

# Squirrel Hill's Jewish History



Squirrel Hill has long been known as Pittsburgh's Jewish neighborhood. The horrific shooting at Tree of Life \* Or L'Simcha synagogue focused national attention on the Jewish character of Squirrel Hill. When and how did that character come about? This display presents a short summary of the Jewish history of Squirrel Hill.



# Jews came to Pittsburgh in the 1700s, but they didn't settle in Squirrel Hill.

The first Jewish traders, merchants, and land speculators came from Philadelphia and Baltimore to Pittsburgh in the mid 1700s, but none are believed to have settled here permanently until after the Revolutionary War. Only a few lived in Pittsburgh in the early 1800s. Back then, the city was limited to the Downtown area. Pittsburgh's seventh mayor, Samuel Pettigrew, who served from 1832-1836, was Jewish.

More Jews came to Pittsburgh in the mid 1800s from Europe, many from Germanic-speaking countries. They settled mostly in Downtown and Allegheny City, now North Side. They assimilated into American life as merchants, businessmen, and professionals.

Another wave of Jews came to Pittsburgh in the late 1800s and early 1900s, mostly from Eastern European countries and Russia. They settled mainly in the Hill District.

Jews also settled in other Pittsburgh neighborhoods and nearby towns, notably Oakland and Homestead.

German Jews founded the Irene Kaufmann Settlement in the Hill District to help the more recent immigrants adjust to life in their new country.



This postcard shows the Irene Kaufmann Settlement in the Hill District around 1936.

Meanwhile, until the late 1800s, Squirrel Hill was a sparsely settled rural area of farms and large country estates. Most of its inhabitants were Scots-Irish, English or German. It wasn't even part of Pittsburgh until the city annexed it in 1868.

# Jews moved to Squirrel Hill in successive waves, beginning in the late 1800s.

**Jews living in Allegheny City and Downtown** began to move to Squirrel Hill in the late 1800s, when improvements in transportation, especially trolleys, made it easier for them to leave the grime and pollution around the Point for a cleaner environment that offered new housing. Trolleys opened up the whole East End, including Squirrel Hill, to development.

**Homestead Jews** came across the Monongahela River after Brown's Bridge, built to carry trolleys, opened in 1895. Jews from Homestead were among the first to establish businesses along the Forbes-Murray commercial corridor.

**Eastern European and Russian Jews** who had settled in the **Hill District** began to move to Squirrel Hill in the 1920s. The demographics of the Hill District were changing, and Jews took advantage of improved roads to move to an area of the city that offered spacious, attractive lots with new single-family homes. By the 1930s, Squirrel Hill was filled to the brim with housing.

**Jewish immigrants from Europe** continued to come to Squirrel Hill as a result of the two World Wars. Nearly 50 percent of its population was Jewish in the mid 1900s.

**Jews from the USSR** came to Squirrel Hill in the late 1900s after the Soviets allowed them to leave the country.



Today, Squirrel Hill's Jewish population is a rich mosaic with many cultural origins, each distinct but bound together by their shared Jewish heritage.

This postcard shows the second Homestead synagogue in 1917. It was built in 1913. The first synagogue, built in 1900, was destroyed by arson in 1911.

# Several factors made Squirrel Hill become Pittsburgh's Jewish neighborhood.

Squirrel Hill became Pittsburgh's Jewish neighborhood because of several related factors happening around the same time.

Squirrel Hill was sparsely populated until electric trolleys in the late 1800s and automobiles in the early 1900s opened up the district to residential development. Jews took advantage of the trolleys to move to "suburban" Squirrel Hill while having their businesses and factories in more heavily populated areas, such as Downtown, East Liberty and Homestead. Lots were advertised in the *Jewish Criterion* and sold quickly.

By the early 1900s, Forbes and Murray Avenues had become a trolley crossroads, leading to the development of the business district. Jews established businesses all along the corridor to cater to their clientele living in Squirrel Hill.

The pace of development accelerated when automobiles came along. Cars could go wherever roads were laid, so the previously rural Squirrel Hill area was opened to rapid residential development. Pittsburgh's population was burgeoning, and new housing was desperately needed. Squirrel Hill offered upwardly mobile Jews new housing and proximity to Jewish stores and places of worship.

