

Pitt and City of Pittsburgh: Linked By History

By Adam Reger

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From its origins as the Pittsburgh Academy, the University of Pittsburgh's development has always been intertwined with that of the City of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh was formally founded in 1758 and, by the 1780s, the once-tiny village around Fort Pitt, at the confluence of three rivers, had grown into a sizeable town, known as the gateway to the West. Recognizing the region's need for an institution of higher learning, Pitt founder Hugh Henry Brackenridge petitioned the Pennsylvania Assembly in Philadelphia to charter an academy of learning in Pittsburgh.

Writing in the Sept. 2, 1786, edition of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Brackenridge said, "I do not know that the legislature could do a more acceptable service to the commonwealth than by endowing a school at this place We well know the strength of a state greatly consists in the superior mental powers of the inhabitants."

On Feb. 28, 1787, the Pittsburgh Academy received its charter.

While the log cabin that stands outside the Cathedral of Learning commemorates Pitt's humble beginnings, the exact location of the University's first home—and even whether Pittsburgh Academy students met in a log cabin—is not known with absolute certainty.

That's because, in 1845, the University—then known as the Western University of Pennsylvania and located on Third Avenue, Downtown—was burned in a fire that destroyed 900 buildings in the city and, with it, the University's records, books, and equipment.

While many trustees favored ceasing University operations, a local church offered the devastated University its basement as a classroom until a new building was finished. Just four years later, however, in 1849, tragedy struck again when a second fire swept through Pittsburgh, again wiping out the University's records. The resilient University rallied once more, raising a brick building with a slate roof—the better to resist fires—at the corner of Ross Street and what is now Forbes Avenue, on the current site of Pittsburgh's City-County Building.

In 1882, another fire struck downtown Pittsburgh, destroying the nearby Allegheny County Court House. This third brush with a devastating fire prompted the University to sell its Downtown property and to move north to Allegheny City, known today as Pittsburgh's North Side. There, the Allegheny Observatory was built, with support from

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influential Pitt trustees, and was later acquired by Pitt. The observatory remains an invaluable regional resource for the study of astronomy.

At last, in 1908, the University settled in Oakland, then a green, tree-filled neighborhood flanked by Schenley Park. It also changed its name to the University of Pittsburgh, cementing the University's connection to the city it calls home.

There it has remained and, in 1931, held the first classes in the newly erected Cathedral of Learning, an iconic Pittsburgh building and a fixture of the city's skyline.

Since then, Oakland and the City of Pittsburgh have grown up around the University. They weathered the loss of the city's steel industry during the 1980s but witnessed a noted recovery spurred, in part, by education and health care, and in part by the industry and ingenuity of generations of Pitt graduates. Those graduates, in turn, have benefitted enormously from the stimulation and limitless opportunities offered by the city just outside their door.

In a March 24, 2014, American Experience Distinguished Lecture at the University, Pitt's then-Chancellor Mark A. Nordenberg invoked the words of Chancellor John Bowman, who was instrumental in the building of the Cathedral of Learning. Bowman predicted that the building would showcase "the heart and soul of education. Courage and spirituality—stones could be made to express such values of character.

"Parallel lines going up and up—they would express courage, fearlessness . . . [and] tell Pittsburgh every day of these values."

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Pitt Chronicle
Office of University Communications
200 South Craig Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

ucomm@pitt.edu
412-624-1033

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