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Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh

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Young Preservationists Association
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The Top Ten Best
Historic Preservation
Opportunities in the
Pittsburgh area
2006

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How does the patient present? From a distance, the Pittsburgh region looks fairly healthy. Downtown is experiencing a revival not seen in 50 years; East Liberty is coming back to life; historic properties like the Armstrong Cork Factory and Heinz Plant have been renovated into loft housing; and the new South Side Works is thriving on a formerly lifeless brownfield.

There are many historic preservation accomplishments to be proud of in southwestern Pennsylvania. This year is the 40th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act, which kicked off the modern preservation movement. This is also the year that the National Trust for Historic Preservation holds its National Preservation Conference in Pittsburgh this fall.

And yet, there has seldom been a time when our region's history is most at risk. Like a disease, vacant and abandoned buildings are everywhere, in nearly every neighborhood, but concentrated in poor and minority communities. The city has approximately 15,000 vacant and abandoned properties, many of

which are targeted for demolition or have already been demolished. Unfortunately, African American history has taken the greatest hit.

Historic properties are like DNA. If we lose them, we lose our identity and our ability to compete with the rest of the world. Historic buildings are assets that explain who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. But if we tear them down, we lose our direction, purpose, and competitive advantage.

The prognosis? Unless a comprehensive plan for the preservation and reuse of historic vacant properties can be developed, the outlook is grim. The situation today is akin to "blight removal" programs of the 1950s, also known as urban renewal.

YPA believes there are at least three responses to the vacant property problem.

First, is a neighborhood-level response. By working with community based organizations, neighborhood residents must identify which vacant properties are his-



L to R: East Liberty's revival is built on historic preservation | Demolition in the West End
Demolition in Hazelwood | East Carson Street is smart growth



torically or architecturally significant. When is demolition and infill new construction a prudent course of action? Community residents should find answers to this and other questions before they lose more irreplaceable assets to the wrecking ball.

Second, is an institutional response. There are a number of tools available to finance the restoration and redevelopment of vacant properties. These include local financial institutions, state agencies like the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and private-market incentives like easements and tax credits. Community based organizations, developers, investors, and funders can utilize these strategies to accomplish community and economic development objectives.

Third, is the development of a comprehensive plan for the preservation, reuse, and in some cases, demolition and infill of these properties. This effort will require strong leadership from elected officials, a commitment of financial resources, and public-private partnerships. Fortunately, there's hope.

Pittsburgh Mayor Bob O'Connor's administration is working collaboratively with community based organizations, financial institutions, and other groups to develop a comprehensive plan for dealing with vacant properties. Although it's a small step for a region beset by vacant properties, it's a significant one. If a successful model can be developed in the city of Pittsburgh, perhaps it can be applied to the entire area.

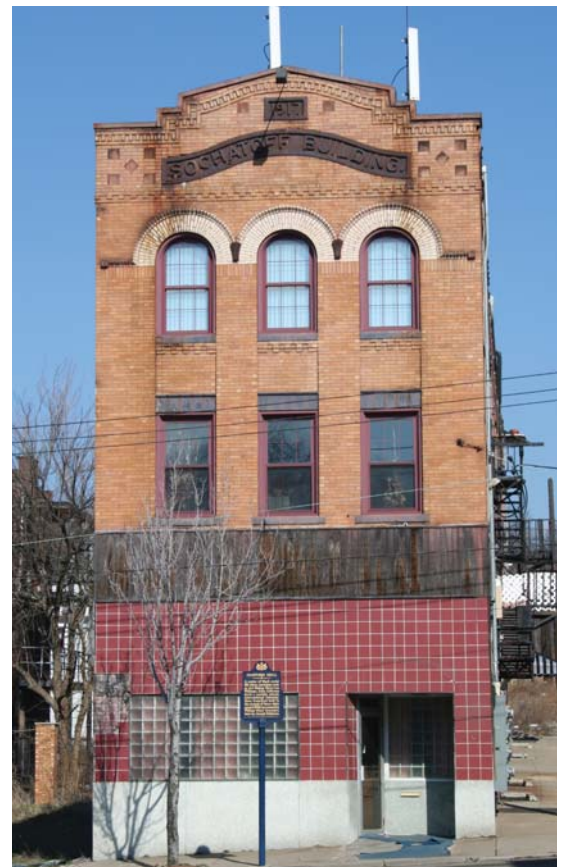
Right now, however, there is no strategy. The prevailing practice has been to demolish derelict properties and leave a vacant lot without determining which ones have historical value. This is not a healthy way to foster neighborhood reinvestment.

