**United States Department of the Interior**
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.* If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Wilson, August, House

other names/site number Sackett, Calvin, House; Bella's Market

## 2. Location

street & number 1727 Bedford Avenue N/A not for publication

city or town Pittsburgh City N/A vicinity

state Pennsylvania code PA county Allegheny code 003 zip code 15219

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

**___ national ___ statewide __local**

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register ___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register ___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

## 5. Classification

**Ownership of Property**
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- [X] private
- [ ] public - Local
- [ ] public - State
- [ ] public - Federal

**Category of Property**
(Check only **one** box.)

- [X] building(s)
- [ ] district
- [ ] site
- [ ] structure
- [ ] object

**Number of Resources within Property**
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | | buildings |
| | | sites |
| | | structures |
| | | objects |
| 1 | | **Total** |

**Name of related multiple property listing**
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions**
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC / Multiple Dwelling
COMMERCE / TRADE / Specialty Store

**Current Functions**
(Enter categories from instructions.)

WORK IN PROGRESS

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification**
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE VICTORIAN

**Materials**
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: STONE
walls: BRICK
roof: ASPHALT
other: WOOD

## Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with **a summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

### Summary Paragraph

The August Wilson House consists of one contributing building that was built in two phases. The front portion of the building is a three-story, rectangular, brick, residence-over-storefront constructed at the front property line circa 1886. Connected to the rear is a two story, rectangular, brick dwelling constructed circa 1841, where August Wilson was born and reared. This late-Victorian building is located in The Lower Hill District, one of Pittsburgh's earliest residential neighborhoods, located immediately east of the central business district. This block of Bedford Avenue is urban in its design and architectural expression, consisting generally of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century storefronts and row houses with several vacant lots. The narrow, rectangular lot rises gradually from the street to rear property line and contains no other structures. The August Wilson House retains integrity illustrating its historic association with Wilson.

## Narrative Description

### Setting

The August Wilson House is located on the north side of Bedford Avenue on a block bounded by Manilla Street to the west, Cliff Street to the north, Cassatt Street to the east and Bedford to the south (Figure A; Photo 01). Setbacks along the block are varied, with about half of the buildings built to the front property line. Immediately to the east are two vacant lots; immediately to the west is a circa 1872-1882 brick, residence-over-storefront.

The neighborhood is undergoing gradual revitalization efforts. Historically, the Hill District has been a culturally dynamic home for new immigrants, largely from Europe in the nineteenth century, followed by African Americans from the South in the early- and mid-twentieth century. There are a number of recent infill townhouses on the street, and one block to the southwest is Crawford Square (1993-2000), a New Urbanist-style housing development, with a mix of apartments, townhomes and single-family homes for rent and purchase. The neighborhood borders the twenty-eight-acre site of the former Civic Arena (three blocks to the southwest of the August Wilson House). Construction of this 1960s, multi-purpose, professional sports venue displaced over fifteen hundred families (the majority being African American). A new sports facility has been constructed to the south of the old arena site.

### Site

The August Wilson House occupies most of the front two-thirds of a long, narrow, rectangular lot that measures just over 24 feet wide at the sidewalk by just over 118 feet deep. At the rear is a partially fenced backyard. To the east is a small side yard, which adjoins a vacant lot (Photo 02). The property has a gradual slope, rising approximately eight feet from the front sidewalk to the rear property line. Landscape features are minimal and non-historic, consisting mostly of weed trees and grasses. Freda Ellis, August Wilson's oldest sister, indicated that the rear yard was where the Wilson kids played most of the time, since their mother could watch from the kitchen window. Tall sunflowers grew along a fence at the back, and there was a fence that marked property lines on the east and west. "Neighbors on the left [west] were always the Butera family. Neighbors on the right changed while we grew up there." The perimeter of the yard was used for gardening—mostly peppers, tomato plants and greens, and four o'clock flowers.[1]

### Exterior Description

The August Wilson House consists of one contributing building that was built in two phases. When originally constructed, circa 1841, the building consisted of a freestanding, two-story, four-bay wide, brick residence with a partially exposed ground floor (basement) and shed roof that corresponds to the rear of the building today.[2] At that time, the building was oriented toward Cassatt Street (Figures D and E). Four decades later, circa 1886, the orientation was changed to face Bedford Avenue with the addition of the three-story, three-bay wide, rectangular, brick, residence-over-storefront with full basement and side-facing gable roof that makes up the front of the building today (Figure B; Photos 02 and 05). Connecting the two is a two-story, brick wing constructed at the same time as the storefront (Photo 03).

[1] Freda Ellis, "August Wilson House Backyard," email to author, 20 June 2008.
[2] For clarity, due to the interconnected nature of the front and rear of the building, floor designations for the rear of the building correspond to the designations for the same relative elevation in the front of the building (See Floor Plans, Figure B).

The present front façade, facing Bedford Avenue, is three bays wide (with the left-most bay on each floor containing the interior stair hall). The front of the building occupies almost the entire width of the lot, measuring approximately 21'-7" wide (leaving space, historically, for a sidewalk along the east side of the house). In plan, the front portion of the building is one room wide (plus stair hall) and two rooms deep (except on the ground floor, where the market traditionally occupied the entire depth of the plan). Although largely obscured by temporary protective plywood (as part of stabilization efforts, 2010 to present), the front facade on the ground floor retains much of its original late-Victorian architectural detailing, especially the storefront, which occupies the right two-thirds of the facade. A recessed entry topped by a single-pane transom is flanked by showcase windows, which are articulated by narrow, engaged wood colonettes (Photo 06). A solid core entry door and security gate have been added (circa 1990s). The entry is reached by a concrete ramp (circa late-twentieth century). The leftmost bay contains original paired, wooden, two-panel entry doors, which are reached by concrete steps. Above these doors is a single-pane transom. The entry doors open into a vestibule, which provides access to the stair hall and upper floor living spaces. The upper two stories of the front facade are clad in red brick, laid in an American bond. Each story has three, one-over-one, wood, double-hung sash windows set into openings in the brick, which contain original stone sills but no lintels. Portions of the original wood cornice at the roofline remain. The roof contains new wood sheathing and new asphalt shingles (2012).

The east facade of the front portion of the building is clad in red brick, laid in an American bond (slightly smaller and of lesser quality than the brick on the front facade). This wall contains no openings except for a single, wood, double-hung sash window in the attic gable (Photo 02). The bricks at the base of the wall have been painted white to cover graffiti (circa late-twentieth century); faded white paint also covers bricks in the gable (circa mid-twentieth century). Utilities enter the building on this façade (electrical, telephone and cable television lines are present along with an abandoned gas supply). Two brick interior chimneys that originally vented fireplaces on the east wall have been capped at the roofline as part of the stabilization work.

The rear (north) façade of the front portion of the building is wider and taller than the connecting wing, providing space for window openings on all three floors. On the ground floor, the single opening has been bricked in (circa mid-twentieth century). The second floor contains a paired, one-over-one, wood, double-hung sash window. The third floor contains a similar-sized opening, but the actual paired window had previously collapsed into the interior (due to improper drainage caused by missing gutters and downspouts). However, it is intact and is being stored in the space for eventual reinstallation. The third floor has an additional wood, one-over-one, double-hung sash window to the west (at the top of the interior stair hall).

The east facade of the connecting wing (Photo 03) is three bays wide and measures approximately 14'-0" wide (north-south). In plan, the connector originally consisted of one room on each floor (subsequently partitioned for the addition of bath rooms). The exterior walls are brick and have been parged with a cementitious coating (circa late-twentieth century). Three bricked-in windows are present on the ground story (infilled circa mid-twentieth century) and three boarded-over, wood, one-over-one, double-hung sash windows are present on the second story (covered for security circa early-twenty-first century). The connecting wing is covered by a very shallow shed roof, which is covered with new sheathing and asphalt roofing (2011-12).

The east façade of the rear portion of the building is two stories tall and four bays wide, with a partially exposed ground floor and shed roof (Photo 03). It measures approximately 30'-4" wide (north-south). In plan, this portion of the building is two rooms wide and one room deep, with a large brick chimney in the center and interior stairs in the northwest corner (Figure B). The walls are load-bearing red brick (two withes thick), laid in an American bond, though they have been parged with the same cementitious coating as on the connecting wing (also circa late-twentieth century). The two end walls extend up beyond the roofline forming parapets approximately twelve inches high. This portion of the building is covered by a shed roof, which is highest on the west side, presenting its entire surface when viewed from the side yard. New sheathing and asphalt roofing was installed in 2011.

This portion of the east façade contains four nearly-symmetrical window and door openings, resulting in a regular fenestration pattern typical of many vernacular, mid-nineteenth century houses. The openings relate directly to the two-room wide/one-room deep plan (two openings per room on the east facade). On the ground floor, from left to right, the first bay has been infilled with brick (circa late-twentieth century); the second bay contains a circa 2010 temporary plywood door, which replaced a circa 1980s solid core door with six faux panels; the third bay contains a small, wood-sashed awning window (circa late-twentieth century) covered by horizontal security bars; and the fourth bay is covered by a flight of concrete stairs (circa late-twentieth century) that lead up the main entrance. On the second floor, the three left bays each contain a one-over-one, double-hung, wood sash; the right-most bay contains the main entrance door, which is a late-

Victorian, interior, wooden, four-panel, cruciform design, which has been installed upside down. On the third floor, all four bays contain a one-over-one, double-hung, wood sash. Exterior window trim consists of simple wood jambs, lintels and sills.

As part of the present stabilization efforts, loose bricks have been removed and stored for future reinstallation and loose or deteriorated wood window elements have been removed and stored for future replication and/or reinstallation. Where this has occurred, openings have been boarded over with plywood to secure the property and tarpaper has been installed to provide weather protection (Photos 02 and 03).

The north (rear) façade is one bay wide and measures approximately 16'-8" deep (east-west). The ground floor contains a late-twentieth century metal bulkhead basement egress (Photo 04). The second and third stories each contain a single one-over-one, double-hung window similar to those on the rear of the east façade. The second story also contains a bricked-in doorway, which once provided access from a rear porch to an interior stairway to the third floor (infilled circa late-twentieth century).

The west facade is mostly contiguous with the adjacent building at 1725 Bedford Avenue, and is therefore largely not visible except for the following two areas: 1) the attic gable of the front portion of the building, which contains a single, wood, one-over-one, double-hung window (Photo 05), and 2) the third story of the rear portion of the building, which contains a small, one-over-one, wood, double-hung window.

**Interior Description**
The front and rear portions of the August Wilson House share common party walls, but have no shared interior circulation (Figure B). The front portion has historically been residential over commercial, while the rear portion has always been strictly residential.

1727 Bedford Avenue Front
The ground floor of the front portion of the building (i.e, the circa 1886 residence-over-storefront) consists of a vestibule and stair hall on the left and the former market space on the right (Figure B). A hall in the west rear corner of the market space provides access to the basement and (by going up two steps) to a grocery storage room (in the connecting wing) and then farther back to a break/work room. The basement extends below all but the break/work room (i.e, beneath the front portion of the building and connecting wing only). It has a dirt floor, a visible stone foundation and an unfinished ceiling with a height of just over six feet.

Though the shelves and fixtures no longer exist, the market space retains the overall form, plaster walls and ceiling, and display windows from the time when it was Bella's Market and August Wilson and his mother and siblings spent time there (Photos 14 and 15). The floor is covered with off-white vinyl composition tiles (late-twentieth century). Overhead, a late-twentieth century drop ceiling was removed in 2011 revealing the original plaster ceiling above. The rear third of the space contains a walk-in cooler with five glass doors facing into the market space (dating from the late-twentieth century).

In the connecting wing, the floor of the grocery storage room is covered with off-white vinyl composition tiles; the walls and ceiling are clad in drywall painted white (late-twentieth century alterations). The bathroom contains a late-twentieth century sink and toilet.

The break/work room shares no circulation with the rear (circa 1841) portion of the building, even though it is located within the massing of that portion of the building. The floor height of the break/work room is approximately two feet lower than the adjacent room to the north (suggesting that the floor in this room was excavated when the front store addition and connecting wing were constructed). The current floor is covered in plywood (late-twentieth century), but the walls and ceilings retain their late-nineteenth century bead board cladding, which has been painted white (Photo 16). The window opening in the east wall has been infilled with brick (circa mid-twentieth century).

The entry vestibule of the left bay of the ground floor has vinyl tiles on the floor and a contemporary slab door (containing a single, small square lite), which opens into the stair hall (all circa late-twentieth century). The remainder of the vestibule retains its original plaster walls and ceiling along with its original, tall, three-part baseboard (base molding, base, and quarter-round) that is present throughout the adjoining hall, stairway, and all rooms on the second and third floors. All of these upper floor interior spaces also retain their original plaster walls and ceilings; original doors (wood, four-panel, inverse cruciform design) and interior transoms; and original wood window and door casings and corner blocks. The trim throughout all three floors is painted brown (unless otherwise noted).

