



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Oldest House on the Block

Everyone who researches buildings has been told at one time or another that they are standing in front of the “oldest house on the block.” Often the informant is mistaken. But the yellow, mansard-roofed house at 600 South Linden Avenue, built in 1875, truly is the oldest on all nine blocks of Linden Avenue. This charming frame house has witnessed many changes in Pittsburgh’s Point Breeze neighborhood.

Point Breeze maps, deeds, and directories help tell the story. Linden Avenue is on what was a 331-acre patent called “Bullock Pens,” registered to William W. Elliott in 1786. The



Homewood, the residence of Judge William Wilkins, was built in 1832 on his 650-acre estate of the same name bounded by present-day Penn, Dallas, Forbes, and Braddock avenues. It is pictured here just before its 1924 demolition.

HHC L&A, GPC-B17-F1.

Point Breeze Tavern (an inn for travelers and a holding pen for their stock) stood at what today is the intersection of Fifth and Penn avenues. The Pittsburgh-Greensburg Pike (now Penn Avenue)¹ was a well-traveled wagon road, paved (in the style of the day, in stone) in 1813. Stage coach lines used the pike, serving 60,000 passengers a year at their peak in 1840. Permanent settlement was limited to farms and the occasional large house with accompanying outbuildings.

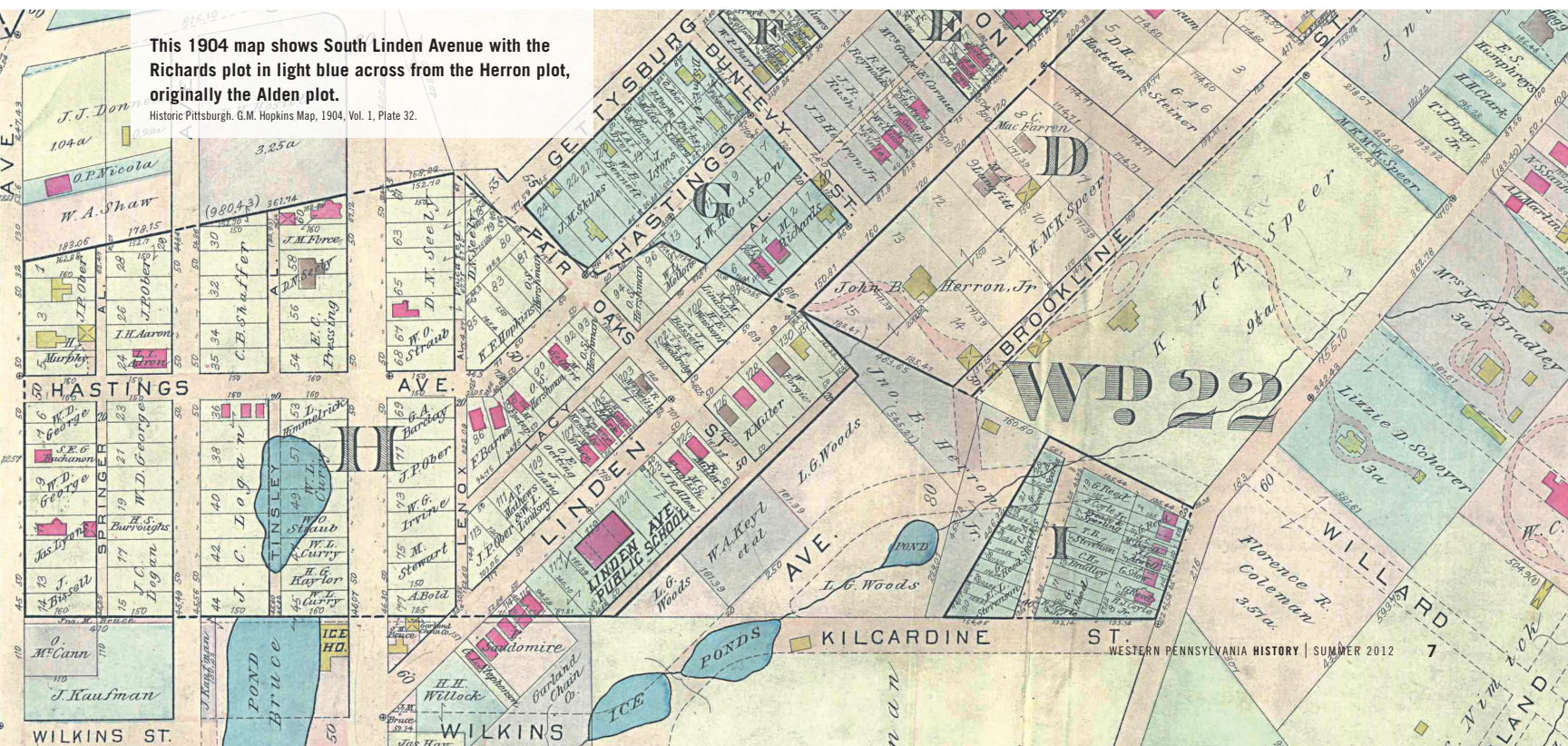
Judge William Wilkins (1779-1865), president of the Pittsburgh-Greensburg

