

# Pittsburgh Steps Walking Tours – North Oakland

## Old Buildings Put to New Uses

“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/>

Despite being a relatively short and easy trek, the North Oakland walking tour offers plenty of variety. You’ll encounter old buildings put to modern uses, see different types of housing, and relish an iconic view of the Cathedral of Learning.

This tour includes four sets of staircases, with a total of 99 steps. Use the map that accompanies this tour to supplement the written directions that follow. The map shows where you will encounter the four staircases in North Oakland.

The walk is 1.9 miles long and takes about 45 minutes. The description of this tour is current as of May 2023.

I recommend starting this tour near the intersection of Melwood Avenue and Dover Way. I found convenient street parking on Melwood Avenue. As you are finding a place to park you will notice how the area’s old warehouse buildings are being retooled for more modern activities, UPMC clinical programs and upscale car dealers.



**Byron Street Steps**

You will find your first set of steps, the Byron Street steps, next to 605 Melwood Avenue. These 41 steps were built in 1949 and ascend from Melwood Avenue to Gold Way. Turn left on Gold Way and proceed to Denver Street. Along the way, and to your left, you have fine views of Children’s Hospital and West Penn Hospital. When you reach Denver Street, coming in from the left, you will turn right and climb the 28 steps that lead to North Craig Street, but not until you pause to admire the

impressive outer space-themed graffiti art on the building to your right.



**Gold Way Steps**



**East Liberty from Bigelow Boulevard**

Cross North Craig Street and turn right. There are seven steps that lead you from North Craig Street to Bigelow Boulevard, where you will turn left. As you stroll along Bigelow Boulevard you have a terrific view of East Liberty in the distance, including the iconic steeple of the East Liberty Presbyterian Church. And across the boulevard on your right you will see the Alpena Street steps, which lead to the Upper Hill neighborhood. You will also see the beautiful homes lining Schenley Farms Terrace in the Schenley Farms Historic District, also in Upper Hill. You’ll have the opportunity to explore these sites

when you tour Upper Hill.

When Bigelow Boulevard meets Centre Avenue, cross Centre Avenue and turn right. As I did, you will likely stand in awe of the magnificent building that once housed Schenley High School; and be pleased that it has been tastefully renovated as an apartment building. Learn more about the history and redevelopment of this architectural beauty here.

<https://www.abandonedamerica.us/schenley-high-school>  
<https://www.nextpittsburgh.com/city-design/schenley-high-school-now-schenley-apartments-heres-look-inside/>



**Former Schenley High School**

As you climb Centre Avenue you pass impressive homes on your left. You may also notice three sets of steps on your right that you will enjoy when you tour Upper Hill. These are at Centre Avenue’s intersections with

Bigelow Boulevard, Bryn Mawr Road, and Allequippa Street (yes, spelled differently than the town of Aliquippa along the Ohio River).

Bear left when you reach Allequippa Street and then descend the 23 steps to University Avenue A, which is under construction. Head back up the steps, turn left, and a little farther up the hill you gain a first-rate view of the Cathedral of Learning. <https://www.tour.pitt.edu/tour/cathedral-learning>

Now you will head back to Centre Avenue, turn right, and start the trek back to your starting point. After crossing Bigelow Boulevard you will find on your left Tudor-style apartment buildings and the Herron Hill Pumping Station, a Department of Public Works facility dating to 1896. This pumping station replaced the original Herron Hill Pumping Station that was built in 1880, along with the Herron Hill Reservoir. Learn more about the history of Pittsburgh's water works here. <https://www.pgh2o.com/about-us/our-history>



**Herron Hill Pumping Station**

Turn left when you reach Melwood Avenue. As you rejoin your starting point you will see many recently-renovated, three-story apartment buildings arrayed in a row along Melwood Avenue, adding to the variety of housing you have witnessed during your brief walk through North Oakland.

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