

ELLIS BILLIARDS BUILDING  
307 Forbes Avenue  
Pittsburgh  
Allegheny County  
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6784  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## ELLIS BILLIARDS BUILDING

HABS No. PA-6784

- Location:** 307 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania  
The Ellis Billiards Building is located at latitude: 40.26241, longitude: -80.00016. This coordinate was obtained on February 1, 2012, by plotting its location on Google Earth. The accuracy of the coordinate is +/- 12 meters.
- Date of Construction:** ca. 1926
- Present Owner:** PNC Bank
- Present Use:** Vacant
- Significance:** The Ellis Billiards Building contributes to the National Register-eligible Pittsburgh Downtown Retail Historic District and is important for its association with the sport of billiards and Pittsburgh's champion player, Charles R. Ellis. The historic district originally included thirty-seven buildings along Fourth, Fifth, and Forbes avenues; however, at least eleven of the buildings have been demolished. The district is significant in the areas of architecture and commerce and retains historic integrity in the areas of location, setting, materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and association. Although some original buildings have been demolished, the style, scale, and form of the remaining buildings retain integrity of design, workmanship, and association.
- Description:** The Ellis Billiards Building is located in part of Tax Parcel 252 at 307-311 Forbes Avenue (former Diamond Street). This three-story, seven-bay building was constructed in 1926 of brick, terra cotta, and stone shortly before the F & W Grand 5 & 10 & 25 Cent Store opened a store on 306-310 Fifth Avenue in 1928. The Ellis Billiards Building is only three stories while the F & W Grand Building was four stories, thus the rear windows were infilled with brick. F & W Grand expanded into the Ellis Billiards Building's first floor, using it as a rear entrance for their store. From this rear entrance, plate glass display windows opened onto the street. Above the windows were black vitrolite panels and the name "F & W Grand 5-10-25 Cent Stores." The Ellis Billiards sign was located on the second and third stories near the center of the building.
- Most recently a restaurant and two commercial one-story shops, each with a separate entrance and basement, occupied the first floor of these

extensively remodeled buildings. The name “F&W Grand Stores” still exists on the first floor’s red and white tile entrance leading to the stairway up to Ellis Billiards. The stairs have tin ceilings and original hand rails and balustrades.

The building’s Classical elements include Ionic pilasters, parapets, and a cornice with lion heads, dentils and other design elements. A metal fire escape spans the street façade. Metal grates and signs have damaged the vitrolite.

The second and third floor billiard rooms measure 78' long x 58' wide. The use of two floors is characteristic of billiard rooms and function to separate the more challenging carom billiards tables from regular billiards. Both floors have original tin ceilings, painted brown. The light fixtures are no longer extant. Both floors are open spaces divided only by eight columns. On the second floor is a check-in desk constructed of wood. Floors are epoxy over mesh on the third floor and asphalt tiles on the second floor.

#### History:

The Ellis Billiards Building at 307-311 Forbes Avenue (formerly Diamond Street) was constructed in the spring of 1926 for Andrew Mellon, the prominent banker and United States Secretary of Treasury, who had purchased this property in 1902. Mellon also owned the adjoining lot at the corner of Wood and Diamond Streets. This lot at 307-311 Forbes Avenue was previously owned by other important Pittsburgh citizens, including Reuben Miller, Jr. and John Bissel who achieved wealth during the city’s Civil War-era iron industry and later served as bank officers. Bissel purchased the property in 1856, and when he died nine years later in 1865, the property was granted to his daughter, Annie M. Bissell. Miss Bissell mortgaged the two lots on Diamond Street in July of 1894 when there were two brick stores or warehouses on the property.<sup>1</sup> Within five months, the bank sold the lots to Reuben Miller, Jr. for \$145,000.<sup>2</sup> Andrew Mellon acquired the property in July of 1902 from Miller for only \$7,000, as well as “other valuable considerations” that were not recorded. The deed also was subject to provisions in a city ordinance for widening Diamond Street.<sup>3</sup>

After Diamond Alley was widened ca. 1903 and became Diamond Street, the original two brick buildings on this lot remained until the 1920s when the Ellis Billiards Building replaced them. The building originally had three commercial spaces on the first floor and a billiards parlor on the second and third floors. The first floor of the Ellis Billiards Building

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<sup>1</sup> Allegheny County Mortgage Book 747:122.

