

# Squirrel Hill Historical Society



## The Morrowfield

### Apartment, Hotel and Reflection of the Roaring Twenties



The Morrowfield Hotel on Murray Avenue has a long and fascinating history. This display features the interesting story of the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel, part of a complex of buildings that encompasses most of the area bounded by Forward, Shady, Morrowfield and Murray Avenues.



THREE ROOMS, \$120.

FOUR ROOMS, \$140.

These rentals include gas for cooking, free cleaning of windows and rugs, heat, hot water and refrigeration. Dining room; garage.

FURNISHED SUITES WITH FULL HOTEL SERVICE.

POSSESSION MAY 1ST OR EARLIER.

Morrowfield Apartment Hotel

Murray at Morrowfield Ave. Hazel 5700.



# The Crowning Gem

The Morrowfield Apartment Hotel opened in 1924 on the block bounded by Murray and Morrowfield Avenues across from the (now) Squirrel Hill Tunnel entrance. The towering nine-story building, a whole block long, has been a visual landmark for 90 years and is an official historic landmark. It holds a lot of stories.

The Morrowfield was the crowning gem of a visionary real estate developer, Thomas A. Watkins. It was to be an elegant apartment hotel, combining the amenities of both. It is surrounded on three sides by Watkin’s planned development of apartments and businesses that was called the Watkins Community.

Morrowfield Edition

THE GAZETTE TIMES.

Morrowfield Edition

PITTSBURGH, PA., SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1924.

MORROWFIELD APARTMENT HOTEL READY FOR GUESTS

SQUIRREL HILL DEVELOPMENT UNIQUE IN SERVICE

New Dwellings Embody Latest Features in Housing Plans

Building of 1-2-3-4-Room Suites in Part of \$5,500,000 Project.

EVERY NEED AT HAND

The new Morrowfield Apartment Hotel, the first part of a mammoth group of apartment buildings comprising three city blocks between Squirrel Hill, Forest, Sycamore and Morrowfield avenues, Squirrel Hill is now ready to receive guests.

The large apartment hotel is unique in the type of service which it offers. It represents the latest type of construction, service, comfort, light, and ventilation, and is a masterpiece of modern architecture. The plan has every advantage of modernized home life, yet has no pretensions and the comforts of the modern home.

Located on the corner and side of Squirrel Hill, the entire group of dwellings commands a fine view of the surrounding district for miles. Ample space is provided for tennis and lawn, and the site thus possesses the advantage of a suburban locality and takes none of the value of the city and the business district.

A 15-minute drive over the Boulevard of the Allies brings the guests into the heart of Pittsburgh, while no more is required to reach East Liberty. The wooded slopes of Squirrel Hill are virtually at the door, and the Sycamore golf course may be reached in a few minutes. The Pittsburgh Golf Club is also within a convenient distance. The site of the new Taylor Athletic High School is close at hand. Industries are at such a distance as to show that the site is clean and wholesome.

\$5,500,000 Project.

The group of buildings represents more than three years of continuous labor by a force which has averaged more than 500 workmen. The cost of the project is placed at \$5,500,000. It is the largest group of apartment buildings between New York and Chicago.

A series of the apartments are located in the group. Calculating an average of four persons to the apartment, the project will house 1,200 persons. There, therefore, housing plans, savings are provided within the apartment to bring pleasure and service, even to the doors of the guests.

The total of units in the group includes the 100 apartments of the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel, 25 five-family houses, and 100 four-family houses.

Alderson Unit Built on Hill After Streets Are Relocated

Quarters grouped for families wanting all modern conveniences.

DE LUXE APARTMENTS

The work is planned under plans in the city and state. Construction of the building is now well advanced. The building is located on the corner of Squirrel Hill and Morrowfield avenues. The building is a masterpiece of modern architecture. The plan has every advantage of modernized home life, yet has no pretensions and the comforts of the modern home.

The apartments on either side are completely new and have been built on the corner of Squirrel Hill and Morrowfield avenues. The building is a masterpiece of modern architecture. The plan has every advantage of modernized home life, yet has no pretensions and the comforts of the modern home.