A side note about the result of improved transportation in bringing Jews and others to Squirrel Hill: Along with roads and housing came car dealerships and service stations, some owned by Jews. Squirrel Hill's affluence gave it the highest percentage of automobile ownership in the 1920s. By the mid 1900s, Squirrel Hill had at least eleven car dealerships, including Horvitz Motor Sales, McKean Olds, Samson Buick, Constantin Pontiac, and Kamin Chevrolet. Other dealers sold Fords, Oldsmobiles, Chrysler/Plymouths, Nashes, Dodges and Mercurys. Gas stations were located on nearly every corner along the length of the business district.



Ad in the *Jewish Criterion*, 1905

# The Squirrel Hill business corridor began in the early 1900s and is still flourishing.

The mile-long Squirrel Hill business corridor of Forbes and Murray began to develop in the early 1900s when trolley lines connected Squirrel Hill to Downtown, Homestead, Wilkinsburg, Braddock, and East Liberty. The earliest business on record opened around 1912.

Storefronts and professional buildings soon lined Forbes and Murray and extended up Forward and Shady as well. The businesses were owned and operated by Jews who came mostly from the Hill District and Homestead. They catered to the Jewish residents of Squirrel Hill, the East End, and the whole Pittsburgh area.

By the 1950s, the business district had become known as the **“Squirrel Hill Fashion Center”** because of the upscale clothing stores, shoe stores, furriers, and hair salons lining the corridor. Squirrel Hill also offered kosher bakeries and markets, along with restaurants, theaters, and bowling alleys.

Although Jews never made up more than 50 percent of the population of Squirrel Hill, the preponderance of Jewish establishments in the business district gave it—and all of Squirrel Hill—the reputation of being Pittsburgh’s Jewish neighborhood.



Corner of Forbes and Murray, 1926



Little's ad, Squirrel Hill News, 1944

# As Jews moved to Squirrel Hill, congregations began to be established there.

Jews began to move to Squirrel Hill in increasing numbers in the first quarter of the 1900s, but only a few synagogues and temples were located in Squirrel Hill before the 1940s. Many of these, however, had been founded years before in other parts of Pittsburgh.

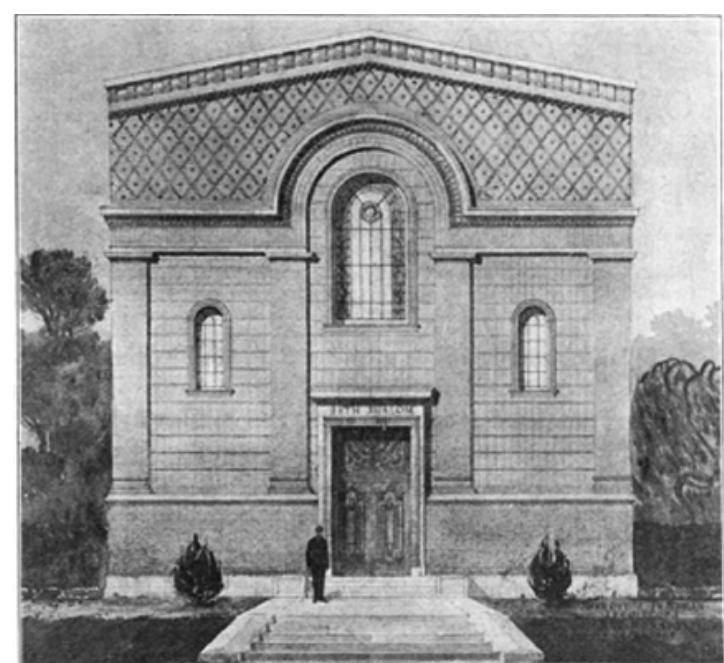
The earliest congregation in Squirrel Hill was also the first to be founded there. **Congregation Beth Shalom** was established in 1917 by a group of Jews who lived in Squirrel Hill. They originally held services at the Orpheum Theater on the corner of Forbes and Murray Avenues. In 1923, they built a synagogue on the corner of Beacon Street and Shady Avenue.

It soon became the second largest congregation in Pittsburgh. The synagogue is still located there today. It has been enlarged several times and survived a disastrous fire in 1996.

**Chofetz Chaim Congregation** was organized in Squirrel Hill in 1925.

The Orthodox congregation bought a house in 1929. It was the second shul to be organized in Squirrel Hill, and there may have been other small congregations organized as well.