<sup>2</sup> Allegheny County Deed Book 915:423.

<sup>3</sup> Allegheny County Deed Book 1465:444.

functioned as the rear entrance for the F & W Grand 5 & 10 & 25 Cent Store. The main entrance was located on 306-310 Fifth Avenue until the store closed during the Great Depression.

The floor and window configuration of the second and third floors suggests that this commercial space was designed to function as billiard rooms. National billiard champion, Charles R. Ellis, managed the facility. Ellis won the world three-cushion billiard championship in March 1915.<sup>4</sup>

Although Ellis never won the championship again, he devoted most of his working life to the sport. He collaborated with another champion player from Pittsburgh – Charles McCourt – to form the McCourt-Ellis Recreation Company during the heyday for billiards in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The McCourt-Ellis billiards room opened on the opposite side of Diamond Street in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

A full-page article in *Billiards Magazine*, dated May of 1926 and entitled “Charley Ellis Moves to New Location in Pittsburgh,” described the champion billiards player and his new facility at 307 Diamond Street.<sup>7</sup> Ellis was a “popular Steel City southpaw cue ace and former national three-cushion titleholder.”<sup>8</sup> He managed the McCourt-Ellis billiards room across Diamond Street for many years but was searching for a new location. Rents were high in Pittsburgh and space hard to find in the crowded downtown. As the new building across the street at 307 Diamond reached completion, Ellis negotiated a ten-year lease for the second and third floors. On April 28, 1926, Ellis opened the “finest hall of its kind in the Golden Triangle” furnished with twenty-nine billiard tables, fifteen pocket slabs, a soda fountain, and a lunch counter with “iceless refrigeration” on the second floor. Installed on the third floor were fourteen tables for carom billiards, a variation of the game.<sup>9</sup> As reported in *Billiards Magazine*, “billiards is no simple game and in the fashion in which the rank and file of Pittsburgh players has advanced the past winter or two speaks well for increase interest and popularity of the sport.”<sup>10</sup>

“From 1890 until the 1940s, Pittsburgh was a major hub of billiards in northeast United States, rivaled only by New York, Boston and Philadelphia. A number of world tournaments and title challenge matches

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<sup>4</sup> “Chicago Daily News Almanac,” *Chicago Daily News*, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Shamos, “Charles Ellis and Billiards in Pittsburgh,” personal email to Christine Davis Consultants, Inc., December 5, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> R. L. Polk and Company, *Pittsburgh City Directory*, 1924-1926, <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/>, accessed on November 17, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Sullivan, “Charles Ellis Moves to New Location in Pittsburgh,” *Billiards Magazine*, 1926. (Copy provided by The Billiards Archives, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

were held here and Pittsburgh was home to several world champions including Ira Morningstar, Charles R. Ellis, and Charles McCourt.”<sup>11</sup> Eight world title competitions took place in Pittsburgh between 1896 and 1931. Billiards was one of the few participatory sports for males in the 1920s and 1930s when the sport reached its heyday.<sup>12</sup> By 1929, there were 160 billiard rooms in Pittsburgh and five companies offering billiard tables and supplies.<sup>13</sup> “The billiard room was an exclusively male environment dominated by cigar smoking, spittoons and betting.”<sup>14</sup> A champion like Charley Ellis brought a clientele interested in learning and watching an expert.<sup>15</sup>

When surveyed in 1987 by Pittsburgh History and Landmarks, this Classical Building at 307 Diamond was believed to date to ca. 1909 based on its context in Pittsburgh's architecture. The building was documented in 1980 during the Pittsburgh survey (003-P-R153-F27) when the Radio Shack, Hardee's Restaurant, and a store occupied the storefronts.

Sources:

**ENGINEERING DRAWINGS:** Carnegie Mellon University's Architectural Archives and Pittsburgh History and Landmarks archives were searched but no original architecture drawings were found.

**HISTORIC VIEWS:** A copy of a photograph, taken by Gerald Schiller of Verona, was provided by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks. The view dates to ca. 1940. No other photographs were found during searches conducted at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Archives of Industrial Society, and Heinz History Center.

