

UP FRONT



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Bell's Hotel in Homestead

Recently I was asked to verify the building date of a fascinating storefront in Homestead. I eagerly agreed when I learned that one of the building owners is Pittsburgh treasure David Lewis, founding partner of Urban Design Associates (UDA) architects, organizer of the 1988 Remaking Cities Conference with Prince Charles as the keynote speaker, and a

distinguished professor emeritus of urban design at Carnegie Mellon University.¹ David recalled being told by James D. Van Trump, co-founder of Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, that the building he and wife Judith Tener own at 216-218 East Eighth Avenue in Homestead was a “coaching inn.” Judith and David have beautifully restored the tin-fronted building to house her Annex Cookery shop and the vegan Tin Front Café run by their children.

The storefront, sheathed in tin, has ornamental swags, garlands, and fleurs-de-lis, as well as egg and dart molding. The fluted pilasters on each

of the building's three stories are topped with squared capitals. Attached on the east side is a small one-story structure that fills the space once allotted to a carriageway to the back of the property. Above the café, they have created a two-story apartment, which has been fully rented since the improvements were made, and a smaller apartment in a former garage at the south end of the property, adorned with Lewis's whimsical metal sculptures.

I began the quest for a possible building date by searching James D. Van Trump's research notes, which are now online on the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation's website. The notes revealed that the Homestead Bank and Life Insurance company bought 230 acres of farmland belonging to Abdiel McClure and four brothers named West in 1870. A few

The Annex Cookery and Tin Front Café share a tin-fronted building that was once an inn.

All Photos by Lu Donnelly.




years later, Henry Dickson laid out 40 more acres of what is now Homestead; this meant the building was not built until after 1870. As usual, Jamie was thorough in documenting the source of his information and I was sent to a series of Homestead directories, which luckily are also online at the Historic Pittsburgh website.

The research revealed that the opening of the Pittsburgh, Virginia and Charleston Railroad (founded as the Monongahela Valley Railroad in 1867, and renamed the PV & C in 1870) prompted the building boom along Eighth Avenue. The first segment of the rail line opened from Homestead to Pittsburgh's South Side in 1872.²

The Borough of Homestead is seven miles from downtown Pittsburgh at a great bend in the Monongahela River and lies on comparatively level land terraced up the hillside from the water.³ The rail line also prompted an industrial boom, first the Bryce Higbee Glassworks in 1879,⁴ then the Kroman iron mill in 1881. During the next 10 years the population grew from nearly 600 people to approximately 8,000. The *1890 Homestead Directory*,⁵ published by the local newspaper, remarked that these businesses changed the complexion of Homestead from residential to industrial, and as the boosterish directory noted, "The great railroad and water systems of the country are as accessible from Homestead as from Pittsburgh."

By checking the historic maps of Homestead I could track the evolution of the tin-fronted building. The first clue was finding the address on the 1886 map with the name "T Bell" attached. This led to a review of the Homestead directories, which began with the 1890 edition (p. 18) where Theodore Bell and his wife, Kate, were listed under "hotels" along

with 18 other hotel entries.⁶ Theodore Bell's hotel must have been successful; the next year it was advertised as "The Bell House, Theodore Bell, Proprietor, Choice Wines, Liquors and Cigars."⁷ The ads for the Bell House continued for 10 more years, until 1900 when Theodore Bell was listed as retired and living at 1003 Tenth Avenue in East Homestead.

This collection of evidence led me to surmise that the Bell House was built after the erection of the Glass Factory in 1879 (when a hotel would have been needed in Homestead) and before the map on which it is shown in 1886. This is further reinforced by studying the history of sheet-metal façades. Their popularity grew after the 1870s when delivery by train became possible. They were touted as fire resistant and a less expensive way of ornamenting buildings. Although a local tinsmith may have done the basic application of the tin front, he would probably have ordered the embellishments from one of three company's catalogues: the George L. Mesker & Company of Evansville, Indiana; the Mesker and Brother Company of St. Louis, Missouri; or, closer to home, Mullins and Bakewell of Canton, Ohio. All were in business in the early 1880s and shipped their sheeting and pressed zinc ornaments nationally by rail.⁸ 

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 David Lewis (born 1922) also founded the Remaking Cities Institute at Carnegie Mellon University in 2006 and is a member of the Homestead Area Economic Revitalization Corporation. The couple lives in nearby West Homestead and restores other buildings along East Eighth Avenue as they become available.

² The Pennsylvania Railroad took an interest in the line because it allowed their trains to by-pass the congested lines in Pittsburgh and re-join the main line at Turtle Creek. In 1879, the name of the rail-line was changed, once again, to the Monongahela Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

³ Van Trump research notes, PHLF.

⁴ Bryce Higbee made pressed glass tableware until the plant was destroyed by a flood in 1907; the land at 2nd Avenue and West Street was then sold to U. S. Steel.

⁵ A series of directories for Homestead and adjacent boroughs was published by M. P. and J. R. Schooley at the Local News Office; Historic Pittsburgh website. The history of Homestead is on pages 5-7.

⁶ Interestingly, all the hotels emphasized in their advertisements that they had well-stocked bars.

⁷ *1891 Homestead Directory*, page 35.

⁸ A discussion of sheet metal façades is found in Chapter 2 of Pamela H. Simpson's *Cheap, Quick, & Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930*, pp. 30-53. What builders called tin plate is actually either iron or steel dipped in molten tin or a combination of molten tin and lead called terneplate. Both types are painted to preserve them. Between 1870 and 1930 there were at least 45 major sheet-metal companies in 10 different states. Unless a plaque is found on the building it is difficult to determine which one supplied the façade for 216-218 East Eighth Avenue.

