

Pittsburgh Steps Walking Tours

West Oakland

Navigating Dead-End Stairways and Meeting Two Sons of Soho

Encountering a dead end can be frustrating. A dead end can also be an opportunity for exploration and discovery. In this tour you'll hit a few obstacles, most of which you can power through and be rewarded as a result. You'll also encounter examples of Pittsburgh's rich history and architecture. And you will "meet" two late Pittsburghers. While very different, both were colorful characters.

"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 I can identify nine staircases in West Oakland, on this tour you will navigate only six of them, with a total of 328 steps. You will be able to catch views of the other three.

The walk is about 2.7 miles long and takes about one and one-quarter hours. This tour is current as of February 2024.

I recommend starting this tour on Burrows Street, just south of Dunbar Way. I found convenient street parking on Burrows Street.

Start by heading south on Burrows Street. You'll see a set of steps on your left just as Burrows Street curves sharply right. Sadly, you encounter your first obstacle at the top of the steps – a chain link fence with signs denoting the area beyond as private property. Frozen in place, you can see the uppermost steps descending through the woods beyond the fence. This now forbidden, 157-step staircase leading down to Robinson Street would have been the longest staircase in this tour. But don't be discouraged. The walking tour through West Oakland holds many pleasant surprises.

Return to Dunbar Way and turn right. Turn right when you reach Robinson Street. As I neared Fifth Avenue I found the lower terminus where the steps leading from Burrows Street emerge on Robinson Street. Behind some brush and a chain link gate with a second, commanding No Trespassing sign, you see the beginning of the stairway. It is directly across the street from the side of St. Agnes School that bears its cornerstone. After walking down Robinson Avenue just past the gate, peer up into the woods to discover some of the staircase's railings.



Steps from Burrows Street to Robinson Street



St. Agnes School and Church

As you are approaching Fifth Avenue, you'll see St. Agnes School (1911) and St. Agnes Church (1916) on your left. It's worth spending some time marveling at the intricate stone carvings on the front of the church, which faces on Fifth Avenue. John T. Comes was the architect who designed St. Agnes Church, as well as more than two dozen other churches throughout greater Pittsburgh. Born in Luxembourg in 1873, he emigrated to the United States with his family in 1882. Learn more about Mr. Comes here.

<http://www.johntcomes.com/Bio.html>

The church and school complex has served as the St. Agnes Center of Carlow University for many years. But in 2019 the beautiful structures were slated for demolition by the university to allow for expansion of its College of Health and Wellness. In 2022, however, the university decided to locate the health sciences project on a

nearby vacant parking lot. Happily, the historic St. Agnes complex will be preserved and utilized for other purposes by Carlow.

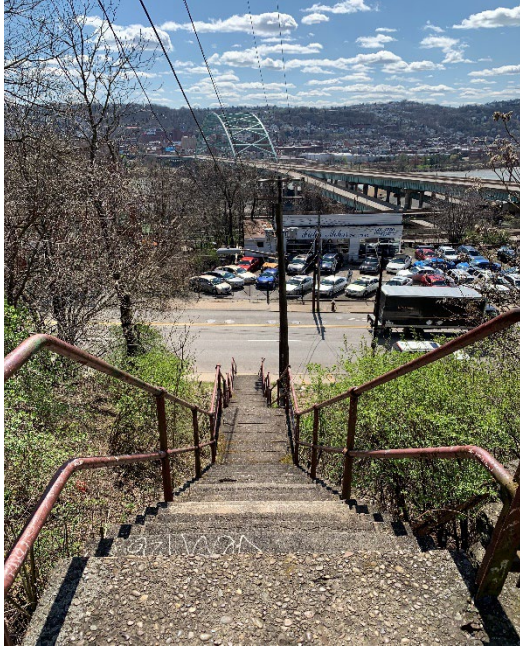
As you continue on Fifth Avenue toward downtown Pittsburgh, nestled against the hillside on your right, and separated by an old brick building, you'll see a new apartment building and rowhouses from a previous era. It's always a welcome sight to see old houses preserved in the midst of new housing as part of maintaining a neighborhood's vibrancy.

