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“Mecca for the Colored People”: Reexamining the Demolition of Pittsburgh’s Lower Hill District

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Title

“Mecca for the Colored People”: Reexamining the Demolition of Pittsburgh’s Lower Hill District

Abstract:

The Hill District of Pittsburgh is a neighborhood of national importance, having hosted jazz legends, nationally renowned newspapers, and artists. However, the Hill of today is much smaller than it has ever been; the destruction of the Lower Hill effectively separated the neighborhood from not only another part of the previously collectively one singular neighborhood but separated the neighborhood and its residents from the economic hubs in both down and up town. The wholesale destruction of the Lower Hill District can be attributed to both the national trend of “urban renewal,” a series of misguided, often explicitly racist attempts to undo the effect of white flight but also to the local trend of the “Pittsburgh Renaissance”. In these trends we can trace a complicit body politic in Pittsburgh, mass evictions of residents, far-ranging destruction of some of Pittsburgh’s historically important landmarks, including what had been by-then the oldest Black church of Pittsburgh. The paper combines both policy and oral history to explore the roots of the rhetoric that led to the evictions, the community’s fight to preserve the neighborhood, and the future of both the land and the people who were forcefully evicted. It uses archival research of both the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as well research conducted by local and national historians. It was originally published as a class project in a course taught by Dr. Jennifer Taylor, without whose guidance in using local archives was instrumental in establishing the historical trends that led to the destruction, how it played out, and countering narratives about the Lower Hill that have been pervasive and untrue in local accounts of the neighborhood.

Authors Note:

Growing up in Pittsburgh, the history of Pittsburgh as presented to me was the predominant history of the city which places an outsized importance on white voices over any other. It was well into my teenage years that I learned about the Hill as a neighborhood with rich history. Recent scholarship like *Smoketown* shows how much this history is forgotten in the popular reimagination. While working on this project and finishing it up for the final version of the paper, I have struggled to reconcile telling a history of the Lower Hill as a non-resident, non-Black person. I have tried to highlight the lived reality of the neighborhood residents as it collided with ‘big history’ but my vision will never match what it was like to experience it oneself. I sought out to explore this history because I felt it was missing from the conversation entirely, I recognize that I have benefited from telling a history that is not my own, for this I expect errors in my account of the history. I apologize for any instances where my blindspots get the better of me. I hope this inspires even one person to get the ball rolling in confronting the legacy of the Destruction of the Lower Hill, especially in confronting the long-lasting legacy of this violent past.

Table of Contents

Title / Abstract / Author’s Note	1
Overview	3
“Mecca for the Colored People”	3
• Mrs. Burwell’s Oral History Account of Neighborhood	4
A Complicit Body Politic	5
• Development of Framing	6
• The Legacy of the Bethel AME Church	7
Where Residents Fled?	8
Which Voices Get Heard?	9
A New Future?	10
Bibliography	12

Overview

What now is a vast empty parking lot was once a lively neighborhood full of thousands of people. Pittsburgh's Lower Hill once housed thousands, today it houses the cars of suburbanites following hokey games. It's fate once again thrown unclear with the recent sale of the Pittsburgh Penguins franchise, as the franchise has sole rights to the Lower Hill.

The Hill District is a mixed used, mostly residential neighborhood In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It is important to note that for all of its history, The Hill has been a historically Black neighborhood and it remains so to this day. The Hill had been historically divided into three sections: Lower, Middle, and Upper Hill District. The Lower Hill was demolished in a nationwide wave of 'urban renewal', replaced instead by the Civic Arena which housed the Pittsburgh Penguins before the construction of the PPG Paints Arena rendered it useless. The Civic Arena broke ground on March 12, 1958, opening on September 17, 1961. It was closed on June 26, 2010. Demolition ended in March of 2012. After the demolition of the Civic Arena, the area was conversated to overflow parking for the new arena. At present, it sits empty.

"Mecca for the Colored People"

Before the bulldozers came bearing down, the Lower Hill was remarkable in its utter unremarkable-ness. Similar to most pre-world war 2 development, it was a mixed use development with dense walkable housing, streets lined with shops community centers, churches, apartments, and houses. Shops, often with housing on upper levels and commercial use on the bottom, lined up Wylie and Centre Avenue much as it does in present-day Hill District. The Lower Hill was situated directly up the proverbial hill from Downtown, providing the necessary economic opportunity and link to the rest of the city.