**INTERVIEWS:** Arthur Ziegler of the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks and Martin Aurand of Carnegie Mellon University were interviewed.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Shamos, *The New Illustrated Encyclopedia of Billiards* (Connecticut: Globe Pequot, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> R. L. Polk and Company, *Pittsburgh City Directory*, 1924-1926.

<sup>14</sup> Shamos, *The New Illustrated Encyclopedia of Billiards*.

<sup>15</sup> Shamos, “Charles Ellis and Billiards in Pittsburgh.”

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Sullivan, Paul. "Charles Ellis Moves to New Location in Pittsburgh." *Billiards Magazine*, 1926. Copy provided by The Billiards Archive, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**LIKELY SOURCES NOT YET INVESTIGATED:** There are no other sources known or thought to contain further or related information other than those listed in the Bibliography section of this document.

**SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION:** Professor Michael Shamos shared information and photographs from The Billiards Archive, the largest holding of billiard artwork in the United States. Mike Shamos is the Curator of the Billiard Archive, a non-profit foundation dedicated to preserving the history of pool, billiards, and snooker. He is also a Contributing Editor of Billiards Digest and has written four books and over 400 articles on billiard history. On weekdays, Shamos is a professor in the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University.

Historian: Christine Davis, 2011

Project Information: The Ellis Billiards Building Recording Project was undertaken by Christine Davis Consultants in 2011 as a mitigation project for PNC Bank. Christine Davis served as project leader and historian. Jeffrey DeNinno and Janelle Kemerer of DeNinno Architects LLC produced the drawings. Charles Uhl produced the digital photography in the Illustrated Appendix of this report.

