



# Archives

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WILKINSBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER  
VOLUME 29, ISSUE 3

## **Contemplating the City of Churches & the Borough of historic Religious Architecture** by Jack Schmitt (who grew up in Wilkinsburg) and volunteers with Preservation Pittsburgh

Although still a work in progress, a study in 2021 listed thirty-nine organized churches and mosques and about twenty-eight heritage religious architectural structures in Wilkinsburg. Four of the heritage religious structures were unoccupied as churches, but remain heritage religious architectural structures. St. James (St. Mary Magdalene Parish) has four religious heritage structures and a very unique Holy Land Chapel.

What is heritage religious architecture? The Department of the Interior definition includes structures originally designed for religious purposes and which retain most of their religious character/design, and be over fifty years of age.

Two former historic religious structures have been successfully adapted to provide new services to the Wilkinsburg community. The original First Church of Christ Scientist building on Graham Boulevard is now a branch of the Wilkinsburg Public Library as well as being the Wilkinsburg Culture and Arts Center. The Mulberry Presbyterian structure is being transformed into the Center for Civic Arts, a center for learning practical crafts and art presentations. These are new uses for buildings when the congregations left.

Heritage religious architectural structures, so beautiful and uplifting in our neighborhoods, are currently under great stress because they are among the oldest, largest buildings and smaller congregations cannot afford quality restoration for aging mortar, flashings, wood, heating systems, or even to upkeep their landscape. Pastors and congregations have valiantly explored traditional and creative new solutions to building restoration and paying high heating and electric and advertising costs. Wilkinsburg hosts wonderful congregations and well-educated pastoral leaders. Most work overtime to hold their church together. They are great!

To properly restore this unique architectural heritage planted among our homes and businesses, help needs to come from outside the congregations. Help must come from people and businesses not associated with the congregation, but working with the congregation and experts in historic restoration! The new tool to focus on is **the structure as architectural heritage!** Bring non-church members in and generate “new partners”, not members, in restoring these neighborhood assets.

This heritage architecture is an asset that can be lost subtly by deferred maintenance. Note demolished churches elsewhere are now holes in the ground. A study of the effects of churches on their neighborhoods was described by Partners for Sacred Places. Historic church buildings stabilize neighborhoods! If the church closes nothing good happens. When the church is demolished the neighborhoods deteriorate; house and apartment vacancies

increase. Graffiti increases, crime increases...Ancient structures need professional loving restoration.

Restoring crumbling religious architecture is everybody's business. And a good business it is! A church with its many ministries and by repairing its building attracts new members. Churches save their municipalities annually hundreds of thousands of dollars that the community would otherwise need to pay for. A church being restored buys from local businesses and hires local workers, and helps control blight and vacancies.

Where to start? Be a little creator! Choose a religious structure where you see a need and offer to work with its owners. Help the owners construct a story of their history, oral reports of memories of the longtime members - their congregation's roots. Help the owners learn about their unique architecture. Plant flowers around the building - flower boxes at doorways, weed sidewalks. Help the owners prioritize the building's needs and get estimates to prepare a plan. Create an "Angel Board" or a "Wish Book" that create "new money" for bills and repairs. Think outside the box a new way to bring non-church members into the building for an architectural tour and photograph the historic details of stone and wood and glass. Tell the story of your building! Outsiders see visions and opportunities that longtime church members may not see. "Some men see things as they are and ask "Why?" I dream of things that never were and ask "Why not?" (George Bernard Shaw and Robert Kennedy)

If the congregation drew a circle about half a block around their largest tool, their building, and then went out in pairs to meet everyone who lives or works within the circle, many things would happen. Ask the neighbor about what the neighborhood needs. Ask their names and when they moved here. Take them a non-religious gift, perhaps a loaf of homemade banana bread. Call it - this project, "the neighborhood Bread Visit". Eventually the circle will become the goldmine that is never was before. Have a monthly Neighborhood Meal at the church. Be ready to give newcomers something to do if they were to ask! Beautification committees are great to start. Don't get "religious"; keep focusing on the heritage structure; religion will follow. If there are churches in your circle, simply skew your circle away from them, or go to meet them!

If each congregation created excitement in their immediate neighborhood, how could twenty-eight heritage religious structures change Wilkinsburg? How would that change all the churches' ability to restore their biggest tool and grow their congregations? Imagine dozens of restored beautiful sparkling churches with flowers around them and people coming and going all week! This approach is working in urban Philadelphia, Chicago, and small towns throughout the country. It can work here!



(Left) Dunamis Baptist on Wallace Avenue - vacant for about ten years

(Right) St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on Pitt Street at Franklin. Active congregation, built 1903.



**900 Wood Street** was the popular location for Kregar's, a butter, egg, deli and bakery business. The Kregars had operated their business at 900 Wood Street since 1908. This newspaper photo was in the scrapbook recently donated to the Wilkinsburg Historical Society by Lois Geschwindt Schroeder, longtime member and a 1950s era graduate of Wilkinsburg High School. Lois' dad, David Geschwindt had saved paper memorabilia during the 1930s and 1940s.



