

TACONY

DISSTON PRECISION, INCORPORATED
(Henry Disston & Sons, Incorporated, Keystone Saw Works)

Tacony

On a site within the block bounded by New State Rd., Unruh Ave., & Milnor &
(Knorr) streets

Philadelphia

Philadelphia County

Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6692-L

HABS

PA-6692-L

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

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~~TACONY~~, DISSTON PRECISION, INCORPORATED
(Henry Disston & Sons, Incorporated, Keystone Saw Works)

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NOTE: Tacony's street grid does not lie true to the compass. For the purpose of locating buildings in this report, the roads running NE to SW (ex. Keystone Street and Torresdale Avenue) will be the N-S axes and those running SE to NW (ex. Longshore Avenue and Disston Street) will be E-W axes.

Location: The buildings comprising Disston Precision, Incorporated are located on a site within a block bounded by Milnor Street, Unruh Avenue, New State Road, and (Knorr Street), Tacony neighborhood, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Disston Precision, Incorporated, is the last remaining physical and institutional vestige of Henry Disston's Keystone Saw Works. For about a century, Disston saws were among the finest made anywhere in the world. In 1872, Henry Disston moved the works from a center city location to Tacony. With the saw and associated steel works as the standard-bearer, Tacony became an industrial locale that contributed heavily to Philadelphia's contemporary nickname, "workshop of the world."

Description:

The buildings presently comprising Disston Precision, Incorporated, are four remnants of Henry Disston's vast nineteenth and early-twentieth-century industrial plant. At first glance, the buildings appear to be in poor condition with many window openings missing sash, glass, or boarded over; however, at least three of the four surviving buildings in this vicinity are in good enough condition to shelter continued industrial production.

Of the remaining buildings, the machine shop—composed of structural steel and iron and faced in brick—is the largest and best articulated. The north and south (end) elevations are composed of a three-story gabled central unit flanked by two-story side units with shed roofs. The exterior is enlivened by a corbelled brick cornice, decorative window surrounds on the long sides, and tall chimney-like extrusions breaking above the roofline on the short sides. On the interior, a central, three-story space—open to the roof rafters—is lighted by clerestory windows and surrounded on four sides by a deep gallery. As with most period industrial buildings, all of the structural steel and iron is left exposed.

The exteriors of the flanking buildings are similarly, but more simply articulated, and remain in fair condition.

Tacony

History:

See the historical report for Tacony, HABS No. PA-6692 for more detailed information about Tacony's general development.

Henry Disston immigrated to the United States from England in 1833 and began a seven-year indenture/apprenticeship under the Johnson Brothers saw-makers.¹ In 1840, upon completing his contract, Disston went into the saw-making business on his own and began to revolutionize the American tool-making industry. Of utmost importance to tool manufacture was procuring high-quality steel which, until Henry Disston began his experimentation at the Keystone Saw Works, had to be wholly imported from Sheffield crucibles in England.² By 1855, Disston had brought Sheffield workers to the United States and was experimenting with his own crucible mill to produce high-grade steel, though it would not be until after the move to Tacony that he could eliminate all English steel purchases.³ Production exploded during the Civil War and profits soared for Disston; unfortunately, part of his greatly expanded works in Philadelphia at Front and Laurel streets burned in 1864.⁴ This fire led to Disston's reexamination of the industry's location—a very dense urban site with little room for expansion—and he ultimately decided to move his saw works and an expanded steel works to Tacony.

In the 1870s, Tacony existed as a small hamlet with a train station, a scattering of houses, a Catholic orphanage, a few commercial establishments, a church, and a school.⁵ Located between the railroad and the river, Tacony provided a perfect place in which to set his new manufacturing complex. The move did not occur all at once. Disston first opened an experimental saw factory in 1872 which provided prototypes that, if successful in tests, were produced at the Laurel Street plant.⁶ He also began to plan an enormous new steel mill to supply the Tacony and the Laurel Street works, which was constructed between 1875 and 1879.⁷ Over the next two decades, Disston slowly expanded the Tacony site and in 1899 moved the last portion of his enterprise—the Jobbing Shop—to the complex.⁸ Disston & Sons' relocation was not restricted only to the production site, as Disston and his family subscribed to period notions of industrial paternalism. They sought to create a company town that enhanced the lives of their workers, which in turn—they believed—would increase worker loyalty and efficiency.⁹ They created the “new” town of Tacony to the west of the railroad tracks on land they had previously purchased. The saw and steel works—and other industrial complexes—were free to spread over Tacony's original street grid.

¹Philip Scranton and Walter Licht, *Work Sights: Industrial Philadelphia, 1890–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 170.

²*Ibid.*

³Harry C. Silcox, *A Place to Live and Work: The Disston Saw Works and the Tacony Community of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, 4.

⁵*City Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards, Complete in 7 Volumes.*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: G. M. Hopkins, 1876).

⁶Silcox, 8.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.* See field notes for a nineteenth-century view of the site, from the Campbell Collection, vol. 6, 35, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁹Silcox, 29.

In addition to providing a healthful and comparatively affordable living environment, the Disstons' efforts to maintain good relations with their workers included the apprenticing of Disston sons and grandsons in the shops and working closely with the craft unions operating on the site.¹⁰ These relationships led to high worker retention and the creation of a particularly stable work environment. Like many industries late in the nineteenth century, Henry Disston & Sons Keystone Saw Works incorporated (1886) and continued to function—though on an increasingly small-scale after World War I—until the firm's sale by the Disstons in 1955 to H. K. Porter who renamed the complex the Carlson Rules and Measures/Henry Disston, Division of H. K. Porter, Inc.¹¹ Porter sold the division to Sandvick Saw of Sweden in 1978 who in turn sold it six years later to R. A. F. Industries; the remaining buildings of the Disston complex and the company they housed were named Disston Precision, Incorporated.¹²

The small group of buildings occupied by Disston Precision, Incorporated currently house a machine shop, a treatment shop, and a smithing shop. In 1888, the buildings comprising the saw and steel works remained almost entirely east of Milnor Street along the River between Longshore Street (Avenue) and Unruh Street (Avenue).¹³ By 1910, the complex had begun to fill the Disston-owned land between Wissinoming (New State Road) and Milnor streets, west of the complex.¹⁴ A sizable brick building noted in the block might be the largest building comprising the present Disston Precision group—the machine shop; none of the other buildings were finished. The inventive brickwork used on the machine shop's exterior further reinforces a construction date prior to 1910; the other buildings have similar brick patterns—particularly evident in the cornices. By 1928 these four buildings were completed and hosted from west to east the jobbing department, an unidentified function, the machine shop, and the file shop.¹⁵

Historian: James A. Jacobs

Sources:

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Baist's Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, Penna, Complete in One Volume. Philadelphia: G. Wm. Baist, 1888.

¹⁰Scranton, 172.

¹¹Silcox, Appendix A.

¹²Ibid.

¹³*Baist's Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, Penna, Complete in One Volume* (Philadelphia: G. Wm. Baist, 1888).

¹⁴*Atlas of the 23rd, 35th, & 41st Wards of the City of Philadelphia: Compiled from Private Plans, Actual Surveys & Official Records in the Bureau of Surveys* (Philadelphia: J. L. Smith, 1910).

¹⁵Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Maps for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, vol. 27 (New York, 1928), 2608.

Campbell Collection, Vol. 6. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. [for turn-of-the-century image]

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