

Botany Worsted Mills
Bounded by President Street, Parker
and Sherman Avenues
City of Passaic
Passaic County
New Jersey

HABS NO. NJ-982

HABS
NJ,
116-PASA,
7-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
MID-ATLANTIC REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS
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BOTANY WORSTED MILLS

HABS No. NJ-982

Location: Bounded by President Street, Parker and Sherman
Avenues
(Tax Block #4065)
City of Passaic
Passaic County

USGS Weehawken, NJ Quadrangle, Universal Trans-
verse Mercator Coordinates: 18.574000.4524700

Present Owner: Passaic County

Present Use: Vacant

I. Statement of
Significance:

By 1899 the Botany Worsted Mills enjoyed a position as the first integrated woolen processing plant in the United States. It quickly became the largest operation of its kind in the world (Herald News 1977). It was instrumental in attracting other worsted manufacturers to Passaic and it established the city as a major industrial center (Meadows 1984 I:18).

A. Physical Context of the Site

The Mill complex lies in the northern part of the City of Passaic in the old First Ward section immediately west of the Passaic River. South of the complex lies Beth Israel Hospital, built between 1955 and 1982.

West and north of the complex are single family detached dwellings and multiple dwellings, mostly dating from the last quarter of the 19th century, and a mixture of commercial and industrial buildings. Fronting Parker Avenue is the immediate neighborhood's most important institutional building, Public School #10, a three story masonry building dating from 1907.

The section of the original mill complex that constitutes the project site is a trapezoidal block bounded on the south by Sherman Street, Parker Avenue on the west, President Street on the north and Dayton Avenue on the east. The block is approximately 12 acres of level land, mostly vacant, with eight 1- to 2-story structures scattered about the perimeter. Its visual character is consistent with its industrial history.

B. Historical Context of the Site

The location of the mill complex had been an industrial site beginning in the first quarter of the 19th century when a mill pond was created from the waters of Weasel Brook. The pond was known as Vreeland Lake or Acquackanonk Pond (Vreeland Estate Map), and covered about two thirds of the site block during most of the 19th century (Geismar 19B7: 7).

From the beginning of the 19th century until the development of the Botany Mills complex the property was associated with the numerous and influential Vreeland family. Farmers and entrepreneurs, the Vreelands had begun to develop the site for small-scale industrial purposes by the year 1832 and possibly a decade earlier. By the latter date deeds refer to a house, grist mill, and accessory buildings (Geismar 19B7: 2B).

John J. E. Vreeland died in 1861 (Court Records 1861 B:20), leaving, as part of a substantial estate, a 116-acre tract that included the future Botany Mills site (Anon. 1875:534-537).

C. Specific History of the Site

(1) Associative Significance

By 1899 the Botany Worsted Mills had constructed several buildings on the former Vreeland tract as part of an ambitious expansion of operations that put the company in the forefront of American textile manufacturing. Between 1901 (Robinson 1901) and 1916 (Wise & Ginsburg 1916) the complex assumed a substantial portion of its final size, eventually resulting in the construction of approximately 23 buildings and associated structures (Sanborn 1935 updated to 1949).

Several factors combined to guarantee the success of the expanded Botany operations. These included a convenient water source (Weasel Brook) and a rail connection which enabled easy delivery of raw goods and the construction of a spur to facilitate distribution of materials within the complex (Sanborn 1918). The last important factor was German ownership, which contributed specialized manufacturing expertise that enabled Botany Mills to inaugurate a fully integrated approach to woolen cloth manufacturing that made it the first plant of its kind in the United States.

By the year 1920, Botany Mills employed 6,400 workers, or a tenth of the City of Passaic's population, many of them housed in company-built dwellings associated with the plant (Meadows 1984; 4-64). These employment statistics, together with the production of superior quality hard-finished fabrics, made Botany Worsted Mills the largest and most significant textile mill in the City of Passaic (Meadows Ibid.).

Because of its German ownership, the company was seized by the United States government during World War I. This important transition

coincided with an era of major labor-force actions. In 1913 strikes had immobilized the silk mills of neighboring Paterson, another important textile center. In 1919 strikes erupted on an unprecedented scale in Passaic and in Paterson simultaneously. Led by union organizers, workers demanded higher wages and introduction of the eight-hour day, demands that lead eventually to organization of the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America (Goldberg 1989).

