

Tacony
ST. VINCENT'S CATHOLIC SCHOOL
(St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum)

Tacony

Bounded by Princeton, Delaware, & Cottman avenues & Milnor St.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia County

Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6692-A

HABS

PA-6692A

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

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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 grounds cover the tract of land bounded by Princeton, Delaware and Cottman avenues and Milnor Street, Tacony neighborhood, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Significance: St. Vincent's Catholic School is the physical and institutional remnant of an important part of Tacony's pre-industrial history. St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum was founded in Tacony in 1855 and the society set up to oversee its establishment funded the endeavor through lot sales under the title "Tacony Cottage Association." These early land transactions expanded Tacony's modest street grid and introduced the Disston family to the locale, ultimately leading to Henry Disston's important decision to move his Keystone Saw Works there beginning in 1872.

Description:

The main building of St. Vincent's Catholic School is a structure whose base is a T-shaped brick boys dormitory constructed in 1901. The edifice contains three-and-one-half stories over a stone basement. It has dressed stone sills, jack arches with extruded keystones, and beltcourses. The main entrance, originally contained under a gabled porch supported by Doric columns, is now surrounded by formstone. This entrance is flanked by two round sculpture niches, the window directly above the entry is flanked by two rounded recesses containing decorative cartouches. The building remains in good condition. The windows have been replaced with aluminum double-hung sash and, in some cases, glass block. Air conditioners hang from some of the windows. The front entry is a set of double doors surrounded by large windows, all contained within aluminum frames.

Presently, offices occupy the 1893 classroom building, which was also used as an infirmary in its history. It contains three principal stories over a basement with a small attic. The building is one-room deep with two rooms and a stair passage per floor.¹ Aside from aluminum replacement windows, very little change has been exacted on this building.

¹Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Maps for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, vol. 27 (New York, 1928), 2611, for schematic plan.

History:

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

On October 1, 1855, "a committee of six [on the St. Vincent's Society] was chosen to prepare and obtain a charter from the Court of Common Pleas [for the establishment of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum]."² Between October 3, 1855 and January 1856, the newly chartered St. Vincent's Society—made up of two German Catholic parishes in Philadelphia—purchased forty-nine acres of land in Tacony; they owned all of the land between the railroad and the river, Township Line road (Cottman Avenue) and Monroe Street (Princeton Avenue). Before the final land purchases, the St. Vincent's Society established an arm called the "Tacony Cottage Association" which sought to survey, plat, and sell nearly three-hundred of "the most beautiful select river-cottage lots."³ A newspaper advertisement encouraged a variety of people to consider relocation to Tacony including those searching for summer homes, workingmen, doctors, and innkeepers.⁴ It further assured potential buyers that no one would be swindled because "the buyers have nothing to do with land-speculators, doing rather a good work out of which a great benefit will result for them and their families...honest people only are invited [to purchase land], for then Tacony will always be free of lawyers."⁵ Apparently this advertisement paid-off because by November 22, 1855, they had made \$29,000 dollars on their initial investment of \$19,400.

Having nearly \$10,000 at their disposal, the St. Vincent's Society commenced construction on their first building on November 20, 1856. It was a roughly square structure, three stories over a full basement and contained classrooms, dormitories, a kitchen and dining room, and a chapel. It was completed in mid-1858. Two years later, a decision was made to enlarge the structure. Plans provided by J. T. Mahoney (likely John T. Mahony) used the earlier building as the core of a new cruciform structure. Mahony was an Irish immigrant and practicing as an architect in Philadelphia by 1850.⁶ His few recorded commissions between 1850 and 1857 were nearly all religious in nature, and pertinent to the St. Vincent's commission, he was responsible for the design and construction of St. John's Orphan Asylum in West Philadelphia (1851). The completed edifice contained a four-and-one-half story core structure over a raised basement and was capped by a large "campanile or bell tower" over the "crossing."⁷ This central section was flanked by two three-and-one-half story wings.⁸ An announcement for the new construction stated:

²Unless otherwise noted, all of the information related to the history of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum is drawn from Francis Xavier Roth, *History of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum, Tacony, Philadelphia: A Memoir of its Diamond Jubilee, 1855-1933* (Philadelphia: "Nord-Amerika," Press, 1934). Direct quotes taken from this volume will be cited to the page. Roth, 19.

