

REPORTER DISPATCH

JOURNAL OF OLD ALLEGHENY HISTORY AND LORE

JAMES WILSON MASTER PAINTER

BY TOM WILSON

HOW DOES ONE GET a street named after them in Allegheny City? It helps to own the land and develop houses there.

The 1850 Census records the family of Thomas and Mary Wilson living in what was then Reserve, but which became part of Allegheny City by 1872. Their sons, Robert and James Wilson inherited Thomas's land, and built their homes along what became Wilson Avenue in Perry Hilltop, off of the Perrysville Plank Road.

James Wilson was born in Scotland on May 1, 1838, and emigrated with his family to the United States around 1845. At the age of 24, James enlisted in the 123rd Pennsylvania Volunteers, a regiment of mostly Allegheny County soldiers. He served as a private and fought at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.

The 1872 Hopkins map shows him living on the Perrysville Plank Road at the corner of Perrysville and the eponymous Wilson Avenue; at that point the city line ran just behind his back yard. Allegheny Mayor Simon Drum owned the house next door.

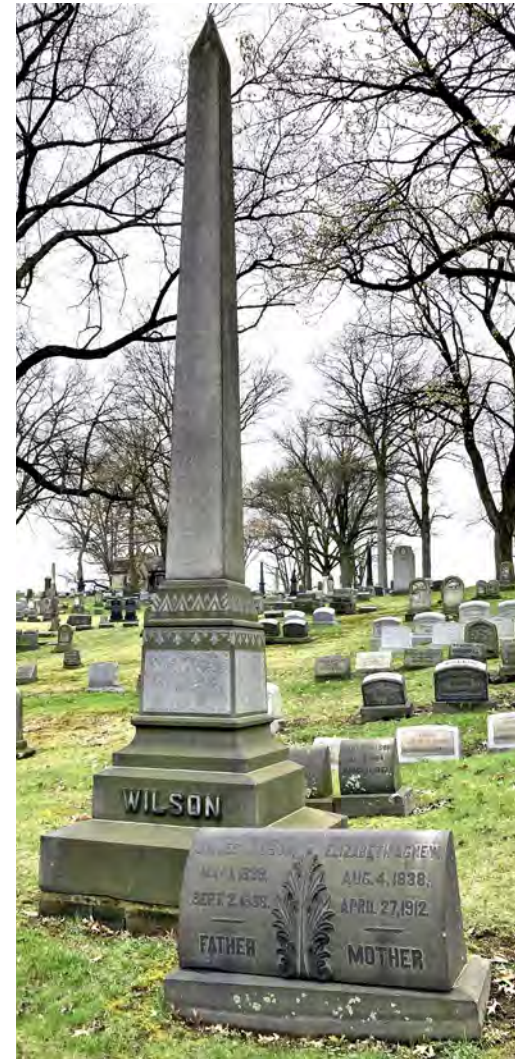
The 1880 census finds him on Perrysville Avenue, and lists his occupation as "House and Sign Painter." The census also lists his wife Elizabeth, two sons and two daughters. He had a painter's shop at 24 Federal Street by 1888. There are some

records that mention his founding and presiding as president of the "Allegheny Master Painters." He belonged to both the Masons and the Elks. James served two terms on the Allegheny City Common Council, and was a prominent Democratic politician of the era.

The 1890 Hopkins map shows a newer house built close to James Wilson's, owned by a V.A. Tannehill. At some point, the two houses were merged to form what is now Odell Robinson's funeral home.

In 1898, his painting company was given the contract to gild the numerals and hands on the clock face in the tower of the Allegheny Carnegie Library. He climbed the scaffolding to supervise, and fell inside the tower to his death on September 2, 1898. He is buried in Union Dale Cemetery in a family lot with his wife and daughters.