**Poale Zedeck** was founded Downtown in 1881, moved to the Hill District in 1901, and built a synagogue on the corner of Phillips and



Shady Avenues in 1929. It was the first Orthodox synagogue to be erected in Squirrel Hill.

As more Jews moved to Squirrel Hill, more Jewish congregations and organizations moved or were founded there. Some moved more than once before settling into their present locations.



# More congregations moved to Squirrel Hill or were founded there in the mid 1900s.

**Temple Sinai**, a Reform congregation, was founded in 1946 by a group of Jewish community leaders. After holding services in several churches, Temple Sinai purchased the Worthington mansion at the corner of Forbes Ave. and Murdoch St.

The Traditional **Young Peoples Synagogue** was founded by Zionists in 1946 as a pioneer *havurah*, or religious fellowship, and moved into a mansion at the corner of Forbes Ave. and Denniston St. in 1996.

The Conservative **Tree of Life** congregation was founded in 1864 and moved from downtown to Craft Avenue in Oakland before building a new synagogue on Wilkins Avenue on land donated in 1946. The central part of the synagogue was dedicated in 1952.

Orthodox **Shaare Torah** was founded in the Hill District in 1884 and built a synagogue on Murray Avenue in the 1950s.

Conservative **New Light Synagogue** was chartered in the Hill District in 1899 and moved to a corner of Forbes Avenue and Beechwood Boulevard in 1957. It moved into the Tree of Life building in 2017.

Orthodox **Kether Torah** began in 1907 in the Hill District and came to Squirrel Hill in 1957. First located in a mansion on Bartlett Street, it now meets at Hillel Academy.

Reconstructionist **Congregation Dor Hadash** was founded in Squirrel Hill in 1963 and held services in various places, including Rodef Shalom and the Community Day School building, until it moved into the Tree of Life building in 2010.

**Young Israel of Greater Pittsburgh**, founded in 1973, is located on Bartlett Street.

Conservative **Or L'Simcha** was founded in 2005 and moved to the Tree of Life building in 2008. It merged with that congregation in 2010.

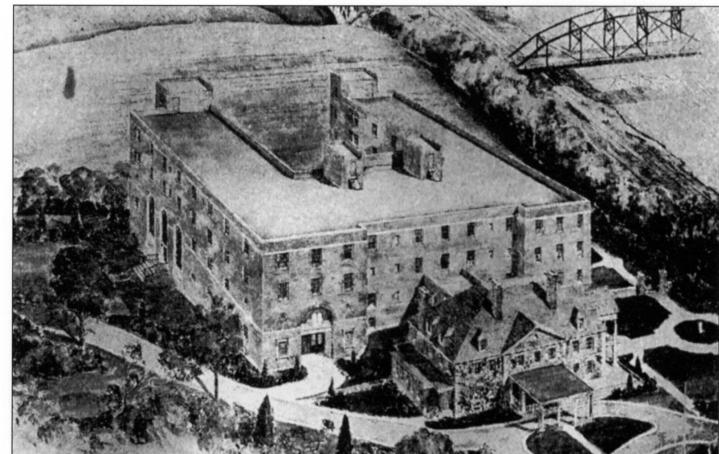
The Orthodox **Chabad Lubavitch Synagogues** are located at the **Lubavitch Center** on Wightman St. The **Chabad of Carnegie Mellon University** is located on Beeler St.



# Squirrel Hill is home to many Jewish organizations and schools.

A number of Jewish schools and organizations relocated or were founded in Squirrel Hill. This display has space for the history of just a few of them.

