

BEDFORD DWELLINGS
Bedford Avenue between Erin and Morgan streets
Pittsburgh
Allegheny County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6339

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PA-6339

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Northeast Region
Philadelphia Support Office
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BEDFORD DWELLINGS

HABS. No. PA-6339

- Location: Bedford Avenue between Erin and Morgan streets
Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania
- USGS Pittsburgh East Quadrangle
UTM Coordinates: 17.058712.4478423, 17.058717.4478323,
17.058643.4478102, 17.058652.4477949
- Present Owner: Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh
200 Ross Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219
- Present Occupant: Public housing residents
- Present Use: Public housing
- Significance: Bedford Dwellings is among Pittsburgh's earliest low-income public housing projects. Following a long period of agitation by housing reformers, the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh was formed in 1937. Shortly thereafter, large-scale demolition began in the Hill District, site of Pittsburgh's worst slum housing. Bedford Dwellings was developed through a collaborative effort by a distinguished team of architects and planners: Raymond Marlier, William Boyd, Edward B. Lee, and Bernard H. Prack. Constructed in 1939-40, Bedford Dwellings provided 420 units of low-income housing in Bauhaus-inspired, two-story apartment buildings on curving streets.

Historical Information

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, heavy industry cast a polluted pall over Pittsburgh, but also drew thousands of immigrants to the region in search of jobs. As the city's population grew, single family houses were quickly divided into overcrowded flats. Landlords often deferred or ignored needed building maintenance. Crowded conditions and lack of basic amenities, such as indoor plumbing and regular trash collection, contributed to high rates of illness and death. With the rise of these urban ills, Pittsburgh, the archetypal industrial city, became the subject of scrutiny by social workers and reformers. The *Pittsburgh Survey*, begun in 1907, and other social welfare studies, documented the deplorable condition of much of the city's housing and publicized the need for safe, sanitary housing for the urban poor. Conditions in the inner city only grew worse when the Great Migration of blacks from the South put additional pressure on limited housing in the late 1910s.

Local civic leaders and reformers made a number of attempts to improve the quality and availability of low-cost housing. During the 1920s the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce created a Community Housing Corporation to build low cost, limited dividend developments. The corporation managed to build 304 units before failing. Plans for Chatham Village, a garden city development in the Mount Washington neighborhood, were also begun in the 1920s. However, while considered a great success, Chatham Village was intended for the working class and did not have an impact on low income, inner-city families.

Beginning in the late 1920s the Pittsburgh Housing Association, a coalition of civic groups, pressed for demolition of substandard housing. The City responded by demolishing hundreds of dilapidated homes, focusing mainly on the Strip District and Hill District, neighborhoods adjacent to downtown. Reformers hoped that the private sector would rally and replace the cleared slums with low-cost housing at a modest dividend. Those efforts, however, failed to materialize.

In the early 1930s a delegation of Pittsburghers participated in two conferences which fueled the idea that the federal government might become a major participant in the solution to the housing problem. The Conference on Housing and Home Ownership, held in Washington, DC in 1931, addressed the possibility of federally assisted slum clearance. Two years later Cleveland convened a national Conference on Slum Clearance and Housing during which participants resolved that, "Housing developments furnish the opportunity for the employment of labor and purchase of materials to a greater degree than most other types of public works," and that "[we] urge upon city councils and administrations... that they aid, participate and cooperate in large scale low cost housing and slum clearance developments to the full extent of their legal and financial powers." Planners, "housers," and reformers began to petition state legislatures for the creation of housing authorities. Pennsylvania delayed action until 1937. Those interested in reform, however, began planning right away.

In 1935, Harold Ickes, head of the Public Works Administration, appointed an eighteen member Pittsburgh Housing Advisory Committee to study and approve projects, and a team of architects was commissioned to identify sites for the city's first projects. Studies completed by the Advisory Committee indicated that the Hill District was in the greatest need of housing. The Hill District had long served as the "point of entry" to the city. Waves of immigrant groups began here and established themselves before moving on to other neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. By the 1930s, the Hill District had a high percentage of substandard housing. Three hill top slum sites, Ruch, Goat, and Gazzam Hills, were chosen to demonstrate the practicality of developing hilly sites for low income housing purposes. In April 1937 Pittsburgh City Council approved an ordinance creating the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh. The following year, the Pittsburgh Housing Authority applied to the United States Housing Authority for a \$10 million loan for three projects. A short time later, they requested an additional \$3.5 million. The first public housing communities in Pittsburgh were to be Bedford Dwellings, Addison Terrace, Wadsworth Terrace and Allequippa Terrace. Initially Addison was known as Terrace Village I and Wadsworth and Allequippa were jointly known as Terrace Village II. Currently Wadsworth and Allequippa are together known as Allequippa Terrace.