A ceremony was held in December 1898, at the Alvin Theater honoring the Elks who had passed away during the year. Pennsylvania Governor-elect William Stone delivered a moving eulogy, saying: "It was my pleasure to know James Wilson for years. He lived in the same ward and the same district as me. He was my neighbor. He was an honest man and a credit to this lodge. And so I mourn with you the loss of this brother, and I mourn even more the loss of this friend."



Wilson family lot in Union Dale Cemetery, with James's and Elisabeth's joint headstone

NUNNERY HILL CONTROVERSY

BY JON HANRAHAN

FOR MOST OF ITS EARLY HISTORY, the City of Allegheny lacked a proper hospital where residents suffering from highly infectious diseases, like smallpox, could quarantine. In the early 1880s, the city finally established its long-sought municipal hospital, and nearly triggered an insurrection in the process.

Initial site prospects on Troy Hill, Spring Hill, and Observatory Hill did not pan out. But on November 22, 1883, the residents of Nunnery Hill (Fineview) learned that their hill had been chosen by the City Council's Health Committee, "with but little discussion." The headline in the *Commercial Gazette* that day: "Got a Smallpox Hospital."

Days later, about a hundred livid residents – most of them landowners, and some of them quite well-off – massed in the Nunnery Hill schoolhouse to organize their resistance. Those hill residents in attendance included council member Edward Bubb, Allegheny Postmaster John Myler, and an engineer named William Girdwood, who lived just down Warren Street from the proposed hospital site, and who, by all documentary evidence that remains from this episode, was the most incendiary man on Nunnery Hill.

The first speaker that evening characterized the sparsely populated hilltop neighborhood as a "thickly populated district," implying that people quarantining in their midst would spark a localized outbreak. He warned that the likeliest outcome of a "pest house" on their block would be the depreciation of their properties' values.

Bubb alleged that his colleagues on the Board of Health had "acted quietly and secretly;" explained that he had blocked consideration of the 12th ward (which at the time included Nunnery Hill) three times before; and claimed that the state law constituting the Board of Health prevented the body from acting in such a way without the full council's consent unless an epidemic was active. He urged

his constituents to sue to block the City Controller from making the payment to secure the property. Postmaster Myler similarly suggested legal tactics.

But when that tense engineer William Girdwood rose to speak, rage prevailed over reason, and moments into his remarks he said, "I can hardly control myself and will sit down."

The meeting continued, a petition circulated, and a request for a delay by the city was drafted and signed. Their next task was to testify before the Board at its meeting the following week.

Hours after the sun had set on December 5, 1883, the mayor was still at City Hall, working late. The Board of Health was working early, gaveling in its meeting a half-hour ahead of schedule. And a crowd was marching down Federal Street, minutes away.

The committee set out to make brisk work of its agenda, moving first to accept a report from the subcommittee tasked with selecting and purchasing property for hospital use. The working group reported that negotiations had advanced to the point that the committee could authorize the Controller to cut a check. Should all go according to plan, Allegheny would own the land – a two-acre hillside lot featuring a stately home – by month's end.

The matter was settled and, seemingly, so was the meeting. "The committee-men all seemed to apprehend trouble and were constantly urging the Chairman to hasten business and adjourn," reported the *Commercial Gazette*. "Bills were left until the next meeting to be considered. The excitement rattled the Chairman and he proceeded slower than usual."

Soon the echoes of bitter footsteps climbing the stairs in City Hall came coursing in through the room's two doors, followed by enough men to fill and heat the cold committee room. They did not know that the object of their objections had already come to pass.

The board hurried through its other business, welcoming in an instant a motion to adjourn. But as they voted on adjournment, Bubb interrupted, asking the men to hear out his neighbors.

A member of the Board replied that the purchase had been all but completed for the past two weeks.

Myler balked. "We have everything at stake," said the Postmaster. "This means ruin to many property-holders. It will make their property worthless, endanger their lives; their schools will be ruined, the water reservoir will become worse than useless for it must carry death to a large portion of the city. If we are to be choked

The crowd yelled "throw him down," "shut up," "put him out," and "other loud cries of disapprobation" as some of them rushed back up toward the clerk.

off, made the subjects of a snap judgment; if our schools are to be ruined and our lives endangered it should not be the work of Councilmen."

