

Pittsburgh Steps Walking Tours - South Oakland

Skyscrapers from Beginning to End

“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/>

The South Oakland walking tour begins with a little-known religious shrine that I suspect doesn’t get a lot of visitors and ends with a shrine that spiritually moved thousands of people for decades.

This tour includes seven staircases, with a total of 310 steps. The accompanying map shows the locations of the staircases.

The walk is about 2.9 miles long and takes less than an hour and a half. This tour is current as of May 2023.

I recommend starting this tour near the intersection of Wakefield Street and Ward Street. I found convenient street parking on Ward Street.

As I walked down Ward Street to turn right on Wakefield Street, I was immediately greeted by something that piqued my curiosity – a sign on a telephone pole pointing to the Shrine of the Blessed Mother. “What is this?” I wondered. I soon found out, but not before being struck once

again by another dramatic view of Pittsburgh's skyline. Here, my focus was on the pyramid-capped Gulf Building. When I moved to Pittsburgh in 1964, it was the city's tallest building. Now? It seems dwarfed by at least four newer, much taller skyscrapers.



10 Wakefield Street Steps

After just one block Wakefield Street ends and becomes eight steps. They're known as the 10 Wakefield Street steps, named not for their height, but rather for the address of the house where they begin. The steps become a brick sidewalk leading through a fence to the Shrine of the Blessed Mother, a series of modest gardens and statues of Saint Mary. The shrine sits on a cliff high above the Parkway East, perilously so, it seems, at the end of the sidewalk. The setting gave me a sense of quiet and calm,

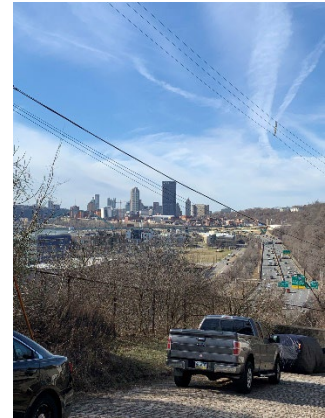
despite the sounds of the traffic hurtling along the roadway below. Looking south you can marvel at the redevelopment of the former site of the J&L Steel plant. I recall nighttime trips driving home from Penn State, rounding a curve on the Parkway, and seeing the mill going gangbusters, "hell with the lid off." Learn more about the shrine here. <https://www.thirdstopontheright.com/shrine-blessed-mother-pittsburgh/>

Return to Ward Street, turn left, and then left again on Frazier Street.



Frazier Street Steps

Like Wakefield Street, Frazier Street ends with a set of steps, one that is much longer than the 10 Wakefield Street steps. Built in 1947, the Frazier Street steps number 117 and extend some 483 feet. Much of the length is an elevated sidewalk wedged into the side of the hill. Bob Regan, the Dean of Pittsburgh's Steps, declares this is his favorite stairway. Why is it his favorite? "The Frazier Street and Romeo Street steps are on an isolated wooded hillside, and yet where they intersect (in the middle of nowhere) there is a telephone pole complete with streetlight and street signs. That has always intrigued me." Sadly, on my most recent visit the street signs had disappeared.



Skyline from Wakefield Street



Shrine of the Blessed Mother

About halfway along the Frazier Street steps you encounter the Romeo Street steps, climbing up to the right. Romeo Street is one of several Shakespearian streets you will encounter on this tour. The 94 Romeo Street steps, also built in 1947, lead to the “real” Romeo Street. After you have climbed the Romeo Street steps, return to the Frazier Street steps and turn right. Oh – is it a tragedy that Romeo Street doesn’t connect with nearby Juliet Street?



Romeo Street Steps



Steps from Bates to Hodge

At the bottom of the Frazier Street steps you will find busy Bates Street. After carefully crossing Bates Street turn right and almost immediately turn left to descend 32 steps that lead to Hodge Street. This staircase is a combination of wood and concrete steps, a blend we encounter from time to time on these journeys.

