

Pittsburgh Steps Walking Tours – Knoxville

“Strawberry Fields Forever,” A Slew of Church Steeples, and a One-Step Staircase

Knoxville. Named for the Revolutionary War general Henry Knox, leader of the Noble Train of Artillery, which in the winter of 1775-1776 delivered cannon that aided George Washington’s siege of Boston that led General William Howe to abandon the city to the Colonists? That Knox, I wondered?

No, the Knoxville neighborhood of Pittsburgh was named for Jeremiah Knox, a fruit farmer known for his strawberries, who had settled in the area early in the Nineteenth Century. His father was a minister, and Jeremiah also became a minister at the age of 17, before tending to plants instead of souls. Not quite the same profession as Henry Knox. General Knox and his men labored during three hard winter months and traversed 300 miles of terrain not ideal for hauling 60 tons of cannon and other armaments; Jeremiah settled on terrain that was ideal for agriculture. According to the Pittsburgh Beautiful website: “the area was desirable for agriculture as it was shielded from the smoky factories and mills located closer to Pittsburgh on the South Side.” Much of Knoxville sits in a shallow valley on the southern side of the ridge that rises up from the Monogahela River and protected the area from the smoke and grime billowing from mills along the river.

During this walk, even in today’s relatively smoke-free Pittsburgh, you have a sense of how the ridge improved the air quality for Knoxville residents. Many times when you are looking north you see only the very tops of Pittsburgh’s tallest skyscrapers, as the ridge blocks the rest from view. Learn more about Knoxville here

<https://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/pittsburgh-neighborhoods/knoxville/>.



Georgia Avenue Steps

This tour includes nine staircases, although one is impassable. The remaining eight staircases have 172 steps. The walk is three miles long and takes about an hour and a half.

The tour is current as of November 2023.

I recommend starting your tour near the intersection of Parklow Street and Arabella Street. I found convenient street parking on Arabella Street.

Start your walk by heading east on Arabella Street. You will soon find the Georgia Avenue steps on your right. These 51 steps were built in 1948. The staircase fills two blocks of a lengthy hiatus between two sections of the “real” Georgia Avenue. On my most recent visit to Knoxville, the second part of the staircase had a “Steps Closed” sign blocking it. Being able to see that just two or three of the steps were in minor disrepair and not presenting a safety issue, I continued up the steps. Crumbling steps on elevated staircases can be another issue! But these steps are at ground level.



Impassable Grimes Avenue Steps

At the top of the steps turn right on Moore Avenue, which curves left until it reaches Suncrest Street. Turn left on Suncrest Street and almost immediately turn left again onto Kernel Way. It’s fascinating that I saw no street sign for Kernel Way, a real street, while the Georgia Avenue steps had a street sign. But keep in mind that 344 of the Pittsburgh City Steps staircases are actual streets; Georgia Avenue being but one example, thus explaining the street sign. Kernel Way soon curves right. Along the way the backyards of houses to your left sit below you; on the right you look steeply up at the backyards of houses along Suncrest Street. Keep your eyes peeled for the now impassable 34 Grimes Avenue steps on your right. Or better yet, the railing alongside these brick steps aids your discovery. Gazing up through the woods, it is clear that the staircase simply becomes consumed by the gone-to-wilds backyards of two houses it once bisected. This

is not an uncommon occurrence when exploring Pittsburgh’s steps. Searching along Suncrest Street above, I was unable to find the upper end of the staircase. As with Georgia Avenue, this staircase was a partial patch for a gap between stretches of the “real” Grimes Avenue.

Continue along Kernel Way until you reach Roll Way, where you will turn right. Walk the one block up Roll Way that leads to Suncrest Street, where you turn left. But not before looking back down Roll Way and across the Knoxville valley, where you catch a glimpse of the tops of the United States Steel Tower (No, it is NOT the UPMC Building!) and BNY Mellon Tower, demonstrating how the ridge serving as Knoxville’s northern border once provided protection from smoke belching forth from the other side. You’ll also see a prominent church steeple in the distance, which you



Pittsburgh Skyline from Roll Way

will learn more about when you are exploring the upper end of Knoxville.

