

The Embassy of Asbury Heights' first floor common areas contain a gym (at right) as well as a private patio, a dining area where a continental breakfast is served daily, and cozy living rooms that feature a television and piano and a kitchen. The apartments (center and far right) all contain a living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms and two bathrooms. One model also has a den. Residents can paint and decorate their spaces as they see fit.



safe, pampered and independent...

At Home

After 44 years of living in the same Mt. Lebanon home her late husband, Edward, had built, Bette Ruh had a tough decision to make. Plans to move to a retirement community in the South Hills had fallen through shortly before her house sold. Active and healthy, Ruh was far from ready for a nursing home, but as a widow, she wanted someplace safe where she would be a bit pampered.

That was when Ruh toured The Embassy, Asbury Heights' new independent living apartment complex on Beverly Road.

"When I saw it I fell in love," she says of her roomy two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment. "It is a mile from my [old] home. I can go to the same doctor, the same stores and visit my friends. And it's so close to town—you can zip in and zip out—and I can walk up to Beverly Road or have dinner down at Atria's."

Ruh is not the first person to be impressed by The Embassy. Built in the 1930s as a residential "apartment hotel," the six-story Art Deco style building originally boasted 61 units and offered residents marbleoid terrazzo kitchen floors, bathrooms in "colored vitrolite marble," beds-in-a-door, GE refrigerators, maid service and switchboard telephone service for announcing visitors and taking messages. Those features plus the fact that the building was on a bus line and close to the Beverly Road Shops, made The Embassy one of Mt. Lebanon's more desirable places to live. Carol Thomas, sales consultant, says Lawrence Welk kept an apartment

at the Embassy for when his orchestra played in Pittsburgh (Welk's champagne music was born at the William Penn Hotel), and a well-known KDKA news personality reportedly ensconced his special "friend" in one of the units.

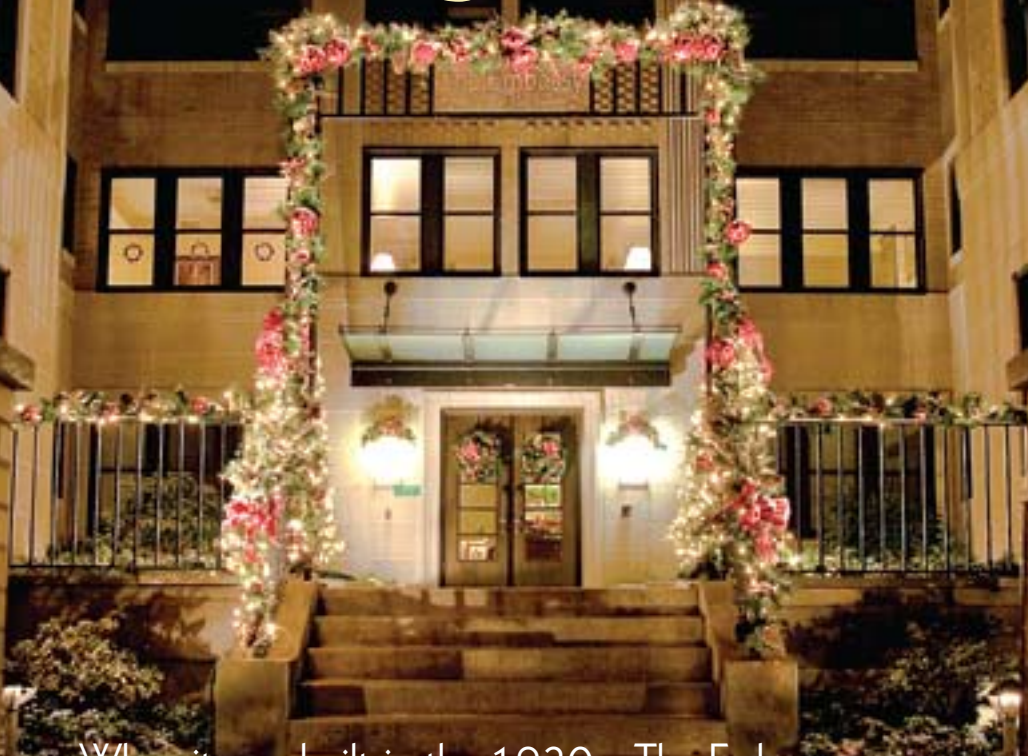
Meanwhile, less than a mile away, Asbury Heights on Bower Hill Road was growing. The facility had started in 1908, when Frances Campbell Hamilton, with the help of the Pittsburgh Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, created a home for 18 elderly men and women in Dravosburg. Filled to capacity by 1926, the home moved to a Victorian farm house on 30 acres of land off Bower Hill Road. Today, operated by the United Methodist Services for the Aging, Asbury Heights is a continuing care community that provides independent- and assisted-living apartments, 21 carriage homes for active older adults, a special unit for people with Alzheimer's or dementia, and rehabilitative care. More than 500 people call Asbury Heights home.