ILLUSTRATED APPENDIX

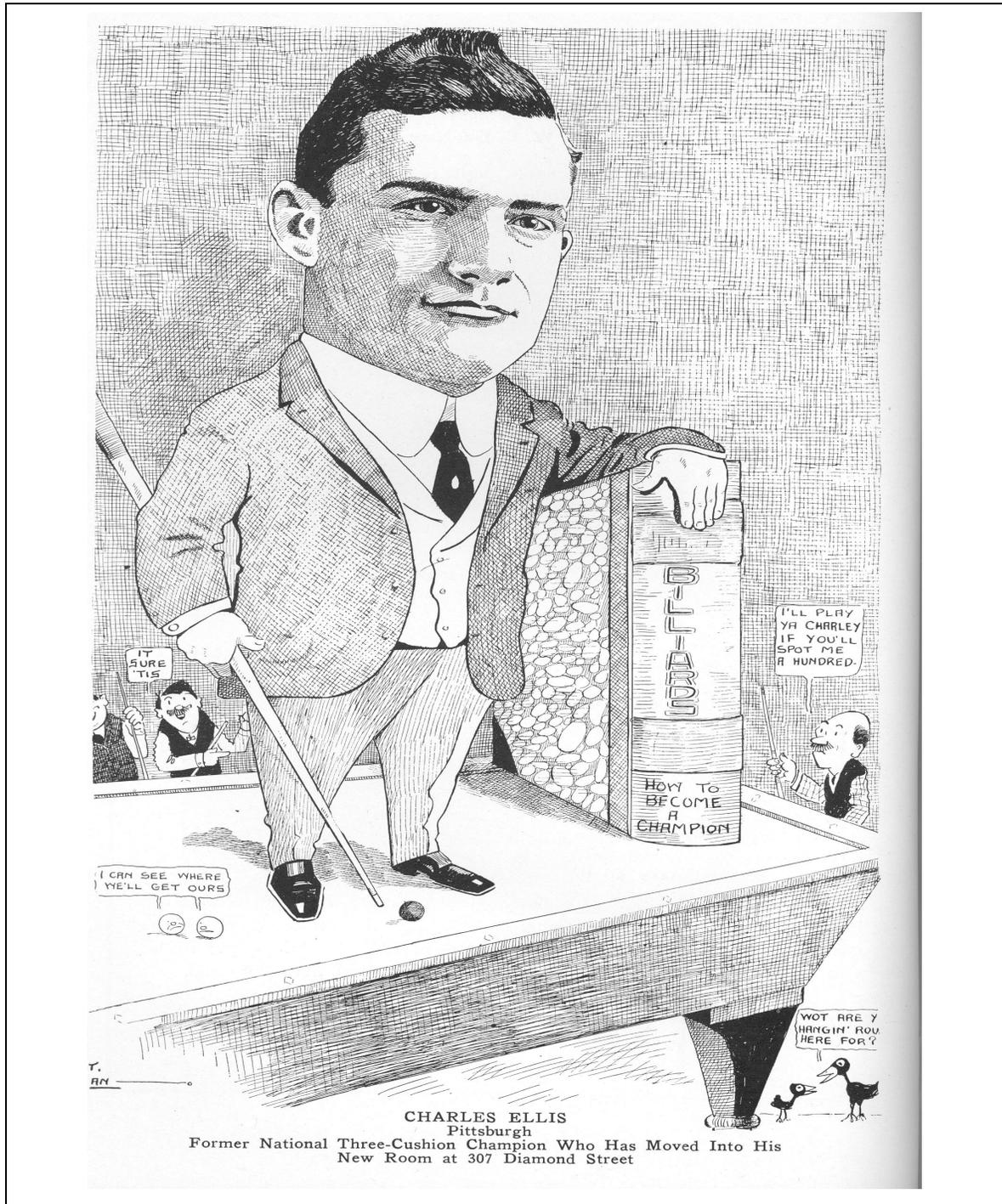


Figure 1. Historic Cartoon Image of Charles Ellis. Provided by The Billiards Archive, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1926).

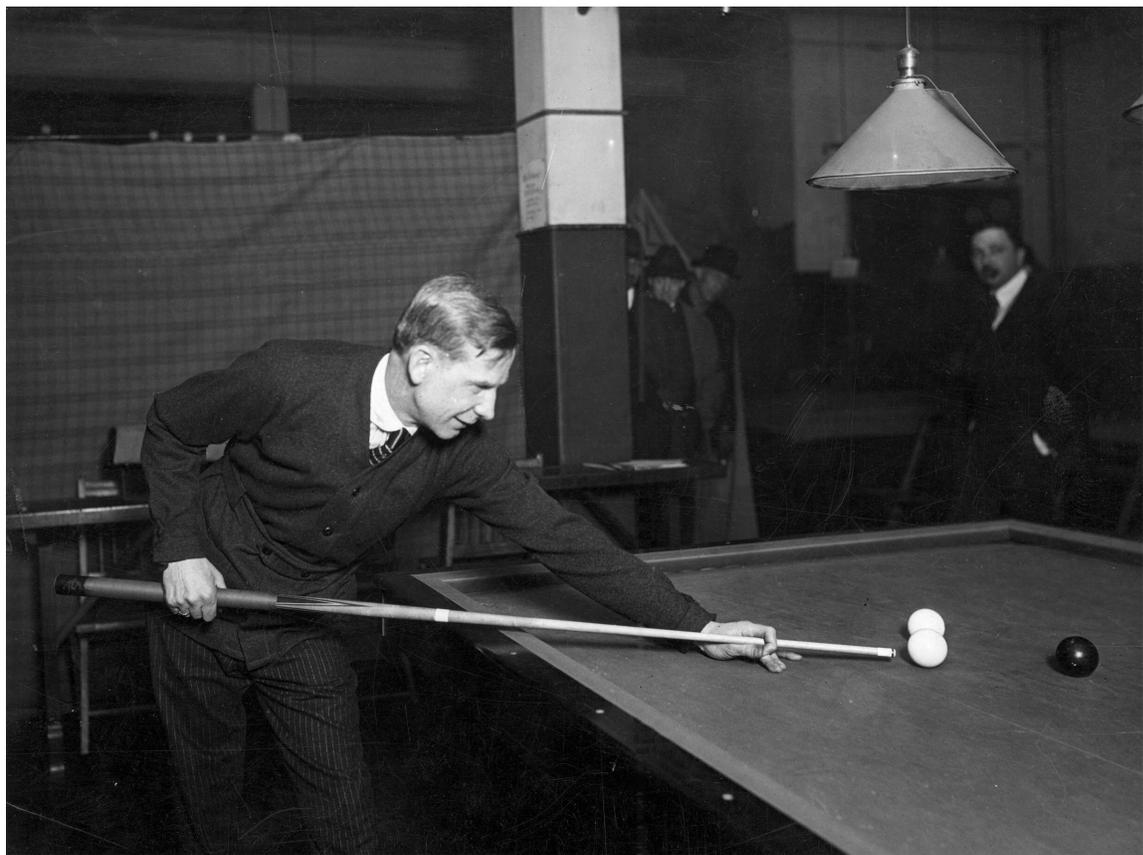


Figure 2. Historic Image of Pittsburgh Billiards Champion Charles McCourt. Provided by The Billiards Archive, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1926).