The committee yielded, accepting a letter signed by 76 Nunnery Hill residents and another from the 12th ward school board. William Speer then urged his fellow board members to reconsider his earlier motion to adjourn, which they did not.

William Girdwood, simmering, began to speak. "It is useless to object to your proceedings, when you get down to secret, clandestine meetings," he uttered.

Arthur Waddington, committee chair, replied, "There has been no secrecy."

“There has,” said Girdwood. “The subcommittee held secret meetings.” He continued, presumably raising his voice. “You have no right to locate the pesthouse in our ward. This is one of the most infamous outrages I ever saw perpetrated. This is a most detestable action. If we rise in rebellion the committee is liable, for it has driven us to it by this most dastardly trick.”

At this, the committee adjourned. The mob poured back out the two doors and down the stairs. Myler shouted to his neighbors that their pending lawsuit had become their only recourse. Bubb began waving his hat above his head and explaining that the committee had ordered the Controller to write a check for the purchase, and that such an act would be illegal.

The Clerk of Councils, looking down on the scene, responded, “If you say that you are a liar.”

The crowd yelled “throw him down,” “shut up,” “put him out,” and “other loud cries of disapprobation” as some of them rushed back up toward the clerk.

At this point the mayor, no doubt roused from his work by the din, stepped in “with uplifted cane” to halt the mob’s advance. Myler “with one hand pushed the Mayor back” and demanded that the group not be called liars.

The clerk apologized “amidst numerous hisses and remarks,” and order was restored.

In three days a request for injunction appeared on the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas docket under the heading Arthur et al v. Waddington et al. The 45 plaintiffs argued that the Board of Health had overstepped and threatened the lives and livelihoods of so many Alleghenians – the property owners especially. John Myler argued in his affidavit that the depreciation in property values that would occur would be tantamount to tyrannical confiscation.

William Girdwood, in typical fashion, offered a more violent affidavit than his fellow plaintiffs, threatening the future hospital itself: “We would resist its

maintenance there in all possible ways, to the utmost extent of our power . . .” (there were other threats around this time to destroy the building, according to a firm hired by the city to insure the property).

Responding on behalf of the defendants, Allegheny’s city engineer, Charles Ehlers, denied the plaintiffs’ claims of crowded conditions on Nunnery Hill, describing the district as being obviously suburban. A representative of the Board of Health similarly pointed to the hilltop’s large lots and suburban character.

A doctor was quoted “speak[ing] of the floating pest house” – in years prior a decommissioned steam towboat named “Panther” had quarantined people on the shore of the 4th Ward – “and point[ing] to the fact that, though it was within 90 feet of a thickly populated district, and though under the railroad bridge, over which many people passed, he never heard of a single case of smallpox in that neighborhood.”

Another doctor, sympathetic to the plaintiffs, warned that merely opening the

windows and doors of such a hospital in a thickly-settled setting would unleash a “miasma” which would infect the entire neighborhood.

The question at hand however was legal, not medical, and in the court’s unsigned opinion, the answer was to deny the plaintiffs their injunction. They had to prove that the city had not exercised proper discretion in choosing the hospital site. They had not.

(The judge in this case, having heard the plaintiffs’ concerns for their own health and safety, did recommend that the hospital be properly drained and ventilated.)

Ultimately Nunnery Hill’s property-owning men did not take up arms against their government. The sabotage that William Girdwood threatened never did manifest. Nor did the flight or blight that John Myler feared. There was simply and finally an Allegheny Municipal Hospital where for years to come Alleghenians would suffer, recover, and die.



