DESCRIPTION OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Exterior

The Homestead Masonic Hall is a four-story, masonry, Classical Revival style building located at the southwest corner of E. Ninth Ave. and McClure Street in the borough of Homestead, PA. It faces northwest onto E. Ninth Ave. and is built to the sidewalk on its primary, secondary, and rear (E. Locust Way) facades. The building's west side facade abuts a surface parking lot which is part of the Masonic Hall property. A date stone on the northeast corner of the primary facade identifies the year of construction as 1917.

The primary (E. Ninth Ave.) and secondary (McClure Street) facades are organized according to the Classical three-part principle of base, shaft, and capital. They have a sandstone foundation, first-story base of smooth-dressed limestone ashlar, and two-story shaft of buff brick capped by a stone cornice. The fourth floor is set back behind a parapet above the cornice on these two sides.

The primary facade is five bays wide and symmetrical with the entrance to the first-floor commercial and third-and-fourth meeting spaces recessed in the central opening. This central entrance portal and the window openings in the first and fifth bays are large and arched. The arched windows are wood-framed with multiple panes around their perimeters and paneled wood spandrels in their lower portions. The second and fourth bays contain smaller, vertically-oriented, rectangular wooden fixed sash divided into six panes. In the wall above each of these smaller windows is a tablet containing a bas relief of a scroll. A larger stone tablet is incorporated into the first-floor cornice above the central entrance. It is engraved "MASONIC HALL" and surmounted by a carved sphere flanked by Egyptian-style wings. A Masonic triangle symbol is at the center.

The five bays of the second and third floors are divided by brick pilasters capped by simple Doric stone capitals. Windows are wood multi-pane casements; those on the third floor are taller and have transoms. A rectangular stucco panel is located between the second and third story window in each bay. The entablature above the third floor consists of a stone architrave, brick frieze inset with panels of checkered buff and orange brick, and stone cornice. Above this, a brick parapet with panels of buff and orange brick in a chevron pattern all but completely blocks sight lines to the set-back fourth story.

The secondary facade is nine bays deep and similarly detailed. Because the building is set on a sloped site, the foundation is highest at the front and steps upward toward the rear. The entrance to the apartments (located on the second floor of the interior) is located in an arched opening in the central (fifth) bay beneath a stone tablet engraved "HOMESTEAD APTS." Forward of this, on the first floor, each bay contains a pair of wood-framed multi-pane casement windows in a nearly-square opening. Rear of the entrance, the first-floor window openings have been infilled with glass block. The second and third floor bays are separated by tall, shallow brick panels rather than pilasters. Windows on the second floor are casements and on the third are square fixed sash of nine panes. A tall panel of checkered buff and orange brick is located between the second and third story window in each bay. The entablature is identical to that on the primary facade.

The west side facade facing the parking lot is of red brick. There is a windowless front section which protrudes slightly farther westward into the parking lot than the long rear section, which is divided into seven bays. Windows are casement pairs on the first and second floors; nine-paned squares (most replaced with glass block) on the third floor; and glass block infill in small, vertical openings on the fourth floor. All openings on this facade have segmental arches, but the

windows themselves are rectangular. The rearmost bay contains a red-brick chimney which rises above the roofline.

The rear facade is of red brick accented with buff brick. A large service entrance in the center has been infilled with stucco; two man doors now provide entrance from the rear. The service portal is flanked by two square window openings filled with glass block. Above them, blind arches rise through the second and third stories. The fourth floor has four rectangular window openings filled with glass block. Only on this facade is the building's gabled roofline evident. An iron fire escape is attached to the rear facade.

Interior

The Masonic Hall entrance on E. Ninth Ave. leads into a lobby with a curved wall at its far (south) end. Doorways set into the curve provide access to a narrow metal staircase on one side and a narrow elevator lobby on the other; these stairs and elevator provide access to the third and fourth floors. The rest of the first floor is offices. Original windows, doors, and trims are present in some spaces, while others have been substantially altered. Ceilings are dropped acoustical tile and floors have been carpeted except in a conference room on the building's west side, where a terrazzo floor remains exposed.