The architectural team chosen to develop Bedford Dwellings included Raymond Mailer, William Boyd, Edward B. Lee, and Bernard Prack. Marlier had served as Chair of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce's Architectural Committee. Boyd, of the firm Ingham and Boyd, designed the homes at Chatham Village. E. B. Lee was a prolific local architect whose work included the Chamber of Commerce building, Peabody High School, and the Edgewood Club. Little is known of the work of Bernard Prack, except that he was a member of the American Institute of Architects.

The site chosen for Bedford Dwellings was located on Herron Hill. Planners were attracted by the difficult topography which made land acquisition inexpensive. The occupants consisted of a gas station, 150 substandard dwellings, brick kilns, a ball field, and a cemetery. Within five months all of the residents were relocated. Remains from the Lincoln Memorial Cemetery were moved to the Woodlawn Cemetery in Wilkinsburg. Site preparation included removal of 132,441 cubic yards of dirt which was used to fill and grade the new Ammon Playground constructed by the City.

Government regulations for low-income housing and caps on the amount allowable per room and per dwelling unit forced the architects to make alterations to the already minimal design. Bedford Dwellings was originally planned as a 331-dwelling community, however, 420 units were included in the final design. Washington also rejected the initial design plans as too expensive prompting the architects to simplify even further. Concrete walks were changed to bituminous, a decorative vertical strip of colored brick or mortar was deleted, as were entrance hoods, tile bathroom floors, linen and cupboard doors, and other amenities. The first tenants arrived at Bedford Dwellings on July 15, 1940.

In 1951 the Housing Authority doubled the size and number of units at Bedford Dwellings. Substandard dwellings were razed on either side of the initial complex and it was expanded by 19.5 acres. This expansion provided an addition 640 units.

Architectural Information

Bedford Dwellings stretches for eight blocks along the north side of Bedford Avenue, one of the main arteries through Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood. Although there are no physical or geographic barriers setting it apart, the housing complex does not blend in with the surrounding area. The rows of spare, rectangular apartments stand in stark contrast with the eclectic 19th century architectural styles of the homes, commercial buildings, and churches across the street.

The original portion of Bedford Dwellings consists of 420 dwelling units in two-story, flat roof, red brick apartment buildings. The structures are devoid of architectural detail except for a brick dentil course along the cornice and the recent addition of gable roof entrances. The parcel was graded to be table-top flat. The buildings are lined up in rigid rows around two U-shaped streets. The Management building, in the same austere style, originally served as the community center. Ammon Recreation Center is located immediately west of the complex, behind Macedonia Baptist Church. It has a playground, basketball court, and baseball field.

In 1951 Bedford Dwellings Addition doubled the size of the original complex. It added 220 units to the west and 240 units to the east. Unlike the original level site, the land on which the additions sit rises gently to the north. Most of the apartments also have a different configuration. They are three stories tall and H-shaped in plan. They are, however, just as stark and unsympathetic to the neighborhood. They have tall, beige concrete block foundations, red brick walls, flat roofs, and no architectural trim.

With the exception of a few large trees, little remains of the original landscape. There are no clothes lines in the rear yards, and no ornamental trees, shrubs, or flowers.

Sources of Information

Architectural plans and views

Architectural drawings and historic views are maintained by the Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh.

Bibliography

The historical information on Bedford Dwellings was adapted from the report "History and Significance of Housing Authority of Pittsburgh Projects: PA-1-2 and PA-1-8 (Bedford Dwellings and Bedford Dwellings Addition; PA-1-3 (Allequippa Terrace); and PA-1-6 (Broadhead Manor)" prepared by John F. Bauman for the Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh in 1997. The following includes bibliographic information from that report.

