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History of
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*History of Public Access*

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3 Rivers - 2nd Nature
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For more information on the 3 Rivers – 2nd Nature Project, see http://3r2n.cfa.cmu.edu

If you believe that **ecologically healthy rivers are 2nd Nature** and would like to participate in a river dialogue about water quality, recreational use and biodiversity in the 3 Rivers Region, contact:

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3 Rivers Wet Weather Incorporated (3RWW)
Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD)
Allegheny County Sanitary Authority (ALCOSAN)

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Pittsburgh's greatest natural assets are its rivers. In the city's tumultuous history, the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio have simultaneously been at the center of the region's commerce, transportation, and industry, and also its aesthetic and recreational resource. Settlers and entrepreneurs built Pittsburgh at the confluence of the three rivers to take advantage of its military and commercial potential, while at the same time taking civic pride in this distinctive natural asset. Pittsburgh has relied on its rivers for both its economic growth and its sense of self.

Universally, pre-industrial visitors to what become "capitalism's first city" were overwhelmed by what they found. An eighteenth century British army captain named Harry Gordon stood captivated by his first glimpse of what is today known as "The Point": the meeting of the Allegheny and Monongahela to form the Ohio. Gordon called it "the most healthy, the most pleasant, the most commodious, the most fertile spot of Earth known to European people." French explorers interpreted the Iroquois term "Oyo" as labelle riviere", or "the beautiful river." Alexis de Tocqueville, during the age of Jackson, declared that the Ohio "waters one of the most magnificent river valleys in which man has ever lived," and early explorer Zadock Cramer called the Ohio, "the most beautiful river in the universe." Upon his first visit to the place that would become Pittsburgh, Judge Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the "Father of Allegheny County," made the following observation:

> It is high amusement, to those who are fond of fishing, to angle in these waters. . . . you will see in a spring evening the banks of the rivers lined with men fishing, at intervals from one another. This, with the streams gently gliding, the woods, at a distance, green, and the shadows lengthening toward the town, forms a delightful scene. Fond of the water, I have been sometimes highly pleased in going with a select party, in a small barge, up or down the rivers, and landing at a cool spring, to enjoy the verdant turf, amidst the shady bowers of ash-wood, sugar-tree or oak, planted by the hand of nature, not art.

A half century later, in 1836, a visitor who took the pen name Peregrine Prolix published an account of his trip to Pittsburgh. The impression he recorded paints a very different picture, and helps to illustrate the centrality of Pittsburgh's three rivers to its commerce and nascent industry from a very early moment:

> Pittsburghers have committed an error in not rescuing from the service of Mammon, a triangle of thirty or forty acres at the junction of the Allegheny and the Monongahela, and devoting it to the purposes of recreation. It is an unparalleled position for a park in which to ride or walk or sit. . . . it is a spot worthy of being rescued from the ceaseless din of the steam engine

> and the lurid flames and dingy smoke of the coal furnace. But alas! The sacra fames auri (the holy hunger for gold) is rapidly covering this area with private edifices.

Pittsburghers made economic use of their most distinctive natural asset from a very early date. By 1811 steamboat building was one of Pittsburgh's major industries. In fact most advances in steamboat technology were developed on the three rivers. To facilitate Pittsburgh's growing importance as a center for transportation and westward expansion, the state commissioned officers to clear obstacles from the Ohio around Pittsburgh as early as 1824. In 1836, the *Monongahela Navigation Company* was formed, and state aid granted in program to build locks and dams. Prior to the Civil War, dock workers loaded cargo directly onto steamboats. An 1857 visitor counted 124 steamboats line up along the Monongahela's extensive cobblestone wharf. Barges made their first appearance on the rivers around the time of the Civil War. By the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of flat boats, steamboats, and keel boats clogged the rivers every year -- laden with coal, agricultural supplies, and manufactured goods, and millions of feet of lumber.