Real estate plat-book of the city of Allegheny: from official records, private plans and actual surveys, Volume I. (1907) G.M. Hopkins Company Maps, University of Pittsburgh Collections

CHARLES DENGLER'S DIARY

BY JON KLOSINSKI

THE UNIVERSITY of Pittsburgh Library System's Archives & Special Collections Department has recently acquired the childhood diary of Charles J. Dengler Jr. (1916–1996), a native Northsider who kept a year-long record of his daily activities in 1932. Dengler grew up at 2029 Howard Street in what is now East Allegheny/Deutschtown, the son of Charles J. Dengler Sr., a produce laborer, and Sophia Dengler. Charles was the oldest of six children in the family, which included three brothers – Frederick, Elmer and Otto, and two sisters, Marie and Elvia.

Dengler's diary tells an endearing story of a 15-year-old Pittsburgh paper boy, student and devoted son and brother who uncomplainingly works and carries out his daily routines. One of Dengler's favorite items to record in his diary were his daily collections on his paper route, which covered City View, East Street, Summer Hill (on Tuesday August 2, Dengler noted that he was bit by a dog while collecting on Summer Hill), Suffolk Street, Milroy Street, Cotton Street and Fulton Road.

Dengler attended St. Peter's United Church of Christ and was diligently

involved in the Christian Endeavor (C.E.) Society where he was elected Treasurer by year's end. Later records show that he eventually became a Cub Master for the church's scouting Cub Pack, as well as Secretary of the Men's Brotherhood.

Dengler also stayed very active in his free time year-round. He was frequently fixing his bicycle to go on rides across the city to places like Moon Run, McKees Rocks, Fleming Park in Stowe Township, Highland Park, Allegheny River Boulevard and the West End Bridge. Although it may be difficult to imagine today, hiking to various parts of the city was a frequent leisure activity for young people like

Dengler's diary tells an endearing story of a 15-year-old Pittsburgh paper boy



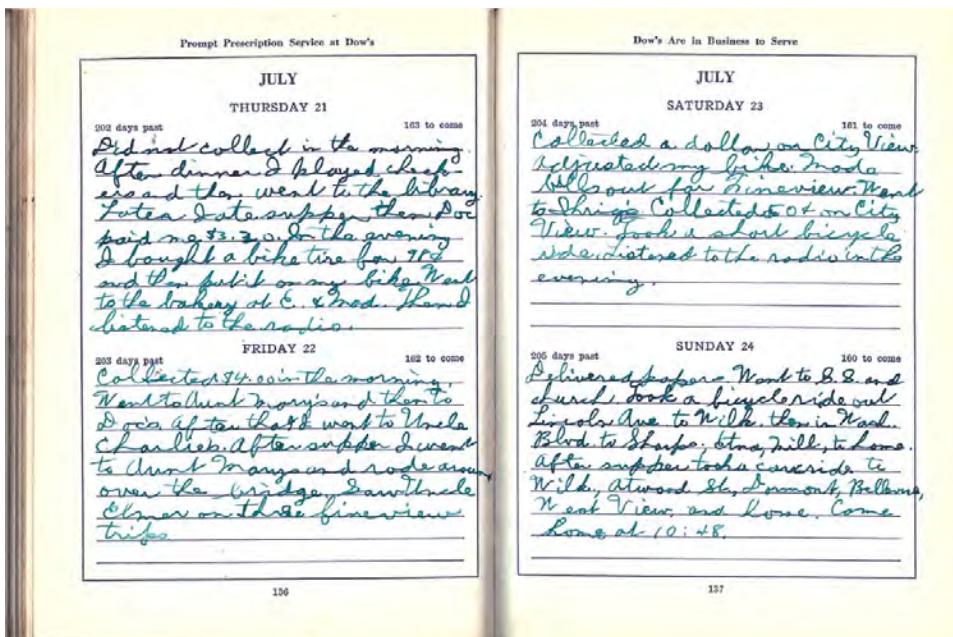
CHURCHMEN'S BROTHERHOOD OFFICERS

Charles Dengler, far right, in St. Peter's United Church of Christ (Evangelical and Reformed) diamond anniversary yearbook, c.1960

Charles, as he details evening and weekend hikes with friends to various destinations on the North Side, across the Ohio river to West End and South Shore as well as day-long journeys to Thompson Run Road, Millvale, West View and Etna.

