

WESTLAKE PUBLIC SCHOOL
900 Lorenz Avenue
Pittsburgh
Allegheny County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6640

HABS
PA
2-PITBU,
95-

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

WESTLAKE PUBLIC SCHOOL

HABS No. PA-6640

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95-

Location: 900 Lorenz Avenue, Pittsburgh, Allegheny County,
Pennsylvania

USGS Pittsburgh West, Pennsylvania Quadrangle
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates 17.581230.4477420

Present Owner: Joseph E. Ackerman

Present Use: Vacant
Demolition proposed
Demolition date not yet selected

Significance: The Westlake Public School, constructed in 1885, is significant for its local educational and architectural significance. The school is a very important historic feature in this community's history. It was constructed by Chartiers Township, later the Elliott neighborhood of the City of Pittsburgh (currently West End), and was used by the children of this community until the school closed in 1939. The Westlake Public School is a locally important example of an institutional building designed in the Italianate style. Although the bell tower has been removed, the building plan, corbelled cornice and triple windows with segmental arches reflect Italianate tradition.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. PHYSICAL HISTORY:

1. **Date of erection:** The Westlake Public School was constructed in 1885 by the Chartiers Township School Board. The original drawings, owned by the buildings current owner Mr. Joseph E. Ackerman, have been lost.
2. **Architect:** Unknown.
3. **Original and Subsequent Owners:** Chartiers Township was the original owner of the Westlake Public School. In 1895, the township was incorporated into the borough of Elliott. In 1905, the borough was annexed to the City of Pittsburgh and Westlake was incorporated into the Pittsburgh Public Schools system. Westlake remained in this system until 1939 when the school was closed. From 1944 until 1978 the building was owned by various private land-owners who used the building as a community center with a roller skating rink and bowling alley. The building was purchased in 1978 by the current owner, Joseph E. Ackerman, who used the space as a wholesale business, coin-operated laundry and karate studio. The building has been vacant since approximately 1992.
4. **Contractors:** Unknown.
5. **Original Plans and Construction:** The original plans for the Westlake Public School were lost after the current owner acquired them. No historic photographs have been located. Based on historic mapping and a report submitted by the school's principal, Mr. W. C. Cleavenger, the original building consisted of 8 classrooms. Four rooms with short connecting hallways and stairwells leading to the second floor were added to the northwest facade in 1900. According to the current owner, Joseph E. Ackerman, the bell tower was removed in 1914, and additional alterations were made according to plans approved June 16, 1914 by C.L. Wooldridge, Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Public Education, Department of Buildings. These plans have been lost. According to historic mapping, the connecting hallways and stairwell added in 1900 were expanded to give the building its current footprint. This expansion was probably done c. 1944 when the building was sold to a private owner for \$3,000.00.
6. **Alterations and Additions:**

1900: Four classrooms and a principal's office were added to the northwest facade. This addition connected to the main building with short hallways and stairwells leading to the second floor. Two chimneys were added at this time, one

located on the exterior of the west façade and one on the interior center of the northwest façade.

1914: According to the current owner, Joseph E. Ackerman, the bell tower was removed and additional alterations were made according to plans approved June 16, 1914 by C. L. Wooldridge, Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Public Education, Department of Buildings. These plans have been lost.

1918: A small one-story addition was added to the west facade near Cameron Way according the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for the City of Pittsburgh, 1924.

c. 1944: According to historic mapping, the connecting hallways and stairwell added in 1900 were expanded to give the building its current footprint. This expansion was probably done when the building was sold to a private owner.

c. 1946: Westlake Recreation Center remodeled the building into a roller skating rink on the first floor and a bowling alley on the second floor. To provide space for the new functions, the interior of the building was gutted including the removal of walls, doors, and other interior features. A narrow addition with three rooms was constructed at the first floor level of the southwest facade extending from Lorenz Avenue to the rear of the building. These rooms that were accessed by the former fire escape doors on this facade and functioned as restrooms and perhaps as a ticket office, or skate rental for the rink.

c. 1960: The building functioned as a wholesale business on the first floor and a karate studio on the second floor. A coin operated laundry consumed the northeastern corner of the basement. The basement facade in this area has been remodeled with sheet metal and particleboard.

Dates for the following alterations are not available: Fire escapes located along the northeast facade have been completely removed.

B. HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The Westlake Public School, constructed in 1885, was named in honor of J. W. Westlake, textbook author and teacher at Millersville Normal School. The Chartiers Township School Board built the new eight-room school to accommodate students residing in what is now the City of Pittsburgh's West End. The new school replaced two smaller facilities, the Orchard and Old Brick Schools. In 1895, the area around Westlake School became incorporated as part of Elliott Borough.

The need for a new school in Chartiers Township resulted from a period of unprecedented regional growth after the Civil War. The need for unskilled workers in the iron and steel industry brought thousands of new families to southwestern Pennsylvania. Between 1861 and 1895, a total of 287 new houses were built in the Elliott (West End) alone. Westlake School was the largest of five public schools built for Elliott students.

In 1905, the City of Pittsburgh annexed Elliott bringing Westlake School under the jurisdiction of the Pittsburgh Public School system. Westlake became one of 115 school buildings in a system with 65,652 enrolled students. In the opening years of the 20th century, Westlake served 490 students and had 13 teachers in Kindergarten through eighth grade. By 1927, the number of students had increased to 534 pupils. At that time, the Kindergarten teachers also served as vocational counselors who visited the homes of pupils to encourage voluntary participation in the program.

Westlake Public School functioned as a regular day school under a single unit plan of organization for Kindergarten through eighth grade. With the exception of the Kindergarten Mothers Organization who met once a month, the school did not function as a community center. No evening classes or other organizations used the building, nor was it used by the community for any other purpose. In the Elliott neighborhood, it was the ethnic churches that provided social and recreational activities.

The majority of students attending Westlake Public School in the 1920s were from working class families who owned their own homes. The racial, social and other characteristics of the neighborhood remained stable in the early 20th century when only 5 percent of the pupils were described as "transient." A total of 80 percent of parents were employed in industry while 53 percent of the parents worked in the clerical field, 48 percent were in business, and only 6 percent were classified as "professional." Over 80 percent of students identified their cultural heritage as "American". Minor percentages of German, Italian, Scottish, Russian, and other European students attended Westlake. The school principal, W. C. Cleavenger, expressed his prejudice against the minority southern and eastern European families in a report about the school dated 1927. He stated that "about 95 percent of the pupils are either American or fall in foreign groups having equal intelligence." According to Cleavenger, this group was favorable for "high achievement in school work." Yet, he characterized the children from southern and eastern Europe as "retarded" stating that they had the "greatest problem in developing habits of punctuality, regularity in attendance, and cleanliness."

Educational values in the 1920s are evident in the words of Principal Cleavenger who stated that the school was considered to be "a place of happiness where children love to work, to play and to study. The feeling among the faculty of Westlake is growing that the teacher must be able to sense the thoughts and feelings of the child and to deal with the open mind of childhood and thus

to guide the child's imagination and not cheat it." The word "punishment" was considered "obsolete" and replaced with the word "remedy" because the enlightened faculty realized that "punishment warps and disturbs the character."

Westlake School closed in 1939 and was sold four years later to a private owner for \$3,000 (Pittsburgh Board of Education n.d.).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. GENERAL STATEMENT:

- 1. Architectural Character:** The Westlake Public School is a locally important example of an institutional building designed in the Italianate style. Although the bell tower has been removed, the building plan, roof, corbelled cornice and triple windows with segmental arches reflect Italianate tradition.
- 2. Condition of Fabric:** The overall condition of the building's exterior is fair due to the recent alterations including the removal of the bell tower and alternations to the fenestration. The interior fabric is very poor and fails to retain historic integrity with the exception of the tin ceiling.

B. DESCRIPTION OF EXTERIOR:

- 1. Overall Dimensions:** The two-and-one-half story brick school measures 72 feet by 95 feet. The five bay Westlake Public School has a partially exposed basement on Crucible Street.
- 2. Foundations:** The foundation is made of sandstone ashlar capped with a molded water table of smooth sandstone.
- 3. Walls:** Exterior walls of red brick laid in running bond with light gray mortar joints form the exterior of the original building and the 1900 addition. Brick corbelling embellishes the wall surfaces. Ribbed brick piers form the building corners on the original building as well as the addition. The main entrance has a gauged brick segmental arch and projects from the building. Brick pilasters with gabled dormers in the attic are centered on the northeast and southwest facades. The original copper fascia and several gutters, painted green, are extant.
- 4. Structural Systems:** The Westlake Public School's structural system involves brick load-bearing walls with interior masonry columns. The basement is constructed of sandstone while the roof is a timber frame.