In the nineteenth century, river traffic moved in spurts - heavy when there was a rise in the river, light when the river was low. The rivers were generally open to commercial use during the long spring season and short fall season, but closed by low water during the summer and winter. Thus, while overcrowding limited the public's access to the water during the busy months, the rivers were largely open to public use for much of summer and winter. During the icy winters elites enjoyed regular skating parties on the Monongahela. By the twentieth century, improvements to the river and to towboats allowed uniformity of movement. As a result, commercial use of the three rivers,especially the Monongahela, skyrocketed, as demonstrated by these numbers:

Monongahela Tonnage by Year

| | |
|---|---|
| 1845 | 222,631 |
| 1855 | 777,213 |
| 1865 | 1,640,815 |
| 1875 | 2,712,413 |
| 1885 | 3,648,756 |
| 1895 | 4,498,494 |
| 1905 | 9,211,752 |
| 1915 | 11,815,085 |
| 1925 | 23,716,121 |
| 1929 | 28,907,614 |
| 1937 | 24,927,507 |

(***Like Hell with the Lid Off*: Industry and the Rivers during the Gilded Age)**

Pittsburgh boomed during the Civil War. By 1870 its blast furnaces produced nearly 40% of the nation's annual iron output. Massive railroad marshalling yards lined the Ohio and Monongahela. The railroad made its

first, permanent mark on Pittsburgh's river valley in 1852, with the completion of a line from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, using the flat flood plains along the river. By 1902, two railroad yards covered much of the lower Point. Smoke from the stern-wheelers and side-wheelers, from the ironworks, blast furnaces, and glass factories encased the river valleys and gave the city its reputation as the nation's dirtiest. Even before the rise of Andrew Carnegie and the full flowering of the local steel industry it looked like "hell with the lid off," according to one reporter.

But the heavy mechanization and concentration of steel during the Gilded Age irrevocably altered Pittsburgh's landscape, severing local access to polluted and crowded rivers for those who worked in the mills. In 1873 Carnegie began construction of the mighty Edgar Thompson Works in Braddock, and in 1879 financiers put up the money for the construction of what would become the Homestead Works. Work began on the Ducquesne Works in 1887. The age of riverside cotillions and winter skating parties were officially at an end. The Pittsburgh region was on its way to becoming, in the words of Carnegie, "the workplace of the world." Not long afterward, muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens remarked of his first Pittsburgh impression: "It looked like hell, literally."

The years that followed, from the mid-1870s into the 1930s, represented the full flowering of Pittsburgh as one of the world's leading industrial centers: "capitalism's first city," according to one British observer. In 1903 the Monongahela, for the first time, carried more annual traffic than the Ohio. By the 1920s the Monongahela, carried more annual traffic than the Mississippi; more than the Panama Canal; More than the Suez Canal. In 1926 the tonnage cleared by the port of New York was over twenty million tons; the Monongahela had piled up *over twenty three million tons* the year before, and was up to *twenty-five million tons* in 1937.

One observer's comments in 1906 reflect the tension between commerce and public use of the city's rivers:

> The rapid building of railways and the fast-growing network of electric roads on the banks of the Ohio make itcertain that, as a route of passenger travel, except for pleasure, the old days of princely passenger boats will never return. But, on the other hand, the old days of the flatboat and barge are fast returning, and though the human element which was so picturesque will be wanting, there is a marvellous future history in the commercial development of America to be wrought out along the sweeping shores of the River.

Historian Roy Lubove described the turn-of-the-century riverbank environment as follows:

> Most of the flatland fronting all three rivers was pre-empted by industrial and commercial enterprises. The desecration of a superb natural environment - one of America's most spectacular in its combination of water-breaks, topography, and verdure - was total.

In 1894, a history Professor at the University of Wisconsin spent the summer floating down the Ohio with his family and a family friend. With a keen eye for historical transformation and drastic, almost total ecological change, Reuben Gold Thwaites documented miles of warehouses and factories, connected by rail lines, all

under a pall of lingering, choking smoke. The machine had come to the garden, and the garden was no more. He described a shrine to industrial progress, "albeit a smoky, dusty shrine, with the smell of lubricators and the clang of hammers, and much talk thereabout of the glories of Mammon." It was an environment degraded by industry. Thwaites wrote:

> But what interested us most of all was the appalling havoc which these clay and iron industries are making with the once beautiful banks of the river. Each of them has a large daily output of debris, which is dumped unmercifully upon the water's edge in heaps from fifty to a hundred feet high. Sometimes for nearly a mile in length, the natural bank is deep buried out of sight. . . . Fifty years hence, if these enterprises multiply at the present ratio, and continue their present methods, the Upper Ohio will roll between continuous banks of clay and iron offal, down to Wheeling and beyond.

