

Downtown Neighborhood
Johnstown
Cambria County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5670

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PHOTOGRAPHS
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD

HABS No. PA-5670

We will not be . . . known as a town surrounded by villages and hamlets, but will be a busy, thriving, prosperous people, . . . residents of the city of Johnstown.¹

The Plan for Commercial Johnstown

When Swiss settler Joseph Johns (Schantz) laid out Conemaugh Old Town, he had very definite ideas about the physical form it should take; he was also quite sure of the future it should pursue. In the charter dated November 3, 1800, he provided for Market Square (at Main and Market streets) "free and undisturbed use . . . henceforth forever," and established a square (today bounded by Main, Locust, and Franklin streets and Park Place) "containing lot Nos. 49, 50, 51 and 52 for a county courthouse and other public buildings."²

Johnstown's two squares are different from one another: the one on Main Street is composed of a whole city block, withdrawn from private sales and dedicated to public use, while the one at Main and Market streets is carved out of the corners of four adjacent blocks. In this latter design, similar to the "Diamond," found in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania, streets intersect the sides of the square, creating opportunities for vistas, markets, and gatherings.

Johns had distinct intentions for the two squares: the one on Main Street was to be the site of public buildings, and the one on Market was to be undeveloped, but would be surrounded by the city market. As Johnstown outgrew Johns' original plan over the years, these squares remained part of the city's fabric, but their uses became muddled.

In its infancy the Main Street square was used for public meetings, circus performances, and as a playground.³ In 1832 the city's first firehouse was erected on the site, and in 1839 the borough purchased a building to be used as a market house. A city jail was built on the square in 1846 and a second market house was added in 1849. In 1870 the borough council passed an ordinance to "protect the Public Square and prohibit trespassing thereon and to prevent geece [sic] from running at large."

¹ Johnstown's burgess describing the effects of Johnstown's consolidation as a city in 1889, quoted in Nathan Daniel Shappee, "A History of Johnstown and the Great Flood of 1889: A Study of Disaster and Rehabilitation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1940), 550-53.

² John Meise, Schantz and Johnstown (Johnstown: The Schantz Memorial Committee, 1913).

³ Meise, n.p.

When Johns mandated that lot Nos. 49, 50, 51, and 52 were to be used for a county courthouse and other public buildings, he was too optimistic: Johnstown did not become the county seat. The square continued to be the site of public buildings and events until 1872 when it was cleared. The city hired a landscape architect to design plantings and walkways to transform the square into a formal setting, which was renamed Central Park.

The four corners of Market Square, at the intersection of Main and Market streets, remained vacant until 1872 when a municipal building was erected on the northeast corner, following the demolition of public buildings on the new Central Park. The growing city needed to build its municipal building somewhere, and since the new building also served as the market, Market Square was a logical choice.

In 1880 newly elected Burgess Samuel J. Royer launched a campaign to prohibit cows from grazing in Central Park, but his proposal was voted down by the council. Progressive "anti-cow men" continued their efforts against the traditionalists, but it was not until 1889 that a cow ordinance had a chance of passing. In 1890 a Park Commission was appointed and the present park plan was laid out. Central Park continues to be the visual and metaphorical center of the downtown.⁴

Early Commercial, Cultural, and Social Character

The commercial growth of the new town was very slow. Between 1800 and 1807 only eight lots were sold.⁵ In 1820, when there were only 200 persons residing in Johnstown, it appeared that Johns's dream of a thriving town at the junction of the Stony Creek and Conemaugh River was just a dream. Then came the Pennsylvania Canal. The canal was completed in 1830; and the Johnstown basin and the Allegheny Portage Railroad were completed the same year. With the new canal and railroad, Johnstown was finally open to the world beyond the valley.

Ten transportation company offices were opened in the 1830s. Hotels serving workers and tourists flourished; so did breweries and saloons. Tradesmen--tailors, cabinet makers, butchers--and professional men--lawyers, physicians, dentists--alike enjoyed Johnstown's new prosperity. Though the canal helped introduce prosperity and growth, it was soon outdated. Not to suffer from the waterway's demise, the coming of the Pennsylvania Railroad heralded the beginning of another new age for Johnstown, which became a stop on the main line between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh in 1851. One year later Cambria Iron Company was founded. Not overnight, but very quickly, Johnstown evolved from a relatively quiet community into a bustling steel town. The

⁴ Edwin T. Pawlowski, "History of City Planning in Johnstown," in Johnstown: The Story of a Unique Valley (Johnstown, 1985), 459. Shappee, 104-05; quote, 109; 183-85. Meise, n.p.

⁵ Shappee, 25-6.

population quadrupled between 1850 and 1856, and commerce grew correspondingly.⁶

During the hectic decade of the 1850s the character of downtown commerce changed dramatically. It was during this time that the first Jewish clothing merchants arrived in Johnstown, mainly from the Hesse-Darmstadt region of Germany.⁷ Through the years these families established some of the biggest and best-known dry goods and department stores in the city, including Nathan's, Schwartz's, and Kline's. The first bank, Smith, Bell and Company, was founded in 1854; the Stiles, Allen and Company department store (later to become the Penn Traffic store, HABS No. PA-5388) was founded the same year; and by 1856 Johnstown boasted thirty grocery stores, fifteen dry goods stores, twelve butchers, and a hardware store.⁸

In spite of the nationwide economic plunge caused by the Civil War, the 1860s was another boom decade for Johnstown. By 1870 there were 245 mercantile establishments in the city, including "six cigar sellers and four oyster and ice cream saloons."⁹ Luxuries had apparently become just as essential as bread and clothing to the Johnstown lifestyle.

