

a brief history of Morningside



Morningside, a small strip of land 4.6 miles east of downtown Pittsburgh on the Allegheny River, was incorporated into the City of Pittsburgh shortly after the end of the Civil War in 1868. At the time, “Morningside” did not refer to a neighborhood, but a small, primarily agrarian community in the flat bottom of the Morningside Valley [1]. The valley, which got its name from the large amounts of sunlight it received in the morning, is at the center of what was once Collins Township, a large tract of land bordered by the

Allegheny River, Negley's Run, and Greensburg Pike (now Penn Avenue) [4]. The land passed from George Croghan, a trader and landowner in the 18th century, to attorney Thomas Collins in the early years of the city [2]. Upon incorporation, Collins Township became the 18th and 19th wards of the city, which today comprise parts of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh wards.

Settlement in Morningside started primarily in the area between present-day Baker and Greenwood Streets, both of which served for a short time as hilltop trenches during the Civil War when Robert E. Lee advanced into Pennsylvania [1]. Throughout the 19th century, Morningside was inhabited by about a dozen families, four of which owned farms in the valley. Though the area is now densely developed into single-family homes, it spent nearly a century as three dairy farms—the Cook, Weber, and Dieffenbacher—and a vegetable farm, the Reichenbecker [3]. By the turn of the twentieth century, Morningside consisted of about 80 homes, but still retained its old dirt roads and fields, and had no sidewalks. By contrast, to the north, the borough of Sharpsburg already had a population of almost 7,000 and neighboring East Liberty was well on its way to becoming prosperous marketplace, in large part because of its role as a streetcar and rail hub [14].

With this city becoming increasingly crowded, however, the era of Morningside's "garden farms" started to come to an end in 1906, when the Pittsburgh Railway decided to extend its streetcar service from Stanton Avenue up Chislett St. to the heart of Morningside [3]. Indeed, the expansion was a small one: the new street car only traveled a little over a mile from the corner of Stanton Avenue and North Negley up Chislett St. to Greenwood St. [1]. Still, prior to the street car expansion, the only way to get access to the Morningside Valley was to either take a streetcar up Butler Street along the river and then hike the steep hill up Baker Street or to walk from Stanton Avenue. Combined with the construction of a bridge over the Allegheny at Aspinwall, the street car opened up a north-south corridor from the Sharpsburg-Aspinwall area north of the Allegheny River, through Morningside, and right into the rail stations and streetcars of East Liberty [3].

In anticipation of the Chislett St. line, *The Pittsburgh Leader* ran a feature on Morningside in June of 1905 that set the tone for the area's imminent development and is the first published account of Morningside.



Morningside was not a familiar area to Pittsburghers, and the article reads primarily as an advertisement for the valley, focusing on a number of environmental factors that made Morningside a healthy place to live and touting its prime location between the towns north of the Allegheny and the central East End.

The article describes the valley as an old-fashioned, charming place, with, "white and green houses and a bubbling brook," which might be expected in a sales pitch of any neighborhood [5]. Importantly, however, *The Leader* says that with little effort, this brook — Hights Run — might easily be, "arched over and turned into a sewer" [5]. Far from a point of disgust, the idea of a readily available sewer is presented here as an amenity that might ensure health and hygiene [5]. Similarly, *The Leader* advertises the absence of smoke in the Morningside Valley as unique and healthy advantage over other neighborhoods. The nearest mills and industrial sites to Morningside were to the north in Sharpsburg and the east in East Liberty, and Morningside's steep topography protected it from both. Interestingly, while the discussion of sewers and smoke is consistent with issues raised by the late-nineteenth century public health movement, the article also gives a strong nod to much earlier theories of disease, saying that the valley's extraordinarily high sun exposure drove mists and vapors out the valley, making Morningside, "one of the healthiest spots in Greater Pittsburgh" [5].