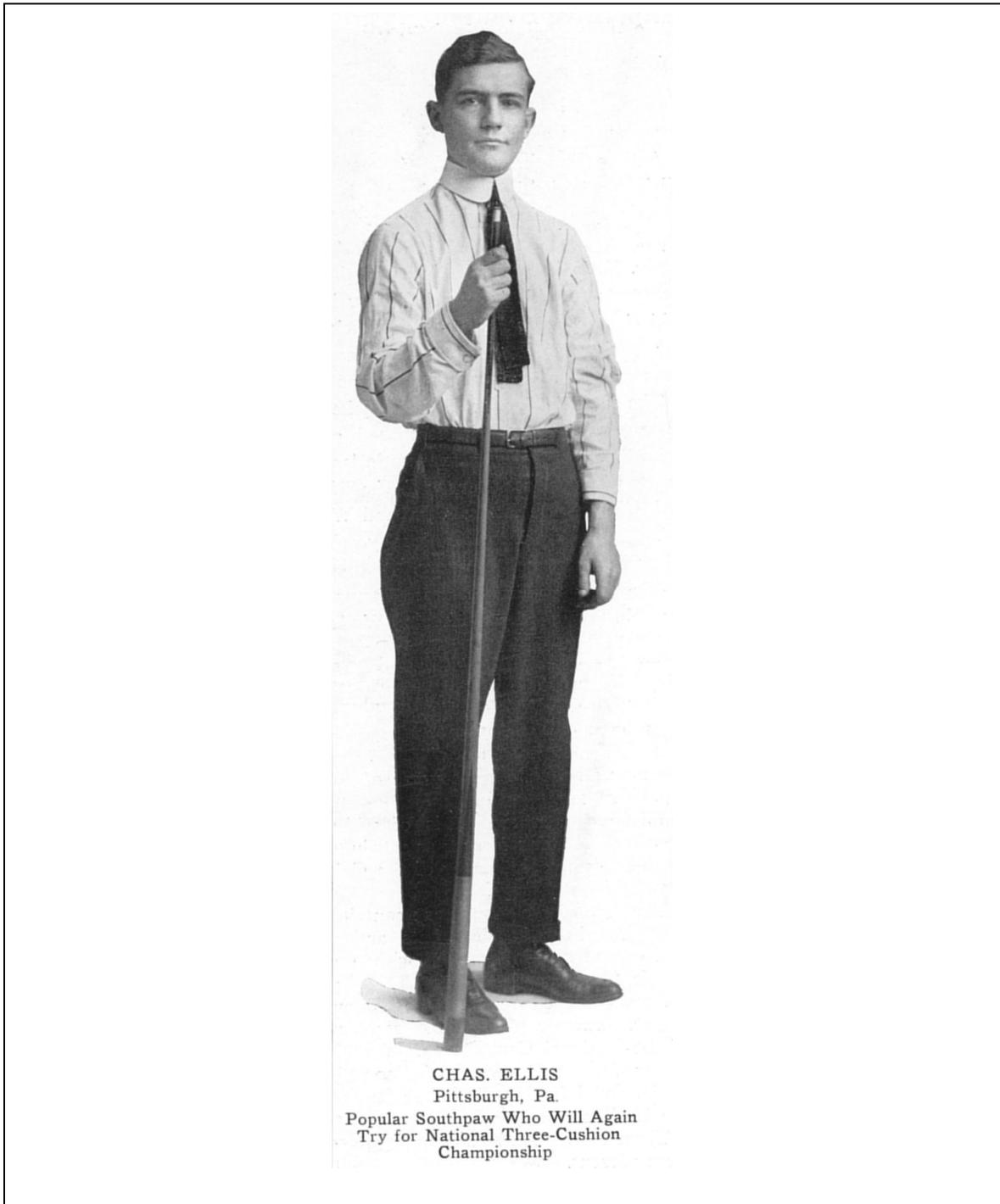


Figure 3. Historic Image of Charles Ellis. Provided by The Billiards Archive, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1926).

