

# One man's vision, Schenley Heights remains a well-guarded Pittsburgh

AP 5 '97 By Donald Miller  
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**T**he world is not what it once was, in many different ways, and that is a mixed blessing.

But one Pittsburgh neighborhood, Schenley Farms, looks much as it did in 1920, when it was young and still growing. And that is all to the good.

In 1905, Franklin F. Nicola (1860-1938) was an imaginative real estate developer with an office in the Farmers Bank Building (now the doomed 500 Wood Street Building), Downtown.

He bought 170 acres of hilly cow pasture north of Bigelow Boulevard, south of Centre Avenue and west of Schenley High School from the Mary Schenley estate (Andrew Carnegie was a trustee) for \$2.5 million and created the Schenley Farms Co.

With the purchase, the Cleveland native became the local equivalent of that town's Van Sweringen brothers, who developed

Shaker Heights, a district of beautiful houses, or "acropolis," of the University City of Pitt into moving there.

In the remaining land, he laid out for Tennyson and Ruskin, named for English writers. But what he did next was to build a road off from the others around it.

Nicola paid \$1.2 million for Schenley Farms and is said to have been the first to put service lines underground.

Above ground, instead of wires and sycamores flourished despite the mill burning the area in summer.

Nicola's ads in *The Builder*, a long-gone Pittsburgh publication, are still available.

## One man's vision is Pittsburgh's

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monthly, were rhapsodical: "The place par excellence for fine homes." They defined Schenley Farms as the most beautiful community in America and sang its cultural advantages.

Nicola was a master at marketing. He had built the Hotel Schenley in 1898. And in 1909 he erected Forbes Field in a mere four months (how's that, Kevin McClatchey?) and wooed the Pittsburgh Pirates from the North Side. Nicola was also instrumental in stimulating construction of the Pittsburgh Athletic Association and Masonic Temple on Fifth Avenue. In fact, he was taking advantage of the larger effort at that time to move the center of Pittsburgh up on the plateau above the grimy, mill flood plains.

In 1913 the developer built the Nicola Building, now Buhl Building, at Fifth Avenue and Market Street, Downtown. Its blue and white Renaissance revival tile exterior is still beautiful, although the structure needs restoring.

The firm of Janssen and Abbott designed this building, along with the PAA and the Masonic Temple. Nicola was then able to convince the firm, along with other talented ar-

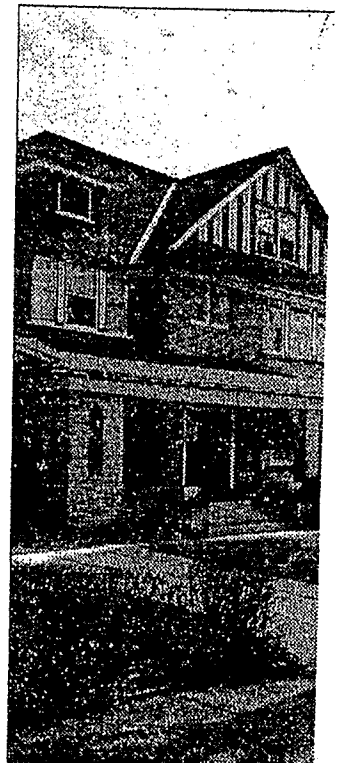
chitects in the city, to design fine period houses in Schenley Farms. The district was almost fully occupied by 1930, its character set long before.

The neighborhood was such a success that it inspired similar houses to be built on Centre Avenue near Bigelow and Schenley Farms Terrace above Centre.

Sally and Loren Siegel bought a large stone house on Bigelow Boulevard 21 years ago, struck by its massiveness and extensive mahogany paneling.

"We looked at the house through eyes of love," she said. "We didn't know how bad it was. Plaster had fallen from 17 of 18 ceilings. The roof leaked so much we caught the rain in plastic wading pools before having it fixed. Over the years we've put hundreds of thousands of dollars into the place, and are still improving it. But we love it."

Siegel, former president of the Schenley Farms Civic Association, the city's oldest such group, is vigilant about the neighborhood's long-standing regulations. It is such devotion that has kept Schenley Farms true to its origins. Over the years, the association has championed single-family zoning to keep the large homes from being chopped up into apartments. Re-



A large house on Lytton Street recently Siegel convinced the ban parking along the north side of Bigelow Boulevard. Siegel estimates 80 percent of homeowners belong to the association.