Murray Avenue Facade of Morrowfield Apartment Hotel.

Group of Five-Family Alderson Apartments.

Featured article in *The Gazette Times*, September 27, 1924

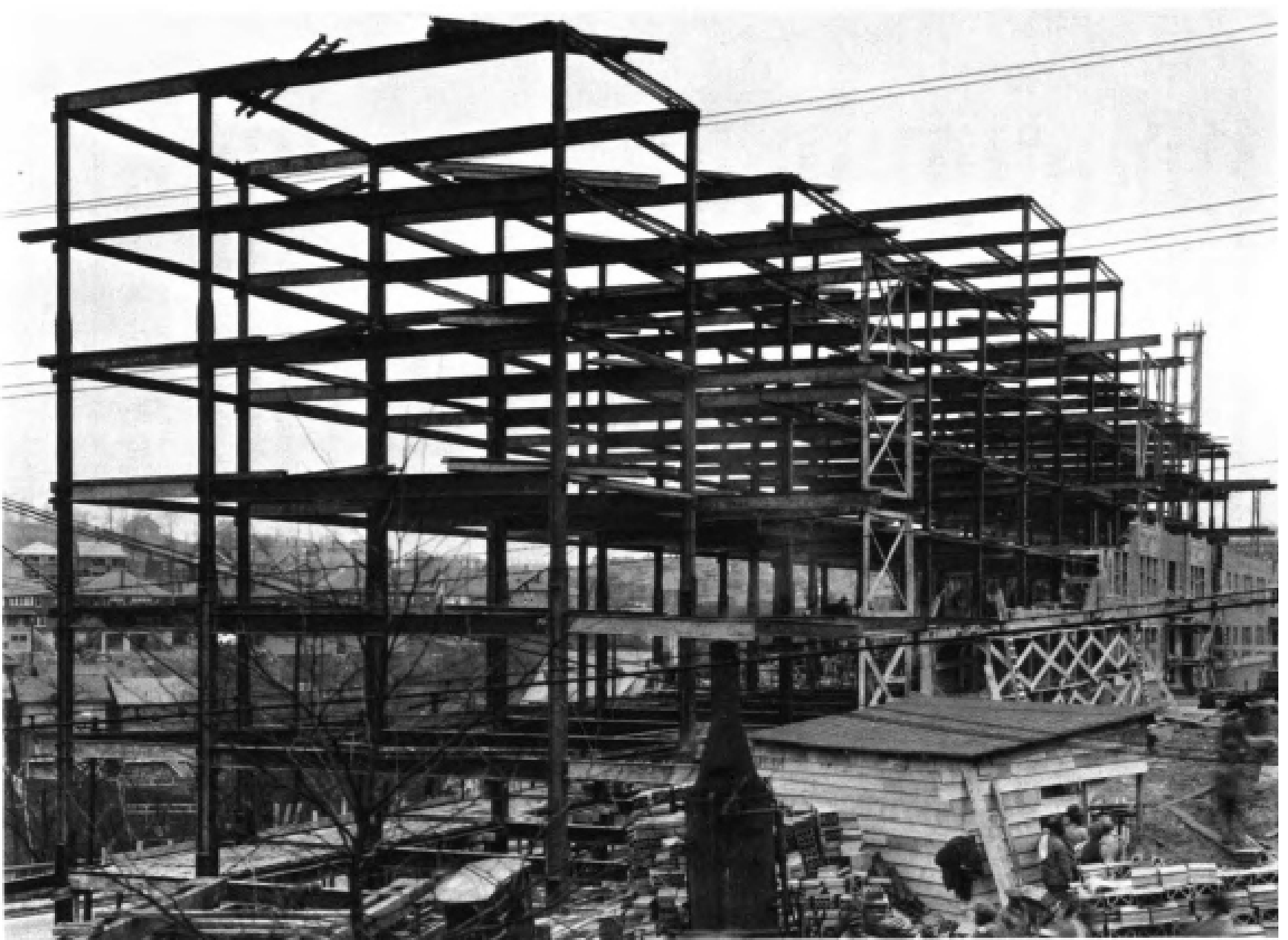


# Innovative Construction

The Morrowfield Hotel was constructed along the hillside that was once called Maeburn Road hill. The hillside was mostly stone, which was used for much of the foundation. The steel superstructure came from the local Levinson Steel Company.

