asteroids now known as Pittsburghia and Alleghenia "remain an eternal memorial to the man whose genius devised a way for other men to find them."

In fact, the names outlasted not just Brashear, who died in 1920, but Allegheny City itself, which was annexed by Pittsburgh in 1907.

According to Mike Weinstein, a graduate student at Penn State's astronomy and astrophysics department, Pittsburghia is about 150 million miles from Earth, while Alleghenia is nearly 200 million miles away. You can find Pittsburghia in the constellation Aquarius, while Alleghenia is currently drifting through the constellation Taurus. Weinstein promises that neither of these asteroids ever come close to Earth, so there's no chance of either causing another cataclysmic summer blockbuster movie to be made. In fact, Alleghenia is so far away and so tiny (half the size of Pittsburghia) that it can only be seen with a professional-grade telescope, and while Pittsburghia would just barely be visible with a large amateur telescope, Weinstein says "it would only look like a feeble point of light."

But those viewing the sky with a naked eye can see a similar phenomenon, just by looking at Downtown Pittsburgh on a clear night. That will change of course, when we knock down a bunch of historic buildings to bring in the Nordstrom department stores that all the major planets have, creating the "retail fusion" necessary to light up the city at night like a white-hot sun.

WHY IS **MT. OLIVER** **NOT** PART OF THE CITY OF PITTSBURGH

JEFFERY FLOHR, WILKINSBURG

A CLUE LIES DEEP IN THE FAMILY HISTORY OF JOHN ORMSBY, WHO NAMED MT. OLIVER AFTER HIS FATHER AND INFANT SON.

According to a municipal history written by Mt. Oliver Tax Collector Jan Mudrun, one of Ormsby's ancestors was a Lord Barrymore, who was the first to demonstrate the proud defiance Mt. Oliver has shown many times since. Though his leg was cut off during a battle, the history reports, "Lord Barrymore was so outraged... that he picked up his severed leg and beat the enemy to death with it."

For most of the 1800s, Mt. Oliver had been a part of St. Clair Township. But Mt. Oliver's residents chafed under St. Clair's rule: As Mudrun's history puts it: "When St. Clair officials appropriated funds for road improvements or public safety, Mt. Oliver was last on the list." Residents circulated a petition for independence, and Mt. Oliver became a separate borough in 1892.

Within a few decades, in fact, Mt. Oliver was the only independent municipality left in the vicinity. During the 1920s and 1930s, residents of neighboring communities like St. Clair, Carrick, Knoxville, Overbrook—which had all been separate boroughs—voted to be annexed by Pittsburgh. Discontent with local leaders played a part in these votes, as did Pittsburgh's promises of lower taxes and expanded public services, benefits only a city-sized tax base could support. By 1927, Mt. Oliver was completely surrounded by the city, but it resisted numerous attempted mergers over the next several years.

Why? For one thing, the *Hill Top Record*—a weekly paper which waged a feisty campaign against annexation—speculated that Pittsburgh was trying to pay off its massive debt by raiding neighboring tax bases. There were also concerns that Grant Street was ruled by Downtown big shots who would be unresponsive to local needs. A *Record* editorial sarcastically put the case for annexation: "Help Pittsburgh pay its \$87,000,000 debt. Don't be selfish.... Give up your schools that are clear of political ties, join Pittsburgh and enjoy the fight of the spoils-hunting politicians." Such opposition played well in Mt. Oliver, where memories of life under the oppressive thumb of St. Clair lingered: a *Record* poll indicated 70 percent of Mt. Oliver residents favored keeping their government.

Mt. Oliver schools were assimilated into the Pittsburgh school system in 1965—over the objections of Mt. Oliver's School Board—and there are still occasional calls today for a municipal merger with the city. When a gunfight between high school students took place in Mt. Oliver in 1997, for example, some neighbors complained the borough could not afford adequate police protection on its own.

But when asked whether a merger is a possibility, Mt. Oliver Borough Council President Martin Palma just chuckles. "I think people are satisfied with the services we offer. We do everything the city does, but on a smaller, more local scale. We're the last municipality."

In fact, it seems that keeping apart from Pittsburgh is part of what keeps Mt. Oliver together. As Mudrun's history proudly concludes, "Mt. Oliver managed to be the only municipality to stand up and say "NO, out of 20 boroughs and townships that gave in [to Pittsburgh]. We stood up for our independence and won!"