The ground floor stair hall is largely original, except for mid-twentieth century vinyl sheet flooring (this floor treatment is repeated on the second and third floor in the stair halls) and a late-twentieth century sheetrock partition that has been constructed adjacent to the stairs (replacing a doorway, which once allowed access between the hall and the market). The stairs are open newel in plan with a narrow well hole. A long, straight flight extends from the ground floor to a half landing; from there one can continue in the same direction up four additional steps to what was once a kitchen and small bath room (occupying the second floor of the connecting wing), or turn 180 degrees and continue up three steps to the second floor proper. The stairs from the second to third floor are similar in plan (but with no additional flight of stairs to the rear at the landing). Throughout all levels of the stair hall, the wall stringer is eased to meet the baseboard in a continuous curve; the face stringers are cut to show the profiles of the steps; and the face stringers are ornamented with brackets carved from a thin layer of applied wood.

The only newel post is the original, wood starting newel on the ground floor (as the railing is continuous from here to its termination at a wall on the third floor—Photo 18). It is square in plan (a box newel) with chamfered edges, and a spherical newel cap. The base of each wood baluster is square in plan; the shafts are also four-sided and consist of a series of tapers, beads and recesses; and the top three inches are turned.

The second floor of the front portion of the building consists of a living room and dining room above the market, a small sewing or storage room above the vestibule, and the kitchen and bathroom, as mentioned, in the connecting wing. The living room and dining room retain most of their original architectural details (Photo 17). While the center of the rooms have been covered with sheet vinyl flooring (mid-twentieth century), many of the original three-inch wide wood floorboards are visible on the perimeter; the walls are original plaster painted light blue (though the plaster has fallen off the rear wall, exposing the inner layer of brick); and the ceiling is original plaster painted white. A pair of four-panel pocket doors with original, faux grain painting divides the two rooms. Each room has a wooden fireplace mantel on the east wall; the fireplaces have been converted to vent heating stoves (which are no longer present). The dining room has a shallow closet in its southeast corner.

The sewing room has three-inch wide wood floorboards, and original plaster and trim.

The kitchen on the second floor of the connecting wing retains its window casings, baseboards, and plaster walls and ceilings (though the sashes are missing). The window casings differ from the rest of the building, matching instead the casings used in the circa 1841 rear portion of the building (suggesting that when the connecting wing was built and windows filled in, the trim was reused here). No kitchen fixtures remain. A closet with storage shelves is located on the west wall adjacent to a chimney breast, which contains a flue pipe that once vented a stove. Plaster is missing from portions of the ceiling (revealing wood lath) and from the rear wall (revealing the portion of a bricked-in window opening mentioned above). The adjacent bathroom appears to have been added in the early- to mid-twentieth century. It is in extremely deteriorated condition. Plaster is missing from the ceiling and most walls; a large section of the floor has been removed (revealing the ground floor closet below), and plumbing fixtures have been detached and stacked on one another.

The third floor of the front portion of the building is similar in plan to the second floor and consists of bedrooms above the living and dining rooms (joined by a single, hinged, four-panel door, rather than pocket doors), a small nursery or bedroom above the sewing room, and stairs to an unfinished attic. In the front bedroom, the floor consists of three-inch wide floorboards (underneath a large late-twentieth century carpet remnant—Photo 20). The walls and ceiling are original plaster. Window sashes have been removed from their frames, but are stored in the room (some in disrepair). There is a shallow closet to the left of the chimney breast. The fireplace mantel has been removed. The rear bedroom retains its wood floors, plaster ceiling, plaster walls (though the plaster has fallen off the rear wall), wood mantel, and a paired double-hung window (though it is in storage in this room for future reinstallation). In the northeast corner is a cast-iron corner sink with pedestal leg (circa early-twentieth century—Photo 19).

The nursery has three-inch wide wood floorboards and original plaster and trim.

The attic is reached by an enclosed flight of winder stairs. Its floor is covered with wide pine boards; the rafters are visible, with no finished ceiling. As mentioned, the east wall contains a single, wood, double-hung sash window in the gable wall.

1727 Bedford Avenue Rear

The ground floor of the rear portion of the August Wilson House contains two rooms (Figure B). As mentioned above, the

south room of the ground floor (the break/work room) is connected on the interior to the store and historically offered no access to the Wilson family's living space in the rear of the building. The north room contains mechanical equipment and served as the Wilson family's bathroom after plumbing was installed in the early 1950s (the building was initially a cold water flat with an outhouse in the back yard). Freda Ellis states that "Indoor plumbing was added later. . . [and] eventually we had a toilet [there] where we also took baths."[3] The room has a concrete floor and brick walls that have been painted white (Photo 07). The doorway to the bulkhead egress on the north wall has been bricked in (circa late-twentieth century). Plumbing fixtures remain (claw foot tub, sink, toilet and water heater), but they are disconnected and have been scattered throughout the space. Narrow, original wood stairs to the kitchen are present in the northwest corner.

As part of the stabilization efforts, temporary wood shoring has been installed in both ground floor rooms approximately three feet inside the east wall due to the deteriorated brick and mortar in that wall. Similar temporary shoring has been installed above in both rooms of the second and third floors (Photos 09 and 12).

The second floor of the rear portion of the building also consists of two rooms. Until August Wilson was seven, these two rooms (and the one ground floor room) were the extent of the family's living quarters. The north room was historically the kitchen (at least from the time of the Wilson's tenancy—Photos 08 and 09). The floor is covered with plywood (circa late-twentieth century) over what appear to be original tongue-and-groove floorboards (determined from below). The walls are plaster painted white (which has failed significantly in places, revealing a layer of blue paint and a number of additional older paint layers); the ceiling is comprised of tongue-and-groove boards (with badly peeling paint, revealing a green base layer). The sink that was once on the north wall behind the entrance door has been removed (circa late-twentieth century).[4] Original window and door casings (wide moldings with no corner blocks) are largely intact or have been removed during stabilization and stored in the room). As mentioned, the entrance door is a late-Victorian, cruciform design. Next to the chimney, at the top of the stairs down to the ground level, are circa nineteenth century built-in storage shelves with no doors. A mid- to late-twentieth century, solid wood door is located at the top of these stairs. There is no door to the stairs to the third floor, nor in the cased opening to the south room, which served as the Wilson's living room and bedroom. Freda Ellis recounts that the kitchen contained a table and chairs in the center, a stove, a sink, one closet, a door to the ground floor, steps to the upstairs, a door to the outside, and two windows; beneath the east window was a big chair; beneath the north window was the sink.[5]

The south room of the second floor historically served as both living room and bedroom (Photo 10). The floor is covered with plywood (circa late-twentieth century) over original tongue-and-groove flooring. The walls are finished with white painted luan attached to furring strips (circa late-twentieth century; but investigation reveals that original baseboards and window casings remain intact underneath, along with mid-twentieth century floral wallpaper). The ceiling is original plaster painted white (though some of the plaster has fallen revealing the original wood lath underneath). Original window sashes have been removed, but are stored in the room. A shallow closet without a door is located in the west corner, next to the chimney. Freda Ellis indicates that a doorway, but no physical door, separated this room from the kitchen; the room contained a small gas stove, one closet, a bed, and a sofa; the walls were covered in a green, Baroque-style print wallpaper; and two windows overlooked the front (east) yard.[6]

Stairs to the third floor are L-shaped in plan, but lack a full landing (two steps from the upper flight extend into a small partial landing area). The steps are covered with late-twentieth century yellow carpet. The walls in the stairway are plaster painted white.

The north room on the third floor of the rear portion of the building served as Daisy Wilson's bedroom (Photos 11 and 12). It is similar in plan to the kitchen below it. The original tongue-and-groove wood floors have been covered with plywood (circa late-twentieth century); the walls are plaster over wood lath painted white; and the ceiling is comprised of sheetrock over plaster and wood lath, painted white. Water infiltration has caused portions of the ceiling sheetrock and plaster to detach, along with some of the wall plaster. Stabilization work in this room has resulted in the temporary removal and storage of both original windows from the east wall (the north window remains in place). A small, built-in storage cupboard (circa late-nineteenth century) is located on the southwest wall (in the space above the stairs). Freda Ellis indicates that after the apartment was enlarged to include this upstairs level, that this became Daisy Wilson's bedroom; one window looked onto the backyard and two onto the front yard; her room contained a small storage closet, where Christmas toys

[3] Freda Ellis, "1727 Bedford Information."
[4] This was the only built-in fixture in the kitchen; Freda Ellis, "1727 Bedford Information."
[5] Freda Ellis, "1727 Bedford Information."
[6] Ibid.

were hidden, along with a narrow clothes closet.[7]

The south room on the third floor also served as a bedroom (Photo 13). It is similar in plan to the living room below it. The original tongue-and-groove wood floors of the south bedroom have also been covered with plywood (circa late-twentieth century). The walls and ceiling are plaster painted white. Water infiltration has caused some sections of plaster to detach. Window casings and baseboards are not original. They are simple and slender and date from the late-twentieth century. Window sashes have been removed, but all four are stored in the room. Freda Ellis explains that this was the children's bedroom—four children slept here in two twin beds; there was also "the same narrow clothes closet," and one tall dresser. Two windows looked onto the front (east) yard, and the tops of the neighbors' roofs.[8]

**Assessment of Integrity**
1727 Bedford Avenue retains integrity for its period of significance (from August Wilson's birth in 1945 until 1958 when his mother moved the family to nearby Hazelwood).

Location: The building retains integrity in regard to location. It remains in its original location.

Design: The building retains integrity in regard to design. It retains its massing, plan, fenestration patterns, sequences of spaces and method of construction (original brick removed for stabilization is intended to be reinstalled). The storefront with housing above and behind readily conveys the importance of the structure as a building type and its role as a retail anchor and neighborhood gathering spot for new immigrants to the Hill District.

Setting: The building retains integrity in regard to setting. Though the house immediately to the east has been torn down, most of the remaining block reflects the setbacks and density that were present during the period of significance. Importantly, 1725 Bedford Avenue (the shop and home of the Butera family frequently recounted by past and present members of August Wilson's family) remains immediately to the west.

Materials: The building retains integrity in regard to materials. The front portion of the building retains interior plaster walls and ceilings; interior and exterior window and door trim; window sashes; interior four-panel doors and transoms; exterior, paired two-panel entry doors; grain-painted interior pocket doors; late-Victorian storefront; wood floors; boxed newel post, bracketed stringers, carved handrail, and ornate squared balusters of the balustrade; fireplace mantels; and bead board wall cladding of the break/work room. The market space retains its overall form, plaster walls and ceiling, and display windows from the time when it was Bella's Market. The rear portion of the building retains its interior plaster walls and ceilings, interior and exterior window and door trim, tongue-and-groove kitchen ceiling, tongue-and-groove flooring, narrow winding stairs, built-in cupboards and closets, and the massive central chimney.

Workmanship: The building retains integrity in regard to workmanship. The exterior of the storefront and the details of the interior stairwell reflect the workmanship afforded by wood lathes and scroll saws which had become popular tools by the time the front addition was built. Additionally, the grain-painted interior doors that remain on the upper floors express both a historically-desired aesthetic and the skill of a particular trade.

Feeling: The building retains integrity in regard to feeling. In particular, the rear portion of the building was always modest and continues to reflect the lower socio-economic struggles experienced by August Wilson during the formative years that directly impacted his writing.

Association: The building retains integrity in regard to association. August Wilson repeatedly credits his early years growing up in the building as being critical to his development as a writer. A very direct association is his setting of the play *Seven Guitars* in the backyard of this building.

Changes that have occurred do little to impact the historic significance of the house. They are minor and include the exterior parging and paint over some of the brick, areas of collapsed plaster and brick, bricks and trim temporarily removed for stabilization, floor coverings over original wood floors, some missing/damaged window sashes, some plaster walls and baseboards covered with luan, brick-filled ground-level window openings, and the temporary shoring.

Most importantly, the rear portion of the building has undergone few changes since the Wilson family's tenancy, and would

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

be immediately recognizable to Wilson—as it has proven to be recognizable today to his oldest sibling, Freda Ellis. Ellis has confirmed how the family used each room and how the rooms were furnished and decorated. She concludes that despite being in a more deteriorated condition, the house is very much as she remembers it in terms of layout, function, materials, finishes and simplicity of ornament.[9]

[9] Ibid.

## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- [ ] A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- [x] B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- [ ] C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- [ ] D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- [ ] A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- [ ] B removed from its original location.
- [x] C a birthplace or grave.
- [ ] D a cemetery.
- [ ] E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- [ ] F a commemorative property.
- [ ] G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Literature

### Period of Significance

1945-1958

### Significant Dates

N/A

### Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Wilson, August

### Cultural Affiliation

N/A

### Architect/Builder

N/A

**Period of Significance (justification)**

Although the house took its current form between circa 1841 and circa 1886, it is significant for its association with playwright August Wilson who was born here in 1945 and lived here until 1958.

**Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)**

The property meets Criteria Consideration C as Wilson's birthplace because his formative years there shaped the Pittsburgh Cycle plays, for which he is significant.

**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

The August Wilson House is significant under National Register Criterion B for Literature. This property was the boyhood home of August Wilson and his experiences while living there informed his later work, specifically his Pittsburgh Cycle of ten plays. As Wilson's birthplace and childhood home, the property meets Criteria Consideration C because it played a significant role in shaping his later work. The period of significance is 1945-1958, the years Wilson lived in the house.

