

**ONE FLOOD TOO MANY:  
Remembering Luzerne County's Historic Buildings in the River's Path**

Who in Luzerne County's flood prone municipalities can forget the destruction caused by Tropical Storm Lee in 2011? The September storm caused the Susquehanna River to rise to a record 42.66 feet at Wilkes-Barre, surpassing the previous record set by Tropical Storm Agnes in 1972 by nearly two feet. While communities protected by the levee system were spared, unprotected areas like West Pittston Borough and Mocanaqua, a Conyngham Township village, were not.

The Susquehanna River spilled into more than 25 percent of West Pittston, swallowing up some buildings nearly to the second floor! The flood displaced thousands of people and caused millions of dollars in damages to nearly 900 West Pittston homes and several businesses. In Mocanaqua, homes close to the river filled with up to seven feet of water, leaving behind mud and devastation.

Parents, grandparents, and perhaps great-grandparents experienced the Susquehanna's wrath in previous major floods: 1904, 1936, 1972, 2004, 2005, and 2006. They stayed, repaired, and replaced what they could. But for some Luzerne County residents, Tropical Storm Lee was the tipping point. They voluntarily accepted options for a federal buyout—and demolition— of their properties and relocation elsewhere.

These options came about after the region received a Presidential Disaster Declaration. Through its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA) acquired and demolished more than 200 substantially damaged residential structures, 14 of which were in West Pittston and 24 in Mocanaqua. In addition, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), through its Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program, provided \$15 million to Luzerne County for funding of last resort to assist flood victims. The HUD funding went toward acquisition and demolition of approximately 150 damaged structures of which 15 properties were in West Pittston and 43 in Mocanaqua. Also, the Luzerne County Flood Protection Authority (LCFPA) acquired four properties utilizing a blend of federal, state, and local resources.

Open space will remain forever where these buildings once stood in the floodwaters' path. Many were located in areas of West Pittston and Mocanaqua considered to be historic districts. While each building was not necessarily significant on its own, each has a story and was part of the fabric that makes up these communities. Click here to learn more about historic [West Pittston](#) and [Mocanaqua](#).

- Army National Guard rescues residents from their homes in West Pittston, September 8, 2011. Photo courtesy of *Times Union*.



- Aerial view of flooding in West Pittston from Tropical Storm Lee. Photo credit: Phillip Dente



- Utility pole in Mocanaqua, Conyngham Township, showing flood levels with Tropical Storm Lee at the top.



Cleaning up in West Pittston after Tropical Storm Lee. Photo credit: Phillip Dente.



## West Pittston

### West Pittston Historic District

West Pittston, known as the “Garden Village,” has a distinctive architectural character and history. With completion of the first bridge across the Susquehanna between Pittston and West Pittston and incorporation of the West Pittston Land Association in 1850, as well as investment by other developers, West Pittston grew into a desirable residential enclave for wealthy and upper middle class capitalists and merchants from Pittston. It also became home to carpenters, miners, housepainters, and other laborers, as reflected in the borough’s range of housing stock. West Pittston’s desirability led to rapid population growth and incorporation of the borough in 1857.

Houses, particularly those with river views along Susquehanna Avenue, portray excellent examples of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century residential architectural styles, including Italianate, Second Empire, Queen Anne, Craftsman, and Colonial Revival. Dwellings of more modest vernacular design also contribute to the story of West Pittston and its people. Because of this rich architectural concentration, the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office determined that a large area of West Pittston— constructed between 1850 and 1930, and roughly bounded by Maple Street, Susquehanna Avenue, and Montgomery Avenue—is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district.

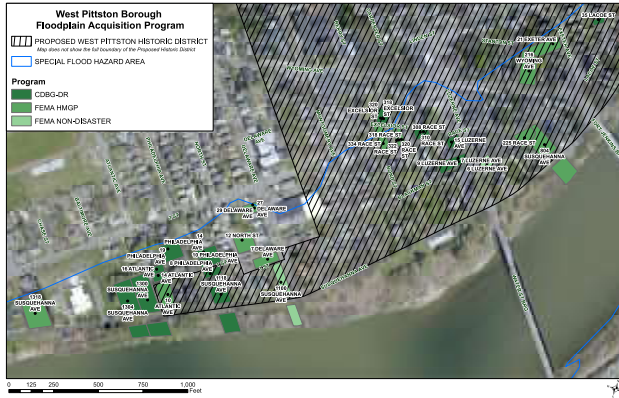
- 1892 Map of Pittston (right) and West Pittston (left).



