

KEASBEY & MATTISON CO., ATTACHED ROW HOUSE
100-114 S. Chesnut Street
Ambler
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6048-R

HABS
PA
46-AMB,
10R-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

KEASBEY & MATTISON CO., ATTACHED ROW HOUSE

HABS No. PA-6048-R

HABS
PA
46-AMB,
10R-

Location: 100-114 S. Chestnut Street, Ambler, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: The attached row houses built ca. 1902 by the Keasbey & Mattison Company, once a world leader in asbestos production, represent one end of the spectrum in Ambler and when contrasted with supervisor's dwellings and executive mansions provides striking evidence of the housing hierarchy of the 'company town'.

Description: This row, built ca. 1902, is fourteen bays across its main facade each unit being three bays wide. The main block of the two story structure is two bays deep. Each unit has a one bay rear section narrower than the main block of the building. This design allows windows to be placed in such a way that interior spaces receive light and air, an impossible option with a simpler linear design. This rear section houses the back door and is variously clad with siding or stucco on different units. The walls are rough-cut stone.

Each unit is served by a brick chimney attached to the exterior of the west wall of the rear section. The units have no porches, and the entry doors were originally outfitted with transom lights, some of which have been boarded up. The windows are a mix of two-over-two and one-over-one double-hung sash. The front wall of most units is comprised of two windows on the second floor, one larger window and the door on the first floor, and two small windows in the basement level. The lintels are flat with keystones and laid in the same stone as the walls of the building. The roof is flat with a slight eave overhang and its cornice adorned with dentils. The row's front facade is interrupted by a large stucco-covered addition of unknown date which encompasses most of 110-114 S. Chestnut St. The remaining bays and original south wall can be seen on the far side of the two-story addition. These row houses have been broken up into a number of apartments.

History: The attached row houses at 100-114 and 214-228 S. Chestnut St. first appear in the 1902 Sanborn Map for Ambler, Pennsylvania. The title 'Keasbey & Mattison Chemical Works' is boldly written across all of S. Ambler on the Ambler plate in the Sanborn Map. The area of S. Ambler was at this time still inhabited predominantly by Italian Americans. It was a common practice to find households with large families or numerous boarders living under one roof, even in these smallest of Keasbey & Mattison houses.

In 1902, the seventeen semi-detached double houses which formed the bulk of the original 'company town' were still

KEASBEY & MATTISON CO., ATTACHED ROW HOUSE
HABS No. PA-6048-R (Page 2)

present. This section of Ambler housed the factory buildings of the Keasbey & Mattison Company, as well as their offices in the Opera House on Butler Avenue. By 1916 another section of attached row houses had appeared at 5-15 S. Chestnut Street. This street in S. Ambler, and Wissahickon Avenue in W. Ambler are the only known locations of attached row houses built by the company.

It is unclear whether success with this building type in S. Ambler prompted its extension across Butler Avenue into W. Ambler, but by 1921 two rows of row houses constructed of tile-walls with brick facades had been constructed on Wissahickon Avenue. They are among the few houses built by Keasbey & Mattison that can be attributed to a specific architect, John Bothwell. Officially located outside Ambler proper in Whitpain Township, these row houses were without basements, and were built on concrete slabs with concrete roofs. One attached row consisted of thirty-nine units and its rear faced the railroad tracks. The other faced the first row with its rear facing Wissahickon Creek. Both rows were served by tile-wall constructed outhouses with concrete roofs.

The area was prone to flooding, and former residents claim that in periods of flood water would flow through the units from the street as they were set up only one step high from the street. An indicated that this was not intended as housing for their higher paid work force.

Historic photographs taken as the rows were being demolished show that each row originally had one long shed-roofed overhang which ran the length of the main facade. The units had no porch, railing, or other exterior features to separate it from the others in the row beyond the one-step stoop already mention. The buildings were eventually determined to be a health-hazard, and were condemned and demolished.

Sources: Sanborn Insurance Company Maps. Map of Ambler, 1902, 1916, 1921.

Mr. & Mrs. Tony "Bubbs" Camasso, interview by author, Ambler, Pennsylvania, 28 July 1994.

Historian: Thomas Heard, HABS, Summer 1994.