Walking down Fifth Avenue you have a fine vista to your left. Across the Monongahela River you see Southside Slopes rising up to Arlington. Two highlights of the view are the clock sitting atop the old Duquesne Brewery and South Side Park. And as you look upriver, knowing that Homestead, Braddock, and the other Mon Valley steel towns lie just around the riverbend, you can truly appreciate how important our rivers were for Pittsburgh's growth and development in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries.

Farther along Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh's skyline, always a treat, comes into view. But another treat awaits on the left side of the street at 2410 Fifth Avenue. Here you will find an old public bath house, erected by the Civic Club of Allegheny County in 1907. Known as the Soho Bath House, it was one of two operated by the Civic Club, the other being on Penn Avenue. How did it get the name Soho Bath House? Pittsburghers, past and present, call the area that sits at the northern end of the Birmingham Bridge Soho. Not an official city neighborhood, it occupies parts of West Oakland and Bluff (known by some as Uptown). James Tustin, an English émigré, came to Pittsburgh in the late Nineteenth or early Twentieth Century, bought much of the land in what is now Soho, and built a grand estate. He named his estate Soho, honoring the Soho neighborhood in London's West End. Learn more about Soho and the public bath houses here <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/pittsburgh-has-a-neighborhood-named-soho-directly-across-the-birmingham-bridge-my-mother-was-raised-there-when-it-was-predominantly-a-rus/Content?oid=1338496> and here. <http://www.preservationpgh.org/soho-baths-1>



Pittsburgh Skyline and Soho Public Baths



Mohawk Street Steps

Shortly before reaching the Birmingham Bridge you will find a set of steps leading up the hill on your right. Built in 1949, these 77 steps are known as the Mohawk Street steps, as they lead to the “real” Mohawk Street where it intersects with Beelen Street. Be careful while ascending this staircase, as a couple of the steps are missing. Turn right on Beelen Street, even though it’s a dead end. At one time there were houses on the left-hand side of the street. No longer. One of the long-gone houses was 55 Beelen Street, the first childhood home of Andy Warhol. While no longer there, the homesite was likely across the street from #54, the last remaining home on that part of Beelen Street. Warhol’s family later moved to 3252 Dawson Avenue in South Oakland. More about Pittsburgh’s artist in a minute. But see? Sometimes it’s worth going down a dead-end street.



This ain't Uptown!

Return to Fifth Avenue by way of the Mohawk Street steps and turn right. Just before I reached Moultrie Street, I noticed a sign high up on a telephone pole. Bearing a photograph of Warhol, it proudly declared: “This ain’t Uptown! Welcome to WEST OAKLAND, birthplace of pop artist Andy Warhol.” It’s fitting that Warhol was born in what many call Soho, as he spent most of his artistic career in New York City. While none of the three locations of his New York studio, The Factory, was in the Lower Manhattan neighborhood of Soho, it’s not hard to imagine him spending time there. What may surprise many is that he is buried back here in Pittsburgh, in St. John the Baptist Byzantine Catholic Cemetery in Bethel Park, next to his parents, Andrej and Julia Warhola. His headstone is always adorned with Campbell’s Tomato Soup cans.

At the corner of Fifth Avenue and Moultrie Street you will find a sign noting the grassy plot of land behind it as the Harry Orlando Memorial Community Garden. While the garden had been active for a few years, it no longer seems to be. Harry, who died in 2010, was a beloved community member and barber in Soho. The garden grew on the site of his barbershop, which was destroyed in a windstorm in 2007. Apparently, the barber shop was home to card games and mini-feasts, as well as haircuts. Learn more about this beloved local character in his obituary.