Aside from schoolwork, evenings were often spent listening to radio programs including a multi-episode history of George Washington, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, baseball games on the radio and addresses from President Hoover. Movies had also become a popular form of entertainment, as Charles recalls a trip to the Warner Theatre downtown to see *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, a jungle adventure documentary starring Frank Buck.

Games with friends included cards, Parcheesi, checkers, ping pong, horse-shoes, three-deep (a popular chase, catch and tagging game) and plenty of mushball games (a softball variant with a bigger, softer ball and no gloves or mitts worn by the fielders). Charles also frequently visited the local library to collect material and research for his debate team at school as well as building his own book collection which grew to 116 books. Descriptions of summer events include fairs at West View, East Street and Riverview Park, a fishing trip to Hamarville, a visit to



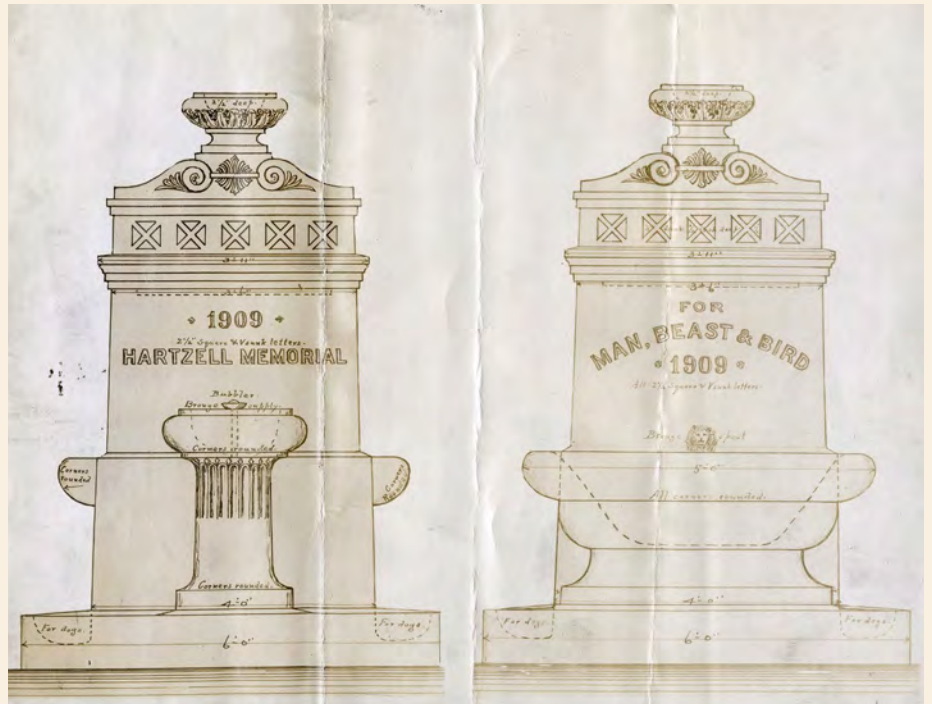
FOR MAN, BEAST AND BIRD

Kennywood Park as well as a weekend trip by the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad to Niagara Falls.

Dengler also provides some insight on the local economy, noting visits to Wilson's Premium Store, Boyer's Bakery, Gimbel's, Kissner & Son's Grocers on Tripoli Street, Stuertz's Drugs on Perrysville Avenue, Murdoch's Store and the Paramount Restaurant.

Diaries like Dengler's express daily life for a young native Northsider in a way that is difficult to uncover through other sources. Dengler's descriptions of his leisure and free-time activities, his friends and his family enliven his story by describing who he saw, where he was, and what he was doing there. One narrative that becomes clear as the story unfolds is that with the passing of his father Charles Sr. two years prior in 1930 (Charles' brother Elmer also passed away in 1930), a 15-year-old Charles Jr. had now taken on increased responsibility as the oldest son in the family, helping around the home, paying and delivering bills and taking care of his younger siblings, making this diary a valuable insight into everyday life for a young person in Depression-era North Side.

