



## **North Allegheny Commons**

Nomination for  
City Historic District  
Designation

March 2011



Mexican War Streets Society

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## North Allegheny Commons – City Historic District Nomination

### 1. DESCRIPTION

North Allegheny Commons is the *proposed* descriptive name for a clearly defined historic neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Situated in the Central Northside, it is loosely bounded on the south by North Avenue and the Allegheny Commons, on the east by Sandusky Street, on the west by the Ohio & Pennsylvania Railroad and Marquis St., and on the north by the hillside ridge line below the bluffs of Perry Hilltop and Fineview. The already-established Mexican War Streets designated City Historic District lies within this area.

#### 1.1 Boundary Definition, Assets & Overview

The full proposed nominating district can be segmented into four areas for overview and discussion purposes, as follows:

- **East of Federal Street:** Bounded by Federal Street on the west; North Avenue on the south; Sandusky Street on the east; Henderson Street on the north.
- **Sherman to Federal:** Bounded by Sherman Street on the west (and its northerly approximate longitudinal extension); North on the south; Federal on the east; the ridge line above Jefferson Street on the north.
- **Brighton Road to Sherman:** Bounded by Brighton Road on the west; North on the south; Sherman on the east; the ridge line above Jefferson on the north to the point where O’Hern St. cuts down to Buena Vista (and its westerly approximate latitudinal extension down to Brighton).
- **West of Brighton Road:** Bounded by Brighton on the east; California Avenue on the north; Marquis Way on the west; the cut of the railroad on the southwest to the point of North (and including part of the Old Allegheny Rows National Historic District).

Existing historic district boundaries are illustrated in Exhibit 1 in Appendix II.

Should this nomination prove successful, both city and national historic designations could be used to realize the benefits of historic preservation, from reuse of the built-environment to economic renewal of neighborhoods.

As the map in Exhibit 1 illustrates, the nationally-designated Old Allegheny Rows and the Mexican War Streets meet in a common boundary, forming a contiguous area from Marquis Way on the northwest, across Brighton Road to Reddour Street, and continuing across Federal Street to Sandusky. The areas just west of Brighton and east of Federal are part of the same contiguous neighborhood, in terms of flow, character and combined historical background and significance, as will be highlighted in this report. The entire area should be included in the city historic designation.

The proposed areas encompass approximately 112 acres and 30 city blocks. There are estimated to be 1235 parcels, the majority of which are 20' x 100' (2000 sq. ft). Approximately 80% contain structures, the rest is vacant land.

Within the bounds of the proposed district, along with a multitude of early residential structures, landmark buildings include:

- |  |                              |                               |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aeberli Building            | E. North at Sandusky         | Former funeral home           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Malta Building              | W. North at Reddour          | Salvation Army                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Metropolitan Baptist Church | Sampsonia at Reddour         |                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Engine Co #3 ("Friendship") | Arch at Jacksonia            | Firehouse Artists' Studios    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Mattress Factory        | Jacksonia at Garfield        | Art Museum                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> United Presbyterian Church  | Brighton at Armandale        | Northside Common Ministries   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New Brighton Theater        | Brighton Place at California | Art Deco Postal Workers Bldg. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brown AME Church            | Hemlock at Boyle/Lorraine    |                               |

As well as major reinvestments on historic land-plots:

- Allegheny General Medical Facility
- Northside Branch of the Carnegie Library
- Zone 1 Police Station
- Federal Hill Town Houses

(Allegheny General Hospital is a dominant facility, a 1920s historic building which contributes to the fabric of the neighborhood, but it lies beyond the scope of this nomination.)

There are other structures, including those within the already-designated Mexican War Streets, the oldest residential neighborhood in Pittsburgh, dating back to the 1840s. The proposed full district in this report has structures that date as early. For example, east of Federal there are a few from the late-1830s, and west of Brighton there are names linked to even earlier periods, sharing a common historical background with the Robinson family land-plots and with the

historical development of Allegheny City, and thus should be considered collectively for designation.

The nominated district is primarily residential, with a commercial corridor along Brighton Road and a small commercial zone in the lower blocks of Federal Street. Within these bounds, there are approximately eighteen relatively small commercial establishments, in mixed-use residential/commercial zones. In former times there were significantly more small businesses embedded throughout the neighborhood.

Not counting the larger structures (some noted above), there are approximately 925 houses originally built as single family homes. The majority of the district is now zoned single-family, but there are a significant number of multifamily conversions that were grandfathered into the current zoning. In particular, there are about 86 buildings within the district that are part of the Northside Associates Portfolio, which are generally multi-family apartments in remodeled vintage houses. Approximately 70% of the houses are brick, party-wall construction, with the complement being frame houses (typically balloon construction, usually party-wall).

The existing content of these four areas is captured in the photo groups provided in Appendix III. The four areas loosely correspond to different phases of historic development.

In the **East of Federal Street** area (Appendix III, Photo Group 1) are 2½ blocks of large homes fronting North Avenue, facing East Allegheny Commons. They are largely intact and well-maintained. At the corner of E. North and Sandusky is the landmark Aeberli building, with its wrap-around porch. This is a city-designated historic structure built in the 1880s. It served for many years as a funeral home. Parkhurst Street-- which crosses this quarter from Sandusky, to the medical complex on Federal-- has been recently rehabilitated with historically compatible in-fill townhomes between Loraine Street and the Community House Presbyterian Church on Sandusky. The sidewalks and historically complementary lighting have been upgraded as well. Aside from the recent in-fill, the vintage housing along Parkhurst is largely intact. Another cross street, Hemlock, is lined with vintage brick row houses, some of the oldest in the district. At the corner of Hemlock and Boyle streets sits the Brown AME Church, built in 1903 and eligible for historic designation as one of the earliest African churches in Pittsburgh. Across from the Brown AME Church on Hemlock, is a vintage, three story apartment building.

Boyle Street ranges from 3-story brick row houses in the lower block to a mix which includes more modest row-houses in the upper blocks. At the top of Boyle Street is a community parking lot and parklet/green-space commemorating Ethyl Hagler, a principle founder of the Central Northside Neighborhood Council and the nationally syndicated Neighborhood Housing Services (with offices in 250 cities across the country). Her modest, early brick home still stands on Loraine Street, facing the parklet. Upper Federal Street has been recently rebuilt with

historically compatible in-fill townhomes. On lower Federal, between Hemlock and North, quite a few original buildings still remain on the eastern side of the street. This lower portion of Federal is predominantly commercial, with the new Carnegie Library flanked by small shops in vintage buildings.

In the **Sherman to Federal** area (Photo Group 2) along W. North Avenue, large, originally single-family homes face the West Allegheny Commons. Between Sherman and Arch streets, every house is intact. This row features wrought-iron pickets, fencing small green plots in front of each house, along a wide brick sidewalk. A three-story Victorian with a corner turret sits at W. North and Arch. The Methodist church that once stood across Arch Street (on W. North) was replaced by a more contemporary structure. At the corner of W. North and Reddour stands the Malta building, a city-designated historic structure built in 1927 and currently used as a Salvation Army facility.

Around the corner, at the top of Reddour on Sampsonia, stands the Metropolitan Baptist Church, built in 1905 and eligible for historic designation due to the date and the size of its African-American congregation. Sampsonia, between Reddour and Arch streets, is one of the oldest blocks in the district. The south side is intact and well maintained. Much of the opposite side of the street is in need of rehabilitation. Around the corner is Arch Street, one of the widest avenues in the district. At the corner of Jacksonia and Arch stands Engine Company No.3 (entitled "Friendship"), one of the last remaining engine houses from the Allegheny City era. Designed by Bailey and Anglin and built in 1877, this is a city-designated historic structure. Arch Street is lined with predominantly large vintage brick row houses, dotted with a few larger structures, such as the turn-of-the-century apartment block at Arch and Gentry. Not pictured is an old warehouse that has been converted into a large loft-style single-family home. The only contemporary structure is the Arch Court senior apartments.

Jacksonia was the first street other than North to connect all the way from Federal to Brighton Road. Starting at the Federal Hill Development and continuing west, Jacksonia is lined with vintage row houses, a high percentage of them rental properties. With very few missing buildings, the majority of the houses are maintained – some of them restored by owner-occupants and others kept up to code by landlords.

