

Pittsburgh Steps Walking Tours – Central Oakland

Heading for Home

“Oakland is Pittsburgh’s most populous neighborhood . . .”

So begins Pittsburgh Beautiful’s website description of Oakland. Well, no wonder it’s so populous, as Oakland boasts four neighborhoods: North, South, West, and Central. The website goes on to describe how Oakland experienced rapid growth after the Great Fire of 1845 in downtown Pittsburgh. The runaway blaze destroyed almost 1,200 buildings and left 12,000 homeless. Showing the same resilience Pittsburghers would again call upon a century later, and aided by an influx of capital, the city’s citizens picked themselves up by their bootstraps and championed rapid redevelopment and growth. Much of the new development pushed eastward to Oakland. Learn more about the Great Fire here.

<http://www.brooklineconnection.com/history/Facts/Fire1845.html>

First known as Oakland Township, the area was annexed to the City of Pittsburgh in 1868. Today, it is home to many of the area’s universities and cultural institutions: Carlow University, the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University (parts of which are in Squirrel Hill North), and two of the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, to name a few. Rising high above Oakland’s many architectural gems is Pitt’s Cathedral of Learning, at 42 stories, the tallest university building in the Western Hemisphere. <https://www.tour.pitt.edu/tour/cathedral-learning>

Learn more about Oakland here. <https://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/pittsburgh-neighborhoods/oakland/>

While on this tour of the Central Oakland neighborhood, you’ll have a constant reminder that you are in Oakland, as the Cathedral of Learning is often in view. And you’ll discover a place where you can join hundreds of other Pittsburghers each October 13 to relive one of the great moments in Pittsburgh history.

This tour includes five staircases, with a total of 361 steps. The description of this tour is current as of May 2023.

The walk is 2.5 miles long and takes about one and one-quarter hours. Use the map that accompanies this tour to supplement the written directions that follow. The map shows where you will encounter the five staircases in Central Oakland.

I recommend starting this tour with the Joncaire Street steps in Panther Hollow. You will find parking in the Panther Hollow parking lot near the intersection of Joncaire Street and Boundary Street. The 136 Joncaire Street steps, rebuilt in 2018, connect Joncaire Street and the Frick Fine

Arts Building. Heeding a recommendation by Bike Pittsburgh, a local cycling advocacy group, the staircase renovation included a runnel – a foot-level metal groove allowing cyclists to easily maneuver their bikes up and down the steps. (When I revisited the Joncaire Street steps in 2023, the runnel was no longer there. But a smooth surface at the base of the railing serves the same purpose.) At \$770,000, the reconstruction cost vividly points out the enormity of the task of rehabilitating Pittsburgh’s 800 staircases. In my many steps journeys to date, I have encountered other staircases that have been completely renovated recently; the Round Top Street steps in Crafton Heights and the Rialto Street steps in Troy Hill are two examples. Learn more about the rebuilding of the Joncaire Street steps here.

<https://pittsburghquarterly.com/articles/bringing-back-pittsburgh-s-steps/>



Joncaire Street Steps

Climb up and then back down the Joncaire Street steps. After descending the steps turn left on Joncaire Street and then right on Boundary Street. When Boundary Street takes a sharp left turn you will see the Yarrow Street steps in front of you. These 19 steps end when Yarrow Street turns right and becomes Yarrow Way. After you ascend these steps, take note of the small parking lot in front of you. In the far-right corner, you will see remnants of three more steps that marked the beginning of the continuation of this staircase up to Bouquet Street. This is one of two staircase casualties resulting from the building of new rowhouses on Bouquet Street. The other defunct staircase was a continuation of Isis Way.

Now go back down the Yarrow Street steps and turn right on Boundary Street. On your right you will soon find the Diulus Way steps. These 99 steps were built in 1949 and pass closely by homes that seem to be built on terraces. As Bob Regan writes in Pittsburgh Steps: “Enjoy the labyrinthine feel to the neighborhood houses along this street of steps.”