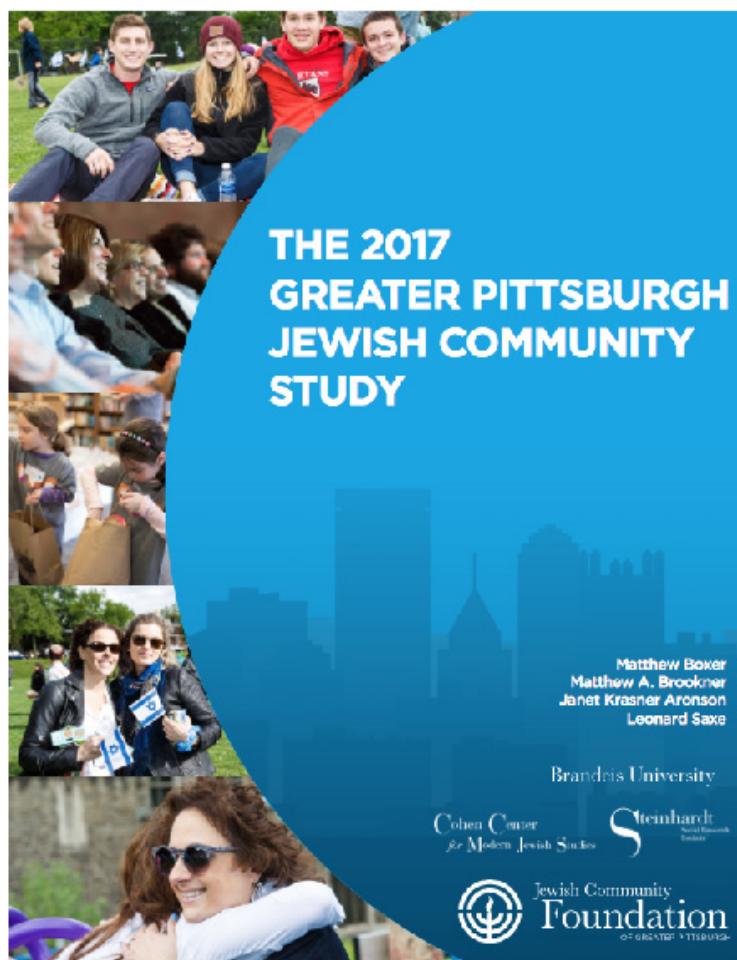
The **Jewish Home for the Aged** was founded in the Hill District in 1908 and moved to Browns Hill Road in 1933, occupying the Brown mansion and a new hospital building. In 1980, it was renamed the Riverview Center for Jewish Seniors. Weinberg Village was built in 1998, containing the Charles M. Morris Nursing and Rehabilitation Center and The Residence at Weinberg Village. Other agencies are also located in the facility. In 2018, Riverview Towers Apartments, Inc., announced it had become an affiliate of the JAA.



The **Irene Kaufmann Settlement** established a facility in Squirrel Hill on Forward Avenue in 1943 but rapidly outgrew the space and moved to a large house near the corner of Forbes and Murray Avenues in 1949. The house was torn down in 1958 and a new building constructed. After mergers with other Jewish organizations, Y-IKC adopted the name **Jewish Community Center** in 1974. The JCC continued to grow, so the new Irene Kaufmann Building was constructed in 1987-88. The Alex and Leona Robinson Building on Darlington Road opened in 1997.

The **Hebrew Institute** moved from the Hill District to two mansions at Forbes and Denniston in 1944. When they were demolished to build Maxon Towers, the institute moved across Denniston Street. Some of the Jewish schools in Squirrel Hill include **Community Day School**, which moved to the old St. Philomena's School from Denniston Avenue in 1996. **Hillel Academy** is located on Beacon Street. **Yeshiva Schools of Pittsburgh** runs a school for boys on the corner of Wightman and Hobart Streets and for girls, in the former Hebrew Institute building on Forbes and Denniston.

# The 2017 Greater Pittsburgh Jewish Community Study gives statistics for Squirrel Hill.



**The 2018 Greater Pittsburgh Jewish Community Study** is an in-depth look at the Jewish communities in the Greater Pittsburgh area. It was undertaken by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University's Steinhardt Social Research Institute and was funded by the Jewish Community Foundation of the Jewish Federation.

Some questions the study sought to answer were, "How will we continue to foster Jewish education with a changed population of school-age

Jewish children? How will we welcome interfaith families and those who identify as 'just Jewish'? What will be our approach to synagogues as the number of Jews belonging to synagogues has declined? Where, throughout the greater Jewish Pittsburgh community, are the gaps in services?"

The study found that "Squirrel Hill remains both the geographic and institutional center of the Greater Pittsburgh Jewish community, and the Jewish community is growing there and in adjacent neighborhoods. The density of the Jewish population and its institutions in Squirrel Hill make it an attractive neighborhood for Jewish households looking to be especially active in Jewish life."