This photo appeared in the Sun-Telegraph newspaper in Pittsburgh circa 1943-1944. The captions are "The waiting line which formed this morning at Ross and Wood Streets, Wilkinsburg, when the store announced a sale of 2,100 pounds of butter."

2 1/2 Blocks — This second picture takes up where the first one leaves off, but still does not show all the people in line at a Wilkinsburg grocery selling butter today. The line started forming at 7 a.m., an hour before the store was scheduled to open. The stock of 2,100 pounds of butter was sold out before 10:00 a.m. Many customers had to go away disappointed.

A bit of background information about the long line of butter customers is that during WWII many consumer supplies were rationed to save items needed to assist in the war effort. For average Americans that meant gasoline, butter, sugar, cheese, tea, coffee, meat, soap and canned milk were rationed. Americans received ration cards beginning in 1942 which permitted the cardholder to purchase a specific amount of the rationed item. Most Americans were happy to sacrifice their lifestyle in an effort to assist in the war effort. It was during WWII that the government encouraged everyone to grow vegetables in their own gardens or public land allotments. Since fruits and vegetables were not rationed, many people did start their own Victory gardens and shared the bounty with friends and neighbors.

## Upper Level Networking at 900 Wood Street is ready for business.

900 Wood St. has been undergoing renovations and remodeling. The upper level is finished and ready for those who wish to grow their business in a professional environment. Co-working is a new concept in affordable, convenient business model.

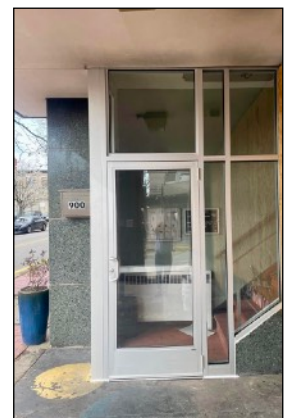


**900 Wood St. in Wilkesburg** is situated on the corner of Wood Street and Ross Avenue, located in the central business district. It is just one block away from the historic train station, Wilkesburg Borough building, police station, fire station, and the Wilkesburg Community Development Corporation. The area offers ample parking, is bike friendly and a walkable distance from the busway to a mix of restaurants, grocery store, shops and service industry businesses.

The revitalization of Wilkesburg is underway. 900 Wood St. 15221 is one of many projects building a better Wilkesburg. **Revitalize Wilkesburg** has repurposed this building to create a hub for small business activity and fast track business expansion. Upper Level Networking provides an opportunity to connect and collaborate in shared offices and shared resources. The flexible leases come with a conference room, kitchenette, secure entry, mail service, professional image and all utilities included. Very affordable private and co-working offices are now available at 900 Wood Street. There is a lot of change happening in the area. Be a part of the revitalization. Co-work with us at 900 Wood Street!



This historic building has been home to many businesses for over 115 years. Now it has available spaces for new enterprise. For more information, or to schedule a visit, please contact Jerry Gaudi. Email: [jerry@RevitalizeWilkesburg.org](mailto:jerry@RevitalizeWilkesburg.org) or contact him through Facebook at Kregar Building or Revitalize Wilkesburg.



**520 Penn Avenue is one of Wilkinsburg's most historic plots.**



In 1995, nearly twenty-eight years ago the large parking lot at the intersection of Penn Avenue and Hay Street became the site for a CVS pharmacy and retail store at 520 Penn Avenue. By 2021 the chain had nearly ten thousand stores. Unfortunately, when corporate CVS opted to close nearly 900 of them, Wilkinsburg's store was shuttered. Since August 2022 this prominent store location has been vacant. There is interest in leasing, but nothing definite at this point.

This historic location in Wilkinsburg is where the famed "Seven Mile House" was located for over a century.

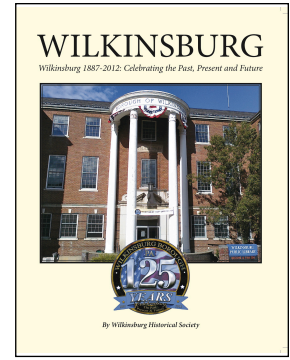
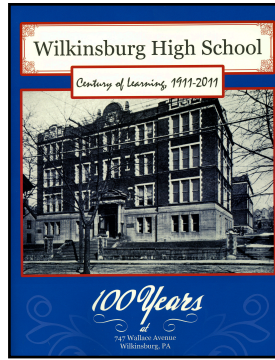
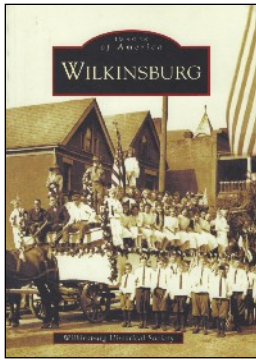


The Seven Mile House was an inn and tavern built in 1840 by Abram Horback. It was located in Wilkinsburg on the south side of the Pike at Kelly's Lane, now known as Penn Avenue at Hay Street. This inn was across the street from the 7-mile stone, indicating that it was seven miles from the point in downtown Pittsburgh. The Seven Mile House was a popular stop for travelers going to or from the City of Pittsburgh.

