

ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Angeline Bamberg

The Rise of Apartment Living in Oakland

Apartments have provided urban housing across the economic spectrum in European cities for centuries. But as the United States urbanized in the 1800s, multifamily buildings came to be associated with shabby, cramped tenements, hastily constructed to absorb the influx of immigrants and workers to cities during the industrial revolution. Apartment houses only gained acceptance as a form of housing for the middle and upper classes in the

A 1923 Plat Book shows the Iroquois apartment house facing Forbes Avenue and its newer garage deeper in the block. Mansions that still lined parts of Forbes Avenue in Oakland—including one owned by Iroquois developer J.J. Flannery, seen across the street and down the block—were on their way out.

University of Pittsburgh, G.M. Hopkins Company Maps, 23v0119a.



early 20th century, boosted by modern conveniences like elevators and central heating. Developers of elegant apartments borrowed Parisian cachet by employing the euphemism “French flats” to distinguish their real estate from tenements.

Luxury apartment living arrived in Pittsburgh with the Iroquois building on Forbes Avenue in Oakland. Built in 1901 to the design of Frederick Osterling, the Iroquois was the first

of several buildings developed by brothers James J. and Joseph M. Flannery in Oakland, an area then poised at the beginning of its own 30-year period as the most prestigious precinct in the city. The Flannery brothers made their wealth by investing in vanadium, an element that strengthened steel, and later in radium.¹

Occupying an entire block facing Forbes Avenue, the Iroquois was built of fireproof construction at a cost of \$300,000. Its first floor was devoted to 10 storefronts, one of which housed the Oakland Savings and Trust Bank founded by the Flannerys. Each residential floor above contained eight family suites, each with a reception hall, parlor, kitchen, dining room, bedrooms, bathroom, and maid’s room. Also on every floor were a pair of “bachelor apartments” without kitchen, dining, or maid’s rooms. Light courts admitted “an abundance of light and air” into each flat, and the building was served by two passenger elevators, a private power plant for heating and electricity, an artesian well, a steam laundry, and janitor service.² All of this was cloaked in the formal language of the Classical Revival style of architecture, connecting the Iroquois to the simultaneous development of the Schenley Farms area as a monumental, Beaux Arts center of culture and education. The Flannerys kept the Iroquois’s amenities up to date, adding a large garage for residents’ automobiles by the early 1920s.



The Iroquois, c. 1901.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Carnegie Museum of Art Collection of Photographs, 1894-1958, 1999.34.6.




The 1930 section of the King Edward Apartments replaced three single-family houses on N. Craig Street. It is faced in glazed terra cotta with a mixture of Gothic Revival and Art Deco motifs.

Wikimedia Commons.

The Iroquois's success inspired a spate of other upscale apartment buildings in Oakland. North Oakland in particular became Pittsburgh's premier district for apartment living. Bellefield Dwellings, designed by Carlton Strong and built 1902–1904, was Oakland's next swank apartment house and first high-rise building in the area named for the early 19th century farm of politician and *Pittsburgh Gazette* editor Neville Craig. For the next 70 years, Bellefield would fill with apartment buildings of all sizes and styles, its most distinctive being the luxury apartment houses built before World War II: the King Edward (1914; enlarged 1930), D'Arlington (Edward Kern, 1908–1910), Bayard Manor (c. 1925), The Fairfax (Philip Julien, 1925), The

Adrian and The Aberdeen (both 1927), Hampton Hall (H.G. Hodgkins, 1928), Dithridge House (1929, with 1959 addition by Nathan Cantor), and the Royal York (Frederick Stanton, 1937). The façades of these buildings exemplify the application of the popular prewar residential styles (such as Colonial and Tudor Revival) to large, multifamily buildings. Such designs often compensated for their density by incorporating small but gracious courtyards as oases for residents. Nearby, Melwood Avenue, between Forbes and Centre, built up with more modest apartment houses between 1925–1945.

The construction of apartment houses continued in Bellefield after the war, but most were smaller and less architecturally elaborate. Exceptions from this period include the International Style Neville House (Tasso Kastelas, 1959, and the green-glazed tile-clad Winchester (1973). Two other large apartment complexes, though of less remarkable design,

were also built on North Craig Street near Fifth Avenue in the 1950s: Park Place Apartments was built on the site of the Duquesne Gardens sports facility, which was demolished in 1956, and University Square Apartments replaced a pair of post-Civil War estate houses, one of which housed a sanitarium in the early 1900s. 

¹ The Flannery brothers went on to launch several business ventures, including the Oakland Savings and Trust Bank and the Standard Chemical Company, the first commercial radium producer in the U.S. The company had its laboratories in the Parkvale Building, formerly known as the Vanadium Building, at Forbes and Meyran Avenues, also designed by Osterling and constructed in 1911.

² "New Flats to Furnish Homes for Thousands" (*Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, January 26, 1902): p. 5; advertisement for Iroquois Apartments (*Pittsburgh Daily Post*, April 20, 1902): p. 2.

An update to "The Motherhouse on the Hill" column in Summer 2022:

In 2019, the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale joined the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities, headquartered in Syracuse, NY. The sisters who had been living at Mt. Alvernia moved to a retirement community in the North Hills.



Courtyard in rear of The Fairfax.

Photo by Angelique Bamberg.



Neville House (foreground) and Winchester (background) apartment buildings on N. Neville Street.

Photo by Angelique Bamberg.