

Stepping Out in Pittsburgh's Neighborhoods

Pittsburgh's City Steps – When and Why Did They Develop?

Pittsburgh's topography – its rivers and hills – has always presented transportation challenges.

Our three navigable rivers are the primary reason Pittsburgh was settled in the first place. They provided an excellent means of transportation for traders, settlers, and armies. Along with an abundance of natural resources like coal and limestone, they were essential to Pittsburgh's industrial development.

But the combination of rivers and hills required inventiveness and variety in land transportation. And variety we have. While the rivers are great for traveling and transporting goods, they need bridges, and lots of them, to get across. While our hills can be majestic and beautiful, they need tunnels to get through them, steep roads to get over them, and steps when they are too steep for roads and where people lack cars.

What was the driving force behind developing our ubiquitous stairways? As the Dean of Pittsburgh Steps, Bob Regan, notes in his fine book, Pittsburgh Steps: The Story of the City's Public Stairways: "The flat land adjacent to the rivers, which were the primary means of transport, was considered prime land for the area's many steel mills. Consequently, the only affordable, inhabitable land for the common people was on the hill tops, or in some cases, along the hillsides. In order for workers to travel to work, a series of steps were built to the steel mills."

Stairways appear in early maps of Pittsburgh, some dating to 1884, demonstrating their importance as a means of transportation to work and shop before the advent of the automobile. The need for more stairways increased as the population grew faster than many people's ability to own automobiles. And there were often places where a street might have been deemed necessary, but the hills were just too steep. Steps were constructed as an alternative.

We know the construction dates for 502 of our stairways. The oldest extant stairway is the Junilla Street steps in Middle Hill, dating to 1911. Most of the stairways you will enjoy exploring on these tours date to the 1940s and 1950s.



Junilla Street Steps – Middle Hill

Pittsburgh's City Steps Today

According to the Pittsburgh Citywide Steps Assessment, Pittsburgh has more public staircases than any other city in the United States – about 800 staircases with over 45,000 separate steps. “The City’s steps connect communities and provide residents access to transit and other amenities,” notes the Assessment. In some cases that is as true today as it was when the stairways were first constructed. In many cases, however, they are seldom used or barely passable.

The stairways generally take three different forms. About 450 are built on structures. The remaining 350 or so are built into sidewalks. Sidewalk steps can take two forms – steps integrated into sidewalks at street level, and high-rise steps serving as or leading to elevated sidewalks providing access to houses on the upper side of streets running along hillsides.



Structure – Troy Hill

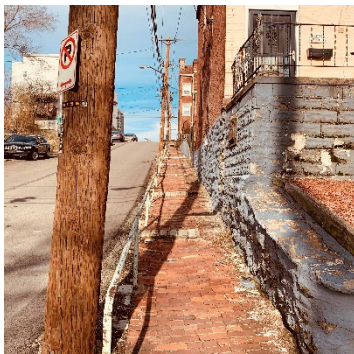


Integrated into Sidewalk -
Crafton Heights



High Rise & Elevated –
Crafton Heights

Reinforced concrete is the most common material for the steps. Some are constructed of wood or brick. And sometimes we find stairways comprised of a combination of materials.



Brick - South Oakland



Wood - West Oakland



Brick and Wood - Morningside

In Pittsburgh Steps, Bob Regan provides us a good working definition for the steps you can explore using the walking tours I have devised. “The Pittsburgh city steps are public stairways, owned and maintained by the City of Pittsburgh, located in public rights of way.”

Bob goes on to note that 344 of our stairways are legal streets. That is, “. . . there are 344 streets in Pittsburgh that are nothing but flights of steps . . .” A good example is Apollo Street in Polish Hill. This steep, two-block long “street” of 98 steps, built in 1947, connects Melwood Avenue and Bethoven Street as they run parallel along the side of a hill.