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

**Overview**

From his birth in 1945 until almost age thirteen, August Wilson and his siblings were reared by his mother, Daisy Wilson, in a small apartment behind Bella's Market at 1727 Bedford Avenue. The house and the surrounding Hill District community would become central to Wilson's writing and the direct source of inspiration for his ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle, a decade-by-decade anthology of African American life in Pittsburgh during the twentieth century.[10]

Critics regard Wilson as one of the leading American playwrights of the late-twentieth century. From the 1980s, when he first emerged as a significant figure in the American theater, until his death in 2005, he won seven New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, two Tony Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes. He is best known for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1985), and *The Piano Lesson* (1987). His plays examine such themes as personal identity, racial injustice, the struggle for power, and spiritual growth. Many of Wilson's works also employ rituals and belief systems derived from African American culture, and borrow extensively from jazz and the blues. By exploring the spiritual and cultural heritage embodied in the Hill District, Wilson hoped to re-envision and reclaim "lost" history, thereby facilitating collective healing and regeneration for African Americans.[11]

**A Brief History of August Wilson's Hill District**

Located between Pittsburgh's Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, the Hill District neighborhood rises eastward from downtown toward Oakland, giving it grand vistas to the west, north and south. Its woods, pastures and proximity to town made it one of the city's earliest residential neighborhoods, attracting the city's elite, who began moving there in the 1820s. It subsequently became a gateway for new immigrants, beginning with Irish and Germans in the 1850s and continuing around the turn of the twentieth century with Southern and Eastern Europeans, especially Jews and Italians.[12]

While African Americans numbered among the city's original settlers, discrimination kept their numbers small until the 1880s when the city's unprecedented industrial expansion created greater job opportunities, particularly in the labor and service sectors.[13] In 1870, only 1,352 African Americans lived in the Hill District (representing just 7.3 percent of the total population of the neighborhood). Between 1900 and 1910, the first decade of Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, the Hill District increasingly became the destination for African American newcomers. In 1900, African Americans living in the Hill District numbered 8,317 (16.7 percent of the neighborhood); by 1910, this figure had grown to 10,754 (representing 21.0 percent of the Hill District's population of 50,957).[14]

Two events significantly increased the African American presence in the Hill in the early twentieth century. Most notably, the Great Migration between 1910 and 1930 increased Pittsburgh's African American population from 25,000 to over 50,000. Also significant was the sharp decline in European immigration during the First World War, which created a labor

[10] The collection is alternately known as *The Century Cycle.* Though Wilson acknowledges that all ten plays are based on his experiences growing up in the Hill District, his first play is technically set in 1920s Chicago (it was his first play on Broadway, and he said, "I was from Pittsburgh, so I thought I needed a more important city").
[11] Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, eds., "August Wilson (1945-2005)," in vol. 31, *Drama Criticism* (Detroit: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2008), 218.
[12] Laurence A. Glasco, "The Hill and the African American Experience," in *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays,* ed. Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011), 29.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Jacqueline Wolfe, *The Changing Pattern of Residence of the Negro in Pittsburgh, PA, With Emphasis on the Period 1930-1960.* MA Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1962, 23; National Urban League, "Negroes in the Population of Pittsburgh: The Third Ward and the Fifth Ward, 1890-1920," in *Social Conditions of the Negro in the Hill District of Pittsburgh*, Survey Conducted Under the Direction of Ira De A. Reid, Director, Department of Research, the National Urban League (Pittsburgh: General Committee on the Hill Survey, 1930), 21.

shortage so severe that many industries in the city altered their hiring practices to include non-whites. As a result, the Hill became majority African American around 1930.[15]

Even with this influx of African Americans, the Hill District was historically a melting pot. In 1920, one-third of African Americans lived within five doors of a white neighbor—typically Jewish. Children attended integrated schools because Pittsburgh had desegregated in the 1870s. Five years before August Wilson's birth, the 1940 Census listed people from twenty-five nationalities living in the neighborhood.[16] This diversity was present on Wilson's block of Bedford Avenue as he was growing up. His sister, Freda Ellis, recalls that the neighborhood was "very mixed" racially.[17] The Butera's, of Italian descent, owned and lived above the watch and shoe repair store next door at 1725 Bedford; the Siger's, a Jewish family, operated Bella's Market in the storefront of 1727 Bedford; and Syrians, Greeks, Italians and African Americans lived up and down the street.[18]

Blacks and whites together supported a vibrant cultural life in the Hill District as bars and nightspots began to attract some of the nation's most talented jazz musicians beginning in the 1920s. The Hill became a center for developing internationally known musicians, earning the intersection of Wylie Avenue and Fullerton Street the nickname "Crossroads of the World." Charlie Mingus, Sarah Vaughn, Lena Horne, Billy Eckstine, Oscar Peterson, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, Erroll Garner, Duke Ellington, Stanley Turrentine all played the Hill.[19]

The rich cultural life of the Hill was disseminated widely, in part through the efforts of the *Pittsburgh Courier,* one of the country's most influential African American newspapers. With a peak circulation over 350,000 in 1942, the *Courier* reached readers in all forty-eight states plus Europe, Africa, Canada, the Philippines and the West Indies.[20] *The Courier*, like Wilson's plays, publicly embraced the Hill as a symbol of identity demonstrating "the ability of the Hill's African American community to construct understandings of black lives, social spaces, and places that reflected the black cultural autonomy from white society."[21]

Despite advancements in employment and cultural opportunities, Hill residents faced a severe shortage of decent housing by the 1940s. The Hill contained some of the city's oldest and most deteriorated housing stock and little new construction except for two massive public housing projects: Bedford Dwellings and Terrace Village, which offered racially integrated, modern amenities amidst a sea of working-class dwellings—many of which lacked toilets and running water.[22]

In 1956, as part of an effort to eliminate substandard housing and create a cultural district on the edge of downtown, the city demolished approximately twenty-eight acres of the Lower Hill three blocks southwest of August Wilson's home. Stemming from the relatively new planning concept of urban renewal, the effort eliminated over four hundred buildings and displaced eight thousand residents—mostly African American.[23] While many people in the neighborhood initially had faith that the plans would improve their lives, the redevelopment efforts are now largely considered a failure. The promised new housing, which many understood to mean more units like the well-regarded public housing projects, did not materialize. Evicted residents were left scrambling to find housing on their own in other neighborhoods, mainly the Middle Hill and Homewood—bringing overcrowding and tension to those areas.[24]

Plans for the envisioned "cultural acropolis" on the Lower Hill also did not materialize. Designed as part of the city's first Renaissance, a massive post-World War II program of downtown reconstruction and flood and smoke control, the redevelopment called for a civic auditorium, arts center, combination opera house and symphony hall, theaters, an art museum, hotels, offices and a half dozen state-of-the-art residential towers in park-like settings. Only the Civic Arena, with its innovative retractable dome, and Washington Plaza Apartments, designed by I.M. Pei, were ever built. By the late 1960s, federal funding priorities changed and subsidies largely dried up. Urban renewal demolitions in the Hill and elsewhere in the city caused neighborhood groups with little prior voice in city hall to rise up and oppose further

[15] Glasco, "The Hill and the African American Experience," 29.
[16] Ibid., 29, 31.
[17] Freda Ellis, "1727 Bedford Information."
[18] Glasco, "The Hill and the African American Experience," 31.
[19] Michael A. Fuoco, "Rebirth of the Hill," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette,* 11 April 1999.
[20] Glasco, "The Hill and the African American Experience," 33.
[21] Colter Harper, *"The Crossroads of the World": A Social and Cultural History of Jazz in Pittsburgh's Hill District, 1920-1970.* Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2011.
[22] Glasco, "The Hill and the African American Experience," 34.
[23] Ibid., 38.
[24] Ibid., 40.

destruction. In 1968, the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. helped close the chapter on the original plan for the Lower Hill as investors instead focused their efforts on restoring a collection of historic downtown performance venues. Urban renewal had gone from idealistic social housing plans to "negro removal" in the view of many neighborhood leaders.

Racial isolation of the African American community increased as whites moved to the suburbs in greater numbers. Inner cities became more segregated, which made issues of housing, employment and education less amenable to civil rights tactics that had worked in the past. As a result, many African Americans increasingly felt a need to “do for self,” a mantra of the Nation of Islam made popular by Malcolm X at the time. Despite the efforts of many African Americans and whites to continue the goal of racial integration, Pittsburgh and much of the nation would struggle with its realization.[25]

By the turn of the millennium, the population of the Hill District had seen decreases as dramatic as the increases that began a century prior. In 1950, before the urban renewal policies went into effect, the neighborhood peaked at almost 54,000 residents. By 2000, that number had dropped to less than 12,800—a loss of seventy-five percent during August Wilson’s lifetime. Today, about forty percent of the Hill District's residents live below the poverty line. The vast majority of residents are African American, with about six percent of the population being white.

Down but not out, the 1990s, the last decade of Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle, offered a glimmer of hope for the Hill. A tight overall labor market saw African American unemployment drop by more than half. Serious crime in the city fell substantially. Racial segregation in city neighborhoods declined—the first drop in living memory. There was significant new construction that included Washington Square (an African American-owned office building on Centre Avenue), and the Crawford Square town house development.[26] This trend continues today with recent completion of a new public library, community pharmacy, grocery store and YMCA along with ambitious plans for a new mixed-use neighborhood on the former Civic Arena site.

**History of the Property**

The rear portion of the building in which August Wilson grew up was constructed between 1841 and 1850 when much of the Hill District was just starting to be developed. The attached residence-over-storefront was added to the front four decades later, circa 1886.

In 1841, Calvin Sackett, a Baptist minister from New York, bought the empty lot where the August Wilson House now stands. Lot 63 was part of a subdivision called Cook’s and Cassatt’s Plan of Lots that was laid out in 1835 (Figure C).[27] Census records from 1850 indicate that Sackett and his wife, Harriett, lived there with three children. The first known map to show the house dates from 1852 (Figure D).[28] The sheriff seized Sackett’s house in 1878 as the result of unpaid debts. The deed indicates that “there is erected a two story brick dwelling house.”[29]

John Frederick Erdman Dorow purchased the house in 1886 and is responsible for construction of the storefront addition and connecting wing, which first appears on an 1893 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map (Figure G).[30] Census records from 1880, when the family lived on Miltenberger Street, indicate that Dorow was a shoemaker from Germany, and that he and his wife Emma had seven children. The 1898 City Directory indicates that Dorow operated a grocery at 1727 Bedford Avenue. The 1900 Census indicates that Emma was by then a widow with five children. At this time, another widow, Sophia Born, rented 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear with her son, William.

In 1914, Morris Picovsky purchased what deeds describe as “a three story brick building” referring to the now more dominant storefront addition (Figure I).[31] Little has been uncovered about Picovsky, but it appears from city directories that he never resided at 1727 Bedford Avenue, but rented space to a series of grocers: Joseph Cohen (1917), Emanuel Guberman (1929), Harry Abromovitz (1931), Saul Sigal (1934), Joseph Feldman (1935), Solomon Hyman (1938), and Louis Siger (1940).
In 1949, Beatrice Siger, the widow of Louis Siger, purchased 1727 Bedford Avenue. Better known as Bella, she operated

[25] Ibid., 51.
[26] Ibid., 51-2.
[27] Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Department of Real Estate, Deed Book 61/Page 235.
[28] Schuchman and Haunlein. *Pittsburgh*, map. Pennsylvania Department, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, 1852.
[29] Allegheny County, Deed Book 383/Page 676.
[30] Allegheny County, Deed Book 538/Page 493. Dorow is alternately spelled Dorrow in some sources.
[31] Allegheny County, Deed Book 1800/Page 639.

Bella's Market on the ground floor of the property until her death in 1970 (Figure J). According to city directories, Louis and Bella Siger rented 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear to August Wilson's mother from 1942 to 1958.

In 1970, the property was sold to Morris and Phyllis Stahl.[32] In 1984, they sold it to Lavaughn Williams and Kevin Harper.[33] In 1997, the property was then sold to Darnell Harper (brother of Kevin Harper and nephew of Lavaughn Williams).[34] Darnell Harper owned the property until 2005 when the sheriff seized it for unpaid debts. On March 11, 2005, Paul A. Ellis, Jr., August Wilson's nephew (and son of Freda Ellis), purchased his uncle's childhood home.[35]

In 2010, under the leadership of Paul Ellis, the Daisy Wilson Artist Community (DWAC) was formed, with ownership of the house transferred to the nonprofit the following year. The mission of DWAC is to interpret the literary and social legacy of August Wilson.

Beginning in 2010, DWAC began a stabilization project for the building in conjunction with developing a long-term preservation and rehabilitation master plan.

