

TACONY,  
DISSTON MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
~~(St. Joseph's Ukrainian Catholic School)~~

HABS No. PA-6692-E

HABS  
PA-6692E

Tacony  
South side of 4500 block of Tyson St., between Jackson & Glenloch Streets  
Philadelphia  
Philadelphia County  
Pennsylvania

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20240

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### TACONY, DISSTON MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

HABS No. PA-6692-E

**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:** 4500 block of Tyson Avenue, south side between Jackson and Glenloch streets, Tacony neighborhood, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**Significance:** Constructed in 1885-1886, the Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church was established by Mary Disston—wife of the “founding father” of industrial Tacony, Henry Disston—to memorialize her daughter Mary Disston Gandy. It stands among the early church institutions established in Tacony and was one of the first large structures constructed west of Torresdale Avenue, some blocks outside the center of nineteenth-century Tacony.

#### **Description:**

The Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church, like most of its ecclesiastical counterparts in Tacony, was designed and built within the Gothic idiom. Rock-faced ashlar stone laid in random courses and accented by dressed stone detailing, pointed arch and trefoil window tops, and robust engaged corner buttresses on the tower reflect its Gothic flavor. An asymmetrical massing of parts alludes to the non-liturgical emphasis of Presbyterian services, which are comparatively more sermon-oriented. The church structure fronts Tyson Avenue and an attached parsonage stands to the right, at the southeast corner of Tyson Avenue and Jackson Street.<sup>1</sup> A large Sunday school building stands behind the church in the center of the block. The church and grounds remain in excellent condition and no major exterior changes are evident. Even the “spikey” high-Victorian pyramidal tower roof survives—including an ornamental iron pinnacle at its apex, quatrefoil recesses along its bottom, and small pyramidal extrusions at each of its corners.

#### **History:**

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

Early in the 1880s, Mary Disston, widow of Henry Disston and a major landowner in Tacony, sought to erect a church to memorialize her late daughter, Mary Disston Gandy.

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<sup>1</sup>Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Maps for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, vol. 27 (New York: 1928), 2655, for a site plan. See Louis M. Iatarola and Siobhán Gephart, *Images of America: Tacony* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 37 and 96, for early photographs of the church.

The Disstons were devout Presbyterians and their missionary zeal may have contributed to Henry Disston's decision to move the Henry Disston & Sons Keystone Saw Works from central Philadelphia to Tacony and establish a paternalistic model company town.<sup>2</sup> The church was truly a memorial in that the bulk of Tacony's industrial workers were likely not Presbyterians. Upon relocating and enlarging the saw and steel works, Henry Disston imported workers from his native England and it is probable that these transplants adhered to Anglican-Episcopal religiosity.<sup>3</sup> As Tacony's industrial base expanded, immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and Italy reinforced a Roman Catholic community present there since at least 1855 with the establishment of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum by two German Catholic parishes in Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the church's existence on the periphery of Tacony's religious and social life, might have contributed to its construction a number of blocks west of Torresdale Avenue, well outside the center of Disston Tacony.

Mary Disston helped to organize the church in 1883 and services were held at "Tacony Hall" from January 1883 until moving into the permanent church structure in April 1886.<sup>5</sup> To design the memorial church, Mary Disston called on Edwin F. Durang, a well-known and very busy architect primarily involved with the planning and construction of Roman Catholic churches and related institutions throughout Philadelphia. Despite the denominational differences, Mary Disston was familiar with Durang's work as he was the architect of the Oxford Presbyterian Church (ca. 1867) at Oxford and Broad streets—the Disstons were "prominent members" of this church located near their North Philadelphia homes.<sup>6</sup> Durang was also the architect of the house of Mary Disston's son, Albert, and his wife Kate located at 1540 N. Sixteenth Street (1881–1882).<sup>7</sup> The structure was sited west of Torresdale Avenue on a rise surrounded by open land and located adjacent to "The Mount," the estate of Henry C. Forrest, vice president of the Tacony Iron and Metal Company and the Tacony Wire Glass Company.<sup>8</sup> The church's cornerstone is dated "1885" and at least the exterior of the structure was completed by the institution's formal organization in the Philadelphia North Presbytery on April 1, 1886.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Harry C. Silcox, *A Place to Live and Work: The Disston Saw Works and the Tacony Community of Philadelphia* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 23.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 53. Interestingly, the first permanent church structure in Tacony was the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Holy Innocents. The congregation was founded in 1867 and the building consecrated on 22 August 1872. See Iatarola, 90.

<sup>4</sup>Silcox, 53, for later immigrants to Tacony. 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), 19.

<sup>5</sup>*Take a Trip through Time: Northeast Philadelphia Revisited*, ed. Lillian M. Lake and Harry C. Silcox (Holland, PA: Brighton Press, Inc., 1996), 182.

<sup>6</sup>Donna J. Rilling, "Disston House," HABS No. PA-6669, Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, 2000.

<sup>7</sup>See Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, "Disston House," HABS No. PA-6669, for further graphic and textual information related to Albert and Kate Disston's house.

<sup>8</sup>Iatarola, 37.

<sup>9</sup>Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church, *Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church* (Bowling Green, KY: Church Bulletin Publishing, Co., ca. 1990), Tacony Branch Library, Free Library of Philadelphia.

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The memorial nature of the church did not deter the congregation's growth and by 1913 they had expanded enough to warrant the construction of a second building which housed a chapel, parish house, and Sunday school.<sup>10</sup> As indicated by the auxiliary building's cornerstone, this addition was "rebuilt" in 1927. The present building is three stories, of stone, with gothic detailing.

The church continues to operate under the name "Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church" and is physically maintained by a modest endowment left by the Disstons.<sup>11</sup>

**Historian:** James A. Jacobs

**Sources:**

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<sup>10</sup>"Lay Cornerstone for New Chapel of Tacony Church," *The [Philadelphia?] Record* 21 September 1913, from the Campbell Collection, vol. 71, 64, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>11</sup>Interview, Louis M. Iatarola, 8 November 2001, Tacony neighborhood, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.