

“I left Pittsburgh but Pittsburgh never left me.”

By: Laura Weiss, Associate Director of Marketing and Media Relations

“I left Pittsburgh but Pittsburgh never left me,” said August Wilson. His hometown – specifically the Hill District that he was born in – never left him and haunted his writing, inspiring many of the people and events seen throughout *The American Century Cycle*. All but one of the plays in the *Cycle* take place in the neighborhood he knew so well.

The Hill District is a short walk from downtown Pittsburgh. It is commonly broken up into three distinct areas: the Upper Hill, the Middle Hill and the Lower Hill. The Hill was first known as Farm Number Three and was owned by a grandson of William Penn. It became a residential area for the well-to-do members of Pittsburgh society in the 1840s.

Between 1870 and 1890, large numbers of immigrant groups started moving to Pittsburgh. Jews, Italians, Syrians and Greeks flocked to the neighborhood and began to outnumber the previous residents of The Hill. By 1880, large numbers of African Americans moved to Pittsburgh in hopes of finding work in the steel and railroad industries. The Hill became a “city within a city,” rich with diversity in ethnicity, religion and race.



By the 1930s, the Hill was referred to as “Little Harlem.” From the 1930s to 1950s, the neighborhood was one of the premiere African American neighborhoods in the country. It was well known for its vibrant nightlife and included such establishments as the Savoy Ballroom, the Hurricane Lounge and the Crawford Grill. The Crawford Grill attracted such musical talent as Duke Ellington, Miles Davis and Lean Horne. The Crawford Grill was owned by Gus Greenlee; Greenlee also owned The

Pittsburgh Crawfords, a baseball team in the Negro National League. In 1932, Greenlee built Greenlee Field, the first black-owned and black-built baseball park in the country, in the center of the neighborhood.

In 1955, the community began to disintegrate. The slowly declining Lower Hill was slated for redevelopment by the federal government. Developers planned to build a civic arena and cultural center in the Lower Hill area. Ninety-five acres were flagged for demolition, displacing over

8,000 residents of the Hill and over 400 businesses. Of these residents, over 1,200 were black families. Almost 100 families refused to relocate and ended up in very poor living conditions.

After the demolition of the Lower Hill and relocation of so many families, tensions in the neighborhood ran high throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr ignited riots within the neighborhood. They lasted for almost a week; nearly 1,000 individuals were arrested, over 500 fires were set and there was over \$600,000 in property damage. The combination of deterred investors and active members of the Citizens Committee for Hill District Renewal lobbying against development ended the plans for the previously planned cultural center.

The Hill continued to wither in the later part of the 20th century. Even today, there is still a divide between downtown Pittsburgh and the Hill District. In 2010, the population of the neighborhood was just 11,000 people. The neighborhood has some bright lights of hope for the future. The Crawford Grill, which was originally demolished during the middle of the 20th century, has been re-established and re-opened on Wylie Avenue, the famed street that housed one of Wilson's most memorable characters – Aunt Ester of Gem of the Ocean fame.

Image: The Crawford Grill, Photo by Teenie Harris, www.visitpittsburgh.com.