Parallel to Arch is Sherman Avenue, a tree-lined street with more well-maintained, party-wall row houses. The west side of Sherman is within the Mexican War Streets' designation. The upper end of Sherman is flanked on the west by the very early Widow's Home. Between Sherman and Arch are two large vacant land-areas that have been converted into shared community gardens.

In the **Brighton Road to Sherman** area (Photo Group 3 and 4) sits a commemorative parklet honoring the earliest subdivided land settlement in the Central Northside-- Mechanics Retreat Park, dating to 1815 in Allegheny Town. (The parklet was founded and is maintained by the Mexican War Streets Society.) In terms of rhythm and scale, there is an historic integrity to many of the structures around Garfield and Jacksonia. At the corner of Jacksonia, the Buena Vista Coffee Shop sits across from Mechanics Retreat Park. Upper Buena Vista is still paved with Belgium block, an original road surface that has been in service for a hundred years. As the houses climb the street in classic Pittsburgh hillside style, a view to the far side of the Ohio River opens up.

The Mattress Factory art museum is located at Jacksonia and Garfield. Housed in a 6-story former factory, the MF museum is an internationally-known installation and performance venue. Behind the Mattress Factory, *City of Asylum Pittsburgh* stages events on Sampsonia Street. Garfield, between Armandale and Jacksonia, is lined with trees and large vintage homes, all well maintained.

There has been a significant loss of buildings in some areas, but there are enough viable vintage houses which preserve historic character and allow for rebuilding with appropriate in-fill. The Central Northside Neighborhood Council has a redevelopment program in place for these areas, utilizing the city's property reserve system and commercial development partners.

East and west of Buena Vista Street are two blocks of Armandale which are very much intact, containing a mixture of modest and larger vintage homes. Monterey Street, from Jefferson down to N. Taylor, has been steadily improving. A key problem spot had been The Manteca bar, which is now closed, and City of Asylum Pittsburgh is planning a literary and art venue for that location. Recently, some frame houses were demolished, leaving only a few vacant or ill-maintained structures on Monterey.

**The West of Brighton Road** area (Photo Group 5) is architecturally consistent with the rest of the proposed district, although it has suffered some significant building loss. Part of this area was designated Old Allegheny Rows National Historic District in 1984, along with several blocks of California-Kirkbride. (Much of the Old Allegheny Rows north of California has been demolished.) The URA recently facilitated the liquidation of Brighton Place Associates, a portfolio of about 20 vintage buildings situated primarily in Brighton Place and on Brighton Road. Most of the properties that turned over are being renovated and put back into service.

The former United Presbyterian Church, a distinctive, early-colonial red brick structure, stands on the west side of Brighton Road and is now home to Northside Common Ministries. But half the houses on this side of the street have been lost. The east side of Brighton Road, from the 1500 to the 1700 block, remains intact. Most of these houses are in use and maintained. On

Brighton Place, much has been demolished, including the Martha Graham house, but this broad, tree-lined street still retains its historic character. Building renovations and landscaping of vacant lots have breathed new life into the quarter. Drugs and gang activity, once endemic, have disappeared. The area now has a relaxed atmosphere, with children playing outside and college students living in affordable rental housing.

At the north end of Brighton Place stands an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century art deco theater which is now used by the Postal Workers Union. At the south end of Brighton Place the intersection with Jacksonia has been closed, offsetting a small, senior housing development recently built behind the Zone 1 police station.

The Garden Theater Block has been excluded from this nomination at the request of the Central Northside Neighborhood Council, a partner in Northside Tomorrow. This block is a nationally-designated historic district. The efforts of Northside Tomorrow conjoined with the block's historic designation should propel its redevelopment. Including it in this nomination would complicate what has already been a long process in redevelopment. The guiding principle for Northside Tomorrow's plan is historic preservation through adaptive re-use, and this objective is complementary to what is proposed here.

## 1.2 Condition

Within the proposed boundaries the vast majority of the structures are vintage row-houses, predominantly brick. Where there has been infill development<sup>1</sup> it has been done with historically-compatible designs and materials. Like many of Pittsburgh's older neighborhoods, there has been some degradation due to vacancy, blight and demolition. But the district has turned the corner with respect to this dynamic. The irreparable buildings have already been taken down. The vacant houses which remain are viable and worth rehabilitating. The land itself is intrinsic to the documented history of Allegheny Town and the Reserved Tract Opposite Pittsburgh drawn up in the 1780s.

Exhibit 3 provides representative statistics regarding land and building use in the nominated district. Approximately 85% of the buildings are in service, leaving roughly 15% vacant. Within this 15%, about three-quarters are houses held by private owners whose taxes are current. A few are tax delinquent and obtainable for redevelopment through a Treasurer's Sale. The rest

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<sup>1</sup> In-fill housing developments have occurred at the following locations: Parkhurst, Federal Hill, Arch Court, Armandale, Senior Facility at Jacksonia & Brighton Place, an ADA compliant single-family currently being built on Brighton Place, one house at Sherman & Jacksonia, and a block of townhomes operated by the Pittsburgh Housing Authority on Carrington. However, the 1970s style block of 5 townhomes on Carrington do not resemble these.

are vacant houses or commercially zoned buildings held by the city or URA. Therefore, those properties which can be acquired, controlled, and finally redeveloped in harmony with the architectural integrity of the neighborhood are limited. This is a key motivation for obtaining city historic designation. The majority of vacant buildings are held by private owners, waiting to either cash out or move forward with rehabilitation projects. Providing assurance that the historic fabric of these quarters will be protected by the Historic Review Commission will encourage the organic re-investment needed for this district to reach its full potential as a desirable, tax-paying, inner-city residential area. The proof of this argument is the degree to which the Mexican War Streets district has been redeveloped. Having both national and city historic designation has been a key enabling factor in the War Streets renaissance.

It is anticipated that redevelopment of the 100 & 200 blocks of Alpine & Carrington below W. Jefferson St. – for which the CNNC has a property reserve-based project in place – will result in a true restoration of the streetscape and eventually spur organic in-fill development on Jefferson, owing to its proximity to the rest of the neighborhood and the desirable city view at that elevation.

## **2. History/Historical Significance for Designation Criteria<sup>2</sup>**

### **2.1 Reserve Tract Opposite Pittsburg**

The history and development of the area known today as the Central Northside of Pittsburgh can be traced back to its origin as a rich, low-lying, central hunting ground to early Native Americans. It lay just below a massive sandstone ridge formed south of the great glacier push. The earliest documentation of settlement is specifically tied to the unique apportioning of the broader land area north of the rivers, and intrinsically connected to a man who is considered the first settler of the Northside, James Robinson.

In 1783, the Pennsylvania General Assembly set in motion the development of the wilderness north of Pittsburgh between the Allegheny and Ohio Rivers. An area bounded by the two rivers and an east-west line approximately one mile north of the confluence of the rivers was

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<sup>2</sup> Credit is due in this section of this document to Lisa Miles, author of *Resurrecting Allegheny City – The Land, Structures & People of Pittsburgh's North Side* (2007). The MWSS retained Ms. Miles to compile a detailed chronological sequence of development of the 14 outlots from Redick's plan that evolved into the nominated district. Her book and the supplemental material she compiled provided the basis for this description of the history of "North Allegheny Commons." A good deal of the material is directly quoted with her permission.

designated a Reserved Tract, and determined to contain 3,025 acres by survey in 1785. North of this large reserved tract a similar amount of land was also subdivided at that time into warrantee tracts of several hundred acres each. Shown in the map in Exhibit 4, these lands would be used to pay public debts incurred during the Revolutionary War. Rather than simply being sold off in 150 to 500 acre farm tracts, like most frontier land settlement, the large Reserved Tract was set aside for the development of a new town. Toward that end, in 1787, the state legislature ordered that a plan be drawn up and commissioned David Redick to complete the task. Subsequent to a physical survey in 1788, Redick delivered the *Plan of the Reserve Tract Opposite Pittsburg*, shown in Exhibit 5.