**Biographical Sketch**

At first glance, August Wilson's background seems an unlikely one for a literary career. His father, Frederick August Kittel, was a white, German baker who "was at best an infrequent and sporadic presence in the household."[36] His mother, Daisy Wilson, was an African American cleaning woman. Though they lived in poverty, Daisy Wilson was determined that her children would have a chance to compete in society.[37] Key to this was teaching them to read. As Wilson credited, "My mother taught me how to read. She had six kids and taught us all how to read. I learned how to read when I was four. She kept books around the house; it was very important."[38] For Wilson, reading was transformative: "You can unlock information and you're better able to understand the forces that are oppressing you."[39]

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945. "Freddy," as he was often called, was the fourth of six children and the oldest son. According to Wilson's sister Freda Ellis, "Daisy Kittel and four children—Freda, Jean, Donna and Freddy—grew up in the 1727 house."[40] Life there offered few amenities. For the first seven years or so of Wilson's life, the family quarters consisted of just two rooms on the second floor and a small ground floor room under the north half of the house. Initially it was a cold water flat with an outhouse in the middle of the back yard. "We lived in two rooms at the back of Bella's grocery store. We didn't have a telephone. We didn't have hot water," recalled Wilson.[41] He added that his mother "had a very hard time feeding us all. But I had a wonderful childhood. . . ."[42]

The streets around Wilson's Bedford Avenue home contained attractive and substantial homes, mostly of brick. When Wilson lived there, the neighborhood was becoming increasingly African American, but still contained a substantial number of white residents. In walking distance were numerous shops and gathering places that would later influence his writing, such as the African American commercial district centered at Wylie Avenue and Fullerton Street, which boasted night clubs such as the Crawford Grill and numbers places like the Crystal Barber Shop.[43]

The family nearly doubled its space in the early 1950s when they expanded their living quarters into the recently vacated apartment above their own—though it was still crowded by most accounts.

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[32] Allegheny County, Deed Book 4913/Page 561.
[33] Allegheny County, Deed Book 6946/Page 298.
[34] Allegheny County, Deed Book 9896/Page 9.
[35] Allegheny County, Deed Book 12,374/Page 547.
[36] Samuel G. Freedman, "A Voice from the Streets," *New York Times Magazine,* 15 March 1987, 36.
[37] Yvonne Shafer*, "August Wilson: A New Approach to Black Drama*," *ZAA: Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik,* 39 (1991): 17–27.
[38] Yvonne Shafer, "An Interview with August Wilson," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Fall, 1989): 163.
[39] August Wilson quoted in Christopher Rawson, "August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood," in *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays,* ed. Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011), 7.
[40] Freda Ellis, "1727 Bedford Information." Most accounts list six children in the following order: Freda, Jean, Donna, August, Edwin and Richard—four of whom were old enough to have lived at the Bedford Avenue address.
[41] August Wilson quoted in Michelle Patrick, "An American Voice." *Philip Morris Magazine*, March/April 1989, 42.
[42] August Wilson quoted in Christopher Rawson, "Obituary: August Wilson, Pittsburgh Playwright Who Chronicled Black Experience," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* 3 October 2005.
[43] Laurence A. Glasco, "Neighborhood," draft of research notes, sent to author, 8 May 2012.

Just before August's thirteenth birthday, Wilson's mother moved the family to Pittsburgh's Hazelwood neighborhood, where he completed seventh and eighth grade at St. Stephen's Catholic School. He then attended Pittsburgh's Central Catholic High School. There, as the only black student, he was taunted and harassed and left just before the end of his freshman year. Wilson started the next year at Connelley Trade School (not far from his childhood home) but found it useless as the classes were well behind what he had already been studying. He then returned to Hazelwood, and enrolled in Gladstone High School in the winter of 1961. However, after a teacher accused him of plagiarism, he left school for good at age fifteen. "I dropped out of school, but I didn't drop out of life," Wilson recalled in 1999. "I would leave the house each morning and go to the main branch of the Carnegie Library in Oakland where they had all the books in the world. . . ."[44]

After a one-year stint in the Army in 1963, Wilson returned to the Hill District, rented a room in a boarding house on Crawford Avenue (one of many he would rent in the neighborhood over the next decade), and soon found himself writing poetry, sitting in diners, scribbling on napkins.[45] "The exact day I became a poet was April 1, 1965, the day I bought my first typewriter," Wilson remembered.[46] He also gave himself his new name that year following the death of his biological father. While acknowledging that "My father very rarely came around," Wilson chose one name from each parent. Most significantly, he selected Wilson for his last name as a tribute to his mother, honoring the fact that "I grew up in my mother's household in a cultural environment which was Black."[47]

In the 1960s, inspired by the Black Power movement then gaining momentum, Wilson joined a group of talented poets, educators, and artists including Rob Penny, Nick Flournoy and Chawley Williams to form the Centre Avenue Poets' Theater Workshop (later Black Horizon Theater). Wilson recalled, "Someone had looked around and said, 'Who's going to be the director?' I said, 'I will.' I said that because I knew my way around the library. So I went to look for a book on how to direct a play. I found one called *The Fundamentals of Play Directing* and checked it out."[48]

Wilson lived and wrote in the Hill District until his early thirties, largely channeling his creative energies into poetry during this period. Aside from an abortive effort to write a play for his theater, he set aside playwriting for almost a decade.[49]

Wilson's stepfather, David Bedford, died in 1969. That same year he married Brenda Burton, with whom he had a daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, before getting divorced in 1972. In 1978, Wilson moved to Saint Paul, Minnesota at the suggestion of his friend, director Claude Purdy, where he eventually wrote his first major play. It was here, while working at Penumbra Theatre, that he met Judy Oliver (whom he married in 1981).

The early 1980s marked a period of transition in Wilson's writing. In early plays, like *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* and *The Coldest Night of the Year*, he gave voice to his characters by filling their mouths with various poetic devices. As he said, "I hadn't yet learned that they had their own poetry already there in their everyday speech."[50] This was about to change.

In spite of the distance he had traveled from Pittsburgh, Wilson was still deeply influenced by the area where he grew up. Characters and scenes based on his life increasingly entered into his writing. *Jitney*, written in 1979, was set in 1970s Pittsburgh and introduced many of the themes from his childhood and early life in the Hill District that would pervade his later work.[51]

[44] August Wilson, "An Op Ed Column by August Wilson: Feed Your Mind, the Rest Will Follow," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette,* 28 March 1999.
[45] Christopher Rawson, theater critic for the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette,* interview with author, 20 October 2008; Christopher Rawson, "August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood," in *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays,* ed. Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011), 10.
[46] August Wilson quoted in Rawson, "Obituary."
[47] Ibid.
[48] August Wilson quoted in Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, "August Wilson," The Art of Theater No. 14, *The Paris Review,* 153 (Winter 1999).
[49] Charles Isherwood, "August Wilson, Theater's Poet of Black America, is Dead at 60," *New York Times,* 3 October 2005.
[50] August Wilson quoted in Daniel Gabriel, "August Wilson's Early Days in Saint Paul." *Saint Paul Almanac,* 1 August 2010.
[51] Schoenberg and Trudeau, 219.

Wilson's marriage to Judy Oliver ended in 1990, and he moved to Seattle—apparently seeking a "relaxed, civilized" place in which to write undisturbed.[52] There he would develop a long relationship with Seattle Repertory Theatre and, in 1994, marry his third wife, Constanza Romero, who was the costume designer at the Yale Repertory Theatre for the first production of *The Piano Lesson*. Together they had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, in 1997.

In 2004, at age fifty-nine, Wilson offered some insights on mortality. In an interview, he said, "There's more [life] behind me than ahead. I think of dying every day. . . .At a certain age, you should be prepared to go at any time."[53] Wilson was more prescient than he knew.

In June, 2005, he was diagnosed with liver cancer and told he had a life expectancy of only months. He died on October 2, 2005, at age sixty in Seattle's Swedish Medical Center. Wilson planned his own funeral service held October 8, 2005 at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial in Pittsburgh. Afterward, the funeral cortege wound through the Hill District so people could pay their final respects. Wilson was buried at Greenwood Cemetery in O'Hara Township near the graves of his mother and grandmother.[54]

**Major Dramatic Works**

The preeminent works of August Wilson are the ten plays that together form his Pittsburgh Cycle—what he called "the odyssey of black people in America."[55] "I'm taking each decade and looking at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it," Wilson explained. "Put them all together and you have a history."[56] While Wilson wrote a number of earlier and/or unrelated poems and dramatic works, it is this ten-play collection that establishes him as a master of American theater.[57]

Wilson wrote one play for every decade—though he did not write them chronologically. The plays are not strictly connected as in a serial, though some characters appear at various ages in more than one decade. Wilson described the purpose of his work this way: "I write, like any artist, for an audience of one, basically, to satisfy myself. But I'm also trying to make an aesthetic statement. What I am trying to do is put Black culture on stage and demonstrate to the world—not to White folks, not to Black folks, but to the world—that it exists and that it is capable of sustaining you. I want to show the world that there is no idea or concept in the human experience that cannot be examined through Black life and culture."[58]

The Pittsburgh Cycle looks constantly back to slavery and to two wrenching diasporas in African American history: the horrific middle passage of the slave ships and the post-Civil War waves of migration from the agrarian South to the industrial North.[59] In response to these events, a recurring theme throughout the cycle is "a resourceful people's sense of destiny and each individual's 'song'—the sense of a personal, spiritual relationship to that shared past."[60] Being cut off from that song "continues the wrenching past into a tragic present. But finding that individual song can turn past and present into a hopeful future. . . ."[61] For Wilson, that hopeful song was expressed in theater.

In most of the plays there are characters who embody the legacy of past suffering and hard-won wisdom. Chief among them is the semi-mythic Aunt Ester (said aloud it sounds like *an-cestor*), a shaman and healer. Although Wilson did not create her until he wrote the fifth play, *Two Trains Running,* she is featured in three more plays and is considered by

[52] August Wilson quoted in Joe Adcock, "August Wilson, 1945-2005: Playwright Gave Voice to Black Experience," *Seattle Post Intelligencer,* 2 October 2005.
[53] August Wilson, quoted in Christopher Rawson, "August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood," 19.
[54] Ibid., 20.
[55] August Wilson quoted in Janet I-Chin Tu, "A Story To Tell—Playwright August Wilson, Now Settled In Seattle's Misty Nest, Writes About The Black Experience Like No Other Storyteller," *The Seattle Times,* 18 January 1998.
[56] August Wilson quoted in "August Wilson (1945-)." *Drama Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 2. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992). 469.
[57] Wilson's other plays, unconnected to the Pittsburgh Cycle, include the following: *Recycle* (1973), *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1977), *Fullerton Street* (1980), *The Janitor* (1985), *The Homecoming* (1989), *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1989), and *How I Learned What I Learned* (2002–03).
[58] August Wilson quoted in Charles Whitaker, "Is August Wilson America's Greatest Playwright?" *Ebony*, September, 2001.
[59] Christopher Rawson, "The Pittsburgh Cycle: Summaries," in *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays,* ed. Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011, 121.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

Wilson to be the cycle's central character. Wilson writes her birth year as 1619, the year the first Africans were forcibly brought to Virginia. She embodies heredity—passing knowledge from generation to generation.[62]

The Pittsburgh Cycle is comprised of the following works, organized by the decade each one represents. The completion date is when the play was first staged in New York, at which point Wilson considered it finished.[63]

1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (set in 1904, completed in 2004)—begins the century-long cycle exploring freedom and resistance.
1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (set in 1911, completed in 1988)—examines the reassembling of identity.
1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (set in 1927, completed in 1984)—the only play in the cycle set outside Pittsburgh and the first of Wilson's plays to reach New York, this play delves into the struggle for power in urban America in the twenties.
1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (set in 1936, completed in 1990)—explores the dilemma of embracing a past of slavery.
1940s - *Seven Guitars* (set in 1948, completed in 1996)—underscores the African-American male's fight for his own humanity, self-understanding and self-acceptance. Wilson based the setting of the play on the backyard of his childhood home on Bedford Avenue.
1950s - *Fences* (set in 1957, completed in 1987)—the most popular play in the cycle, *Fences* explores the implications of persistent racial barriers on the relationship of a father and his son.
1960s - *Two Trains Running* (set in 1969, completed in 1992)—examines responses to a racially divided America coming apart.
1970s - *Jitney* (set in 1977, original version staged in Pittsburgh in 1982; rewritten for New York debut, 2000)—revisiting themes of urban renewal, *Jitney* accentuates the disenfranchisement of African Americans during the boom of the 1970s.
1980s - *King Hedley II* (set in 1985, completed in 2001)—one of Wilson's darkest and most operatic plays, *King Hedley II* delves into identity, rebirth and revenge amid a dictating environment.
1990s - *Radio Golf* (set in 1997, completed in 2005)—the final play in the Pittsburgh Cycle examines African American assimilation into the mainstream and the spiritual alienation of the nineties.

In these ten plays, Wilson poetically placed African American culture onstage and proved that "Black culture is still alive, still vital. The human spirit cannot and will not be broken."[64]

**Critical Reception**
Though August Wilson's works were completed within the past fifty years, the critical reception they received during his life, and in the intervening years, clearly establishes Wilson as a prominent voice of the twentieth century whose works will continue to be viewed with importance.

