

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Pennsalt Historic District

and or common Pennsalt Company Houses

2. Location

street & number Multiple

N/A not for publication

city, town Natrona

N/A vicinity of

state Pennsylvania

code 42

county Allegheny

code 003

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>N/A</u> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<u>N/A</u> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Multiple

street & number

city, town

N/A vicinity of

state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Allegheny County Office Building

street & number Ross Street

city, town Pittsburgh

state Pennsylvania

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Allegheny County Survey

has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1979-1984

federal state county local

depository for survey records Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

city, town Harrisburg

state Pennsylvania

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date <u>N/A</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Pennsalt Historic District is an approximately 8.5-acre area of mid-19th century company housing erected by the Pennsylvania Salt Manufacturing Company beginning in 1850. Eight blocks of densely-built detached houses and rowhouses are situated on the north side of the Allegheny River approximately 21 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, on flat land between the river and a steep hillside in Harrison Township. The company's industrial buildings, where a wide range of chemicals for home and industrial use were produced from 1850 until 1957, were located on adjacent land to the northeast. Including various buildings for refining salt and oil, furnaces, chemist, cooper, and carpenter shops, a brick yard, and stables, this area was taken over by Allegheny-Ludlum Steel Corporation in 1967. One large simple brick building and a deteriorated brick section of another building may have been built by Pennsalt, but otherwise the industrial site has been thoroughly rebuilt to suit the new owner and does not have historic character. The historic district includes simple popular vernacular architecture derived from the Greek and Gothic Revival styles. The uniform use of brick or frame construction, middle to late nineteenth century proportions and detailing, and uniform siting give the district an extremely cohesive appearance and vivid sense of time and place. The near absence of intrusions and the stable nature of the tightly-knit community further enhance the district's ambience. There are 62 buildings in the district, containing 153 residential units. There is one vacant commercial building. Sixty of the buildings are contributing properties, and two are intrusions.

The historic district is bounded on the northwest by railroad tracks, following the former path of the Pennsylvania Canal. On the northeast, it's bounded by Federal Street, on the southeast by non-historic buildings and vacant land along the river, and on the southwest by Pond Street and an alley, beyond which is the village of Natrona, an out-growth of the company housing district with less cohesive architecture of a generally later period.

The streets of the historic district form an irregular grid, with five major streets paralleling the river: Blue Ridge, Greenwich, Wood, Center, and Penn. Perpendicular to these at their northeastern end is Federal Street; two alleys parallel to Federal Street pierce the long residential blocks.

The houses and rowhouses built by the Penn Salt Company fall into eight major categories, three of frame and five of brick. There are also slight variations of the major building types and several unique structures. The earliest, and most unusual, building type is found on the west side of Federal Street. Sixteen one and one-half story houses were built in the fall of 1850 shortly after the company's local establishment. Identical in dimensions and design, they have very steep gable roofs, with the gable ends facing the street, and are of heavy timber construction sheathed with boards and battens. Their strong verticality and cottage-like appearance is derived from the Gothic Revival style prominent at mid-century. The main section of the house, approximately fourteen feet wide and thirty feet deep, has a two-room plan (front and back) with a central chimney to serve both rooms. One-story, flat-roofed kitchens are at the rear, and the entrances are on the houses' northwest sides. A variation of this type can be seen in five houses on Wood Street, which are slightly larger and have front entries and porches. Most of the houses are now covered with modern siding, but a few retain the exposed boards and battens.

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Considerably larger (approximately eighteen feet wide and forty feet deep), but also of frame construction with a gable end-to-street plan, are eleven houses on the north side of Greenwich Street. These are two and one-half stories tall, two bays wide in their gable end, and have a transverse gable attached at the rear. A kitchen shed, occasionally gabled, extends at the rear of each unit. Again, most of these houses have been re-sided. The original sheathing was apparently horizontal wood lap siding.

On the south side of Greenwich Street, seven identical houses have gable roofs with the roof ridge parallel to the street and asymmetrical, three-bay front elevations. These houses measure approximately thirty feet wide and sixteen feet deep. They, too, have one-story rear kitchen additions, and are of horizontal wood lap siding.

The brick construction in the historic district, generally Greek Revival in its stylistic origins, consists mostly of rowhouse units. Identical rows on Blue Ridge Avenue and the north side of Wood Street comprise the most prevalent housing type in the district and are distinctive due to their unusually small scale. A squat two stories tall with a shallow slanted roof, each of these units is two bays wide and two rooms deep, with an additional one-story frame kitchen at the rear. There are double chimneys located at alternating party walls. The windows, six-over-six double hung sash, have wood lintels and sills. A one-story wood porch shelters the front entrance of every pair of units. Straight-forward in design, the only architectural decoration on these buildings is simple brick corbelling at the cornice line (and this may have had a practical purpose--to facilitate water run-off from the front of the house). The exterior of 13 Blue Ridge Avenue has been restored as an example of how all of these units probably once looked.

