THE NUMBERS GAME

“It wasn’t till I hit the numbers eight or nine years ago that I got to the point where I could change my clothes every day. See, most of these niggers around here can’t do that. The only way they can do that is to hit the numbers or get lucky in a crap game.”

Memphis, Act I, scene i

The characters in Two Trains Running may disagree on the wisdom of gambling, but it’s undeniable what a major impact the numbers game played in Pittsburgh’s economy in the 20th century, especially in its lower-income communities.

Players bet a small amount of money on a three-digit number; the winning number is usually drawn daily. Someone in the Great Depression could bet a penny and win $5—not an insignificant amount of money at the time—while promoters could make millions of dollars over the course of a career.

When the Steel City Bank, which served the Hill District, closed in 1925, William Augustus Greenlee started his own numbers racket. He earned a fortune and used it to run the Negro League’s Pittsburgh Crawfords baseball team, build the nation’s first black-owned ballpark, start a restaurant/cabaret, employ 5,000 people, and give loans to neighbors in need—many of which were not paid back, and which the black community couldn’t have gotten from any of the banks.