- 1100 block of Susquehanna Avenue, circa 1920. Photo courtesy of West Pittston Historical Society



- West Pittston Borough Floodplain Acquisition Program, 2012-2018



## Gone, but Not Forgotten

Whether a pristine example of original architecture or a building that’s undergone substantial changes over time, there’s a hole in the streetscape when it’s gone. So as not to be forgotten, here’s a glance at West Pittston history that surrendered to the river. Click on each image to learn more about the property. The voluntary FEMA and HUD acquisitions and demolitions of these buildings took place from 2016 to 2019.

- 14 Atlantic Avenue



This vernacular, gable-fronted house was built circa 1922 for, and in part possibly by, Joseph B. Morton, a carpenter. Morton, who had resided in Pittston, moved into this West Pittston house with his wife, Helen, and raised two sons and a daughter. For at least some portion of his career, Morton worked for P. W. Dershimer & Sons, Pittston manufacturers and dealers in doors, sash windows, blinds, flooring, and lumber. Archibald Dershimer, from whom Morton purchased the property for \$500 on January 19, 1922, listed himself as “architect” in the 1910 and 1930 census records. Perhaps Dershimer had a hand in the design and/or construction of 14 Atlantic Avenue.

- 16 Atlantic Avenue



The bungalow at 16 Atlantic Avenue was built circa 1921 for John Kramer, a carpenter working in a lumber mill. Kramer previously lived in Pittston with his wife, Bertha, and their young daughter, Evelyn. The house was worth \$7,500 in 1930. The three Kramers resided at 16 Atlantic at least until 1942 when Evelyn, a bookkeeper, got married. The bungalow was a popular style of residential architecture in the 1910s and 1920s.

- 318-320 Excelsior Street



The vernacular, two-story twin house at 318-320 Excelsior was built by 1881. Early on, it was a rental property. Eli Brown, a carpenter, and his wife, Frances, purchased 318-320 Excelsior in 1883. They rented out both units and resided at 321 Wyoming Avenue. When first Eli (d. 1907) and then Frances (d. 1917) died, the new owners continued to rent the twin houses.

Judson N. Tiffany, also a carpenter, rented 320 Excelsior by 1888. In 1900, James Courtsight, a teamster, leased 318 Excelsior, living there with his wife, Rachel, and five children; house painter Joseph Gunston, his wife, three children, and mother-in-law occupied 320. By 1910, Henry McGuffin, a draughtsman in an ironworks and later an automotive mechanic, his wife, Bessie, and their daughter lived in 318. Next door in 320, Ralph Frater, a coal miner who had immigrated from England at age eight, resided with his wife, also named Bessie, and two children. By 1920, the Fraters moved out of 320 and Uriah McHenry, a miller, his wife—yet one more “Bessie”—and their two children moved in.

- 7-9 Luzerne Avenue



Pittston dentist Clinton M. Williams and his wife, Mary J., are the earliest documented owners and occupants of this Queen Anne-style house, built around 1887. They moved from Pittston into what was then a single-family home at 9 Luzerne Avenue in West Pittston. In 1889, after only a short time in the house, Clinton died at age 56 from kidney disease, an occupational hazard from mercury exposure in dentistry. His widow took in boarders, not an uncommon financial measure. Upon Mary Williams' death in 1913, St. James Episcopal Church of Pittston acquired the property. The church rented the house as two units to ministers: Rev. S. Ezra Neikirk (7 Luzerne) and Rev.

Morgan H. Jones (9 Luzerne) in the 1910s and 1920s. St. James Episcopal owned the property until 1959.

- 15 Luzerne Avenue



The congregation of the Gospel Tabernacle of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church of West Pittston erected their 30x60-foot, vernacular Gothic Revival-style chapel in 1913-1914. The Alliance had begun in 1887 as a para-church ministry to connect Christian people in the U.S. with worldwide missionaries and grew into a church entity in the early 1900s. Door-to-door evangelism, Bible school, Sunday services, fairs, and community outreach programs thrived in this small West Pittston congregation. In the 1980s, they explored the possibility of relocating, but the right opportunity did not arise. In 1996, a balcony addition provided extra seating and a nursery, and the building was made handicapped accessible. Space, parking, and floods posed ongoing challenges for the church, which in 2008 purchased and moved into the Luzerne Avenue Baptist Church at 317 Luzerne, a safer distance from the river. An independent Spanish Protestant Church occupied the old Christian Missionary Alliance chapel from 2008 to 2010. The 2011 flood from Tropical Storm Lee essentially destroyed the building, which was demolished in 2016.