5. **Balconies:** No balconies were present.
6. **Chimneys:** In 1900, two chimneys were added to the new addition including one located at the interior center of the northwest façade and the other located on the exterior of the west corner.
7. **Openings:**

- a. **Doorways and doors:** The original entry on southeast façade has a projecting main entry bay with sidelights that are now infilled with glass blocks. Above the door is a lunette infilled with an original brick basketweave. Two double-hung windows with brick corbelling and stone lintels and sills are located on the second floor above the entrance. The brickwork separates these windows from a signature stone with the word "Westlake". Above the stone was a triplet of small square attic windows; however, two windows have been infilled with red brick leaving only the central window intact. The original recessed entrance (now covered with glassblocks and plywood) had paired doors below an arched entry. Stone steps lead to the entrance. A wooden sign above the transom displays the name of the Better Gift Service, Inc., the last business to occupy the first floor. A vertical metal sign with a hand-painted word "BOWLING" on both sides was attached to the main facade to advertise for the bowling alley and is still extant.

On the northeast façade are six doors that functioned as exits to the fire escape in each classroom. The six doors reflect the window design through the use of segmental arches, a transom window, and a window in the door.

The rear entrance located on the northwest facade of the 1900 addition reflects the architecture of the main entrance expressed in the blind lunette above the door and the gauged brick arch with gray parget. The entranceway and lunette have been infilled with brick and two wood doors replace the original.

- b. **Windows and shutters:** The original fenestration is expressed as single, double and triple two-over-two light double-hung windows with gauged brick segmental arches, sandstone quoins and flat stone sills. A light gray mortar parget covers the gauged brick giving the appearance of stone. The majority of windows have been infilled with glass blocks or boarded over although several of the original double-hung windows on the second floor are still extant.

8. **Roof:**

- a. **Shape, covering:** The hip roof of slate on the original building has been altered by the removal of the original bell tower. The roof has collapsed along the southern side of the building creating damage to the ceilings and floors in the building's interior. The 1900 addition has a gable roof of slate with two chimneys.
- b. **Cornice, eaves:** Brick corbelling richly embellishes the roof cornice.
- c. **Dormers, cupolas, towers:** The original bell tower has been removed. Two dormers embellished with lunette windows with gauged brick arches bracket the roof on southwest and northeast facades. Glazing in the lunettes consisted of four triangular fixed lights. The arches are pargetted with gray mortar to give the appearance of stone. Above the arches near the top of the gable are triangular brick motifs.

C. DESCRIPTION OF INTERIOR:

1. **Floor Plans:** See attached drawings for pre-1940's floor plans.
2. **Stairways:** The original stairway is located in the vestibule and leads to the second floor. A narrow stairway off of the second floor landing leads to the attic. A wood door adjacent to the stairwell on the first floor opens to a single stairway leading to the basement. When the addition was completed in 1900, it included stairways leading to a narrow hallway that integrated the original and new sections of the building. Doors opened from these stairways to the playground on the northeast façade and the alley on the southwest façade. These stairways were later removed when the main floor was remodeled into a skating rink in the 1940s. With the stairs eliminated, red brick walls were constructed to form a uniform exterior wall on the northeast and southwest facades and to further expand the first floor space.
3. **Flooring:** The original first and second flooring has been covered with new materials during the building's use as a roller skating rink and bowling alley. Small sections of original flooring in the entranceway and stairwells revealed an original tongue-and-groove oak floor. The attic floor was never finished.
4. **Wall and Ceiling Finish:** An original pressed tin ceiling with geometric patterns covers the first floor ceiling and bulkheads. The second floor ceiling may have

had a similar treatment but is now covered with modern plaster applied when the floor was reused as a bowling alley.

The vestibule walls are covered with vertical beaded board walls with egg and dart motifs. A pressed tin ceiling embellished with the same design as the classroom ceilings is present in the vestibule. Peeling paint from the tin roof is evident throughout. No other original wall surfaces were present except in areas where water had damaged the modern surfaces revealing small sections of the original plaster over brick-bearing walls. In these sections where the original wall surface was present, white paint covered the plaster.

