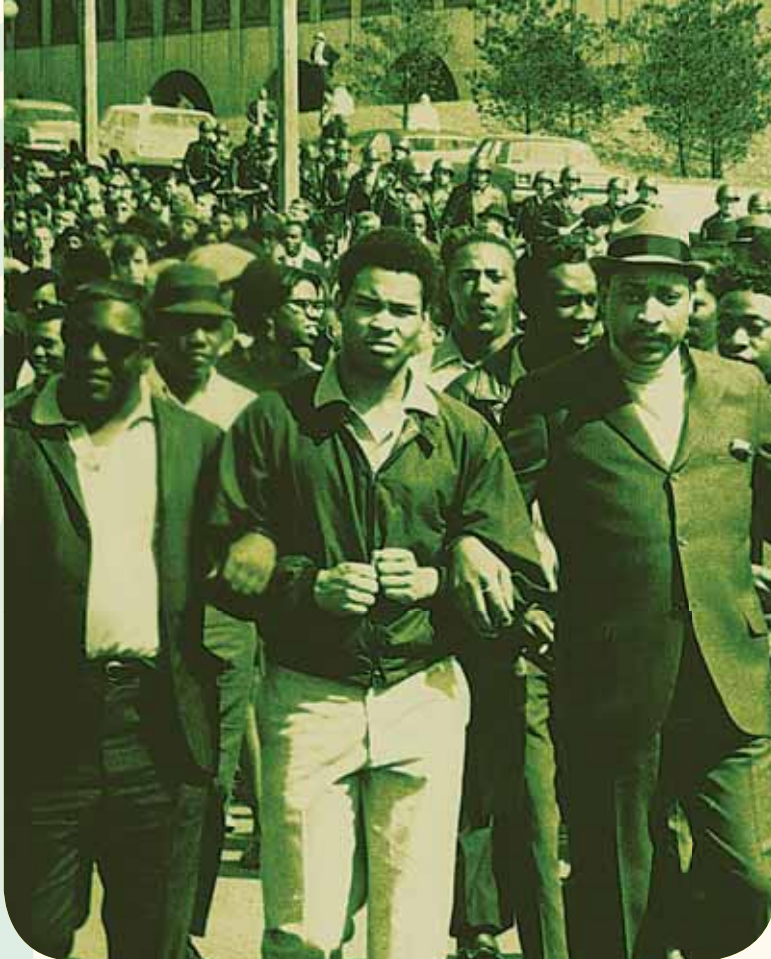




THE YEAR THAT ROCKED PITTSBURGH

By Emily Ruby



Why 1968? Momentous events happened throughout the 1960s, yet the History Center's exhibit *1968: The Year That Rocked America* highlights just one year. The exhibition focuses on events big and small that rocked the nation that year: the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, the escalation in Vietnam, race riots in America's cities and riots at the Democratic National Convention, assertions of Black Power at the Olympics, feminist protests at the Miss American Pageant, and the slaughter of hundreds of protestors in Mexico City. This year of chaos arrived in America's living rooms increasingly via the nightly news, bringing national and world events into every home with immediacy. Though a small corner of the world, Western Pennsylvania did not escape the turmoil, and its residents grappled with the same headlines and experienced their own moments of change.



n January 1, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* made this prophetic declaration: “1968 promises to be a lively year of travail as Americans undergo further

tests of their national character.” How true this statement turned out to be. January headlines were dominated by hostilities in Vietnam and a bizarre story of six local college students blinded after an LSD trip that involved staring at the sun for several hours. It only took a few short weeks for the latter story to be declared a hoax started by Pennsylvania State Commissioner Norman Yoder in a desire to keep students away from drugs, but it typified

the fear of the growing counterculture and the widening generation gap.

January’s news presaged what would come—a year dominated by the urban crisis, the housing crisis, and the youth crisis. The persistent problems of inadequate housing, city budget deficits, tax increases, and a debt-ridden and outdated public transit system plagued the city and filled the headlines. Pittsburgh’s economic base had become reliant on outdated industry, a ticking time bomb that would explode a decade later. Its population, after peaking in the 1950s, began a slow decline exacerbated by suburban flight and the economic turmoil of the 1970s. In addition, the influx of immigrants stalled, further contributing to a declining urban population. The city’s national rank fell from 12th largest in the nation in 1950 to 51st by 2000.

City Mayor Joseph Barr, a Democrat who had held the office for almost a decade, was part of the machine politics that ran the city for years. His tenure marked the end of Renaissance I projects that had begun in the years following WWII. Barr completed much of the redevelopment that David Lawrence had envisioned, assisted by Democratic County Commissioners Tom Foerster and Leonard Staisey, known as “The Builders” for their work to expand the airport, start community colleges, and complete the new stadium on the North Side.

