



Archives

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WILKINSBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER
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Wilkesburg, like many other urban boroughs, is known to have a declining population. As more residents moved away or passed away, the number of vacant structures rose as did tax delinquency. The abandoned homes and the resultant blight have been the focus for various programs in Wilkesburg. The WCDC (Wilkesburg Community Development Corporation) Strong Neighborhood Initiative, Wilkesburg Land Bank and the county-run Vacant Property Recovery Program have been creating new initiatives to clear land titles and generate opportunities for home ownership in the Borough of Wilkesburg. An upcoming national conference, *Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference* will be held downtown at the Pittsburgh Convention Center. Part of the conference includes a chartered bus trip through Wilkesburg to showcase the work being done to stabilize neighborhoods, eliminate blight, promote conservatorship, advance the Land Bank initiative and more. Wilkesburg Historical Society was asked to provide a brief audio history of Wilkesburg to acquaint the bus participants with Wilkesburg. The following is that history:

“Wilkesburg is a unique and historic town with a fantastic location, just outside of the city of Pittsburgh and seven miles from the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. Unique? Yes Wilkesburg is the one and only town in the world named Wilkesburg.

In 1789 after the Revolutionary War with the British, many early settlers bought land in western Pennsylvania. The area which would become Wilkesburg was purchased by Colonel Dunning McNair, who also represented Allegheny County in the Pennsylvania State Legislature. McNair knew that the immense Allegheny County, formed in 1788, included land all the way to Lake Erie and needed to be divided up to better represent the interests of the inhabitants. He proposed a bill with boundaries for eight new counties. His bill passed and became law March 12, 1800. The new counties were Beaver, Butler, Armstrong, Mercer, Venango, Crawford, Warren and Erie.

The area where McNair chose to live would become Wilkesburg. He loved the location and laid out the foundation for a great town. The street plan was an easy grid with Main Street, later renamed Penn Avenue, running east to west, with North Avenue and South Avenue parallel to Main Street. He built his home there and named his new town McNairstown. McNair had served in the war with General John Wilkins, Jr. They were just a year apart in age, born in 1761 and 1762, and had become close friends. In

1812 when McNair sold a parcel of land to a Patrick Green he provided the name “Wilkinsburgh” on the deed to be recorded, thus honoring his friend by re-naming the town after him. When John Wilkins Jr. died a few years later in April 1816, his grave-length tombstone noted “Here rests the dust of the fifteen-year-old soldier boy of '76, General John Wilkins, Jr., *for whom Wilkinsburg was named.*”

In 1825 Dunning McNair died and his land holdings were purchased in 1833 by James Kelly. Kelly was married to Dunning McNair’s niece Sarah Ann Horner Kelly.

Kelly was a religious man who wanted Wilkinsburg to be a dry town. He donated land to religious groups of all denominations who wanted to build a church to worship in. Thus, Wilkinsburg became known as the “City of Churches” as over twenty-five churches were erected. He emphasized education for the young and care for the elderly. Kelly gave land parcels for public schools to be built and donated land for old age homes for elderly men and women. Wilkinsburg grew very slowly as James Kelly enjoyed the rural country life and chose not to sell many parcels of his land holdings. At the time of Kelly’s death in 1882 the population of Wilkinsburg was 1,529. The residents had great interest in gaining the amenities that the City of Pittsburgh enjoyed. Several petitions to incorporate the Borough of Wilkinsburg were presented and the third attempt passed on October 5, 1887. The new government of Wilkinsburg enabled property taxes to be levied and improvements made. Municipal services included public water, sewage system, paved streets, garbage collection, electric street lights, fire and police protection and other amenities. These benefits were exactly what the residents had wanted and Wilkinsburg enjoyed a surge of new residents and construction of homes. By 1890 the population of Wilkinsburg had more than tripled to 4,662! By 1900 the population had more than doubled again to 11,886. By 1920 there were nearly 25,000 residents in Wilkinsburg, and by the 1950s over 31,000 people were living in Wilkinsburg. It was the most populated Borough in all of Pennsylvania in just 2.3 square miles!

Wilkinsburg had several thriving business districts on Wood Street, Penn Avenue and Trenton Avenue. Several hundred businesses joined the Wilkinsburg Chamber of Commerce. There was no heavy industry in Wilkinsburg but many residents were employed in the steel mills in nearby Pittsburgh or at Westinghouse Electric Corporation in East Pittsburgh.