Turn left on Hodge Street and then bear right on an unnamed street leading up a hill. You will encounter 26 steps, built in 1945, as you walk up this street. There is a chain link fence at the end of the street. Peering through the fence you can see remains of where the steps continued to the

crest of the hill and then, I presume, down the other side of the hill. Who knows where they led before the first section of the Parkway, running between Bates Street and Churchill, was opened in 1953.

Head back down to Hodge Street and turn left. As Hodge Street curves sharply left while climbing a hill, it becomes Mackey Street.



Steps on Unnamed Street



Former Mackey Street Steps Viewed from Lawn Street

According to the Pittsburgh Citywide Steps Assessment there were once 18 asphalt and wooden steps aiding in the climb around the curve. Peering into the underbrush on the right, you can see some of the asphalt and the few remaining weathered wooden steps.

At the end of Mackey Street, as recently as 2021, you would have encountered 28 wooden steps that led up to Lawn Street. Since then, likely in 2022, a fallen tree wiped them out. Vestiges of the destroyed staircase remain, as does the gap in the stone wall above where the staircase once led. Sadly, you need to do some backtracking. As you walk back to Bates Street, looking back across the valley

that Bates Street runs through, you will be able to see the Frazier Street and Romeo Street steps.

Turn left when you reach Bates Street and begin the long ascent to Boulevard of the Allies. Turn left when you reach the Boulevard and left again when you reach Craft Avenue. On Craft Avenue you encounter a lovely neighborhood park and playground, recently restored, it seems. Continue straight until you reach Lawn Street.

It's worth the extra steps to turn left on Lawn Street and follow it to its end, where you can see where the former Mackey Street steps rose to meet Lawn Street. Turn around and follow Lawn Street until you reach Hamlet Street.



Hamlet Street Steps

Turn right on Hamlet Street, which offers 15 steps to take you to the Boulevard of the Allies. At first the sidewalk is made of bricks, several of which had TORONTO inscribed on them. My guess is these bricks were made in Toronto, Ohio, as eastern Ohio is home to clay beds that yielded excellent material for brickmaking. Toronto was one of the many cities manufacturing bricks in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. You can learn more about brick manufacturing in Toronto, Ohio, here.

<http://www.digitalshoebox.org/digital/collection/books/id/59/>

At the end of Hamlet Street turn right on Boulevard of the Allies, but only after looking left to get another view of some of Pittsburgh's skyscrapers. As you stroll along the Boulevard the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning – a skyscraper in its own right at 42 stories and 535 feet – dominates the view

on your left. <https://www.tour.pitt.edu/tour/cathedral-learning>

You will soon pass the second shrine on this journey in South Oakland – the old Isaly's ice cream factory and store, which opened in 1931. For decades thousands enjoyed the heavenly experience of Isaly's ice cream cones, fittingly called Skyscraper Cones. How do you spell Isaly's? "I Shall Always Love You Sweetheart." Sadly, for many, the store closed in the 1970s. While no longer made in Pittsburgh, there are still places where you can enjoy Isaly's ice cream. Learn more about the history of Isaly's here.

<https://www.pittsburghmagazine.com/the-origins-of-isalys-its-not-what-you-think/>



Old Isaly's Ice Cream Factory

As you continue along the Boulevard you encounter a Welcome to South Oakland sign, noting the neighborhood as the childhood home of Dan Marino, Andy Warhol, and Bruno Sammartino.

Andy Warhol's second childhood home was on Dawson Street, here in South Oakland. His first was on Beelen Street in West Oakland. Warhol, by the way, is buried in St. John the Baptist Byzantine Catholic Cemetery on Connor Road in Bethel Park, next to his parents Andrej and Julia Warhola. His headstone is always adorned with Campbell's Tomato Soup cans.

Turn right when you reach Ward Street, to complete the tour. Now you can either go to a store and buy an Isaly's Klondike, or do as I did and drive across the Hot Metal Bridge and find the Birmingham Bridge Tavern, where I enjoyed a fine ale and some deep-fried pickles. Also a religious experience.

<https://birminghambridgetavern.com/>

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Birmingham Bridge Tavern