

Life, Death, and Rebirth of Neighborhoods— The East Liberty Story



Penn Avenue looking toward Highland Avenue, 1930s.

In its heyday before World War II, Penn Avenue featured drug stores, department stores, specialty shops, and theaters.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Barbara Latterman, PFF 68.

Not all neighborhoods are represented equally in the History Center photo collections; some are barely covered while others are thoroughly documented from their earliest days to the present. East Liberty is the most prominent of neighborhoods found in the collections of the Detre Library & Archives. What is it about East Liberty that led it to be photographed so frequently over the years, and for those photos to be preserved in such large numbers?

In the mid-19th century, East Liberty was home to wealthy families who could afford to live five or so miles from the already-smoky city of Pittsburgh. They owned large parcels of land and gave their names to East End streets such as Mellon, Roup, Baum, Winebiddle, and Negley. In the 1850s, when relatively few Pittsburghers could afford to have a single daguerreotype taken of themselves, Thomas Mellon had one taken of his house.

Penn Avenue in East Liberty, the main artery from downtown to the East End, became a vibrant business district, growing over the years to become the third largest commercial area in the state—often called Pittsburgh's second downtown. Photos show it bustling with activity

from the 1870s through the 1930s. But after WWII, as living and shopping patterns shifted toward the suburbs, the commercial district in East Liberty declined.

Pittsburgh's Post War Renaissance, transforming the Point downtown and the lower Hill District, received national accolades. By the early 1960s, that work was largely complete and the Urban Redevelopment Authority turned its attention to East Liberty. Although the East Liberty Redevelopment Area included housing rehabilitation and new construction, the plan is mainly remembered for turning the business district into a car-free outdoor shopping mall. In an effort to mimic European shopping patterns and burgeoning shopping malls, planners blocked traffic on Highland and Penn Avenues, installed a ring road around the business corridor, and unintentionally choked off the retailers they meant to make more accessible. Photos document the redevelopment process from the demolition and rehabilitation of buildings to the installation of the new Penn Avenue pedestrian mall. In recent years, many of the urban renewal ideas of the 1960s are being undone.



Thomas Mellon house 401 Negley Avenue, East Liberty, 1850s. Daguerreotypes taken outside of a studio were quite a rarity. Lawyer and banker Thomas Mellon not only had daguerreotypes of his family, but of his house as well.

HHC Detre L&A, gift of James Ross Mellon, Cased images, B5.

Aerial view of East Liberty, 1971. The Redevelopment District provided low income housing in addition to turning Penn Avenue into a pedestrian mall. The high rises are East Mall (upper left straddling Penn Avenue), Penn Circle Towers (center, now the site of Target), and Liberty Park (right edge of photo).

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East Liberty Pedestrian mall, c. 1970. Closed to vehicular traffic, Penn Avenue became a pedestrian mall.

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