Starting in 1984, the Pittsburgh Cycle plays swept through the American theater. All ten enjoyed high-profile runs in New York—nine opened on Broadway (*Jitney* excepted).[65]

During his lifetime, August Wilson's plays were performed approximately 1,800 times on Broadway. *Fences* broke the revenue record for a nonmusical Broadway play after it grossed $11 million in a single year.[66] While *Fences* was still on Broadway, Wilson earned the distinction of being the first African American with two concurrent Broadway plays when *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* opened in 1988. He was one of only seven playwrights to receive multiple Pulitzers. He lived long enough to learn that he would be the first African American to have a Broadway theater named after him—shortly after his death, The Virginia Theatre was rechristened the August Wilson. In 2006, New York's Signature Theatre dedicated its season to Wilson's dramatic achievements; and in 2008 the Kennedy Center presented all ten plays of the

[62] Ibid., 121-2.
[63] Adapted from John Lahr, "Series Introduction," *The August Wilson Century Cycle* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007); Sarah Bellamy, *Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Saint Paul: Penumbra Theatre, 2010); Rebecca Witt, et al., *Study Guide: August Wilson's Radio Golf* (Milwaukee: The Milwaukee Repertory Theater, 2010); and Christopher Rawson, "The Pittsburgh Cycle: Summaries," in *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays,* ed. Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011), 121.
[64] August Wilson quoted in Mervyn Rothstein, "Round Five for a Theatrical Heavyweight," *The New York Times,* 15 April 1990.
[65] Christopher Rawson, "August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood," in *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays,* ed. Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011, 5.
[66] Isherwood.

Pittsburgh Cycle in a festival of staged readings. In his hometown, the new August Wilson Center for African American Culture opened in his honor in 2009.

Among the awards that the plays of the Pittsburgh Cycle have received are two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama *(Fences* in 1987 and *The Piano Lesson* in 1990), two Tony Awards (*Fences* Best Play in 1987 and Best Revival in 2010), eight American Theatre Critics Association Awards/Citations,[67] two Drama Desk Awards for Outstanding New Play, eight New York Drama Critics Circle Awards/Citations, two Outer Critics Circle Awards, a Peabody Award, and a Whiting Writers' Award.

In addition to the many awards Wilson won for individual plays, Wilson's body of work and overall contributions to American theater have been recognized with the following honors: more than a dozen honorary degrees; Rockefeller, Guggenheim, and McKnight Fellowships; Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame Award; National Humanities Medal awarded by the President of the United States; the New Dramatists Lifetime Achievement Award; induction into the American Theatre Hall of Fame; and membership in both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Wilson was especially proud of receiving the only high school diploma ever issued by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, testimony to the education he gave himself in its branches in the Hill District, Hazelwood and Oakland.[68]

**Wilson's Enduring Significance**

Commentators praised the scope and complexity of August Wilson's ten-play cycle long before it was completed. While only a few years have passed since Wilson's death, assessments of his legacy by critics and scholars strongly indicate that Wilson made both a unique and a lasting contribution to American theater in a number of significant ways.

Wilson's work has regularly been described as "classic" and frequently compared to the work of great playwrights, including Shakespeare. The most frequent references are to Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Christopher Rawson, theater critic for *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* and Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Pittsburgh, writes, "Rich in both humor and pain, powered by expressive language and poignant story, the plays [of August Wilson] have already become classics of the American stage. Each stands alone, but together, as the Pittsburgh Cycle, they are unmatched in American theater for scope and cumulative effect. Wilson has taken his place as a great American playwright alongside Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee."[69]

John Lahr, senior theater critic for *The New Yorker,* offers a similar assessment while also crediting Wilson for his social legacy: "No one else—not even Eugene O'Neill, who set out in the mid-thirties to write a nine play cycle and managed only two—had aimed so high and achieved so much. [Wilson's] plays brought blacks and whites together under the same roof to share in the profound mysteries of race and class and the bittersweet awareness of how separate and indivisible we really are."[70]

Playwright Tony Kushner (a fellow "political" playwright whose work, like Wilson's, stresses the essential role of cultural memory and community)[71] grounds his praise of Wilson in the magnitude of the stories Wilson told: "[August Wilson] was a giant figure in American theater. Heroic is not a word one uses often without embarrassment to describe a writer or playwright, but the diligence and ferocity of effort behind the creation of his body of work is really an epic story."[72] Elizabeth Alexander, professor of African American Studies at Yale University, concurs: "Wilson audaciously redefined the American theater canon in just 25 years. He finished the cycle he began, one play for each decade of the 20th century, and while it does not make up for his absence from our midst, let alone for the absent promise of more words, he chiseled something in granite that will stand like Shakespeare."[73]

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[67] The American Theatre Critics awards and citations are important because they are given to the best new American plays that have not yet played in New York. Note that award and citation names changed over time.
[68] Rawson, "August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood," 19.
[69] Ibid., 6.
[70] John Lahr, "Write, Stop, Pivot, Punch."
[71] Richard Noggle, *From the Individual to the Collective: Community in August Wilson and Tony Kushner.* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 2007, 8-9.
[72] Tony Kushner quoted in Charles Isherwood, "August Wilson, Theater's Poet of Black America, is Dead at 60," *New York Times* (3 October 2005).
[73] Elizabeth Alexander, "The One Who Went Before: Remembering the Playwright August Wilson, 1945-2005," *American Scholar* 75.1 (2006): 122.

Kushner, additionally, heralds the power of Wilson's storytelling to revitalize American theater: "The playwright's voice in American culture is perceived as having been usurped by television and film, but [Wilson] reasserted the power of drama to describe large social forces, to explore the meaning of an entire people's experience in American history. For all the magic in his plays, he was writing in the grand tradition of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, the politically engaged, direct, social realist drama. He was reclaiming ground for the theater that most people thought had been abandoned."[74]

Wilson's ability to transform the inner workings of American stagecraft has also been praised by Rachel Shteir, author, critic, and Associate Professor at the Theatre School at DePaul University. Though often a Wilson detractor, Shteir writes, "What is Wilson's legacy? Most of all, his influence. When Wilson started writing the cycle in 1979, you could count the number of mainstream African-American playwrights on one hand. Forty years later, the major American playwrights—the dazzling Suzan Lori Parks, the inestimable Anna Deveare Smith, and the stylish Lynn Nottage, to name three—are African-American. Of course, this is not just Wilson's doing, but the culmination of other social factors. But Wilson's example led the way by setting the bar high for other African-American playwrights. And yet as Wilson would be the first to say, the American theater, particularly outside of New York, remains overwhelmingly white."[75]

Wilson's import, it is critical to note, is not qualified by race. While Wilson is no doubt significant as an *African-American* playwright, he has universally been hailed as an *American* playwright. Charles Isherwood, theater critic for *The New York Times,* acknowledges the breadth of Wilson's reach, simply stating that "[August Wilson's plays] will stand as a landmark in the history of black culture, of American literature and of Broadway theater."[76] Patricia M. Gantt, Professor of English at Utah State University, writes with similar unreserved acclaim: "If it can be said that a single voice dominated the American theater from the 1980s through 2005, that voice definitely belonged to playwright August Wilson."[77] Numerous scholarly essays echo this broad recognition. *Literature Criticism* calls Wilson, "The preeminent American playwright of the final decades of the twentieth century;" and *College Literature* states: "Certainly the most prominent playwright in the latter part of the twentieth century, [Wilson] stands alongside giants such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams and has joined the ranks of such groundbreaking African American writers as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. Like them he has transformed his chosen medium."[78]

Sergei Burbank (actor, writer, producer and cofounder of Conflict of Interest Theater Company), writing in *College Literature,* concludes, "August Wilson will be remembered in a century's time as one of the nation's greatest playwrights. But the central paradox of his work, that is, portraying the protean shape of black identity in America using portraits of specific moments in time, will be the paradox of Wilson's legacy as well. Of America's greatest playwrights, Wilson may prove to have the greatest shelf life: his works will be better received and more profoundly understood in a generation's time than they are now; this is because we are too close to the trauma Wilson outlined to fully appreciate its dimensions."[79]

**Negative Criticism**

Despite Wilson's immense critical success, his plays have not escaped their share of negative criticism. Some of this, like that by *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* theater critic Joe Adcock, seems more than anything to ask for more time to develop greater historical perspective:

> Inevitably, there has been speculation about Wilson's place in history. Will he become a permanent icon, like Eugene O'Neill, whose plays won him a Nobel Prize for literature in 1936 (though 70 years later O'Neill's work is more revered than produced)? Having a Broadway theater bear your name would seem to be a claim to immortality. But who remembers playwright George H. Broadhurst, his name on a Broadway theater not withstanding? Scholars have written books—some 30 of them at last count—about Wilson. There's even an eBay site dedicated to Wilson memorabilia. Whatever history eventually decides about Wilson, one fact distinguishes him from all other playwrights: His 10 major works constitute a unique historic monument. Each play deals with the African American experience during a particular decade of the 20th century. Characters

[74] Tony Kushner quoted in Isherwood, "August Wilson, Theater's Poet of Black America, is Dead at 60."
[75] Rachel Shteir, "August Wilson: What is His Legacy, Really?" *Slate,* 6 October, 2005.
[76] Isherwood.
[77] Patricia M. Gantt, "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle," *College Literature* 36.2 (2009), 1.
[78] Schoenberg and Trudeau, 220; Cynthia L. Caywood, Marilyn Elkins, and Carlton Floyd, "Introduction: Special Issue on August Wilson," *College Literature* 36.2 (2009).
[79] Sergei Burbank, "The Shattered Mirror: What August Wilson Means and Willed to Mean," *College Literature* 36.2 (2009): 117.

> and themes recur. Taken together, the plays share a special resonance. To find a comparable achievement in dramatic literature, one has to go back 400 years to William Shakespeare's eight *Wars of the Roses* plays."[80]

As is common with any play, some critics have found fault in dramaturgical aspects of Wilson's writing: "Reviewers, more than scholars, have faulted some of Wilson's works for being overly diffuse, often containing unnecessary subplots and contradictions that never get resolved. Others have complained that Wilson's use of the supernatural, such as the ghosts in *The Piano Lesson,* is contrived and ill-suited to his otherwise realistic style."[81] Ben Brantley, chief theater critic of the *New York Times,* sees Wilson's use of the supernatural in a more positive light:

> [Wilson's] mythic and otherworldly are always anchored to a landscape dominated by the physical and economic facts of hard lives: the exact costs of shoes and coffins and bottles of liquor; the potential for profit in stolen refrigerators and dog feces; precise psychological descriptions of bodies scarred and shattered by knives and bullets; the hungry before and depleted after of quick sexual couplings. It is the music of Mr. Wilson's prose that connects the mundane and the mystical, and allows earthbound men and women to raise voices that fly to heaven.[82]

Rachel Shteir, just days after Wilson's death, dared to be the first post-Wilson detractor, objecting to Wilson's incorporation of history in his plays (the one thing critics generally cite in agreement as a Wilson strength): "At their worst, Wilson's plays are overly preoccupied by history. Pumping a play full of history is like icing a cake: It can hide cracks and other defects in the gooey layers. Reading through Wilson's cycle play-by-play today, there's lots to enjoy and reflect on, but ultimately something exhausting and even programmatic in them, something forced and repetitive, although few critics say so."[83] Much more common, however, is praise for the manner in which Wilson reclaimed and reinvented African American history. As Sandra G. Shannon, noted Wilson scholar and Full Professor of African American Literature at Howard University asserts, "For Wilson, the process of reestablishing a link with Africa involves tapping the resources of his memory—both private and collective. He becomes a willing medium for synthesizing elements of his past and the imagined past of thousands of African descendents in order to produce inspirational new adaptations of recorded history. Wilson's revisionist scheme makes room in the history books for renewed dialogue between past and present."[84] Scholar Harry Justin Elam, Jr., Professor of Drama at Stanford University, reminds readers to not be too literal with the literature: "The critical task with Wilson's dramaturgy is that we recognize the utility of the representation without reading it as totalizing; that we note the possibility of responding to its symbolic meaning without corresponding absolutely to it or subordinating oneself to its authority."[85]

Harsher criticism has come from feminist critics and others who have "lamented over the scarcity of female characters in [Wilson's] plays, adding that those that do appear typically occupy subordinate roles to the men and are defined according to patriarchal views."[86] Kim Marra, Chair of the Department of American Studies at the University of Iowa agrees, "Wilson writes in a predominately realistic mode whose narrative structure posits a male protagonist and constructs female characters as Other."[87] Shannon, however, counters these critiques, observing that in each of Wilson's plays following his early *Jitney* there emerges "a singular African American woman [who] manages to wrestle free from prevailing social restraints or domestic concerns to, in some way, affirm a separate identity."[88] Tara T. Green, Director of the African American Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, while acknowledging that "women in Wilson's plays commonly do not play dominant roles," maintains nonetheless that "the women's *act* of speaking"—what they say and how they say it—exerts a strong influence on the male characters and must be recognized when assessing

[80] Joe Adcock, "Wilson's Legacy? A Unique Historic Monument of the African American Experience." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* 19 January 2006; It should be noted that the George H. Broadhurst Theatre is an eponymous gesture of self-promotion, rather than a critical honor bestowed by others (as is the case with the naming of the August Wilson Theater).
[81] Schoenberg and Trudeau, 220.
[82] Ben Brantley, "August Wilson's Operatic Sweep Added Nobility to Already Noble Lives," *New York Times*, 4 October 2005.
[83] Shteir.
[84] Sandra G. Shannon, quoted in Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, eds., "August Wilson (1945-2005)," in vol. 31, *Drama Criticism* (Detroit: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2008), 218.
[85] Harry Justin Elam, *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), xvii.
[86] Schoenberg and Trudeau.
[87] Kim Marra, "Ma Rainey and the Boyz: Gender Ideology in August Wilson's Broadway Canon," in Marilyn Elkins, ed. *August Wilson: A Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 123.
[88] Sandra G. Shannon, "The Ground on Which I Stand : August Wilson's Perspective on African American Women." in Alan Nadel, ed. *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 151.

their characterization and "the role they play in plot development." For this reason she concludes, "Wilson's women are the voice of the culture."[89]

Other critics have countered this criticism claiming that Wilson intentionally did not risk objectifying women and misrepresenting their identity because he felt he could not authentically represent them. In his own defense, Wilson deferentially explained, "I am cautious in writing women characters; I am respectful of them as I would be of my mother. That is, I try to write honest women, I try to place myself in their shoes, I try to look on both sides. I write honestly whatever I find, but I am cautious of being respectful."[90] Perhaps Wilson felt he could not tackle both race and gender successfully, and chose to throw his literary weight at the former: "My plays are talky . . . . They are about black men talking, and in American society you don't too often have that because the feeling is: 'What do black men have to say?'"