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Project Information

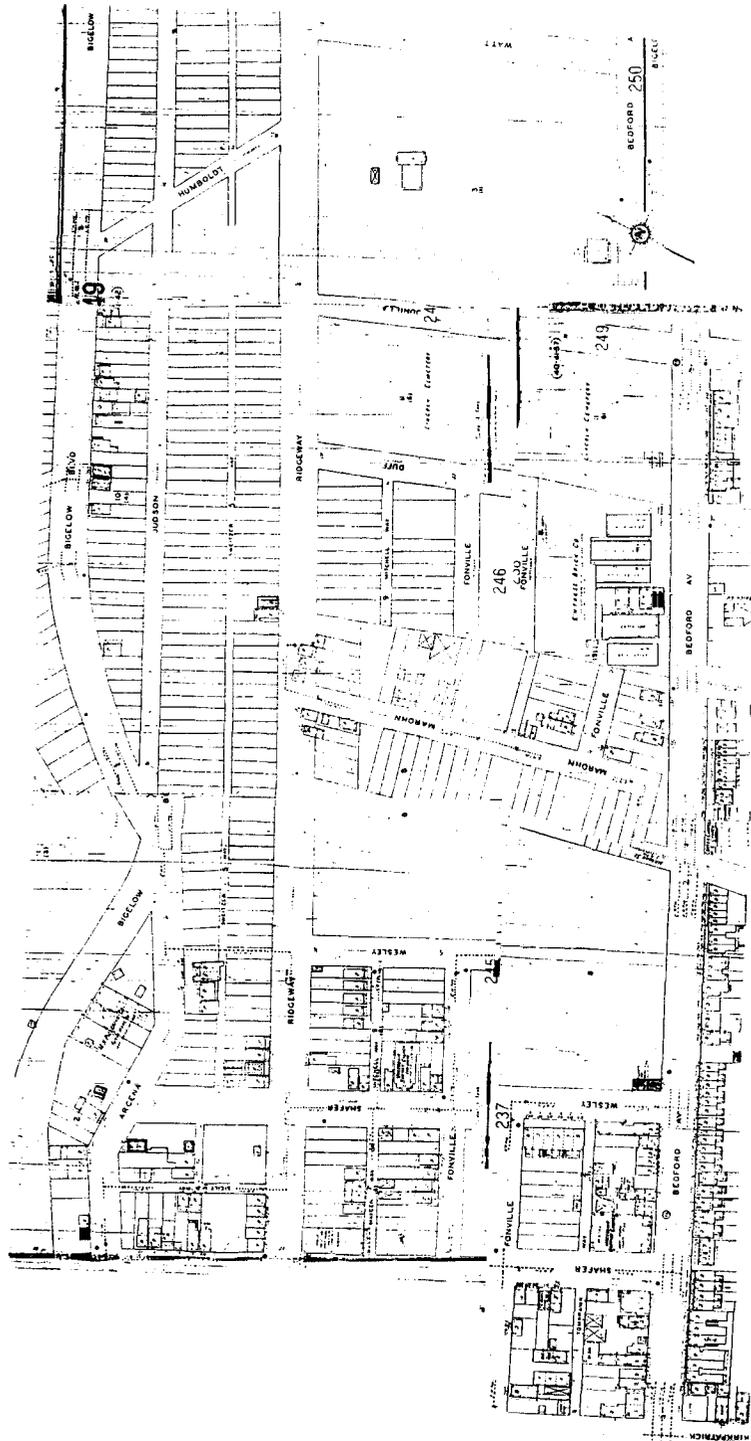
The Bedford Dwellings Management building is slated for demolition in April 1999. It will be replaced with a larger building which will house the management offices as well as the Hope VI Self Sufficiency Program.