In preparation for digitizing Charles's diary to be displayed online, the University of Pittsburgh Library System welcomes volunteers from the Allegheny City Society membership who are interested in helping to create a full-text transcription of this fascinating piece of North Side history to be shared on the library website.



With the permission of the City of Pittsburg, Pa., I propose to erect a Memorial Fountain, "For Man, Beast and Bird," to the memory of my departed wife, Mrs. Annie Hartzell, said fountain to be known as the "Hartzell Memorial," to stand on the East side of Federal Street, nearly midway between North and Montgomery avenues, in close proximity to the Federal Street entrances of the East and West Parks, Pittsburg, North Side, the aforesaid Memorial Fountain to be hewn from light medium Barrie, Vermont granite, the granite work to be made in two main pieces, 8 feet high and ground space 6 feet front and 3 feet 6 inches deep, the estimated cost being between Sixteen and Eighteen Hundred Dollars. In consideration therefor, when the work has been completed, all rubbish removed, and city ordinances observed, I deferentially ask that the aforesaid City of Pittsburg, Pa., will maintain and care for the aforesaid Memorial Fountain, such as providing water free, turning on and off said water as atmospheric conditions may demand, and washing and cleaning and repairing the fountain when necessary.

*Respectfully submitted,
James Hartzell,
9 Sampson Street.
Pittsburg, N.S., May 8, 1909*



THE WEITERSHAUSEN LEGACY

BY CAROLE ASHBRIDGE

WHEN REFLECTING ON THE HISTORY of Deutschtown and the North Side of Pittsburgh, it is impossible to overlook the influence and contributions of the Reverend Carl Weitershausen. His mark on the community was seen in his ministry of three churches and the founding of two social clubs, as well as the respect he garnered for being a decent and kind man.

Carl Weitershausen

Born in 1811 in Beltersheim, Hessen, Germany, Carl attended the equivalent of high school in Darmstadt before going to the University of Giesson, where he studied theology. On July 2, 1832 he spoke at a Volksfest in Wollenberg beim Wetter. His liberal views were in opposition to the government and were considered extreme for the times. Consequently, he was entered into the *Schwarzes Büch* (Black Book) as an enemy to the government and was barred from taking his exams and, therefore, ineligible to become a cleric. He became a *Hauslehrer* to Friedrich Roemheld, a pastor in Dautphe. It was there he met his wife, Elide, whom he married in 1837. In 1839 they came to the United States through the port of Baltimore. He assumed his first pastorate in Chambersburg, where his first son was born.

In 1839 he came to Allegheny City and assumed the pastorate of the Voegtly Church. After seven years a schism occurred and on July 1, 1846, Carl tendered his resignation. Almost concurrently a meeting was held at the home of John Beilstein on Suismon Street where a group of 50 indicated their desire to form a new church with Carl Weitershausen as their pastor. And so “The German United Evangelical Protestant Church of St. Paul’s Congregation,” Allegheny, Pennsylvania was born. Officers of the church elected at that same meeting were Siegfried Graebing, President, Jacob Suelzner, Treasurer, and Adam Treser, Secretary.

Just a week later, the first worship service was held in a school room of the old 4th Ward School building. An application for a charter was filed with the court of Allegheny County and was granted on March 3, 1848. Shortly after the congregation adopted

a constitution by which it was to be governed. It bore the signature of 15 men who would become the first church council: Siegfried Graebing, Friedrich Sprung, Henry Vierheller, Friedrich Klages, Adam Busz, Adam Treser, Henry Ochse, Johann Eighart, Philip Beilstein, Henry Horn, George Spengler, Helmund Bauer, Nicolaus Boehm, Jacob Koehler, and Karl Strauch.