Still mostly a working class city, Pittsburgh was beginning its transformation to a center of medical and technological innovation. In 1968 there were 170 research and development labs in the region, and doctors such as Magovern and Bahnson made Pittsburgh a center of

Barr and Humphrey (Left)

Pittsburgh Mayor Joseph M. Barr and Vice President Hubert Humphrey at a press conference at Connelley Vocational High School.

HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Public Schools Photograph collection, 1880-1892, MSP 117.

Staisey/Foerster Pin

Tom Staisey and Leanord Foerster were the Democratic county commissioners in 1968 and were known for the many development projects begun under their tenure, including several community colleges and the airport expansion.

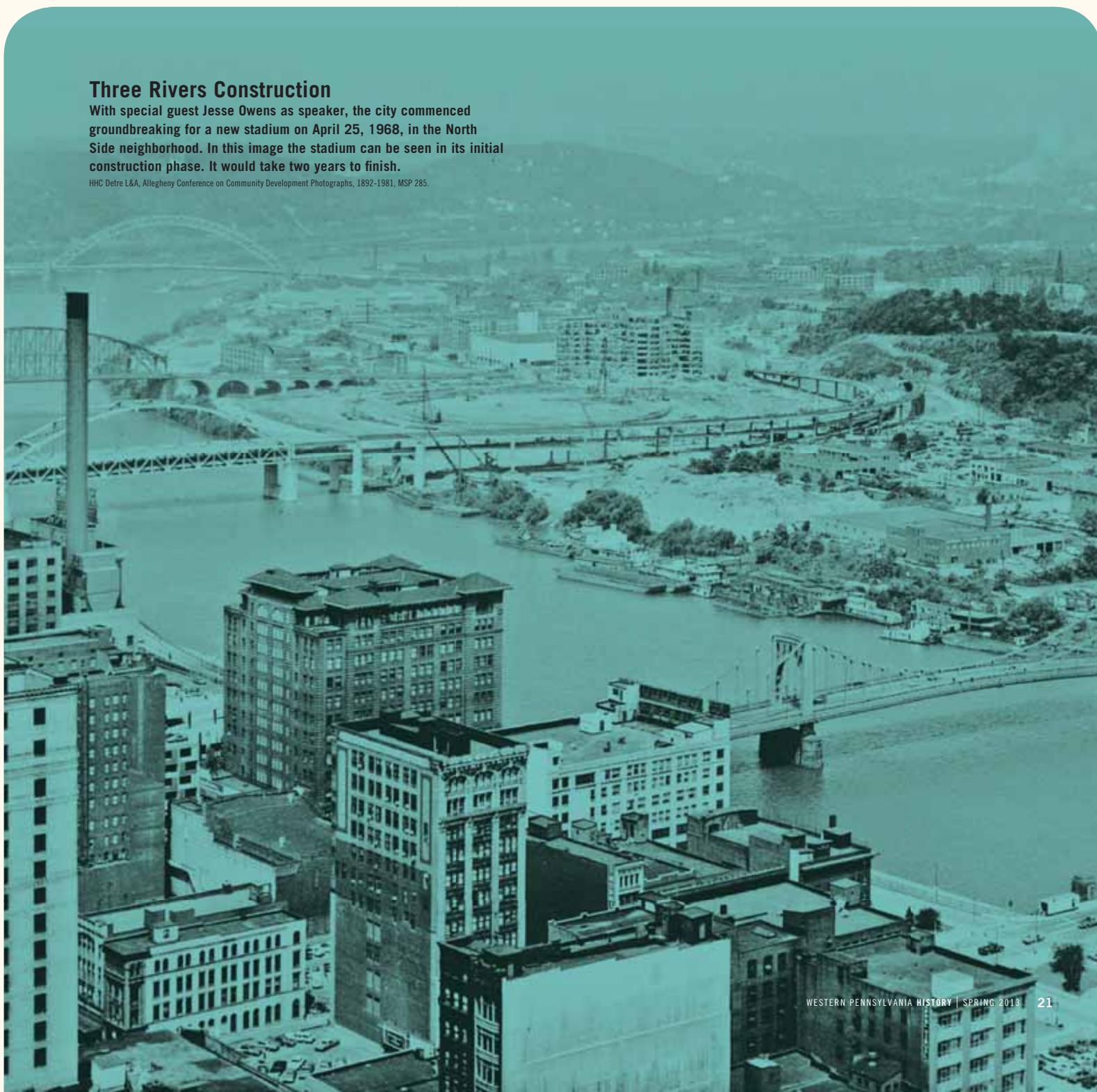
HHC Collections, gift of Barbara Liberati, 2011.100. Photo by Paula Andras

STAISEY FOERSTER
THE BUILDERS

Three Rivers Construction

With special guest Jesse Owens as speaker, the city commenced groundbreaking for a new stadium on April 25, 1968, in the North Side neighborhood. In this image the stadium can be seen in its initial construction phase. It would take two years to finish.

HHC Detre L&A, Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, 1892-1981, MSP 285.