Near the southern side of the building, the roof has deteriorated with resulting damage from rain and snow. In this area the floor has rotted and the panels of the tin roof have fallen.

5. **Openings:**

- a. **Doorways and doors:** Presumably, all classrooms and the office had an interior door; however, none are extant. Examples of interior door moldings are present on the first floor where doorways were surrounded by a decorative wood molding and a glazed transom. The moldings have been repainted many times but appear to have been originally white. No original interior doors were present with the exception of a wood four paneled door to the basement stairway.
- b. **Windows:** The original wood moldings around windows are extant although most glazing was removed during past remodeling projects when the windows were infilled or covered with new materials.

6. **Decorative features and trim:** The most significant extant interior feature is the geometric pressed tin roof on the first floor and vestibule ceilings and also on the ceiling above the second floor landing. The board-and-batten walls with egg-and-dart motif in the vestibule are another original feature. Small sections of board-and-batten wainscoting are extant on the first floor walls. Decorative moldings around the windows and doors on the first floor are still extant. These features suggest that similar designs for window and door moldings, and wainscoting were once present throughout the building but were removed during remodeling.

7. **Hardware:** No original hardware remains extant.

- 8. Mechanical Equipment:** The mechanical systems have been replaced with modern materials.

D. SITE:

- 1. General Setting and Orientation:** The Westlake Public School overlooks a slope within the residential and commercial neighborhood of West End in the City of Pittsburgh. The building's orientation is southeast on Lorenz Avenue at the corner of Crucible Street. The main or Lorenz Street façade slopes down to Crucible Street where the building's basement is fully exposed. Cameron Way passes along the southwest façade separating the school from the Lorenz Avenue Baptist Church.
- 2. Historic landscape design:** The exterior landscape design includes an original cast iron fence with cast iron posts that wrap around the southern corner of the building continuing along the length of the southwest facade. It is in fair condition, although small sections of the rail are missing. The former concrete playground of approximately 6,000 square feet was located on the northeast side of the property along Crucible Street. The fire escapes located on this façade infringed on the playground reducing in usable space and leaving older children to play in the street. Only two of the fire escapes are extant, both on the southwest façade. On the northwest side of the building is an asphalt parking lot. Along Cameron Way is an original sandstone retaining wall.
- 3. Outbuildings:** A one story concrete block boiler room with a separate entranceway is attached to the southwestern corner of the main building. According to Sanborn mapping, this building was added in 1918.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS: The original drawings for the school were once in the possession of the current owner, Mr. Joseph E. Ackerman. However, Mr. Ackerman can not locate the drawings.

B. HISTORIC VIEWS: A search for historic views was conducted. Walter Kidney of Pittsburgh History and Landmarks who is currently working on a preservation project for Pittsburgh Public Schools was contacted for any information or photographs in their collection. Mr. Kidney had no additional information about the school. Marlene Demerest, Librarian for the West End Carnegie Library, searched the local library's records for information but could not locate any materials that could supplement the documentation. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and the West End Historical Society were

surveyed for information but without success. At the time of this report, the University of Pittsburgh's Archives of Industrial Society was in the process of packing and moving their collections to a new building. Photographs may be available in this collection when the facility is reopened. Mr. Keith Romanowski, Chief Architect for the Pittsburgh School District, was contacted regarding the project but no information was provided. The owner, Mr. Joseph E. Ackerman, stated that he owns historic photographs but he could not locate the materials.

C. INTERVIEWS: Mr. Joseph E. Ackerman was interviewed at 1:00 pm on March 14, 1999 at the Westlake Public School. Mr. Ackerman is the current owner of the building.

D. BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Civil and Environmental Consultants, Inc.

1997 Phase I Environmental Assessment Report: Former West Lake School. Prepared for ACTION Housing Inc.

Creque, Peta

1981 "Better Gift Service Inc." Survey form on file at PHMC.

Pittsburgh Board of Education

n.d. *Pittsburgh Board of Public Education.* Archives on file at Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

Pittsburgh Public Schools

1927 *Report on a Questionnaire Submitted to the Principals of the Pittsburgh Public Schools by the Survey Commission: Westlake and Thaddeus Stevens Schools.* Submitted to the Survey Commission by W. C. Cleavenger, principal of the Westlake and Thaddeus Stevens Schools, March 31, 1927. (located at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh)

2. Secondary and published sources:

Boucher, John Newton

1908 A Century and a Half of Pittsburg and Her People. The Lewis Publishing Company. Vol. II.

- Lawrence, Peter W.