At McKeesport the party looked for spot to camp, but "So far as we could see down the Monongahela, the air was thick with the smoke of glowing chimneys, and the pulsating whang of steel-making plants and rolling-mills made the air tremble." They disembarked at Pittsburgh when they came to a dam, and attempted to make their way along the shoreline which was obstructed with docks and bordered by railroads. Hundreds of steamboats lined the downtown waterfront. Below Pittsburgh, Thwaites wrote of the "railways upon either bank [which] are built on neat terraces."

The rail lines, built along the flat river beds, had transformed the city's landscape over the course of the nineteenth century as themills belched smoke into the river valleys, docks and warehouses cut-off access to the water. By 1910, nine major shipping lines carried 11 million tons of goods in and out of the city and sixteen rail line brought nearly 5,000 freight cars a day into Pittsburgh. According to Bodnar, Simon, and Weber, "The choice flat terrain along the rivers was wholly given over to the railroads and to heavy industry." The north shore of the Allegheny was home to the Pressed Steel Car Works (2,725 employees), Pittsburgh Machine Company (1,082 employees), the Ft. Wayne Railroad Shops (1,043 employees), and American Steel and Hoop Company (575 employees). The south banks of the Allegheny featured ten iron and steel firms, several brick yards, the Armstrong Cork Company, and the extensive yards of thePennsylvania Railroad, all abutted to the river. Similar enterprises lined the banks of the Monongahela: most notably the huge Jones and Laughlin steelworks, occupying thirty blocks along the river. East of the city were the massive works at Braddock and Homestead.

Thwaites documented the dilapidated housing of the poorest, unskilled, immigrant workers -- many of whom worked twelve hour days, six and even seven day weeks. They came home to crowded grimy homes by the railroad tracks and the dirty, polluted river. "Sometimes these huts, though in the mass dreary enough, are kept in neat repair; but often are they sadly out of elbows - pigs and children promiscuously at their doors,

paneless sash stuffed with rags, unsightly litter strewn around, misery stamped on ever feature of the homeless tenements."

The concentration of water and air pollution along the city's rivers, played a direct role in the suburbanization of Pittsburgh. Only those too poor to leave, and unable to afford daily public transport to their place of work, remained along the riverbanks in grungy, crowded housing next to the rail lines, the factory gates, and the Monongahela and Allegheny. Industrial development along the rivers led directly to residential expansion to inland neighborhoods. Squirrel Hill, Oakland, and the East End soon developed as middle class suburbs connected to the city and the mills by street cars, and populated by the rising managerial bureaucracy reordering American industry.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, there was a well-established higherarchylinking housing, social class, and ethnicity.In the steel towns, the "English-speaking" men supported families in brick homes that sat atop the hills away from the choking smoke smothering the river valleys. The "foreigners" lived next to the mills and worked such long hours that, in the words of one immigrant woman interviewed in 1919, “the children do not know him [their father] nor does he know them." Many women took in boarders - single men occupying corners of kitchens and rotating shifts on the cot, just as at the mill. African Americans migrating north, largely without female relations, boarded in bunk houses on the grimy streets outside the factory gates.

Thomas Bell wrote evocatively of class, race, and space in his classic, semi-autobiographical novel of three immigrant generations in Braddock, Out of This Furnace: "When you have money you can even breath better air than other people," comments Mike, one of the novel's second generation protagonists. His life was changed one Sunday afternoon as a young man when he entered his aunt's meager kitchen and found Mary (his future wife), recently returned from the middle class home where she performed domestic labor. Still in uniform,

> She was sitting by the table, her back to the window that looked out on the railroad tracks and the river. She was all in white. He noticed that first, her white dress with its ruffles at the throat and spilling down her bosom, the full skirt flowing over her crossed leg, the white buttoned shoes. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table beside her; it was white too, wide-brimmed and trimmed with white flowers. A white parasol leaned against her thigh.
>
> Mike did not recognize the girl he had known casually for years. He did not even see her face. What enchanted him was her otherworldliness in a room, a neighborhood, and a life of squalor. Mary embodied whiteness - an idyllic female vision of safety, happiness, cleanliness, and leisure. He saw her

> fore-grounded against the tracks and the river simultaneously symbolizing industry and escape. "You look more like an American girl now," he stammered.

