

BOOK REVIEWS



August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays

By Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson
Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011
166 pages, 104 photos and maps, \$8.95 softcover

Reviewed by Samuel W. Black

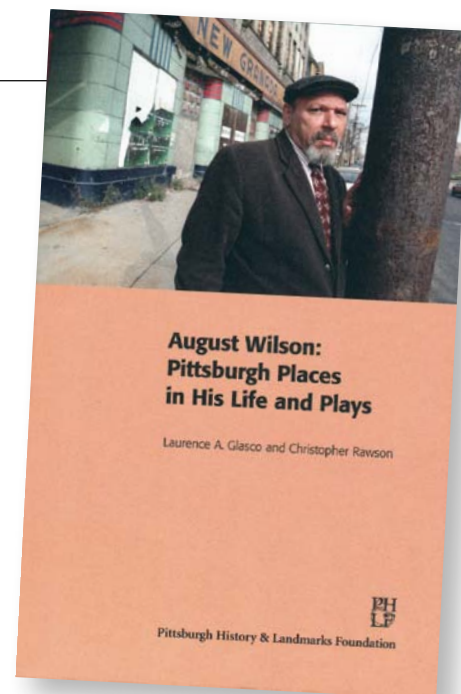
In May 2010 I attended the Pennsylvania Preservation Partnerships conference and participated on a panel called “Preserving the African American Past.” My presentation discussed Pittsburgh’s lack of preserved historic sites related to the African American experience, such as the former homes of 19th-century abolitionists Martin Delany, John Vashon, and John Peck, along with Vashon’s barbershop and bath house, and Peck’s oyster bar, which doubled as safe houses for fugitive slaves. In light of the Civic Arena and lower Hill District disposition, some have questioned Pittsburgh’s commitment to historic preservation. However, more contemporary views about site preservation include not just the preservation of the physical space but of those spaces in mind, body, and soul. In *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays* by the University of Pittsburgh’s Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson, home, community, and change converge into the historic site prism.

Glasco and Rawson reconstruct Wilson’s life and legacy with the urban spaces that influenced and inspired his playwriting. Two introductions, one by Wilson’s niece Kimberly C. Ellis, Ph.D., and another by Wilson’s lifelong friend Sala Udin, set up the book’s sections, which include Rawson’s biography of Wilson

and Glasco’s tour of Hill District community, family, cultural, and political demographics. In her introduction, “Pride and Pain of Place,” Ellis, through her eyes as a Wilson-family insider and knowing the pain and pride Wilson had for his hometown, says Wilson “gives voice to the bricks and mortar” of the Hill District. Udin, in “Growing Up with August,” recounts vivid memories of his friendship with Wilson and walks the reader through adolescence and the explosive revolution and creativity of the 1960s—a period where Wilson, Chawley Williams, Rob Penny, Nathan Oliver, Nick Flournoy, and others formed the Black Horizon Theater.

The book continues on the course of Wilson’s biography with Rawson’s “August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood.” The title frames one of Wilson’s most noted quotes and treads a path through his life as a playwright and his success as an icon. Supported with numerous Wilson quotes from a lifetime of interviews and public speeches, Rawson draws upon the playwright’s voyage from high school drop-out to literary icon to community biographer. The book presents Wilson’s Hill District cycle of plays as the redeemer of Black humanity. Rawson notes that Wilson’s theater audiences were majority white and that the content was, for some, their introduction to the Black struggle and a course in Black dignity and humanity. Wilson drew upon the Hill District for his work, and reflected back to its people a sense of respectability and worthiness. Rawson quotes director Marion McClinton, who said in his eulogy of Wilson, he “loved his people and he would not let them not love themselves.”

Although historian Larry Glasco, in his chapter “The Hill and the African American Experience,” spends much time profiling the Hill’s Euro-American communities, he returns to the Black community with somewhat of a summary of the 1960s and the impact of social political change on the region’s demographics.



Glasco shows how urban renewal plans of the 1950s and ’60s in the lower Hill left nothing to preserve. The lower Hill destruction impacted Wilson’s family, as his mother Daisy Wilson decided to move to Hazelwood to avoid the oncoming bulldozers. Glasco’s chapter summary draws on the civil rights movement’s impact on the Hill. The civil rights and Black consciousness movements did much to influence the content of Wilson’s dialog.

The last two sections of *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays* are a guide to the Hill, and appendices that further connect Wilson to contemporary spaces in the Hill and beyond. The self-guided tour of the Hill puts into context the dozens of sites that can be seen today with the spaces Wilson knew or from which he drew inspiration. Numerous maps, graphics, photographs, and more quotes by Wilson or excerpts of dialog from his plays bring life to the tour. The book is a different type of study, joining a dramatist (Rawson) and historian (Glasco) in a product that is easily readable and functional as you walk or drive through the Hill District. Maybe someone will produce a similar work that recaptures the sites and spaces of Black Pittsburgh’s abolitionist past.

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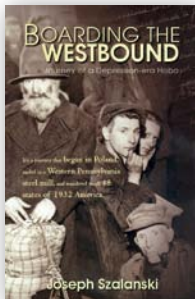
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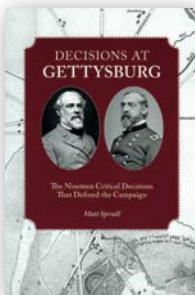
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Boarding the Westbound: Journey of a Depression-era Hobo

By Joseph Szalanski
Tarentum: Word Association
Publishers, 2010
Photographs, bibliography,
291 pps., \$16.95 softcover

Szalanski has woven a touching, engaging tale around a diary his father kept while traveling the 48 states as a hobo during the Depression. A few years after returning to Pittsburgh, Szalanski's dad, also Joseph, became the first steelworker killed in an industrial accident at the Irwin Works steel plant in West Mifflin. The author, just 2 months old then, recalls both aspects of his father's life with grace and skill.



Decisions at Gettysburg: The Nineteen Critical Decisions that Defined the Campaign

By Matt Spruill
Knoxville, Tenn.: The University
of Tennessee Press, 2011
Bibliography, 198 pps.,
\$24.95 softcover

Spruill takes a unique look at the battle of Gettysburg, scrutinizing the 19 critical decisions by Union and Confederate commanders that determined how the events of those three momentous days in 1863 unfolded. He includes a valuable appendix that takes the reader to the actual locations where the decisions were made or executed.



History to Go: The Carrie Furnaces

DVD
Pittsburgh: Rivers of Steel
National Heritage Area, 2010
Running time 43:23, \$14.99
Available at
www.riversofsteel.com

For nearly a century, the Carrie Furnaces in Rankin and Swissvale, Pa., were among the world's most productive iron-producing blast furnaces, and were integral to the region's rise as an industrial power. Wonderful archival footage, photographs, documents, and graphical explanations help tell the story of the Carrie Furnaces' contribution to the world, but best of all are interviews with former workers.



Tales From Shrimps

By Michelle Strangis
Stefanides, art by Stacy
Kelley
Bloomington, Ind.:
AuthorHouse, 2010
18 pps., \$10.50

Locals will recognize some locales in this children's book as the author takes readers to a spillway to feed ducks, a hockey game with penguins, and a 1930s diner, among other settings for these tales.



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