1981 The West End and Elliot: A Geographical History. Pittsburgh.

Sanborn Map Company
1906 City of Pittsburgh. Sanborn Map Company
1924 City of Pittsburgh. Sanborn Map Company
1949 City of Pittsburgh. Sanborn Map Company

E. LIKELY SOURCES NOT YET INVESTIGATED: Pittsburgh's Archives of Industrial Society has not yet been investigated because they are in the process of relocating.

F. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION: None.

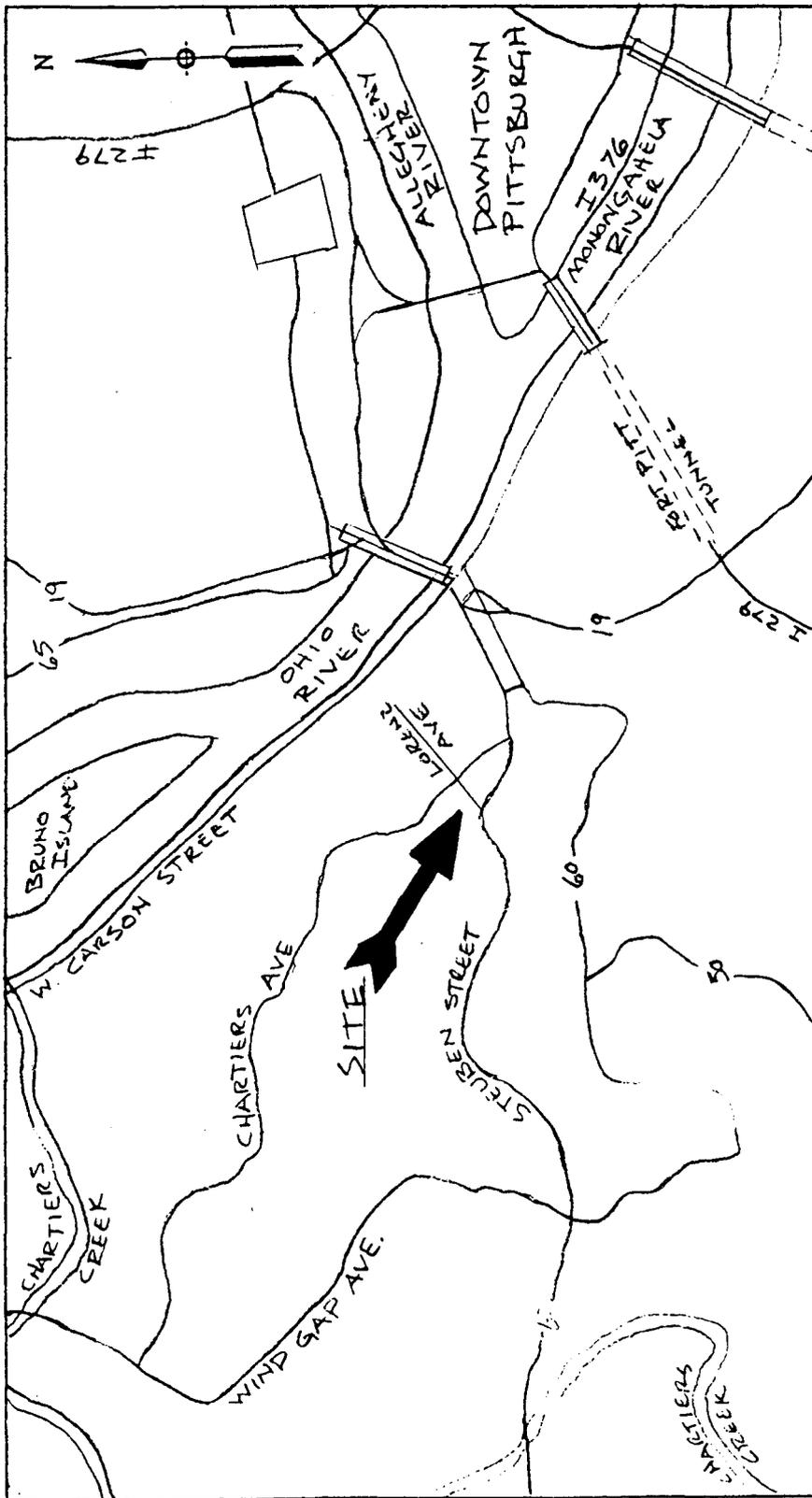
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Westlake Public School is currently the subject of a study conducted by Action Housing of the City of Pittsburgh. The proposed undertaking would involve the demolition of the Westlake School in order to provide space for the construction of a new senior citizen housing facility. The Westlake School has been determined eligible for listing on the National Register. Pursuant to 36 CFR Part 800, a Determination of Effect and MOA have been submitted to the PA SHPO office. This project was conducted to mitigate the adverse effect of demolition.