Turnpike, gave the Point Breeze area cachet by building “Homewood,” an exquisite Greek Revival mansion four blocks from Linden Avenue, in 1835. His 650-acre estate was sold off gradually until the house was demolished in 1924.²

By the 1850s, the Pennsylvania Railroad installed tracks perpendicular to Linden Avenue and parallel to and four blocks north of Penn Avenue. The railroad offered a popular commuter service to downtown, but a bigger change came in 1864, when the railroad purchased a 41-acre plot (bounded by Fifth

This 1904 map shows South Linden Avenue with the Richards plot in light blue across from the Herron plot, originally the Alden plot.

Historic Pittsburgh. G.M. Hopkins Map, 1904, Vol. 1, Plate 32.



UP FRONT



#617 South Linden Avenue.

Avenue, Penn Avenue, Dahlem Street, and its own tracks). The stockyards it built—holding 35,000 hogs and sheep, 10,000 cattle, and 5,000 horses—created noise and aromas not conducive to building mansions.³ But the tree-covered lots, influential neighbors, and low number of adjacent slaughterhouses overrode the stockyards' proximity. Andrew Carnegie and his mother moved to the neighborhood in 1860⁴ as other large estate houses began to dot the pike. The Reverend Jonathan Fulton subdivided his land in 1868,⁵ the same year the surrounding area, then known as Peebles Township, was annexed to the city. The subdivision created Linden Avenue.

The pressure to build homes culminated in a series of developer's plans after the 1870s, even within blocks of a busy rail line hauling tons of livestock.⁶ Mrs. Elizabeth Ann Hastings registered her five-acre plan with the city in

February 1873. The house at 600 South Linden Avenue sits on lot 1 of the Hasting plan's 24 lots and three streets. Deeds show that a house and stable were built on lot #1 by 1875 and that the Richards family owned them until 1904. Mary Richards ran her own notions and millinery shop on Market Street downtown. She must have been successful to buy land and build a house this far from downtown at that early date.⁷

Local industrialists like George Westinghouse, Henry Clay Frick, and Henry Heinz bought houses in the neighborhood; Linden Avenue's housing stock grew first north of Penn Avenue and slowly to the south. The street did not cut through to Wilkins Avenue, as it does today, and was oriented towards Penn Avenue and the tracks beyond. Residents

Walls along South Linden Avenue.



#600 South Linden Avenue.
Modern photos by Lu Donnelly

caught the train at either the Torrens or Dallas stations, and Fifth Avenue had horsecar lines, which were electrified in the 1890s.

The number of houses (including row houses, suburban homes, and mansions) in Pittsburgh's East End increased more than five-fold between 1870 and 1900.⁸ Directly across the street from the Richards' frame house at 600 South Linden Avenue, Bostonian Frank Ellis Alden, a principal in the architectural firm of Longfellow, Alden & Harlow, designed and built his family home between 1889 and 1890. It was a successful marketing tool—the firm eventually had nearly 200 commissions in the region. Alden sold his Linden Avenue house in 1892 to John B. Herron, Jr., who commissioned a larger house on the same site from the Longfellow, Alden & Harlow firm. Herron moved the Alden house just a few doors down to 617 South Linden Avenue, where it still stands. Unfortunately, Herron's new large Shingle Style house, Hadston, is represented today only by the stone walls that once surrounded the property.