Prepared by: Lauren Uhl

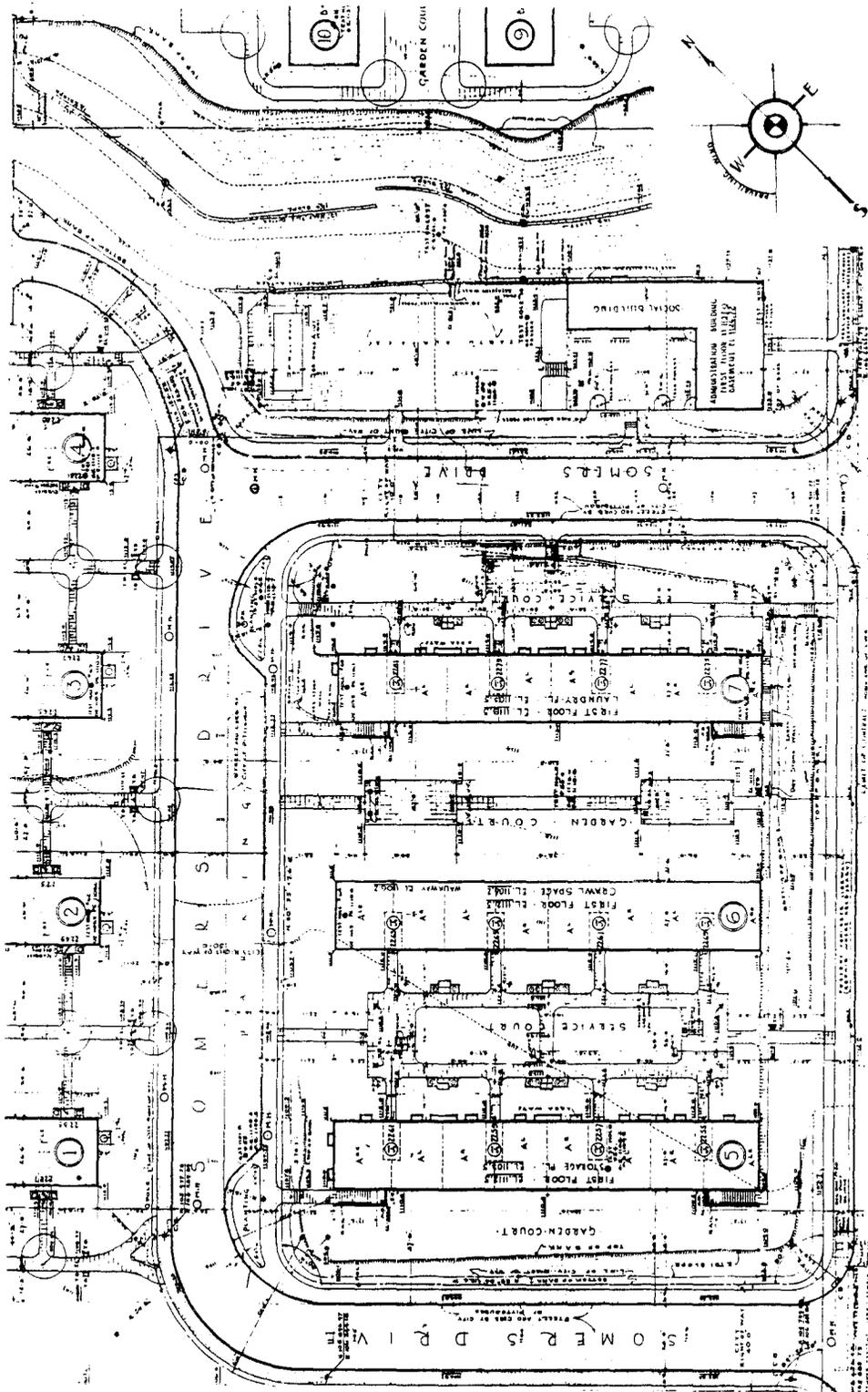
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Affiliation: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
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Date: February 1999