The first church building was erected on a lot on South Canal Street and was bounded by the homes of the Weitershausens and J.P. Beilstein, who were to serve as guardians of the church. The contract for the construction of the church, a two-story brick building with basement, was let to Gehle & Martin for the sum of \$2850. Within seven months the building was completed and the congregation held its first service on May 2, 1847.

After 28 years Pastor Weitershausen tendered his resignation as the spiritual leader of the church on November 22, 1874. Having guided the church through the Civil War, the great Pittsburgh Fire, and economic strains, he was showing the signs of poor health and aging. He was bestowed with the title of Pastor Emeritus that commemorated his years of service during which he preformed 1709 marriages, 4949 baptisms, and 1685 burials. As Pastor Emeritus from 1874–1889, he added 412 marriages, 1265 baptisms, and 64 burials. He passed away on June 14, 1890, just three months after his wife, Elide. In addition to his dedication to his church, he founded the Teutonia Männerchor and the Allegheny Turn Verein.

The Torch is Passed

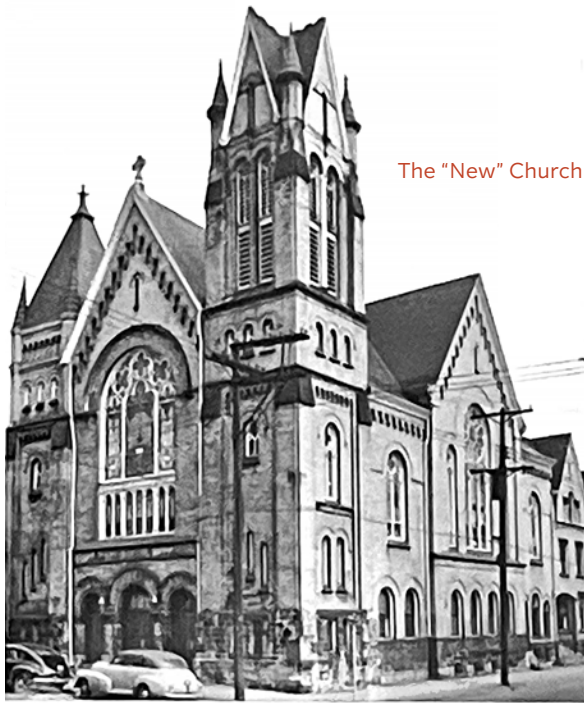
Following Carl Weitershausen’s retirement there was a succession of ministers including the Reverends Jacob Blass, William Elterich, Alfred Koerner, Karl Rumpf, and Henry Baehr.

As the Canal Street neighborhood became busier and the railroad traffic increased making it dangerous to even cross the street, the members of the church began to look for a new place to hold worship. The property on the corner of East and First (now Foreland) Streets was purchased. The last service in the Old Church on Canal Street was held on May 16, 1897. In the mean time, the cornerstone for the New Church was laid on June 16, 1896. Members of the congregation in parade formation followed a brass band from Canal Street to East and Foreland. There was special music provided by a 300-voice choir and an address given by Reverend H. Fleer of the Manchester Evangelical Protestant Church. His remarks were delivered in English, the first time the language had been used in any of the services at the church.

Although the cornerstone had been laid, the money took a while to raise amid some strife within the congregation. Many of the parishioners even mortgaged their homes to contribute to the building. By pulling together under the leadership of Pastor Carl Goosmann, the new church was dedicated on May 23, 1897. The *Pittsburgh Press* on May 19, 1897 described the church as “one of the most imposing structures” in Allegheny. It continued:



The "Old" Church



The "New" Church

¶ *It is Gothic in design and built of buff brick with Cleveland blue stone trimmings. It is two stories in height. The first floor contains capacious school and Sunday school rooms, an entertainment hall with kitchen and ladies reception parlors and a fine library. The second floor is used as the church auditorium which will seat about 800 people. The windows are of art stained glass. The largest which is near the main entrance, was donated by the Ladies society of the church. It contains a picture, artistically worked in colors, of the old church building and has the inscription: "Founded by Pastor Carl Weitershausen in 1846. There is also a tower 146 feet high at the First Street corner of the building.*

The church flourished and became a major part of the North Side life and culture, hosting meetings, having members serve on the boards of the community and providing a spiritual home.