Cultural activities were also increasingly important at this time. The Johnstown Literary Society was formed in 1850, the Drehsford Dramatic Association started in 1856, and the Brougham Theatrical Association was established four years later. Four auditoriums designed to host cultural events opened in the 1860s.¹⁰

The Cambria Library Association, sponsored by the Cambria Iron Company, began in 1870; in 1881 a library building at the corner of Washington and Walnut streets was dedicated. The library association organized the Cambria Scientific Institute to provide technical instruction for Cambria Iron workers and lectures for the association's middle-class members.¹¹

Not all recreational pursuits in Johnstown were as high-minded as literary or theatrical associations. In fact, evidence suggests that the working men congregated in taverns rather than reading rooms after their shift was over, perhaps preferring the social atmosphere. Prior to 1889 there were 110 saloons in Johnstown boroughs, compared to twenty-six churches and twenty

⁶ Richard Burkert, "Iron and Steelmaking in the Conemaugh Valley," in Johnstown: The Story of a Unique Valley, 267.

⁷ Ewa Morawska, "Johnstown's Ethnic Groups," in Johnstown: The Story of a Unique Valley, 490-91.

⁸ "Retail Field Here Grew With City," Johnstown Tribune-Democrat, April 18, 1953, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Shappee, 149-52.

¹¹ Ibid., 152-54.

common and parochial schools. In Johnstown itself, thirty of the town's thirty-seven saloons were located in Wards 2 and 3, located opposite the Cambria plant and the Gautier mill.¹²

With its saloons, stores, and cultural associations, Johnstown was undeniably a full-fledged city by the time of the 1889 flood. Proud residents recognized the needs for many improvements, however. A writer in 1881 observed that:

The town itself is not yet noted for the architectural beauty of its private and public buildings, nor for ornamental squares, which indicate the enterprise and esthetic taste of a people, yet the few we have, in their incipency, are at least, an earnest of what we may hope to attain to in this regard in the not very remote future.¹³

The potential for a beautiful city existed, the writer believed, but in the 1880s it was only that. The consensus among critics seemed to be that it was time for Johnstown to take itself in hand, and plan the future based on recent rapid growth. One visitor admonished:

. . . Your town or towns have outgrown the struggling village: the aggregate population of your distinct, but adjacent boroughs is, by the last census over 21,000, and, whether, you desire it or not, this condition of things forces upon you the character and responsibility of a city.¹⁴

The Flood and the Immediate Reclamation of the Commercial District

The flood of May 31, 1889, completely destroyed most of the downtown district. Once the shock had passed, it was time for the municipality to resurrect its commercial life. On June 13, 1889, General Hastings, the governor's representative sent to oversee the reclamation, held a conference with the city's businessmen to determine their intentions. All agreed they wanted to reopen as soon as possible; and by June 17 -- less than three weeks after the deluge -- grocery stores, two barber shops, a jewelry store, a drugstore, a shoe store, and a newsstand were operating. Merchants in the immediate post-flood days sold their wares out of jerry-built shops on Bedford Street, as Main Street was still piled high with twenty feet of wreckage.¹⁵

¹² Shappee, 159-61.

¹³ Shappee, 183, quote from Johnstown Tribune, November 2, 1881.

¹⁴ Ibid., 189, quote from Johnstown Tribune, March 28, 1881.

¹⁵ Shappee, 519.

Commerce during these grief-stricken days was haphazard, but at least one merchant managed to continue advertising:

We Still Live to Shave
COSY BARBER SHOP
at No. 59 Adams Street
Opposite the Fourth Ward Hotel
Temporarily well fixed until better quarters can be secured.
TWO CHAIRS running, and all the Luxuries. Come and see me.¹⁶

At the June 13 meeting the merchants had asked Hastings to approach the Flood Relief Commission about erecting a business block on Central Park. The commission agreed, with the stipulation that merchants could operate out of the building for just eighteen months, until they had time enough to rebuild their own stores. Four long wooden buildings, measuring 20' x 40', were erected on the perimeter of the square. Three additional buildings were constructed on the corner of Main and Market streets, on Market Square. Business was re-established in these new facilities in early July.

Banks fared well in the dark days after the flood; in fact, relief money came into Johnstown at such a rate that a new institution -- Citizens' National Bank -- was opened on February 12, 1890. New construction after the flood also had an advantageous effect upon the building and loan companies in town; three new companies were formed between 1889 and 1891.

The zeal with which the merchants and bankers faced the calamity's aftermath buoyed the city's psychological health. Renewed businesses conveyed the message that, in spite of the unspeakable disaster, Johnstown would survive. The regenerative civic spirit was recorded by Johnstown Weekly Democrat (HABS No. PA-5675) editor Warren Worth Bailey as he reviewed the events of 1890:

It is doubtful whether any other city of the United States has greater reasons for self complacency and heartfelt gratitude in viewing the doings and events of the past year. Business has been sufficiently brisk and remunerative to satisfy all men of reasonable expectation. The general health of the community has been quite as good as that of any other place in the State or out of it. The improvements in the general appearance of our city are so manifest as to be the subject of remarks by all visitors. Our streets and sidewalks have been made the equal to those of most third class cities. Improvements, wonderful improvements are to be seen on all sides. Fine buildings, many of them far superior in size and architectural beauty to any ever before erected here,

¹⁶ Ibid., 520.

have been put up during the year, and many others are in the process of completion. The Adair Opera House, the Dibert block, the Hannan and Woolf massive structure, the Ruth block, the Company's mammoth store, and many beautiful residences have been completed, especially on Lincoln, Clinton, Market, Morris and Main Streets. Other fine structures such as the Library building and Merchant's Hotel are well under way.¹⁷

Disasters beget the possibility of rebirth: cities rarely get the opportunity to start anew, shed the old and, phoenix-like, begin again. Like Chicago after the 1871 fire and San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake, the Johnstown flood offered such an opportunity, and much of the historic downtown fabric reflects the hope of a city reborn (fig. 3.3).

