

## Pittsburgh Steps Walking Tours – St. Clair

“The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men

Gang aft agley,

An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,

For promis’d joy!”

-Robert Burns

Lower St. Clair Township was established in 1806. The extensive township once included the present-day communities of West End, Mount Washington, South Side, Beechview, Brookline, Banksville, Beltzhoover, Mount Oliver, Bon Air, Knoxville, Allentown, parts of Baldwin, Carrick and Overbrook. It also included a relatively small parcel at its eastern end that became, in 1920, the last Lower St. Clair neighborhood annexed to the City of Pittsburgh. Today that neighborhood is known as St. Clair. The neighborhood is small at 198 acres, and my rough count, using an overhead map view, indicates there are only about 75 houses in St. Clair.

A view from above also shows quite a bit of open land around some long loops of roadway. What used to be there? Well, from 1953 until 2010 St. Clair was home to St. Clair Village, a housing project built by the Pittsburgh City Housing Authority. Created with a great deal of hope, no doubt, for bringing modern, pleasant, and affordable housing for people displaced by development in the lower Hill District, conditions in St. Clair Village eventually deteriorated to the point where it was torn down in 2010.

The Housing Authority sold 90 acres of the land occupied by St. Clair Village to the Allegheny Land Trust. The Trust has maintained 67 acres as a conservation area, and in 2017 plans were developed for an urban farm on the remaining 23 acres. The farm was developed by a nonprofit organization, Hilltop Urban Farm. In April 2024 I spoke with Hilltop’s executive director, John Bixler, who enthusiastically described the farm’s many programs, which include youth farming projects in conjunction with local schools, operation of a community farm and a 200-tree orchard that provide produce for local food banks, and a farm incubator program that provides training and resources for aspiring urban farmers. Learn more about Hilltop Urban Farm here <https://www.hilltopurbanfarm.org/>.

Learn more about St. Clair here <https://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/2020/02/22/st-clair/> and here [St. Clair Village Housing Project \(1951-2010\) \(brooklineconnection.com\)](https://www.brooklineconnection.com/st-clair-village-housing-project-1951-2010).

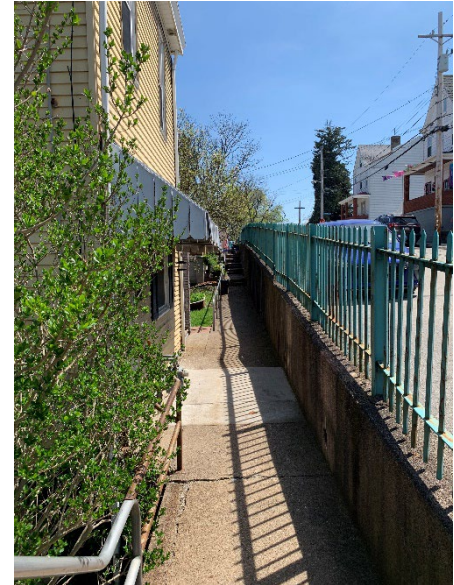


**Fisher Street Steps**

This is a very short tour that includes just two sets of steps, with a total of 75 steps. Nonetheless, one of the staircases is unique and well worth the exploration. The tour, current as of April 2024, is about one-third of a mile long and will take you only ten minutes to complete.

Begin your short walk at the corner of Mountain Avenue and Fisher Street, on the east side of Mountain Avenue. I found convenient street parking on Fisher Street. You immediately encounter the unique Fisher Street steps,

numbering about 50. The steps begin as a sidewalk between a railing along the street and a fence. Through holes in the fence, you realize you are walking along an elevated sidewalk perched above backyards of houses on your left. The sidewalk descends below the level of the street, which is on your right, before reaching sets of steps that ascend to houses. At this point you are now walking right next to the houses' front doors, with the railing tight against you on your right. A unique set of steps, indeed!



**Upper Part of Fisher Street Steps**

At the end of the Fisher Street steps, turn right, backtrack briefly, and walk up Engstler Street. Turn right when you reach Pliney Way, at the end of which a trail leads to the Pliney Street steps. These 25 steps lead back down to Mountain Avenue, where you will turn right to return to your starting point.

A brief exploration, indeed. As I got back in my car, I wondered if you could drive along the old roads that served St. Clair Village. Nope. They are imposingly fenced off with large no trespassing signs. Signs of hopes dashed. But very hopeful and inspiring is the work being done by Hilltop Urban Farm. After speaking with John Bixler, I am not worried about *their* plans going "agley."



**Approach to Pliney Way Steps**