In 1914, under the pastorate of Oscar Hempleman, the congregation passed a new set of by-laws that brought the church into the 20th century. Women were given equal status in the congregation and were allowed to vote, services were conducted in English, and the "pew rent" was eliminated in favor of offerings.

In June 1957, the name of the church was changed to St. Paul's United Church of Christ to reflect the merger of the Evangelical and United Church of Christ. As the community changed mid-century, a group of five churches were combined into a federation. The churches were faced with extinction due to a decline in membership, and the East Street expressway project that would demolish them.

In the booklet that commemorated the 120th Anniversary of the church in 1966, the final paragraph read:

¶ *The seed planted by Rev. Weitershausen 120 years ago has been nourished and cultivated by thirteen pastors and thousands of individuals. It is our responsibility, our calling, our opportunity to lead other to Christ through His Church. (...) Let us look forward now and rededicate ourselves to another 120 years of dynamic life for St. Paul's.*

However, it was not to be. The last service of the 126 year old St. Paul's was held on May 21, 1972. At the conclusion of the service the congregation bade farewell to the church that had been their home for the past 75 years and walked to St. Peter's United Christian Church on Lockhart Street with whom they had merged (some mementos were saved from the church and are in the possession of Weitershausen family members).

St. Paul's Cemetery

The membership of the church flourished to such a degree almost immediately after its founding that a plot of land (100×228 ft) was purchased in New Troy for a burying ground on September 19, 1846 for \$400. Recorded in the Allegheny County book of deeds, vol. 94 page 443, Christian Snively and his wife, Mary, sold to the German Evangelical Congregation, represented by Seigfried Grabing, John Eichelbart, and Phillip Beilstein piece of land bounded by New Troy Road and Martin Hoffman's land.

Also known as the Weitershausen Cemetery, today the land is located on Mount Troy at the corner of Highland Avenue and Mount Troy Road. It served as the principle burial ground for members of the St. Paul's congregation and is still used for interments today. According to George McKee, superintendent of the cemetery and chair of the foundation that oversees its finances, there are over 5000 people buried within the grounds. The cemetery office, which is available by appointment, contains many records and a diagram of the plots. From the chart of plots one notices two large areas that are designated as "single interments. These hold the graves of unknown or pauper burials as well as those for infants.

Upon entering the cemetery one sees a commemorative block that is the cornerstone of St. Paul's United Church of Christ. However, the inscription on the block misspells the Weitershausen name.

Just a few steps from the marker is the obelisk that marks the burial place of a number of the Weitershausen family. On each side of the marker are inscriptions commemorating the life of Pfarrer (pastor) Carl and wife, Elide, sons Bernard, Washington Hermann and his wife Christine, Carl Reinhard and his wife Antoinette, and daughter, Marie Weitershausen Guenste.

The cemetery has many interesting monuments, obelisks and very plain grave markers. Perhaps one of the most interesting is the grave of Jacob and Philipine Bohlen that appears to be the trunk of a tree. According to Mr. McKee, the cemetery was originally a vineyard and is the reason for the prevalence of so many grapevines.

A grave marker of another Bohlen family seems quite ordinary until one looks at the reverse of it with its rough hewn carvings.

Information on some of the graves in the cemetery can be found on Find-A-Grave and many are identified on the Pennsylvania US Gen website.

A walk through the cemetery will afford a panoramic view of the city of Pittsburgh and a chance to experience the lasting legacy of the life well lived of Carl Weitershausen.



Allegheny City Society
PO Box 100255
Pittsburgh PA 15233-0255



"For Man, Beast and Bird, to the memory of my departed wife..." The Hartzell Memorial Fountain
Photo August 3, 1914 *The Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, 1901-2000*; University of Pittsburgh