

PITTSBURGH CITY COUNCIL- STAFF REPORT

APPLICATION	DCP-HN-2024-00641
NAME	Donny’s Place
PROPERTY	226 Herron Avenue – 26-Q-189
PROPERTY OWNER	Donald Theris
NEIGHBORHOOD	Polish Hill
RCO	Polish Hill Civic Association
ZONING DISTRICT	H
COUNCIL DISTRICT	7 – Deb Gross
MEETING DATE	TBD

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. Historic Nomination DCP-HN-2024-00641 was filed by Elizabeth Anderson, on October 24, 2024, for the historic nomination of Donny’s Place.
2. The Nomination is attached to this staff report for Commission review.
3. The property owner was sent notice of this nomination by the nominator on October 23, 2024 and by the City on October 28, 2024.
4. A Development Activities Meeting (DAM) was held on December 16, 2024. The DAM report is attached.
5. Summary of Public Meetings – Historic Review
 1. The Determination of Viability Hearing was held on February 5, 2025.
 2. A public hearing was held before the Historic Review Commission on March 5, 2025.
 3. A public hearing was held before the Planning Commission on March 25, 2025.
6. Per Section 1101.03, Criteria for Designation, a nomination must meet at least one of the following criteria in order to be designated a historic structure:
 1. *Its location as a site of a significant historic or prehistoric event or activity;*
 2. *Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related aspect of the development of the City of Pittsburgh, State of Pennsylvania, Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;*
 3. *Its exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation,*

rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship;

- 4. Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;*
 - 5. Its exemplification of important planning and urban design techniques distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design or detail;*
 - 6. Its location as a site of an important archaeological resource;*
 - 7. Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;*
 - 8. Its exemplification of a pattern of neighborhood development or settlement significant to the cultural history or traditions of the City, whose components may lack individual distinction.*
 - 9. Its representation of a cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological or related theme expressed through distinctive areas, properties, sites, structures or objects that may or may not be contiguous; or*
 - 10. Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Pittsburgh.*
7. Per Section 1101.03, the City Planning Commission shall consider effects of designation on adjoining properties and surrounding neighborhoods within the framework of established planning, development, and land use objectives for the City of Pittsburgh.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE HISTORIC REVIEW AND PLANNING COMMISSIONS

- On March 5, 2025, the Historic Review Commission voted to provide no recommendation to City Council regarding the historic nomination of Donny's Place.
- On March 25, 2025, the Planning Commission voted to provide a negative recommendation to City Council regarding the historic nomination of Donny's Place.



HISTORIC REVIEW COMMISSION
Division of Public History, Art, and Design
City of Pittsburgh, Department of City Planning
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15219

HISTORIC NOMINATION FORM

Historic Preservation Staff Signature:

****Nomination is incomplete without historic preservation staff signature**

Fee Schedule

Individual Landmark Nomination:

\$100.00

District Nomination:

To be determined

1. HISTORIC NAME OF PROPERTY: Norreh Social Club, then Donny's Place and Leather Central
2. CURRENT NAME OF PROPERTY: Donny's Place
3. LOCATION
 - a. Street: 1226 Herron Avenue
 - b. City, State, Zip Code: Pittsburgh, PA 15219
 - c. Neighborhood: Polish Hill
4. OWNERSHIP
 - d. Owner(s): Estate of Donald Thinnies
 - e. Street: Bresnahan, Finnegan, & Bresnahan, 1000 Gamma Drive, Ste 206
 - f. City, State, Zip Code: Pittsburgh, PA 15238
 - g. Phone: (412) 856-7340

5. CLASSIFICATION AND USE – Check all that apply

Type

- ☒ Structure
☐ District
☐ Site
☐ Object

Ownership

- ☐ Private – home
☒ Private – other
☐ Public – government
☐ Public – other
☐ Place of religious worship

Current Use:

vacant commercial building

6. NOMINATED BY:

- a. Name: Elizabeth Anderson and Matthew Cotter
- b. Street: 3717 Melwood Avenue, Pittsburgh 15213 AND 3531 Bethoven St. Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- c. City, State, Zip: _____
- d. Phone: (937) 269 - 5455 Email: em.and.sequins@gmail.com and matthew.cotter@gmail.com
(610) 737 - 5797

7. DESCRIPTION

Provide a narrative description of the structure, district, site, or object. If it has been altered over time, indicate the date(s) and nature of the alteration(s). (Attach additional pages as needed)

If Known:

- a. Year Built: 1917-1919
- b. Architectural Style: un-styled commercial building
- c. Architect/Builder: unknown

Narrative: see attached

8. HISTORY

Provide a history of the structure, district, site, or object. Include a bibliography of sources consulted. (Attach additional pages as needed.) Include copies of relevant source materials with the nomination form (see Number 11).

Narrative: see attached

9. SIGNIFICANCE

The Pittsburgh Code of Ordinances, Title 11, Historic Preservation, Chapter 1: Historic Structures, Districts, Sites and Objects lists ten criteria, at least one of which must be met for Historic Designation. Describe how the structure, district, site, or object meets one or more of these criteria and complete a narrative discussing in detail each area of significance. (Attach additional pages as needed)

The structure, building, site, district, object is significant because of (check all that apply):

1. ☐ Its location as a site of a significant historic or prehistoric event or activity;
2. ☒ Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related aspects of the development of the City of Pittsburgh, State of Pennsylvania, Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;
3. ☐ Its exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship;
4. ☐ Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;
5. ☐ Its exemplification of important planning and urban design techniques distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design or detail;

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6. ☐ Its location as a site of an important archaeological resource;
 7. ☒ Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;
 8. ☐ Its exemplification of a pattern of neighborhood development or settlement significant to the cultural history or traditions of the City, whose components may lack individual distinction;
 9. ☒ Its representation of a cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related theme expressed through distinctive areas, properties, sites, structures, or objects that may or may not be contiguous; or
 10. ☒ Its unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Pittsburgh.

Narrative: see attached

10. INTEGRITY

In addition, the ordinance specifies that “Any area, property, site, structure or object that meets any one or more of the criteria listed above shall also have sufficient integrity of location, design, materials, and workmanship to make it worthy of preservation or restoration”. (Attach additional pages as needed)

Narrative: see attached

11. NOTIFICATION/CONSENT OF PROPERTY OWNER(S)

1.3(a)(2) *Community information process.*

Preceding submission of a nomination form for a District, the Historic Review Commission shall conduct at least one (1) public information meeting within or near the boundaries of the proposed district, which shall include at least one (1) member of the Department of City Planning and one (1) Commission member, to discuss the possible effects of designation. Notice shall be given to the owners of property in the proposed district in accordance with Section 1.3(b) below. The final public information meeting shall be held no more than six months before the nomination form is submitted.

