

Author: **Stephan Bontrager, Director of Communications, Riverlife**
A Big Step Forward: Point State Park

Pittsburgh's riverfronts have undergone a long transformation from being used primarily for industry in the first half of the 20th century to the green public parks, trails, and facilities of today. The city's riverbanks along its three rivers—the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio—are a patchwork quilt of publicly- and privately owned land, lined with industrial and transportation infrastructure that has created challenges for interconnected riverfront redevelopment across property lines. Despite the obstacles, Pittsburgh has seen a remarkable renaissance along its waterfronts.

The city's modern riverfront transformation began with the construction of **Point State Park** during the first "Pittsburgh Renaissance" movement of the 1940s and 50s by then-mayor David L. Lawrence. The 36-acre park at the confluence of Pittsburgh's three rivers (the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio) was conceived as a transformational urban renewal project that would create public green space at the tip of the Pittsburgh peninsula. Championed by a bipartisan coalition of Lawrence, banker Richard King Mellon, and the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, Point State Park was created on land used primarily as a rail yard and acquired through eminent domain. Construction took several decades and the park was officially declared finished and opened to the public in 1974 with the debut of its signature feature, a 150-foot fountain at the westernmost tip of the park. After its opening, Point State Park saw near-constant use and subsequent deferred maintenance. In 2007 as part of the Pittsburgh 250th anniversary celebration, the park underwent a \$35 million top-to-bottom renovation led by the Allegheny Conference, Riverlife, and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources which owns and operates the park. The renovation concluded in 2013 and was the largest park restoration project in Pennsylvania history.[\[1\]](#)

Allegheny Landing

Situated between the 6th and 7th Street bridges on the north bank of the Allegheny River, **Allegheny Landing** was dedicated in 1984 as one of Pittsburgh's first modern riverfront parks and one the nation's first urban riverfront sculpture parks.[\[2\]](#) It was established in recognition of Pittsburgh's riverfront potential for recreation and incorporating arts within the urban landscape and has since become a well-used node of Pittsburgh's riverfront trail system. Project open to the public: 1984; Renovation began: 2013; Renovation partners: Friends of Allegheny Landing, City of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art, Riverlife

Creating Access Through Trails

Western Pennsylvania's hilly topography meant that highways, railways and other transportation infrastructure were often built along the flat riverfronts throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, with the unintended result of cutting off many neighborhoods from the waterfront. Access was also challenged by industrial sites like steel mills, warehouses and rail yards which used the riverfronts for transportation, manufacturing

and discharge. In the late 1990s creating access to the waterfront was a priority of **Mayor Tom Murphy** (who served from 1994-2006) and trail advocacy group **Friends of the Riverfront**. Trail development at the Station Square site (see below) on the Mon River became a starting point for the **Three Rivers Heritage Trail**. The Heritage Trail expanded along Pittsburgh's South Side, first including a span from 4th to 9th Street built by the City of Pittsburgh with support from Laurel Foundation and other stakeholders. The trail was expanded between 9th and 18th Streets by the City in 1991 after urging from Friends of the Riverfront, and entered Southside Riverfront Park in 1999. The Three Rivers Heritage Trail continues to branch and grow throughout Western Pennsylvania, now encompassing 24 miles of riverfront including 13 miles in the Downtown area. Friends of the Riverfront also established 23 access points to the river known as the Three Rivers Water Trail for non-motorized recreation on the rivers in the early 1990s, and the organization continues to coordinate trail stewardship and development efforts throughout the region.

Riverfront destinations in the 1990s: Washington's Landing, Pittsburgh Technology Center and others

Two significant projects during the tenure of **Mayor Sophie Masloff** (who served from 1988-1994) changed Pittsburgher attitudes about development near the rivers. During the 1980s and 1990s, Pittsburgh's **Urban Redevelopment Authority** advanced a redevelopment plan for Herr's Island, once blighted by former cattle stockyards, meatpacking and rendering plants, metal salvaging plants and other industrial uses. The redevelopment plan called for brownfield remediation, new roadways, and parks and trails, an overall public investment of \$26.5 million.[\[3\]](#) Additional housing and commercial development brought the total cost of development to over \$70 million and resulted in establishing Herr's Island (renamed **Washington's Landing**) as a premiere piece of real estate. Over on the northern bank of the Monongahela, the **Pittsburgh Technology Center** was built on a portion of the former J&L Steel Mill site in the neighborhood of South Oakland. The 48 acre park opened in 1989 and has been home to research and tech laboratories for Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pittsburgh and others.[\[4\]](#)

