

BLAIR HEIGHTS

State Street, Maple Avenue, Chambers, and Francis Avenue

Clairton

Allegheny County

Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6642

HABS
PA
2-CLAIR,
2-

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

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Location: State Street, Maple Avenue, Chambers, and Francis Avenue
Clairton, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

USGS Glassport Quadrangle

UTM Coordinates: 17.59554.446124, 17.59540.446112,
17.59542.446106, 17.59558.446108

Present Owner: Allegheny County Housing Authority
341 Fourth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Present Occupant: Public housing residents

Present Use: Public housing

Significance: Blair Heights, first occupied in April 1942, was one of Allegheny County's defense housing projects. At the beginning of World War II, the tremendous demand for industrial production resulted in the expansion of steel mills and related industries. Industrial expansion created an influx of workers in need of housing. This defense housing project was designed by the noted Pittsburgh architectural firm of Charles M. and Edward Stotz, Jr. The landscape architect for the project was Ezra Stiles. The spartan, Bauhaus-inspired rows are very similar in design to contemporary public housing such as Allequippa Terrace in Pittsburgh.

Historical Information

Pittsburgh's economy, long based on steel and heavy industry, made the region an ideal candidate for expansion during World War II. The expansion of facilities such as United States Steel's Homestead Works and Dravo's shipbuilding facilities on Neville Island brought an influx of workers to the region which, in turn, created a severe housing shortage. The Federal Works Agency responded by allocating \$22,500,000 to build 5,000 housing units in Allegheny County for defense workers. About a dozen projects were erected, the majority of them in industrial communities throughout the Mon Valley. The defense housing projects ranged in size from the 82-acre Electric Heights complex in Turtle Creek, which contained 148 buildings and 600 units, to the modest Blair Heights complex in Clairton with 11 buildings and 148 units on only six acres. Most of the projects contained 200 to 400 housing units. Blair Heights is a short walk from the USX Clairton Works.

Blair Heights is located on the site of the former Blair family homestead. A publication marking Clairton's 25th anniversary noted that two brothers, Francis and James Blair, left their native Ireland for tropical Jamaica in the early 19th century. After some time there, the brothers moved north and purchased land in what is now Clairton. Deeds indicate the brothers jointly purchased 300 acres from John Gormley in 1827. John built a house on a hill overlooking the Monongahela River. The land at the foot of the hill was named "Irish Point" by river men.

The land remained in the Blair family until the mid 20th century, as the home on the hill was passed from one generation to the next. The Clairton anniversary book includes a reminiscence that at the turn of the century the Blair homestead was occupied by William, Emma, Adelaide, and Frank Blair. In 1901 Margita and Jane H. Blair had a portion of the family property surveyed, and the strip along Francis Street was divided into lots. Several of these parcels were sold in the mid-1920s and improved with modest dwellings. Clairton was incorporated in 1922. Today, the neighborhood in the middle of the borough is still generally known as "Blair" after its early owners.

The parcel bounded by State Street, Maple Avenue, Chambers, and Francis Street was acquired for defense housing by a declaration of taking on September 22, 1941. Although William P. Blair and Adelaide Blair Miller were among the defendants named in the suit, neither lived in Clairton. By the 1920s Adelaide had moved to Swissvale, a suburb of Pittsburgh, and William had moved to Exeter, California. Construction on the complex began December 10, 1941 and the first tenants moved in July 29, 1942. Although built by the federal government, the complex was managed by the Allegheny County Housing Authority. In 1953 the Housing and Home Finance Agency transferred title of the property to the Housing Authority. As of June 1999 a majority of residents have moved

out and demolition is scheduled for late 1999.