Strauss Street Before and After Photos

Strauss Street homes in the North Side before and after renovation by the Allegheny Housing Rehabilitation Corporation (AHRCO), which was founded in 1968 by Action Housing. AHRCO received financing from 40 Pittsburgh-based corporations with the goal of renovating some of the dilapidated housing in the city for low to moderate income families.

HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Public Schools Photograph collection, 1880-1892, MSP 117.



medical research. Awarded a grant in 1968, George Magovern performed groundbreaking research on implantable artificial hearts and Dr. Henry Bahnson performed the first heart transplant in Pennsylvania at Presbyterian Hospital that same year.¹

The Renaissance did not make life better for all of the city's residents. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reporters and representatives of the black community lamented the lack of job opportunities, inadequate housing, and de facto segregation in the city. In 1968 the Allegheny Conference on Community Development stated that the major crisis facing the city was no longer physical (as it was in 1940), but social. The list of problems facing Pittsburgh included "poverty, unemployment, crime, delinquency, poor housing, alienation and other corrosive forces of ghetto existence." In light of these issues the ACCD planned to expand into "the social renaissance field" as stated by President Henry Hillman and Chairman H.J. Heinz, II, in their 25th anniversary report of 1968. Work focused on three main areas: employment, social and economic development, and education and training. The ACCD worked with the Pittsburgh Committee of the National Alliance of Businessmen to encourage the major corporations with headquarters in Pittsburgh to commit to creating jobs for what they termed "the hard core unemployed," as well as providing summer work for youth in hopes of alleviating possible rioting. In the spring of 1968 the Conference set up a fund to encourage small business development in the city. They saw this as a temporary emergency measure deemed necessary in light of the current urban crisis and intended for projects started through the fund to be self sufficient or supported through other sources in the future. Recipients included the East Liberty Youth Advance; a summer job training program through the Pittsburgh public schools; The United Black Front, an organization that encouraged new business in the Hill District;