The Commercial Character of Downtown Johnstown

By the turn of the century, eleven years after the flood, Johnstown was well on its way to becoming a mid-sized city. The population of Johnstown and adjacent boroughs was 43,804 in 1900, and 70,295 by 1910--a 60 percent increase in ten years. The downtown commercial district, roughly the area bounded by Washington and Vine streets on the north and south, and Walnut and Clinton Streets on the west and east, was growing quickly. The 1901 city directory lists five large business/office buildings; by 1918 there were fifteen.

The variety and volume of businesses were on the rise. In 1901 there were thirty-eight attorneys, six banks, twelve blacksmiths, eleven department stores, thirteen restaurants, and fifty-four physicians in Johnstown. By 1918 there were no blacksmiths, but there were twenty-three automobile dealers and eighteen garages. There were fifty attorneys, eleven department stores, ninety-six physicians, and the number of banks had doubled. Plus, there were thirty-three restaurants--almost a 200 percent increase since 1901--two of which advertised that they served Chinese food. Other interesting statistics from the 1918 directory include the listings for nineteen boarding houses (thirteen run by women), seven bowling alleys, twenty-seven contractors, a dancing academy, nine midwives (eight of whom had Eastern European surnames), twenty-three pool halls, two sanitariums, a skating rink, and thirteen theaters.

While Johnstown's growth during the expansive decades immediately after the flood was remarkable, the city's commercial character must be viewed in a wider context. It did not take shape in a vacuum--since Johnstown was dependent upon the steel industry, which in turn was dependent upon the greater tides of industrial America, development here naturally reflected

¹⁷ Bailey, Johnstown Weekly Democrat, 2 January 1891, quoted in Shappee, 529-30.

larger trends. In fact, in many ways Johnstown can be interpreted as a microcosm of what was happening in larger cities throughout the country; trends occurred here later than they did in larger cities, but they did occur. By the late nineteenth century:

businesses were intentionally clustered in more or less central districts. This core was not only instrumental in giving a town its identity, but also provided a focus for its activities. Main Street became to America what the piazza was to Italy.¹⁸

In Johnstown, "Main Street" was quite literally Main Street, and the piazza image was enhanced by Central Park, which became an urban gathering place and focal point. Commercial buildings clustered around the park; the configuration and ornament of their facades advertised their commercial function. Histories of extant buildings in Johnstown's central business district enhance the understanding of the city's commercial development. Except for the largest examples, almost all downtown commercial buildings erected before 1925 had ground-floor storefronts with offices or apartments upstairs.

Of the larger downtown buildings, Nathan's Department Store at 430 Main St. is indicative of the optimistic commercial climate right after the turn of the century. Family-owned and operated, Nathan's had been doing business in the city since the late 1880s. By the turn of the century, though, the family decided they needed to update their image--and what better way to do that than to build a bigger, more modern store? The family commissioned Pittsburgh architect Charles Bickel to design it. The four-story building was built between 1905 and 1908, and sits solidly across Main Street from Central Park, a cream-colored terra cotta dowager of commerce.¹⁹ Today it is occupied by stores and offices.

Another department store, Glosser Brothers, anchors the opposite side of the park. Louis and Nathan Glosser opened a tailoring shop at 118 Franklin St. in 1904. In 1906 they bought out Jacob Fisher, who owned a menswear concern in the Franklin Building, on the corner of Franklin and Locust streets. The sturdy, four-story red-brick Italianate structure had been built in 1905, as combination office/retail space. It was on the site of the Johnstown Opera House, an auditorium and office building, which burned in 1903. In 1909 Glosser Brothers moved into an adjacent room in the Franklin Building, and twelve years later they occupied the entire first floor. The location was a favorable one, as in 1926 the company bought the building, from which it continues to operate (HABS No. PA-5783).

¹⁸ Richard Longstreth, The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987), 13.

¹⁹ Benjamin Policicchio, "The Architecture of Johnstown," in Johnstown: The Story of a Unique Valley, 389-90.

The large, four-story David Dibert Building, built in 1889, is at the corner of Franklin and Main streets (HABS No. PA-5674). The Diberts had been a leading Johnstown mercantile family since the canal era; over the years various members owned dry-goods and hardware stores and founded banks. When the building was complete, David Dibert was listed in the city directory as a retired merchant, and John Dibert, his brother, owned the John Dibert & Co. Bank in the building. John died in the flood, but the building survived, and Scott Dibert operated a shoe store there for another twenty years. Originally it was one of the city's largest office buildings. Today a drugstore is on the ground floor and offices for a loan company and a dentist occupy the second floor; the other floors are vacant.

Fraternal organizations have always been popular in Johnstown. By 1925 there were three lodge halls facing Central Park. Built in 1884, Alma Hall, 442-444 Main St., is the elder of the group. The G.A.R. Hall, at the corner of Locust Street and Park Place, was built shortly after the flood, in 1893, and the Masonic Lodge, 434-436 Main St., was built in 1925. In addition to meeting halls, the three buildings have provided office space to beauty colleges, dentists, and attorneys over the years.

Impressive as the large commercial buildings are, narrow and decorative two- or three-story buildings make up the majority of the Main Street streetscape. On Main Street alone there are at least two dozen extant buildings erected after 1889 and before 1930 that are composed of a ground-floor storefront with upstairs space to accommodate between three and eight business or residential tenants.

No. 417 Main St. is a three-story Victorian commercial building, ca. 1901-1903. Its first tenant was then-mayor and undertaker John Pendry, who lived and worked there. Since that time different commercial interests have occupied the ground floor and the offices above. In 1949 the building was a hotel. Today it houses a clinic.

The narrow, three-story brick building at 421 Main St. was built after 1913 and before 1929. The first occupant, according to the city directory, was the Widener Company Ladies Ready-to-Wear; over the years Turkish baths and lodge rooms have been operated in the building, which currently houses YMCA offices.

Joseph T. Kelly built the J. T. Kelly Building at 502 Main St. in 1913. He operated Kelly's Cafe and Bar on the first floor of the three-story Richardsonian Romanesque structure, and rented out the top floors to various businesses. The Main Street Bakery now occupies the ground floor, and Planned Parenthood of Cambria County is upstairs.