Subsequent to these initial labor disruptions was a severe decline in the call for worsted cloth, resulting from changes in domestic fashion and reductions in military orders after American troops were demobilized. These factors resulted in reduced work hours and low pay at precisely the time when demands were increasing for improved pay and working conditions (Meadows Ibid.).

In 1926, labor organizers rallied 16,000 Passaic-area textile workers to the union cause. The resulting strikes halted or reduced to a bare minimum the production of textiles in the whole area, and led to violent demonstrations. A labor settlement was not reached until 1929.

Subsequent to 1929 the history of the Botany Worsted Mills was one of gradual decline. According to Meadows (4-64):

. . . the weakened Botany Mills barely survived bankruptcy until World War II which created a temporary demand for woolen cloth and a new byproduct, lanolin. The last profitable year for the Mills was 1950, after which it succumbed to the competition of synthetic fibers. It ceased production in 1955, and in 1956 was sold and converted into a multi-tenant industrial park.

(2) Architectural Significance

Although Botany Mills was revolutionary because it introduced all stages of wool processing and cloth manufacture coordinated by a single entrepreneur on a single site, its separate operations did not require sophisticated architectural (as opposed to technological or worker skill) elaboration. Thus the many individual processes (such as twisting, spinning, weaving, washing and dyeing) that comprised the complete operation were carried out in buildings that were essentially large brick sheds or loft spaces.

At Botany Mills, architectural form had only a very limited relation to specialized function. The Mill buildings were not architecturally innovative in stylistic or structural terms, but were typical of generic 19th century mill architecture; they might have been built at any time in the last two decades of the 19th century to accommodate any number of different industrial operations.

II. Physical Description of Site

The subject properties are located in a single block bounded by Sherman Street, Parker Avenue, President Street, and Dayton Avenue. The buildings represent a later period of development for Botany Mills, approximately twenty to fifty years after its founding. Two of the buildings are of frame construction; three are built of brick. All are simple one-story industrial sheds with few unusual architectural features.

The earliest building on the site was the initial center portion of the brick wool storage building, located at 99 President Street (NJ-982-D), built sometime between 1901-10. The wool storage shed received an addition between 1910 and 1918, when the majority of the remaining buildings on the site took shape. These include the brick waste picker house, 176 Parker Avenue (NJ-982-A), which has a distinctive "sawtooth" roofline. Also located at 176 Parker Avenue and built during this period are the frame bag factory (NJ-982-B) and a frame wool and waste storage building (NJ-982-C). The brick locomotive house at 30a Sherman Street (NJ-982-E) was also built in the 1910-18 period.

Both the waste picker house and the wool storage building were expanded sometime during the period 1935-49, and the current structures reflect the contrasts between earlier construction and later additions.

With the exception of the waste picker house (NJ-982-A) which appears structurally sound and retains architectural integrity, the subject buildings are in a fair to poor deteriorated condition.

Prepared by: Robert P. Guter, Project Director
Title: Director
Affiliation: ACROTERION Historic Preservation Consultants
Date: December 1989

III. Major Sources Consulted

The narrative portion of this report was abstracted from a report by Joan Geismar titled "Passaic County Resource Recovery Facility: Final Environmental/Historical Impact Study," 1987.

ACROTERION consulted collections with potential relevance at Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, and the Passaic County Historical Society, Lambert Castle, Paterson. Neither yielded information about the function of specific buildings at Botany Mills during its period of significance.

Additional sources include the following:

Goldberg, David J. A Tale of Three Cities: Labor Organization in Paterson, Passaic, and Lawrence 1916-21. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

Meadows, Robert A. City of Passaic Cultural Resource Survey, Passaic Department of Community Development, 1984.