Rising to the vacant property challenge will be tough medicine to swallow. But to YPA, there's only one prescription: Preservation.

Give life to history.SM



L to R: Chiodo's Before | Chiodo's After
Demolition Downtown | Will the Crawford Grill be saved?



Executive Summary

In the four years since YPA's first Top Ten list, there have been many blissful victories and some heartbreaking losses. But overall, our list has achieved its purpose—to raise awareness of the Pittsburgh region's historic assets among developers, funders, elected officials, and the general public. Sites on YPA's Top Ten List have been featured on WQED's "On Q" TV program, in local papers, on the radio, and in conferences, workshops, and other public programs.

Four years is, of course, a very short time in which to measure the progress of historic preservation, particularly for complex deals that take years to assemble. Still there have been a number of wins.

This year's Top Ten list includes Mooncrest, Moon Township's first planned community (1943), which is developing a restoration plan after years of disinvestment. Mooncrest became an officially-recognized state historic district after Shelly Todd, Mooncrest's general counsel, attended a YPA training seminar in July 2003. According to Ms. Todd, who is now on YPA's Advisory Committee, the training that YPA provided allowed Mooncrest to "give life" to its historic community.



Mayor Fetterman of Braddock



Murphy Building Before



Murphy Building After



Norma Ryan of Brownsville

Another success story in the making is Brownsville. YPA featured Brownsville on our 2003 Top Ten List, and since that time, much attention has been focused on the historic downtown. In the words of Brownsville's former mayor Norma Ryan,

I understand the struggle to make a difference! It has been a long time effort here in our small town of Brownsville and continues to be an uphill battle. For the first time in almost 17 years we are seeing a ray of hope through the Governor's stimulus package and his desire to help small towns come back economically. But the battle is not over. The support of YPA gave us that opportunity to be recognized by the Governor.

YPA has also supported efforts to restore the former South Hills High School in Mt. Washington which made our list in 2004. Two-thirds of the South Hills High School building (Alden and Harlow 1916) will be saved and recycled for 80 units of senior housing. However, developer Tony Rodriguez plans to demolish the auditorium and shop wings, which will eliminate the possibility of National Register designation. Preservationists are still working with the URA to see if there is a way to build the senior housing and retain the whole building. Stay tuned. . . .

Additional wins have included the following:

- Restoration of the Union Project in Highland Park (YPA Top Ten in 2004) is nearly complete;
- The Armstrong Cork Factory in the Strip (Top Ten in 2003), whose restoration plan was ten years in the making, will be ready for occupancy this fall;
- The John Woods House in Hazelwood (Top Ten in 2005) has been stabilized;
- Restoration work is underway at the John Wesley AME Zion Church in the Hill District (Top Ten in 2005); and
- Water no longer leaks through the roof of the B'Nai Israel Synagogue in Garfield (Top Ten in 2003).

Despite all these victories, it's the losses that hurt the most. A real shocker came in 2005, when the Murphy Building in downtown Uniontown (number one on YPA's 2003 list), was demolished for a park.

Some sites continue to sit and deteriorate. These include the National Negro Opera Company in Homewood and the New Granada Theatre (both Top Ten in 2003), although there is some hope for the closed theater. YPA has been working with

the Hill CDC to develop a restoration plan for this prominent historic site.

Homestead's East Eighth Avenue, which YPA featured on our 2003 list and on a bus tour in December of that year, lost the venerable Chiodo's bar in 2005. And much of Braddock's main street (number one on our 2005 list) has been reduced to rubble.

Still, YPA has much faith in the new mayor, John Fetterman, who is a preservationist at heart. His website, <http://www.15104.cc/>, announces "Destruction breeds creation. Create amidst destruction." Mayor Fetterman calls Braddock "an unparalleled opportunity for the urban pioneer, artist or misfit, to be a part of a new, experimental effort." For his efforts, YPA has awarded Mayor Fetterman the 2006 "Promise Award."