Wilson's most vocal criticism has been targeted not at his plays but at his writings and positions on African American theater in America, specifically his call for more regional companies dedicated to the work of African Americans and for race-based hiring. As a result, some in the theater community labeled him a "cultural separatist," a description he denied and defended against throughout his life: "We are not separatists . . . .We are Americans trying to fulfill our talents. We are not the servants at the party. We are not apprentices in the kitchens . . . .We are Africans. We are Americans."[91]

The debate over Wilson's work and legacy can be seen as a necessary step in the process of properly developing historical perspective en route to "canonizing" an artist. Wilson deserves to have his flaws exposed and examined in exactly the same way as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and those other "flawed" giants.[92] Despite the controversies, both critical and professional, most commentators generally agree that Wilson has earned a lasting place as a major figure in American theater. Utah State's Patricia Gantt assesses Wilson's literary contributions as follows: "It is not merely the number of his productions that marks Wilson's dominance in modern drama, but his ability to put into words the ideas and experiences of everyday African Americans, who have long been caricatured, relegated to the periphery, or displaced altogether in drama created by playwrights from mainstream white society. His characters, while for the most part living out their lives in a single locale, grapple with themes and issues that all people must deal with. In constructing a thoroughly American world of recording studios, taxi stands, back yards, and kitchens, Wilson created a body of drama with universal appeal."[93]

**Significance of the Property Under National Register Criterion B**
It is not possible to write about the significance of August Wilson without acknowledging the impact of his childhood home on his writing. Wilson's experience in the house was central to the development of his career as a playwright and is critical to interpreting his work.

Wilson reflected on the formative influence of the house in "The Ground on Which I Stand," an address he gave to the Theatre Communications Group National Conference in 1996:

> Growing up in my mother's house at 1727 Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain that my mother had learned from her mother, and which you could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent. It is this culture that stands solidly on those shores today as a testament to the resiliency of the African American spirit.[94]

Wilson's personal history exemplifies the symbolic construction of what he called "the blood's memory."[95] This "deepest part of yourself where the ancestors are talking" operates throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle and testifies to the ways in which collective memory and race are the products of historical, cultural, and social construction.[96] "Wilson notes that he

[89] Schoenberg and Trudeau.
[90] August Wilson quoted in Vera Sheppard, "August Wilson: An Interview," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson,* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 109.
[91] August Wilson quoted in John Lahr, "Been Here and Gone: How August Wilson Brought a Century of Black American Culture to the Stage," *New Yorker Magazine,* 16 April 2001, 64.
[92] Adapted from The Playgoer Blog: "Wilson Detractors," http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2005/10/wilson-detractors.html
[93] Gantt, "Putting Black Culture on Stage."
[94] August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand,* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2011), 15-16.
[95] Elam, xviii.
[96] Ibid.

constructs memory through the learned behaviors passed on in his mother's house. The meanings of the cultural traditions he describes in his mother's house, then, are produced in the present. How they come to signify on the past comes through current understandings of self, identity, and of subjectivity."[97]

It can be argued that the house at 1727 Bedford Avenue was for Wilson what French historian Pierre Nora refers to as a *lieu de mémoire,* or a site of memory, where a profound sense of historical continuity exists. These realms, Nora argues, are here to help us transport the past into our everyday lives and to stave off the act of forgetting.[98] For Wilson, this was the deep connection he felt in his mother's house to "a shared past that emerged unexplained from irrepressible ancestral ties with Africa."[99] Laurence Glasco, Pittsburgh scholar and University of Pittsburgh Associate Professor of History, describes the house as the "nexus of August Wilson's memory landscape."[100] In much the same way, Wilson created the character of Aunt Ester to serve this central purpose in his plays.

Central to Wilson's dramaturgical process is the idea that one can move forward into the future only by first going back—and he goes back for inspiration time and again to his Bedford Avenue home where he "learned black culture at his mother's knee."[101] Wilson directly credits his childhood home as the source of inspiration for, and setting of, *Seven Guitars*, the 1940s entry in the Pittsburgh Cycle.[102] In the play, Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton recalls a woman, inspired by Wilson's mother Daisy, who sat in a kitchen window and sang "Old Ship of Zion" and "The Lord's Prayer."[103]

When *Seven Guitars* ran at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 1995, the stage set was so similar to the family's backyard at 1727 Bedford Avenue that Wilson's sister, Linda Jean Kittel, burst into tears. "I was home when I saw it," she cried. "I was among all those people, but I was home." Wilson himself had a similar experience watching a rehearsal of the play at Seattle Repertory's Bagley Wright Theatre, exclaiming, "That's my back yard!"[104]

Along with the family's residence in the rear of the building, the storefront facing Bedford Avenue holds an important role in Wilson's plays. Remembering the store as a young boy, Wilson recalled the Sigers, a Jewish family, often allowing his sisters to pretend to work in the family-owned store, or his mother hanging out near the pay phone. Bella and her market are featured in *Fences*. In one line from the play, Troy Maxson explicitly compliments Bella, saying "Ain't nothing wrong with shopping at Bella's. She got fresh food." Other neighbors made their way into Wilson's writing. *Gem of the Ocean* features a shopkeeper named Butera, a reference to the Italian immigrant family who operated a watch and shoe repair store next door at 1725 Bedford Avenue for ninety years. The Wilson and Butera children played together growing up.[105]

It was not just the experiences that took place in his childhood home that shaped Wilson as a writer; it was also the people and activities that surrounded his home and informed him during the years he was growing up there—the sights and sounds he would bring home to digest, connect and store away. As *Post Gazette* theater critic Christopher Rawson remarked, ". . .it is the Hill of Wilson's youth and young adulthood that remained the deep well of memory into which he kept dipping the ladle of his art."[106] As Wilson stated during one particular homecoming on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Hill District Library, "I left Pittsburgh but Pittsburgh never left me. It was on these streets in this community in this city that I came into manhood and I have a fierce affection for the Hill District and the people who raised me, who have sanctioned my life and ultimately provide it with its meaning."[107]

[97] Ibid.
[98] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 19.
[99] Sandra G. Shannon, "Framing African American Cultural Identity: The Bookends Plays in August Wilson's 10-Play Cycle," *College Literature* (22 March 2009).
[100] Laurence Glasco, interview with author, March 2012.
[101] Elam, xviii-xix; August Wilson quoted in Bill Moyers, "August Wilson: Playwright," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson,* University Press of Mississippi, 2006, 72.
[102] Ben Brantley, "The World That Created August Wilson," *The New York Times,* 5 February 1995; Rawson, interview with author, 20 October 2008.
[103] Ervin Dyer and Monica Haynes, "Real-Life Drama Surrounds Wilson's Childhood Home," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette,* 26 January 2003.
[104] August Wilson quoted in Janet I-Chin Tu, "A Story To Tell."
[105] Freda Ellis, "1727 Bedford Information."
[106] Rawson, "August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood," 3.
[107] August Wilson, "Feed Your Mind, the Rest Will Follow."

From his home and the surrounding streets, Wilson "learned a rich, vibrant argot, which he has translated into powerful, striking dialogue in his plays." [108] One example was Pat's Place, a local cigar store where Wilson went just to listen to his elders: "I stood around in Pat's Place and listened to them. They talked philosophy, history; they discussed whatever the topic of the day was—the newspapers, the politics of the city, the baseball games, and invariably they would talk about themselves and their lives when they were young men. And so a lot of what I know of the history of blacks in a very personal sense I picked up standing there in Pat's Place."[109]

In an article about the Pittsburgh Cycle for *The New York Times* in 2000, Wilson wrote, "I wanted to place this culture onstage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves."[110]

**Other Resources Associated with August Wilson**

August Wilson spent his life mostly in three locations: Pittsburgh, where he was born and reared (and which provided the inspiration for his plays); Saint Paul, Minnesota, where he found his theatrical voice and ascended to the heights of Broadway; and Seattle, Washington, where he completed the last pieces of the Pittsburgh Cycle and lived his final days.[111] The following is a brief overview of resources in each city that played a role in Wilson's life and an explanation of whether they continue to reflect this role.

Pittsburgh

In some ways, it might be argued that it was the entirety of the Hill District that inspired August Wilson to become a writer. Whether it was a jitney station, diner, street corner or barbershop, these were the places where he would figuratively sit "around the fire while the tribal elders talk."[112] But it is the childhood home at 1727 Bedford Avenue that encapsulates the historic racial and ethnic composition of August Wilson's Hill District in the twentieth century. No other single property remains in Pittsburgh, or elsewhere, which was as directly or profoundly influential on Wilson's formative development. As Laurence Glasco states, Wilson had many homes, but "they are not where his memory came from."[113]

Other resources associated with Wilson that informed his writing include the following (all are in the City of Pittsburgh and extant unless noted): the rooming house on Crawford Street (demolished, circa 1992) where, in 1965, Wilson first declared himself a writer and changed his name; the Hill District, Hazelwood and Main branches of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh where he undertook his self-education; the A. Leo Weil School (2250 Centre Avenue) where Wilson and his colleagues established what would become Black Horizon Theater;[114] a host of local haunts where Wilson would watch and write, including Eddie's Restaurant (the likely inspiration for the diner in *Two Trains Running,* 2172 Wylie Avenue—demolished in 2007);[115] Pat's Place (cigar store on the southwest corner of Wylie Avenue and Elmore Street—demolished, date unknown); Halfway Art Gallery (2033 Centre Avenue at Calliope Way), where Wilson helped establish the Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop;[116] and a jitney station on Wylie Avenue near Arthur and Roberts Streets (demolished by the time Wilson wrote *Jitney).*[117]

Places of less importance include the two-bedroom apartment and house in Hazelwood,"[118] along with a number of schools in the Pittsburgh area. Most, with the possible (indirect) exception of Gladstone, played only minor roles in his development as a writer. They include: Letsche Education Center (1527-33 Bedford Avenue);[119] St. Benedict the Moor

[108] Shafer, "An Interview with August Wilson," 161.
[109] August Wilson quoted in Vera Sheppard, "August Wilson: An Interview," 101-2.
[110] August Wilson, "American Histories: Chasing Dreams And Nightmares: Sailing The Stream Of Black Culture," *New York Times,* 23 April 2000.
[111] Daniel Gabriel, "August Wilson's Early Days in Saint Paul," *Saint Paul Almanac,* 1 August 2010.
[112] August Wilson, quoted in Christopher Rawson, "August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood," 10.
[113] Glasco, interview with author, March 2012.
[114] Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson, *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays,* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011), 88.
[115] Charles Rosenblum, "Echoes of August Wilson Sound in the Hill District's New Carnegie Library," *Pittsburgh CityPaper,* 13 November 2008.
[116] Glasco and Rawson, 91.
[117] Ibid., 81.
[118] August Wilson quoted in Dennis Watlington, "Hurdling Fences," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson,* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 83.
[119] Ibid., 67.