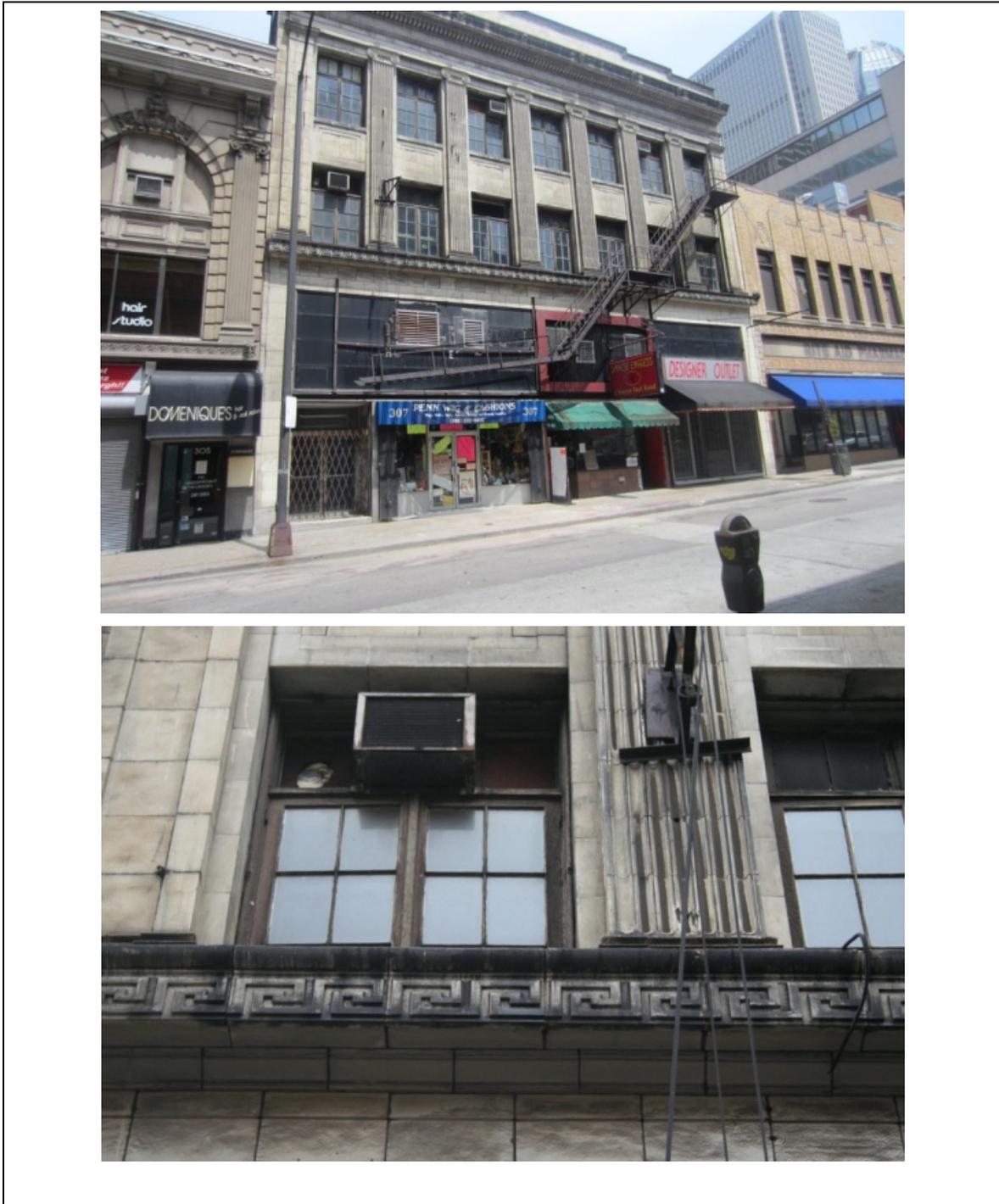


Figure 4. Ellis Billiards Building looking northeast on Forbes Avenue.

(All digital photographs by Charles Uhl, 2011.)

Figure 5. Detail of terra cotta on second floor façade.

ILLUSTRATED APPENDIX



Figure 6. Detail of terra cotta pilasters.  
Figure 7. Detail of vitrolite glass panels on façade.