1.3(a)(1)(a) *Subsection F.*

In the case of a nomination as a Historic District, by community-based organizations or by any individual, but in either event the nomination shall be accompanied by a petition signed by the owners of record of twenty-five (25) percent of the properties within the boundaries of the proposed District.



- Please attach documentation of your efforts to gain property owner’s consent.-

** The nomination of any religious property shall be accompanied by a signed letter of consent from the property’s owner.

12. PHOTO LOGS: *Please Attach*

13. BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Please Attach*

14. NOMINATION FORM PREPARED BY:

- a. Name: Elizabeth Anderson and Matthew Cotter
- b. Street: 3717 Melwood Avenue/ 3531 Bethoven Street
- c. City, State, Zip: Pittsburgh, PA 15213 / Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- d. Phone: (937) 269-5455 Email: em.and.sequens@gmail.com and matthew.cotter@gmail.com
Matthew phone: (610) 737-5797
- e. Signature:  



HISTORIC NOMINATION – INSTRUCTIONS

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FILLING OUT THE NOMINATION FORM

1. Indicate the original name of the property if it is currently known by a different name; e.g. Union Station.
2. Indicate the current name of the property
3. Indicate the street address for the property. For districts, attach a separate sheet listing the street address of each property included in the nomination and a clear street map of the area showing the boundaries of the proposed district.
4. Indicate the owner of the property and his or her mailing address. For districts, attach a separate sheet listing the owner of each property and his or her mailing address.
5. Check the classification as indicated.
 - a. **“Historic Structure”** means anything constructed or erected, the use of which requires directly or indirectly, a permanent location on the land, including walks, fences, signs, steps and sidewalks at which events that made a significant contribution to national, state or local history occurred or which involved a close association with the lives of people of nations, state or local significance; or an outstanding example of a period, style, architectural movement, or method of construction; or one of the last surviving works of a pioneer architect, builder or designer; or one of the last survivors of a particular style or period of construction.
 - b. **“Historic District”** means a defined territorial division of land which shall include more than one (1) contiguous or related parcels of property, specifically identified by separate resolution, at which events occurred that made a significant contribution to national, state, or local history, or which contains more than one historic structure or historic landmarks, or which contains groups, rows or sets of structures or landmarks, or which contains an aggregate example of a period, style, architectural movements or method of construction, providing distinguishing characteristics of the architectural type or architectural period it represents.
 - c. **“Historic Site”** means the location of a significant event, a prehistoric or historic occupation or activity, or a building or structure whether standing, ruined or vanished, where the location itself maintains historical or archaeological value regardless of the value of any existing structures.
 - d. **“Historic Object”** means a material thing of historic significance for functional, aesthetic cultural or scientific reasons that may be, by nature or design, moveable yet related to a specific setting or environment.
6. Indicate the person(s) responsible for the nomination. Please note: According to the Historic Preservation Ordinance:

“Nomination of an area, property, site, or object for consideration and designation as a Historic Structure, Historic District, Historic Site, or Historic Object may be submitted to the Historic Review Commission by any of the following:

- a. The Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh
 - b. A Member of the Historic Review Commission
 - c. A Member of the City Planning Commission
 - d. A Member of the Pittsburgh City Council
 - e. The Owner of Record or any person residing in the City of Pittsburgh for at least one year (for the nomination of a Historic Structure, Site or Object)
 - f. A signed petition of 25% of the owners of record (for the nomination of a Historic District)
7. Write a physical description of the nominated property or district. Include the following information as applicable:
 - architectural style(s)
 - arrangement of architectural elements
 - building materials
 - method(s) of construction
 - visual character
 - street pattern
 - density
 - type and arrangement of buildings
 - topography
 - history of the development of the area
8. Provide a narrative history of the structure, district, site, or object. Include the following information when available:
 - History of the development of the area;
 - Circumstances which brought the structure, district, site, or object into being;
 - Biographical information on architects, builders, developers, artisans, planners, or others who created or contributed to the structure, district, site, or object;
 - Contextual background on building type(s) and/or style(s);
 - Importance of the structure, district, site, or object in the larger community over the course of its existence.
 - Include a bibliography of all sources consulted at the end. Where historical information is uncertain or disputed, reference sources in the text.
9. Listed below are the categories and criteria for historic designation as set forth in the Pittsburgh Historic Preservation Ordinance. Describe in detail how the structure, district, site, or object meets one or more of the criteria. According to that legislation in Section 1.4 of the Pittsburgh Historic Preservation Ordinance, *Criteria for Designation*, a building must meet at least one of the following criteria in order to be designated:
 1. Its location as a site of a significant historic or prehistoric event or activity;
 2. Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related aspects of the development of the City of Pittsburgh, State of Pennsylvania, Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;
 3. Its exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship;
 4. Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;

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5. Its exemplification of important planning and urban design techniques distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design or detail;
 6. Its location as a site of an important archaeological resource;
 7. Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;
 8. Its exemplification of a pattern of neighborhood development or settlement significant to the cultural history or traditions of the City, whose components may lack individual distinction;
 9. Its representation of a cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related theme expressed through distinctive areas, properties, sites, structures, or objects that may or may not be contiguous; or
 10. Its unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Pittsburgh.
10. In addition, the ordinance specifies that “Any area, property, site, structure or object that meets any one or more of the criteria listed above shall also have sufficient integrity of location, design, materials, and workmanship to make it worthy of preservation or restoration.”
11. The nomination must be accompanied by evidence that the nominator has made a good-faith effort to communicate his or her interest in the historic designation of this landmark or district to the owner(s) of these properties. Describe how this was done, and attach evidence that the owner(s) of the nominated landmark or of the properties within the nominated district have been informed of the nomination. This may include a copy of a notification letter with a mailing list, a letter confirming phone calls, or a petition signed by affected property owners.
12. Clear photographs of the nominated buildings or districts should accompany the nomination form. The applicant shall include photographs of all elevations of an individual building and its setting, or the front elevation of each building in a district. In the case of closely spaced buildings or rowhouses, several buildings may be included in one photograph. Each photograph must be labeled with the street address of the building(s) and the month and year the photograph was taken.
13. Copies of major supporting documents should accompany the nomination form. Such documents may include, but are not limited to:
- historic photographs;
 - historic and contemporary maps;
 - historic or contemporary texts describing the subject property or district;
 - historic or contemporary texts describing people, places, or events that comprise the historic context of the subject property or district.
 - Oversized materials (such as architectural drawings) and materials too fragile to copy may be accepted.