School (at the time called St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church School, 2900 Bedford Avenue);[120] St. Stephen's Roman Catholic School (131 Elizabeth Street, Hazelwood);[121] Central Catholic High School (4720 Fifth Avenue);[122] Connelley Trade School (1501 Bedford Avenue); and Gladstone High School (327 Hazelwood Avenue, Hazelwood), which represents the impetus for Wilson leaving formal education after being accused of plagiarism.[123]

Saint Paul

Wilson's move to St. Paul in 1978 helped provide the perspective from which to hear and develop the unique voices of his Hill District characters. "There weren't many black folks around," Wilson recalled. "In that silence, I could hear the language for the first time."[124]

The most significant property in St. Paul associated with Wilson is the Penumbra Theatre (Hallie Q. Brown/Martin Luther King Community Center, 270 Kent Street). Lou Bellamy founded the Penumbra Theatre Company (PTC) in 1976, and serves as its artistic director. At the urging of late-director Claude Purdy, Wilson moved to the Twin Cities to turn a series of poems about black heroes of the Old West into a play. In 1981, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* became Wilson's first professional production when Purdy staged it at Penumbra.[125] Wilson's relationship with Penumbra throughout the 1980s helped him hone his craft and mature as a playwright.[126] Recounting Penumbra's impact on Wilson, Bellamy recounts, that Penumbra "spurred him on."[127] In 1997, Wilson credited PTC for much of his professional development: "I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.[128]

As in Pittsburgh, Wilson wrote in numerous places in St. Paul, especially in the traditionally black Selby-Rondo neighborhood where he lived.[129] However, none are as significant as Penumbra, nor as formative as his childhood home in Pittsburgh.

Seattle

August Wilson moved to Seattle in 1990 largely to write and start a new life after his marriage with Judy Oliver ended. There he established a relationship with the Seattle Repertory Theater, which eventually produced all ten plays of the Pittsburgh Cycle (Bagley Wright Theatre, 155 Mercer Street). During his decade and a half in Seattle, Wilson lived in the city's Capitol Hill neighborhood. Though often identified with Pittsburgh and the Twin Cities, Wilson's widow Constanza Romero says Wilson "was a Seattle man, too."[130] However, when asked if he had any plans to write a play set in the cloudy hills of his new hometown, Wilson replied, "It's like I haven't looked at Seattle. I'm still looking there. At Pittsburgh."[131]

As in St. Paul and Pittsburgh, Wilson wrote in a number of places in Seattle, but none appear to be especially significant, with the exception, perhaps, of his home: "I work in the basement of my house. On some days it is a sanctuary. On others it's a battlefield and then at times it's a dungeon. It is a place surrounded by the familiar particulars of my life."[132]

[120] Ibid., 87.
[121] Ibid., 104.
[122] Ibid., 109.
[123] Ibid., 106.
[124] August Wilson quoted in Lahr, "Been Here and Gone," 60.
[125] Rohan Preston, "Claude Purdy Gave August Wilson His Break in St. Paul," *Star Tribune,* 28 July 2009.
[126] Lou Bellamy, interview with author, March 2012.
[127] Ibid.
[128] August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997, in Penumbra Theatre Company, *A Brief Overview on the History of African American Theater,* 2009.
[129] Lou Bellamy, interview with author, March 2012.
[130] Misha Berson, "Embracing the Legacy of August Wilson." *Seattle Times,* 30 October 2007.
[131] Janet I-Chin Tu, "A Story To Tell—Playwright August Wilson, Now Settled In Seattle's Misty Nest, Writes About The Black Experience Like No Other Storyteller," *The Seattle Times,* 18 January 1998.
[132] Ibid.

**Conclusion**

The significance of August Wilson's childhood home in Pittsburgh's Hill District is as an enduring icon of memory and metamorphosis. The house is the most significant extant resource for understanding the formative development of Wilson as a writer—it is there where he found his "song." The *Post Gazette's* Christopher Rawson concludes, "In dramatizing the glory, anger, promise, and frustration of being Black in America, [Wilson] created a world of the imagination—August Wilson's Hill District—to rank with such other transformational fictional worlds as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, Hardy's Wessex, or Friel's Donegal. Critics from Manhattan to Los Angeles now speak knowingly of "Pittsburgh's Hill District," not just the Hill as it is now or was when Mr. Wilson grew up in the '50s, but August Wilson Country—the archetypal northern urban Black neighborhood, a construct of frustration, nostalgia, anger, and dream."[133]

**Developmental history/additional historic context information** (if appropriate)

[133] Christopher Rawson, "Obituary: August Wilson, Pittsburgh Playwright Who Chronicled Black Experience. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* 3 October 2005.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

____preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
____previously listed in the National Register
____previously determined eligible by the National Register
____designated a National Historic Landmark
____recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
____recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
____recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

**Primary location of additional data:**

____State Historic Preservation Office
____Other State agency
____Federal agency
____Local government
____University
____Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): N/A

## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** Less than one
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

**UTM References**
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

| | Zone | Easting | Northing | | Zone | Easting | Northing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 17 | 586033 | 4477684 | 3 | | | |
| 2 | | | | 4 | | | |

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)
The August Wilson House property occupies Allegheny County Tax Parcel 0009-S-00036-0000-00 (Deed Records, Allegheny County Department of Real Estate, County Office Building, 542 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219).

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)
The boundary encompasses the parcel of land historically associated with the August Wilson House.

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jeff Slack, AICP
organization Pfaffmann + Associates date 30 September 2012
street & number 223 Fourth Avenue, Suite 800 telephone 412-471-2470
city or town Pittsburgh state PA zip code 15222
e-mail

## Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

  A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

## Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: Wilson, August, House
City or Vicinity: Pittsburgh City
County: Allegheny County
State: PA
Photographer: Jeff Slack, Pfaffmann + Associates; Charles Uhl (for photos dated 2008)
Date Photographed: May 2012 (unless noted)
Location of Original Digital File: Pfaffmann + Associates, 223 Fourth Avenue, Suite 800, Pittsburgh, PA
Description of Photograph(s) and number:

Printer: HP Deskjet 5650
Paper: HP Premium Plus Photo Paper
Ink: HP Photo ink cartridge (#58)

Photo 01 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0001)
Bedford Avenue streetscape, showing 1727 Bedford Avenue (right) camera facing west toward downtown Pittsburgh.

Photo 02 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0002)
Front and east facades, showing the Wilson's rear apartment (right), camera facing northwest.

Photo 03 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0003)
1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, with the connecting wing at left, camera facing west.

Photo 04 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0004)
Rear facade, camera facing south (2008).

Photo 05 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0005)
Front facade, showing 1725 Bedford Avenue next door (left), camera facing northeast.

Photo 06 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0006)
Elements of surviving late-nineteenth century storefront, camera facing north.

Photo 07 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0007)
Bathroom, 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, Ground Floor, camera facing southeast (2008).

Photo 08 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0008)
Kitchen, 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, Second Floor, camera facing northeast (2008).

Photo 09 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0009)
Kitchen, 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, Second Floor, showing temporary shoring, camera facing northeast.

Photo 10 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0010)
Bedroom/Living Room, 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, Second Floor, camera facing southeast (2008).

Photo 11 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0011)
Daisy Wilson's Bedroom, 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, Third Floor, camera facing northeast (2008).

Photo 12 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0012)
Daisy Wilson's Bedroom, 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, Third Floor, showing temporary shoring, camera facing northeast.

Photo 13 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0013)
Bedroom, 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, Third Floor, camera facing southeast (2008).

Photo 14 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0014)
Interior of Former Bella's Market, 1727 Bedford Avenue Front, Ground Floor, camera facing northwest (2008).

Photo 15 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0015)
Interior of Former Bella's Market, 1727 Bedford Avenue Front, Ground Floor, showing exposed plaster ceiling and showcase windows, camera facing south.

Photo 16 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0016)
Break/Work Room, connected to 1727 Bedford Avenue Front, Ground Floor, showing beaded board walls and ceiling plus temporary shoring, camera facing southeast.

Photo 17 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0017)
Dining Room, 1727 Bedford Avenue Front, Second Floor, camera facing north (2008).

Photo 18 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0018)
Stair Hall, 1727 Bedford Avenue Front, Third Floor, camera facing north (2008).

Photo 19 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0019)
Rear bedroom, 1727 Bedford Avenue Front, Third Floor, camera facing northeast (2008).

Photo 20 (PA_Allegheny County_Wilson, August, House_0020)
Front Bedroom, 1727 Bedford Avenue Front, Third Floor, camera facing southeast.

**Property Owner:**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

**Continuation Sheets**

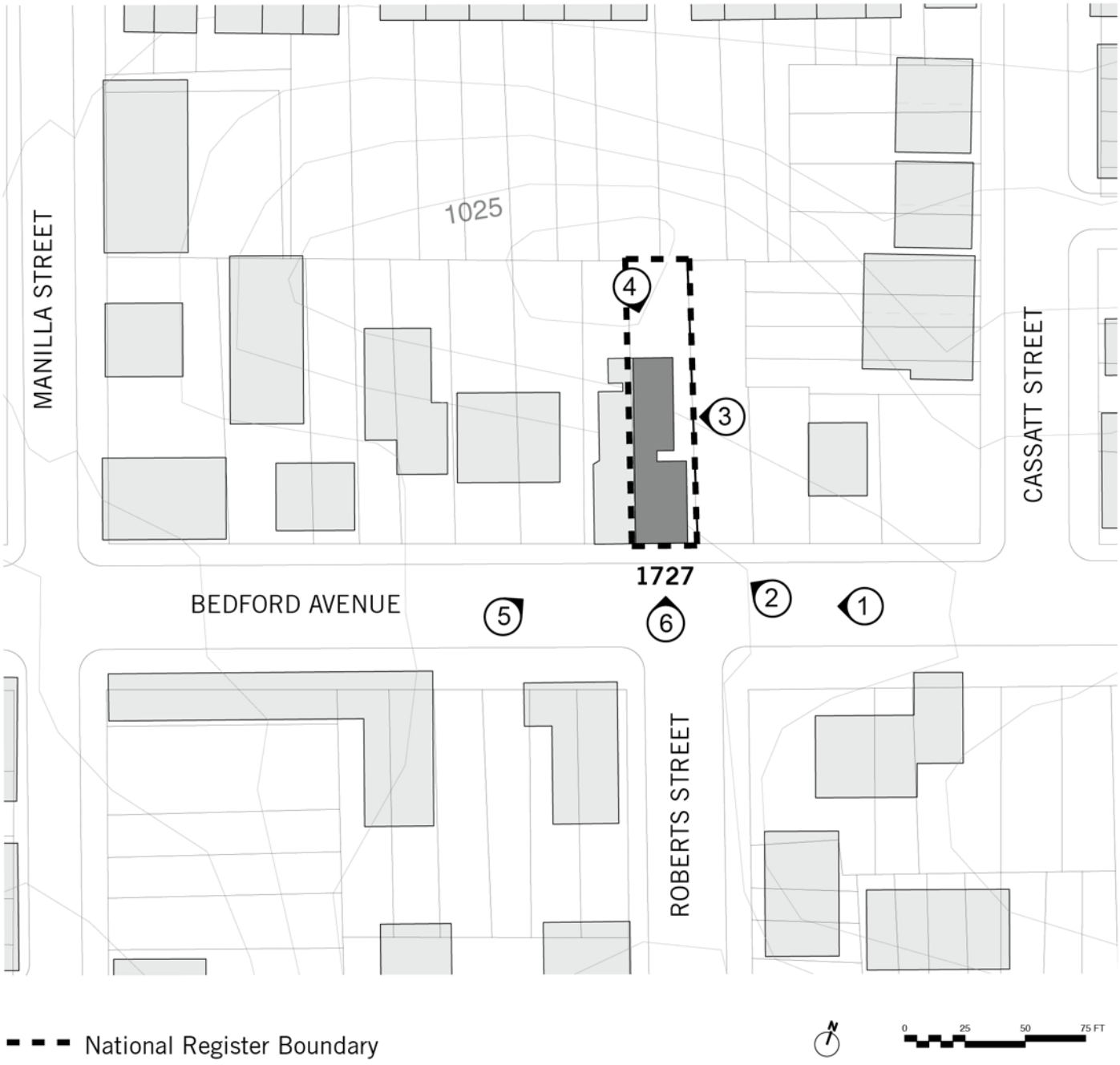


Figure A. Site Plan


Figure B. Floor Plans

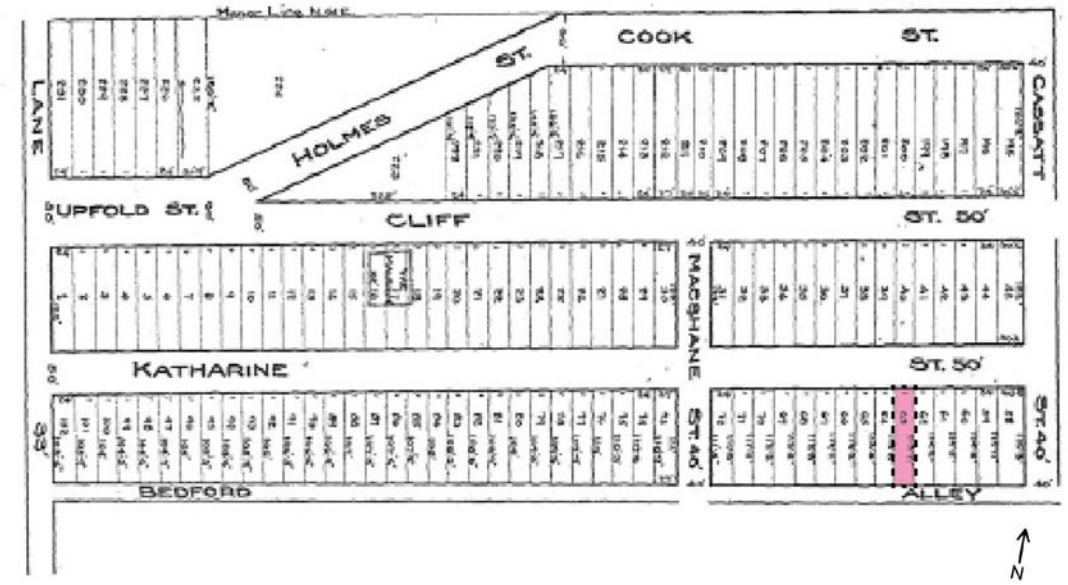


Figure C. Cook's and Cassatt's Plan of Lots (1835), showing the future site of the August Wilson House on Lot 63 in Pittsburgh's Hill District (Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Department of Real Estate).