There had been a portion of land on the northern bank first cleared by a man named James Boggs around 1760, though he retreated back to “Pittsburg” due to Native American unrest. In the early 1780s he tried again. He cleared nine acres but died while felling trees in his clearing. His widow Martha wrote to the President of the Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth to retain her land claim. The Commonwealth voted in Martha Boggs’ favor, significantly affecting the history, development and settlement of much of the Reserved Tract, the whole of Allegheny Town and what became the Central Northside. To better protect her interests, Martha Boggs shortly thereafter, in the 1790s, married a man by the name of James Robinson. Robinson picked up where James Boggs left off, buying more land to add to what he had acquired through marriage. In addition to his business in real estate, he built the first ferry house near what is today the 6th Street Bridge, on the eastern side of Federal Street.

Redick laid out the town “based on early colonialist models that followed English custom, with a town square, surrounded by common land, and outlying lots.<sup>3</sup>” Redick centered the town on the intersection of the Venango Trail and the Great Path, two Native American routes that were the first human imprint on the land. (The Venango Trail stretched from the confluence of the three rivers to Lake Erie.) The town square, town lots and surrounding commons contained 150 acres. The complement of the 3,025 acre tract was divided into 276 outlots of 10 acres each (except for the odd shapes at the margins). The general concept was that settlers would each receive a town lot for their home and an outlot for agricultural purposes - although there were more outlots than town lots (276 vs. 128).

## **2.2 Allegheny Town & Outlots**

The parcels defined in Redick’s plan were allocated and/or auctioned in the 1790s, and the town of Allegheny gradually took shape over the next 20 years. The town center and river front developed first, with some of the areas north of the commons cleared and converted to farm

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<sup>3</sup> *Resurrecting Allegheny City – The Land, Structures & People of Pittsburgh’s North Side*, Lisa Miles (2007) – chapter 2, pg 33.

land. The map (Exhibit 5) is Redick's original 1788 plat, updated (1914) with the owners of the parcels written directly onto the map as the titles were assigned. (i.e. warrantee atlas method of record keeping). A detail of the 14 outlots that evolved into the nominated district are outlined and highlighted in red in Exhibit 6. The owner of record at the time is listed for all of these parcels except #176. James Robinson owned two of the three outlots fronting the North Commons, along what was then called Shanopin Lane (now North Avenue). John Irwin, who established a rope factory in the Allegheny West area, owned the middle outlot (#178).

The earliest development within the 14-outlot subject area was Mechanic's Retreat, in outlots #181 and #182. Circa 1815, this land was subdivided and developed into a residential area for workers employed in early industry along the banks of the Ohio River a short distance west. Mechanic's Retreat was a rural enclave of modest housing along Pasture Lane (Brighton Rd) surrounded by acres of undeveloped land. Aside from Mechanic's Retreat, there was no development north of the commons in the Allegheny Town era.

### **2.3 Allegheny Borough**

By the 1820s, the population of Allegheny Town reached 1000 and was incorporated as a borough in 1828. The map in Exhibit 7 shows a portion of the borough line and includes the outlots north of the commons. Note that by this time James Robinson had acquired outlots #177 and #178, making him the owner of *all* the land fronting the north commons.

The first expansion of Allegheny north of the commons occurred in these outlots, on the west side of the Federal Street (formerly the Old Franklin Road, along the path of the Venango Trail). Beaver Street (Arch), Middle Alley (Reddour), and Webster Street (Sherman) were extended to the other side of the commons (but not *through* the commons) from the Allegheny Town street grid. Only on Webster and Beaver were the lots subdivided down to their current size. Benton Alley (now Eloise) dates to the original subdivision of outlot #178. This extension of the town street grid north of the commons on Robinson's outlots adjoined, but did not intersect with, the evolved Mechanic's Retreat development, which by that time saw Jackson Street extended to run the full distance between Federal Street and Pasture Lane (Brighton). At this time the Mechanics Retreat area consisted of Jackson Street and Carroll Street (now Armandale), connected by Coffee Street (now Garfield).

In the Allegheny Borough era (up through 1835, according to the map in Exhibit 7), there was no real development east of Federal or west of Brighton, and James Robinson's outlots (#179 and #180) opposite the commons that would become the Mexican War Streets were still used for agriculture by tenant farmers. Although not shown in Exhibit 7, the earliest street east of Federal, White Oak Alley (now Loraine) had been established as a farm lane, according to state

archive records. An extension of Sandusky street, as a farm lane, may have existed at this time as well.

## **2.4 Allegheny City**

In 1840, Allegheny Borough became Allegheny City. Four wards were defined, clockwise, in the four quadrants defined by Ohio Street and Federal Street, with the northwest quadrant being Ward 2 and the northeast quadrant being Ward 3. The nominated district is the area north of the commons in Wards 2 and 3 as shown in the 1852 map in Exhibit 8. Allegheny City was now expanding on all sides of the commons, including the Deutschtown (east) and the Allegheny West areas.

As shown in Exhibit 8, by 1852 both sides of Federal had been subdivided more or less into their current form (e.g. note the size of the lots). East of Federal, the Boyle Street quarter extended from North Avenue up to Fairmount Street (Henderson), crossed by Locust (Parkhurst) and Hemlock. Boyle Street is named after the owner of outlot #148, from which it was developed. West of Federal, Jackson Street and Beaver Street (Arch) were brought into intersection, and Sampson Street was created. Above Jackson, the extension of Beaver was known as Division Alley, which ran up to Jefferson Street, parallel to the build out of Federal Hill up to the bluffs. At this time Jefferson, Carroll (Carrington), and Ledlie (Alpine) extended west from Federal the width of outlots 175 and 176, to Amelda Alley (Saturn). This abutted the east end of Mechanics Retreat. Hence, with a slight jog at Amelda Alley (the boundary between outlots), the name Carroll Street was extended from the Mechanic's Retreat area east to Federal (what is now Armandale and Carrington).

During the 1840s, James Robinson's son, General William Robinson, finally developed outlots #179 and #180, at the west end of North Avenue opposite the commons. In keeping with the flair of the times, he called this development Buena Vista, naming the streets after places & people from the Mexican-American War (hence, the later name: Mexican War Streets). Note that this development was not initially integrated with the street grid that had grown up around these last-to-be-subdivided outlots (with the exception of Benton Alley (Eloise) being extended from Federal to Pasture Lane (Brighton)). The original Buena Vista development was bounded by Taylor Street on the north and Palo Alto on the east. Note that Palo Alto was the eastern boundary of the original outlots, on the same line as Almeda Alley (Saturn). The block between Palo Alto and Webster (now Sherman) appears to have initially been left undeveloped.

By this time Jackson Street had been extended across Pasture Lane (Brighton), the first development in outlots #254 and #253 (Brighton Place quarter). The Mechanics Retreat area (Jackson and Carroll from Coffee Street west in Exhibit 8) appears more or less the same at this point in terms of the layout of streets and lots (i.e. no connection with Robinson's Buena

Vista development). Outlot #183 above Armandale (then Carroll) is undeveloped, although there appear to have been a few houses at its western border along Pasture Lane.

## **2.5 Street Grid Evolution**

The east and west side of Federal Street developed as a logical extension of the street grid of the original Allegheny Town center. The commons was not “violated” (i.e. not turned into streets and lots, but kept common and open). The early, independent development in Mechanics Retreat had created some pre-existing streets with which the expanding town street grid now had to intersect and integrate. The remaining sequence of maps in Appendix II show how the final stages of development played out between the 1850s and the turn of the century.

### **2.5.1 Buena Vista and Monterey meet Jackson**

Between 1852 and 1872, the Mechanics Retreat area was substantially rearranged (1872 Exhibit 9). Buena Vista and Monterey Streets, from Robinson’s Buena Vista development, were extended north from Taylor up to Carroll Street (now Armandale), which was renamed Ackely Street. (Ackley owned the property north of that line.) In a 4½ block area, the old lot lines were completely replaced. The larger north/south-oriented Mechanic’s Retreat lots fronting Jackson & Carroll were replaced by new 20-ft wide lots fronting Buena Vista & Monterey in the current east/west orientation. Residential development seems to have pushed west from Federal down Jackson Street to meet with the newly extended Monterey, which in these decades appears to have been the western edge of the built-out neighborhood. At this time, lower Buena Vista was still dominated by stock yards, which probably discouraged residential development (the alley between Buena Vista & Brighton is still called Drovers Way). In addition to the extension of Buena Vista & Monterey, Jefferson was pushed west past Amelda Alley (Saturn) to Monterey, and Davis Alley (Sampsonia) was created providing rear access for the lots along Jackson & Taylor.