The prominent Pittsburgh firm Charles M. and Edward Stotz, Jr. was chosen to design the project. Ezra C. Stiles is noted on the plans as the landscape architect. Charles and Edward Jr.'s father, Edward Stotz, was a noted architect who designed many institutional buildings in the region. Charles received his Master of Architecture degree from Cornell in 1922 then moved to New York City where he worked briefly as a draftsman. The following year he returned to Pittsburgh to join his father's firm. Edward received his degree in engineering and joined the firm a few years later. In 1925 Charles made a European tour which further sparked his interest in architectural history. Upon his return, Stotz began exploring the early buildings around Western Pennsylvania. His hobby eventually lead to the creation of the Western Pennsylvania Architectural Survey which documented pre-Civil War buildings throughout the western half of the state. In 1936 a large-format book "The Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania" was published.

The firm handled a wide variety of projects including United States Steel's research center in Monroeville, Fox Chapel United Presbyterian Church, several buildings for Wells College, Dravo's shipyards, schools, hospitals, and over 150 homes. In 1935, Charles Stotz won first place in the Allegheny County Better Housing Committee's competition for a house combining the "maximum of comfort, convenience and good taste with reasonable first cost and economy of maintenance." Stotz is best remembered, however, for his preservation work. Although he estimated that only 10% of the firm's commissions involved restoration, most books and articles about Stotz feature this aspect of his work. As a result of his study of early Western Pennsylvania buildings, Stotz was commissioned by the state in 1938 to restore Old Economy in Ambridge. This was followed in later years by recreating Fort Ligonier, and developing the Fort Pitt Museum and Point State Park in downtown Pittsburgh. No mention of the commission for Blair Heights was found in any reference to Stotz. Although the stark Bauhaus-inspired design of the complex was unusual for Stotz, who favored more historic styles, he was accomplished with a variety of institutional building types. Doubtless, the extremely tight budget allowed for defense housing dictated the minimalist style.

Architectural Information

The site is circumscribed by State Street, Maple Avenue, Chambers, and Francis Avenue. State Street, also SR 837, is a main artery that skirts the eastern end of Clairton. It contains a mix of residential and commercial buildings, many of the commercial buildings now vacant. East of State Street the USX Clairton Works sprawls along the Monongahela River. The approach to Blair Heights is via Maple Avenue which inclines as it angles west and south. Maple, Chambers, and Francis are residential streets which contain a scattering of houses from the early 20th century.

Blair Heights consists of eleven three-story rows and a community center. The site is level except for the south and east boundaries which slope to meet the adjacent streets. The rows are arranged with rigid geometry-- parallel and perpendicular to each other. Buildings 1, 2, and 3 surround an open quad. Buildings 8, 9, and 10 surround a parking lot. Buildings 5, 6, 7, and 11 are in parallel rows, and Building 4 lies artlessly perpendicular to building 5 as though it were an afterthought. Narrow concrete walks run between the buildings and lead to the entrance doors. Originally, the common areas between the buildings were landscaped with grassed areas and a variety of trees and shrubs. Drying yards to the east and west of buildings 5 and 6 contained clothes poles and lines. The area east of the community building was reserved as a playground with swing sets. Few physical changes have been made over the years. Most of the landscaping has disappeared except for patches of grass and a few scattered trees. Locusts line the fronts of Buildings 8, 9, and 10. Maples, oaks, and crabapples appear near other buildings. Rusted clothes poles remain in the drying yards and the grassed area between them has been paved with concrete. Austere concrete benches have been added to the quad in front of Buildings 1, 2, and 3.

Sources of Information

Architectural drawings and historic views

The Allegheny County Housing Authority has copies of the original drawings for Blair Heights. The Authority has no archives of the organization itself nor any historic images of its projects. No historic images of Blair Heights were located in local repositories such as the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, the Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh, or the Pennsylvania Department at the Carnegie Library.