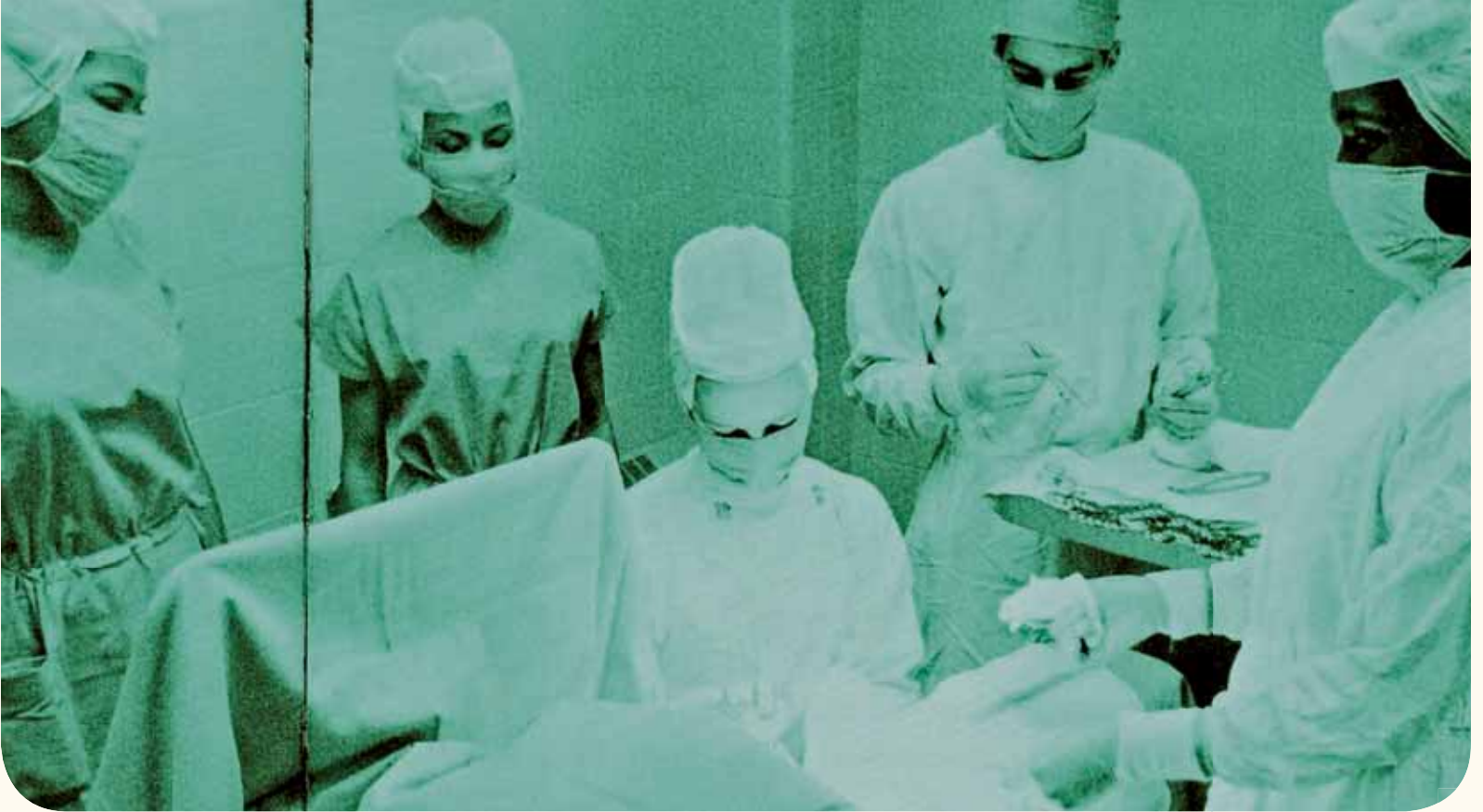


Playlot at 1118 Sheffield Street

An abandoned playlot at 1118 Sheffield Street in the Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The Manchester neighborhood was the subject of a study by the City of Pittsburgh planning department in 1968 because of the high numbers of dilapidated houses in the area.

HHC Detre L&A, Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, 1892-1981, MSP 285.

The list of problems facing Pittsburgh included "poverty, unemployment, crime, delinquency, poor housing, alienation and other corrosive forces of ghetto existence."



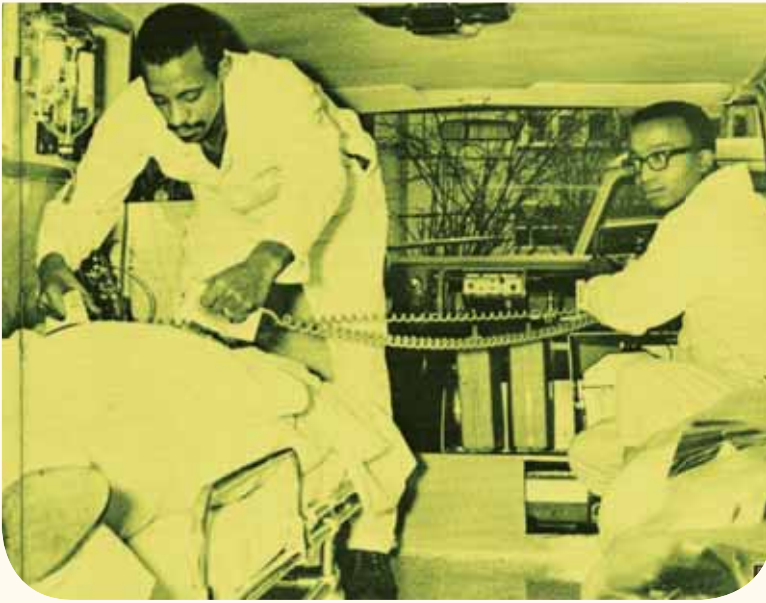
A fear of racial unrest is evident in the actions of the ACCD and indeed riots had rocked several American cities several summers previously, and they were anticipated for 1968 as well.

an NAACP sponsored inner city counseling program; The United Movement for Progress, which purchased a building in Homewood for an educational and recreational center; The Mistert Service Group, which encouraged black men to start organizations designed to promote the education and economic development of other black men; and many others.²

These efforts by the ACCD to alleviate the urban crisis did not completely address the underlying issues of the urban poor. A fear of racial unrest is evident in the actions of the ACCD and indeed riots had rocked several American cities several summers previously, and they were anticipated for 1968 as well. J. Edgar Hoover fed this fear by declaring that the Communist Party, in league with black militants, hoped to make 1968, “a year filled with explosive racial unrest.”³

A 1918 study of Pittsburgh’s migrant black communities had revealed several small fractured communities with almost half of the residents’ intent on eventually leaving, many because of inadequate housing and a lack of job mobility.⁴ Fast forward 50 years and the problems of Pittsburgh’s urban black communities sound remarkably similar. Inadequate housing, concentrated especially in poor neighborhoods, still plagued the city.

“A Basic Conditions Report” of the North Side neighborhood of Manchester by the Pittsburgh Department of City Planning found that of the 1,718 residential structures, 57 were vacant, 431 were substandard and in need of major repairs, and 973 had numerous deficiencies. Only 257 units were rated as sound. With the added factors of poor education and rising unemployment, frustrations in many communities were reaching a boiling point.⁵



Social Renaissance (Left and Above)

