

KEASBEY & MATTISON CO., THREE-STORY DOUBLE
HOUSE, GABLE FRONT ROOF TYPE
91-93 Lemon Street
Ambler
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6048-X

HABS
PA
46-AMB,
10X-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: 91-93 Lemon St., Ambler, Montgomery County,
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Significance: The three duplexes on Lemon Street represent the only existing example of three-story gable front houses which were once part of the company town of the Keasbey & Mattison Company, a world leader in asbestos production. The three-story duplex, of which the Lemon Street houses are a variation, was the original form of housing built by the company in S. Ambler in the early 1880s for their factory workers. None of those early examples survive, however.

Description: The duplex is three stories high and six bays, three bays per unit, across the main facade and six bays deep. The foundations and walls are rubble stone. The two units share a full-width one-story porch with a shed roof. The porch deck is poured concrete atop a low stone wall, the steps descending to the sidewalk are also concrete. The porches may have originally been set on stone pillars at the corners, as was the norm for Keasbey & Mattison Company houses. Additional alterations included a brick wall, which divides the walk approaching the porch, and a pair of brick pedestals on either side of the porch steps. The four square posts which support the porch roof and the metal railing between the posts are presumably of recent vintage. Variations such as the enclosed porch with a concrete stoop on the north wall of the west unit have also occurred.

The building has three chimneys, all set along the south wall. A shared chimney is centered on the ridge of the gable roof. This rectangular chimney has a simple beltcourse of stone near the top, and is flanked by a pair of brick chimneys, one for each unit. These are taller than the shared chimney and are adorned with the typical belt-course found on Keasbey & Mattison three-story double houses.

The main entry doors of the duplex, set close together and surrounded by the one-story front porch. Each has a three-light transom above. Additional entry doors would originally have been found on the side porches between the building's three-story main block and two-story rear section. The porches have been enclosed with stucco-covered, two-story additions. The final pair of doors, located in a well, provides access to the basement level.

The original windows, as seen in the east unit, are two-over-two double hung sash. The west unit has more modern one-over-one pane double hung sash windows. Lintels in both units consist of a row of stones. The smaller basement windows are

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covered with glass louvers, or are three or four pane awning or casement windows.

The roof is a simple front-gable. The two-story rear section has a flat or slightly graded roof. Each type has a slight eave overhang. The fascia and soffit have been enclosed in siding on all three examples on Lemon Street.

History: This building and others of its type are examples of the company housing built by the Keasbey & Mattison Company in Ambler, Pennsylvania, for their workers around the turn-of-the century. In this incarnation of the American 'company town', variations in housing size, style, level of ornamentation, and the presence or lack of modern conveniences were physical representations of an employee's (and renter's), ethnicity and/or occupational/wage earning status. Clearly defined neighborhoods and streets were intended for different groups of workers from factory employees to supervisors and executives. This plan was executed in the early years by a number of local builders and unknown architects. Italian stone masons were employed in the building operation for in Ambler, unlike in the majority of company towns, workers' housing was built of stone. Ca. 1920, Mattison began the final and largest phase of his housing campaign with the aid of Philadelphia architect John Bothwell.

The three duplexes on Lemon Street first appear on Sanborn Insurance Maps in 1916, though local informants date the buildings to 1899. They are part of a series of company houses built around a quadrangular block including earlier houses on Rosemary and Orange avenues, and houses on Trinity Avenue which appear at the same time as those on Lemon Street. This area was known as 'Hell's Half Acre' due to its horrible drainage. In especially wet seasons wooden boardwalks were used as sidewalks.

These duplexes were intended for factory workers who could afford the rent. Like nearly all the three-story houses built by Keasbey & Mattison these were originally designed with indoor plumbing. Unlike the earlier three-story duplexes on Rosemary Avenue, those on Lemon Street had full porches.

These houses are the only examples of three-story front-gable duplexes east of the railroad tracks in Ambler. The earliest known company houses in South Ambler (west of the tracks) was of the same type, though, not identical physically.

Sources: Sanborn Insurance Maps. Map of Ambler, 1909, 1916.

Newton Howard, interview by author, Summer 1994.

Historian: Tom Heard, HABS, Summer 1994