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Project Information

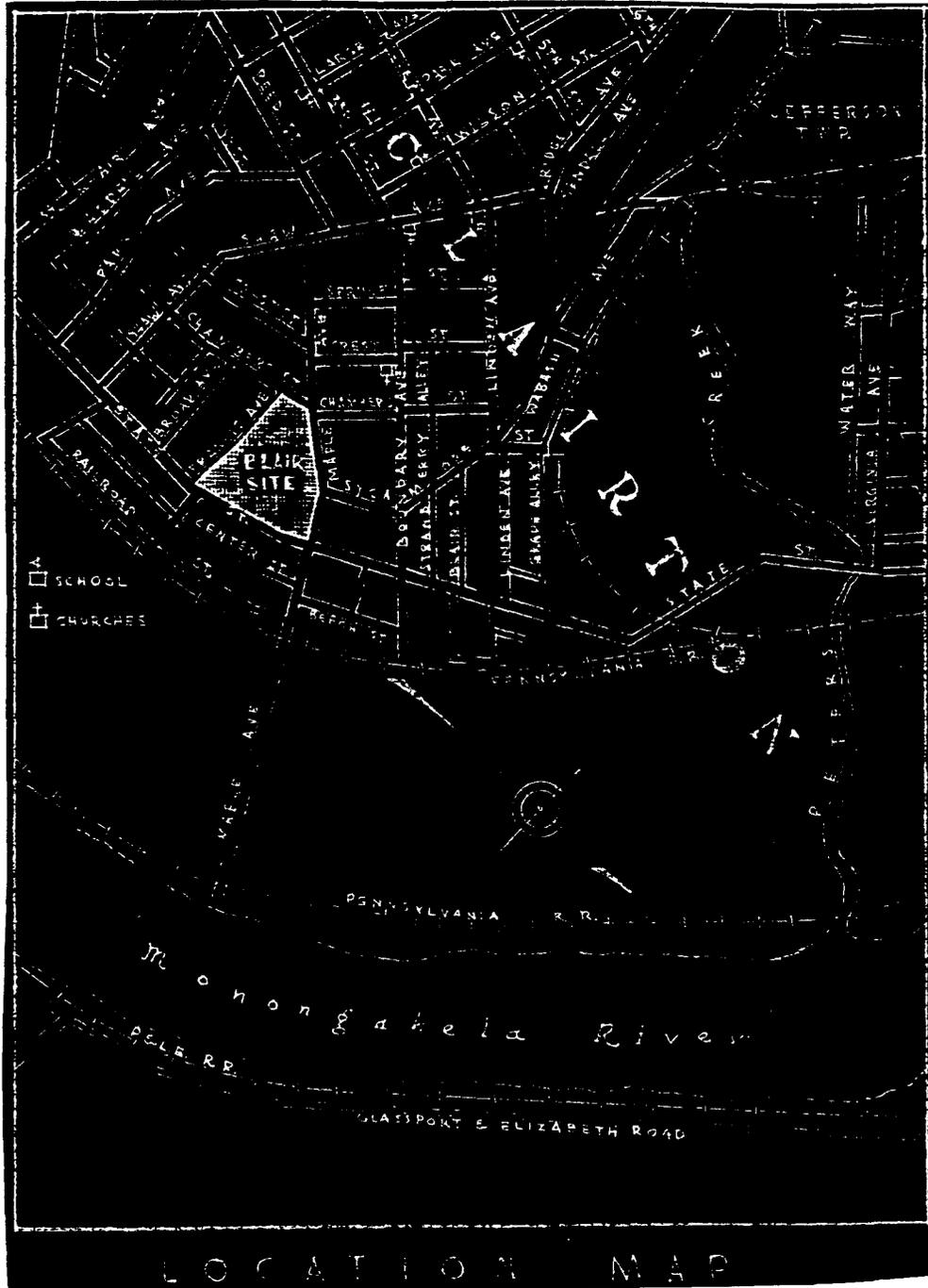
The Blair Heights complex is slated for demolition using funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Prepared by: Lauren Uhl