Even as early as 1905, overcrowding had already become a problem in some city wards and Morningside was offered as a solution. *The Leader* observed that, "waves of population seem to have rolled over it but left it intact,"

but that would quickly change [5]. Now connected to the busy east-west streetcar loop along Fifth-Forbes-Highland-Penn, and also serving as a way for residents of Sharpsburg-Aspinwall-Fox Chapel to travel through the East End to destinations south, such as Squirrel Hill and Homestead, Morningside farmers realized it was time to sell. Millionaires began investing in housing stock in Morningside: the first of the group was Leopold Vilsack—the namesake of Vilsack Avenue—who put up 15 new homes in 1906 [5].

After the introduction of the streetcar, the first wave of residents into the neighborhood came from nearby Lawrenceville and Millvale, and was comprised primarily of middle-class English, German, Irish, and Scottish Protestants, though there was also a significant contingent of Jews, which remained until the 1940s [3]. In the same way that city residents later left the city proper for its suburbs, residents of Lawrenceville and Millvale at the turn of the century had grown tired of urban problems. Pollution, crowding, and worsening economic conditions within neighborhoods sent those who had the opportunity to leave flying to Morningside. The trend of upward mobility became apparent enough that one Lawrenceville priest observed that, “as soon as Lawrencevillers learn to eat pie with a fork they move to Morningside” [4]. The majority of those who settled Morningside were not heavy industrial laborers, but rather pattern makers, machinists, carpenters, and small business owners. Morningside, unlike Hazelwood, Sharpsburg, or Braddock, was never home to any mills or major industry, except for a short period where a brickyard existed on Standish Street. Morningside, while



A typical Morningside home at the corner of Morningside Ave and Greenwood St.

not a well-to-do neighborhood, enjoyed above average income through the first half of the twentieth century [3].

Starting in 1915, Morningside experienced a housing boom, with a period of intense construction from 1924 to 1928, when 600 dwellings were constructed. By 1921, the Morningside Community Association had over 400 members, and by 1930, the valley had been completely settled and the Protestant population of the neighborhood had peaked [3]. Fully settled, the neighborhood of Morningside was small by all measures, comprising 352 acres, or only 1% of the City of Pittsburgh’s area, and, with nearly 6,000 residents by 1940, housing only about 1% of city’s population [3]. With its unique topography, bordered by a hill, a ravine, and a stream, there was little room for expansion after 1930.

The effects of overcrowding and economic pressures continued to transform Morningside into the second half of the twentieth century. After World War II, an influx of Italian immigrants significantly altered the culture and consistency of the neighborhood. While Morningside had been primarily a community of relatively affluent Protestants, the Italian immigrants that relocated to Morningside from more crowded areas of the city like Bloomfield, East Liberty, and the South Side were Catholic and noticeably more working-class than their Protestant counterparts [6]. Keeping pace with the change, the Catholic church in Morningside, St. Raphael, underwent a dramatic expansion in the early 1950s. In 1949, with a \$150,000 grant from Mildred Kelly King—one of the few Catholics in the prominent King family of Pittsburgh—and support from a variety of other partners, the church built a new building to accommodate the burgeoning Italian population [6]. In 1958, St. Raphael’s congregation was only 5% Italian, but by 1968 it was over 40% Italian due to an influx of Italians from an ethnic enclave along Larimer Avenue in East Liberty. Later, in 1970, the church and the neighborhood saw a second, smaller influx of Italians, this time from Italy itself instead of neighboring communities. [4].

After reaching a peak population of 6,004 in the 1960 census, Morningside experienced significant population loss in the second half of the twentieth century. Still, it would be misleading to say that Morningside declined in the same way that Pittsburgh in general declined after the collapse of heavy industry. In fact, the period be-

tween 1960 and the 1990 proved a period of stability for the neighborhood. Despite population loss, decreases in the number of married couples, and an increasing elderly population through the 1960s and 1970s, other indicators show that the neighborhood remained fairly healthy [7]. In particular, a comprehensive Pittsburgh-wide survey conducted by the Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance in 1977 reported that Morningside's satisfaction with the neighborhood and its services, such as parks, recreation, schools, garbage collection, fire department, and police, were all very high compared to city averages [3].