The two-story Pennsylvania Trust Building, 504 Main St., was built by 1929. The trust company occupied the first floor, and a physician's offices were upstairs. Cover Studio Photography moved into the upstairs office by 1949 and remains there today; Walnut Medical Services is on the first floor.

No. 515 Main St. is undergoing a complete remodeling. Built prior to 1913, in 1929 tenants included a billiard parlor, a photographer, and a shoe-shine stand. The billiard parlor was still listed in the 1949 city directory.

The commercial character of Johnstown in its 1920s heyday is encapsulated in the descriptions of these buildings and their inhabitants. The 1929 city directory proudly notes that the city had 10,020 retail establishments and, with a metropolitan population of 94,223, Johnstown was the rapidly growing commercial center of the area. Almost every item and service imaginable could be found within sight of Central Park.

The Entertainment Character

And so could almost any type of entertainment. From 1900 to 1930, downtown Johnstown was definitely the place to go on a Saturday night. Before the 1936 flood, there were eleven theaters in the central business district; nine were on Main Street. The Globe, Grand, Nemo, Park View, Park, State, and Strand theaters offered movies; the Cambria featured Broadway shows, and the Majestic staged vaudeville acts.

The Majestic drew well-known acts during these days, including Harry Houdini, Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor and, for the racier set, stripteaser Sally Rand. Saturday night trips to the Majestic were family rituals, as a longtime Johnstown resident reflected:

We had a family custom that we went to the one and only vaudeville theater which was the Majestic. I think we often sat in one of those boxes.²⁰

The first downtown movie houses were built as nickelodeons at the turn of the century. These theaters, the Stadium at 521 Main St., and the Bijou on Clinton, didn't have movie screens; instead, films were projected onto white walls. The nickelodeons were still operating as late as the mid 1920s.

Most of the Main Street theaters were operated by the Panagotacos family. The Panagotacos bought the Presbyterian Church at 416 Main St. in 1912, when the congregation moved to a new building at the corner of Lincoln and Walnut streets. Rather than demolish the church (which had some sentimental value, albeit of a grisly nature, since it had served as a morgue following the 1889 flood), the family built a new facade and marquee over the existing building. The Presbyterian Church thus became the Nemo Theater. This was the longest lived of the Main Street theaters--as the Embassy Theater, it showed movies until summer 1988.²¹

²⁰ Jean Crichton, "Music and Lights of Main Street," in Johnstown: The Story of a Unique Valley, 674.

²¹ A year later, the theater additions were removed and the facade of the church was exposed.

The Panagotacos also owned the Park Theater on the corner on Main Street and Park Place, and the Park View at 434-436 Main St. A Panagotacos grandson recalls his family's adventures in the theater business:

Business was good at that time, and my uncle wanted to increase the seating capacity [at the Nemo], so he put a balcony in. I don't remember how much he spent, but when the lease expired, he wanted credit for the balcony, and the owner wouldn't do it. So my uncle spited him and went and bought the property down at the State from the Cook estate and just let the lease expire at the Nemo. It was closed for a while, but somebody else took it over. . . .The movie business was a big thing at one time. That's the only entertainment people had.²²

The State Theater, now part of the Lee Hospital auditorium, was by far the most lavish of the Panagotacos theaters, deserving of the description "movie palace." It cost \$700,000 to build in 1926, and featured a crystal chandelier, a \$35,000 Wurlitzer organ, and three kinds of marble in the lobby. The State was famous for its extravaganzas; opening night, July 4, 1926, was particularly memorable:

I was there opening night on that Fourth of July. One thing I remember, a couple danced and the girl had on a circular skirt that was very wide, and the top of it was striped. In under though, when she turned, it was blue with stars. I'll never forget that.²³

For more active entertainment, the Auditorium ballroom on the corner of Main and Jackson streets featured the swinging sounds of the Big Band era. The Dorsey Brothers and Ozzie Nelson were among the big names guaranteed to draw a crowd at the Auditorium which also hosted the annual balls that attracted the smart set of Johnstown who would don their finery and do the two-step.

After a night at the movies or on the dance floor, Main Street restaurants were packed with hungry revelers. The Elite Candy Store, at 510 Main, was a popular gathering place, as was Kredel's Drugstore, next to the Nemo Theater, at 406 Main. For big spenders, the dining rooms at the Fort Stanwix (on Main between Walnut and Market streets), Capital (on the corner of Walnut and Main streets), and Merchants (537 Main St.) hotels served some of the finest food in the city.

²² Ibid., 683.

²³ Ibid., 685.

The bright lights of downtown Johnstown have been dark for many decades now; the flood of 1936 destroyed many of the buildings, and in those Depression days there was no money or inclination to rebuild them. The buildings that managed to survive the flood housed businesses that were not sturdy enough to survive Johnstown's faltering economy, so today there are few remnants of the sensational Saturday nights on Main Street.

Not all Johnstown residents out for a good time made it to Main Street. Like the citizens of Westmont, the millhands and laborers had their favorite haunts--the bars and hotels on the corner of Clinton and Washington streets were opposite the Gautier works. As far back as 1880 the corner was highly valued as a location for saloons.²⁴ One hundred years later, there are still bars on the corner (HABS No. PA-5673).

