

The Charles Brewer House  
Pittsburgh, Pa.

*Allegheny Co.*

HABS No. PA 41 ✓

HABS

PA

2-PITBU

7-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
District No. PA 4

*Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings*

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Charles M. Stotz, District Officer  
818 Bessemer Bldg., Pittsburgh, Pa.

## THE CHARLES BREWER HOUSE

Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

Owner Mr. Thomas Donaldson, 1127 Western Avenue,  
North Side, Pittsburgh.

Date of Erection 1830 (approximate).

Architect Not known.

Builder Not known.

Present Condition Fair to poor. Has been altered into moderate-rental apartments, and not well kept up. Shows considerable departure from original condition.

Number of Stories Two and one-half.

Materials of Construction Stone foundation; brick exterior and bearing walls, wood interior partitions, wood floor and roof construction, slate roof covering. Exterior brick work painted.

Other Existing Records Short account in "Chronicles of Families, Houses and Estates of Pittsburgh and Environs", by Annie Clark Mitchell, (1927). Land transfer data from Deed Books in office of Recorder of Deeds for Allegheny County.

Additional Data: The Brewer House stands at No. 1131 Western Avenue, (formerly Water Lane), in the old City of Allegheny, now the North Side, City of Pittsburgh.

The land, part of the original William Penn tract, was first conveyed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on January 9th, 1789, to Robert S. Smith; his executors sold it in 1828 to Rev. John H. Hopkins of Pittsburgh, who in turn disposed of it on November 5th, 1829 to Charles Brewer, said to have been Captain of a sailing vessel.

Captain Brewer is said to have built the house, (the main portion only), in 1830; It is recorded that he bought an adjoining piece of land from David Evans on July 10th, 1833.

PA.

2-PITBU

7-

His executors sold the property on February 28th, 1861, to George Black, of Allegheny, who subsequently added the wing to the house, with no doubt some minor alterations. It remained in the possession of Mr. Black and his heirs until September 1925, when it was bought by Mr. Thomas Donaldson of Pittsburgh, the present owner. The character of the neighborhood had changed by this time from high-class residential to commercial, and the fine old house has fallen upon evil days - it has been remodeled into an apartment building, and is encroached on to the east and south by various commercial enterprises.

The house is a fair example of the Classic Revival Period of about 1830, so far as the main portion of the building is concerned; the wing, which was added shortly after 1861, has much less architectural interest, although carried out with the same general feeling.

The original building is somewhat typical of the large house of the early period; it has a wide central hall extending from the front to the rear, and porticos, similar in size and detail, on both the front and rear elevations, each having four large Ionic columns extending the full height of the building, supporting pediments above.

The large Drawing Room extended the full depth of the house. The old mantels have disappeared, but the interior woodwork, doors, stairs, plaster cornices, carved corner blocks, etc. are in keeping with the dignity of the house and the general character of the time, although lacking in the refinement of the earlier Georgian period.

The stone vaulting of the cellars under the wing, which would appear to be older than the rest of this portion of the house, is an unusual feature of houses of this type; their original purpose is somewhat conjectural.

The following information concerning the old house, from the book referred to on page 1 of this description, is of interest in this connection:

"The old Brewer homestead on Water Lane, known for past 70 years as the Black residence, 1131 Western Avenue, is now converted into a modern apartment house. It was built in 1830 by Captain Charles Brewer, an Englishman by birth and owner of a sailing vessel that made many crossings to England. He came to Pennsylvania from Massachusetts. He said he chose the location because he wished to be near water but out of hearing of the sea.... The house was modeled after an old English plan. The same dignified entrance with massive pillars reaching to the third story (which is but a half story), each pillar a solid tree five and one-

PA.

2-PITBU

7-

half feet in circumference, greeted guests coming from Lane or River. Entrance steps have wrought-iron railings, a knocker and lock fastened by a mighty key, matching that used at the bastille,<sup>1</sup> ornament the front door. The doors are beautifully paneled, and, instead of being of one piece of wood, are constructed of several thicknesses. Every door has a hand-carved corner with four oak leaves in deep relief. The arch in the entrance hall has its keystone carved in rose and scroll design. The great drawing room is the whole depth of the house. There are two fire-places with snowy white marble mantelpieces.... The elaborate ceiling centerpieces and cornice of acanthus leaf and Grecian border are so beautiful in design that students of architecture have been sent to study and copy them. Great was the admiration of these students for the circular stairway, its graceful sweep and its perfect construction; the rails unusual in form, slim and round at top, but oval at the foot. These inquisitive fellows found that one of the rails was of iron. An iron construction rod enclosed in this particular rail was found imbedded firmly in the basement floor, which solved the perfect rigidity of the ancient work. The original dining room and kitchen were below stairs, due to <sup>a</sup>slope in rear. A conservatory originally opened from dining room. The stone walls are three feet thick and the ceilings are vaulted. The kitchen, even during the occupation of the Blacks, was the most picturesque room in the house. The fireplace built of smooth white brick had its deep mantelshelf. Out of kitchen opened great cellars and subcellars for fuel, storage, wine and laundry. One passage, which ran back under the garden to an underground ice storage room, had been permanently closed up and is said to be piled full of old fenders and fire-irons. In the ceiling hangs the original bell that responded to Madame's summons. The chimney corners have night-cap cup-boards and the thick partitions give space for medicine and other curious closets. In 1860 Mr. Black bought the place and it became a storehouse of beautiful old furniture, paintings, curios, etc. He added a wing to provide more bedrooms.

<sup>1</sup>"Bastille", Paris, fortress or prison  
destroyed 1789.

*Louis Stevens*

Louis Stevens - Author.

Approved

*Charles M. Stotz*

Charles M. Stotz  
District Officer PA 4

Date Feb. 26<sup>th</sup> 1935

*Reviewed by H.C.F.  
1936*