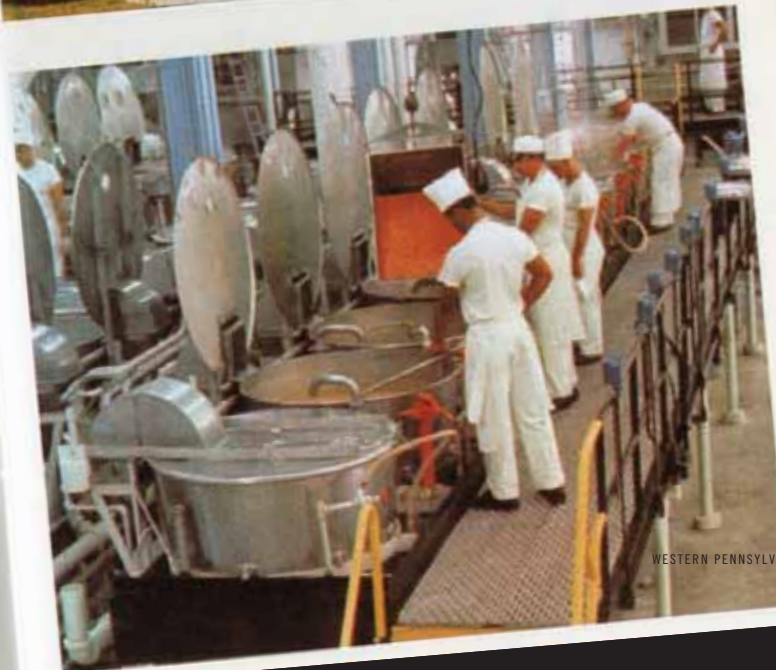
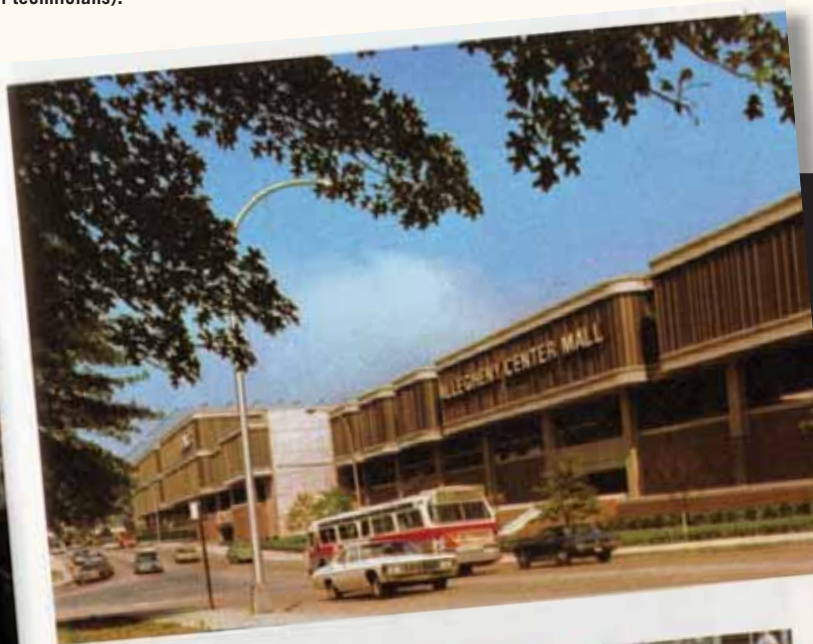
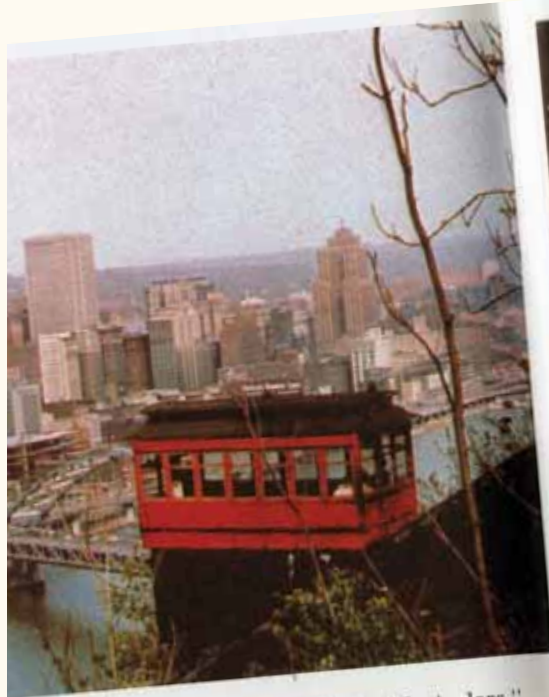
In its 1968 report, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development highlighted its new focus on the “social renaissance” by emphasizing programs it funded such as the Freedom House Enterprise ambulance service, a non-profit corporation that provided ambulance service to previously underserved areas like the Hill District, and the Pittsburgh Public Schools Occupational, Vocational, Technical Center (seen here training surgical technicians).

HHC Detre L&A, ACCD 1968 annual report.

Youth Programs

The Allegheny Conference on Community Development stressed youth programs for the summer of 1968 in hopes of avoiding the rioting that had rocked many other cities in the U.S. during the summer months. The August youth employment program was one such method to keep teens occupied and off the streets.

HHC Detre L&A, ACCD 1968 annual report.