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Date: May 1999



Pittsburgh West, USGS Quadrangle, 1993



LOCATION MAP
SCALE: (MILES) 1

WESTLAKE PUBLIC SCHOOL

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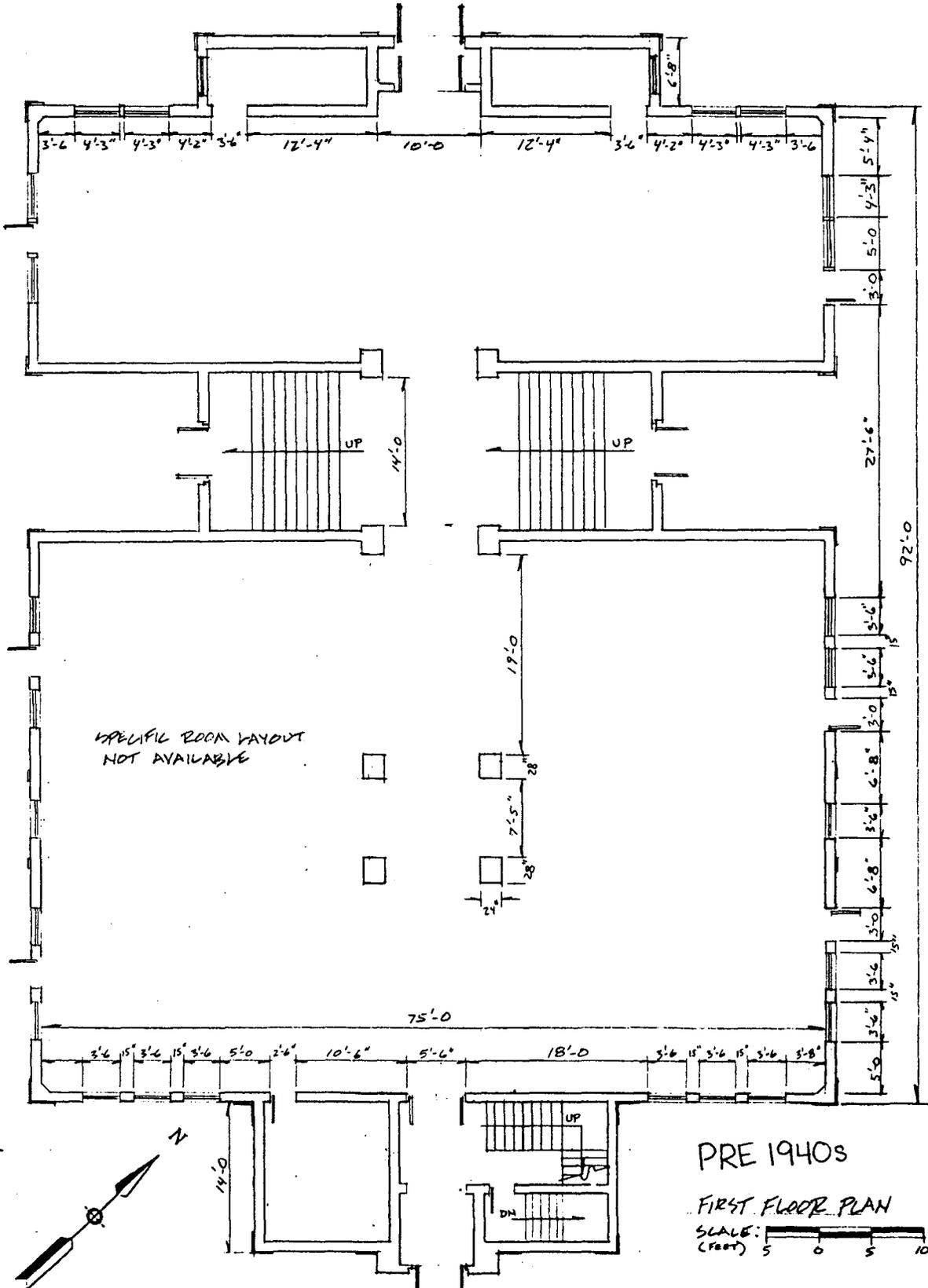
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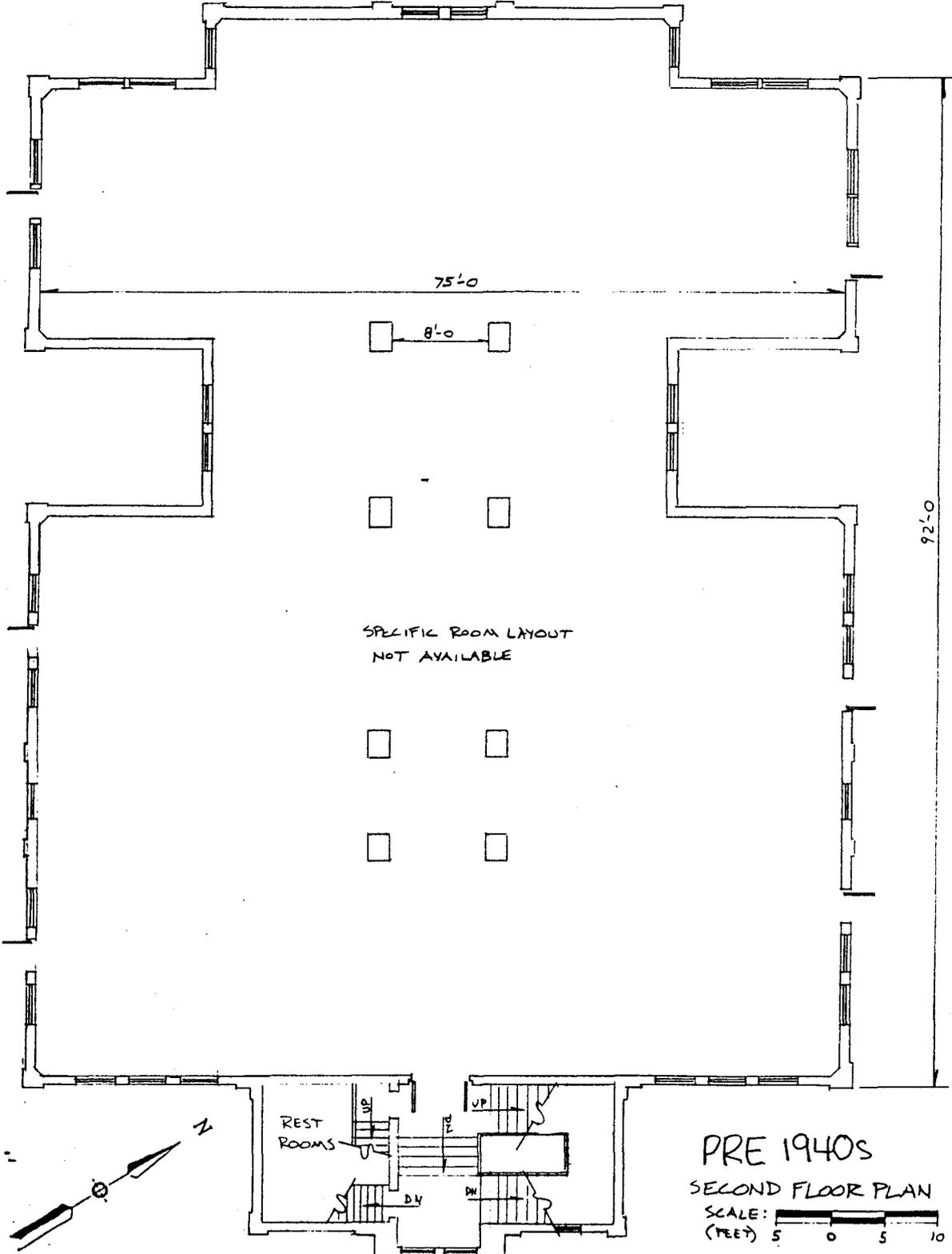