The outlots on the west side of Irwin Avenue (Brighton Rd) were subdivided by this time, with Freemont Street (now Brighton Place) connecting Jackson Street to Washington Avenue (now California). Although the land on the west side of Freemont was owned by the Pittsburgh Fort Wayne & Chicago Railroad Company, it was partitioned into town lots – perhaps a real estate venture related to the railroad business. Although Freemont Street was only sparsely populated at this time, it was the route chosen for a trolley line that descended from the east side of Union Cemetery, down to Jackson Street, east to Monterey, down Monterey to North Avenue, then east to Federal and downtown Allegheny.

At the periphery of the nominated district, O’Hern Street now connected Perrysville Avenue to Irwin Ave (Brighton Rd). The roughly 20 acres between Ackely (Armandale) and O’Hern (formerly outlots #183 and #184) were now partitioned in a north/south orientation, with the

parcels fronting Irwin Avenue (Brighton Rd) occupied by Taggart's tannery. In addition to the land north of Ackley (Armandale), a large parcel on the east side of Coffee Street (Garfield) remained undeveloped at this time.

### **2.5.2 Buena Vista pushed through to Perrysville**

By the 1880s, the population of Allegheny City was over 75,000. The major development in this decade was the installation of sewer and water service throughout the lower wards, which is illustrated prominently on the 1882 map (Exhibit 10). By this time Buena Vista was extended north to meet with Perrysville Avenue, crossing O'Hern in the process. This was a major challenge, owing to the steep grade, but with the observatory and the Western University of Pennsylvania on the bluffs overlooking the town, the motivation was fairly strong to improve accessibility.

With the extension of Buena Vista, many more of the lots on upper Buena Vista were built out in this time, while most of the lots on lower Buena Vista were still available, although no longer marked "stock yards." A significant amount of housing also appears on Fremont Street (Brighton Place) in this time frame, perhaps a boon of the passing trolley line. As the map in Exhibit 10 shows, West Jefferson Street, like O'Hern, connected all the way to Irwin Avenue (now Brighton Rd). North of East Jefferson, there existed Spring Alley, which has since been reclaimed by nature.

Although many homes have been built by this time, there are still a plentiful supply of partitioned town lots available to be purchased. The names of the pre-subdivision owners are still written broadly across tracts that had originally been outlots (e.g. Robinson, Campbell Estate, Ackley). Apparently the sale of this real estate, as it occurred, accrued to these land owners. By this time nearly everything had been partitioned into town lots, except for a few large parcels here and there. One such notable parcel is the two blocks on the east side of Coffee Street (now Garfield).

### **2.5.3 Victorian Gentrification**

In ten years the population of Allegheny City grew by another 30%, to over 100,000. The lower, original wards benefited, in terms of attractiveness & marketability, from the modern amenities of sewer and water as well as proximity to the center of Allegheny City, with the Market House and associated commercial district. Moreover, residing in the lower wards meant that one could walk to downtown and not have to climb the steep hills flanking Federal Street or Pleasant Valley (now called Charles Street Valley). Manchester, originally a separate borough but by now a part of Allegheny City, shared these same advantages, although further from downtown.

Comparing the housing build-out in Exhibit 10 to the 1890 map in Exhibit 11 there is a substantial increase in density reflecting the population growth mentioned above. A lot of the earliest housing that had been built in the nominated district between the 1820s and 1850s had been quite modest by Victorian standards. As the burgeoning middle class became more affluent, these undersized structures were either remodeled (expanded) or replaced. Lisa Miles notes in her book that this was actually the first time that the Northside experienced a period of gentrification.

With the exception of the grand homes on North Avenue, the nominated district was never like Millionaires Row on Ridge Avenue. Nevertheless, what they lacked in scale they approached in style and quality of craftsmanship. The new middle classes of merchants and industrial professionals built spacious homes, many designed to include servants, with stone quarried from nearby places like Fineview, lumber floated down the Allegheny River from Allegheny Forest, and glass made in Pittsburgh. A wide range of Victorian architectural styles were executed, including Italianate, Gothic Revival, Richardson Romanesque, Empire and Queen Anne. Given the relatively rapid build-out and the gentrification that occurred, there is a consequent Victorian consistency across the whole district in terms of style and streetscape, as well as a consistency in terms of durability. If it has been maintained, it is still in service. The quality and durability of the housing in this district is a monument to the birth of the American middle class and the emergence of Pittsburgh as a first-tier industrial center.

#### **2.5.4 Turn of the Century**

The turn of the century map (1901) in Exhibit 12 shows that the nominated district had been completely built out by this time. Virtually all of the vintage housing stock standing today is between 110 and 170 years old. It is possible to correlate the areas with a higher density of frame versus brick construction on the last two maps with areas in the current Central Northside where the most demolition has occurred – particularly Ledlie (Alpine), Carroll (Carrington) and Jefferson.

#### **2.6 Allegheny City in the Twentieth Century**

The remaining history is fairly well known. Although there had been some commercial establishments within the North Allegheny Commons area, it was always primarily residential. The commercial district was in the center of Allegheny City, a short walk across the commons. When downtown Allegheny was demolished and replaced with Allegheny Center in the 1960s, the north commons area declined significantly. Saved from the brink by preservationists, the Mexican War Streets designated historic district has been the center of a renaissance for this district. The historic designation of the War Streets played a key role in its revitalization.

Extending historic designation to the greater North Allegheny Commons would significantly enhance the continuation of that organic, market-driven urban renewal across the whole district.

### 3 Historic Significance

#### 3.1 Criteria

- 1) *Its location as a site of a significant historic or prehistoric event or activity.* The story of North Allegheny Commons begins with a prehistoric, geologic event which caused a topographical delineation. An ice-age ridge set aside what would become a fertile hunting ground for native Americans. For these early inhabitants the area was a gateway for passage between inland rivers and the Great Lakes. Eventually, it was discovered by settlers, whose use was agricultural, then industrial. The story culminates in the birth of Allegheny City and the economic expansion of Pittsburgh.
- 2) *Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related aspect of the development of the City of Pittsburgh, State of Pennsylvania, Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.* James Robinson married the widow Martha Boggs and acquired land through marriage. He bought more land in the area and started a ferry service to the three rivers triangle. Later, his son William subdivided that land which would become a part of Allegheny City. Not quite Christopher Columbus, but James Robinson was a quiet visionary and the first Northsider.
- 3) *Its exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.* North Allegheny Commons is the only architecturally coherent neighborhood in the City of Pittsburgh. This is due partly to its conception as a city-scape grid of connected row houses, but also to its development, over a short period of time, which ensured its stylistic uniformity. Its idiomatic Victorian architecture encompasses Italianate, Gothic revival, Richardsonian Romanesque, Empire, Queen Anne and, yes, idiomatic Arts and Crafts meets Queen Victoria. While there are other neighborhoods in the city which exhibit areas of some coherence, as in the English Tudor Style of Shadyside and Highland Park (and elsewhere), these are small ponds of uniformity in a sea storm of variegated colors when compared to the downpour of Victorian detail brimming from the streets of North Allegheny Commons.
- 4) *Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.* n/a

- 5) *Its exemplification of important planning and urban design techniques distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design or detail.* Consider each dialectical pair: the row house and Grid against green space and relentless topography; high density against security; the checkerboard of residential façade against commercial storefront. And ask: is it because of or in spite of? This is the dialectic of compression and release. The essence of good residential urban design is a dramatic concept! In Pittsburgh, this particular manifestation is found only on the Northside.
- 6) *Its location as a site of an important archaeological resource.* n/a
- 7) *Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.* n/a
- 8) *Its exemplification of a pattern of neighborhood development or settlement significant to the cultural history or traditions of the City, whose components may lack individual distinction.* n/a
- 9) *Its representation of a cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological or related theme expressed through distinctive areas, properties, sites, structures or objects that may or may not be contiguous.* Addressed above, especially in criteria 3 and 5.
- 10) *Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Pittsburgh.* Like the original waterfront neighborhoods of Baltimore, find here a discreet location, bounded by river and ridge, like Baltimore, giving birth to the row house but within a discrete architectural period. Are we in Pittsburgh? Of course. What sets this neighborhood apart is the architecture. What brings this city together, finally, is the topography.