Turn right on South Bouquet Street. Almost immediately you will see the upper railings where the Yarrow Street steps once joined South Bouquet Street. Farther along South Bouquet Street, and just past the new rowhouses, you’ll come to a modest red brick building. I was struck by the engraving above the front door: ST. LORENZO DI GAMBERALE MUT. BEN. ASS. 1914 – 1938.

“What was that?” I wondered. “Some kind of insurance company?” Well, in a way, it was. But not your typical insurance company. In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, Pittsburgh attracted many immigrants from Gamberale, Italy, and more were on the way. Working



St. Lorenzo di Gamberale Mutual Benefit Association

conditions in Pittsburgh were not easy then; unemployment was high, and families faced with sickness or loss of wage earners found themselves in need of charity. They had no insurance. In 1914, members of the community of Gamberale immigrants met and voted to form the San Lorenzo di Gamberale Mutual Benefit Association. For years to come the association welcomed new immigrants from Gamberale to Pittsburgh and provided aid to families in times of need. Learn more about the association, including a delightful six-minute video in recognition of its centennial, here. <https://www.pantherhollow.us/sanlorenzo.php>

Continue along South Bouquet Street until you come to Roberto and Vera Clemente Drive, where you turn right to take a short but worthwhile detour. You'll soon reach a small park on your right, nestled up against a remaining stretch of the brick outfield wall of Forbes Field,

home of the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1909 until 1970. Also home to the Pittsburgh Steelers for three decades and the Pitt Panthers from 1909 through 1924, Forbes Field was the site of many memorable sporting events. Babe Ruth hit his last three homeruns here, all in the same game! Four World Series were played at Forbes. Roberto Clemente claimed four batting titles and 10 Gold Gloves while playing right field in this historic ballpark. But the greatest moment at Forbes Field, and arguably, the most dramatic moment in World Series history, took place at 3:37 P.M. on October 13, 1960, when Bill



Forbes Field Outfield Wall

Mazeroski's game 7 walk-off homerun delivered a World Series title to the Pirates over the heavily favored New York Yankees. If you happened to miss that game – I listened to it on a transistor radio in my sixth-grade classroom, earplug in my ear, the hidden wire running up my sleeve – each year on October 13 you can join a couple hundred fellow Pirates fans in this small park and listen to the 1960 radio broadcast, and also cheer wildly as the ball clears the nearby fence.

Now return to South Bouquet Street and turn right. When you reach Forbes Avenue you won't be able to miss Pitt's three tall, cylindrical dormitory buildings across the street. Designated as Buildings A, B, and C when they were first constructed, they were cleverly called Ajax, BAB-O, and Comet by students and townspeople alike. When were they built? I'm not sure, but I know they were there as early as 1964. As a high school sophomore, I was invited to a Pitt football game by a Pitt student and we had a pre-game lunch in the dining hall in one of the dorms. Final score: Pitt 34 – William and Mary 7. That, I remember.

Turn left on Forbes Avenue. Look across the street as you start down Forbes and you will see an imposing two-story, stone castle. Or at least a building built to look like a castle, ramparts and all. Now occupied by two eateries, the fortress was built in 1901 and served as Police Patrol

Station No. 4. I found this entry in the April 18, 1921, Proceedings of the Council of the City of Pittsburgh: “Mr. Garland presented No. 2761. An ordinance authorizing the construction of a Public Comfort Station on land belonging to the City of Pittsburgh in the rear of No. 4 Police Station near the corner of Forbes and Boquet streets, and authorizing the Mayor and the Director of Public Works to advertise for and award a contract for the construction thereof, and providing for the payment of the costs thereof.” The resolution was referred to the finance committee. Public comfort stations are too few and far between these days.

Continue along Forbes Avenue until you arrive at Semple Street, where you turn left. Turn right when you reach Louisa Street. After two blocks Louisa Street ends as a real street, becomes the Louisa Street steps, and then later resumes as a real street. The 34 Louisa Street steps are relatively new – 1984 – and, like the Joncaire Street steps, have a runnel; a boon to the area’s many college students who rely on bicycle transportation.