Maps

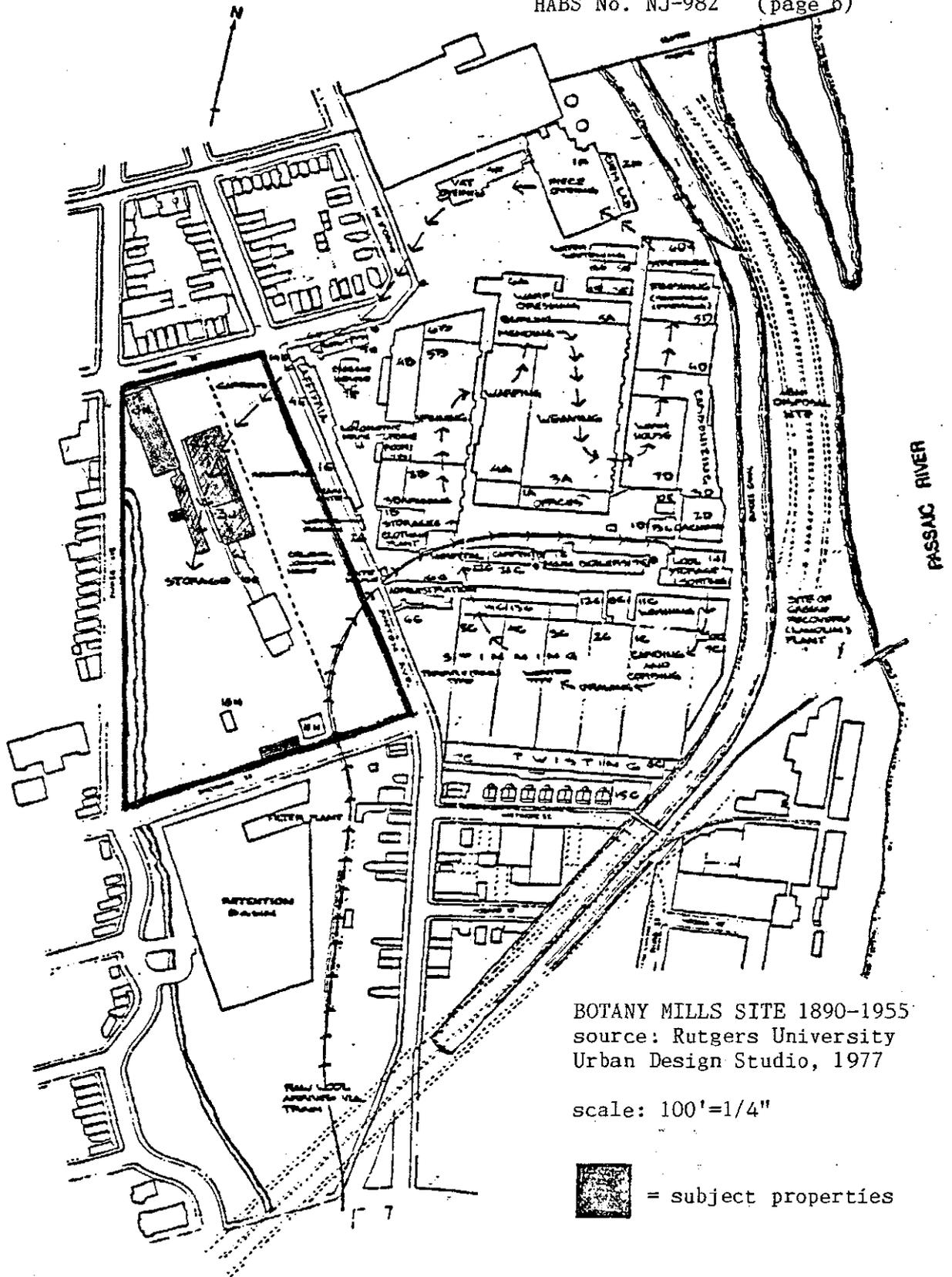
Robinson, E. Atlas of the City of Passaic and Acquacknonk Township. New York: 1901

Rutgers University Urban Design Studio: Botany Mills Redevelopment Plan, 1977. New Brunswick, NJ.

Sanborn Insurance Maps, 1910, 1918, 1935 (updated to 1949), 1935 (updated to 1951), 1986, City of Passaic. Sanborn Map Co., New York.