ILLUSTRATED APPENDIX



Figure 8. Detail of terra cotta entrance to stairway with tile entrance.  
Figure 9. Original tile: rear entrance to the F & W Grand Store.

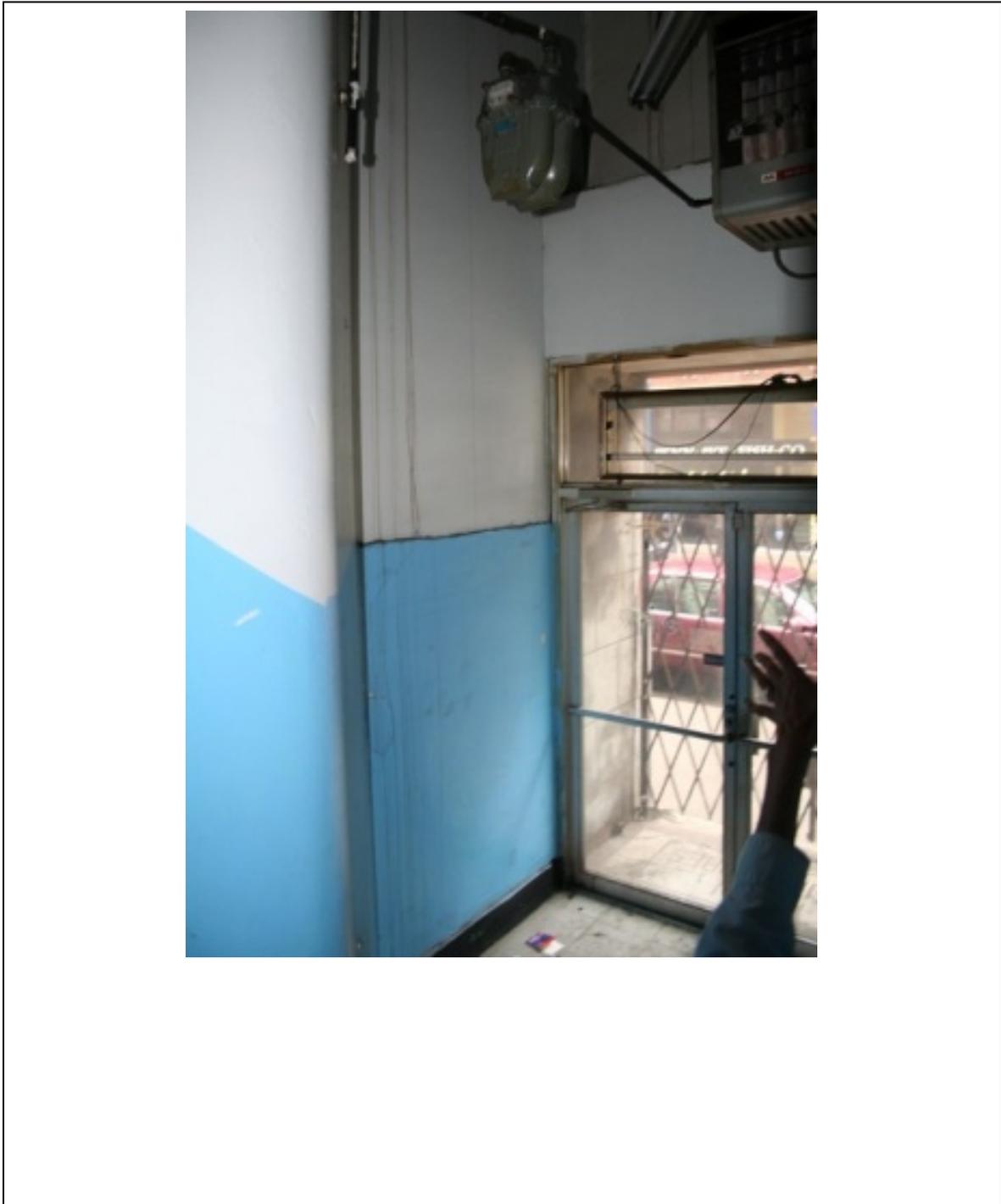


Figure 10. Interior of entrance on Diamond Street.



Figure 11. Stairway leading to second floor.

Figure 12. Detail of tin ceiling.



Figure 13. Second floor window looking onto Diamond Street.  
Figure 14. Tin ceiling on second floor.