Table 2.8 Geographic distribution of Pittsburgh's Jews

Geographic region <sup>22</sup>	Jewish households	Jewish individuals
Squirrel Hill	26	30
Rest of Pittsburgh	31	26
Suburbs:	43	44
South Hills (Mt. Lebanon, Upper St. Clair)	20	18
North Hills (Hampton, Fox Chapel, O'Hara)	9	11
Rest of region	14	15

Table 2.9 Geographic region of Jews by age (% of Jewish individuals)

	0-17	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 +
Squirrel Hill	48	36	25	26	33
Rest of Pittsburgh	20	32	38	20	30
Suburbs	32	33	37	55	38

# The shooting at Tree of Life

## \* Or L'Simcha brought the Squirrel Hill community together against hate.

On October 27, 2018, Squirrel Hill was rocked by a horrific crime—the deadly shooting of innocent people by an anti-Semitic man who killed 11 innocent people at Tree of Life \* Or L'Simcha and wounded six. Four of the wounded were police officers.

This terrible tragedy will scar Squirrel Hill forever, but it will not conquer it. The shooting was followed by peaceful rallies, vigils, concerts, and other events. A poignant makeshift memorial has been replaced by a small array of ceramic flowers, with the memorial now inside.

A little more than a month after the shooting, Hanukkah, the festival of lights, held special significance for Squirrel Hill Jews. A TRIB Live article by Megan Guza and Stephen Huba quotes Rabbi Ron Symons of the JCC as saying, “Hanukkah is a celebration of religious freedom, and it’s a celebration of our ability to bring light into a dark place.”

In the same article, Rabbi Stacy Petersohn of the Congregation Emanu-El Israel in Greensburg says, “It’s a slow, conscious increase