A short block after turning left on Suncrest Street, you'll reach Brownsville Road. Turn left on Brownsville Road and cross Knox Avenue. There is a relatively new (1996) one-step "staircase" leading you down Knox Avenue. "Claim" it before continuing along Brownsville Road.

In one block you reach Moore Avenue on your left, which has staircases on both sides of the street. Descend the 23 steps on the left and then climb back up to Brownsville Road using the 25 steps on the other side of the street. These old steps were constructed in 1929.

Turn left on Brownsville Road and proceed for one block before turning left on Marland Street. Like Moore Avenue, steps appear on both sides of the street. Descend the six steps on the left. Before



Moore Avenue Steps



Holy Faith Tabernacle Church

climbing back up the 15 steps on the other side of the street, pause to admire the Holy Faith Tabernacle Church across Knox Avenue. Formerly the Knoxville Methodist Episcopal Church, the twin-steepled structure was constructed Anno Domini MDCCCC. One of the small joys of finding old structures on these tours is being able to dust off my Roman numeral skills. MDCCCC is 1900. Right? Mrs. Algayer, my fifth-grade teacher, would be proud.



House of Laundry

After ascending back to Brownsville Road, turn left. Walking along Brownsville Road, still an active thoroughfare, you have a glimpse into what was likely a very busy commercial sector in bygone years. Along the way, and across the street, you will see the Pittsburgh Christian Fellowship, housed in the former Harris Mt. Oliver Theater, the congregation's name on the canopy seemingly a coming attraction. (The municipality of Mt. Oliver, surrounded by Pittsburgh neighborhoods as it has defiantly resisted incorporation into the city, lies on the opposite side of Brownsville Road.) Farther along, you'll see faded lettering painted on a brick building advertising the long defunct House of Laundry, featuring a drop off service and gas dryers. Behind you on the opposite wall, you'll see another painted advertisement, this one for an automobile service. As the telephone number bears no

area code, it's a reminder of days gone by when we could dial directly. Unlike the House of Laundry, this building still serves its original purpose an auto service business. Along your way you'll also discover the Knoxville branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. While no doubt a valuable community asset, perhaps you will wonder, as I did, whether Mr. Carnegie spun swiftly in his grave at the building's ribbon cutting. No, it's not quite the classic architecture of most other Carnegie Libraries you find throughout the land.

Many people don't know how generous the Steel Man was when it came to building houses of knowledge. Carnegie funded over 2,500 libraries, about 1,760 in the United States and the rest throughout the world. In almost all cases he provided the money to construct the library but asked the local library organizations to cover the operating costs. In five instances, however, he also provided funds to cover operating costs. These were the first Carnegie Library, in his hometown in Scotland, and four here in the Pittsburgh area: the Carnegie Libraries in Homestead, Duquesne, Braddock (the first Carnegie Library in the United States), and the eponymously named borough of Carnegie. The doors are still open at all but the library in Duquesne.

A bit later in the walk, I came to the handsome Elder-Ado Building, dating to 1927. I could find no history of the building, which now houses services for senior citizens. The grandest structure you'll encounter is the St. Clair Savings & Trust Company building, constructed in 1931 at the intersection of Brownsville Road and Bausman Street.



St. Clair Savings and Trust Company



Cedarhurst Street Steps

After taking it in, cross Bausman Street and proceed along Amanda Avenue. You'll notice a staircase leading from Amanda Avenue to Brownsville Road. Save it for another day as it is in Mt. Oliver. Your next destination is the Cedarhurst Street steps, located where Amanda Avenue ends at Arlington Avenue. Before turning left to ascend these 39 steps, built in 1953, look north across Arlington Avenue to catch a glimpse of the Cathedral of Learning far in the distance.