The hotel had central heating and—new to the time—central refrigeration piped into every unit's refrigerator. Construction was done with quality materials and attention to workmanship. It was one of the early fireproofed buildings in the area.

Standard wages for the time were 50 cents an hour for carpenters and \$5.50 a day for brick masons. The cost to build the Morrowfield was approximately \$1.5 million.



Construction of the Morrowfield in 1923

# Morrowfield Amenities

The Morrowfield Hotel was a forerunner in comfort and design. The exterior was imposing, but the interior was carefully designed with a remarkably human scale. It blended the luxury of a hotel and the privacy of an apartment unit.

And that is how it was marketed. A Pittsburgh Gazette-Times article from July 27, 1924, read in part:

*“Will you live in the Morrowfield, Pittsburgh’s first and most elegant residential hotel? ... the relief from the full responsibilities of a house—new environment in a magnificent new home.”*

The apartments became available in 1924. Furnished ones rented for \$250 per month and unfurnished for \$120-\$140. If a resident did not wish to cook, the Morrowfield Dining Room was available for lunch or dinner. Like today’s large resort hotels, the lobby had small shops and convenience stores.

The lobby, with a receptionist for residents and guests, set the tone of refinement.

The current lobby gives a glimpse of its elegant past.

The Morrowfield lobby today





# Interior Design

The apartments, ranging from studio to two-bedroom, were built with 12-foot ceilings, decorative moldings, French doors separating living room and dinette, dark oak floors and memorable efficient kitchens. A feature that pointed to the “apartment-hotel” genre was the service room. Adjacent apartments shared a service room entered from a small door in each kitchen. There, brooms, mops, pails and trash were placed out of sight.

Here is a recollection of a resident of 47 years who was interviewed in 1981:

*“I like the high ceilings, and cupboard space is remarkable. We kept the garbage pail in the service closet and a man came after every meal to dump it. ”*



The caption to this photograph in a 1924 article reads, “Morrowfield kitchen, showing numerous built-in cupboards, central refrigeration, and refuse closet.”



# The Garage



Builder Thomas Watkins knew the upscale residents he wanted to attract would be the same people as those who would be interested in owning a newly popular automobile. Accordingly, he insisted on an adjacent indoor garage—a novel concept at the time.

Service at the garage reflected the hotel's service. Your vehicle would have a clean windshield each morning and would be delivered by valet to the entrance for free. Over the years the garage has been adapted to serve a variety of uses. Storage of an elegant Packard was just one of those uses.

## **1934 Packard Twelve Sport Coupe by LeBaron**

According to Edward J. Blend's book, *The Magnificent Packard Twelve of Nineteen Thirty-Four*, vehicle number 1106-4 remained with the Packard manufacturer for five years. When

purchased, it was delivered to a Pittsburgh industrialist, Mr. Braeburn, in 1939. It was kept at the Morrowfield garage. It was sold 10 years later. Most recently it was auctioned through The Andrews Collection in 2015 and sold for \$2,200,000.





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# The Roaring '20s

Completed in 1924, the Morrowfield Hotel captured the *zeitgeist* of the era. There was constant activity—celebrations, ladies' card parties and luncheons, charity balls, wedding receptions. It was the place to be and be seen. The Grand Ballroom on the top floor was in frequent demand.



Written on the above photograph are the words,  
“CHAS I. AARON CLUB,  
Graduation – Banquet.  
– 1929 –  
Morrowfield Hotel

In the Roaring '20s at  
the Morrowfield, one  
would see flappers,  
cotillions, and  
bathtub gin.





# The Celebrities

The guests at the Morrowfield included famous names of the day; Fanny Brice, Al Jolson, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne were a few. Some members of the Pirates baseball team stayed there for the season, notably Lee Meadows, George Grantham and Joe Harris. The Morrowfield was convenient for visiting teams, too.