One of the liveliest accounts of the goings-on at the corner concerned an English wire drawer employed at the Gautier works. One night, "under a full load" from a stop at the corner saloon, James Reilly entered the Gautier gates and:

proceeded straight to where the workmen were the thickest, and began shooting off his mouth like a double-barrelled breech-loader, declaring that no ten men in the establishment had muscle to put him out. The challenge was not accepted, and no attempt was made to eject him. He went where he pleased, and finally mounted a ladder and climbed on to the roof of the building to enjoy the prospect. He was on his way to the ground again when the three officers caught sight of him, and just as he reached the bottom round of the ladder they pounced on him and took him prisoner. He tried to get away, but finding that he was fast, he suddenly lost the use of his legs, and it was necessary to get a wagon to haul him to the Justice's office. The hearing occupied only a few minutes and resulted in his being bound over for trial at the June term of court. He was then carried out of the office and dumped into the wagon, and while two of his captors held him, the third drove down to the Johnstown lock-up, where he was soon located in a cell.²⁵

The saloons where James Reilly and his cronies spent at least some of their leisure time were destroyed in the flood, but the new buildings at the corner, 100 and 102-04 Clinton St., have always had saloons on the ground floor. No. 100 Clinton was built in 1890, and has historically served as a hotel or apartments (HABS No. PA-5915). Built by 1895, 102-04 Clinton St. was, and continues to be, a combination restaurant/bar with apartments upstairs (HABS No. PA-5916). Each of the buildings was given a facelift

²⁴ Shappee, 159-60, cites the Johnstown Tribune, February 12, 1880.

²⁵ Shappee, 164, quote from the Johnstown Tribune, April 3, 1879.

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sometime in the 1930s, resulting in Victorian buildings with moderne ground floors featuring glass block, metal and neon embellishments.

The Residential Character

The buildings on the corner of Clinton and Washington streets are significant in Johnstown's history for reasons beyond their dubious reputation. They have been part of Johnstown's housing stock for almost 100 years, and shed some light on the question of who lived where when, a question whose answer is not as readily apparent as it may seem.

Prior to the 1889 flood, well-to-do citizens lived in the mansions that flanked Main Street and Central Park. The waters destroyed most of these homes, but the ones that survived were quickly rehabilitated:

The spirit of recovery took a firm hold on Johnstown citizens today. Everywhere owners of property seemed to have regained their senses after this terrible disaster and were hard at work cleaning out their cellars, drying carpets and bedding and inaugurating a general renovation. The women labored bravely, and with water and brush began to see their floors for the first time in twelve days. The mud is caked all over the walls and furniture and most of the carpet is utterly useless but it will have to be used until something better can be secured.²⁶

Many of the lost dwellings were rebuilt on the same lots, but within several years many of the downtown residents had moved to the new suburb of Westmont, the "New Town on Yoder Hill" subdivided by the Cambria Iron Company.²⁷ The flight to the suburbs, coupled with the increased commercialization of the valuable downtown land, caused a change in Johnstown housing patterns. By the early 1910s apartment buildings were being erected downtown. Residential hotels and boarding houses for laborers had always existed there (eleven residential hotels appear in the 1884 city directory), but these apartment buildings were different--they were designed for middle- and upper-middle-class tenants.

The Mayer Building at 414 Locust St. was built as an income property in 1914 by physician L. H. Mayer (HABS No. PA-5385). When constructed, the Mayer Building was by far the largest and most elegant apartment building in Johnstown, with high Victorian ceilings, built-in fireplaces, and heavy, dark woodwork. City directories and tax records from the 1920s reveal that, for the most part, occupants of the building were well-heeled families headed by doctors, attorneys, and aldermen. By the 1930s, when the suburban areas were more developed and housed many more people, the Mayer Building attracted less-affluent residents, but the tenants were still solidly middle class: teachers, nurses, department-store buyers, and physicians' and lawyers' widows.

²⁶ Shappee, quote from Philadelphia Press, June 12, 1889.

²⁷ Shappee, 583, 586.

Downtown housing stock for the middle class did change from large houses to apartment buildings when suburban development took place, but it did not disappear altogether. There was always a small residential stronghold in the central city as evidenced by the 75-year-old Mayer Building.

The apartments and residential hotels on Clinton Street tell a different story. Twenty years older than the Mayer Building and far from luxurious, they were built at a time when the majority of middle- and upper-middle-class persons lived in single-family homes. Also, by virtue of their location next to the Gautier gates, they have traditionally housed a different class of tenant than did the luxury buildings. In 1905 a saloon keeper, general superintendent, and a bartender lived at 100 Clinton; a saloon keeper and a laborer lived next door. In 1921 No. 102 Clinton housed a hotel keeper, a laborer, a superintendent and their wives; three laborers lived at 100 Clinton. The same type of tenant--and in some cases the very same tenants--occupied the buildings over the next twenty years. In 1959 every person who lived in 100 Clinton St. was a pensioner. Only several blocks away from the Mayer Building, the Clinton Street properties have served an entirely different class throughout their 100-year lifetimes.

The Governmental Character

In addition to serving citizen's commercial, social, and residential needs, Johnstown was also a government center. It never became the influential county seat Joseph Johns envisioned in 1800; but by the turn of the century, when the city needed a new municipal building and a post office, the resulting buildings demonstrated the importance attached to contemporary governmental buildings.

When the combination market house and municipal building at the northeast corner of Market Square was destroyed by the 1889 flood, the city fathers decided the new City Hall needed to symbolize what they believed was the modern, progressive nature of Johnstown. To that end, Charles Robinson of Altoona (with project architect Walter Myton, who later established a prolific architectural practice in Johnstown) designed a Richardsonian Romanesque structure, at the time the American style of choice for monumental civic buildings. The cornerstone was laid on October 5, 1900, and the building was occupied almost exactly two years later. It has been used continually since then (HABS No. PA-5387).

The Post Office at the corner of Market and Locust streets was the first building in Johnstown designed specifically to serve as such (HABS No. PA-5390). A grand example of the Greek Revival Civic style, the design of the post office represents the optimism felt about Johnstown in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Designed by James Knox Taylor, supervising architect of the U.S. Treasury, between 1897 and 1912, the post office served Johnstown for twenty-four years. On May 28, 1935, Postmaster Frank J. Studeny wrote to the

Honorable Joseph Gray of the House of Representatives, complaining that the lobby of the post office was too small, the roof leaked, and the building was not set up to handle parcel post effectively. Gray, in turn, approached the postmaster general, and by September 3, 1935, bids were being accepted for a new post office site in Johnstown.