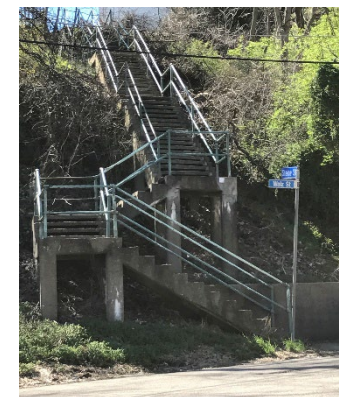


Apollo Street - Polish Hill

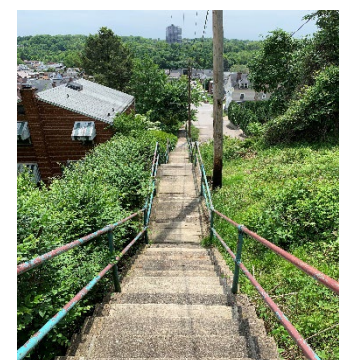
There are three ways that stairways can be part of “real” streets.

1. When steps are integrated into sidewalks, they assume the name of the streets they line.
2. There are times when a “real” street ends at the top of a hillside and a set of steps serves as the connection and continuation to the perpendicular street below. An excellent example is in Spring Hill-City View. The only way to reach Homer Street, far below the end of Steine Street, is to descend the steep 105 Steine Street steps, built in 1947. On foot, of course!

Steine Street Steps - Spring Hill-City View



3. Finally, there are streets that are “real” streets for a few blocks, become a staircase for a block or two, and then resume as a “real” street, with or without sidewalk steps. The 144 Martha Street steps in Stanton Heights and Morningside, constructed in 1949, serve as a perfect example. Martha Street begins in Stanton Heights as a real street, becomes a stairway street as it connects El Paso Street to Duffield Street while still in Stanton Heights, and then becomes a real street with two sets of sidewalk steps in Morningside.



Martha Street Steps - Morningside

Pittsburgh’s staircases vary widely by number of steps and steepness. Ray Avenue has the most steps in one staircase – 378. These steps, built in three sections in 1954, connect Fair Avenue and Pioneer Avenue in Brookline. For steepness, head to Troy Hill and climb the 177 steps that lead from Vinial Street to Province Street, traversing only

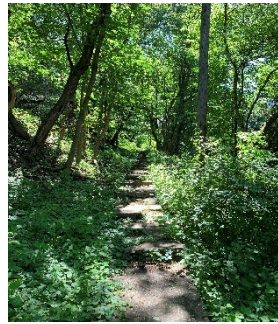
237 feet as you do so. Compare that to the Straka Street steps in Crafton Heights. These 104 steps meander through the woods for 742 feet before they connect Berry Street to the “real” Straka Street. And believe it or not, there are stairways with no steps. Apparently, all it takes is a railing along a sidewalk to earn the designation of Pittsburgh City Steps. Eleanor Street in South Side Slopes is a good example. In two sections, the stepless sidewalk and its railing curve along Eleanor Street as it runs downhill from Cobden Street to Burham Street. The Assessment notes the “steps” were constructed in 1936.



Ray Avenue Steps - Brookline



Vinial Street Steps – Troy Hill



Straka Street Steps - Crafton Heights

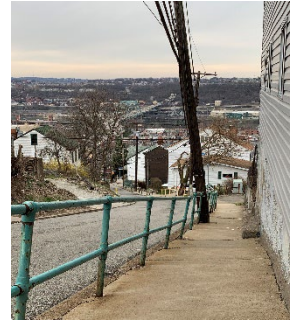


Figure 1 Eleanor Street Steps – South Side Slopes

Pittsburgh’s Neighborhoods, By the Steps

We Pittsburghers are proud of our uniqueness. We enjoy unique cuisine (think Primanti Brothers and French fries inside sandwiches). To some, we talk funny (think n’at). We have more bridges than any other city in the world. I could go on. We love our towns and neighborhoods. Allegheny County has the second highest number of separate and distinct municipalities of any county in the United States (think Rankin at one-half square mile). And Pittsburgh has no fewer than 90 neighborhoods. That’s a lot for a city our size. And except in one case, neighborhood pride abounds. The one exception? Brunot Island. What’s up with them? Well, there are no “them.” No one lives on the island neighborhood, which is accessible only by a railroad bridge.

Of Pittsburgh’s 90 neighborhoods, 66 have steps. Southside Slopes has the most – 68 stairways with 5,447 steps. Five neighborhoods might be called step poor, with just one staircase, ranging from nine steps (Lawrenceville) to 108 (Glen Hazel).

If you want to explore Pittsburgh’s diverse neighborhoods, and you want to start a quest to climb all 45,000+ of Pittsburgh’s city steps, why not do both at the same time? That’s the challenge and the opportunity provided by these tours.

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