“Pittsburgh Today” Brochure

The Pittsburgh Convention and Visitors Bureau produced this 1968 brochure that highlighted “the city of change” while also stressing that it was still, in the words of *Forbes* magazine, “the heaviest and proudest concentration of U.S. industrialism.”

HHC Detre L&A, 159.15.

...esne Incline, one of two remaining “funiculars,”
ot track to the top of Mt. Washington. The view is
or night. Opposite, top, Allegheny Center Mall, a
plex of shops, department stores, townhouses,
es, and office buildings. Still under construction,
redevelopment project of Alcoa Properties, Inc.
Northside, across the Allegheny River from down-
soup kitchen at the Northside plant of H. J. Heinz.
international headquarters for this leading food
pany.



Martin Luther King March

During the worst day of the April riots in Pittsburgh, April 7, 1968, local civil rights activists planned a peaceful march in the city to commemorate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The march started in the Hill District and ended at Point State Park.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

Even before King's assassination, there were rumblings of unrest in Pittsburgh planned for the spring, with the *Pittsburgh Courier* reporting on a "burn day" planned for May.



Some scholars argue that prior to Dr. King's assassination, the civil rights movement in Pittsburgh adhered to King's non-violent stance, but that the movement took a more militant turn afterwards.⁶ Supporting this assertion is the viewpoint of some community leaders of the period who did not feel that riots would happen in Pittsburgh. Monsignor Charles Owen Rice, a priest serving in Homewood, told a Catholic periodical, "Pittsburgh is different. No riots are likely."⁷ However, even before King's assassination, there were rumblings of unrest in Pittsburgh planned for the spring, with the *Pittsburgh Courier* reporting on a "burn day" planned for May much like riots the previous summer.⁸ In addition, many in the black community were frustrated with top-down programs pushed by elitist organizations like the ACCD. Activists such as William "Bouie" Hayden and his United Movement for Progress and other grass roots organizations formed Forever Action Together in 1968 to unite inner city, black-run organizations and work for change in their neighborhoods.⁹

The work of these community groups proved inadequate to stem the violence that erupted on April 5 in the city's urban neighborhoods, particularly the Hill District, Homewood, and the North Side, following the assassination of King a day earlier. The riots lasted for six days and, in the end, casualties included one dead, 36 injured, and more than 1,000 arrested. On April 7, the most violent day of the riots, a peaceful march to commemorate King was planned from the Freedom Center (now Freedom Corner in Uptown) to Point State Park. The police tried to cancel the march due to the riots, but the 3,500 marchers, led by Pittsburgh NAACP Executive Director Alma Fox, insisted and eventually were allowed to proceed downtown. As Fox recalled, when she encountered a line of police blocking the marchers, "I scooted right under there and got to the other side."¹⁰ Put in a police car, Pittsburgh NAACP President Byrd Brown and Safety Director David Craig negotiated Fox's release and passage for the marchers as they continued downtown. As Fox remembered, "It was a peaceful demonstration and we

gave honor to Dr. King."¹¹ Later that same day Governor Shafer ordered nearly 2,000 National Guardsmen and 300 state troopers to the Hill District and the next day deployed 1,650 more to the North Side and Homewood neighborhoods.

In the end, Pittsburgh fared better than some other major cities with credit given to both community leaders such as K. Leroy Irvis and Reverend Jimmy Joe Robinson, who walked the streets in an attempt to calm the rioters, and Public Safety Director David Craig and Police Sergeant Harvey Adams, who kept the police force in check. Craig later received criticism from many business owners that he was too soft on looters. The central business district in the Hill District, weakened by Civic Arena redevelopment in the 1950s, was effectively destroyed by the riots. Whites owned many of the businesses targeted by rioters; more than 100 of those businesses never returned to the Hill after the violence ended. Black community leaders pointed out that much of the rioting focused on the white business owners in the Hill who made money



Teachers' Strike

Pickers outside of South High School during the 1968 Pittsburgh city schools teacher strike. Identified are Patsy Alvise, Ivan Frank, and Bernie Gmys.

HHC Detre L&A, Albert Fondy Papers and Photograph collection, 2012.0130.

Time Magazine stated in March 1968 that, "The nation's restive school teachers continue to display their fighting mood." Across the country teachers struck for increased pay and bargaining rights.

off the community, but did not give back. There were tense community meetings after the riots, especially between representatives of the police, business owners, and community leaders. Mayor Barr allotted money to clean-up the Hill but none for Homewood and the North Side, and he also increased the size of

the police force.¹² The sharp division over actions taken by the city in the aftermath of the riots continued to divide the community for years.