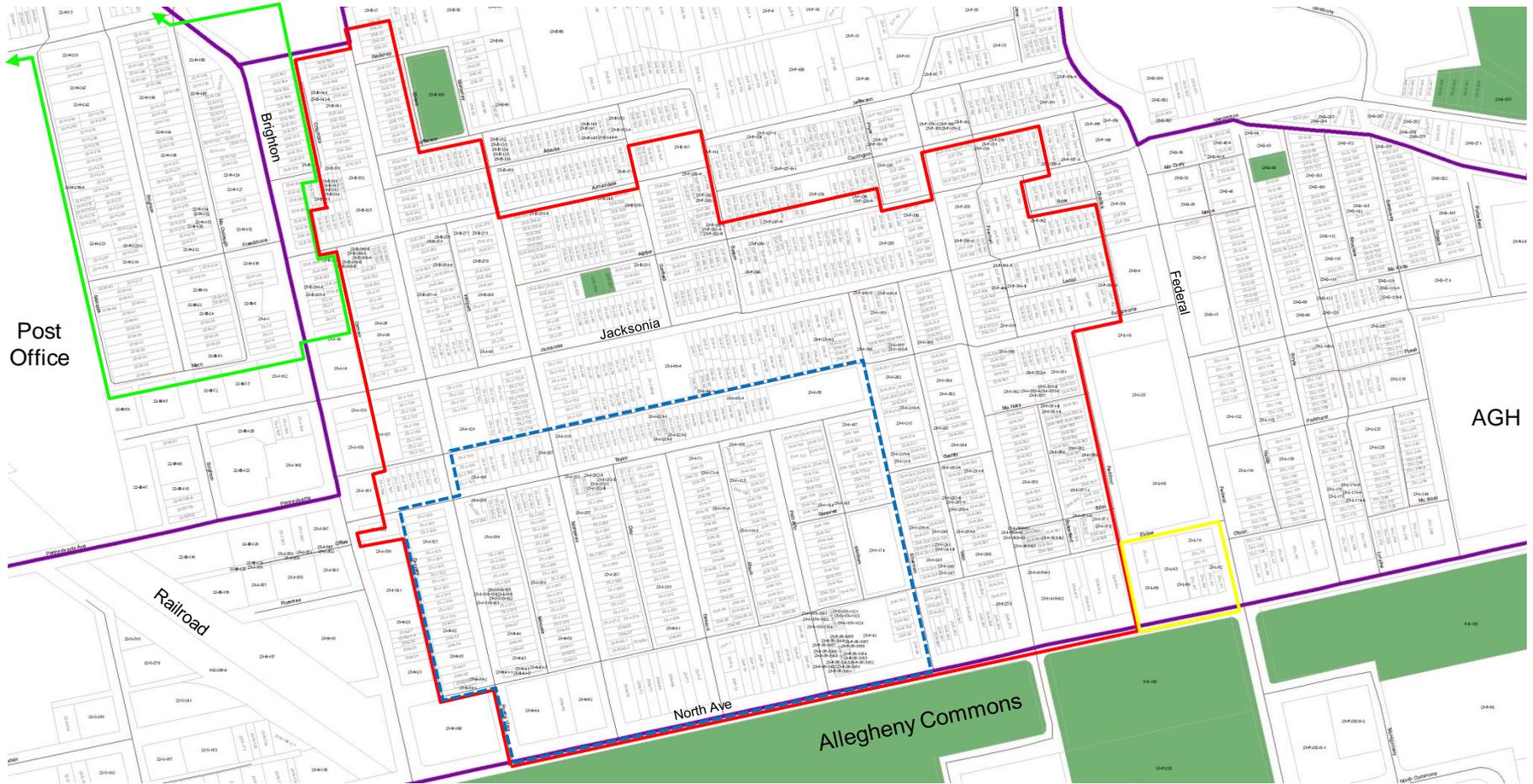
## **North Allegheny Commons: City Historic District Nomination**

### **Appendix II**

#### **Exhibits**

- 1. Current Historic District Boundary Designations**
- 2. Proposed City Historic District: *North Allegheny Commons***
- 3. Land & Building Use - Representative Statistics**
- 4. 1785 - Reserve & Warrantee Tracts Opposite Pittsburgh**
- 5. 1788 - Redick's Plan for the Town of Allegheny / Reserve Tract**
- 6. Detail of Redick's Plan – 14 Original Outlots Comprising North Allegheny Commons**
- 7. Detail of Circa 1835 Map – Borough of Allegheny**
- 8. Detail of Circa 1852 Map – City of Allegheny, Wards 2 & 3**
- 9. 1872 - Allegheny City, Most of Ward 2 & Part of Ward 3**
- 10. 1882 - Allegheny City, Most of Ward 2 & Part of Ward 3**
- 11. 1890 - Allegheny City, Most of Ward 2 & Part of Ward 3**
- 12. 1901 - Allegheny City, Most of Ward 2 & Part of Ward 3**

# Current Historic District Boundary Designations



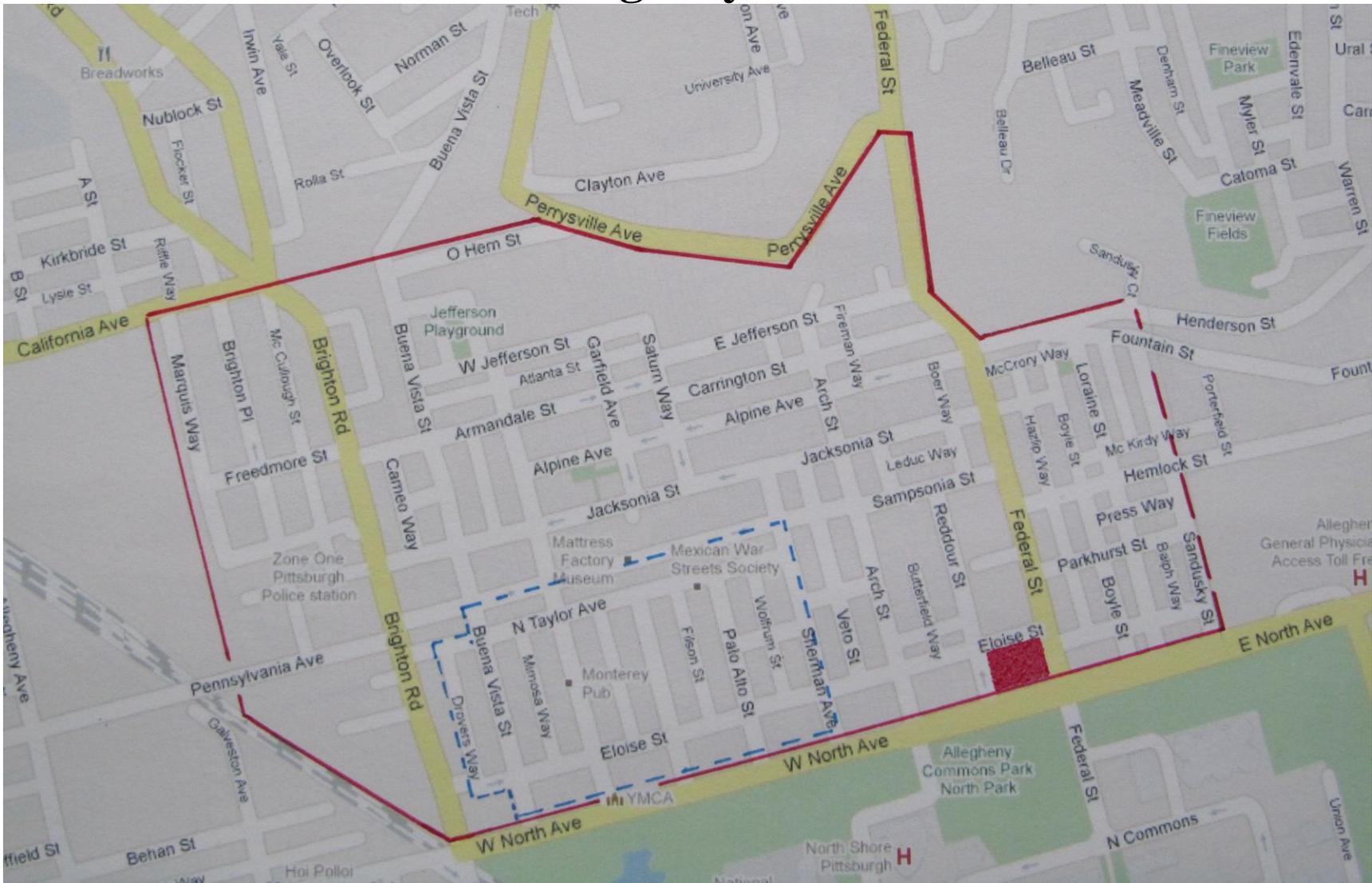
— Mexican War Streets National Historic District