By 2000, Asbury needed to expand. When no property adjoining the campus proved suitable, the search was widened. Enter The Embassy.

In June 2005, Asbury Heights purchased the apartment building for \$1.3 million and embarked on a year-and-a-half long renovation project. Perkins Eastman was the architect; National Development Company was the contractor. Plans called for turning the first floor into spacious common rooms and reducing the number of apartments from 61 to 34, but preserving the character of the historic building while updating it was a goal. Much of



at The Embassy



When it was built in the 1930s, The Embassy apartment building was considered one of Mt. Lebanon's more desirable places to live.

Its lovely entryway off Beverly Road, professionally decorated for the holidays, provides a clue why.



For Bette Ruh—a longtime Mt. Lebanon resident—life at The Embassy is a dream come true. She is close to her friends, her church, her doctor and many local stores and restaurants. She accessorized her homey apartment with her favorite treasures and memorabilia.

the original woodwork was saved, including many of the original walnut three-panel apartment doors and interior louvered doors. Worn and damaged woodwork was replaced with replicas. Many of the period glass doorknobs were reused and others replicated. The lighting fixtures in the hallway are not original but are Art Deco reproductions.

The \$8.2 million complex opened in early 2007, and residents began moving into the luxury apartments offered in four sizes that range from 1,134 to 1,277 square feet. Every apartment features two bedrooms and two bathrooms, with the largest model also containing a third bedroom/den. Bathrooms have walk-in showers with molded plastic seats and handrails, and every unit has a washer/dryer. Residents also have storage units in the basement. The monthly fee includes a 30-meal plan, daily continental breakfast, housekeeping services, transportation by shuttle or private car to shopping, medical appointments, cultural events or the Asbury Heights campus, and 24-hour security and concierge service.

The first floor features a small gym; a common room with TV, gas fireplace, overstuffed chairs and sofas, and an adjoining tree-lined patio. In February a new meeting space—originally slated to be an apartment—with a grand piano, billiards, a dining area

for larger gatherings, library and computer center—will be completed. Thomas says the residents suggested the new amenities. “They tell us what they want and we listen,” she says.

With a call to the concierge, residents can have their cars brought up to street level from the heated underground parking garage. Or they can call the activities director with an idea and she’ll take care of the arrangements—in November activities planned by the residents’ council included a dinner at the Grand Concourse, a pre-Thanksgiving cocktail party and shopping at the Tanger Outlets.

Dinner is delivered to the residents’ apartments by 5 P.M.—Ruh says she usually has enough left over for lunch the next day. Soon they’ll have the option of joining other residents in the dining room, if they feel like company.

“Whatever they need, it comes to them,” says Thomas.

“The concierge really spoils you,” adds Ruh, who is one of 23 residents at the 34-unit apartment complex.

