

Pittsburgh Steps Walking Tours – Mt. Oliver

Cathedral on the Mount

I could have easily named this steps tour “Which Mt. Oliver Are We Talking About Anyway?” After all, the Pittsburgh area has two Mt. Olivers, situated adjacent to each other. Long confusing to many, me included. So, let’s clear this up.

There is the Pittsburgh neighborhood called Mt. Oliver and there is the separately incorporated Borough of Mt. Oliver, which is surrounded by the Pittsburgh neighborhoods of Knoxville, South Side Slopes, Arlington, Mt. Oliver, and Carrick. In briefly searching for the history of Mt. Oliver, things I could find online focused on the borough. But with their proximity to each other, it’s fair to say the two Mt. Olivers share the early history of being settled by John Ormsby, an officer who served under General Forbes of local historical fame. Forbes granted Ormsby 249 acres of land, which became part of St. Clair Township in 1788. In naming the area Mt. Oliver, Ormsby was honoring his son, Oliver Ormsby.

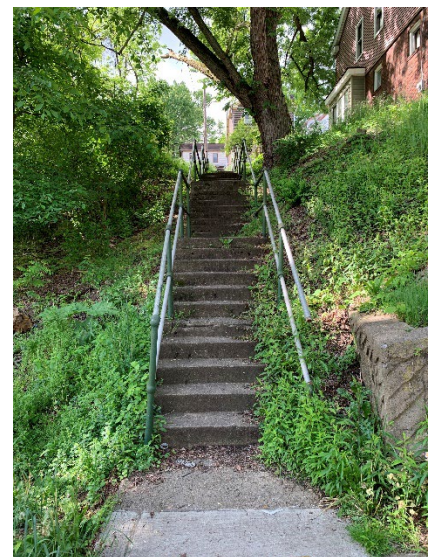
Over the years, the Borough of Mt. Oliver has heartily resisted any efforts to be annexed to the City of Pittsburgh, the most recent effort taking place in 1927. This fierce defense of its independence results in the borough residents being a prideful bunch.

Learn more about Mt. Oliver, the borough, here.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Oliver,_Pennsylvania

What we would think of as Mt. Oliver’s business district, along Brownsville Road, is in the borough. As we have seen in my Knoxville steps tour, part of which runs along Brownsville Road across the street from Mt. Oliver, the business district includes many old buildings and other sites of note. The neighborhood of Mt. Oliver, however, is almost entirely residential. Therefore, you will find this tour to be a pleasant neighborhood walk.

There are six staircases in the neighborhood of Mt. Oliver, comprised of 175 steps. You will be navigating five of the staircases and 170 steps. (More on the sixth set of steps later.) This tour is a little under a mile long and will take about a half hour to complete. It is current as of May 2024.



Como Street Steps

Begin your tour at the intersection of Otilia Street and St. Joseph Street, where you will find convenient street parking. Head east on St. Joseph Street. When the street starts to bear right and go downhill, be on the lookout for the Como Street Steps on your right. You will note a bus

stop sign by the steps, reminding us of the importance of the steps in accessing buses and trolleys in the days when not everyone owned cars. And today, of course, many Pittsburgh City steps continue to provide this benefit for those preferring mass transit over driving. Climb these 52 steps, which were built in 1953.



Burr Street Steps

Turn left when you reach Ormsby Avenue, which bears the neighborhood's founder's name. Turn right on Burr Street. At the end of Burr Street, on the left, you will find the 38 Burr Street steps. This wooden staircase is relatively new, having been built in 1990.

At the end of the staircase, turn right onto Fisher Street. You will soon reach Rectenwald Street, where you will turn right and ascend the upper Rectenwald Street steps, numbering 26. While climbing the steps you can't help but notice the imposing church at the top of the hill; impressive even though you are looking at the rear of the church. Rectenwald Street meets the appropriately named Cathedral Avenue at the back of the church's property. Curious as I was to identify this impressive structure, I decided to wait until the end of the tour to visit the front of the church and discover its name.



Upper Rectenwald Street Steps

Turn around and descend the upper Rectenwald Street steps, cross Fisher Street, and continue down the lower Rectenwald Street steps. This gradually-sloping staircase numbers 42 steps and was built in 1948.

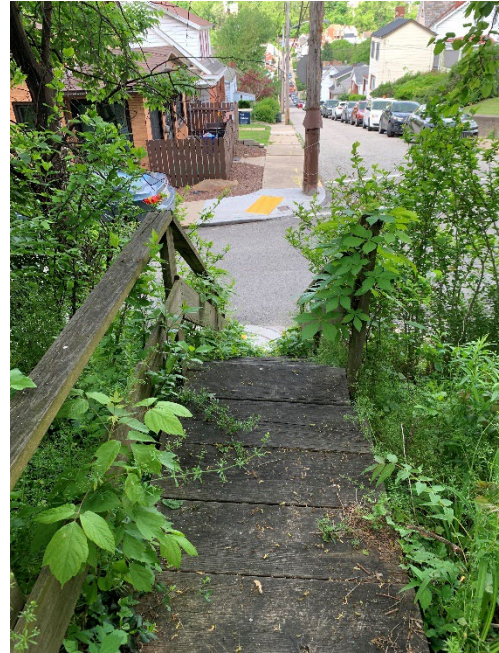
Now turn right on Walde Street. As you are walking along Walde Street you are afforded a nice view of Carrick to the south. This view gives us an opportunity to appreciate the beauty of Pittsburgh's hills and valleys.

Turn right when you reach Gorgas Street. Walking uphill, you soon reach Fisher Street, with street signs on the right and left. Coming in on your right is the "real" Fisher Street. The sign on your left announces the Fisher Street steps, which begin as a grassy path. When I first walked this tour, the path was recently mowed, suggesting it is used frequently by the

locals. Descend the wooden staircase, which has 12 steps and was built in 1990, like the Burr Street steps.

Now turn right on Otilia Street and return to your starting point.

If you are as curious about the “Cathedral on the Mount” as I was, head back to Ormsby Avenue to see the front of the church we first saw when ascending the Rectenwald Street steps. There was nothing on the building that identified the church’s origin. Doing a little online research, however, I was able to identify it as the former St. Joseph Church. Founded as a German ethnic church in 1870, the original structure was destroyed by fire in 1951 and rebuilt in 1953. The church was closed by the Diocese of Pittsburgh in 2005 as part of parish consolidations. A sign out front suggests the structure was more recently used as a church by Potter’s House Ministries. But a tour inside the rectory and the church, courtesy of some workmen performing renovations in the rectory, suggests the buildings haven’t been functional for several years. They are in bad shape, sadly. What remains in the church proper, however, are large, intricate stained-glass windows. I hope they can be saved. Learn more about St. Joseph Church here. <https://diopitt.org/saint-joseph-mount-oliver>



Fisher Street Steps



Inside St. Joseph Church

Recall that I mentioned a sixth staircase in Mt. Oliver. You can find these five steps at the intersection of Mountain Avenue and Wagner Avenue. Apparently, these steps were constructed when the two streets had sidewalks, which no longer exist. It’s a short, curved staircase from nowhere to nowhere. Also, the intersection does not offer a safe option to stop and visit the steps, so you are limited to “claiming” them visually.

One more thing. Unless it is winter when you take this tour, it's time to reward

yourself for taking time to explore the neighborhood of Mt. Oliver. Take the short drive to the bottom of Beck’s Run Road, where it meets Carson Street. Visit Page’s Dairy Bar for a great ice cream treat at a wonderful little place with a rich history.