A task force formed to assess why the riots had happened and how to prevent them in the future, and identified education as one of the

key areas of entrenched racism. The all-white school board had members who, for the most part, sent their children to private schools.¹³ Inner city blacks were increasingly frustrated with the desegregation measures that bused their children out to better school districts, but did nothing to improve neighborhood schools.¹⁴ At both the college and high school level black students protested the lack of black history curriculum, black teachers, and (at the college level) low levels of black students. In the spring of 1968, Westinghouse High School students staged a strike, which spread to other city schools, until the Board of Education agreed to hear the students' demands. Although the Board agreed to student requests to get rid of the principal at Westinghouse,

improve the lunchroom, and increase black studies courses, by the start of school in the fall little had been done to enforce these measures.¹⁵ Wilksburg High School faced student riots, racial strife, and demands to their school board as well. Into the fall of 1968 additional city schools were rocked by student demonstrations and strife, prompting Mayor Barr to issue a statement declaring the school disruptions, “too heavy a price to pay for racial animosity or whatever other underlying factors may be creating the unrest.”¹⁶

Time Magazine stated in March 1968 that, “The nation’s restive school teachers continue to display their fighting mood.” Across the country teachers struck for increased pay and bargaining rights. From February 29 to March 10 the Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers held their first strike in city schools, with 1,200 of the 3,600 teachers walking out after insisting on bargaining rights for teachers and recognition of the union by the school board. Al Fondy, president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, represented the teachers and won a collective bargaining agreement by a vote of 1,772 to 1,590.¹⁷

Labor unrest tested other industries and institutions. A strike of several months duration closed the Penn Sheraton Hotel and stymied new owners from operating the business. A deal worked out in May with Local 327 Hotel and Restaurant workers and Bartenders Union Local 188 ended the strike.¹⁸ In July the United Steelworkers of America narrowly avoided a strike after tense negotiations and, in August, Alcoa settled a 63-day strike by plant workers. In addition, police and firefighters won a limited right to collective bargaining, but not to strike, with the passage of Act 111. This measure required a change in the state constitution, which was one of 85 reforms to emerge from the state Constitutional Convention of 1968.¹⁹

Though not central to any major protest movements, and still largely socially conservative, Pittsburgh did have a small community of activists focused on the issues of



Pittsburgh Pipers, c. 1968

A franchise of the American Basketball Association (ABA), the Pipers began in 1967. Originally owned by Gabe Rubin and coached by Vince Cazzetta, the 1967-68 Pipers won the inaugural ABA championship. After the season William J. Erickson became controlling owner and moved the team to Minneapolis. In 1969, the franchise moved back to Pittsburgh, changed owners and names, and operated as the Pioneers in 1970 and the Pittsburgh Condors from 1970 to 1972. The team was disbanded by the ABA in 1972. From left to right: Vince Cazzetta, coach; Steve Vacendak; Chico Vaughn; Ira Harge; Craig Dill; Connie Hawkins; Tom Washington; and Charlie Williams.

Carnegie Museum, Charles "Teenie" Harris Collection.



Pittsburgh Penguins

Finishing their inaugural season in 1968, the Pittsburgh Penguins replaced the AHL franchise Pittsburgh Hornets and brought Pittsburgh back into the NHL.

Pittsburgh Penguins.

As Election Day approached, Allegheny County voters faced a tough decision at the polls and the added confusion of voting machines, which were used county-wide for the first time.



Hubert Humphrey Lunchbox

A homemade lunchbox supporting the campaign for the presidency by Hubert Humphrey. A month after President Johnson declared he would not accept his party's nomination, Vice President Humphrey threw his hat into the ring. He lost the election by a narrow margin of the popular vote, but a sizeable amount of electoral votes.

Minnesota Historical Society.

Wallace License Plate

In February of 1968 George Wallace announced his candidacy for President, running on the American Independent Party ticket. As governor of Alabama, Wallace's strong support of segregation had garnered national attention in the early 1960s. He gained enough national support to carry five states in the election, all in the Deep South.

Minnesota Historical Society.



civil rights, women's rights, and peace. Drawn from the local university community and religious organizations such as the Quakers, Catholics, and the United Jewish Federation, these activists often allied themselves with leaders of the black community. According to Molly Rush, a leader of the peace movement in Pittsburgh, activists, although not supported by the general population in Pittsburgh, were a small, connected, and tight knit community who worked together much more than other activist communities in larger cities.²⁰ Members were often involved in advocating for feminist agendas, civil rights, and peace issues, and the lines between these groups were not always clearly defined. Alma Fox is a prime example of this dynamic. As a leader in the Pittsburgh chapter of the NAACP her primary concern was civil rights for blacks. Over the years, however, as she examined her role in the community as a black woman, she became convinced that women's rights were also crucial, and involved herself in the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Organization for Women. In the late 1960s, as the women's movement just began to gain national attention, Pittsburgh became one of the first cities with a strong emphasis on women's liberation and already had a NOW chapter (see sidebar).