Throughout the 1890s, sections of the street saw speculative houses built on narrow city lots. In 1903, Linden School, designed by Ellsworth Dean and later attended by future historians David and Hax McCullough, anchored the neighborhood only two blocks from #600. By the 1920s the entire street was lined with substantial houses. Richard M. Ketchum, who lived at the corner of Linden and Reynolds during the Depression, characterized the neighborhood as having “an air of settled, genteel prosperity, all within walking distance of Linden School, which our parents firmly believed was the best in the city of Pittsburgh.”⁹

The frame house at #600 illustrates the continuing value of housing along Linden Avenue. In 1981, architect Arthur Lubetz designed a modern interior for the former farmhouse, bringing it into the 20th century. 🌻

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010) a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

¹ The road was also part of the Forbes Road and Old Glade Road.

² Wilkins was also a lawyer, banker, and federal judge, serving in the state and federal legislatures. President Andrew Jackson appointed him minister to Russia and President John Tyler made him his secretary of war. Wilkins retired to Homewood c. 1845, although he continued to take ceremonial positions throughout his life.

³ David S. Rotenstein, “Model for the Nation: Sale, Slaughter and Processing at the East Liberty Stockyards,” *Western Pennsylvania History* magazine, Winter 2010-2011, p. 41. The author notes, “In Pittsburgh, slaughterhouses and byproducts processors were slow to open near the East Liberty stockyards. By the turn of the 20th century, only a few small slaughterhouses, one tannery, and an ice plant had opened in proximity to the East Liberty yards during their active lifespan.” This could explain wealthy Pittsburghers’ willingness to build within sniffing distance of the yards, which operated until 1903.

⁴ Carnegie, then 24-year-old superintendent of the Western Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and his mother remained in Point Breeze (then called Homewood) from 1860 to 1867, then gave the house to Andrew's younger brother Tom and his wife Lucy, whose father, William Coleman, lived nearby. Their carriage house remains on Carnegie Place.

⁵ Plan Book, Volume 3, p. 238. “Plan of Two Pieces of Ground Situated in the 22nd Ward of the City of Pittsburgh (sic), Allegheny County, Pa.”

⁶ Rotenstein, p. 39. By 1863, the Pennsylvania Railroad shipped 270,713,390 tons of livestock between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

⁷ The Richards family had trouble keeping the house after the 1873 depression as it went into foreclosure, but was later returned to the family.

⁸ Joel A. Tarr, “Infrastructure and City-Building in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *City at the Point*, ed. Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989) p. 232. From 5,350 to 28,278 houses.

⁹ Richard M. Ketchum, *The Borrowed Years: 1938-1941* (New York, Random House, 1989), p. 28.



Lawrenceville Historical Society

- The Lawrenceville Historical Society (LHS) is celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2012. Seven times a year, the society presents lectures at Canterbury Place, McVay Auditorium (First Floor), 310 Fisk Street, Lawrenceville.
- LHS will soon open a museum space at 4825 Butler Street, across from Allegheny Cemetery. This has been a quest for the society since 1993.
- LHS's 7th Annual “Doo Dah Days” celebration will be Saturday, July 14, in Allegheny Cemetery. All proceeds benefit The Stephen Foster Music and Heritage Festival (Doo Dah Days), ensuring its continuance for years to come.
- On September 16, LHS will hold an outdoor commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the September 17, 1862, Allegheny Arsenal Explosion. The disaster caused the deaths of 78 arsenal employees, most of them young women. A digital recreation of the destroyed laboratory and events that led to the disaster will be shown.
- For an update of LHS activities, visit www.lhs15201.org/ or e-mail queries to lhs15201@gmail.com.

The History Center Affiliate Program, HCAP, is a membership-based network that allows local and regional historical societies and museums access to museum professionals and best practice standards through the Senator John Heinz History Center.

To find out more about HCAP or to apply for membership for your organization, please contact Robert Stakeley, Education Programs Coordinator, at rostakeley@heinzhistorycenter.org or (412) 454-6359.