**Roads Not Taken: The Progressive Era**

Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr., the son of the designer of Central Park and aprofessor and landscape architect at Harvard, toured Pittsburg in 1910 and articulated an alternative vision for the relationshipbetween the city and its rivers. The chairman of the executive committee of the *National Conference on City Planning*, and designer of an impressive list of parks in other cities, Olmstead saw the debris-strewn mud banks of the downtown area and made a comparison to the aesthetic waterways of European cities. He commented,

> In it's waterfront Pittsburgh has a great public asset which now lies undeveloped both from the point of view of transportation and that of recreation and civic beauty . . . .Pittsburgh, like most American river towns, where she had not actually turned her water front over bodily to the railroads, has left it in a most inefficient primitive condition.

Instead, Olmstead advocated the construction of public wharves and floating quays and while he called for a "wide marginal thoroughfare for the relief of traffic congestion," he argued that it should be bordered with a well-landscaped park, promenades, and gardens "for recreation and as an element of civic comeliness and self-respect." "The rivers and hills are the two big fundamental natural elements characteristic of the Pittsburgh District. Thus, any provision close to the heart of the city, whereby the people can have the enjoyment of these mighty landscapes, is of peculiar importance." At its heart, Olmstead's vision called for a mixed use environment - a utilitarian but also aesthetic combination of the organic and the urban. "One of the deplorable consequences of the short-sighted and wasteful commercialism of the later nineteenth century," claimed Olmstead,

> lay in its disregard of what might have been the esthetic by-products of economic improvement; in the false impression spread abroad that economical and useful things were normally ugly; and in the vicious idea which followed, that beauty and the higher pleasures of civilized life were to be sought only in things otherwise useless. Thus the pursuit of beauty was confounded with extravagance.

But in the same year that Olmstead's report was released, local courts ruled, in an air pollution case involving Jones and Laughlin Steel, that "Persons living in Pittsburgh must submit themselves to the consequences

incident to a manufacturing district. If the growth and expansion of manufacturing industries make present resident neighborhoods undesirable, residents must either accept the changed conditions or seek other localities." Even at the dawn of the Progressive Era, corporate interests trumped public health, safety, and recreational concerns. In such a context, Olmstead's report was widely disseminated, debated, and discussed, but ultimately city planners tabled his recommendations. Three years after Olmstead's visit, Robert Haven Schauffler wrote of Pittsburgh in Romantic America,

> Man befouled the streams, bedraggled their banks, ripped up the cliffs, hacked down the trees, and dumped refuse in her stead. He sowed the imposing heights with hovels and set beneath them black mills to cover everything far and wide with a film of smoke.

**Mid-Century: Renaissance and Beyond**

Not long following Olmstead's visit, Pittsburgh's steel industry peaked, and then began a slow and protracted decline. The Depression of the1930 profoundly affected local industry, slowing traffic on the rivers as well as production in the factories lining their banks. By World War II, Pittsburgh, both in economy and environment, was suffering. Though the city still produced over half of the nation's steel, steel production had already begun to move elsewhere. Companies formerly headquartered in Pittsburgh were leaving town. In 1944 *The Wall Street Journal* surveyed the future outlook of 137 cities and classified them into four categories, with Class ***D*** being the bleakest. Pittsburgh was a ***D***.

The river banks of the Point and throughout the rest of the city were littered with debris. The Point was an inhospitable eyesore, featuring fifteen acres of freight yards and terminal, and a half mile of unused elevated track. Property value assessments in the Golden Triangle were at an all-time low and were dropping at a rate of $10 million a year. Finally, several hundred communities lining the Allegheny and the Monongahela dumped their sewage into the rivers daily. According to Alberts in *The Shaping of the Point*, "

> The Point and the Triangle itself had lost their contact with the rivers. The Monongahela wharf, a wide cobblestone slope running down from Water Street, had once given the city an open shore and a view over the river to the high ridge on the south. The wharf had been a meeting place, a Saturday garden market, a mooring place for boats and barges, and finally, inevitably, a parking place for cars. This last stretch of open space along the Monongahela had disappeared with the building of the Fort Pitt waterfront highway in 1938-1939.