PLEASE NOTE: It is the responsibility of the nominator to provide the Historic Review Commission and its Staff with information sufficient to fairly evaluate the nomination. **Incomplete nomination forms will not be accepted. Fee must be included. Nominations must be submitted in both electronic and hard-copy format.**

- ☒ **#1-6 Nomination Form:** Address, Ownership, Classification, Nominator Info.
- ☒ #7: Description
- ☒ #8: History
- ☒ #9: Significance
- ☒ **#10 Integrity**
- ☒ **#11 Consent of Property Owners**
- ☒ **#12 Photographs of Property:** numbered and labeled
- ☒ **#13 List of Supporting Documents**

- ☒ **Fee**
- ☐ N/A **Hard-Copy nomination**
- ☒ **Electronic nomination (Word Format for text).**

Nomination form is incomplete without the signature of Historic Preservation Staff.

Please email HistoricReview@pittsburghpa.gov to schedule a meeting.

City of Pittsburgh Historic Nomination Form
1226 Herron Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219
Narrative Addenda

Overview

The bar and nightclub most recently called Donny's Place, operated by Donald R. Thinnies (January 27, 1947- January 20, 2024), was an anchor of gay life in Pittsburgh for almost fifty years, operating at the base of Herron Avenue in Polish Hill from 1973 to 2022. We are not aware of any designated historic landmark or state historical marker in the Western PA region related to queer history. We would like to add to efforts happening in places across the country to recognize LGBTQ+ history. These efforts are happening within the historic preservation realm such as via the National Trust for Historic Preservation, local designations and state historical markers, and National Register nominations. We believe that all who made Pittsburgh what it is today should be reflected. By trying to fill in the gaps that exist in what has received historic recognition, we hope to inspire interest in uncovering more stories and leverage other nominations. Many of Pittsburgh's LGBTQ+ bars have closed for various reasons. Some structures have been demolished or repurposed for new use. The former Donny's Place still stands and we feel it is important to recognize the building for its social and cultural significance – it is a landmark and part of our shared Pittsburgh history.

7. Description (Architectural)

Provide a narrative description of the structure, district, site, or object. If it has been altered over time, indicate the date(s) and nature of the alteration(s)



Photo 1 Primary and Western façade, 1226 Herron Avenue. Wen Miller. September 2024.

The former Donny's Place building is located at the intersection of Herron Avenue and Ruthven Street, adjacent to the Martin Luther King Jr East Busway. It is situated in a semi-wooded area on the northern edge of the steeply-hilled Polish Hill neighborhood, which is occupied predominantly by residences and scattered small businesses. The building is a flat-roofed, un-styled, rectangular commercial building two stories in height and measuring two bays wide by four bays deep. The building rests on a continuous foundation, which is not visible. The exterior walls consist of red brick laid in a Common Bond pattern. The main entrance is a wood pedestrian door, covered by a pent roof, on the right side of the building's west (front) façade. The building's fenestration consists of one-over-one light, double-hung, sash windows. The windows are wood, with the exception of two on the second story of the front façade that appear to be aluminum replacements. Two narrow, brick, internal chimneys pierce the roof along the edge of the building's north (side) façade. A one-story, two-bay, pre-fab addition with vinyl siding has been appended to the building's south (side) façade. It appears that the building exterior has had few alterations other than replacement windows.

The structure where Donald “Donny” Thinnes first established the Norreh Social Club (taking over the former Polish social club that was also called Norreh), and then Donny’s Place and Leather Central, was originally built between 1917 and 1919 as a two-story brick dwelling and store in front, and a two-story frame dwelling in the rear. It sits on a lot with room for parking at the base of Polish Hill, just before the Herron Avenue Bridge and in sight of the former Pittsburgh Brewing Company complex. A red light hangs over the door—a vestige of the discretion once necessary for Donny’s Place and its patrons to protect themselves from policing and homophobia—and an adjacent covered courtyard once hosted cookouts for all manner of Pittsburgh’s gay, leather, and fetish communities.

8. History (of structure, include bibliography, and relevant source material):

Form No. 15, 10 ADJUSTED 1935 (Rev. Oct. 1934)
Adapted by The American Land Tenure Foundation
© 1935 THE AMERICAN LAND TENURE FOUNDATION

For Sale by F. J. McKeel, Esq. Clerk, Public
177 Fourth Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15103

26-E-197✓

The Indenture

BETWEEN the day of April, in the year of our Lord,
one thousand nine hundred and seventy-nine (1979)

Between: WALTER T. THINNES and CONNIEVE THINNES, his wife, of the
County of Allegheny, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,

parties of the first part and

DONALD THINNES, of the City of Pittsburgh, County of Allegheny,
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,

222 party of the second part:

Witnesseth, that the said parties of the first part, in consideration of ONE DOLLAR
(\$1.00) and other good and natural consideration

to them now paid by the said party of the second part, do grant, bargain, sell
and convey unto the said party of the second part, his heirs and assigns,

All that certain lot or piece of ground situate in the Sixth Ward of the City of
Pittsburgh, County of Allegheny and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, bounded and
described as follows, to wit:

BEGINNING at a point on the Eastern line of Harrison Avenue at the dividing line
between Lots Nos. 2 and 3 in a Plan of Lots laid out by T. J. BREWSTER and duly
recorded in Plan Book Vol. 3, Page 280, thence running Southeast along said
Avenue, a distance of 22' 6", more or less, to a point on the dividing line between
Lots Nos. 3 and 4 in said plan, thence running along said dividing line North 77°
30' East, a distance of 122 feet to a point on the Western line of Lot No. 16 in
said plan, thence running North 17° 30' West, a distance of 20 feet, more or less,
to the corner of Lot No. 9 aforesaid, thence running South 77° 30' West, a dis-
tance of 125 feet to Harrison Avenue at the place of beginning.