The three other brick rowhouse types in the district, located on Center and Penn Streets, are all larger, somewhat more detailed, and were most likely built later than the Blue Ridge Avenue and Wood Street units. Some have segmentally arched windows and additional corbelling; a few have graceful arched alleyways between units.

Five brick double-houses, sited on Wood, Center, and Penn Streets, are the largest residential buildings of the district (twenty feet wide, forty feet deep). They have gable roofs, the gable end facing the street--the only brick buildings in the district with this orientation.

Unique buildings in the district include the former company store and two frame houses. Located at the corner of Blue Ridge Avenue and Federal Street directly across from the industrial site is a large, brick warehouse-type structure with a storefront facing the street corner and a partial cornice embellished with swags. Beside it on Blue Ridge Avenue is a frame house similar to the cottages but longer and taller with a partial crossing gable and small corner porch. On Federal Street, between two groups of cottages, is another enlargement of the cottage type. It has a cruciform plan with corner porches, and has the addition of a simple bargeboard. Presumably both houses were occupied by employees of some distinction.

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The district's overall orientation is noteworthy, for its buildings face neither a central square or center per se, nor the river which it nearly abuts. Rather, the district closely fronts the former industrial site and the railroad tracks, with the company store sited at their intersection. This spatial arrangement underlines the economic fact that the community's livelihood depended upon the operations of Pennsalt.

Economy and practicality surely guided the erection of the Pennsalt houses, and the district has appealing visual qualities that resulted from its functional lay-out. The repetition of identical building forms, most impressive along Federal Street, creates rhythmic streetscapes. The rowhouses lend unity to their streets, while the detached houses add variety. Altogether, there is a pleasant alternation throughout the district of solids and voids and between the vertical and horizontal orientations of the various building types. These characteristics give the district a lively feel not generally seen in industrial company towns.

The historic district's contributing buildings date from the 1850-1900 period and were built by the Pennsylvania Salt Manufacturing Company to house or otherwise serve its workers. Only two buildings in the district, both modern ranch houses, do not qualify, and are considered intrusions.

The Pennsalt Historic District is a unified nineteenth century housing district built by one company for its workers. The numerous identical and similar buildings, densely packed between the river and railroad beside the former work site, provide an enduring image of an early western Pennsylvania company town.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below		
prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture
1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law
1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature
1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military
1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music
X 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy
1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics government
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
			<input type="checkbox"/> science
			<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
			<input type="checkbox"/> social/humanitarian
			<input type="checkbox"/> theater
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1850-1900

Builder/Architect Pennsalt Company

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Pennsalt Historic District, an early and architecturally intact collection of workers' housing built by the Pennsylvania Salt Manufacturing Company, is a significant example of a western Pennsylvania company town of the mid to late 19th century. Pennsalt, as it came to be called, was in operation for over one hundred years at its site along the Allegheny River in northeastern Allegheny County. The vernacular housing the company erected for its workers from 1850-1900 is architecturally unique in the region, and is the earliest such housing in the county. A distinctive physical site, which has changed little since the early 20th century, enhances the overall impact of the district today.

Pennsalt actually manufactured chemicals, producing salt only as an intermediary step. The company was chartered on September 1, 1850 as a salt works because there was no provision at the time for chartering a chemical company. George L. Lewis and Samuel Fox Fisher, two Philadelphians, and Charles Lennig, a German Quaker and successful Philadelphia chemical manufacturer, were the company's founders, organizing a group of Quakers to form the corporation. They hoped to profit manufacturing soda ash, and to sell it in the Mississippi River Valley with its bustling steamboat traffic and ready market. The production site in Allegheny County, approximately 21 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, was chosen because of its abundance of salt and coal, the two most important ingredients of soda ash. Pittsburgh was; at the time, the "head of existing water and rail transportation westward"¹ and the Pennsylvania Canal which ran past the Pennsalt site was the "only heavyweight connection with the east coast."² In the fall of 1850, the new company purchased land for \$5,750, drilled two salt wells, bought 100 tons of lead for their equipment, and erected sixteen frame buildings for workers and a superintendent.

Until 1852, however, the company's only product was brick from the brickworks it had erected to supply building materials for the plant. In August of that year, soda alkali production finally began and the product was sold to Cincinnati soap-makers.