As Election Day approached, Allegheny County voters faced a tough decision at the polls and the added confusion of voting machines, which were used county-wide for the first time in this election. The Pittsburgh region, especially the surrounding mill towns, had

voted staunchly Democratic since the 1940s, with close ties between the labor movement and the Democratic Party machine.²¹ However, in 1968 what Richard Nixon referred to as the "silent majority" of Americans spoke in Pittsburgh. It was a closer race than usual in Allegheny County with Hubert Humphrey winning with 355,033, Nixon second with 252,949, and George Wallace with a sizable showing at 77,527 votes.²² The majority of Wallace votes came from working class whites in former Democratic strongholds such as McKeesport. Just a month before the election Republican County Commissioner William Hunt reprimanded a group of working class men in McKeesport for their support of a man who was "stirring a witches brew of prejudice" in a country already rife with racial turmoil.²³ The Democratic machine won most of the offices they usually occupied, but County Commissioner Leonard Staisey acknowledged that Wallace's 11 percent of the county vote was a protest against the party establishment that had to be addressed: "We should make an inquiry into the nature of their complaint," he stated to the *Post-Gazette* in early November.²⁴

The riots and struggles of 1968 left the city more racially divided than at the start, but also more aware of the problems that it faced in moving forward. The struggle to expand job opportunities for minorities continued into 1969 and the 1970s led by civil rights leaders such as Nate Smith and his Operation Dig's efforts to desegregate the building industries (historically the most segregated unions in the country). Major strides were made in the area

of women's rights and collective bargaining for city workers as well. Pete Flaherty replaced Mayor Barr in the 1969 mayoral election. After the frustrating year of 1968 the people of Allegheny County were ready for a change from the machine politics that Mayor Barr represented. A year of strikes, riots, financial crises, and turmoil in the public schools and in many local neighborhoods gave Flaherty the win.²⁵ Not a part of the traditional Democratic machine, he effectively ended the period known as Renaissance I. Part of his election platform rested on a return to neighborhood coalitions and grassroots change rather than the traditional public/private partnerships of the Renaissance era. The protests by black students at universities finally brought change in the late '60s. At Pitt in particular, the black student population doubled from 1968 to 1970 and students finally had a Black Studies program.

As the new year approached, Pittsburghers gathered around their television sets, along with the rest of America, to see the first view of Earth from space. They heard the astronauts read from Genesis and perhaps reflected on the tumult of the past year. Seeing the earth in its entirety without divisions of country or class, gender or race was a fitting end to the year of chaos that rocked America and the world. It provided a vision of hope for the future. ☀

Emily Ruby is a curator at the Heinz History Center.



Thunderbolt Postcard

The Thunderbolt made its Kennywood debut on April 15, 1968.

HHC Detre L&A Postcard Collection.

Fred Rogers

Making its national debut in February of 1968, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* won two Emmys that spring for its outstanding programming. Speaking to the appeal of the show, the Sears-Roebuck Foundation president, a major funder, remarked, "We have been gratified by the spontaneous public reaction to a television personality who, in a time of violence, speaks quietly about coping with violence."

Fred Rogers Company.

¹ "Pitt Surgeon Will Build Robot Heart," *The Pittsburgh Press*, 9 January 1968, 15.

² *Report of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development*, Pittsburgh, Pa., ACCD, 1968. HHC Detre L&A.

³ Tom Talburt, "Reds Side with Black Power Leaving Moderates -Hoover," *The Pittsburgh Press*, 5 January 1968, 5.

⁴ Michael P. Weber, "Community-Building and Occupational Mobility in Pittsburgh, 1880-1960," *City at the Point* ed. Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 365-66.

⁵ *Manchester Basic Conditions Report*, Department of City Planning, Pittsburgh, Pa., 26 January 1968, 4. HHC Detre L&A.

⁶ Joe W. Trotter and Jared N. Day, *Race and Renaissance* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 90.

⁷ Alyssa Ribeiro, *A Period of Turmoil: Pittsburgh's April 1968 Riots and Their Aftermath* (Pittsburgh: self-published, 2006), 9.

⁸ Trotter and Day, 104.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁰ Robert Johnson, "MLK riots: 40 years later, turmoil on the Hill stirs memories," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2 April 2008.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Bryant Artis, "Won't Permit 'City of Fear,' Mayor Stresses," *Pittsburgh Press*, 3 July 1968, 1.

¹³ Ribeiro, 17.

¹⁴ Trotter and Day, 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 120, 130.

¹⁶ *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1968.

¹⁷ Paul Ryan, "City Teachers End Eleven Day Strike," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 11 March 1968, 1.

¹⁸ "Penn-Sheraton Union Ratifies New Contract," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 27 May 1968, 1.

¹⁹ Patrick Boyle, "Public Strike Right Backed 'If Safe,'" *Pittsburgh Press*, 25 June 1968, 1.

²⁰ Molly Rush, interview at the Thomas Merton Center, Pittsburgh, PA (9 October 2012).

²¹ Richard Oestreicher, "Working Class Formation, Development, and Consciousness in Pittsburgh, 1790-1960," *City at the Point* ed. Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 141.

²² Ribeiro, 42.

²³ *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1968.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Ribeiro, 34.