— Old Allegheny Rows National Historic District

- - - Mexican War Streets City Historic District

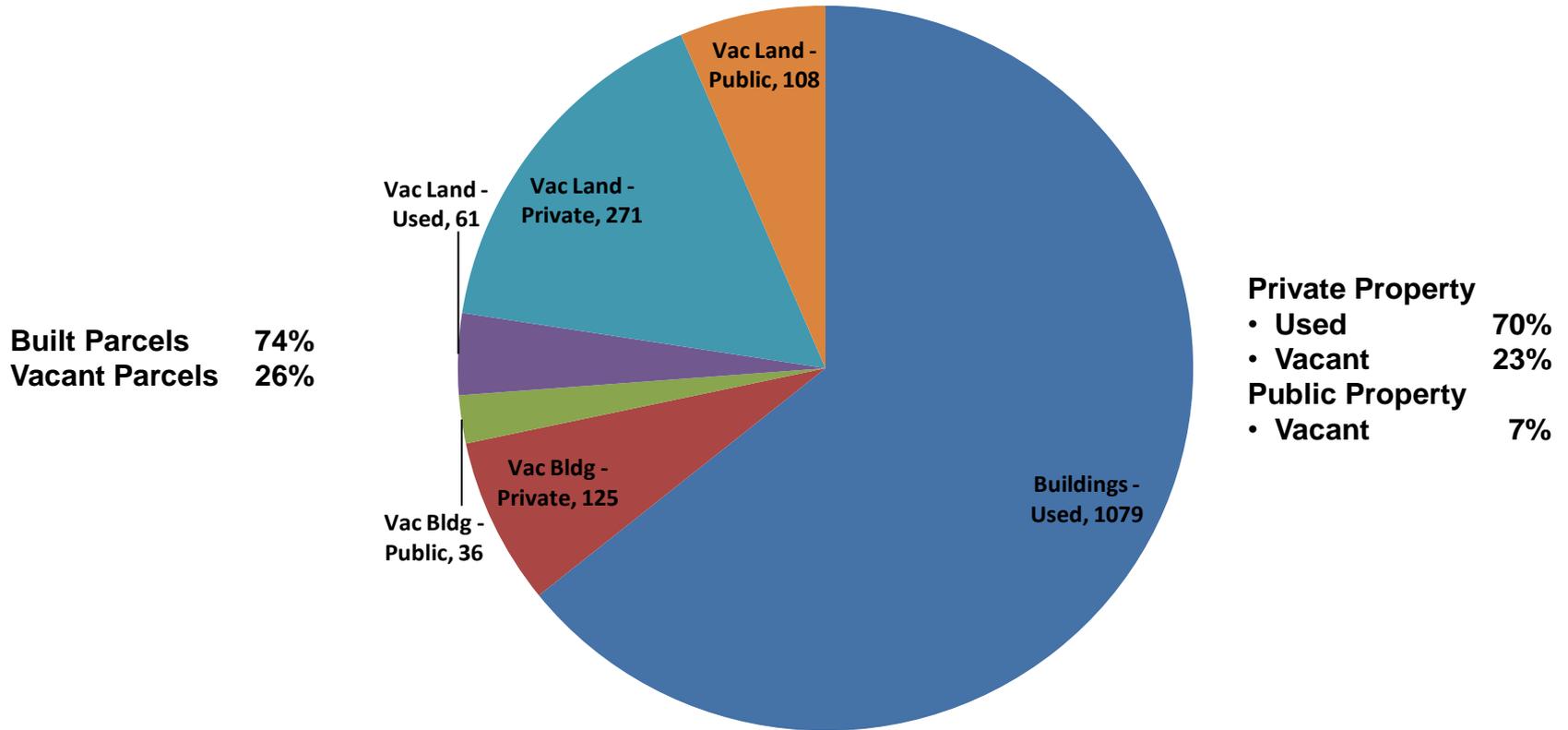
— Garden Block National Historic District

# Proposed City Historic District: North Allegheny Commons



**North Allegheny Commons:  
City Historic District Nomination**

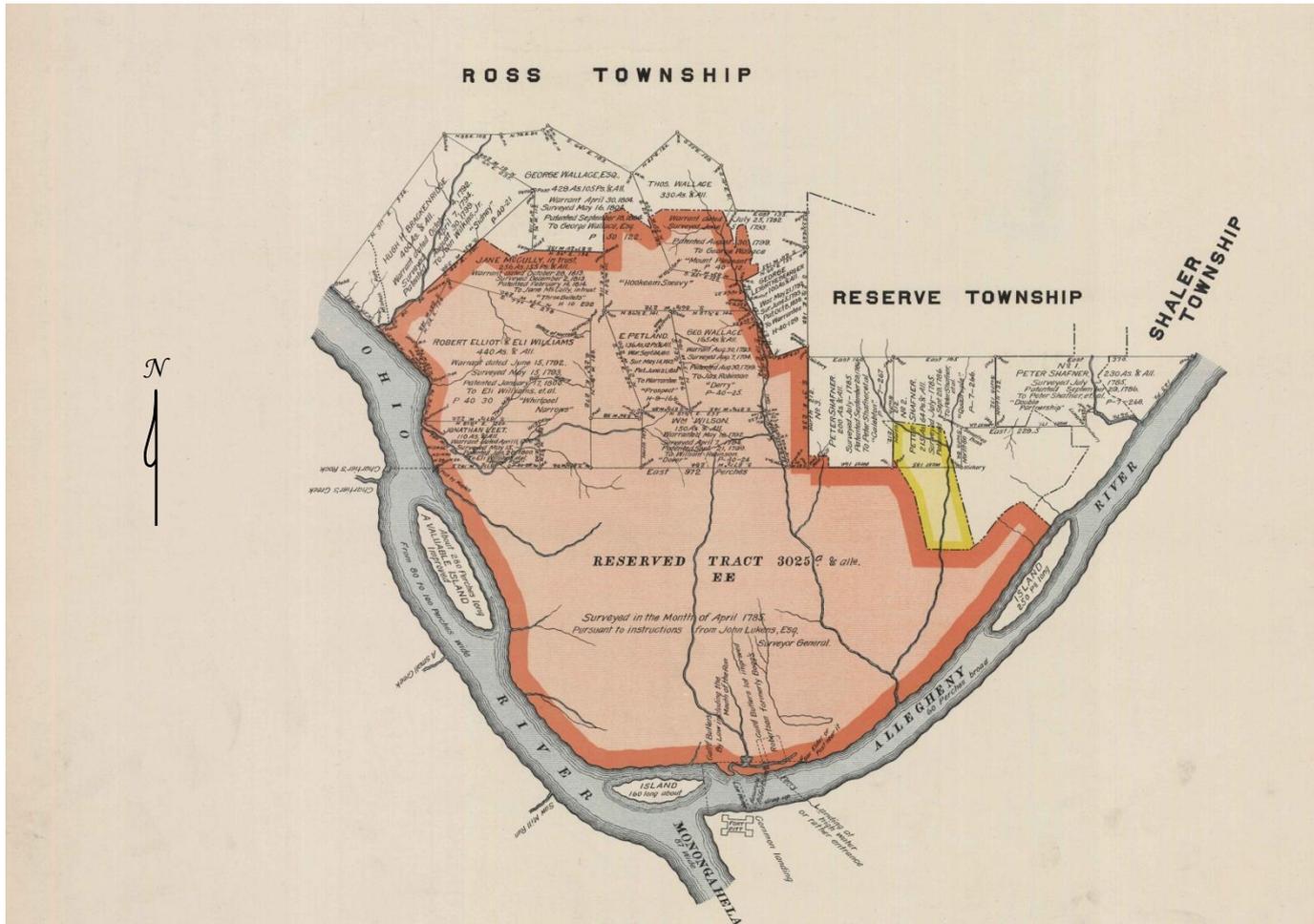
# Land & Building Use - Representative Statistics