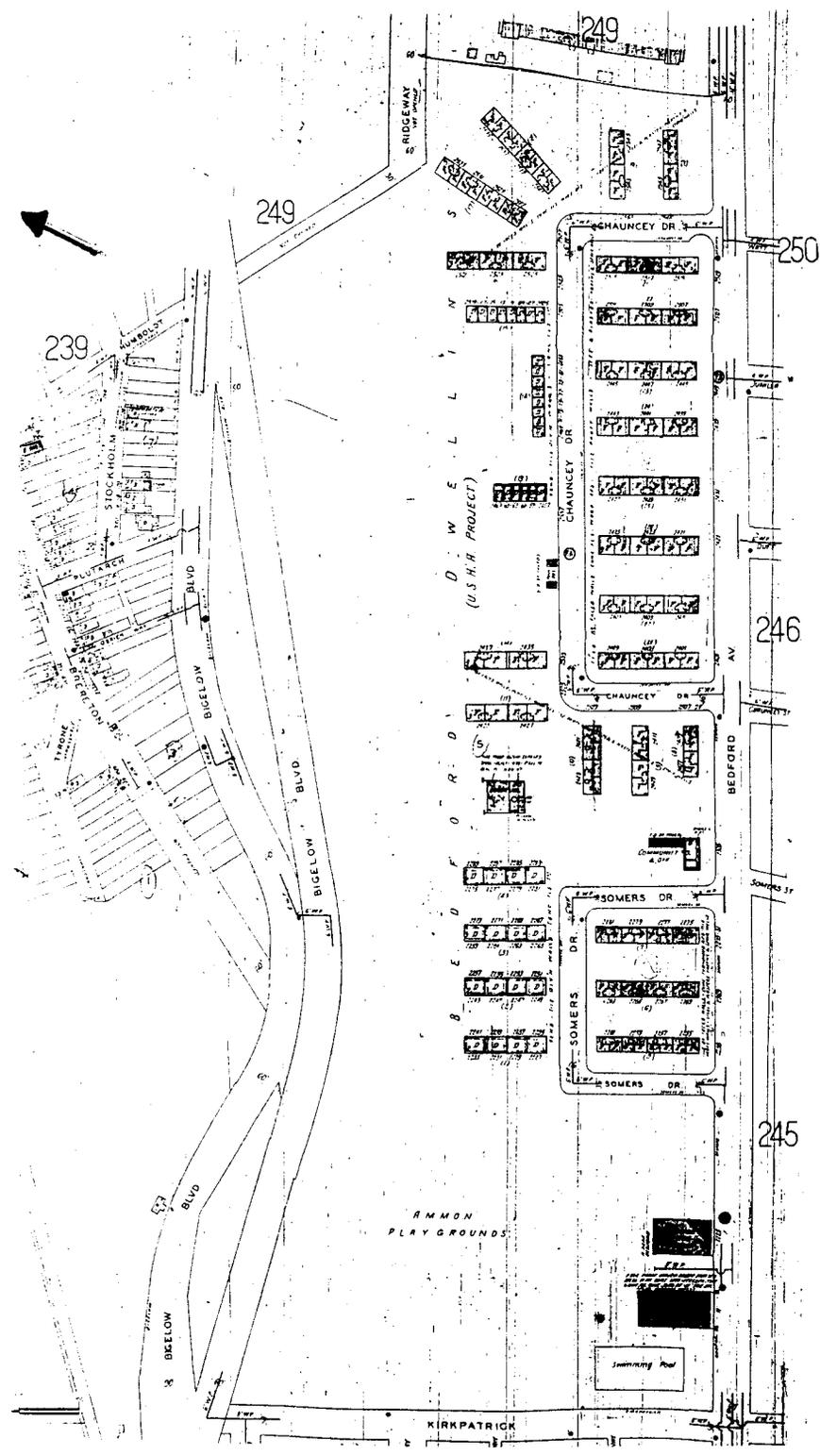


G. M. Hopkins Atlas, 1927 - showing approximate boundaries of Bedford Dwellings

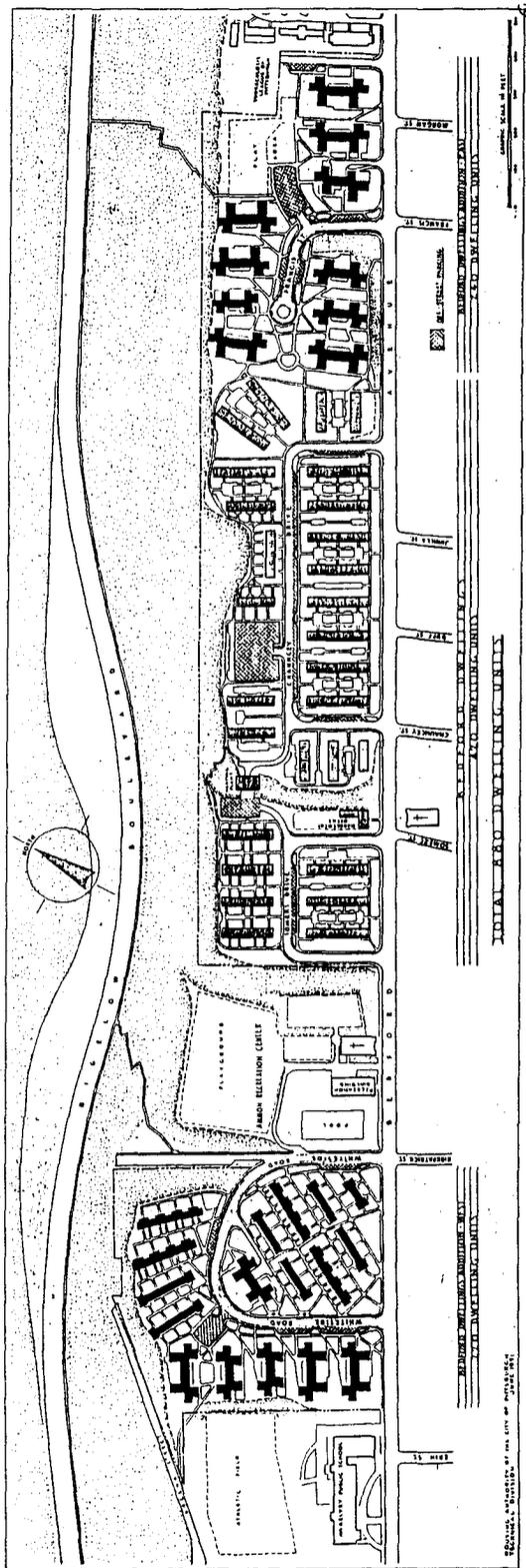


Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh
Bedford Dwellings Site Plan Showing Portion at Bedford Avenue and Sommers Drive, 1939