A separate lobby off of McClure Street contains the original wooden staircase to the building's second floor. Originally apartments, these spaces have been more recently converted to offices. The central core of the second floor contains the building's four staircases—each of which accesses and bypasses different floors—as well as several small mechanical rooms, storage rooms, and a toilet room. Circulation is via U-shaped corridor surrounding the core. The former apartment rooms occupy the floor's perimeter. As on the first floor, finishes are a mixture of original wood trims and more modern materials, such as carpeting, acoustical ceiling tiles, and paneling.

The third floor contains the Masonic meeting hall, featuring a high beamed ceiling and paneled pilasters on the perimeter walls. Windows are set high in the walls, above eye level, and surmounted by recessed blind arches. This room has been subdivided into several smaller rooms with dropped acoustical tile ceilings and a T-shaped access corridor which is open to the full height of the space. Forward (north) of the meeting hall on this floor is a suite of offices, utility rooms, and rest rooms originally designed as support spaces for the meeting hall. Like the rest of the building, these display a mixture of original and updated finishes.

The fourth floor has a slightly smaller footprint than the rest of the building due to its being set back from the parapet on the north and east. Its original configuration was similar to the third floor with a large banquet hall south of the staircase and elevator and support spaces to the north. The banquet hall has been subdivided into an office suite with a dropped acoustical tile ceiling, except in the rearmost (south) portion, where original steel trusses supporting the concrete gabled roof are visible. The original music balcony is present above the dropped ceiling of the office suite's reception room. It is bow-shaped with turned wooden balusters.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Homestead Masonic Hall is a contributing resource in the Homestead Historic District (NRHP 1990). It is not listed in the district inventory, but this appears to be an oversight. The Homestead Masonic Hall is within the boundary of the district, was constructed during the period of significance of the district (1890-1941), and contributes to the district's significance under Criterion A as a "varied and representative selection of residential, institutional, and commercial architecture from the period ca. 1890-ca.1940, as well as some individual buildings of architectural distinction" (Homestead Historic District NRHP nomination, p. 8).

The Homestead Masonic Hall was constructed in 1917 to plans by architect Maximilian Nirdlinger (1881-1966). After apprenticing for two years with Furness and Evans in Philadelphia, Nirdlinger moved to Pittsburgh, where he designed a variety of commercial, educational, religious, and residential buildings in the city and surrounding communities from about 1900 through the early 1960s. Nirdlinger worked with various partners throughout his years of practice, but the Pittsburgh City Directory for 1916 lists him working under his own name out of an office in the Fidelity Building on Fourth Avenue, downtown. Other prominent extant works by Nirdlinger include the former Bedell Store building at 222 Fifth Avenue, downtown; Medical Arts Building at 3700 Fifth Avenue near the University of Pittsburgh in Oakland; the First Baptist Church on Bayard Street, also in Oakland; and the Whitehill-Gleason Motors dealership (NRHP 1998) on Baum Boulevard in East Liberty. Nirdlinger also designed several houses in affluent East End neighborhoods such as Shadyside, Point Breeze, and Highland Park.

The Homestead Masonic Hall was constructed at the beginning of the heyday of Masonic activity in the United States: the years between World War I and the Great Depression. The Homestead Masonic Hall displays strong Classical Revival elements with an Egyptian flourish and suggestions of the streamlined geometry of Art Deco, which Nirdlinger would fully explore in his Medical Arts Building of 1932. Like many Masonic halls, the Homestead building had a mixed-use program. It combined specialized spaces for Masonic lodge gatherings and ceremonies with rentable commercial and residential spaces to generate income. Access to the commercial, residential, and Masonic floors of the building is controlled via a system of separate entrances and staircases which lead to or bypass selected floors. The building has excellent exterior integrity such that it makes a strong contribution to the Homestead Historic District's collection of non-industrial buildings built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to serve an industrial community.