IV. Project Information

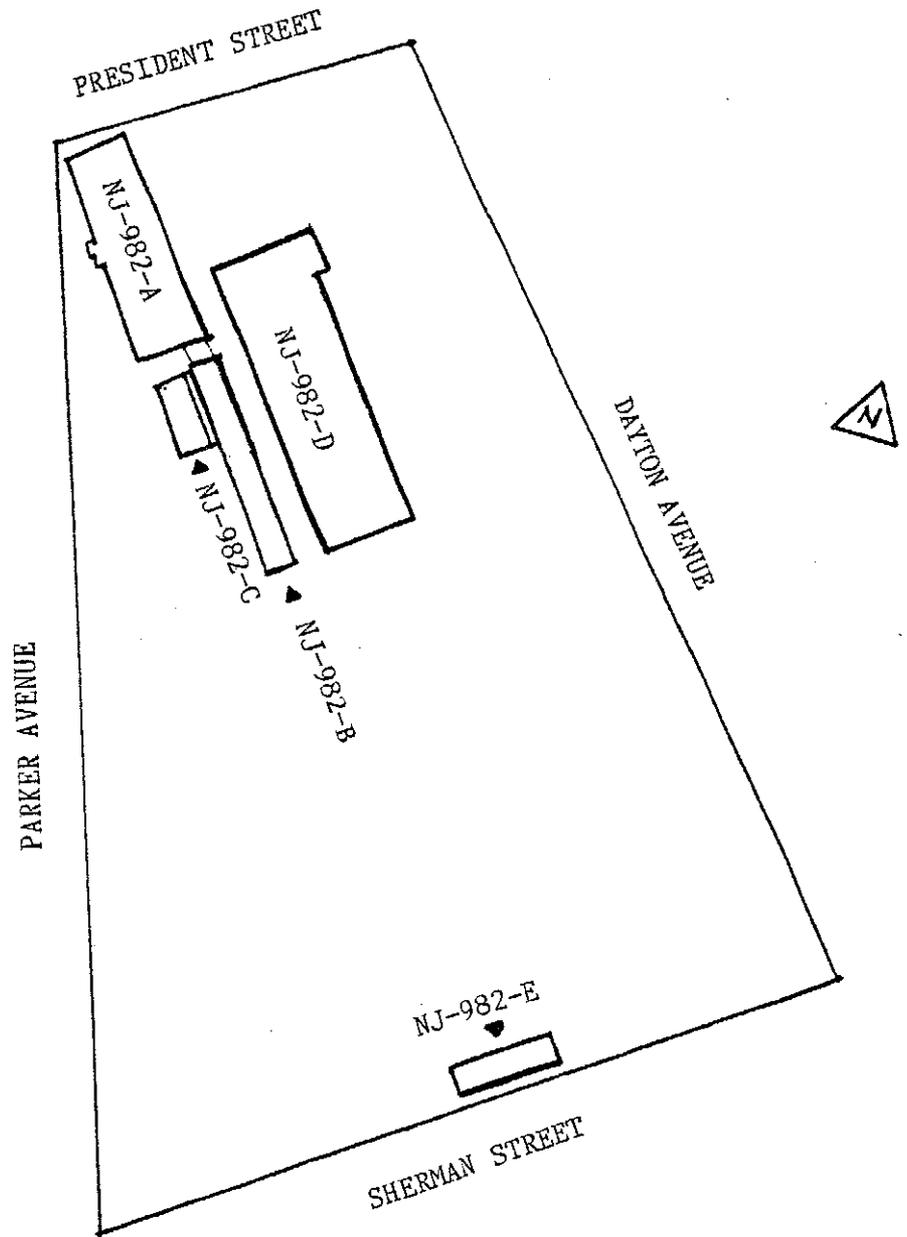
The subject properties are scheduled for demolition prior to the construction of the Passaic County Resource Recovery Facility. The complex was documented by ACROTERION, Historic Preservation Consultants, 71 Maple Avenue, Morristown, NJ in October-December 1989.



BOTANY MILLS SITE 1890-1955
source: Rutgers University
Urban Design Studio, 1977

scale: 100' = 1/4"

 = subject properties



Detail: Botany Mills Site,
Subject Properties

Not to Scale