Despite population decline, news reports in the 1980s and 1990s consistently described the neighborhood as uniquely stable: families who moved there in the mid-twentieth century stayed put and there was little movement in or out. Census statistics bear this tendency out: in 1977, 74% of Morningside residents lived in the same house they had five years prior, with 92.8% having lived in Pittsburgh five years prior; outsiders represented only 2.8% percent of the population [3]. A 1980 feature from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reiterated this point. Karen LaFrance, a Pittsburgh city planner at the time, observed that, “[Morningside is] a very stable neighborhood. There's very little opportunity for outsiders to move in” [6]. Most houses passed within families or to other families in Morningside, creating what some residents considered attractive—but artificially low—housing prices [6]. Morningsiders seemed to have been aware that the community had problems, but remained committed to their neighborhood. Indeed, while 47% of residents in the 1977 survey said their neighborhood had gotten worse in the past two years, only 17% said they would leave if given the option [4].

This stability resulted in a neighborhood that exceeded Pittsburgh averages throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Morningside consistently had a higher rate of home ownership than the city, and a lower crime rate. Whereas Pittsburgh remained roughly half owner-occupied, half rented in the period between 1970 and 1980, Morningside experienced owner-occupancy rates of about 70% over the same period, and a vacancy rate on only 2% [8]. In 1984, the Pittsburgh Department of Health and Welfare reported that Morningside home values exceeded Pittsburgh's average by 18% (though, as I have said, this might be artificially low) and the neighborhood had a workforce that enjoyed higher rates of employment than their peers in other neighborhoods [7]. The neighborhood remained primarily work-

ing class, with only 10% of the residents over the age of 25 having a college degree in 1984 [7]. Morningside also bucked the city's crime trends: crime in the early 1970s hovered between 10 and 20 crimes per thousand, and by 1980 was still only 15.8 per thousand [8].

After the Italian influx, the racial composition of the neighborhood also remained static for over fifty years. African-Americans did not relocate to Morningside after urban renewal programs pushed large populations of blacks out of the Hill, instead deciding to settle to the east in Homewood [7]. The number of African-Americans in Morningside actually stagnated or decreased between 1960 and 1980 [7]. A lack of African-American residents did not prevent the neighborhood from becoming the site of a significant show of racial violence. In August 1987, Morningside was the site of the second in a string of three attacks by whites on black families (the others were in Oakland and Point Breeze) that led to a widely publicized anti-violence parade through the heart of Morningside.

While this bout with racial violence cast a pall on Morningside, the area's stability over many decades resulted in a neighborhood dynamic that was distinctly more small town than inner-city. Though it lacks a major business district, the community boasted public and private schools, a strong community development association, a community center, two parks, and an



St. Raphael Church, the largest congregation in Morningside, is historically strongly Italian.

uncharacteristically robust set of youth athletic programs. Morningside's biggest claim to fame in the last half of the twentieth century was undoubtedly its midget football team, the Morningside Bulldogs. Started by community organizer and later Superintendent of Pittsburgh's Department of Parks and Recreation, Joe Natoli, in 1949, the Bulldogs played in Morningside from 1950 to 1979 [6]. Recognized as the most successful pre-high school football team in the country, the team had to travel into Ohio, Tennessee, and Virginia to find opposing teams that matched their skill level, and ended their run with a record of 271-19-8 [6]. For his leadership of the Bulldogs and four decades of service with the city and county, Morningside's sports field (and largest open space) was renamed Joe Natoli Field in 1980, just after Natoli put the Bulldogs into retirement. Both Natoli and the Bulldogs are considerable points of pride for the residents of Morningside, and are consistently referred to in newspaper reports on the city throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