All of that growth and prosperity changed in the late 1970s with the collapse of the steel industry and in 1988 with the closure of the Westinghouse Electric plant.

By 1990 Wilkinsburg’s population had dropped to 21,080 and kept dropping. By 2010 there were 15,930 residents and the 2020 census shows just 14,349. Many of the century-old homes needed repair, elderly residents passed away with no will or plan in place for their homes, some frustrated residents who couldn’t afford repairs moved away leaving a vacant structure.

The WCDC, Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation, a non-profit focused on revitalizing Wilkinsburg, launched the Strong Neighborhoods study. The purpose

was to discover which neighborhoods in Wilkinsburg were most vulnerable to further deterioration and had residents who wanted to see their area improve. By 2022 the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative had identified several of these areas and began to identify ways to improve the neighborhoods and boost the confidence and outlook of the residents. The focus neighborhoods were: Singer Place, Hamnett Place, and Park Triangle. Programs have been implemented to reduce blight, improve the esthetics of residences and increase home ownership. Additionally, the Wilkinsburg Land Bank has focused on the Laketon neighborhood where they are working to clear titles of vacant properties and getting them into the hands of new owners.

Additional housing will be available soon with the new Penn-Lincoln apartments, a 42 unit building on Penn Avenue patterned after the 1927 Penn-Lincoln Hotel which stood for over 85 years in that location. Wilkinsburg is filled with many interesting and historically significant buildings. One of the most important and significant buildings is the Wilkinsburg Train Station that was built in 1916 and was recently totally restored beautifully and ready for a new tenant. Another important building is the Lohr Building, at the corner of Wood Street and South Avenue. That building is over a hundred years old and has served as a hardware store, Singer Sewing machine store, office building and is now the home of the WCDC. There are quite a few mansions in Wilkinsburg that are still in beautiful condition. One of these is the Yingling Mansion, now known as the Sleeping Octopus, at 1300 Wood Street. Formerly a private home, then as the Wilkinsburg Private Hospital and Gibbs Rest Home, it now serves as a vibrant community center for many groups. Another mansion is the John F. Singer House on Singer Place, built in the 1860s. Singer was a Pittsburgh steel manufacturer who built his own Gothic home in Wilkinsburg for his family to enjoy the healthier air quality of Wilkinsburg. The Singer Mansion is one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture anywhere in the Pittsburgh area. It is currently undergoing restoration.

Wilkinsburg is also the home of the first commercial radio broadcast. Frank Conrad broadcast out of his garage on Penn Avenue, and that became the birth of radio station KDKA, the first commercial broadcast radio station in America.

It is also important to note that Penn Avenue was part of the Great Road from the 1700s. It is also part of the Lincoln Highway which came through Wilkinsburg in 1913. That helped to boost Wilkinsburg commerce in that era of 1913-1916 when a copper statue of Abraham Lincoln was erected to point out that Wilkinsburg is on the Lincoln Highway, the first coast-to-coast road across America which went from New York City to San Francisco. And Wilkinsburg was right there!

The future of Wilkinsburg is bright with many people committed to restoring structures and optimism in the borough.”

Be My Neighbor Day 2026

Saturday, September 19th, 2026

10AM – 2PM

Location: Wilkinsburg

- Civically/FreeStore Wilkinsburg
- Wilkinsburg Public Library
- Wilkinsburg Train Station

Families and neighbors are invited to **Be My Neighbor Day** in the Borough of Wilkinsburg on Saturday, September 19, 2026, from 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.



Inspired by the legacy of Fred Rogers, the free event helps children learn what it means to be a caring neighbor and encourages families to connect with each other, while promoting a welcoming environment for all.

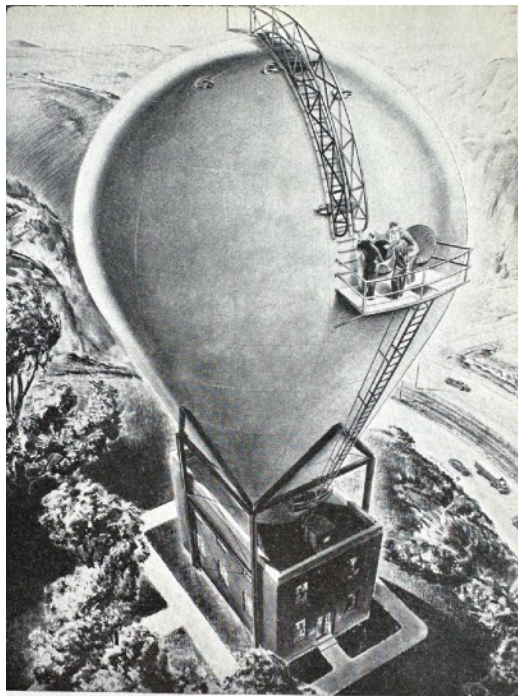
This year's theme, "History to Hope," celebrates Wilkinsburg's unique story while looking ahead to the community's future. The event features activities at several key locations, including the Civically FreeStore Wilkinsburg, Wilkinsburg Public Library, and the newly remodeled Wilkinsburg Train Station.