Also right of way over Lot No. 15 as granted by deed from Thomas J. Brewster,
et ux. to William Verron, et al, dated September 1, 1905, recorded in DBV 72d
Page 561.

6088 140 535

HAVING erected thereon a two-story brick dwelling and store in front and a two-story frame dwelling in the rear. Known as Block 20 E, Lot 197.

BEING the same property which Jo Ann Zachary by her deed dated January 10, 1974, and recorded in Deed Book Vol. 4569, Page 166, in the Recorder's Office of Allegheny County, granted and conveyed to Walter Thirnes, the grantor herein.

THE purpose of this Deed is to convey said property from Walter Thirnes and Genevieve Thirnes, his wife, to their son, Donald Thirnes.

222

H.6083 PAGE 533

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/144830906/>

<p>k rooms. 926wb</p> <p>st End—Nicely furnished; convenient location. 926we</p> <p>—Three furnished modern house; pos-iten. 925we</p> <p>insburg—Two furnished. Apply only after 925we</p> <p>ght, third floor, cor-to car; gentleman. 925wr</p> <p>1100—Two light second floor; all 925wn</p> <p>.. 130, near Penn—with electric light. 925xn</p> <p>Oakland—Furnished 921b</p>	<p>Wanted—Shipping Space.</p> <p>About 40x40 feet; must have rear entrance for trucks. Must be in downtown section.</p> <p>Immediate Possession.</p> <p>Write O 131, Press office. 923wn</p> <p>RESTAURANT—New apartment building, fine location; no opposition; rooms if desired; reasonable. 1226 Herron ave. 926wp</p> <p>SUITABLE space for rent; shoemaker's shop or barber shop. Call Bell phone, Grant 4051-J; M. G. Moshilties. 921wb</p> <p>STABLES, GARAGES, ETC.</p> <p>CLYDE st. fireproof garages; offices Gabel Apartment, corner Ellsworth ave. and Clyde st. Phone 4704 or 4433 Schenley. 921wb</p>	<p>FOR SALE—furnace, bath 110. Phone</p> <p>CITY A</p> <p>FIVE ROOM of ground. Pine Creek, o line.</p> <p>MENTION SWERING A</p> <p>NORTI</p> <p>THE tenant o house with</p>
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1226 Herron "RESTAURANT - New apartment building"

Until 1972, the building at 1226 Herron Avenue functioned as primarily as a gambling and drinking society with a mostly Polish membership, which operated discreetly and by a membership system, like many other immigrant and ethnic societies of the era. A September 26, 1919 classified ad in *The Pittsburgh Press* advertises a restaurant and new apartment building at the location. The date that it became a social club is not known.

The social club would have been important to the Polish immigrants who began to arrive and settle in Polish Hill in the late 1800s (following German and Irish immigrants). By 1905, with the construction of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church, an increasing percentage of residents were Polish. Most residents were working class and contributed to the steel mill and railroad economies. During the following decades, residents often referred to Herron Hill as simply "the Hill." The location became known as the Polish neighborhood in Pittsburgh (although the population included a variety of races and ethnicities). The Immaculate Heart of Mary Church and the Polish social club at 1226 Herron Avenue served the needs of residents. Around 1969 or 1970, residents petitioned the City to be recognized as a separate neighborhood known as Polish Hill.

In 1972 Donald "Donny" Thinnies, a gay man born and raised in Bloomfield who had recently returned from a tour of Vietnam (1966-1968), obtained the former Polish social club's liquor license and reopened it as a gay after-hours club. The Norreh Social Club (the name derived from Herron Avenue spelled backwards and was a nod to the former Polish social club that used Norreh in its name) joined The House of Tilden and the Travelers' Club, both operated by

Robert “Lucky” Johns, whose mafia connections made possible the operation of gay social venues in an era when homosexuality was illegal. Johns also served as Thinnes’ mentor, having taught him how to operate an after-hours club when Thinnes worked for Johns in the late ‘60s at the Tilden, one of Pittsburgh’s first gay bars, and at his gay bar The Holiday. Donald Thinnes had such a strong relationship with his parents, Walter and Genevieve Thinnes, that they provided the money to purchase 1226 Herron Avenue. By 1979, the club was profitable enough that Thinnes was able to buy the bar from his parents.

Under Donny Thinnes management and ownership, the gathering place at 1226 Herron Avenue had various names. In addition to the Norreh Social Club and Donny’s Place, other names included: DB’s Place (after Thinnes partner at the time), Leather Central (the name of the basement-level bar that catered to members of the leather community, and which was a gathering place for the Three Rivers Leather Club, founded in 1991), and others.

From 1973 until October 2022, 1226 Herron Avenue was an anchor of Pittsburgh gay life: hosting fundraisers, performances, life-saving HIV/AIDS testing and information, and an opportunity for queer people from Pittsburgh and across Northern Appalachia to meet each other and be themselves, away from the controlling eyes of a society that didn’t welcome them.

At its inception, the Norreh was an after-hours venue, open late into the night and operating on a membership system inherited from Pittsburgh’s ethnic social clubs of the early twentieth century and refined by Robert “Lucky” Johns, the father of Pittsburgh’s gay after-hours clubs and the gay nightlife scene in general. The club might have had 25,000 members over the years. Very few of them realized that their membership cards were coded, so the club owner or doorman could verify identities by physical characteristics, such as race, gender, or eye and hair coloration. It was a precaution that was necessary, since forged membership cards or those that had been stolen or 'borrowed' were the easiest way for the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board to gain entry and issue citations. Donald Thinnes claimed that it took seven years for the Liquor Control Board to get through the door.

Women were welcome though the bar downstairs would become a men's only space, catering to a rapidly growing interest in leather. Eventually, the upstairs would become a dance floor or a performance space, with a lit dance floor “worthy of Saturday Night Fever.”

As time went on, the after-hours club became a bar. The Liquor Control Board became less tolerant of places that served late, and after two raids, Donny changed the club's hours (this was in line with other clubs curtailing their hours in response to enforcement).

In the 2000s, one floor of Donny’s was for a time the city’s major lesbian bar. The lesbian dance party Sappho, hosted regularly around the city by DJ Mary Mack through 2013 and occasionally as a pop-up event since 2020, got its start at Donny’s. At least once Donny’s hosted the after-party for the Pittsburgh Dyke March.