Despite the losses, there is hope. Those sites that are gone serve as poignant reminders that our work is never done. We must remain vigilant and work cooperatively, creatively, and diligently to make preservation work.

Only with your help can YPA give life to the Pittsburgh region's history.

The Top Ten Best Historic Preservation Opportunities in the Pittsburgh area 2006

1 Vandergrift Historic District (1895-1925)

Municipality: Vandergrift
County: Westmoreland
Theme: Community Planning

When the town of Vandergrift was developed in the late 1800s, it was modeled on a radical notion: that a better-planned, more “inspiring” community would encourage better productivity from its workers. Designed by Central Park architect, Frederick Law Olmstead, Vandergrift’s curving streets, rounded buildings, and numerous parklets seemed like a park itself. Hailed by historian Ida



Tarbell in the early 1900s, it is now a National Register Historic District. Although the town has fallen victim to the population and job losses of similar western Pennsylvania towns, a new radical idea is taking root. A group of residents called the Vandergrift Improvement Program, or V.I.P., is trying to revitalize their town by adopting Natural Step sustainable principals. These principals reduce humans’ impact on the land, use alternative energies such as wind power, use recycled metals and nontoxic substances, employ organic gardening, and add more green space—in the hopes of invigorating Vandergrift’s economy. V.I.P. members are pursuing state funds to revitalize their downtown, rehab storefronts, and attract new businesses to create a 21st century model town that builds on the original 19th century mold.

2 Eagles Club (1880-1899)

Municipality: McKeesport
County: Allegheny
Theme: Grand Homes

Originally built as the home of Dr. Henry Hizrot, a prominent local physician, the Fraternal Order of the Eagles No. 285 purchased the home in 1910. When the Eagles moved to another location on Walnut Street, the building became known as the Museum Hair Institute. Today, the grand house is one of the last existing mansions in McKeesport. In January, the City of McKeesport fined the owner, Henry Russell, \$10,000 for failing to demolish the structure, which he wants to restore. He is seeking approximately \$200,000 to make basic repairs to the roof.



3

St. Cloud Hotel (1852)

Built in 1852 as the Johnston House, the St. Cloud Hotel served as a depot and a ticket station for the railroad and later as a hotel. More recently known as the Valley Inn, the St. Cloud Hotel has suffered from neglect through its years. Two fires have destroyed much of the interior. Fortunately, the local fire department has purchased the building with the help of the Homewood Borough Council, which has a successful track record of buying blighted structures, fixing them up, and selling them. Architectural drawings and cost estimates have been prepared by a consultant, who is seeking foundation support for restoration of the building. The community has expressed overwhelming support for this project.

Municipality: Homewood

County: Beaver

Theme: Hotels



4

East Liberty Town Square (c. 1889- 1970s)

Municipality: Pittsburgh [East Liberty]

County: Allegheny

Theme: Community Planning



Until the mid-20th century, the East Liberty Town Square area was a bustling and important commercial, transportation and communication hub, rivaling Downtown Pittsburgh in significance to the region. However, the East Liberty Town Square has been threatened by decay and neglect for the last half-century, made worse by urban renewal in the 1960s-70s. Ironically, the ongoing and successful redevelopment of East Liberty Town Square and the entire neighborhood threatens the existing building stock at the core. In 2005, Semple Brown Design completed a masterplan for the Town Square area that focused on retaining the exiting building stock and character while taking advantage of several key development opportunities to connect the core to surrounding new developments. In 2004, Rothschild Doyno/Brean Associates created a set of development guidelines for all of central East Liberty. SBDesign's masterplan and Rothschild Doyno's development guidelines laid out clear suggestions for market-driven change. There has been significant community input and support from property owners for the plans.

5

Denton Powell Farm (1871)

This property, owned by Denton Powell, has been farmed continuously for 135 years and is one of the last working farms in Cranberry Township. Rapid suburban development threatens this 71-acre farm. However, Mr. Powell is in the process of applying for an easement through the PA Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, administered by the Butler County Agricultural Land Preservation Board. If the easement is approved, the Powell Farm will preserve a glimpse into Butler County's agrarian past for future generations.