<https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/legacyremembers/harry-orlando-obituary?id=22116365>



Steps from Fifth Avenue to DeRaud Street

After Moultrie Street you will find 55 wooden steps on the right that will take you up to DeRaud Street. As was the case with the Mohawk Street steps, navigate with care as a few steps are missing or in disrepair. Turn left on DeRaud Street and, after passing some rowhouses, turn right on Wyandotte Street. At the end of Wyandotte Street you will find a set of 109 steps, built in 1949. While not quite a dead end or “steps to nowhere,” they do end inauspiciously with a short sidewalk that peters out on a hillside. Up the grassy hill to the left you will see part of a new housing development on Bentley Drive. My guess is the steps and sidewalk continued to Bentley Drive when older homes occupied the area, giving them access to businesses on Fifth Avenue. Walking back down the steps you can enjoy a stunning view of the Birmingham Bridge and South Side Slopes; nothing inauspicious about this vista.

And there is still plenty to explore. Return to DeRaud Street and turn left. Go past the wooden steps you ascended earlier and continue on DeRaud Street as it turns sharply left. I have seen one map that describes this section of DeRaud Street as Old Kirkpatrick Street. You’ll encounter a gate meant to keep cars out. Walking past the gate you’ll discover that the street leads to the Martin Luther King Park. Formerly a baseball field, the park now serves primarily as the Marting Luther King Community Garden. But before reaching the park, look into the woods on the left. You’ll find the remains of impassable steps that once led to Bentley Drive. Another dead end, but a satisfying bit of perambulatory detective work. While I advise against it, I admit to bushwhacking my way up the 90 or so steps as they, in switchbacks, climbed almost to the top of the hill, before apparently succumbing to site work related to the new housing development.



Wyandotte Street Steps



Abandoned Steps Leading from Old Kirkpatrick Street to Bentley Drive

Now return to Fifth Avenue by way of the wooden steps that connect DeRaud Street and Fifth Avenue. Cross Kirkpatrick Street (apparently the “new” Kirkpatrick Street) and turn left. Immediately after you cross Beelen Street you find five steps that lead to Allequippa Street (yes, spelled differently than the town of Aliquippa downriver on the Ohio). Turn right onto Allequippa Street. You will find another set of steps at the end of this short, one-block long brick street.

These steps trigger an adventure. The 69 steps were built in 1947 and weave uphill through the woods, terminating at Bentley Drive. But after climbing the initial section, you are presented with another obstacle – yet another chain link fence. In this case, fortunately, there is no private property sign and a previous step walker had yanked the fence aside so those wanting to use the stairway could proceed. And it appears many have done just that. I decided to join them and am glad I did. After

passing through the yanked-open fence, be sure to bear left, following an initial set of steps. The Allequippa Street steps meander through the woods, replete with wild turkeys the day I traveled them, and ends at a chain link fence on Bentley Drive. Worry not. It was easy to walk around.

Turn right on Bentley Drive. You will soon enter Oak Hill, a pleasant and attractive housing development of apartments and townhomes. Oak Hill was first developed in 2011.

Turn right when you reach Oak Hill Drive and then turn left on Whitridge Street. The upper end of Whitridge Street has 13 steps, between Ellers Street and Allequippa Street. This stairway appears in the Pittsburgh Citywide Steps Assessment. But the lower section of Whitridge Street is also lined by 11 steps that do not appear in the assessment. Between brush, a tree, and cars parked along the sidewalk, I found them impassable. Enjoy then from the brick sidewalk on the other side of the street.



Allequippa Street Steps



Whitridge Street Steps

As you walk back down Whitridge Street you have a fine view of the “Muddy Monon” as it bends west on its way to the Point. Did you know you can take a pleasure boat 140 miles up the Monongahela River to Fairmont, West Virginia? I remember the time in high school when two of my buddies and I went water skiing on the Mon somewhere upriver from Braddock. We ran out of gas on the far side of the river from the marina, so we dove into the water and swam the boat across the river to the marina, pulling it by a rope. Fortunately, we beat the towboat with a load of coal-laden barges approaching us from upriver. By how much? The towboat gets closer, and is moving faster, with every retelling of the story. Ah, the halcyon days of youth.

Turn left on Terrace Street when you get to the bottom of the hill, then turn right on Burrows Street to return to your car. Take another look at that first fence, be glad it didn’t discourage you, and enjoy memories of discoveries you made in the face of obstacles.

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