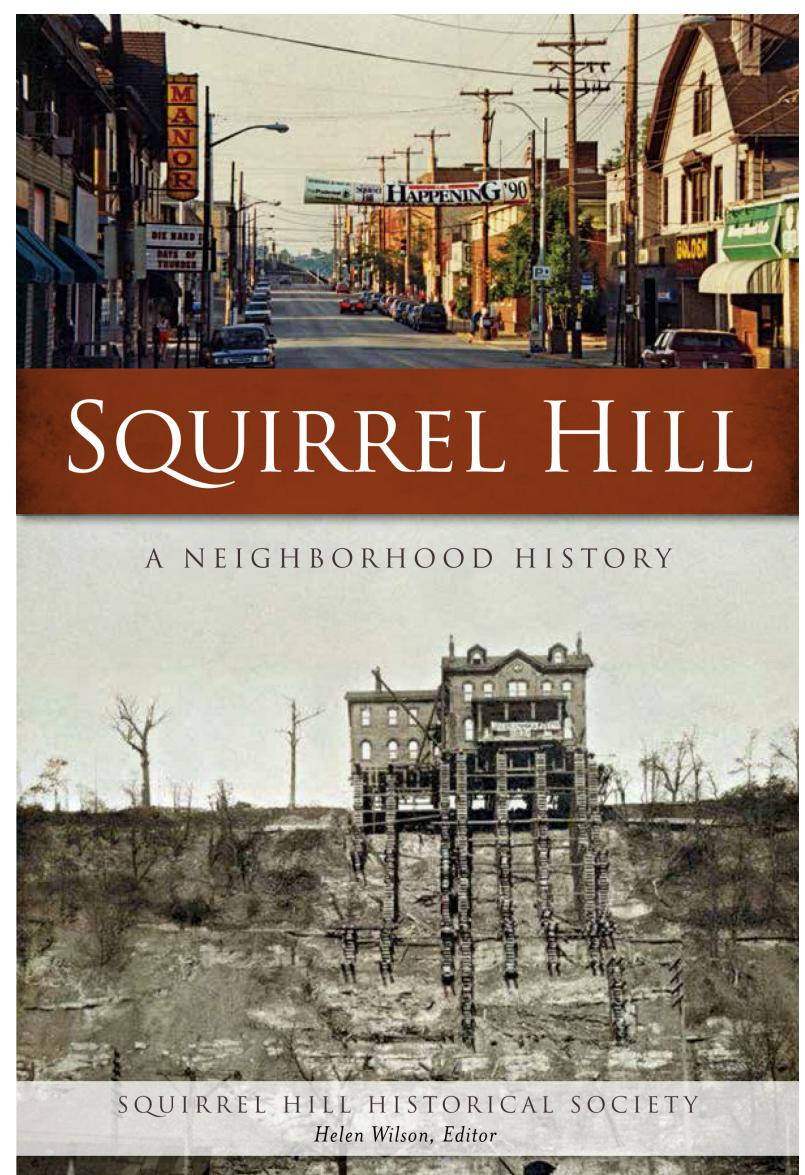
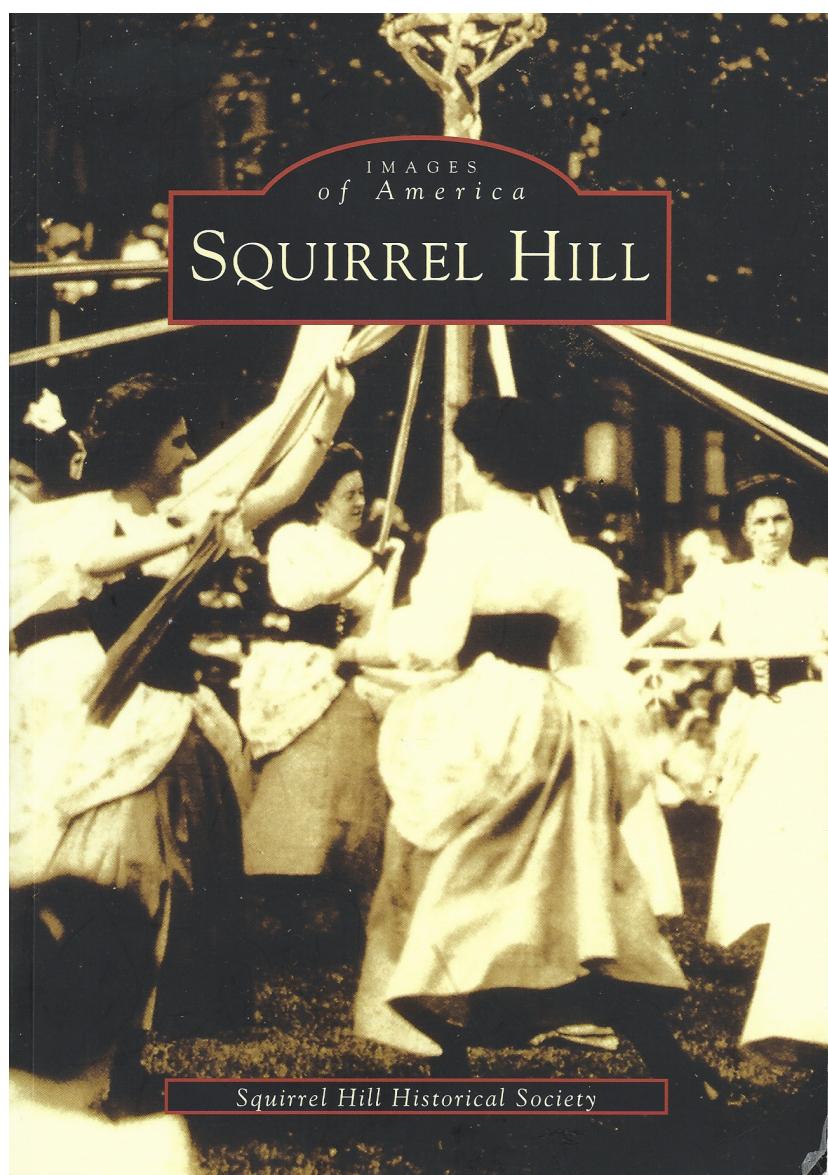
of light. It’s very reflective of how healing has to happen. It’s a slow progress, but it’s always in a direction toward healing, toward completeness, toward wholeness.”



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# Squirrel Hill's Jewish History

This display gives only a very brief summary of the history of the Jews in Squirrel Hill. You can read a lot more about that history in the SHHS's two books, both of which contain chapters about Squirrel Hill's Jewish history. Much of the information in this display is from the books.



Both books can be checked out from this library or purchased from the Squirrel Hill Historical Society. Go to [www.squirrelhillhistory.org](http://www.squirrelhillhistory.org) or call 412-417-3707 for details or purchase. The books are also available in bookstores.

This display was created by Helen Wilson, Michael Ehrmann, and Audrey Glickman of the Squirrel Hill Historical Society..