Figure 15. Detail of tin ceiling.  
Figure 16. Third floor indicating tin ceiling.



Figure 17. Third floor.

Figure 18. Roof view looking north to Fifth Avenue and adjoining buildings.

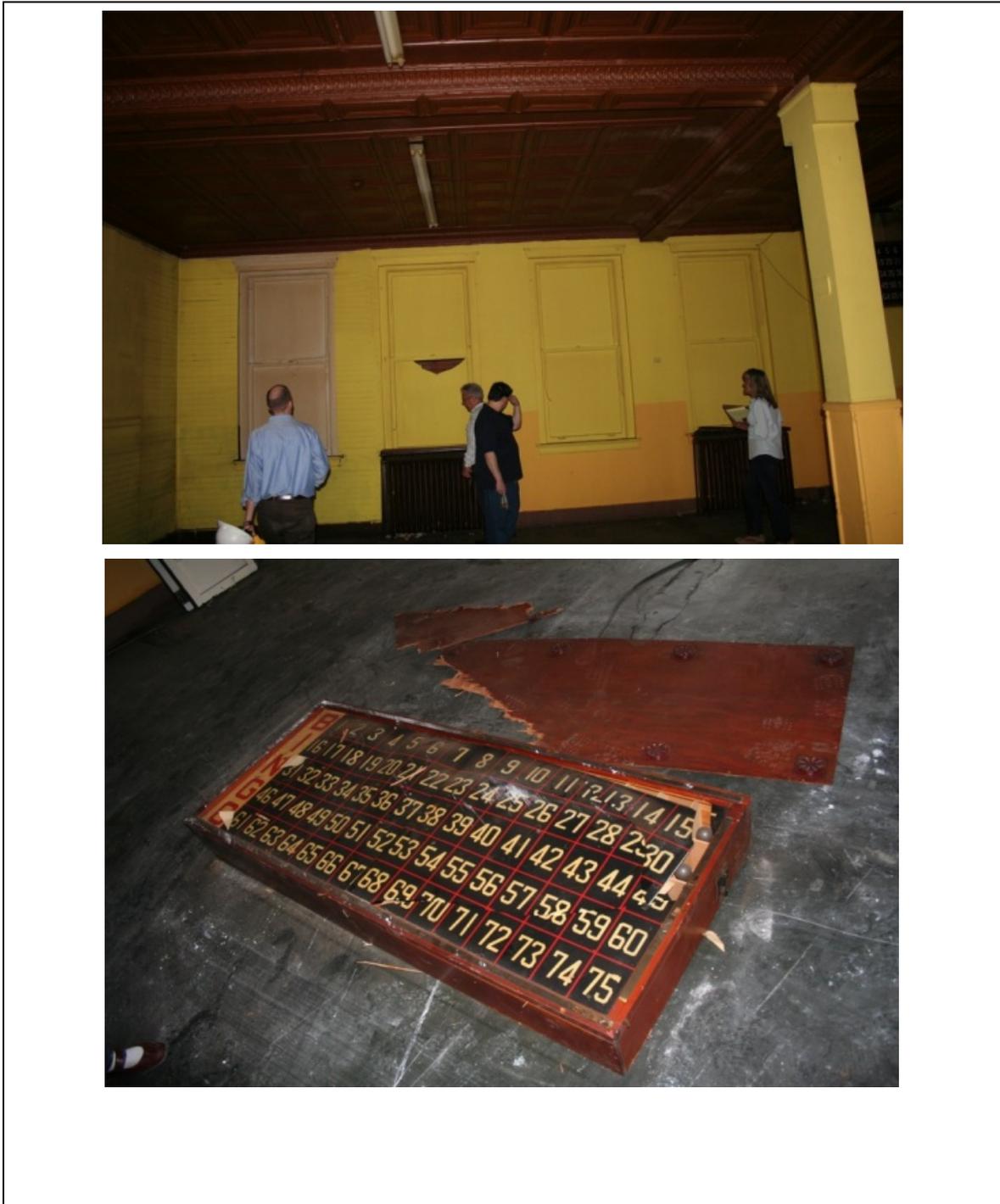


Figure 19. Third floor indicating original windows, later bricked in.  
Figure 20. Bingo Board in Ellis Billiards Building.