After Wilkinsburg's new Train Station was built in 1915-1916, and the coast-to-coast Lincoln Highway came through Wilkinsburg in 1913, additional buildings were added on the lot. The businesses which occupied them were mostly related to automobile repairs, tires, batteries and upkeep. Although the Seven Mile House existed, it was enveloped by other structures and no longer served as an inn. By 1960 the Wilkinsburg Parking Authority began demolition of the entire corner to provide a new Municipal lot. The metered parking lot existed for 35 years, from 1960 to 1995 when the CVS building was constructed.



SITE OF NEW LOT — Wrecking crews will soon begin demolition work on the buildings shown in the above photograph to make way for another new off-street parking lot for Wilkinsburg's business district. The Parking Authority has advertised for bids and work is expected to begin shortly. New lot will be located at corner of Penn Avenue and Hay Street.



These are the three books that the **Wilkinsburg Historical Society** wrote and published during the past twelve years. They help to promote and preserve the history of Wilkinsburg and raise funds for the various projects of the Society. All three books are still available to purchase from the Society. Another way to support the activities of the Historical Society.

On the far left is ***“Images of America - Wilkinsburg”***, a 128 page soft-bound book printed by the Arcadia Publishing Company. It includes over 220 black and white photos depicting the history of our town from the early land patents in the late 1700s up to the 75th celebration of Wilkinsburg in 1962. The book is available from the Wilkinsburg Historical Society for \$20.00, plus \$3.00 for shipping.

The middle book above is ***“Wilkinsburg High School - Century of Learning 1911-2011”***. This book chronicles the history of the local high school from its early start in the late 1880s, the creation of the magnificent structure in 1910, and each decade since with highlights of the events that were important in the lives of the students and the Wilkinsburg community. For over 100 years the Wilkinsburg High School served the Borough of Wilkinsburg students and this book has several hundred photos showing much of this important history. This *Century of Learning* book is available from the Wilkinsburg Historical Society for \$15.00, plus \$3.00 for shipping.

The book on the far right is ***“Wilkinsburg - 1887-2012, Celebrating the Past, Present and Future”***. This book was produced by the Historical Society in 2012 to recognize the 125th anniversary of Wilkinsburg’s incorporation as a Borough. This soft-bound book has 196 pages and includes chapters on the history of Wilkinsburg, the celebrations from the past, information about Wilkinsburg’s government, and all the events that occurred during the 125th celebration. There are several chapters about the clubs and organizations in Wilkinsburg as well as the churches and worship centers in the Borough. The “future of Wilkinsburg” section recognizes advertisers and sponsors who helped to fund the creation and printing of the book. This book, originally \$15.00, is now available for \$10.00, plus \$3.00 for shipping.

<p>Make check or money order payable to: <b>Wilkinsburg Historical Society</b></p> <p>Orders can be mailed to: Wilkinsburg Historical Society, P.O.Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235</p>			
Images of America - Wilkinsburg	(\$20.00 + \$3.00) = \$23.00	Quantity _____	Total _____
Century of Learning 1911-2011	(\$15.00 + \$3.00) = \$18.00	Quantity _____	Total _____
Wilkinsburg 1887-2012	(\$10.00 + \$3.00) = \$13.00	Quantity _____	Total _____
Name _____		Address _____	
City _____	State _____	Zip _____	



Don't miss out on **The Wilkinsburg Sun**, a free monthly community newsletter published by the volunteer Wilkinsburg Community Newsletter Board, with the support of the Wilkinsburg Borough, the Wilkinsburg School District, the Wilkinsburg Chamber of Commerce and the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation.

The Sun accepts submitted articles provided they are related to Wilkinsburg and are civic-minded.

<https://wilkinsburgsun.wordpress.com>

Sign up to receive The Sun by email at:

<http://eepurl.com/v0iBP> and friend The Sun on Facebook.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society has a website, to share more information about the history of Wilkinsburg. [wilkinsburghistory.wordpress.com](http://wilkinsburghistory.wordpress.com)

Mailing address: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society, P.O. Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235**

The "Archives" Historical Society newsletter is published monthly, March through November.

We do not usually publish the Archives during the three Winter months of December, January and February.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society yearly dues for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society are:

\$20.00 INDIVIDUAL Member, \$35.00 FAMILY Membership

\$10.00 STUDENT or ASSOCIATE Members Please keep your membership dues up to date.

Contributions are needed for "Lights for Lincoln", to get improved lighting for the Lincoln Plaza area. Abraham Lincoln stands in the dark after sun-down. Your donation can help us illuminate this outstanding area overlooking the Lincoln Highway.

**Wilkinsburg Historical Society - Membership application**  
**Help promote the valuable history of Wilkinsburg.**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

( ) \$20 Individual membership

( ) \$35 Family membership

( ) \$10 Student or associate membership

( ) \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Additional donation

Please make check payable to: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society**  
**PO Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235**

Anytime is a good time to pay your dues for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society. We have many preservation projects going on, and providing displays for Wilkinsburg events. Many thanks to those of you who have already sent in your membership dues. Please use the address on the form, our PO box.