Municipality: Cranberry Township

County: Butler

Theme: Rural History



6

First Presbyterian Church (1887)



Municipality: Braddock Borough

County: Allegheny

Theme: Sacred Spaces

Built in 1887 across the street from the Braddock Carnegie Library, the First Presbyterian Church was purchased by John Fetterman in 2003. He later became the mayor of Braddock and has begun to restore the large, prominent church. Some basic maintenance has been completed, but Mayor Fetterman has a larger challenge of raising approximately \$500,000 to restore the roof of the church, which is doable with the right publicity campaign. Eventually, he wants to turn the vacant 12,000-square-foot space into a community center where residents, especially young people, can exercise, learn, have fun and find alternatives to the street life that destroys so many young lives.

7

Mooncrest (1943)

Constructed in 1943 by the Federal Housing Administration as affordable housing for defense workers engaged in World War II industrial production, Mooncrest was the first planned, residential housing development in Moon Township, the oldest Township in Allegheny County. With its majestic river views, Mooncrest occupies highly desirable real estate. However, the mostly low-income neighborhood suffers from disinvestment by absentee landlords and redlining that have further impacted the community's ability to remain healthy on numerous levels. Encouraged by a YPA education session held in 2003, the Mooncrest Neighborhood Association developed a master plan for community restoration and pursued a historic district designation, which was awarded in 2005. The revitalization plan is geared not to "gentrify" the community, but to allow for low to moderate income families to purchase a home and maintain the neighborhoods historic working class roots and values.

Municipality: Moon Township

County: Allegheny

Theme: Community Planning



8

Graceton Coke Ovens (1886)

Municipality: Graceton

County: Indiana

Theme: America's Industrial Legacy



Eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the Graceton Coke Ovens, originally called Mikesell Station, were the first coke ovens in Indiana County. Known as "beehive" coke ovens for their beehive brick structure, twelve ovens were constructed in 1886, and additional ovens were constructed on the site from 1890 to 1897. Today, thick vegetation has reclaimed the area, with tree roots systematically destroying the structural integrity of the ovens. The Homer-Center Historical Society, along with the Evergreen Conservancy, has developed a master plan that calls for removal of vegetation and construction of amenities for visitors. Funds could be acquired from Pennsylvania state agencies to facilitate preservation of this site.

9

Lemington Center (c. 1890)

Founded in 1883, Lemington Center, originally called the “Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored Women,” was the first home for elderly black women in western Pennsylvania at a time when elderly black individuals were denied beds in many nursing homes. Two new facilities were constructed in 1983 and 1984 on 12 acres, creating a campus providing a panoramic view of Pittsburgh. On April 13, 2005, the Lemington Center filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Since a buyer wasn’t found, the nursing home and the assisted living facilities were closed in July 2005. Potentially, another service provider can reopen the facility and operate it as it was originally intended. The original structure (c. 1890) is operating as a church. A historical marker should be erected here, and the site should be included on an African American history tour.



Municipality: Pittsburgh (Lemington)
County: Allegheny
Theme: African American History