- 308-310 Race Street



This vernacular gable-fronted house, built as a single-family residence circa 1889, was owned and occupied by various members of the Bond family. Newlyweds John A. and Ida Bond were the first to live here with adult sisters Priscilla and Sadie (Sarah) Bond, the former a music teacher, the latter a schoolteacher. Ida, who in 1890 gave birth to a son, Ira, died in 1897. John A. and their son moved out of the house by 1900 and the elderly John E. H. Bond, high constable in the 1890s, and his wife Ruth moved in with daughter Priscilla, who had remained there. John E. H. died shortly thereafter, around 1901.

By 1910, the property was rented as a two-family home, 308 and 310 Race Street. It is possible that alterations/additions were made to the building at that time. The earliest known tenants were William C. Voightsberger, who worked in the chemical industry, and his family (308 Race) and druggist George Cadwallader and his family (310 Race). The Cadwalladers still lived there in

1920 when Norman Langford, a bricklayer in the mines, and his family rented 308 Race Street.

## **Mocanaqua, Conyngham Township**

### Mocanaqua Historic District, Conyngham Township

The Mocanaqua Historic District, determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, consists of two non-contiguous areas of the village, a northern section along Main Street, above the new Shickshinny-Mocanaqua Bridge, and a southern section centered around Italy Street. Located between the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks and the Susquehanna River, the area grew as a coal patch of rental housing built by the West End Coal Company for workers in its nearby mining operations. The historic district reflects the importance of the coal industry in shaping Mocanaqua during a period spanning roughly from 1882 to 1959.

The West End Coal Company constructed workers' housing in three phases, beginning with the northern section around 1882. Most of the buildings in the southern section of the historic district, known as "The Settlement," resulted from two subsequent building campaigns: 36 houses started by 1897 and 50 houses erected between 1918 and 1924. For that last phase, the Company hired Grosvenor Atterbury, architect and urban planner, who designed a picturesque village of homes that departed from the characteristic workers' housing in Mocanaqua and elsewhere. Additional houses in the historic district were built between 1939 and 1959.

During the Great Depression, the West End Coal Company sold the homes to its employees, eager to reinvest the proceeds in mining operations. Financed through payroll deductions, many of the houses passed from generation to generation, outlasting Luzerne County's coal industry. Repeated floods would eventually take their toll on houses in the Mocanaqua Historic District.

- Conyngham Township Floodplain Acquisition Program, 2012-2018.



This map shows the northern (right) and southern (left) sections of the recommended Mocanaqua Historic District and the individual properties—both within and outside the historic district—that were acquired under the CDBG-DR, FEMA, and LCFPA programs. Demolition of these properties took place 2014 through 2019.

- West End Coal Company breaker, ca. 1911.



Miners, breaker boys, and mine superintendent Joe Hughes (far right) are posed in front of the West End Coal Company breaker. This wasn't the first mining operation in the Mocanaqua area, but it became a very successful one. Around 1882, the company began construction of the breaker, washing facilities, and housing for the influx of workers. Coal production peaked in 1911, coinciding with a series of company photographs including this one. That year, the company produced 754,631 tons of coal and employed 1,350 hands. With yearly production remaining above 600,000 tons until World War I, the West End Coal Company launched its largest campaign of housing construction. Photo courtesy of Frank J. Evina

- "Map of Settlement: Mocanaqua, Luzerne County, PA," 1917.



The West End Coal Company's engineering department drafted this map, dated December 24, 1917. Italy Street appears as Main Street on this site plan, which corresponds to the southern section of the Mocanaqua Historic District. Note the two cul-de-sacs and the triangular park area, part of the architect's effort to create a more attractive environment for workers' housing. The cul-de-sacs were named Pulaski Circle and Columbus Circle to honor the large number of Polish and Italian immigrants who lived here. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress



- Architect and urban planner Grosvenor Atterbury (1869-1956).



Grosvenor Atterbury designed the West End Coal Company's third and last phase of housing construction (1918-1924). Passionate about improving the living conditions of the working class, Atterbury departed from the characteristic company housing of Mocaqua and elsewhere. He laid out River Street and extended Italy Street southward, breaking up the uniformity of the streetscapes with cul-de-sacs and houses sited at various angles and setbacks. The houses were single-family detached homes designed in the period's popular Colonial Revival style. Although each had the same floor plan, variations like shingles versus clapboarding, porch and garden embellishments, and tree plantings fostered individuality and variety.

