

TACONY,  
HAMILTON DISSTON SCHOOL

Tacony

North side of 4400 block of Knorr St., between Cottage and Gillespie Streets

Philadelphia

Philadelphia County

Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6692-G

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PA-6692-G

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, HAMILTON DISSTON SCHOOL

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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:** 4400 block of Knorr Street, north side between Cottage and Gillespie Streets.

**Significance:** Named for a son of Henry Disston, the Hamilton Disston School honors a man who was actively involved in Tacony affairs throughout his life. The school plant reflects the radical modernization of elementary and secondary school buildings in the 1920s and 1930s. Constructed using "fireproof" materials, heated by steam, lighted by electricity, and containing a well-appointed auditorium that included a "motion picture booth" and a gymnasium, the school utilized many of the available improvements in layout and material.

### Description:

The three-story building with a raised basement is organized into a U-shaped plan with no dominant entrance façade.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of grade differences, the Cottage and Gillespie street façades are essentially mirror images and contain entrances placed in extruded portions of the wall. The building's details were conceived using a generic classical revival vocabulary common to many large public buildings of the era. Each of the entries is contained within a trabeated frame consisting of paired Doric columns holding up a simple entablature. The Knorr Street façade, while containing no entrance, is probably the most carefully articulated of all the exterior walls. Two-story arched openings are placed between shallow pilasters "supporting" a robust entablature/stringcourse that incorporates the sills of the third-floor windows. The arched openings—lighting an auditorium—contain double-hung sash filled with stained glass up to the springing-point of the arches; stained-glass lunette windows have been infilled since construction. The building remains in good condition. The sash has been replaced with aluminum windows and security grates have been applied to the lower windows.

### History:

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

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<sup>1</sup>Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Maps for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, vol. 27 (New York, 1928), 2673.

The Hamilton Disston School was constructed between 1923 and 1926 on the periphery of what was then Tacony. The building—dedicated on January 13, 1926—was intended to house 1,500 “elementary” students and designed using some of the latest improvements regarding artificial and natural lighting, ventilation, and heating.<sup>2</sup> The school likely served students considered “middle school” age given the presence of a mechanical art room, domestic science rooms, model apartment, and auditorium—all common features of period middle school plants. The building also contained twenty-eight “regular” classrooms, lunchrooms, an infirmary, library, and a variety of offices. A power plant was also constructed to supply heat and electricity for the building. Independent of the lots—which were donated by the Disston family—the building and its equipment cost \$582, 453.

The school remains in use and in good condition.

**Historian:** James A. Jacobs

**Sources:**

Board of Public Education. “Dedication Program: Hamilton Disston School.” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1926. Tacony Branch Library, The Free Library of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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

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<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise stated, all information related to the Hamilton Disston School is drawn from, Board of Public Education, “Dedication Program, Hamilton Disston School,” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1926, Tacony Branch Library, The Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. See John J. Donovan, *School Architecture: Principles and Practices* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921) for period information related to period school design and construction.