SOURCE: 1906 SANEORN FIRE INSURANCE MAP OF PITTSBURGH

SITE PLAN



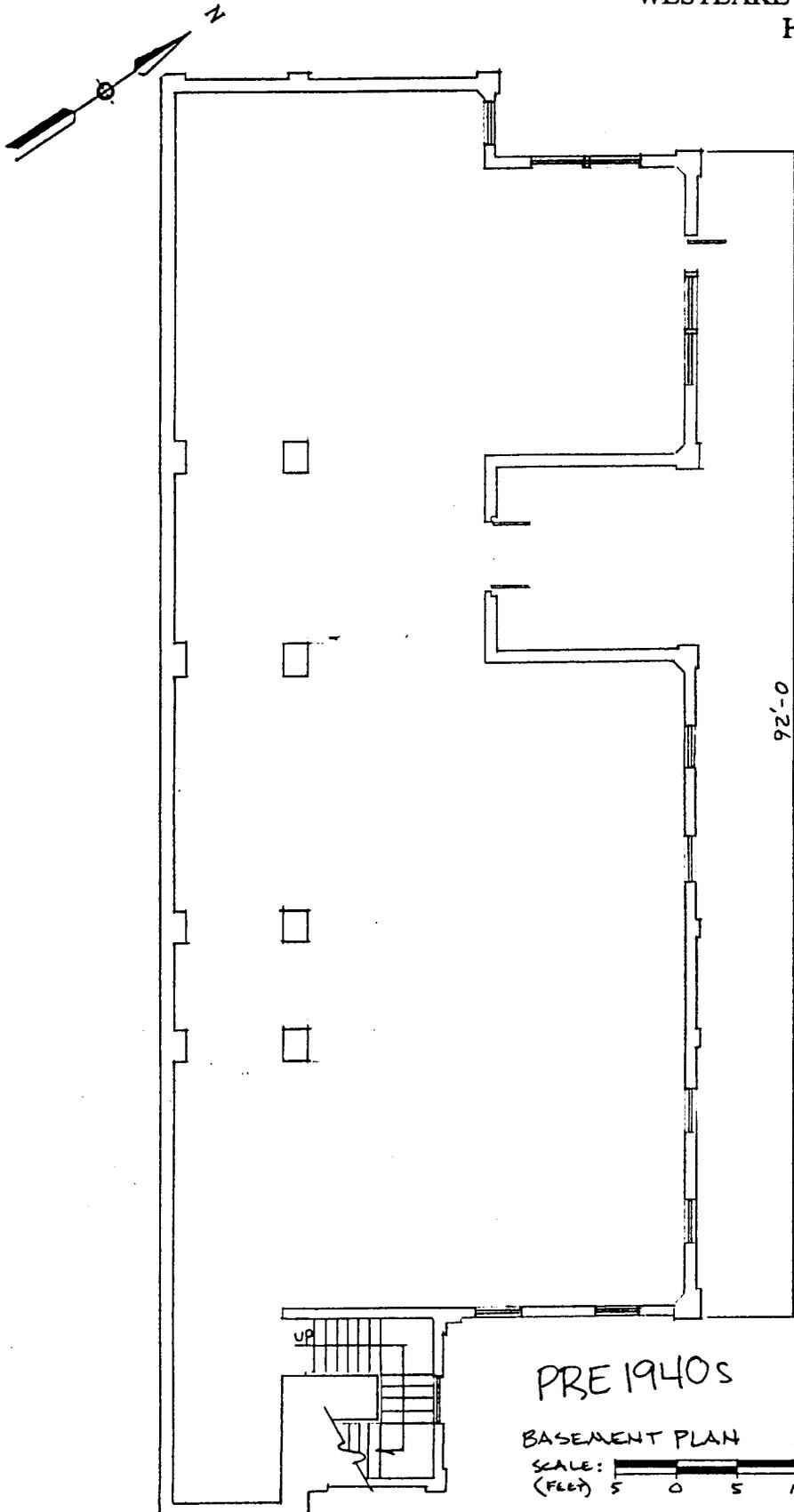




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PRE 1940s

BASEMENT PLAN

SCALE: (FEET) 5 0 5 10