While its stability and lack of mobility formed the foundation for Morningside's tight-knit sense of community, it also resulted in aging community which could no longer support the type of activity it once had. By the 1990s, the percentage of elderly residents in the neighborhood, which had been rising through the 1970s and 1980s, reached over 15% and showed no sign of letting up [9]. As the elderly residents of the neighborhood began to sell their homes or pass away, younger residents moved in and the community changed once again. In 1991, the sudden and unexpected failure of the neighborhood's only grocery store put a spotlight on the changing community dynamic. Stumpf's Market, which had started out as a meat shop five generations before, was forced to close its doors because of declining sales [10]. Importantly, Stumpf's had served a walking community. For nearly seven decades, Morningsiders had walked into the grocery store, but after the market closed, elderly residents who did not know how to drive were disadvantaged [10]. According to the store's owner, the younger residents of the neighborhood, who were not adverse to driving outside the neighborhood to find grocery bargains, stopped going to Stumpf's and it proved impossible for the store to recover in a changing neighborhood [10].

Despite indications of decline and change in the early 1990s, Morningside proved particularly resilient among neighboring communities, especially at keeping its eth-

nic community in tact. In her 1993 ethnographic study of six East End neighborhoods, researcher Michelle Franco found the neighborhood to be uniquely tight-knit, even closed, relative to the surrounding neighborhoods, noting that:

"Morningsiders, especially the older ones, would be happy if a plastic bubble stretched over the neighborhood forever. Ultimately, Morningside emerged as the gem of my study, with a vibrant and stable ethnic community – a neighborhood in a time warp" [4].

Indeed, only after getting an interview with Joe Natoli would residents of the community agree to speak with her, so concerned were they that publicity might draw undesirable people into the community. Despite the decline and imminent collapse of the neighborhood's Protestant churches and the general trend of consolidation among Pittsburgh's Catholic churches, Franco found that Catholic St. Raphael had remained a pillar of the community. She reported that Morningside's Italian community had not weakened, but grown stronger and more cohesive throughout the last half of the twentieth century. The feelings among the neighborhood's residents, while tinted with pessimism at the specter of a growing African-American contingent, were still optimistic that Morningside would remain an Italian neighborhood into the next decade.

Into the twenty-first century, Morningside has struggled to deal with an influx of younger residents, while also maintaining its stable community dynamic and working-class Italian culture. The Italians of Morningside have traditionally thought of their community (and not Bloomfield) as the Italian neighborhood of Pittsburgh. By the beginning of the 21st century, Morningside had supplanted Bloomfield as the city's most ethnically Italian neighborhood, though by 2000, the neighborhood was still only 29% Italian, down from 36% in 1990 [11]. A 2003 report by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on the decline of ethnic neighborhoods describes the city-wide trend succinctly:

"Deaths of the first wave of European immigrants and their children explain much of the region's percentage declines, along with migration into communities by other nationality or racial groups. The tendency of upwardly mobile succeeding generations to move elsewhere, though often close enough to continue attending their original church, is another large factor" [11].



A mural of the original Morningside Bulldogs logo on the side of a field house at Joe Natoli Field off of Chislett St.

Still, Morningside has fared better than other ethnic neighborhoods. Nearby Polish Hill's Polish population dropped by a third over the same period and Lawrenceville, Hazelwood, and Troy Hill have also seen their ethnic populations shrink [11]. In Morningside, bocce is still a vibrant tradition, with new courts having been built in the early 2000s. Predominantly Italian St. Raphael Church, still a focal point in the community, sponsors an annual St. Rocco Festival, a two-day festival in August that features Italian mass, singing, and dance [11][12]. The Spigno Club, an exclusive group of Morningside residents who have ancestors from the island of Spigno, Italy, continues to meet, while ethnic clubs in other neighborhoods have long since folded. The neighborhood's lasting influence on Italian-American culture is evident. For example, The National Italian-American Sports Hall of Fame has named an annual community development award for Natoli, a lifetime Morningside resident.