*These Statistics were developed for the Central Northside as a whole, including east of Federal. Brighton Rd west side and Brighton Place were not included . The Mexican War Streets has not been excluded.*

Source: CNNC Development Committee

# 1785 – Reserve & Warrantee Tracts Opposite Pittsburgh



Warrantee Atlas of Allegheny County (1914) – Plate 7







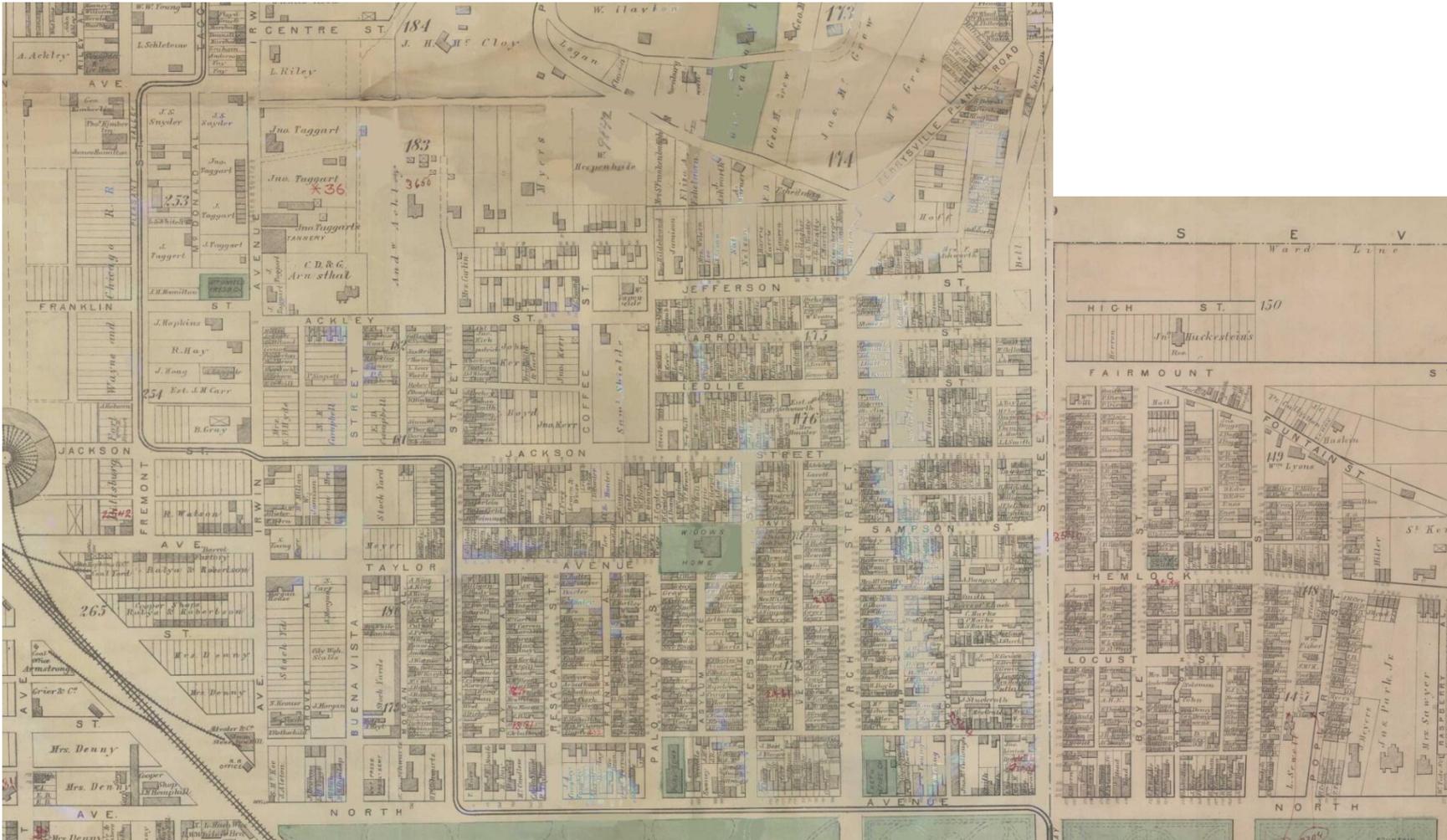
# Detail of Circa 1852 Map – City of Allegheny, Wards 2 & 3