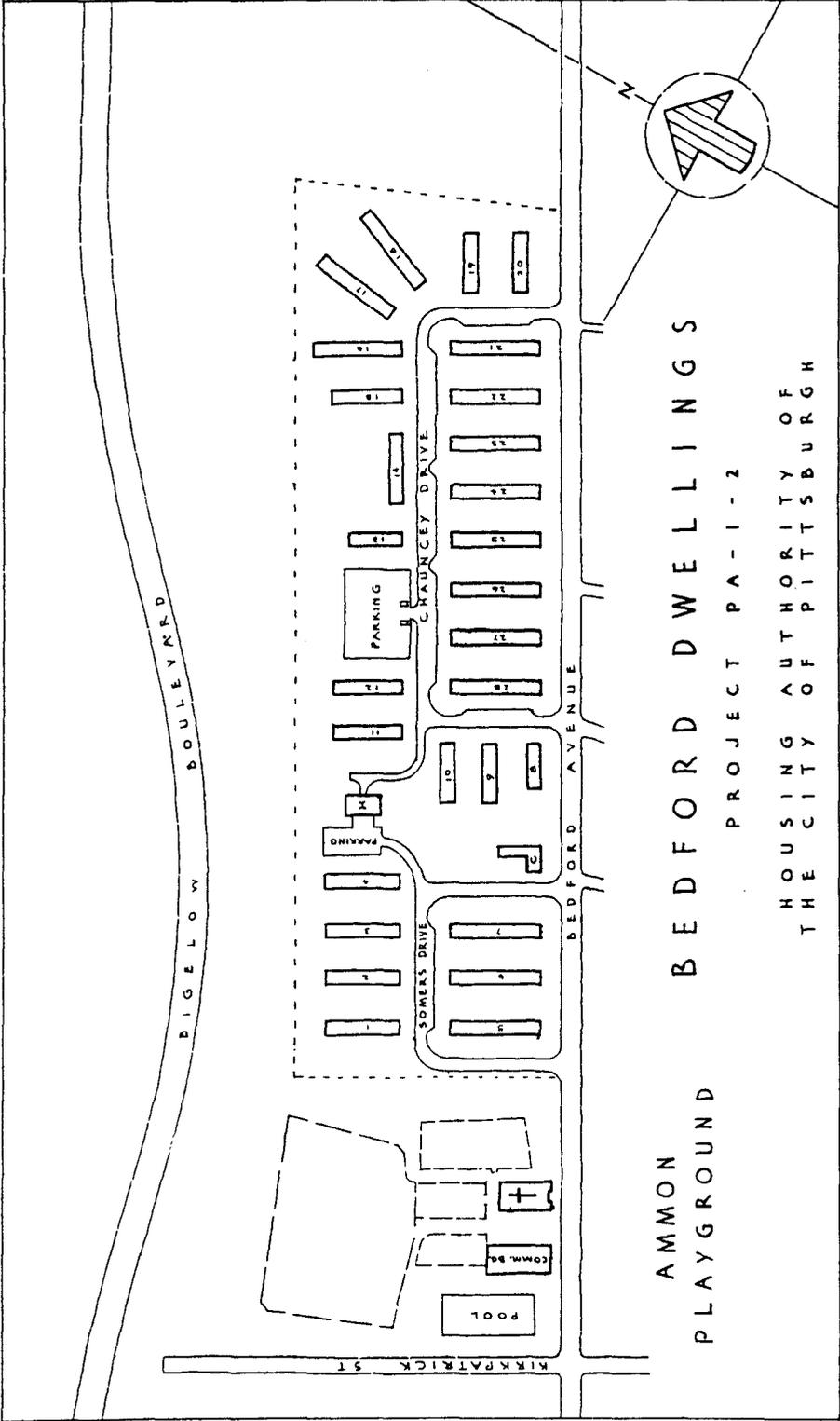
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Sanborn Insurance Atlas, updated in 1951