Still, British novelist Sorm Jameson said in *The New York Times* after the war, "Pittsburgh is fascinating and tremendous, and if they would clean it up it would be one of the most beautiful cities in the world."

Facing declining industrial production but still debased by the remnants the industrial boom, Pittsburgh decided to clean up in an effort to re-make its economic base. On the assumption that new kinds of business might be attracted to the city if it could shed itself of its industrial remnants and its international reputation for pollution and grime, Pittsburgh sought to reclaim its natural assets, turning aesthetics to new commercial advantages in an age of de-industrialization.

Considering Pittsburgh's natural advantages in 1963, urban planner Patrick Horsbrugh ranked foremost among them the physical and aesthetic affect of its rivers. "A location whose landscape permits water to be glimpsed between hills or looked down upon from a variety of positions, giving different combinations of reflections and juxtapositions, possesses a continuing source of enchantment season by season. There is no scene of human contrivance not improved by association with water." He went on about the effect of the rivers:

> The indifferent industrial facades along the riverbanks become mysterious and evocative. The stinking atmosphere of Herrs Island demands to be explored. The rotting rubbish screes along the waterfront of the Strip, mercifully concealed by the self-sown willows, now so desolate and deserted, ensure uninterrupted solitude within sight and sound of busyness. The wasted water fouled, the deserted railway yard, eye-high with delectable weeds and grasses, wonderland of butterflies in their season, are now as undisturbed as fields a hundred miles remote. The soaring steel mills represent a spectacle that is striking enough by land, but dramatic in the extreme when seen both in fact and in reflection.

At mid-century city elders decided that the rivers were what made Pittsburgh distinctive and potentially attractive to investors. The rivers must therefore be turned to new, aesthetic uses. Horsbrugh observed,

Water is so alive by both day and night that its presence sets the quality of the place, and its existence must be recognized by all who plan and build. Not a single street in Pittsburgh, nor building for that matter, is effectively designed to recognize the proximity or significance of water.

Later he complained, "To descend from the city's streets to the water's edge is something of an ordeal . . ." and still later he wrote,"The endless surprise and kinetic qualities of the Pittsburgh scene viewed from the reflective waters should have made this prodigious city the envy of every metropolis in the union." Finally, he articulated a new agenda:

> However fascinating its history, however prodigious its feats of industry, however valiant its people, however noble their building, the quality and character of the City of Pittsburgh depend upon the remarkable, even the triumphant combination of water, of topography formed by that water, and of the vegetation sustained by that water, all that is collectively known as the landscape. It is the appreciation of the landscape that a people, and therefore a city, aspires to and achieves greatness. Herein lies Pittsburgh's singular opportunity to demonstrate not only its prowess as a titan of industry, but its cultivation as civilized society by maintaining the conditions of contrast, so urgently required by every city of size throughout the country, by a determined program of landscape consciousness, conservation, and control.

Toward this end, the city commissioned construction of Point State Park, which was officially dedicated on August 30, 1974. At the ceremony, the chairman of the citizens committee declared,

A fountain at the apex of the Point is most appropriate. It not only signifies the meeting of the three rivers, the role the rivers have played in the growth and development of our city, but also from time immemorial fountains and water have been the symbols ofeverlasting life, the eternal renewal of life itself. It is a fitting symbol for this great and beautiful city in which we all take pride.

But this renewed appreciation of the city's greatest natural assets has not been without commercial motivation. Recent plans for converting the physical remnants of the city's industrial past emphasize the economic utility of the river-fronts as private, not public, domain. The Riverfront Development Plan hopes "to introduce new elements not typically associated with industry - natural green river edge spaces and public access." The goal of the plan is to use the rivers to "provide added value and important employee amenities" promising that "the river's edge will be heavily landscaped in a naturalistic form along industrial properties." The Plan explicitly dictates that "Public access should be developed where it would not conflict with the needs of industrial uses; where it may conflict, pedestrian access should be physically separated from industrial uses."

The nature of the commercial usage has changed over time, but in both the industrial and post-industrial eras, the values that privilege commercial usage over public access remain the same.