In an effort to understand what the Lower Hill was like for the residents who called it home. The Lower Hill was covered by the press as a slum for much of its life, however some rare accounts provide a better picture. An oral history account of the Lower Hill was recorded for the Pittsburgh Courier by John Clark in 1962 when he interviewed Mary Burwell. It is with Mrs. Burwell's recollection that we are able to see the dichotomy of the coverage versus how the neighborhood was experienced by people living in it. Going as far as describing it as a "mecca for the colored people at the time"¹ Mrs. Burwell remembers the business in the Lower Hill, the residents who made up the neighborhood, and the day to day of living in the neighborhood.



However, by the time urban renewal hit Pittsburgh, and enchanted the elites of the city, the "Pittsburgh Renaissance" became obsessed with the notion of redeveloping the Lower Hill. A hegemonic view of the Lower Hill emerged. Black and White leaders alike condemned the neighborhood as a slum. The mostly white *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* was joined by the *Pittsburgh Courier* in encouraging redevelopment of the Lower Hill. The neighborhood would soon be labeled a slum in need of clearance. Mrs. Burwell directly challenges this notion as she recalls

¹ Clark, "Down memory lane" 34.

² Harris *Pittsburgh police van*.

³ Harris *Dickson Bros*.

that, “some people have the idea that the ‘Lower Hill’ was a slum area, always. This is not so. Some of the finest colored and white people lived in that section. This I know”. Mrs. Burwell, and the thousands of others were unsuccessful in challenging this notion, the Lower Hill was doomed for demolition.

A Complicit Body Politic

Recent scholarship has noted that more than 8,000 people were left to flee after the demolition of the Lower Hill for construction of the arena.⁴ The question that calculation begs is how the city came to the conclusion to evict as large a population as 8,000 people. One of the first considerations that must be made is the national trend of ‘urban renewal’. Urban renewal was a guise that let politicians demolish old neighborhoods, often majority Black due to the recent white flight to the suburbs, to not only add space for the construction of new highways to carry said white suburbanites but to create spaces for suburbanites to enjoy city amenities. In Pittsburgh, it became the aforementioned “Pittsburgh Renaissance”. The Pittsburgh Renaissance, as noted by historian Mark Whitaker, was a top-down social phenomena.⁵ The city’s elite were enchanted with ‘redeveloping’ old neighborhoods in the style of the modern 1960s.

Aided in their push were the media narrative. The second factor to consider is the extent to which the media did not challenge the notion of the Lower Hill as a slum. Both White and Black press in Pittsburgh became enamored with the redevelopment scheme of the Lower Hill, describing the area as blighted. In 1954, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a historically Black newspaper, celebrated that “the Lower Hill, long considered the shame of Pittsburgh; and just a step from the newly revamped Golden Triangle, will have its face lifted”.⁶ A year before, the Pittsburgh Post-

⁴ Klein, “The Hill District” 1.

⁵ Whitaker, *Smoketown* 314.

⁶ “Arena to Replace Worn Out Homes in Third Ward” A9.

Gazette, a mostly white newspaper, described the neighborhood as a “tinder box of blighted dwellings”.⁷ Such descriptions were common in characterizing the Lower Hill before the construction and during the eviction of residents. Residents who protested the demolition were rarely highlighted, instead the press grew fixated with the idea of a redeveloped Hill District.

Arena to Replace Worn Out Homes In Third Ward

**Less Residents Per Acre in Poorer
Districts Is One Goal in Razing
Lower Hill to Build Amphitheatre**

Simply put, a mix of elites with overwhelming power clamoring for redevelopment, spurred by the hegemonic media view of neighborhoods like the Lower Hill, with no real input from the residents of such neighborhoods made the possibility of eviction via eminent domain a reality. These historical trends, combined with anti-Black racism proved a combination too strong for the community to overcome. Demolition became inevitable.

After initially being welcoming of the “Pittsburgh Renaissance” sweeping the city at the time, Black leaders and community organizers soon realized what this renaissance would mean

⁷ “June 30, 1953” 9a.

for the Lower Hill. The historic buildings would soon be demolished, and thousands would find themselves resettling in lower income areas, most lacking the same access their old neighborhood presented plenty. One such strong example if this is again from *Smoketown*, which describes the frantic nature of the development. Whitaker describes the chaotic nature of the development, residents were often not informed of demolitions and the frantic search to save the Bethel AME church of the Lower Hill. Petitioners got to work getting signatures to appeal to the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh (URA). In the panic, the petitioners were not informed that the petitioners couldn't stop the demolition of the church. The truth, as Whitaker points out, was that the URA itself had little to no say in the process of 'redevelopment', most of the project after being approved by the city council was spearheaded by the billionaires in the city, RK Mellon at the forefront of this 'renaissance'. What had been Pittsburgh's oldest Black church now lie in ruins. Charles "Tennie" Harris was present at the scene for the demolition.



