

KEASBEY & MATTISON CO., ATTACHED ROW HOUSE
214-228 S. Chesnut Street
Ambler
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6048-S

HABS
PA
46-AMB,
105-

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

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Location: 214-228 S. Chestnut Street, Ambler, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: The attached row houses built by after the turn-of-the century 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: Built ca. 1902, the eight attached units at this address measure a total of twenty-four bays across by three bays deep. One bay of the building's depth consists of a two-story rear section. The walls are rough cut stone laid without courses. There are shared porches on the east side of the building for each pair of units. These have a simple shed roof supported by four round columns. The porch foundation and walls are of the same masonry composition, possibly concrete or stucco-covered stone. The main entry door of each unit is topped by a transom light and covered by the front porch. There are six windows per unit, two each on the first and second floors, and two smaller windows on the basement level. The building has a flat roof.

History: The attached row houses at 100-114 and 214-228 S. Chestnut Street 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 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 building type in S. Ambler prompted its extension across Butler Avenue into W. Ambler, but by 1921 two rows of row houses with brick facades with a masonry tile structural system had been constructed on Wissahickon Avenue. Officially located outside Ambler proper in

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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 end faced the railroad tracks. The other faced the first row and had its rear overlooking the Wissahickon Creek. Both rows were served by tile-walled 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.

Historic photographs taken as the rows were being demolished show that each row 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 mentioned. The buildings were eventually determined to be an unsanitary and therefore health hazard, and were condemned and demolished. These row homes in W. Ambler were part of the building campaign of the 1920s and were presumably designed by John Bothwell.

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: Tom Heard, HABS, Summer 1994.