At the top of the Cedarhurst Street steps, continue along the gravel alley that is Cedarhurst Street. In the valley below you and to your right you can't help but notice the two magnificent steeples of a grand church.

Even though it is located beyond Knoxville, I had to know what it was, so I continued exploring after completing my tour of Knoxville. Located in Allentown and no longer active, it was St. George Roman Catholic Church, constructed 1910-1911.

Now turn left on Knox Avenue. As you walk up Knox Avenue you'll find the church steeple that was prominent in your view from Roll Way early in your tour. The steeple sits atop the former St. Canice Church, built in 1932. The church is part of a parish complex that also includes a school and, what appears to me, a convent. Having been an executive in a Catholic hospital and working for nuns for many years, I think I know a convent when I see one! The only building on the campus currently in use, the convent now houses the Hilltop Community Children's Center.



St. George R.C. Church Steeples from Cedarhurst Street

Continuing along Knox Avenue you'll find the former Knoxville Presbyterian Church on your left, at the intersection with Jucunda Street. This church dates to 1902.

So, we've circled back to Rev. Knox's strawberry fields, as Jucunda Street is named for a nationally acclaimed variety of strawberry he developed and christened Jucunda. Rev. Knox died of "apoplexy" in 1872. A year later, at a meeting of the American Pomological Society in Boston, the Society's president, Marshall Pinckney Wilder, remembered Knox this way: "His name as the 'Strawberry King' and the proprietor of the Knox fruit farm, will ever be remembered in the annals of American Pomology."

Now continue along Knox Avenue until you come to Charles Street, where you turn right. You will soon see a closed, but still impressive, school building, the former Knoxville Junior High School. The school was built in MCMXXXV (1935, Mrs. Algayer!). High above the front door are intricate stone crests depicting, apparently, the school's early instructional emphases: art, science, trades, and play.

After passing the school, turn left on Georgia Street. Before turning right on Zara Street, you'll notice the Solid Rock Church on the far-left corner of Georgia Street and Zara Street. The structure appears as hardy as its name. Its original name, however, was the First M. P. Church. The cornerstone reads: First M. P. Church S.S. Pittsburg 1908. The S.S., no doubt, is a reference to being located generically on the South Side. Note the missing "h" in Pittsburg and ponder, as you will, the historical controversy and local pride in the spelling of our fair city's name. Why a burg-ending "h" in Pennsylvania's Pittsburgh, when like-pronounced towns in Kansas, California, and New Hampshire have no "h" at the end of their names? Learn the fascinating story here.

<https://popularpittsburgh.com/whatsinanh/#:~:text=The%20official%20spelling%20of%20the,at%20the%20time%2C%20William%20Pitt.>



The Knoxville Junior High School



Solid Rock Church

Now turn right on Zara Street and follow it to its end, where you will descend the 12 wooden Zara Street steps. The steps lead to Beltzhoover Avenue, where you turn left and then almost immediately turn right on to Zelda Way. Turn left when you reach Bernd Street. Across Bernd Street in McKinley Park, named for President McKinley, you will see a long and inviting set of steps leading up a hillside into the woods. This staircase is in Beltzhoover -- so we will save it for another day.

Follow Bernd Street until it reaches Bausman Street, where you bear left. Turn right when you reach Grimes

Avenue, named for James F. Grimes. Mr. Grimes was a prime mover behind the Knoxville Land Improvement Company, which built most of the houses in Knoxville. Grimes Avenue, at least this section of it, ends at Lorna Way, where you turn left. The steep hill Grimes Avenue never did climb seems a perfect candidate for steps, but such a flight does not appear in the city's steps inventory.

But on a late fall day when the brush was barren, I could see evidence of steps about two-thirds of the way up the hill.

Lastly, turn right onto Romeyn Street when Lorna Way ends, and then right again when you reach Arabella Street. You will soon return to your starting point. And if it's summertime, you'll likely agree that your next destination should surely be anyplace that serves some good strawberry shortcake or strawberry pie.



Zara Street Steps