

KEASBEY & MATTISON CO., ATTACHED ROW HOUSE  
5-15 S. Chesnut Street  
Ambler  
Montgomery County  
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6048-AB

HABS  
PA  
46-AMB,  
10AB-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

KEASBEY & MATTISON CO., ATTACHED ROW HOUSE

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Location: 5-15 S. Chestnut Street, Ambler, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: These ca. 1916 attached row houses built 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 is the third set of a grouping of attached row houses closest to Butler Avenue, and the last to appear in Sanborn Maps for Ambler, ca. 1916. This set is distinguished from the others by its smaller size and differences in materials. The row is nineteen bays across, three bays per unit, by three deep. The structure has brick walls and a stone front. The brick walls (as indicated by the Sanborn Map) are hidden beneath stucco or some other facing. The stone is square-cut in regular courses rather than random as in the other row houses in S. Ambler. There are stone quoins on the corners of the building, facing front.

The two end units are without porches and may have originally both had storefronts. Presently, the north end unit retains a storefront while the south end unit has a bay window surrounded by 'fill'. The four units in the center all have entry doors above the street level with concrete stoops. In the two intermediate units in the row, the steps descend toward the center of the row from a landing. The two central units share a double-landing in the middle of the row. Each has its own set of steps descending away from the center of the row. All stoops have metal railings.

Each of the end units has one door, a storefront or single bay, and two windows on the second floor. The four units to the center each have a door, two windows on each of the upper floors, and two at the basement level. The windows and doors all segmented arches with a keystone.

The six-unit row is broken down into three two unit sections, each being slightly lower than the last. The effect is highlighted by the obvious differences in height of the cornice moldings on each building. The stone of the middle section is lighter in color than the end sections, difference which serves to further separate the three sections.

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

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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.

This building type was later extended across Butler Avenue into W. Ambler in 1921 when two rows of tile-wall constructed row houses with brick facades were constructed on Wissahickon Ave. Officially located outside Ambler proper in Whitpain Township, these row houses were built on concrete slabs without basements and had concrete roofs. One attached row consisted of thirty-nine units and its rear faced the railroad tracks. The other faced the first and had its rear facing Wissahickon Creek. As housing for low-level employees, both rows had tile-walled outhouses with concrete roofs rather than interior bathrooms. Furthermore, 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 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 mentioned. The buildings were eventually determined to be an 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 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.