Across the Allegheny River in the Strip District neighborhood, the former Armstrong **Cork Factory** sat empty and deteriorating after closing in 1974. The Frederick Osterling-designed building saw new life when it was purchased in 2005 by McCaffery Interests and Big River Development. The new owners invested more than \$60 million in refurbishing the building into condominiums, using historic tax credits from the National Park Service and establishing a popular residential complex on the riverfront.[\[5\]](#)

The former Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad Complex on the southern bank of the Monongahela River was redeveloped into an indoor/outdoor retail and entertainment complex called **Station Square** in the mid-1990s by **Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation** and **Forest City Enterprises**.[\[6\]](#) A public landing and marina were added in 2005.

The Aluminum Company of America, or **Alcoa**, built the **Alcoa Corporate Center** in 1998 on what would become the North Shore and relocated its corporate headquarters there from downtown Pittsburgh. The recognizable wave-form glass façade was envisioned by then-chairman and Riverlife co-founder Paul O'Neill, and featured many green building features as a precursor to LEED green building practices being adopted across the country in the early 2000s.

Allegheny Riverfront Park is a linear riverfront park with ramp and stair connections along the southern bank of the Allegheny River adjacent to Pittsburgh's Cultural District. **The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust**, under the leadership of then-president Carol Brown, commissioned a collaboration in the 1990s between artist Ann Hamilton and landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh to create river access and public open space, and the park opened to the public in 1998 at an estimated cost of \$25 million.[\[7\]](#)

1999 Creation of Riverlife and a master plan for riverfront redevelopment

As Pittsburgh's riverfront redevelopment opportunities began to grow in sites formerly occupied by industry and blight, community leaders saw the importance of forming a task force that would oversee a comprehensive master planning process for the Downtown riverfronts. In 1999 civic leaders including Mayor Murphy, philanthropist Teresa Heinz[\[8\]](#), president of the Heinz Endowments Maxwell King, PNC president James E. Rohr, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editor John G. Craig Jr., and former Alcoa chairman and Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Paul O'Neill came together to form the 40-member **Riverlife Task Force** comprised of riverfront property owners, elected officials, landscape architects, and community members.[\[9\]](#) One of Riverlife's first initiatives was selecting architecture firm Chan Krieger Sieniewicz of Cambridge, Mass. from a national request for qualifications process to lead the vision planning process.

After conducting hundreds of public meetings with Pittsburghers, Riverlife Task Force and Chan Krieger Sieniewicz released *A Vision Plan for Pittsburgh's Riverfronts* in 2000, which called for the creation of **Three Rivers Park**, a 13-mile loop of interconnected riverfront trails and public open spaces. The vision plan was accepted by the City of Pittsburgh, and **Riverlife** (which shortened its name in 2008) continues to work with city administrations, property owners and developers to oversee the creation of Three Rivers Park. An economic impact study completed by Sasaki Associates (Boston, Ma.) in 2015 revealed that since 2000, \$129 million invested in building Pittsburgh's riverfront park system has helped to catalyze nearly \$2.6 billion in riverfront development activity and nearly \$4.1 billion in total riverfront and adjacent development. Just analyzing the \$2.6 billion riverfront yield, the ratio between park investment and riverfront development has been 20:1.[\[10\]](#)

Other notable Riverlife advocacy and planning projects included working with PennDOT in 2003 to create a new type of bridge barrier that would preserve scenic river viewsheds while improvements were underway on the Fort Pitt Bridge and adjacent Parkway areas.[\[11\]](#) In October of 2005, Riverlife and Alcoa Foundation publicly launched the West End Pedestrian Bridge Competition. The competition invited

entrants internationally to envision a new pedestrian crossing at the West End Bridge, creating new connections to both land and water[12]. The winning design was submitted by the firm Endres Ware and is currently being evaluated for implementation.