It was Natrona Refined Saponifier that finally made Pennsalt a name for itself, and a profit. In 1855, Lewis had suggested packaging caustic soda, or lye, in conveniently-sized containers for home soap-makers. Christened "saponifier," the product sold well. More workers were hired to make the sheet iron boxes in which it was packaged. The period 1856-1862 saw continued expansion and construction at the site, with investment in new equipment for making industrial chemicals, considered to be a more lucrative product. By 1858, over a dozen different products were sold, though caustic soda and saponifier made up eighty percent of the business. In celebration of its new product, the town's name was changed from East Tarentum to Natrona in 1862. (The name derived from the Greek Natron, meaning soda.) The next year the company achieved its then all-time high in profits, \$146,000, and the first dividend to stockholders was declared. The company even saw fit to give rent-free housing to the families of the 120 men who had left for the Civil War.

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A brief try at oil refining from 1861-1868 ended unprofitably, but continued diversification proved successful for Pennsalt. The discovery of a new compound, called cryolite, in Greenland, and a Danish process for converting it to various alkalis led to "Improved Saponifier" in the late 1860s. Packaged in lighter cardboard boxes, this product captured the home soap-making market and held it until home soap-making died out, well into the 20th century. Descriptions of Natrona refer to "mountains" of cryolite, as well as sulphur, piled near the factory. The secondary ingredients of cryolite proved to be even more important than its sodium, however. In the 1880s, flux and electrolyte were used in the successful refining of aluminum.

Porous alum, another new product, was useful in textile-dyeing and paper industries. After it was produced in the 1860s, the paper industry became one of Pennsalt's most important outlets.

Aside from erecting houses for its workers--certainly an essential undertaking in western Pennsylvania in 1850--Pennsalt contributed to the broader growth of Natrona as its own fortunes grew. It built a "company store," donated land for churches and public buildings, and provided the town with gas, electricity, and water. Looking to the future, it provided \$200,000 to the Pennsylvania Railroad, which replaced the canal in 1866.

The company's main offices remained in Philadelphia; its shipping warehouses were in Pittsburgh. In 1872, a second plant opened near Philadelphia, in Greenwich, Pennsylvania, to serve the growing eastern market. In 1957, the operations at Natrona were moved to Philadelphia. The company subsequently merged with Wallace-Tiernan and the corporate name became Penn-Walt.

While one source described Pennsalt's industrial complex in 1876 as "a wilderness of huge, queer-looking buildings of stone, brick, and wood, with a score of towering chimneys, from which vast clouds of smoke and steam rise heavenward"³ it described the residential village as a "thrifty, substantial-looking place."⁴ The simple but sturdy construction of the Pennsalt houses gives that impression even today. Their particular vernacular styling is unique in the region, and their large numbers and early date of construction make them unusual in western Pennsylvania.

The sixteen frame buildings on the west side of Federal Street are of particular interest, as these were most likely the first sixteen buildings erected by the company in the fall of 1850. Sited closest to the industrial buildings, they were specifically tailored to their site in at least one characteristic: their entries are on the side rather than the factory-facing front. (Other houses in the district of similar design that do not face the factory have front entries.) The steeply pitched gable roof, board and batten sheathing, and cottage-type configuration was derived from the Gothic Revival style then popular in the east where the company was headquartered. The transferral of an essentially rural architectural style to a densely-planned, industrial company town is peculiar, but may stem from the benevolent impulses of the company's Quaker founders who were, no doubt, anxious to attract capable and loyal workers to the fledgling firm in 1850.

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The picturesque characteristics of these cottages fits a pattern of company-built housing that developed along the east coast in the late 18th and early 19th centuries when the country's first large industries were established. "Model-cottages," such as those along Federal Street, were felt to both ameliorate the harshness of industrial labor and to actually promote good behavior and morality among workers and their families.⁵ (Ironically, the houses tended to more picturesque than comfortable.) The extent to which the Pennsalt houses represent this early corporate paternalism could only be fully understood through a thorough study of the company. The company's written history does describe a "family relationship"⁶ at Pennsalt. The buildings in the historic district were owned by the company and rented to the employees. However, the company credits itself with providing loans to employees who wanted to build their own houses--presumably outside the historic district, in the village of Natrona at large--as well as providing for old-timers, and serving as "the principal contributor in every civic movement" in Natrona.

More familiar in appearance are the brick rowhouse units on Blue Ridge Avenue and Wood Street, erected during the company's diversification in the 1860s. The brick buildings in the district grew larger and more detailed as more were built. That brick construction apparently displaced frame as the more desirable residential type over the years was probably due in part to fire safety concerns. The subtle changes in size, proportion, and detail in the later buildings add interest to the architectural collection.