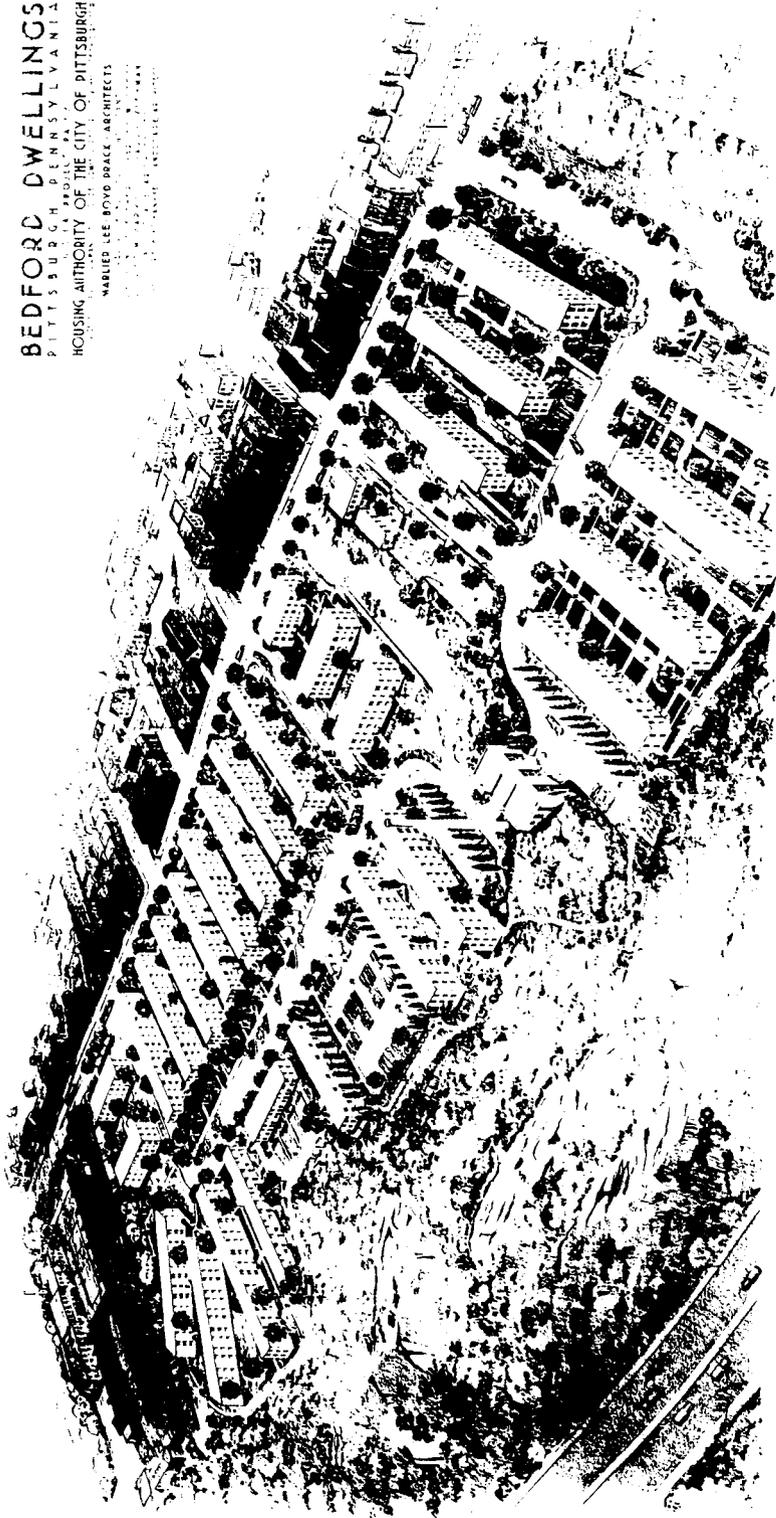


Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh,
Site Plan Showing Bedford Dwellings Addition, 1951