Original Source Unknown – via *Resurrecting Allegheny City*, Lisa Miles

# 1872 – Allegheny City

## Most of Ward 2 & Part of Ward 3



GM Hopkins – Allegheny City 1872, Plate 77

Plate 79

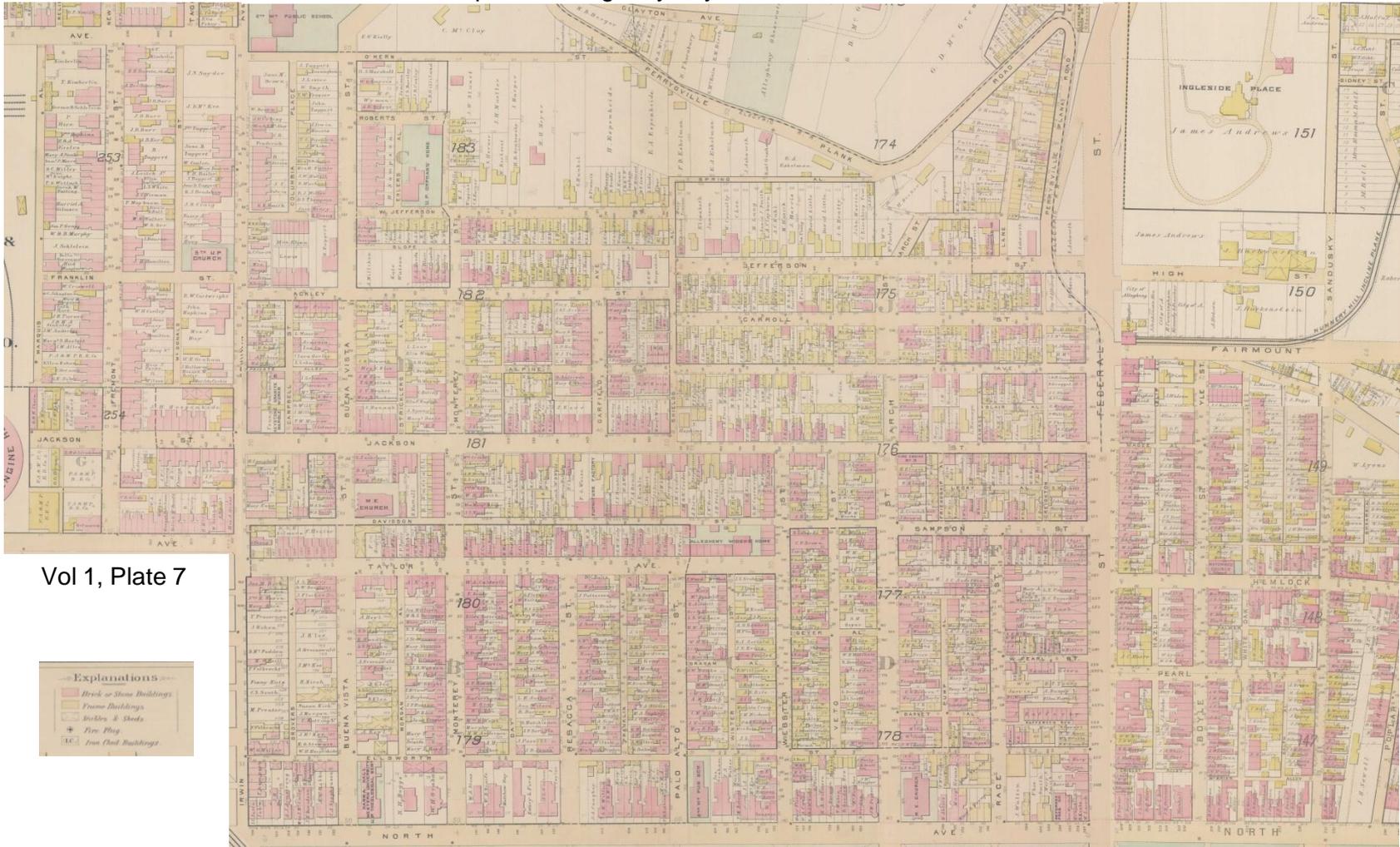


# 1890– Allegheny City

## Most of Ward 2 & Part of Ward 3

GM Hopkins – Allegheny City 1890, Vol 1, Plate 4

Vol 2, Plate 4



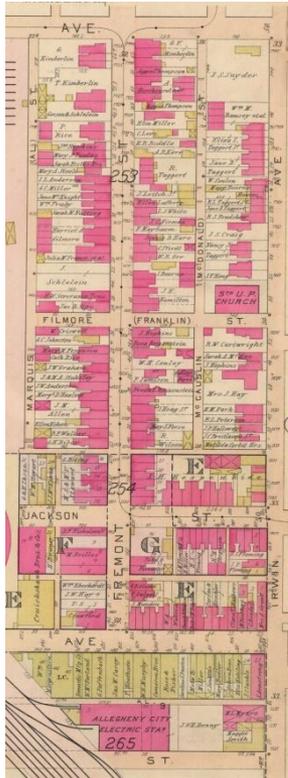
Vol 1, Plate 7

GM Hopkins – Allegheny City 1890, Vol 1, Plate 3

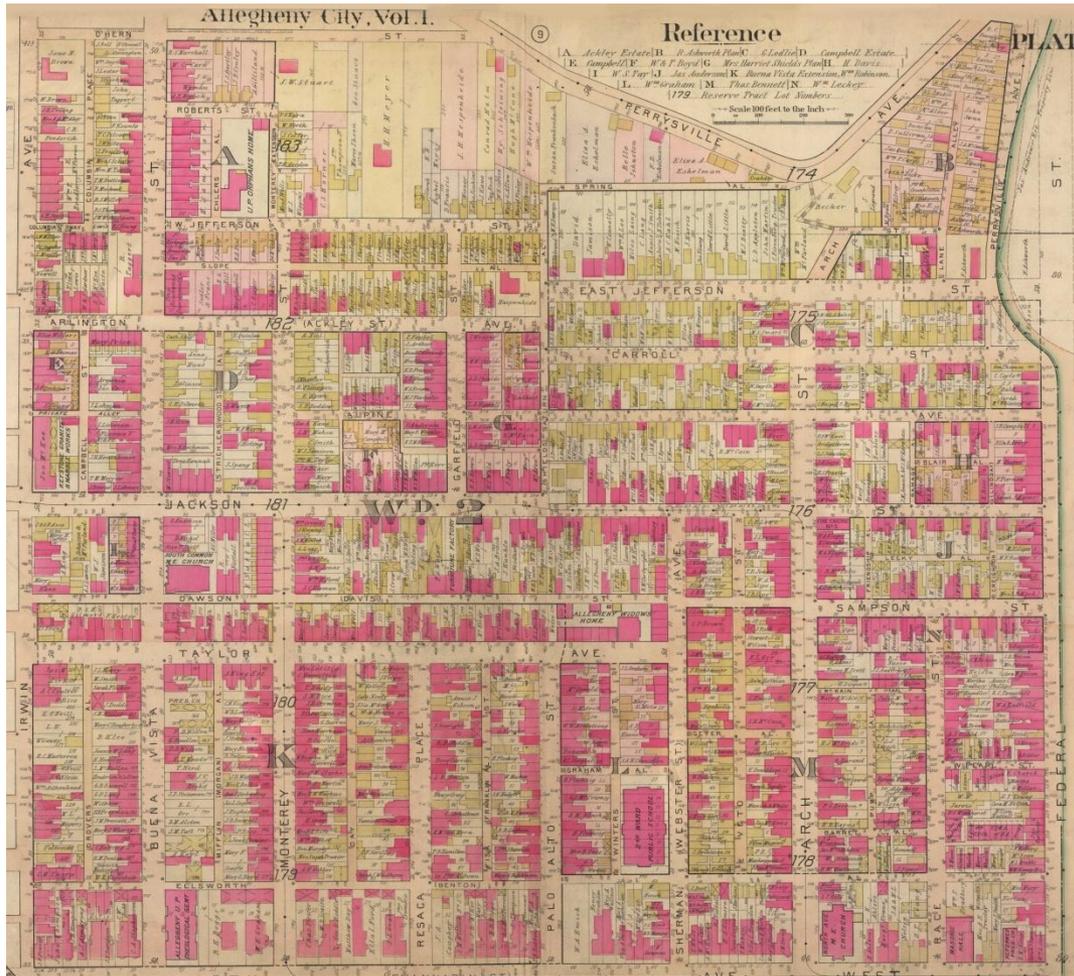
Vol 2, Plate 3

# 1901– Allegheny City

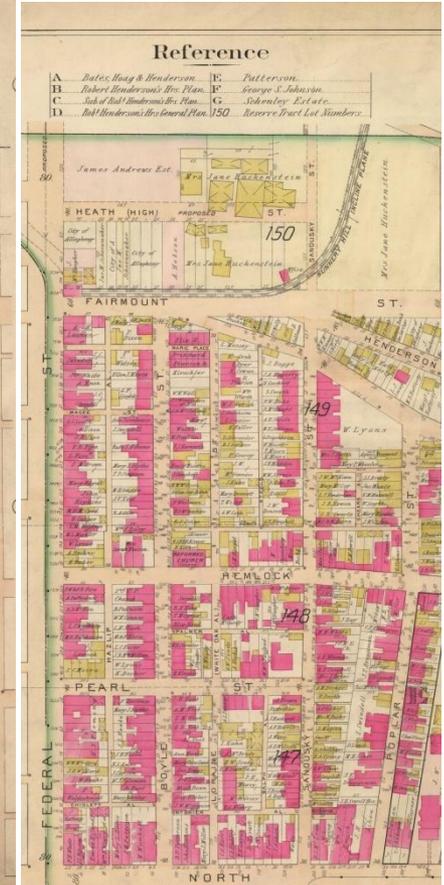
## Most of Ward 2 & Part of Ward 3



Vol 1, Plate 5



GM Hopkins – Allegheny City 1901, Vol 1, Plate 10



Vol 1, Plate 15

## **North Allegheny Commons: City Historic District Nomination**

### **Appendix III**

#### **Photo Groups**

- 1. East North: *E North Ave, Boyle, Hemlock, Parkhurst, Federal St.***
- 2. West North: *W North Ave, Sherman, Arch, Redour, Sampsonia***
- 3. Jacksonia: *Jacksonia, Carrington, Saturn, Garfield, Armandale***
- 4. Buena Vista: *Monterey, Armandale, Buena Vista, Jacksonia, N Taylor***
- 5. Brighton: *Brighton Road, Brighton Place***



East North Ave



★ Aeberli Building



Hemlock



Hemlock



Parkhurst



★ Aeberli Building



Sandusky





**Boyle Street**



★ AME Brown Church





**Federal Street**





★ Malta Building

### West North Ave





★ Metropolitan Baptist Church



**Sampsonia**



Redour





★ Firehouse



Arch Street





**Sherman Ave.**



**Eloise @ Sherman**





**Jacksonia**





Jacksonia



*up Garfield from MF parking lot*



★  
Mattress Factory

**Garfield**



**North Allegheny Commons:  
City Historic District Nomination**

**Photo Group 3c**

**Armandale**



**Saturn**



**Alpine**



**File Photo:  
Before Demo**

**After Demo**



**N Taylor**



**Buena Vista**



**Jacksonia**





**Buena Vista**



**Armandale**





Monterey



North Allegheny Commons:  
City Historic District Nomination

Photo Group 4d

## Brighton Road



★ fmr U Presbyterian Church





**Brighton Road**





**Brighton Place**



**North Allegheny Commons:  
City Historic District Nomination**

**Photo Group 5c**

**Brighton Place**



★ New Brighton Theater