Donny's Place closed briefly due to COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. When it reopened in 2021 the liquor license for the bar had lapsed. Friend of the bar and fellow Pittsburgh Tavern Guild member Scott Noxon (formerly the proprietor of Pegasus, The Pittsburgh Eagle, and There Video Lounge) used There Video's liquor license to allow the venue to reopen. Due to development pressures and Donald Thinnes' declining health, the bar closed permanently in the fall of 2022. Scott Noxon joined Donald Thinnes' caretaking team, and Donny died on January 20, 2024. In response to Donny's death, community members expressed their appreciation of Donny and what his life and his bar had meant to them. Here is a brief selection of remembrances that accompanied Thinnes' obituary:

Donny was amazing in his endless contributions to the community in which he believed in helping people in need. He gave more than most. During the Aids crisis, he lost his brother and his partner and still Donny helped those who were in need . He stands out as one of the greatest in the history of gay Pittsburgh. I will always remember Donny fondly
Stephen Dario - February 29 at 03:04 PM

My condolences to Donnie's family. We will always be great for his generosity to the LGBTQ+ community. May he rest in peace.
Michael Tevis - January 29 at 11:16 AM

9. Significance

(1) *Its location as a site of a significant historic or prehistoric event or activity;*

This resource does not meet this Criterion.

(2) Identification with a person who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, architectural, archeological, or related aspects to the City of Pittsburgh, State of Pennsylvania, Mid-Atlantic Region, or the United States.



Donald Thinnes on left. QBurgh. Date unknown.

The bar and nightclub most recently called Donny's Place was an anchor of gay life in Pittsburgh for almost fifty years, operating at the base of Herron Avenue in Polish Hill from 1973 to 2022. Donald Thinnes was born and raised in Bloomfield. Supported by fellow bar owners throughout his life, Donny was a founding member of the Pittsburgh Tavern Guild, an organization of Pittsburgh gay bar and nightclub owners founded in the late 1970s in order to protect one another and their venues from pressures exerted by homophobic legal restrictions; the local mafia, which exerted great influence in the nightlife scene at the time; and the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board. (The first Tavern Guild in the country formed in San Francisco in the 1960s). In the early 1980s, the Tavern Guild was responsible for disseminating information about HIV/AIDS, then known as GRID, within the Pittsburgh gay community long before such information was widespread, and as a result Pittsburgh's rate of death from AIDS was far below that of comparably sized cities. The Tavern Guild also used Donny's Place to recruit participants for the Pitt Men's Study. Founded in 1984 and continuing today at the University of Pittsburgh with funding from the National Institute of Health, the study "has followed a cohort of approximately 3,000 men to gather information on the epidemiology, virology, immunology, and pathology" of HIV/AIDS, according to the study's website. Data from the Pitt Men's Study has been a major factor in the development of the treatment for HIV/AIDS for the last forty years.

In addition to disseminating information about HIV/AIDS, Donny's Place served as a major center of harm reduction and community organizing for queer people in Pittsburgh for the entirety of its operation. In the 1980s and 1990s the bar held fundraisers for community members living with AIDS and memorials for those who died. In the 1990s and 2000s, the bar offered free sodas and coffees for designated drivers during an epidemic of drunk driving, and continued to offer incentives such as free admission or free drinks for patrons to join the Pitt

Men's Study or to prove that they had been tested for HIV/AIDS. As recently as 2022, bartender David grilled free hot dogs for patrons every Sunday night.

The Tavern Guild was even presented with a Certificate of Merit in Public Health in 2000 for "outstanding service to the citizens of Allegheny County in the recent outbreak of Hepatitis A."



Certificate of Public Merit awarded to the Tavern Guild by the Allegheny County Health Department, 2000. Donald Thinnies papers, Heinz History Center. Image by Dade Lemanski

In 1999, Mike Zuhl, a key figure in the Pittsburgh leather community, as well as leather communities nationally and internationally, bought out the Mr. Drummer Contest, a national leather community pageant that had been hosted by *Drummer Magazine*, a gay men's leather periodical based in San Francisco that was published from 1975-1999, and featured work from such major writers and artists as Patrick Califia and Robert Mapplethorpe. When *Drummer Magazine* folded, the contest needed a new sponsor, and the strong Pittsburgh leather scene, anchored at Leather Central, became the host. Zuhl also went on to found the contests International Mr. Leather Sir/boy and International Mister Bootblack.

The capacity of Donny's Place to host these major leather community events was made possible by its decades of hosting more local community events and pageants, and building infrastructure through the Tavern Guild with other gay bars and clubs across Pittsburgh, such as an annual Labor Day gay cruise on the Gateway Clipper and a Memorial Day picnic held by the Golden Triangle Society in North Park. The Miss Norreh Pageant ran annually at Donny's Place from some time in the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the Horse of a Different Color gay western and two-stepping club met and hosted dances at the bar (in the upstairs space which the club called "Stetson's") throughout the 1990s.

Thinnes was also a founding member of the Lambda Foundation, a nonprofit that supported all kinds of queer and trans projects in Pittsburgh—from an Asian American lesbian society at the University of Pittsburgh to Shepherd Wellness Community, an organization that has been providing care and support to people living with HIV/AIDS in the Pittsburgh region since 1987, along with many other projects and organizations. Donald Thinnes along with Robert "Lucky" Johns (who died in 2014) were anchors of the Tavern Guild and in the development of the infrastructures of gay life in Pittsburgh. The Tavern Guild even promoted the City of Pittsburgh via an advertising campaign in the 1980s as "Gay America's Best Kept Secret." Pittsburgh was promoted in gay newspapers within a 6 hour drive of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh has no designated historic structures to commemorate gay history, including its nightlife. Pittsburgh was at one time so well-known that the groundbreaking Showtime series *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) was set here. *Queer as Folk* was the first mainstream television series to introduce stories featuring gay life. Those who remember the heyday of gay bars and after-hours clubs are dwindling in number, and sites of gay life are threatened and disappearing due to encroaching development.

In this moment, we have the opportunity and necessity to act in preserving Donny's Place, a building that signifies almost fifty years of Pittsburgh gay history—not only since its founding in 1973, but the pre-Stonewall Uprising organizing and infrastructure in which Robert "Lucky" Johns built up the after-hours gay scene in Pittsburgh, and from which Donny's Place emerged. Donny's was an early anchor of the scene continuing into the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, offering the only place for leather community members to gather between Philadelphia and Cleveland. No other place like it existed in Pittsburgh, or will. The many lives that changed due to Donny's Place are worth remembering. The building at 1226 Herron Avenue embodies the contributions of Donald Thinnes and Pittsburgh LGBTQ+ history.