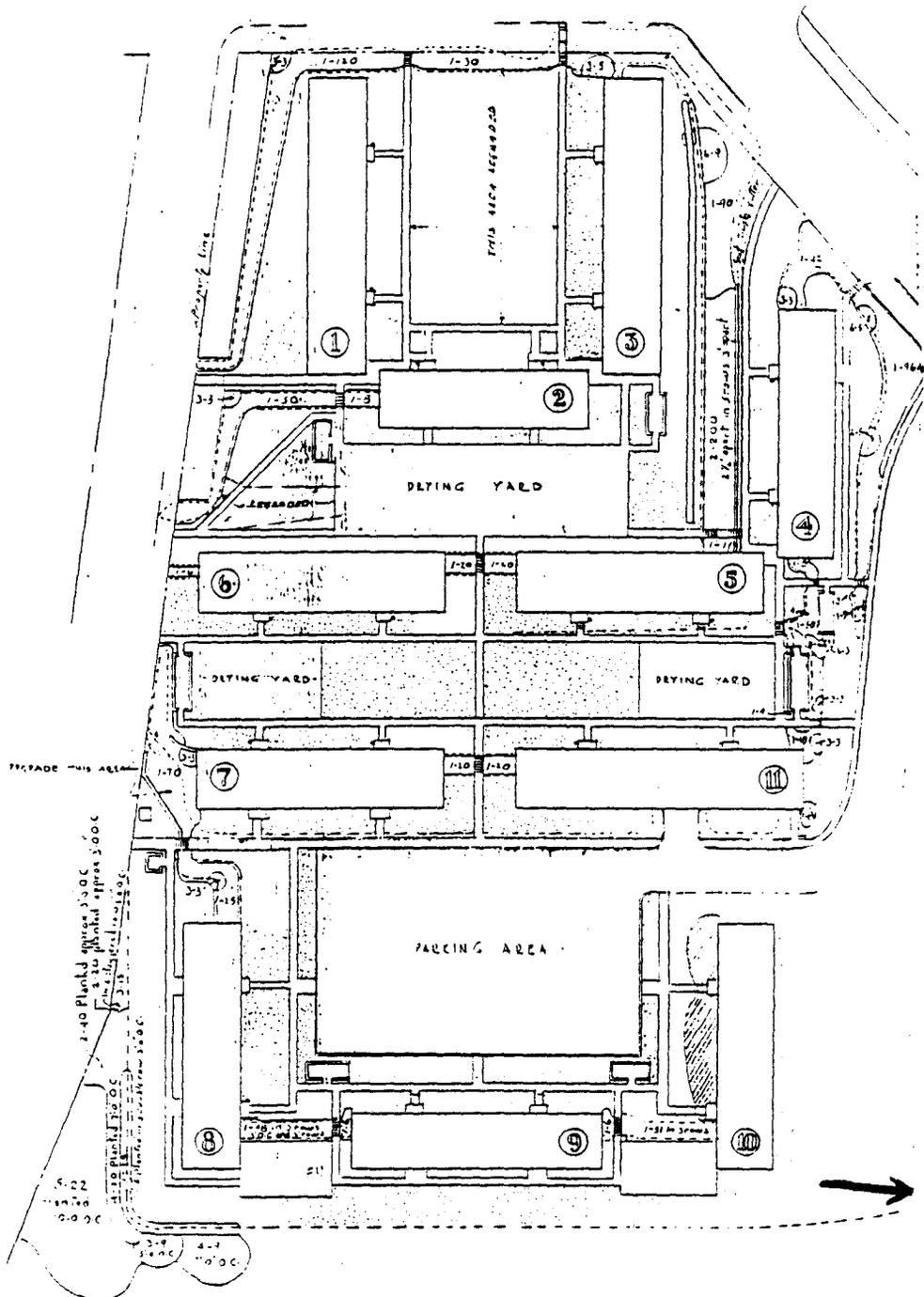
Title: Special Project Associate

Affiliation: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania

Date: June 1999



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Unsigned, Undated Landscape Plan, ca. 1941
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