Louisa Street Steps

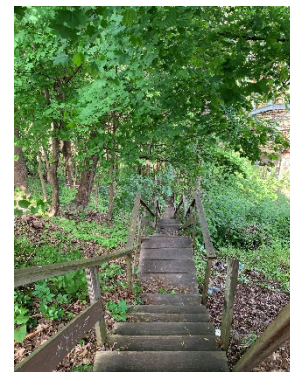
Louisa Street ends at Halket Street, where you will turn left. When you reach the end of Halket Street at the Boulevard of the Allies, you’ll see the old Isaly’s ice cream factory and dairy store across the street - and surely wish you could transport yourself back in time and enjoy a Skyscraper ice cream cone. The other side of the Boulevard is South Oakland, and you can learn about the history of Isaly’s during that tour. For now, no Skyscraper in hand, turn left on the Boulevard of the Allies.



Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral Cornerstone

An impressive church building awaits you at the corner of Dawson Street and the Boulevard of the Allies. The original cornerstone, on the left hand side of the building, reads: St. George Syrain Orthodox Church A.D. 1917. Apparently, the stone carver didn’t have autocorrect. Now known as Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral, the parish was organized in 1908, and this was the congregation’s first church. Learn more about the parish’s history here. <https://www.sgcoakland.org/cathedral-history>

Continue along the Boulevard. After you pass Parkview Avenue, look for a Healthy Ride bicycle stand on your left. Just past and behind the bike stand you’ll find the Juno Street steps descending through woods into Panther Hollow. These 73 wooden steps at one time connected with Juno Street far below. But now they seem to end near a house; clearly private property. I ventured only halfway down the stairway the two times I have visited these steps, not wanting to disturb the home’s inhabitants.



Juno Street Steps

So, head back up to Parkview Avenue and turn right. You'll soon discover the street is well named. An empty lot among the closely-packed houses affords an expansive view of Schenley Park's Panther Hollow, Panther Hollow Lake, Panther Hollow Bridge, and Phipps Conservatory.

Continuing along Parkview Avenue, you'll soon arrive at Oakland Square. Developed 1889-1890, Oakland Square is a collection of 26 homes built around a long rectangular park. Eugene Murrough O'Neill, an Irish émigré, was the prime mover behind developing Oakland Square and wanted the neighborhood to be reminiscent of neighborhoods of Victorian England and Dublin. In March and April of 1889, this advertisement appeared in the *Pittsburgh Chronicle Telegraph*:

For Sale \$6,500 Oakland New

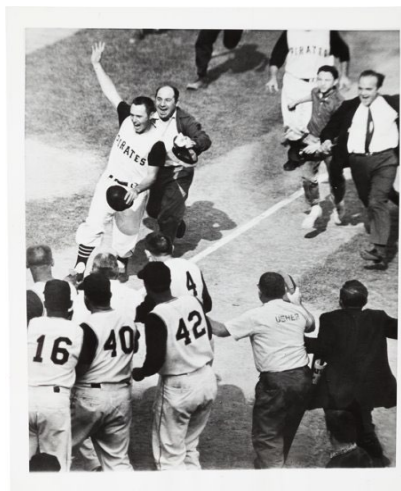
Two story and mansard, brick dwelling 8 rooms, hall, bath, laundry, inside shutters and w.c., bay window, large front and rear porches, slate mantels, fine tile hearths, electric bells, etc. The entire house elegantly papered and decorated, very fashionable locality, shade trees, etc. 5 minutes walk from Fifth Avenue Cable line, easy terms. Samuel W. Black & Co. 99 Fourth Avenue

You can admire these 130-year-old homes as you take a leisurely stroll around the grassy, tree-lined "square," ending at Dawson Street.

Now turn right on Dawson Street. The Cathedral of Learning serves as a beacon as you approach the end of your journey through Central Oakland. Dawson Street ends at Bouquet Street, where you will descend the Diulus Way steps and continue back "home" to your starting point. No one will be cheering wildly, no announcer will be shouting "and the fans go wild," as they did for Maz when, batting helmet in hand, he joyously reached home plate, surrounded by teammates and fans. But now you know *the* place to be in Pittsburgh the next time October 13 rolls around.



Cathedral of Learning from Panther Hollow Parking Lot



Coming Home