10

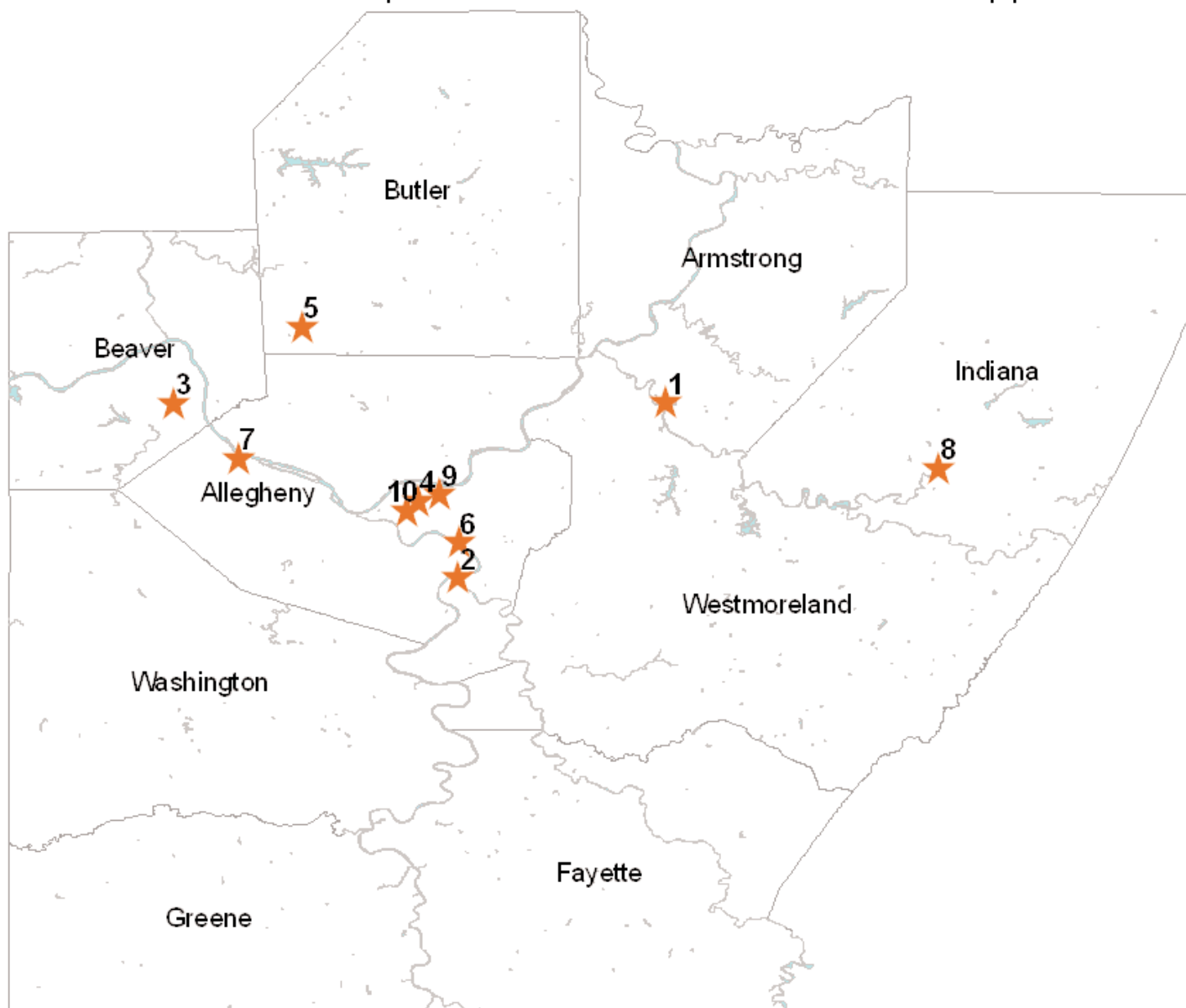
McCook Mansion (1906)

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Shadyside)
County: Allegheny
Theme: Grand Homes



One of the last remaining big houses of “Millionaires Row,” 5105 Fifth Avenue was constructed for Willis McCook, a prominent lawyer for Henry Clay Frick and represented Mr. Frick in his legal disputes with Andrew Carnegie. An excellent example of Elizabethan-Revivalist architecture, the structure suffered fire damage in 2005. The owners have held community meetings and have assembled a team of designers and contractors who are currently working on a restoration plan. The owners have developed a detailed business plan involving restoration of the property and development of an historic inn. However, the property is under threat of demolition and redevelopment, if the proposal to restore and develop it as an historic Inn is not successful.

Young Preservationists Association 2006 Top Ten Best Historic Preservation Opportunities



Map by Rachel Steigerwalt, rsteiger@gmail.com

- | | |
|----|-------------------------|
| 1 | Vandergrift Hist. Dist. |
| 2 | Eagles Club |
| 3 | St. Cloud Hotel |
| 4 | E. Liberty Town Square |
| 5 | Denton Powell Farm |
| 6 | 1st Presbyterian Church |
| 7 | Mooncrest |
| 8 | Graceton Coke Ovens |
| 9 | Lenington Center |
| 10 | McCook Mansion |

The 2005 Top Ten List

1. Braddock Avenue Historic District (1875-1915)

Municipality: Braddock Borough
County: Allegheny
Theme: Main Streets



Braddock Avenue topped the list in 2005, but these buildings didn't survive.

