Stevenson Williams Real Estate Company, Mt. Lebanon, Pa.

If there’s one sign that captures the attention of the more than 12,000 motorists and pedestrians that pass it daily, it’s the colorful Stevenson Williams marquee at 666 Washington Road in Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Animating the heart of the municipality’s “Uptown” business district, the 40 x 12 x 6-foot sign stands at a crossroads, both literally and figuratively. It’s beloved by many for its 1940s design and overhanging, sheltering qualities but derided by others as an “architectural intrusion.” The massive marquee reflects a convergence of the early commercialization of American suburbs, the practical concerns and personalities of its owners, and the shifting styles of decades past.¹

Installed in 1946, the steel-and-enamel sign provided Stevenson Williams Real Estate with eye-catching advertising along the bustling commercial corridor, which also housed industry competitors.² Replacing the company’s original modest sign, which hung over its doorway, the flashy marquee glowed with pink, orange, and green neon lettering and Art Deco striping. Broadcasting the Stevenson Williams’ brand—derived from its founders’ names—the bright sign resembled a theater marquee more than the standard hanging signs characteristic of independent businesses.

Behind the bold neon lies a very different architectural statement. Constructed in 1927, the stone-faced building is typical of bank architecture of the day, which communicated strength and stability to customers. The façade features late 1920s-era Classical architectural elements, including Doric pilasters, large windows, and carved laurel wreath and lion head ornamentation, which helped define Mt. Lebanon’s upscale commercial corridor.³

Founded in downtown Pittsburgh in 1919, Stevenson Williams relocated its headquarters to Mt. Lebanon in 1927, after the opening of the Liberty Tunnels sparked a South Hills building boom. Its founders were active in national real estate associations, and knew to join in the move to suburbia. They later transformed the industry by establishing the West Penn Multi-List, wherein competitors pooled their listings.⁴

Beyond advertising, the sign served important practical functions. Protruding from the façade, it shaded company windows from intense morning sun, which would have damaged the large color photographs of homes for sale that lined its east-facing windows. The sheltering marquee also became a popular gathering spot for commuters waiting for streetcars and later, buses.

Featuring a white uppercase typeface set against a bold blue-and-red backdrop,
the sign cleverly employs a “conversation bubble,” suggesting the firm’s successful word-of-mouth marketing. The sign also features Stevenson Williams’ “Pioneer Realtors” slogan, underscoring its reputation for developing affluent sections of Mt. Lebanon such as Mission Hills and Beverley Heights. “It’s a ‘think of us first’ saying that encompassed everything they were able to—rentals, mortgages, insurance, and sales,” says president Rob Stevenson, whose grandfather worked on the sign.5

Restoration carried out over the past 20 years has included repainting the sign, replacing transformers, and removing the damaged neon. “We’d love to restore it and put the neon back,” adds Stevenson, who says it would cost $80,000 to fully restore the sign.6

“It would be great to have it lit up again and be the landmark it once was smack dab in the central business district,” says Margaret Jackson, with the Mt. Lebanon Historical Society. “People would say ‘Meet me under the Stevenson Williams sign—like the Kauffman’s clock.’”7

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1 Wally Workmaster, local preservationist. Interview with author, December 8, 2009.
3 Louise Sturgess, Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. Interview with author, December 5, 2009.
4 Rob Stevenson. Interview with author, December 5, 2009.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Margaret Jackson, Interview with author, December 4, 2009.