Construction of the new building at the corner of Franklin and Locust streets began in late 1937, and by fall 1938 it was occupied. The U. S. government then used the Market Street building as office space for various agencies; the 1938 city directory lists the occupant as the Works Progress Administration; in 1943 the building was vacant. From 1951 to 1965 the Veterans Administration was the major tenant, with various agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, Selective Service, Bureau of Mines, and U.S. Coast Guard Recruiters occupying offices during different periods. The building was vacant from 1966 until 1968, when Crown Construction (later Crown American Corporation) moved in. When Crown Construction bought the building in 1968 for \$127,500, the terms of sale included the conditions that Crown Construction spend not less than \$200,000 to improve the structure, and it would never use the property as a public garage, parking lot, or manufacturing establishment.

The Architectural Character

As most of the extant downtown buildings were erected in the years immediately following the flood, they exhibit stylistic features of the late Victorian period--shaped roofs, heavy cornices, and arcaded windows. The designs reflect a combination of styles and influences that challenge textbook definitions and categories: they reflect the unique interaction of builder, patron, architect, time, and place.

Compare, for instance, the restrained solemnity of the G.A.R. Hall with the exuberant David Dibert Building. Built on a diagonal across Central Park within four years of each other, the buildings employ similar elements but possess different characters. The slender granite columns supporting the Romanesque arches of the J. T. Kelly building are certainly not textbook Romanesque, yet the building is an integral part of the Main Street streetscape. Or consider the restrained, very regular stone facade of the Embassy Theater--certainly there are not many other cities where the front facade of a movie theater could be stripped away to reveal the brick gable-front of a Presbyterian church. The commercial buildings at the corner of Clinton and Washington streets are quite proper, yet their 1930s moderne storefronts call forth a completely different set of associations. Johnstown "style" is an entity unto itself.

The architects and builders responsible for Johnstown's buildings were exposed to outside influences. Addison Hutton, who designed the Carnegie Library in 1892 (HABS No. PA-5386), lived and did the majority of his work in Philadelphia. New York architect Kenneth Murchison, who designed the 1916 Pennsylvania Railroad station (HABS No. PA-5389), received his architectural

training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. When Nathan's Department Store needed an updated image in the early 1900s, the Nathan family turned to architect Charles Bickel of Pittsburgh, who designed a department store in the then-progressive Chicago Style. The architect for the 1938 post office was Lorimer Rich from New York. In instances where the actual architect and his provenance are not known, evidence from the built environment indicates that influences from outside Johnstown were very strong; the white brick building at 417 Main St., with its bay window, rivals the more famous examples in San Francisco, and the partially iron facade of 515 Main St. echoes the blocks of cast-iron buildings in New York's SoHo district. In what can be considered the most ambitious gesture of physical planning in Johnstown's history, the city fathers turned to a New York firm to devise a Comprehensive Plan.

The Comprehensive Plan of 1917

Swept up in the nationwide progressive movement which, at its most basic level, sought to improve cities by removing political machines and implementing new forms of municipal government and comprehensive planning, civic leaders in Johnstown decided in 1916 that it was time to devise an overall formal plan. The City Planning Commission hired the New York architecture and planning firm of Hornbostel and Wild to do so.

The senior partner in the firm, Henry Hornbostel (1867-1961), was born in Brooklyn and studied architecture at Columbia University and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. In the early 1900s he founded the school of architecture at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. He designed many notable buildings and bridges throughout his career, including city halls in Pittsburgh; Oakland, California; Wilmington, Delaware; and Hartford, Connecticut. Most of his buildings and all planning schemes drew upon his Beaux Arts background and was inspired by the grand designs of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

Hornbostel and Wild's elegant program for Johnstown was no exception. The tone of the plan, "The Comprehensive Plan of Johnstown, A City Practicable: Plans for the Enhancement of Its Natural Beauty and Desirability as a Manufacturing Center," is echoed by the optimism of the title. It consists of twelve sections, covering the thoroughfares, districts of Johnstown, alleys, rivers and bridges, traffic regulations, transportation, municipal buildings, housing problem, parks and playgrounds, building regulations, billboards, and grade crossings.

The introduction to the Comprehensive Plan is worth consideration, as it exhibits the optimistic--and ultimately unrealistic--formulation of the plan as a whole.

Johnstown is a city of the future. By this it is meant to say that the growth enjoyed by Johnstown up to the present time is only a hint of the great expansion awaiting the community. After the end of the World War [I] the United States will enjoy a

tremendous export trade, which will mean a flood of orders for the mills and factories. The Cambria's superbly equipped and organized plant will be kept busy for years making steel for the rebuilding of war-torn areas, to say nothing of the demand in home markets. This will give Johnstown a magnificent impetus; no one looking into the future from this time can set a limit to the increase in population, expansion in area and gain in prestige which await this city. The situation is one of great hopes and the citizen of Johnstown who has faith in the community's future will receive his rewards in due time.

In the face of such a prospect it is the duty of intelligent citizenship to prepare for the future's requirements. There are large areas now in the outskirts of this city which in a few years will be occupied and developed as home centers. The older portions of the city can hardly be remade, even by the most expert planners and the most devoted work. But in the sections yet to be improved there is every opportunity for the application of modern ideas which spell comfort and are based on utilizing every favorable factor to the improvement of human efficiency.