Families will enjoy hands-on activities, educational resources, a community resource row, and the chance to meet neighbors who are making a difference—including a special appearance by Daniel Tiger from Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood!

The Wilkinsburg Historical Society will also participate in this special event.

Our activity features patriotism in this 250th year of America as well as information related to the Lincoln Highway and the statue of Lincoln in Wilkinsburg.

The **Westinghouse Atom Smasher** was under construction in 1937 when this artist-rendering and description was featured in *The Nugget, 1887-1937 fiftieth anniversary of Wilkinsburg*. It was built in Forest Hills and was visible above the tree line of Ardmore Boulevard and the Lincoln Highway. It was across Ardmore Blvd. from the well-known Vincent's Pizza Park.



The "Atom Smasher" now under Construction at Westinghouse Research Laboratory.

Disintegrating the Atom

WESTINGHOUSE has now developed new equipment to pick apart the atom—the foundation-stone of matter—thereby hoping to solve some of the mystery now surrounding the structure of matter. This "atom-smasher" is a huge, pear-shaped steel tank about as tall as a six-story building. It will house an electrostatic direct current generator and other required parts, including a 40 foot vacuum tube. Voltages generated in the "atom-smasher" will range to 5,000,000 and higher. The high voltage will accelerate particles of matter, shot through the vacuum tube, at speeds ranging from 30 million to 100 million miles an hour. In the process of bombardment, the particles will be measured, counted, and identified by special instruments. Leaping from the end of the tube through thin windows of metal, the particles will strike the hard centers of targets with velocity great enough to penetrate the hard centers, or nuclei of the atoms, thus producing new substances.

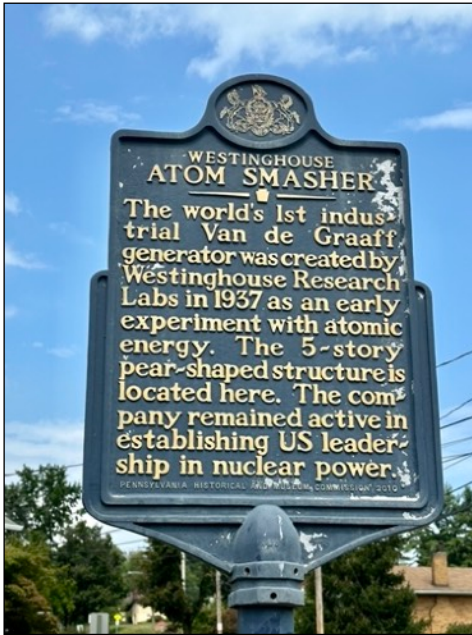
This new venture in scientific exploration by Westinghouse is recognized by the engineering world as one from which the world may gain fundamental knowledge of major importance.