As an example of community planning the Pennsalt Historic District is significant for its longevity, its subtle variations of architectural types, and its regular, though not quite rigid, site planning. The street names seem more Philadelphian than western Pennsylvanian; nor is the architecture typical of western Pennsylvania coal patches or other industrial communities. The community is a unique product of Pennsalt. Though Pennsalt sold its Natrona property when it moved back to Philadelphia in 1957, the neighborhood's continued stability and architectural integrity make it a particularly important example of an early western Pennsylvania industrial town.

1. Leavitt, Prologue to Tomorrow, p. 8.
2. Ibid, p. 8.
3. Everts, History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, p. 118.
4. Ibid, p. 118.
5. Wright, Building the Dream, p. 65.
6. Leavitt, np.
7. Ibid, np.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Leavitt, Robert Keith. Prologue to Tomorrow: A History of the First Hundred Years in the Life of the Pennsylvania Salt Manufacturing Company. (Philadelphia: 1970).

History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Company, 1876) pp. 117-118.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 8.5

Quadrangle name New Kensington East

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A

1	7	6	0	7	7	7	0	4	4	9	6	7	2	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

B

1	7	6	0	7	7	0	0	4	4	9	6	6	4	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

C

1	7	6	0	7	7	7	0	4	4	9	6	5	5	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

D

1	7	6	0	7	8	0	5	4	4	9	6	5	8	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

E

1	7	6	0	7	8	0	5	4	4	9	6	5	3	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

F

1	7	6	0	7	8	0	0	4	4	9	6	4	6	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

G

1	7	6	0	7	9	0	0	4	4	9	6	4	2	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

H

1	7	6	0	7	9	9	0	4	4	9	6	5	1	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

Verbal boundary description and justification

Beginning at the corner of Blue Ridge Avenue and Federal Street, proceed south along the west side of Federal Street to the southern property line of 10 Federal Street (block 1368H-lot 21). Follow this boundary line westward to the edge of Diamond Alley

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Christina Schmidlapp

organization Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation date 1/85

450 The Landmarks Building

street & number One Station Square

telephone 412/741-5808

city or town Pittsburgh

state Pennsylvania 15219

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature _____

title _____ date _____

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date _____

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date _____

Chief of Registration

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History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. (Chicago: A. Warner & Co., 1889) pp. 152-153.

Van Trump, James D. and Ziegler, Arthur P., Jr. Landmark Architecture of Allegheny County. (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 1967). pp. 195-196.

Van Trump, James D. "A Century of Worker Housing in Natrona," Tribune-Review (Greensburg, PA), 10:22 (April 17, 1983). p. 6

Wright, Gwendolyn. Building the Dream--A Social History of Housing in America. (London; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983) pp. 58-72.

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and proceed north along the eastern edge of the alley to a point opposite the north side of the alley south of Penn Street. Proceed south across the alley to the southern property lines of the properties on the south side of Penn Street. Proceed west to the east side of Pond Street along these property lines, then north on Pond Street to its intersection with Penn Street. Follow the south side of Penn Street east to a point opposite the east side of Pond Street. Crossing the street, follow the east side of Pond Street northwest to its intersection with Center Street. Proceed east on the south side of Center Street to a point opposite the western property line of 12 Center Street. Follow the western and then northern property line of 12 Center Street, continuing east along the northern boundaries of the adjoining properties to the east to a point opposite the western property line of 43 Wood Street. Crossing an alley, proceed north along this property line and continue in a straight line across Wood Street to a point. Proceed west along the northern side of Wood Street to its intersection with an alley. Proceed north along the east side of the alley to its intersection with Blue Ridge Avenue (actually a pedestrian walkway). Proceed east on Blue Ridge Avenue to the point of origin.

Boundary justification: The boundaries were drawn to include the most architecturally intact workers' housing recognizably erected by Pennsolt between 1850-1900. Though much of the town of Natrona was built as the result of Pennsolt's location there, the proposed historic district is the most cohesive collection of buildings associated with the company as well as being the earliest group of buildings in Natrona. Other buildings on the edge of the district--a school, churches, and detached houses--were probably erected with the assistance of Pennsolt. The school and churches post-date 1900 and are quite different architecturally from the residential buildings, and do not obviously wear the "stamp" of Pennsolt; the houses were not included because they are separated from the rest of the district by the school and churches and do not possess exceptional architectural integrity. Furthermore, the proposed historic district has a street grid oriented northeast-southwest. At Pond Street, on the western border of the district, the street grid changes its orientation to northwest-southeast. Thus, the proposed boundaries are appropriate for spatial, as well as architectural reasons.

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