In many respects, the neighborhood's current statistics are similar to those in the 1970s and 1980s. Owner-occupancy is still very high in Morningside, average household income is above average, and unemployment is still very low. The vacancy rate has risen from 2-3% in the 1980s to a current rate of about 9% and the African-American population is now nearly 10%, though no other minority groups have gained a foothold in the neighborhood [9]. The biggest change has been the shift from primarily sales and clerical workforce throughout the second half of the 20th century to a management/professional workforce, which likely reflects the occupations of the neighborhood's newcomers [9].

A survey conducted by Carnegie Mellon's Heinz School in 2008 showed that most of the young newcomers in Morningside work at the universities and hospitals and were attracted by the neighborhood's old-fashioned ethnic community feel that, sadly, they may be jeopardizing [13]. Also attractive have been Morningside's housing prices, which are significantly lower per square foot than Squirrel Hill or nearby Lawrenceville and Highland Park. The younger residents of community, however, have been active in the Morningside Area Community Council (MACC), and have prompted the development of a number of new businesses along Chislett St. that have marketed themselves to a younger crowd. Morningside has never been a business-oriented neighborhood like Shadyside, East Liberty, or Lawrenceville. Still, a new coffeehouse, Morning Glory, and a new restaurant, The Bulldog Grill (named in honor of the football team) have the potential to attract even more new residents to the neighborhood [13]. To some degree, the presence of younger residents seems to have softened the neighborhood's old guard. Morningside barber Tim Pantana, who Franzo states she struggled just to get a interview with in 1993, actually appears in a feature photo on the cover of the *Post-Gazette's* Metro section in 2008. The accompanying story, which highlights Morningside as an eminently livable community, has a feel not altogether different from *The Pittsburgh Leader's* article a century before.

Though Morningside reflects many of Pittsburgh's unique qualities, it has served more as an anomaly to the city at large than a microcosm. Having never experienced a significant vacancy rate or breakdown of its ethnic community, Morningside remains one of the few neighborhoods in the East End that is not in need of drastic commercial or residential redevelopment projects. With help from home-grown organizations like St. Raphael and MACC, the neighborhood remains cohesive, and is attracting a steady stream of new homeowners. This third wave of new immigration in Morningside's history has the potential to change the face of the community once again, though the new immigrants seem as committed to the neighborhood as the Italian influx a half-century before. •

Sources

- [1] Soens, Ted. "Morningside: an urban village" Thesis. Carnegie Mellon University, 1969.
- [2] Fleming, Gordon Thornton. "History of Pittsburgh and Environs." Vol.1. New York: The American Historical Society, 1922.
- [3] "An Atlas of the Morningside Neighborhood of Pittsburgh 1977." Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance, 1977.
- [4] Franzo, Michelle C. "Ethnographic Study 1993: Bloomfield, East Liberty, Friendship, Garfield, Morningside, Shadyside." Steel Industry Heritage Corporation, December 1993.
- [5] "Morningside is in a picturesque valley." The Pittsburgh Leader. June 18, 1905.
- [6] "Morningside – a neighborhood with pride." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Feb 23, 1980.
- [7] "Morningside." Report of the Pittsburgh Department of Health and Welfare Planning. June 4, 1984
- [8] "A Profile of Change 1970-1980: Morningside." Pittsburgh Department of Urban Planning. January 1984.
- [9] "Census: Pittsburgh" Pittsburgh Department of Urban Planning, January 2006.
- [10] "Area loses Morningside market, bakeries." The Pittsburgh Press. Sept 04, 1991.
- [11] "Ethnic neighborhoods becoming thing of past." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. May 25, 2003.
- [12] "Mural Masters." Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. Dec 24, 1998
- [13] "Morningside attracts families, businesses." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. November 30, 2008.
- [14] "Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania." Wikipedia. Accessed May 7, 2009. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharpsburg,_Pennsylvania



Note

My impetus for using this paper to look at Morningside is personal. My grandmother grew up in a house on the corner of Greenwood St. and Morningside Ave, at the heart of the neighborhood and my great uncle, Joe Natoli, still lives there. Uncle Joe has gotten considerable press for his achievements in community development in Morningside, and it is my pleasure to have the chance to contextualize his achievements in a broader history of Morningside.