2. John Woods House (1792)

Municipality: Pittsburgh [Hazelwood]
County: Allegheny
Theme: Eighteenth Century Experience

3. Renaissance Place and Murphy Building

Municipality: Aliquippa
County: Beaver
Theme: Main Streets

4. Andy Warhol Residence (1915)

Municipality: Pittsburgh [South Oakland]
County: Allegheny
Theme: Homes of Famous Pittsburghers

5. Bryce-Mesta Mansion (1880)

Municipality: West Homestead
County: Allegheny
Theme: Women's History

6. Murphy Building (1903)

Municipality: Blairsville
County: Indiana
Theme: Main Streets

7. Small Town Theaters (various)

STRAND THEATER (1914)
Municipality: Zelenople
County: Butler
Theme: Historic Theaters

GRANADA THEATER (1928-32)
Municipality: Beaver Falls
County: Beaver
Theme: Historic Theaters

CINEMA 4 (C. 1920S)

Municipality: Dormont
County: Allegheny
Theme: Historic Theaters

HOLLYWOOD THEATER (C. 1920S)

Municipality: Dormont
County: Allegheny
Theme: Historic Theaters

DENIS THEATER (C. 1920S)

Municipality: Mt. Lebanon
County: Allegheny
Theme: Historic Theaters

8. John Wesley AME Zion Church (1894-95)

Municipality: Pittsburgh
County: Allegheny
Theme: Sacred Spaces



There's new hope for the future of the John Wesley AME Zion Church.

9. Hays Woods

Municipality: Pittsburgh
County: Allegheny
Theme: Scenic Landscapes

10. Otto Milk Plant (c. 1865-1880s)

Municipality: Pittsburgh
County: Allegheny
Theme: America's Industrial Legacy

BEST OF THE REST, 2005

11. Fifth Avenue High School (1875-1899)

Municipality: Pittsburgh
County: Allegheny
Theme: Schools

12. Union Trust Building (1915-1917)

Municipality: Pittsburgh
County: Allegheny
Theme: Downtown Legacy

The 2004 Top Ten List

1. Tally Hollow Farm

Municipality: Waynesburg
County: Greene
Theme: Family Farms

(Tie) 2, 3. The Manchester Plan

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Manchester)
County: Allegheny
Theme: African American Neighborhoods

(Tie) 2, 3. Pullman Park

Municipality: Butler
County: Butler
Theme: Recreation Spots

4. Carnegie Library, Hazelwood Branch

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Hazelwood)
County: Allegheny
Theme: Civic Architecture

5. South Hills High School

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Knoxville)
County: Allegheny
Theme: Educational Institutions

6. Union Project

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Highland Park)
County: Allegheny
Theme: Religious Properties

7. Watts Mill Bridge

Municipality: Beaver
County: Beaver
Theme: Transportation Infrastructure

8. Creative Arts Center

Municipality: Greensburg
County: Westmoreland
Theme: Arts

9. Penn Station

Municipality: Wilkinsburg
County: Allegheny
Theme: Transportation Infrastructure

10. Allegheny County Health Department

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Lawrenceville)
County: Allegheny
Theme: Civic Architecture

The 2003 Top Ten List

1. Murphy Building, Downtown Uniontown

Municipality: Uniontown
County: Fayette
Theme: Small Town Main Streets

2. Downtown Brownsville

Municipality: Brownsville
County: Fayette
Theme: Small Town Main Streets

3. Eighth Avenue Historic District

Municipality: Homestead
County: Allegheny
Theme: Small Town Main Streets

4. National Negro Opera Company House

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Homewood)
County: Allegheny
Theme: African American History

5. New Granada Theater

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Hill District)
County: Allegheny
Theme: African American History

6. Ambridge National Register Historic District

Municipality: Ambridge
County: Beaver
Theme: Small Town Main Streets

7. Peter Colley Tavern

Municipality: Brier Hill-Redstone, Redstone Township
County: Fayette
Theme: Eighteenth Century Experience

8. August Wilson Birthplace & Home

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Hill District)
County: Allegheny
Theme: African American History

9. B'Nai Israel Synagogue Sanctuary

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Garfield)
County: Allegheny
Theme: Religious Structures

10. Armstrong Cork Factory

Municipality: Pittsburgh (Strip District)
County: Allegheny
Theme: Pittsburgh's Industrial Legacy

YPA thanks the West Pittsburgh Partnership for co-presenting "Prescription Preservation."

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YPA Mission

The active participation of young people in the preservation of historic resources.

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