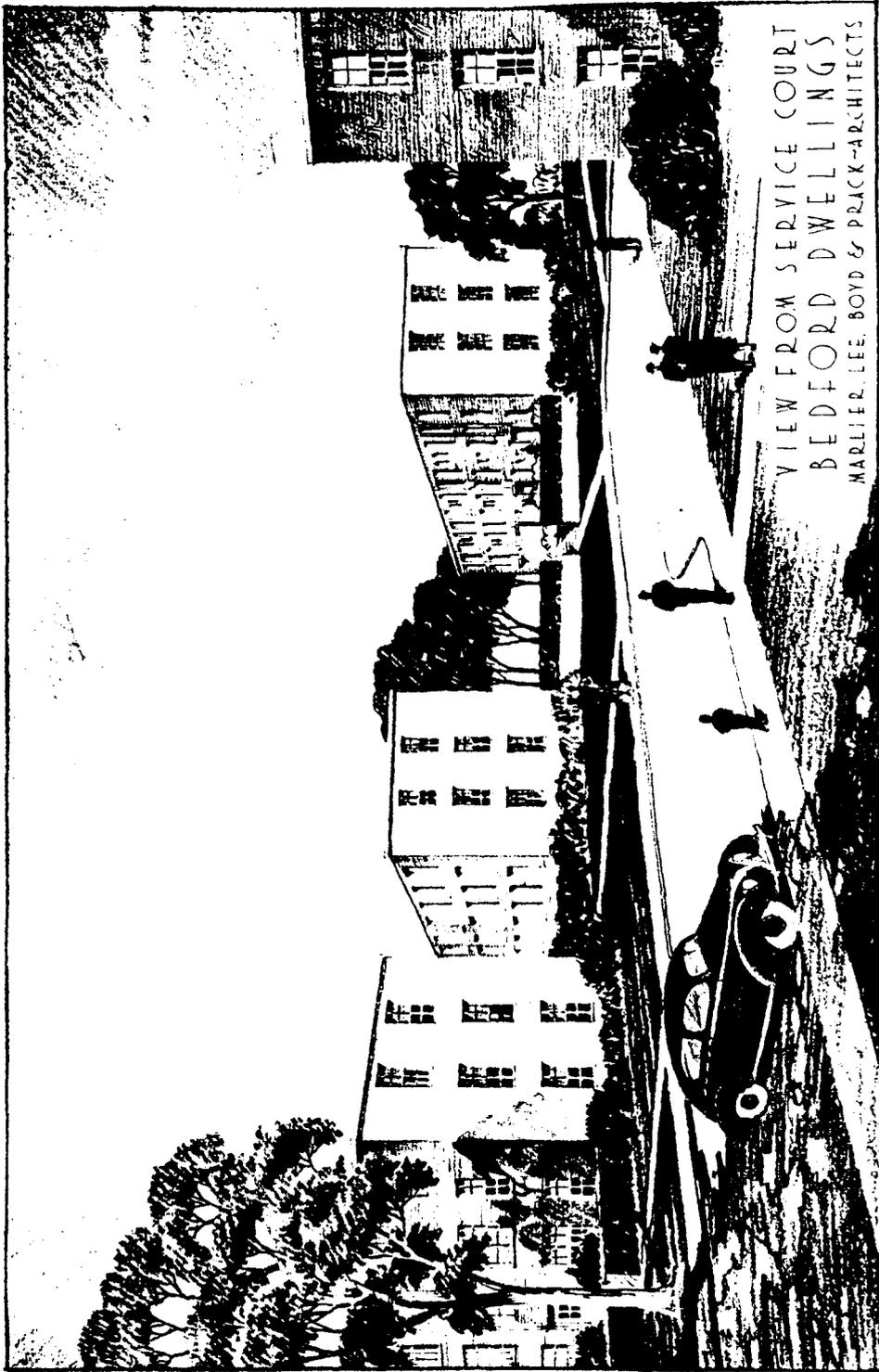


Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh
Site Plan Showing the Original Bedford Dwellings, 1997

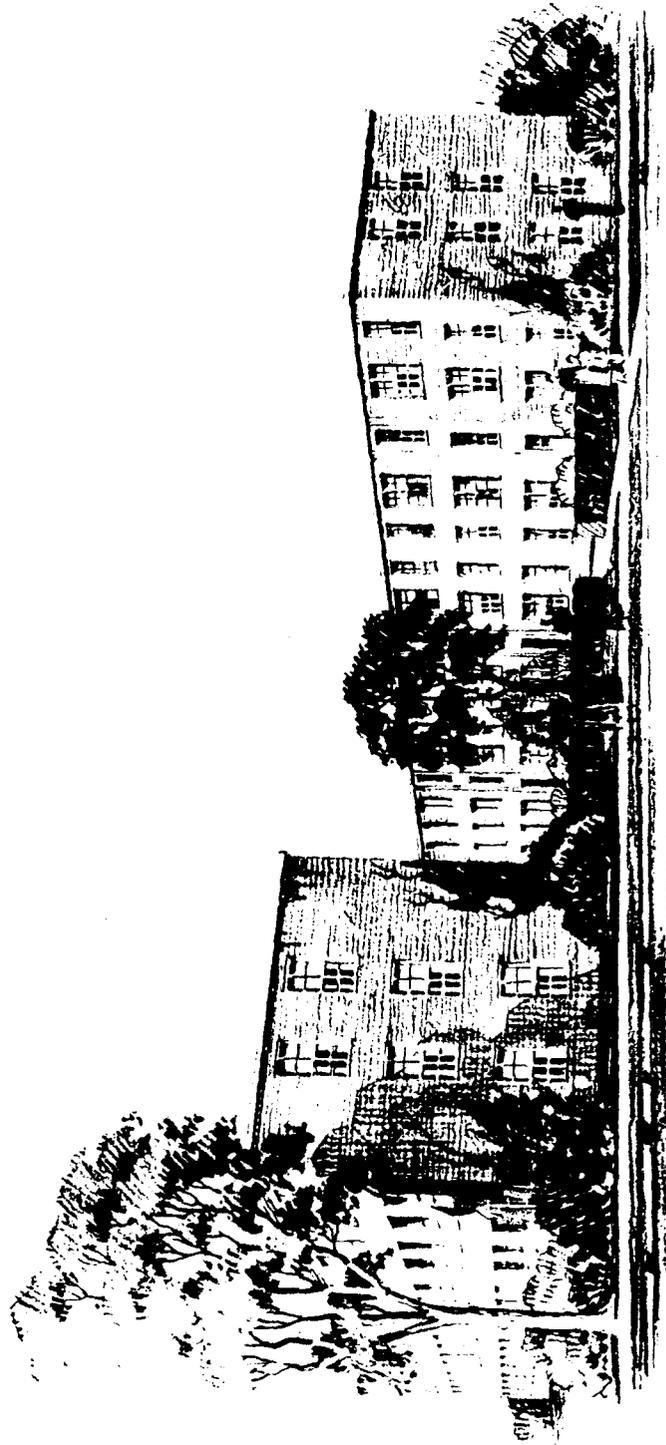
BEDFORD DWELLINGS
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA
HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE CITY OF PITTSBURGH
DRAFTER: LEE BOYD DRACK ARCHITECTS



Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh
Undated Drawing of Aerial View of Bedford Dwellings by Paul M. Bott



Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh
Reproduction of Pencil Sketch, "View from Service Court, Bedford Dwellings," undated



V I E W I N T O S E R V I C E C O U R T

Housing Authority City of Pittsburgh
Reproduced Pencil Sketch, "View Into Service Court," undated