. . . . This work is for the future generations to realize in Johnstown. We are like the sower who plants the seed and then steps from the scene to allow another to garner the harvest. Our greater reward will come when the builders come to see that the work of the City Planning Commission of Johnstown during the years 1916 and 1917 was not chimerical and was not in vain. The cost will be spread out over many years, with the work, and will not prove a grievous burden to our taxpayers. It is our prayer that the results will be such as to impel the children and grandchildren of these taxpayers to rise up and call us blessed.²⁸

Ultimately, the Comprehensive Plan of 1917 proved improbable. In its massive attempts to overhaul the city and create a beautiful, rational Beaux Arts scheme, it completely ignored the realities of an early-twentieth-century industrial city. The planners envisioned beautiful parks and recreation areas built on the edges of the rivers, yet in fact the rivers in Johnstown were already dangerously contaminated:

. . . our streams are utilized as sources for domestic and industrial water supply and concurrently as convenient sewers for domestic and industrial waste--beyond the capacity of their normal process to purify.²⁹

²⁸ Henry Hornbostel, George Wild, and Victor A. Rigamont, The Comprehensive Plan of Johnstown, A City Practicable (Johnstown: The Leader Press, 1917), 25-6.

²⁹ James Greco, "Environmental Disruption," in Johnstown: The Story of a Unique Valley, 171.

Beautiful parks on the banks of the Conemaugh River and Stony Creek would have been impossible.

The planners also forecast a downtown civic center, which they thought should contain a city hall, a federal building, an industrial museum, a public exchange, and a people's theater.³⁰ The recommended site for the civic center was Locust Street, opposite Central Park. This would have violated Joseph Johns' charter and entailed the demolition of the Franklin Building (part of which, at this time, housed the Glosser Brothers Department Store), but Hornbostel and Wild believed that the positive results of the center would far outweigh the negative:

And when the Civic Center is completed with a plaza which affords ample space for public outdoor assemblages, reviews and celebrations, there is imparted to the communal life a touch of democratic contact with its public activities which will elevate its political standards and constantly will benefit its citizenship.³¹

The large-scale recommendations were never put into effect, but small-scale aspects of it were implemented, such as one-way streets and closed-off alleys. On the whole, although the Comprehensive Plan of 1917 was unrealistic and impractical, it remains valuable as a signpost of the optimistic and expansive atmosphere in Johnstown during the post-flood era.

The Current Character of Downtown Johnstown

Today downtown Johnstown seems to have a dual personality, with both parts played out against the backdrop of the built environment. As discussed above, most of the extant buildings date from immediately after the flood, and consist of a ground-floor storefront and at least two upstairs stories. All of the storefronts in the commercial area are occupied, but most of the upstairs floors are at least partially unoccupied. The storefronts, almost without exception, have been altered and "modernized," giving the commercial district--at first glance--a haphazard or patchwork look. On the other hand, the second, third, and fourth floors of the buildings retain much of their original integrity and present an amazingly cohesive mien. Recent efforts to integrate new construction into the existing fabric do not appear to have been overwhelmingly successful, a condition attributable to the 1960s and '70s trend toward history blindness, and the belief that somehow old buildings inhibit progress.

The situation is not as bleak as this may sound. A positive aspect of downtown is that it is quite alive with shoppers and pedestrians on weekdays.

³⁰ Hornbostel, et al., Plan, 113.

³¹ Ibid., 111.

The center of downtown activity is Central Park, which is usually filled with people sitting on benches on summer afternoons. At night and on Sundays, however, the streets are as empty as the upper stories of the buildings. Somehow, the dual personality of downtown Johnstown needs to be reconciled; and, of course, utmost attention should be given to the retention of the architectural and historical integrity of the commercial district. A difficult but worthwhile task.

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³² Two abbreviations have been used here to indicate the location of a number of sources--JFM for the Johnstown Flood Museum and JPL for the Johnstown Public Library, the David Glosser Memorial Library.

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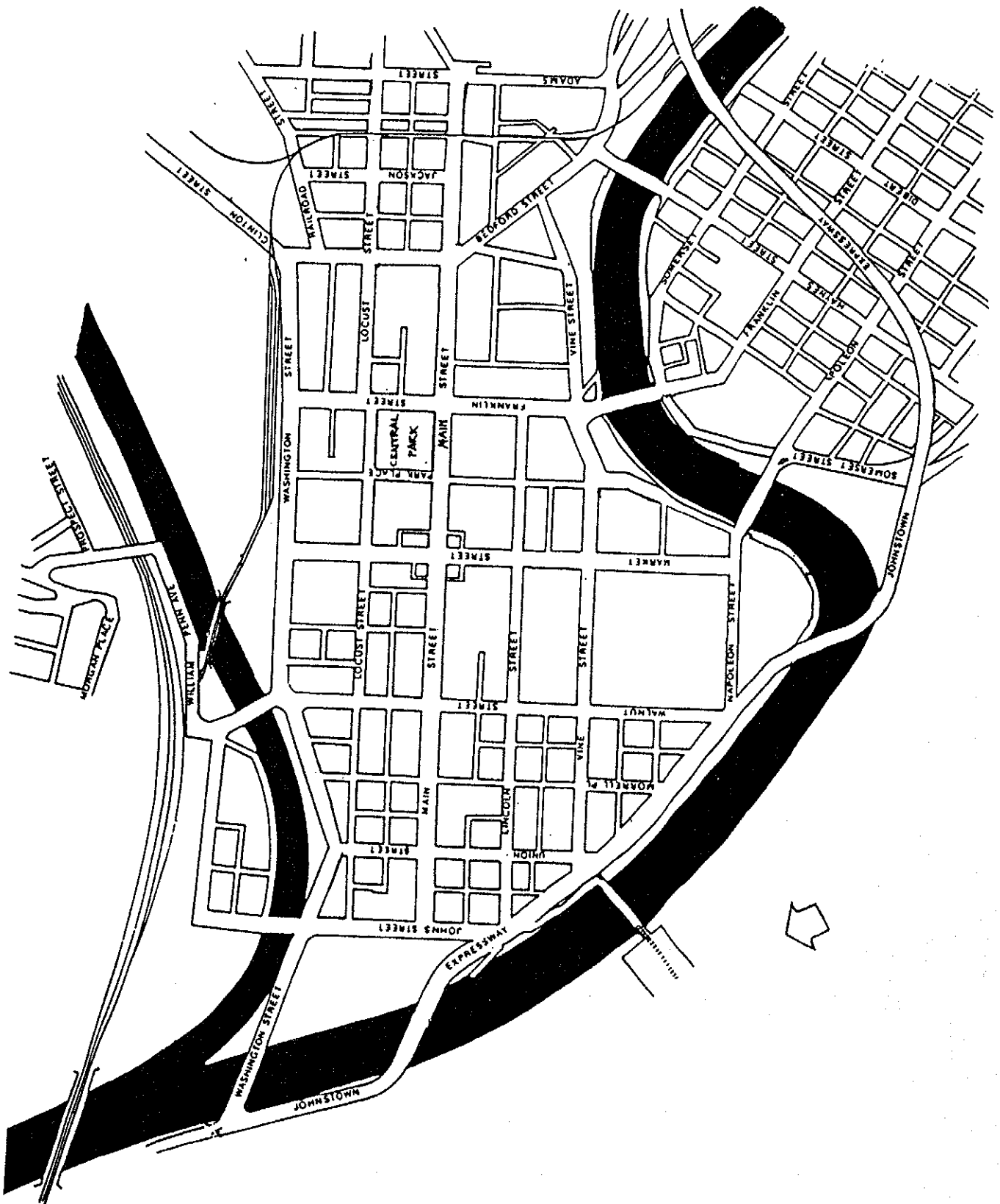
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Project Information: This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP). An overview of history of the city (HABS No. PA-5669) provides context for this neighborhood. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the downtown and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Terri L. Hartman in August 1988 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian, and Kim E. Wallace, the supervisory historian of the project. Hartman's and other project historians' work was published as The Character of a Steel Mill City: Four Historic Neighborhoods of Johnstown, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1989), edited by Kim E. Wallace. Illustrations in the publication include large format photographs taken by HAER photographer Jet Lowe and 35 mm photographs taken by the project historians.

DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD
HABS No. PA-5670 (Page 28)

Fig. 1.1 Map of downtown Johnstown, 1988. Collection: National Park Service



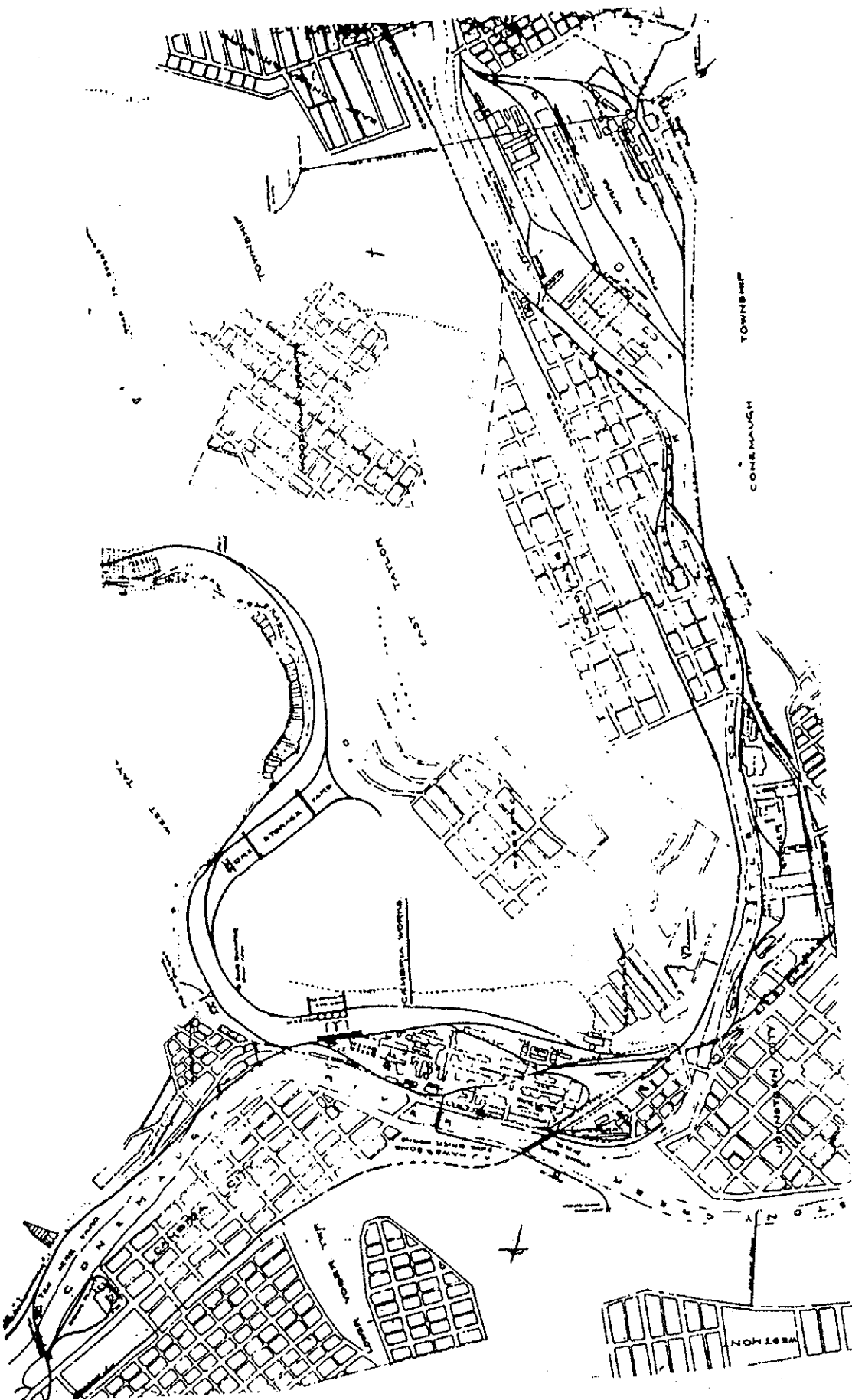


Fig. 1.2 Map of downtown Johnstown, 1988.