³"Advertisement," *Philadelphia Democrat* 10 May 1856, as quoted in Roth, 21. See field notes for an early plat drawn by the Tacony Cottage Association.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶All information about architect John T. Mahony is drawn from Sandra L. Tatman and Roger Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985), 503.

⁷*The Catholic Herald*, 21 July 1860, as quoted in Roth, 25.

The building will be of brick with circular headed windows with brownstone sills. It is placed lengthwise to the river and turnpike [probably the Tacony Plank Road, which ran parallel to the railroad], and will present a striking and handsome appearance when viewed from either side.⁹

Construction of the expanded asylum stretched from August 14, 1860 until 1866. The finished building was sited on-axis with St. Vincent Street. The new structure included more dormitories and living rooms, classrooms, and a larger chapel. "For a long time it was the most beautiful building in Tacony. It was built in that type of Renaissance style which at the time was mostly used by Napoleon LeBrun, the leading architect in the city."¹⁰ This later noted affinity to Napoleon LeBrun is particularly interesting given that, for a few years late in the 1850s, Mahony was the supervising architect of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul for which LeBrun was the primary designer.¹¹ In 1866, there were four Sisters of Notre Dame and five candidates looking-after and teaching 131 children at St. Vincent's. With money made from the "Great Fair of 1884" on the grounds of the asylum and from a charitable gift from the Drexel family, changes and additions—including a larger dining room and kitchen, addition of steam heat, a water tank and new bathrooms, gas lighting, and fire escapes—were made to the building. Around the same time, a second building was constructed on the site, a two-story brick laundry constructed by a Mr. McCarty.

In 1893, on account of the large number of Catholics moving into the area who desired to send their children to a parochial elementary school—there was no other Catholic school in Tacony until 1908—St. Vincent's constructed a separate school building for use by the orphans and day students. Frank L. Wentz is the recorded architect and Mr. McCarty, again, was the builder. It was simply articulated with brick segmental arched window lintels and a robust cornice at the roofline; "the building committee of the Board 'looked more for the practical usefulness and sanitary accommodations, than for architectural beauty.'"¹² Gas lighting and steam heat were included in this new school building.

In 1901, a new boys dormitory, presently the main building for St. Vincent's Catholic School, was constructed. George G. Dietrich is the recorded architect and builder for a structure described as being conceived of "in the plain old Colonial style."¹³ Dietrich cleverly played off the form, scale, and arrangement of the original asylum structure, but he did so within the then popular Colonial Revival idiom. It was sited to the north of the original asylum structure.

⁸See field notes for an 1876 drawing of the building.

⁹*Herald*.

¹⁰Roth, 27.

¹¹Tatman, 469. In 1857, John T. Mahony appears on the site after John Notman—secured when LeBrun was suspended as project architect in 1851—was let go as building costs skyrocketed. Ultimately, LeBrun returned in 1860 and oversaw construction until the cathedral's completion in 1864. Neither the reason for Mahony's departure, nor his subsequent whereabouts, are known.

¹²*Ibid.*, 61.

¹³*Ibid.*, 79.

In 1960 and 1963, new gymnasium and classroom buildings, respectively, were constructed to the north side of the 1901 boys dormitory. Their construction may have been spurred-on by the burning and razing of the original cruciform school building early in the 1960s. A new chapel and administrative building—constructed in 1985—is located on the site of this original structure. While no longer serving as an orphanage in a traditional sense, St. Vincent's now exists as a diocesan-run transitional shelter for abused children

The landscape encompassing St. Vincent's has always been notable as it spreads-out along the Delaware River. While initially separated from the encroaching city by its comparatively spacious grounds, St. Vincent's has been isolated from the rest of Tacony with the construction of Interstate 95. Despite the proximity of the highway, however, the grounds at St. Vincent's retain some remnant of its more bucolic past. Picnic pavilions are located on the lawn between the school buildings and the river. A rusticated stone grotto—dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes—has stood on grounds near the pavilions since its dedication on August 15, 1912.¹⁴

Historian: James A. Jacobs

Sources:

Roth, Francis Xavier. History of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum, Tacony, Philadelphia: A Memoir of its Diamond Jubilee, 1855-1933. Philadelphia: "Nord-Amerika," Press, 1934.

Sanborn Map Company. Sanborn Maps for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, vol. 27. New York, 1928.

Tatman, Sandra, and Roger Moss. Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1928.

¹⁴Exhibit, "St. Vincent's Chronology," St. Vincent's School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2001.