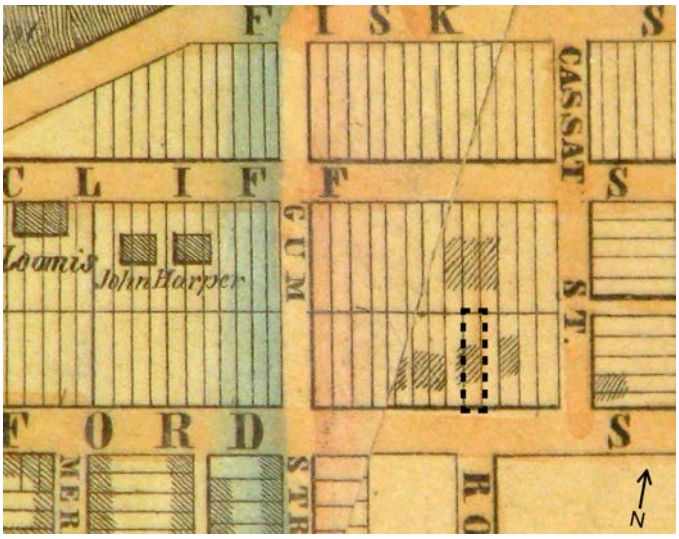


Figure D. 1852 map showing the Calvin Sackett House, which would become the August Wilson House (Schuchman and Haunlein, *Pittsburgh,* map, Pennsylvania Department, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, 1852).

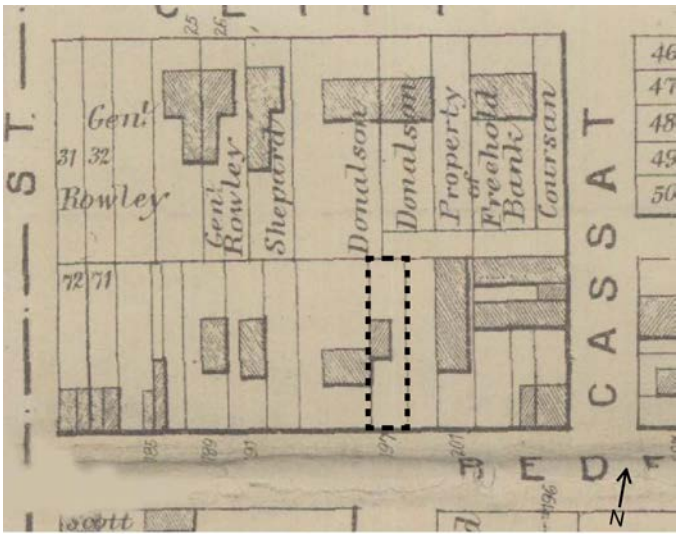


Figure E. 1872 map showing the Calvin Sackett House with its deep setback from Bedford Avenue before the storefront addition was constructed.

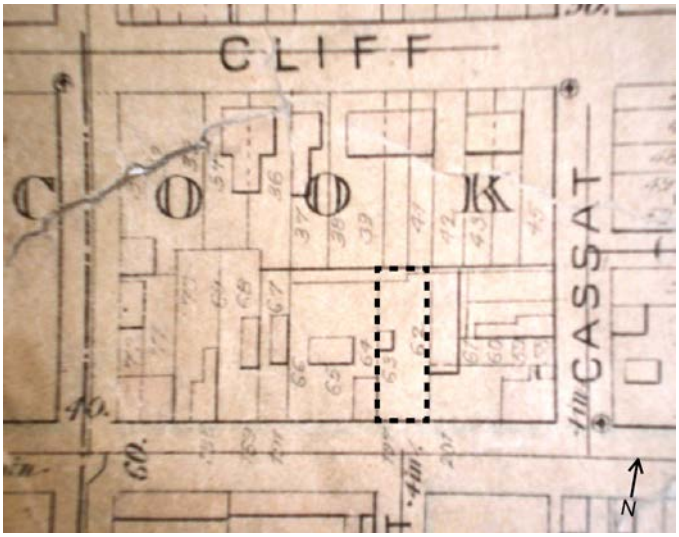


Figure F. 1882 map showing Lots 62 and 63, at the time owned by the Real Estate Savings Bank.

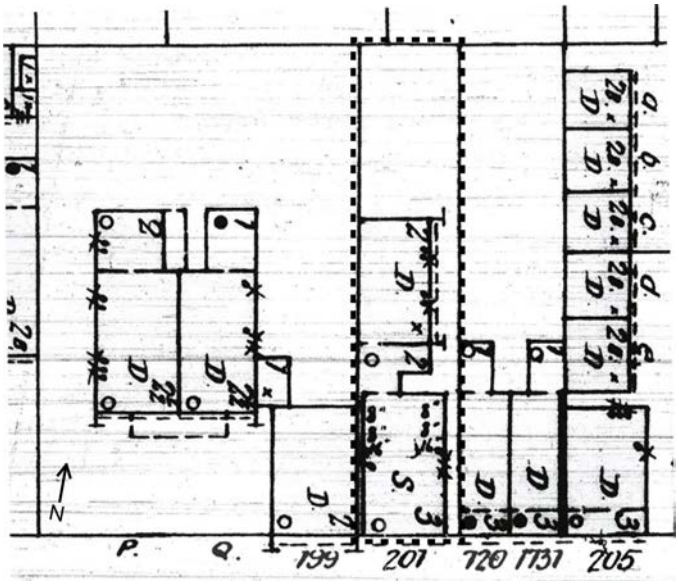


Figure G. 1893 map showing that the storefront and two-story connector have been constructed at the front of 1727 Bedford Avenue (then numbered as 201 Bedford).

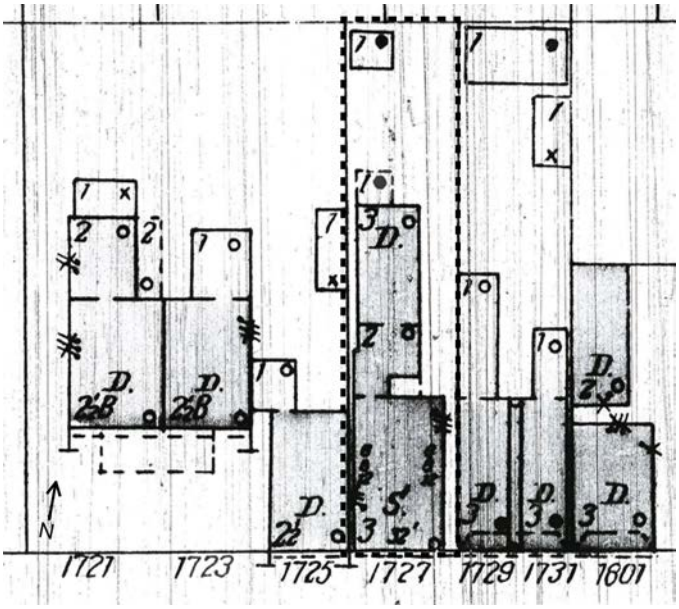


Figure H. 1905 map showing a single-story rear porch on 1727 Bedford Avenue Rear, which provided access to a second floor apartment.

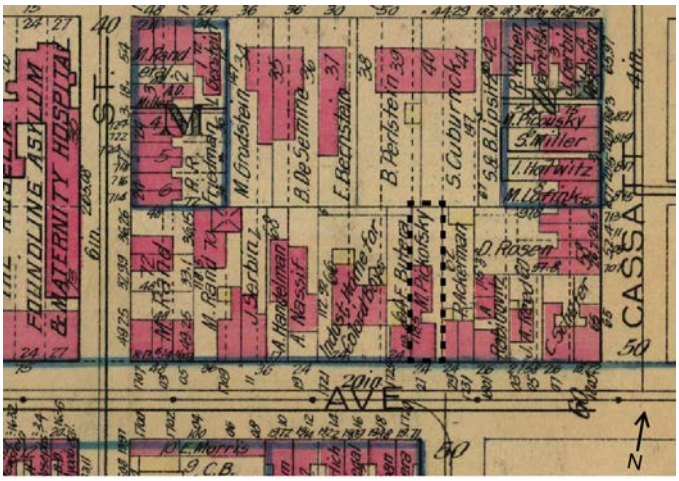


Figure I. 1923 map showing ownership of 1727 Bedford Avenue by Morris Pickofsky.


Figure J. Louis and Beatrice "Bella" Siger, inside Bella's Market
(1727 Bedford Avenue Front) sometime in the 1940s (Courtesy of Len Siger).

Wilson, August, House
Allegheny County, PA

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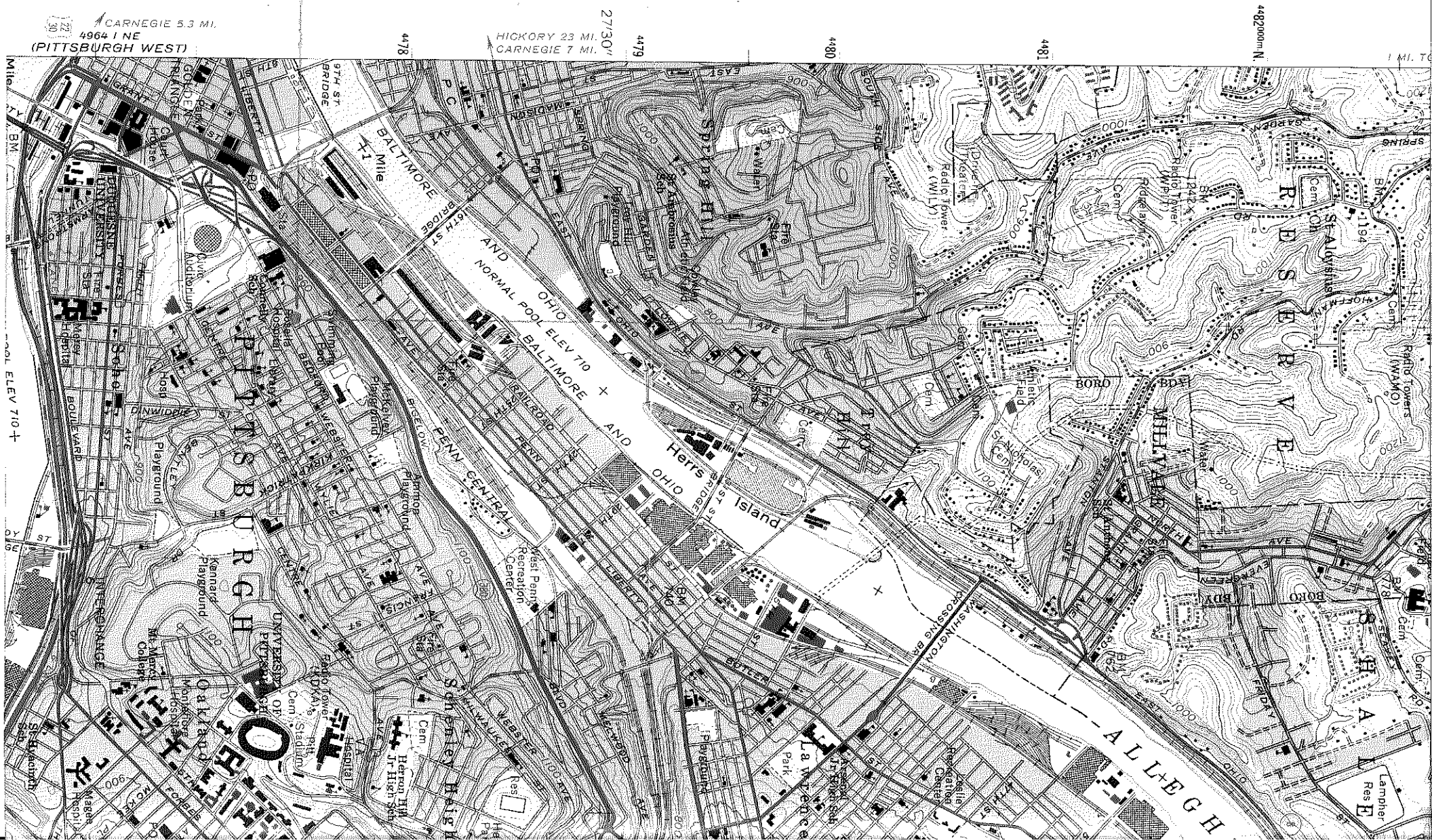


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