53

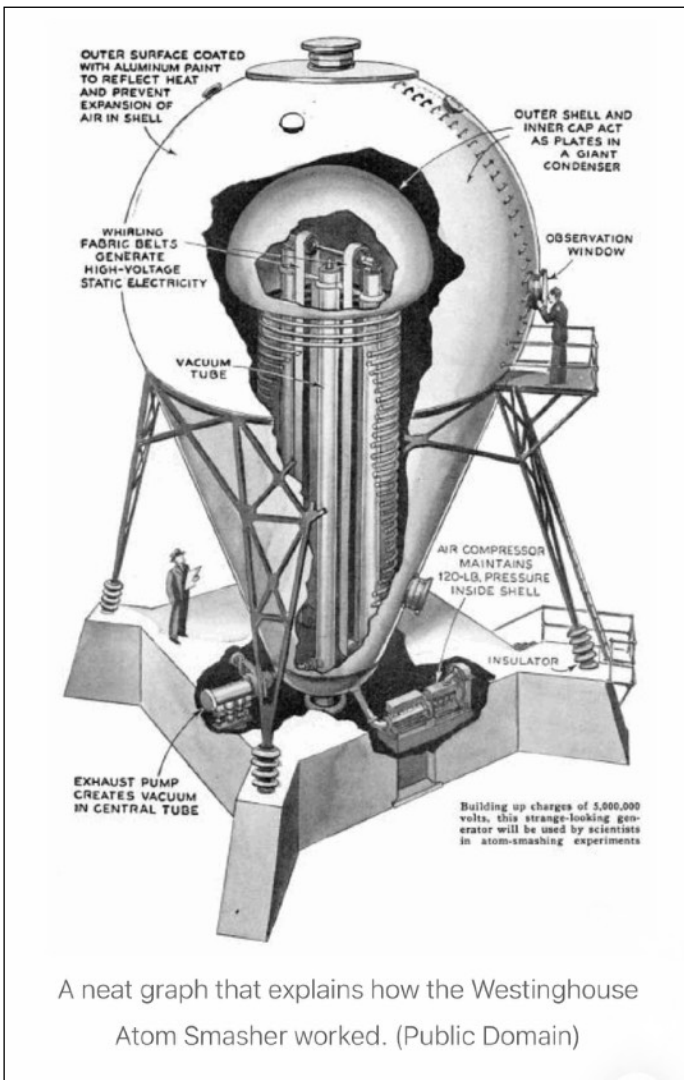


Atom Buster. Westinghouse Laboratories. East Pittsburgh, Pa.

This vintage 1940s era postcard shows the Westinghouse Atom Smasher while it was in use. It is located on Service Road #1 at Avenue F in Forest Hills, formerly visible from Ardmore Boulevard, Thousands of Wilkinsburg residents worked for the Westinghouse Corp, some in East Pittsburgh, others at the Research Laboratories.



The PA Historical and Museum Commission historical marker was placed in 2010. These photos were taken by Anne Elise Morris in August, 2024.



The **Westinghouse Atom Smasher** was a 5 million volt Van de Graaff electrostatic nuclear accelerator operated by the Westinghouse Electric Corporation at their Research Laboratory in the borough of Forest Hills. It was used in the development of practical applications of nuclear science for energy production. In 1940 it was used to discover the photo fission of uranium and thorium, and was most cited for certain nuclear physics measurements. The Westinghouse Atom Smasher was intended to make measurements of nuclear reactions for research in nuclear power. It was the first industrial Van de Graaff generator in the world, and marked the beginning of nuclear research for civilian applications. Built in 1937, it was a 65-foot tall pear shaped tower and was unused after the end of World War II. In 1985, it was named an Electrical Engineering Milestone by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics. In 2015 the brick building surrounding it was removed and the Atom Smasher was laid on its side. In recent months (2026) it has been taken apart and will be moved to Cranberry Township to be reconstructed at the Westinghouse headquarters there.



Don't miss out on **The Wilkinsburg Sun**, a free monthly community newsletter published by the volunteer Wilkinsburg Community Newsletter Board, with the support of the Wilkinsburg Borough, the Wilkinsburg School District, the Wilkinsburg Chamber of Commerce and the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation. The Sun accepts submitted articles provided they are related to Wilkinsburg and are civic-minded.
<https://wilkinsburgsun.wordpress.com>

Sign up to receive The Sun by email at:
<http://eepurl.com/v0iBP> and friend The Sun on Facebook.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society has a website, to share more information about the history of Wilkinsburg. wilkinsburghistory.wordpress.com
 Mailing address: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society, P.O. Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235**

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

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

Wilkinsburg Historical Society yearly dues for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society are:
 \$20.00 INDIVIDUAL Member, \$35.00 FAMILY Membership
 \$10.00 STUDENT or ASSOCIATE Members Please keep your membership dues up to date.
 Contributions are needed for "Lights for Lincoln", to get improved lighting for the Lincoln Plaza area. Abraham Lincoln stands in the dark after sun-down. Your donation can help us illuminate this outstanding area overlooking the Lincoln Highway.

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

Name _____
 Address _____
 City, State, Zip _____
 Home Phone _____ Cell Phone _____
 E-mail address _____

- ☐ \$20 Individual membership
☐ \$35 Family membership
☐ \$10 Student or associate membership
☐ \$_____ Additional donation

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

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