A trainer comes twice a week and helps residents plan exercise programs or teaches them to use the fitness equipment and two registered nurses assist with health issues such as blood sugar monitoring. People planning to move in have a complimentary meeting with an organizer who can help them downsize from a house to an apartment.

Downsizing doesn’t mean you’ll be forced to leave your treasures behind, however. Ruh’s charming apartment overflows with collectibles and memorabilia. She was able to further personalize her space by picking out the colors for the walls, installing a

When renovating the The Embassy, Asbury Heights paid close attention to detail and, whenever possible, retained and refurbished the original wood doors and woodwork. Reducing the number of apartments from 61 to 34 gave the new units a more open floor plan. The building features 24-hour security and concierge service.

favorite ceiling lamp in the second bedroom and turning a huge closet into a dressing room.

The Embassy is open to people age 55 and older who pass a basic health screening. They pay a deposit, which is 100 percent refundable, however, if they should choose to move to Asbury's main campus they are guaranteed a spot. Embassy residents also can use Asbury's physicians and other medical services if they need rehabilitation or other short-term specialized care. Thomas says she expects residents will stay 10 to 12 years before moving on to a facility that offers more care.

"I am very happy here at The Embassy," Ruh says. "My son and daughter do not have as many concerns for me, knowing I am being well taken care of and am safe. Really, what is there for me not to like?"

mt. lebanon's first apartment hotel

The Embassy not only came very close to never being built, but its construction ignited a zoning war.

When Bernath and Regina Herskovits purchased—for the bargain price of \$1—a section of the Edward Abbott farm on Beverly Road across from Sieaforth Avenue in 1928, they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. Since 1924 the area had fast been moving from farmland to residential neighborhood, so the Herskovitses had every reason to believe the land was the perfect spot for a six-story, 65-unit apartment building. Bernath Herskovits applied for a building permit, which was granted, and hired a contractor.

But then the bottom fell out.

With more and more builders seeking to build apartment complexes in Mt. Lebanon, residents became concerned that apartment buildings would start popping up throughout the community. On April 5, 1929, the Mt. Lebanon Civic League was formed with the purpose of pushing an ordinance that would restrict the size of buildings in residentially zoned neighborhoods. The league was successful: in July commissioners passed an ordinance that restricted the height of buildings in the commercial district to 75 feet and 45 feet from street level in the Beverly Road residential district. Herskovits' final building permit was denied.

Even when the Board of Adjustment upheld Herskovits' permit application, Mt. Lebanon balked; the building inspector refused to carry out the order. Herskovits then embarked on a legal battle that took the case all the way to the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court where on January 13, 1930, his lawyers argued that "the commis-



sioners of a first class township cannot deny a building permit to a property owner whose plans and specifications comply with all existing ordinances simply because the height of the proposed building would violate the terms of the amending ordinance that had not been introduced for consideration but the commissioners had in mind to adopt at a future date."

Herskovits won and construction on the apartment building resumed. Originally dubbed The Regina, after Herskovits's wife, by the May 1931 opening it had been changed to The Embassy.

Advertised as "Mt. Lebanon's First Apartment Hotel," the Embassy featured an elevator, telephone, maid and mail service as well as a large lobby, lounge rooms, integral garage and suites with three, four or five rooms. Advertising also touted its roof garden, soundproofing, fireproofing, artistic decorations and proximity to parks, the Dormont pool, schools, stores and transportation (the Oriole Bus Line to downtown Pittsburgh stopped in front of the building). Rents ranged from \$70 to \$125 with the month of May rent-free. Of the people who took advantage of the apartment's many selling points was Herskovits and his family. He lived there until his death in 1933.

Subsequent applicants for building permits in the Beverly Road residential area had to adhere to the zoning ordinance amendment of a three-story height limitation. Thus the Embassy at Asbury Heights continues to be the tallest apartment building in the area—all because of a legal decision that made it the exception to the rule.

Research by Thomas A. Josephi. To read Josephi's complete article on the zoning controversy, log on to www.mtlebanon.org.