(3) Its exemplification of an architectural type, style, or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship;

This resource does not meet this Criterion.

(4) Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history of development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid- Atlantic region, or the United States;

This resource does not meet this Criterion.

(5) Its exemplification of important planning and urban design techniques distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design or detail;

This resource does not meet this Criterion.

(6) Its location as a site of an important archaeological resource;

This resource does not meet this Criterion.

(7.) Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;

Donny's Place was the site of much of the first recruitment for the still ongoing Pitt Men's Study at the University of Pittsburgh for HIV/AIDS (as described in Criterion #2). Founded in 1984 and continuing today at the University of Pittsburgh with funding from the National Institute of Health, the study "has followed a cohort of approximately 3,000 men to gather information on the epidemiology, virology, immunology, and pathology" of HIV/AIDS, according to the study website. Data from the Pitt Men's Study has been a major factor in the development of the treatment for HIV/AIDS for the last forty years.

Donny Thinnes was also a founding member of the Pittsburgh Tavern Guild, an early gay business association (following that which formed in San Francisco in the 1960s). It was through Donny Thinnes and Donny's Place where the infrastructures of gay life in Pittsburgh developed – a support system and infrastructure that we might simply take for granted today without knowing what came before. Donny's Place and the Tavern Guild provided critical health and wellness information and served as a meeting place and refuge for the LGBTQ+ community. It even took steps to promote Pittsburgh to gay tourists in the 1980s.

(8) Its exemplification of a pattern of neighborhood development or settlement significant to the cultural history or traditions of the City, whose components may lack individual distinction

This resource does not meet this Criterion.

(9.) Its representation of a cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related theme expressed through distinctive areas, properties, sites, structures, or objects that may or may not be contiguous; or

Donny's Place was one of the early gay after-hours clubs and bars in the Pittsburgh area during a critical time beginning in the early 1970s, following the Stonewall Uprising. These times included more freedom and possibilities, but also the trauma of the AIDS epidemic. Donny's Place had a long and lasting presence continuing into the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those who remember the heyday of gay bars and after-hours clubs are dwindling in number. The buildings that housed these bars and clubs have been demolished. Those still standing are threatened and are disappearing due to various factors including encroaching development.

The Donny's Place building signifies five decades of Pittsburgh gay history—not only since its founding in 1973, but the pre-Stonewall organizing and infrastructure in which Robert "Lucky" Johns built up via the after-hours gay scene in Pittsburgh, and from which Donny's Place emerged.

(10) Its unique location and distinct physical appearance represents a familiar visual feature.

The building at 1226 Herron Avenue has anchored the base of Herron Avenue since approximately 1919 -- and since 1973 as a gay bar. The property is located across the Herron Avenue Bridge from Liberty Avenue and right across the street from a stop on the Martin Luther King Jr East Busway. Despite the injustices of policing and homophobia, the building is not hidden, but rather it sits in a prominent central location near the borders of Lawrenceville and the Strip District, as well as near the former Iron City Brewing, also a historic landmark.

10. Integrity

The building retains moderate integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship and feeling. Most of the original design, materials, and workmanship are intact.

11. Notification of Property owners (see enclosed letter)

Contact has been made with the estate of Donald Thinnes to discuss plans for the property as well as the property's potential to honor Donald Thinnes and Pittsburgh's LGBTQ+ history.

12. Photographs (numbered, dated, and labeled)



Photo 1 Donny's Place, Primary and Western façade, 1226 Herron Avenue. Wen Miller. September 2024.



Photo 2 Donny's Place, North façade, 1226 Herron Avenue. Wen Miller. September 2024.



Photo 3 Donny's Place, South façade and parking lot, 1226 Herron Avenue. Wen Miller. September 2024.



Photo 4 Donny's Place, South façade and parking lot, 1226 Herron Avenue. QBurgh. c. 1980s.



Photo 5 Donny's Place, Primary and western façade, 1226 Herron Avenue. bulldogchicago. Date unknown.

Archival Materials: Related to Donny's Place, 1226 Herron Avenue, and Donald Thinnes



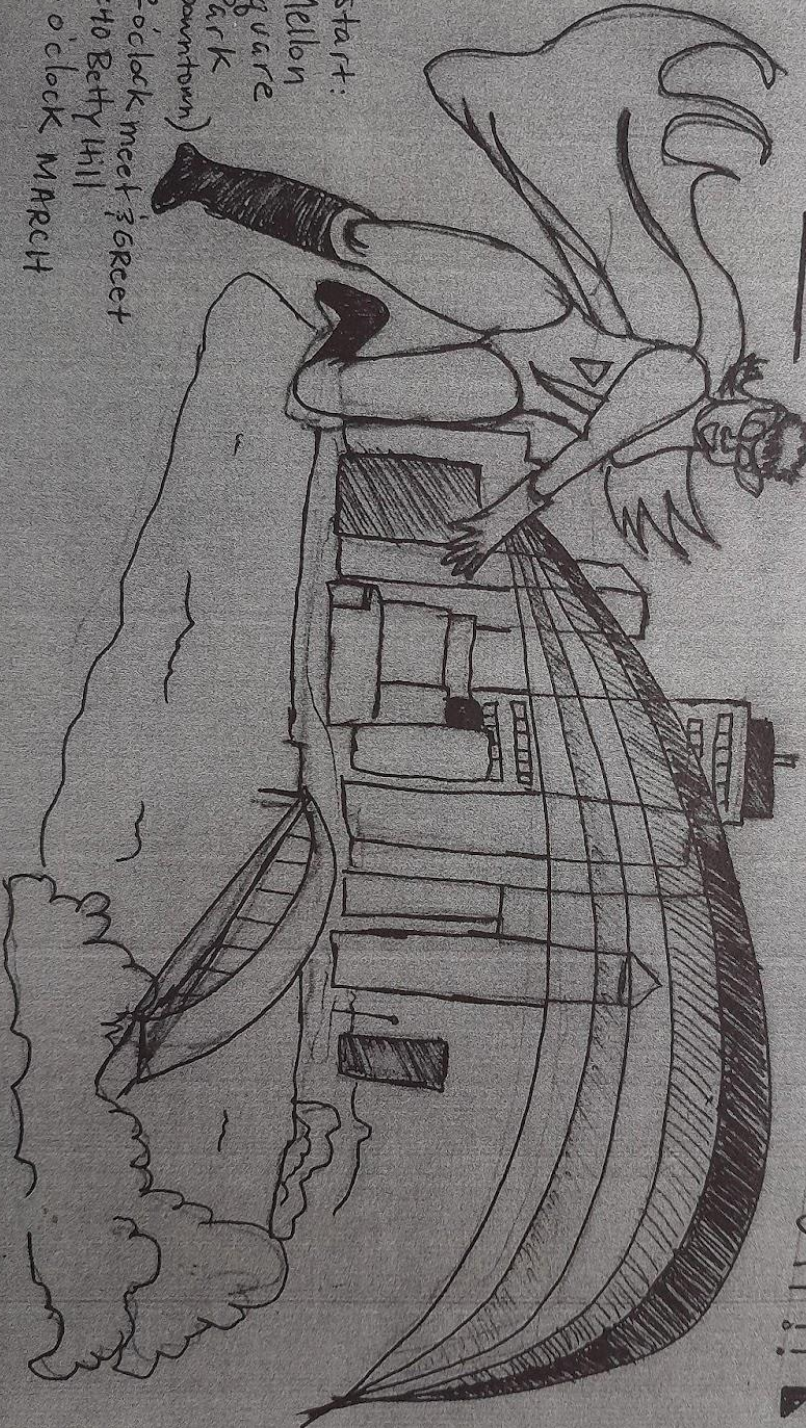
Photo of Robert "Lucky" Johns and Donald Thinnes taken by Brian Michaels at the Norreh Social Club, *Gay Life*, September 1977. Donald Thinnes papers, Heinz History Center. Image by Dade Lemanski.


