

Mini-History
Schenley Farms and
215 Lytton Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Located in the Schenley Farms area of Pittsburgh, 215 Lytton Ave. is one of approximately 100 homes constructed on land that had come down from the Penns to the estate of Mary E. Schenley. When she died in 1903, Andrew Carnegie, John W. Herron and J. Denny Brereton were named trustees of the estate empowered to sell properties as they saw fit.

Consisting mostly of farmland, the Schenley Farms Dairy caught the eye of a Cleveland native, Mr. Frank F. Nicola, who had come to Pittsburg (the "h" was added to Pittsburgh in the early 1900's) in his early life as a contractor and realtor. In early 1905 Mr. Nicola and associates, as the Schenley Farms Co., bought 104 acres from the Schenley estate for \$2,500,000 -- land that General James O'Hara, great grandfather of Mary Schenley, had paid only \$2,000 for over 100 years earlier.

Consisting of the area north of Forbes St. between Boquet St. and Bellefield Ave., the land was laid out in three sections by Mr. Nicola: public, semi-public and residential, with ample space for beautification. In 1905, some persons held that values could not be maintained with so much land going to open space and thought of the area as downtown, with buildings close together, calling the Nicola plan "the most reckless sort of gamble."

However, Mr. Nicola went ahead, spent a million and a half on streets, utilities and landscaping before attempting a sale, using such advanced concepts as underground conduits "to be used for telegraph, telephone, fire alarm, police alarm, electric light or power or other purposes."

Lots on Fifth Ave. were priced \$1,000 a front foot, those on Grant (now Bigelow) Blvd. at \$500 a front foot. Allegheny county made the first purchase -- for Soldiers Memorial Hall at Fifth and the Boulevard. It is called Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall today.

Ten years after Schenley Farms Co. had made its start, the civic and cultural center was well in the making. Some of today's buildings were completed, others were going up; there were 85 beautiful homes in the residential section. Among the major buildings developed by Mr. Nicola were the Schenley Apartments, Schenley Hotel, Memorial Hall, Masonic Temple, Syria Mosque and the Pittsburgh Athletic Association. A collector of paintings,

(his collection had included etchings by Whistler, works by the Spanish artist Degas, and Monet's "Cathedral of Rouen" and "Pond of Lilies") Nicola was active until his death in 1938 at the age of 78. Although he had raised several fortunes during his lifetime, on final accounting his estate was only \$16,365, of which the federal government received \$14,149 in back taxes for 1928 (Nicola was indicted by a Federal grand jury in November of 1931 for evasion of \$26,394.20 taxes on his 1928 net income of \$216,938.24) and 1935; his widow received \$500, and his brother Charles received \$1,040 reimbursement for doctor bills.

Mr. Nicola's wife, Margaret L. C. Nicola, died at age 93 in 1954, had been a physician before her marriage, and was wealthy in her own right.

With 50 foot frontage, the land alone for 215 Lytton was valued at \$25,000 when the residence was constructed for Mr. Nicola in late 1905-early 1906. A number of real estate transfers for the property are recorded between 1905 and 1910, during which time Mr. Nicola apparently transferred a number of empty and developed lots between several of his separate companies and a contractor, Walter E. Schilpp. Records indicate that Mr. Nicola transferred ownership of eight properties (including 215 Lytton) to Walter E. Schilpp in June of 1907, transferred the properties back to the Schenley Farms Co., in August of 1908, then on completion of the Schenley Apartments in 1910, moved his family and staff to that building, where he resided until his death.

On May 2, 1910, John H. and Elizebeth Porter Smitley bought 215 Lytton from the Schenley Farms Co., erected a "car-house" with chauffeur's quarters above, and lived in the home until their death in 1923, when the property was sold to William H. Hill. Mr. Hill apparently "modernized" the rear of the home by adding the first floor sun room, the small "nanny" room and a second bath on the second floor.

Mr. Hill apparently passed on in 1925 leaving the property with his widow Irma McMahon, who in 1928 married Carl H. Robinsteen. The next ownership transfer was to J. Huber Wagner on April 5, 1930, and apparently in a depression-era maneuver, title was passed on Dec. 9, 1931 to Maurice Louik, unmarried, and later the same day, back again to J. Huber Wagner and Patricia M. Wagner, "for \$1 and other good and valuable consideration." Mr. Wagner lived in the house for 23 years, during which time the walnut panels in the living room were refinished in a "limed oak".

John B. and G. Bernice McCrady acquired the former showplace of Lytton Avenue on April 20, 1953, and proceeded to redecorate and update the property, having the living room restored by Jack Strassler to its original walnut panels, and installing what at that time was a very fashionable turquoise wall-to-wall carpeting throughout.

Five years later, in June of 1958, John F. and Camile Horty acquired 215 Lytton Ave. Upon their divorce, Camile received the property in the family settlement, and later married Richard C. McHugh. During this time, Camile had the carriage house removed as "it was in bad shape, and the kids wanted a basketball court," and had the in-ground swimming pool installed.

After moving out in August of 1976, the home was empty and in a general state of neglect until acquired by Paul Schmidt in January of 1977. Mr. Schmidt had a new two-car garage installed somewhat below the pool level and next to it, so as to enable the top of the garage to be used as a sun deck to compliment the pool, and embarked on a total restoration project, returning 215 Lytton Avenue to its former glory.