The Watkins family, who ran the hotel then, knew how to treat entertainers. They would run transportation for them to and from Downtown and Oakland where they performed and arrange to take them to and from the train station.



Fanny Brice as Baby Snooks, 1940



Al Jolson, c. 1916

Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in 1950



Lee Meadows, c. 1925



# Up to the Present



The Watkins family lost the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel during the Depression era. It was converted to all apartments in the 1940s. It has had several out-of-town owners. In 2010, Philadelphia-based CMS Management sold the building to Oakland-based Mozart Management, which owns and manages a host of apartment properties throughout Pittsburgh's East End.

Today, according to the Mozart Management website, the building is 100 percent leased and attracts a stable mix of senior citizens and college students. With 156 units, 23 retail storefronts and a four-story garage, the property, originally built as an apartment-hotel, seems ready for more decades as a unique shelter for Squirrel Hill citizens.



The Morrowfield today

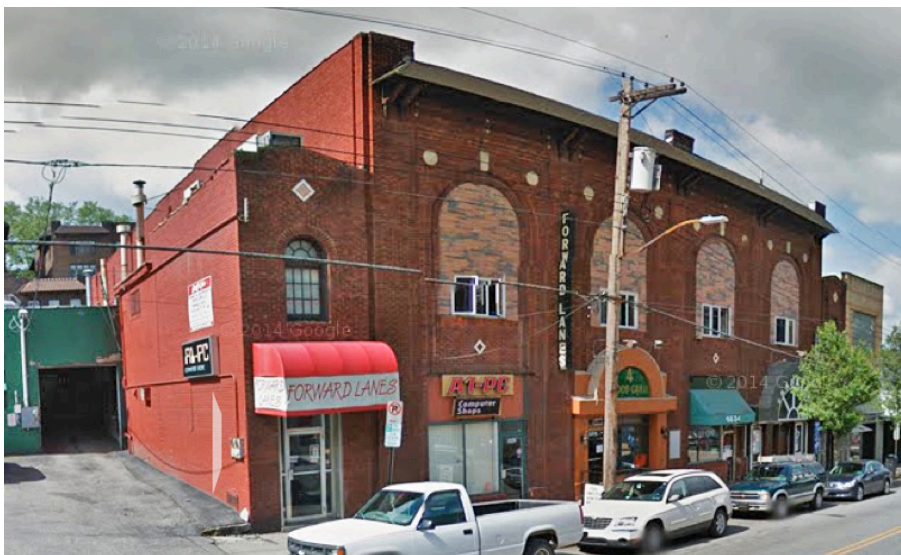
*Because the Morrowfield was the place for many celebrations, if anyone reading this display has photos of family events at the Morrowfield or recollections of them, the Squirrel Hill Historical Society would be excited to hear from you. We will copy your photos and return them to you. You can reach us at our website: [squirrelhillhistory.org](http://squirrelhillhistory.org).*



# The buildings along Murray and Forward were extensions of the Morrowfield Hotel.

Besides the Morrowfield Apartment Hotel and the indoor parking garage, the other buildings along Forward and Murray Avenues were also part of the Watkins Development.

The complex of buildings included the McKean Oldsmobile Company's new car showrooms, a bowling alley, a dance hall and an 800-seat theater. The theater wasn't the Squirrel Hill Theater, which opened in 1937. Its exact location isn't specified in articles about the complex, but plat maps show the theater was probably at the same location as the Squirrel Hill Theater.



Forward Lanes



The Morrowfield Complex under construction in the 1920s.



# The Fire on the Corner of Forward and Murray

A fire on May 14, 2015, destroyed several buildings at the corner of Forward and Murray Avenues. The buildings were called “historic.” Why? What was so significant about them?

It so happens they were part of the Watkins Community. The buildings that burned were part of the community. In the old days, they housed a deli, lounge and ice cream parlor.



The fire also damaged the adjacent, closed Poli's restaurant building, so it was demolished. This picture from 2016 shows the site after the debris was cleared but before the new Seymoure and Corinne Krause Commons building was constructed.