Other Significant Projects

Dramatic changes were made to the northern banks of the Allegheny and Ohio Rivers in Pittsburgh's North Side during the near-simultaneous construction of the Heinz Field football stadium and PNC Park baseball stadium in 2000 and the demolition of Three Rivers Stadium in 2001. Pittsburghers voted down a referendum that would have increased sales tax to finance the construction of the new sports facilities and public amenities; however the construction moved forward when elected officials announced a "Plan B" that allocated \$809 million of Regional Asset District funding to make the North Side improvements and expand the David L. Lawrence Convention Center.[13] Named the **North Shore**, the new riverfront neighborhood included a \$35 million, 11.25 acre riverfront park and trail built by the **Sports and Exhibition Authority** between the two new stadiums and featured outdoor recreational amenities, public art, water features and a fishing pier.[14]

The Mon Wharf Landing is a 2017-foot linear riverfront park that was constructed on the Monongahela Wharf on the northern edge of the Mon River downtown. A \$3 million joint project between Riverlife, the Pittsburgh Parking Authority, PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, PennDOT and City of Pittsburgh, the Landing opened to the public in 2009.[15] Planned connections on both ends of the landing will connect it to Point State Park (on the western end) and the Smithfield Street Bridge and Great Allegheny Passage (eastern end).

Rivers Casino amphitheater: Rivers Casino's privately owned, public riverfront amphitheater was completed in 2009 by Gaming Holdings, and has become a landmark destination for area residents and visitors alike. The design includes a riverfront promenade, 1,200-seat outdoor amphitheater facing the Ohio River, riverfront lighting and dock for boat access. The casino's award-winning landscape design by Pittsburgh-based Strada also incorporates a stormwater management system. Park opened to public: 2009; Estimated Project cost: \$3.5 million[16]

South Shore Riverfront Park: At the site of the former Jones & Laughlin steel mill in Pittsburgh's South Side neighborhood, a former mill barge dock has been converted to a riverfront park that straddles a railroad tunnel and overcomes a 40' drop in elevation to provide access to the Monongahela River. The park provides a riverfront face to the adjacent SouthSide Works retail and entertainment complex. Switchback terraces connect upper and lower plazas to create an outdoor public space for recreation, relaxation and special events, and interpretive elements and unearthed artifacts on display pay tribute to the site's steel history. Park opened: 2012; Estimated Project cost: \$13 million.[17] Project Partners: Soffer Organization, Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh, Riverlife. Related: **The Hot Metal Bridge** – originally built to transport molten steel from one plant to another via railcar – now connects the SouthSide Works residential and retail complex to the Pittsburgh

Technology Center across the Monongahela River. A bike/ped walkway officially opened in 2007 alongside the vehicular lanes provides for safe pedestrian traffic. Access ramps are integrated with public parks on each side of the river. Project opened to public: 2007; Project cost: \$11.6 million; Length: 1,052 feet; Project Partners: City of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Urban Redevelopment Authority, PennDOT, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, Allegheny Trail Alliance.

Building on the success of the opening of South Shore Riverfront Park in 2010 and the park's boat landing in 2013, a new marina opened in June, 2015 with 360 boat slips. The marina is another waterfront amenity that connects the retail and residential activity of the SouthSide Works complex down to the riverfront.

David L. Lawrence Convention Center Riverfront Plaza: Pittsburgh's David L. Lawrence Convention Center debuted in 2003 and was immediately recognized internationally for its sustainable design as the largest Gold LEED-rated building in the world. After an extensive planning period and public process, the Convention Center Riverfront Plaza broke ground in 2009 and was opened to the public by the Sports and Exhibition Authority in 2011, completing the Convention Center's connection to the riverfront. Park opened: 2011; Estimated Project Cost: \$9.5 million[18]

Please note: Due to space limitations, this narrative is not able to include every Pittsburgh riverfront development of the past several decades. This outline focuses on projects that have created significant public open space along the riverfront and/or catalyzed significant adjacent riverfront development in the latter half of the 20th century and first half of the 21st.

Contact:

Stephan Bontrager, Director of Communications, Riverlife

412-258-6636 x105

stephan@riverlifepgh.org

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