► PITSBURGH'S 3rd Annual

SATURDAY JUNE 21ST @ 3

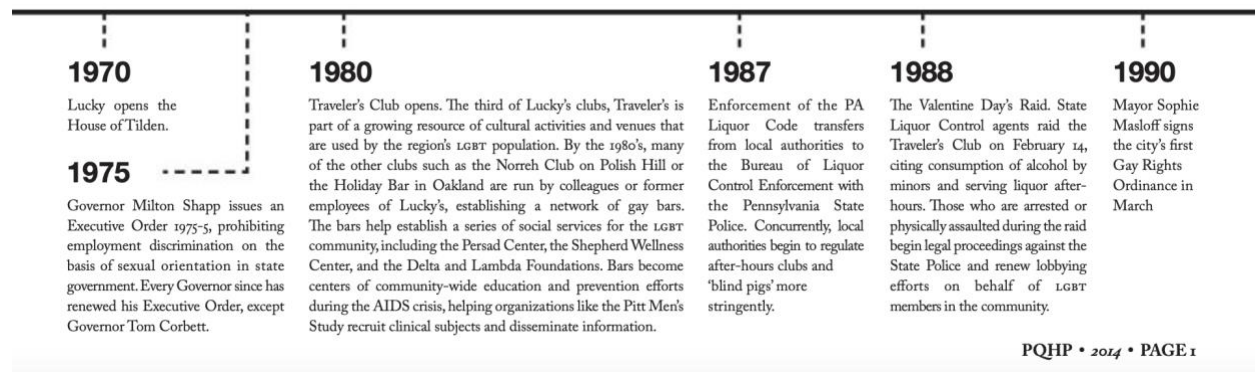
DYKE MARCH !! ►

Start:
Melon
Square
Park
(Downtown)
2 o'clock meet @ Greet
2:40 Betty Hill
3 o'clock MARCH



After Party: Hosted by Pink Party Productions @ Donny's 7-?  WEEZIES

Flyer for the 3rd Annual Pittsburgh Dyke March. Donald Thinnnes papers, Heinz History Center. Image by Dade Lemanski.



Pittsburgh Queer History Project: Lucky After Dark timeline, 2014.

DO YOU KNOW?

QUESTIONS:

1. Will only gay men with many different sex partners get AIDS?
2. How much free medical testing is available from the Pitt Men's Study?
3. Can Hepatitis-B be prevented?
4. Are only men who are anal receptive able to get AIDS?

ANSWERS:

1. No, AIDS can be acquired from just one sexual partner.
2. Study I — \$150.00 Study II — \$500.00 per visit
3. Yes, a safe, effective vaccine is available from your doctor, county health service and some university student health centers.
4. No, AIDS can probably be transmitted to either partner who engages in oral or anal sex.

Join the Pitt Men's Study

Call 624-2008

DO IT FOR A FRIEND

Cocktail napkin advertisement for the Pitt Men's Study, 1980s. Donald Thinnes papers, Heinz History Center. Image by Dade Lemanski.



SAVE IT FOR THE NEXT TIME

When you really don't want another drink - but you don't want to insult someone who wants to buy you one **SAVE IT FOR THE NEXT TIME** with your Norreh Drink Disk. Instead of a drink - you receive a disk, which is redeemable anytime you visit Norreh.



We want you to have a
good time at the club —
and a safe ride home!

SO

SAVE IT FOR THE NEXT TIME

Remember Coffee and Food are Always Available

Leaflet from Norreh Social Club newsletter c. 1990. Donald Thinnes papers, Heinz History Center. Image by Dade Lemanski.



A BENEFIT FOR THE MARCH ON
WASHINGTON FOR LESBIAN & GAY RIGHTS

SPAGHETTI DINNER

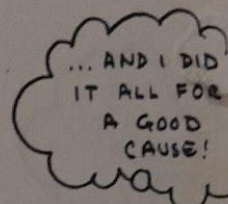
at the

NORREH SOCIAL CLUB

Saturday, Sept. 5th

8:00 to 10:00 PM

\$3.50



For more information about the March and related events call 255-0296

SPACE AND BAR PROCEEDS GENEROUSLY DONATED BY THE NORREH
SPACE AND BAR PROCEEDS GENEROUSLY DONATED BY THE NORREH

Flyer announcing benefit spaghetti dinner for the March on Washington for Lesbian & Gay Rights at the Norreh, 1979. Donald Thinnes papers, Heinz History Center. Image by Dade Lemanski.