⁸ Harris, *Demolition of Bethel AME Church*.

Where Residents Fled?

When demolition came to the doorsteps of residents of the Lower Hill, it became clear how chaotic the process of demolition would be. The sheer number of households that would experience demolition is hard to conceive. The entire neighborhood was uprooted. There are multiple governments whose constituents are less than that figure in Allegheny County today, which begs the question of what happened to the residents of the Lower Hill.

First the trauma of the demolition cannot be understated, as will be explored in the next section of the paper, the demolition of not only housing but the culture was the “most devastating thing that ever happened to the black community”.⁹

In their book *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since World War II*, Trotter and Day trace the movement of residents of the Lower Hill. They note that not only was the demolition a traumatic experience but that the demolition pushed people out into other neighborhoods where further segregation became exacerbated. Furthermore, many residents were pushed into neighborhoods that lacked the same opportunities of movement and into spaces lacking basic amenities in housing units. Some neighborhoods include Homewood-Brushton, East Liberty, the remainder of the Hill District, and some outer boroughs in the East End. All of these neighborhoods became further segregated as white flight occurred with the influx of the new residents. These trends can be felt at present, none more so than in East Liberty. A neighborhood defined by segregation, movement of the Lower Hill residents, and a modern wave of gentrification fueling mass movement once again. As such, movements of present can be

⁹ Trotter and Day, *Race and Renaissance* 71.

traced to movements of the past. The demolition of the Lower Hill can also be felt by the history that was lost in the wholesale destruction of a neighborhood.

Which voices get heard?

When one looks at the state of urban America, it is littered with highways and underpasses. From Robert Moses designing bridges to be too low for busses to reach Black neighborhoods to the mess of highways separating the Hill from Downtown Pittsburgh are part of the same collective story. It is easy to see these highways as a development pattern and think they are permanent. However, urban renewal came and went., to discount the blow to it during its peak is erasure which made demolition possible in the first place. One of the most telling parts about the way the community viewed the development of the Civic Arena is look at what followed construction. A citizen group organized to put up a billboard “as an emblem of their defiance”.¹⁰



This billboard was more than its simple message. On its face it is an appeal to stop all future development from encroaching on The Hill, but the position of the billboard is also quite

¹⁰ Whitaker, *Smoketown* 321.

¹¹ Harris *Attention*.

significant. It was placed at the end of what was now the end of the Hill District, it focused towards the Civic Arena and towards downtown. Downtown, where politicians for the county and city both worked. It was an explicit effort to drive down home the community response of stopping all future development and criticize the already ‘developed’ parts of the Lower Hill. However, such actions after the fact are not to say that the community did not resist during the construction and before it.

A New Future?

The reality of ‘redevelopment’ was not acknowledged for years following demolition. The stories of those who lived, worked., and built lives in the Lower Hill are rare to find. It is telling that two years after the opening of the arena the Pittsburgh Courier published an article celebrating the construction, they quote the executive director of Allegheny Conference on Community Development, Edward J. Magee, “The new Lower Hill will provide a modern, attractive residential area for ‘returnees’ to the city”.¹² For years following the construction, then subsequent eviction of thousands of residents, the benefits of the Civic Arena was touted. Paying little attention to the community it displaced and the wholesale eviction of its residents.

But of course, the Civic Arena is no more. Left in its wake is a vast parking lot. Sweltering in the summer heat as it creates an urban heat island effect on nearby neighborhoods, including the Middle Hill next door, and sustaining piles of winter snow well into spring heat. The parking lots which once housed 8,000 people rarely serve as even overflow parking at present. However, with the sale of the Pittsburgh Penguins, the control of the entirety of the Lower Hill will transfer to a new owner. With this comes the possibility of regaining some sense

¹² Molinaro, “Lower Hill Presents Challenge” 3.

of community, to create a more inclusive Hill District. One that engages with the residents of the Hill, to ask what is needed in the community and the best use for the land to serve the community. A new opportunity like this only comes once in a generation.

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