### If these Houses Could Talk

If these houses could talk, they'd speak the Polish, Hungarian, Russian, and Italian languages of their earliest occupants. Immigrants flocked to the coal region, where opportunity awaited hard workers. Bachelors may have started out in West End Coal Company boarding houses on Main Street. Double and eventually single-family houses provided space to settle down, raise families, and build community. These houses would also speak of sadness. Fatal or disabling accidents were an everyday hazard of the coal industry. Floodwaters from the Susquehanna damaged structures and swept away personal belongings in their path.

- West End Coal Company buildings on Main Street, ca. 1911.



This view looking south on Main Street shows the 1880s housing the West End Coal Company built in Mocanaqua. It was the earliest of three phases of housing construction and the one built closest to the breaker. The Company office is in the lower right; the first two houses beyond that were reserved for Company executives and their families. Farther down Main Street, boarding houses teemed with single men working in the nearby mining operations and saltbox style duplexes housed married men with families. Photo courtesy of Frank J. Evina

- View from postcard of Mocanaqua, postmarked 1905.



This early 1900s view of Mocanaqua shows the West End Coal Company's first two blocks of facing rows of saltbox style duplexes in "The Settlement." The last block of houses, 83 through 102, were not yet built. The railroad cars passing through are on the Pennsylvania Railroad line. Photo courtesy of Frank J. Evina

- Looking northwest along Italy Street at company housing, ca. 1911.



The West End Coal Company built 36 identical duplex dwellings as the first part of "The Settlement," an area located south of the Shickshinny Bridge. Construction of three blocks of these houses started by the mid-1890s; pictured here is the last section to be built (ending with 101 and 102 Italy Street), completed by 1910. These utilitarian, two-story duplexes with long pitched roofs that sloped down to the back resembled the saltbox style houses commonly found in New England. Sited uniformly in rows, they faced each other along Italy Street, between Kadtko Court and River Street. Photo courtesy of Frank J. Evina

- The Partyka-Billy House, 104 Italy Street (center), ca. 1920.



The Partyka-Billy House at 104 Italy Street was one of the houses designed by architect Grosvenor Atterbury. Contrast the orientation of the house perpendicular to the street and the arched arbors in front of 104 and 106 Italy Street, with the row of older, uniform houses in the background.

In 1918, George (also known as Albert) Partyka, a miner, and his wife Bertha, were the first tenants to live here. They had two young children, Leo and Mary, by the time George died from meningitis in 1922. Bertha and the children remained at 104 Italy Street until 1927, when John and Mary Billy moved in. John, 10 years old when a runaway mine car killed his father, had gone to work as a breaker boy to help support his mother and five siblings. As an adult, he worked as a motor runner in the mine and later found employment as a pipefitter at the American Car and Foundry Company in Berwick. John and Mary raised two sons (John Jr. and Joseph) in 104 Italy Street, occupied by Billy family members for 90 years. The house was demolished in the HUD buyout program in 2019. Photo courtesy of Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

- Italy Street improvements, 1919.



Wearing their Sunday best, these sisters pose on new sidewalks in the vicinity of 102 and 104 Italy Street. The planting of street trees and addition of latticework to the porches of these otherwise identical houses from the early 1900s mirrors the landscape and architectural embellishments architect Grosvenor Atterbury put into his design for the single-family housing built between 1918 and 1924. Photo courtesy of Frank J. Evina

- The Kropiewnicki House, 143 River Street, during the 1936 flood.



The Kropiewnicki House at 143 River Street saw its share of hardship and tragedy. Around 1918, the West End Coal Company leased the newly built house to miner Frank Kropiewnicki and his wife Rose. Frank had emigrated from Poland in 1912 and, three years later, married Rose Bizup, the daughter of Polish immigrants. The Kropiewnickis raised five children (Annette, Walter, Ada, Frank, and Edward) in this Atterbury-designed house facing the Susquehanna. The river flooded their home in March 1936, a problem structures closest to the river would experience time and again. Around the first anniversary of the flood, a mining accident claimed Frank's life. In March 1938, the Company sold Rose 143 River Street, where she continued to live with the three youngest children.

In February 1942, daughter Ada married Stanley Lapinski. Four months later, Rose died in the kitchen of 143 River Street from a freak drowning accident while bathing. Twelve-year-old Edward went to live with his eldest sister Annette in New Jersey. Ada, who worked in a woolen mill, and her husband stayed at the family home and, in 1947, acquired her siblings' interests in it. Ada lived there a total of 91 years, cleaning up after numerous floods. The house was demolished as part of the FEMA buyout program in 2015. Photo courtesy of Frank J. Evina

---