13. List of Supporting Documents for 1226 Herron Avenue

- Photo Log
- Bibliography

Photo Log for 1226 Herron Avenue

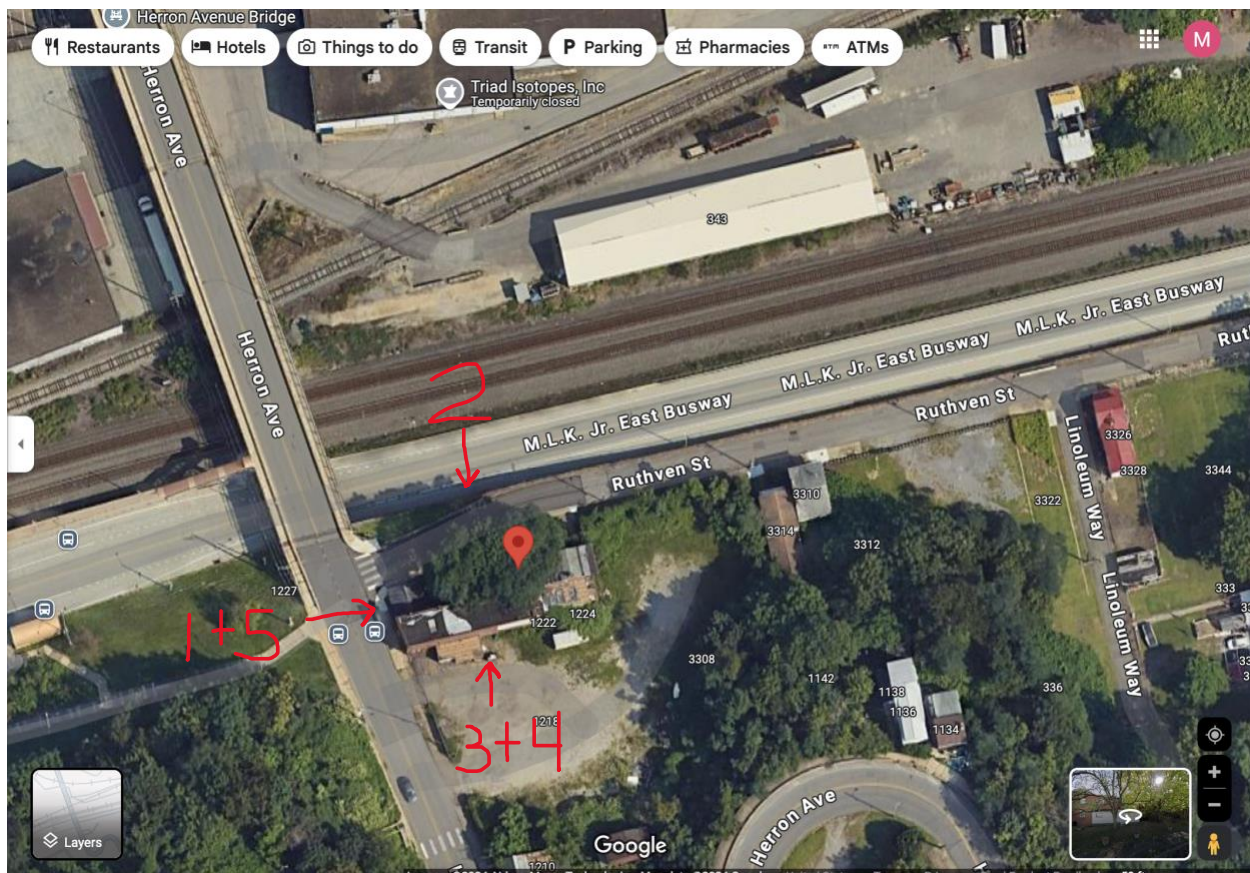
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Photo 5 Donny's Place, Primary and western façade, 1226 Herron Avenue. bulldogchicago. Date unknown.



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<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/94f3865430e049f99e1220f4ea477ab7>

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<https://qburgh.com/donald-thinnes-long-time-bar-owner-community-stalwart-has-died/>

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<https://obituaries.post-gazette.com/obituary/donald-r-thinnes-1089322058>

Switzer, Silas Maxwell. In Memoriam: Donny Thinnes. *QBurgh*. May 16, 2024.

<https://qburgh.com/in-memoriam-donny-thinnes/>

Other Sources & Media

Donald Thinnes papers, Senator John Heinz History Center:

- Photo taken by Brian Michaels of four patrons upstairs at the Norreh (upstairs on the lesbian floor), *Gay Life* magazine, late 1970s

- Photo of DJ Michael playing New Wave at the "Ratskelter" at the Norreh, taken by Brian Michaels, *Gay Life* magazine, late 1970s

- Portrait of Donald Thinnes from "Pittsburgh's Gay Community is Growing and Flourishing," *Pittsburgh Press*, September 27, 1979

- Invitation to Norreh Social Club Ten-Year Anniversary, 1983

- Photo of bartender John (far right) downstairs at the Norreh, *METRA* magazine 156, September 25, 1985

- Leaflet from Norreh Social Club newsletter, c. 1990

- Photo of Ever Lovely and LaDonna, the reigning Miss Norreh, at the Norreh Social Club, *METRA* magazine issue 246

- Leaflet from Norreh Social Club newsletter, announcing Leather Night at the Norreh hosted by Pittsburgh MC, c. 1990

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October 22, 2024

Estate of Donald Thinnes
Bresnahan, Finnegan & Bresnahan
1000 Gamma Drive, Ste 206
Pittsburgh, PA 15238

RE: 1226 Herron Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter is to inform you that we are submitting a nomination for historic designation of the building located at 1226 Herron Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219. It will be submitted to the City of Pittsburgh's Historic Review Commission. This notice is required of the nomination process.

The former Donny's Place, located at 1226 Herron Avenue, operated by Donald Thinnes, was an anchor of gay life in Pittsburgh for almost fifty years, operating at the base of Herron Avenue in Polish Hill from 1973 to 2022. To date, we know of no other officially designated landmark or state historical marker in Pittsburgh, or in the region, that explicitly relates to queer history.

We believe that the building meets several criteria for historic designation and that due to its history and connection to Donald Thinnes, it should be added to the City's list of Designated Historic Structures – a designation that would not only recognize the significance of Donny's Place, but would honor Donald Thinnes and the community that he supported and that supported him over his lifetime.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Anderson & Matthew Cotter



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