

TACONY,  
TACONY BRANCH LIBRARY FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA

Tacony

6700 block of Torresdale Ave., southwest corner of Torresdale Ave. & Knorr St.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia County

Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6692-H

HABS

PA-6692-H

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

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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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:** 6700 block of Torresdale Avenue, southwest corner of Torresdale Avenue and Knorr Street, Tacony neighborhood, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**Significance:** While not initially established—but partially funded—by the Disstons, education and social betterment were a key part of their concept of benevolent industrial paternalism. The Tacony Branch Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia both underscored this continued interest as well as the involvement of large turn-of-the-twentieth-century educational networks centered on the Free Library system in Philadelphia as well as in the national philanthropic work of Andrew Carnegie. Architecturally, the building's design is a variation on a general scheme used in the planning and construction of a number of branch libraries throughout Philadelphia early in the twentieth century.

### Description:

The Tacony Branch Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia, constructed in 1906, displays a street façade utilizing classical elements and a symmetrical arrangement of parts that indicates the *Beaux Arts* influence commonly seen in early-twentieth-century civic buildings. The single-story brick and dressed-stone structure is dominated by an extruded central entrance pavilion. The entrance is flanked by a single engaged Ionic column on each side; the transom above is surrounded by a stylized garland. Other elements associated with period classical revival architecture in the United States include shields on either side of the carved "Free Library of Philadelphia," an emphatic denticulated cornice, stone quoins at the corners, a diagonal pattern of window muntins, and a parapet wall with turned balusters above the door. The single-story façade with a stepped-out entrance pavilion and columns flanking the main doors is seen a number of Free Library branches constructed in the first two decades of the twentieth century including the Lehigh Avenue Branch Library (1906) and the Manayunk Branch Library (1909).<sup>1</sup> The building's exterior remains in excellent condition, however the front doors have been replaced and two light standards have

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<sup>1</sup>See field notes for other examples.

disappeared from the front of the building. A 1998 building rehabilitation uncovered original stained-glass panels in the reading room's central skylight and 1920s murals in the children's reading room.<sup>2</sup>

### History:

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

On October 24, 1876, the Keystone Scientific and Literary Association was founded in Tacony and in January 1877 they established a fund-raising committee to purchase books and seek-out library space.<sup>3</sup> By early in February they had purchased seventy-eight books and on March 6 opened a public reading room in the schoolhouse; the reading room was moved to the "Old [public] Hall" in 1880. The Keystone Scientific and Literary Association broke-up in 1884 and the Tacony Literary and Library Association was chartered in its stead by the Library of Congress. One year later the name was changed to the Disston Library and Free Reading Room and relocated to "more convenient rooms secured in the new [Music] Hall Building."

In December 1890, a movement to "raise funds for the erection of a library building by the Disston Library Association" was launched.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps only limited funds were obtained because in October 1892 it was announced that the Disston Library and Free Reading Room would relocate across Longshore Avenue to the second floor of the new Tacony Trust Company Building.<sup>5</sup> By 1893, the library held about 2,500 volumes.

Outside Tacony, in 1892, the institutional antecedent to what would become the Free Library of Philadelphia was founded. In 1895, the Free Library was organized and within five years a campaign to open branch libraries began.<sup>6</sup> Early in the twentieth century, Jacob Disston donated property at the southwest corner of Torresdale Avenue and Knorr Street, initially slated to remain parkland, for the construction of a local branch of the Free Library.<sup>7</sup> While Longshore Avenue east of Torresdale Avenue, containing a number of commercial, civic, and religious structures was Disston Tacony's principal thoroughfare, the first decades of the twentieth century saw increasing development west of this area. In the first decades of the twentieth century it became clear that Torresdale would eclipse Longshore in that sense and it is not surprising that the Disstons desired a prominent site on Torresdale

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<sup>2</sup>Louis M. Iatarola and Siobhán Gephart, *Images of America: Tacony* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 69.

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all information related to the libraries preceding the Tacony Branch Library of the Free Library is drawn from S. F. Hotchkin, *The Bristol Pike* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co., 1893), 74.

<sup>4</sup>*Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* (PRERBG), 17 December 1890.

<sup>5</sup>PRERBG, 19 October 1892.

<sup>6</sup>See Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, "Wagner Free Institute of Science," HABS No. PA-6667 for information related to the establishment of Branch Number One of the Free Library.

<sup>7</sup>"Tacony Branch of the Free Library," untitled newspaper clipping, December 1906, from the *Campbell Collection*, vol. 6, 34, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Avenue for the new library building.<sup>8</sup> With the donations of land by the Disstons and the building through Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic fund, the Free Library absorbed the holdings of the Disston Library when the building opened on 17 November 1906.

The building enclosed a single large reading room with a central stained-glass skylight and bookcases lining the walls; an original public auditorium at the rear was converted into a children's reading room in 1927.<sup>9</sup> Photographs located at the library branch indicate a fairly extensive interior renovation around 1959 that included the introduction of fluorescent lighting, tiled floors, and new furniture. The building enjoyed a rehabilitation—and nearly total removal of the 1959 fabric—in 1998 and continues to serve the community as a branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

**Historian:** James A. Jacobs

**Sources:**

Campbell Collection, Vol. 6. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Hotchkin, S. F. The Bristol Pike. Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co., 1893.

Iatarola, Louis M., and Siobhán Gephart. Images of America: Tacony. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000.

Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide.

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

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<sup>8</sup>Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Maps for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, vol. 27 (New York, 1928), 2654.

<sup>9</sup>Iatarola, 69.

ADDENDUM TO:  
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National Park Service  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TACONY BRANCH LIBRARY, FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA

HABS No. PA-6692-H

This report is an addendum to a 3 page report previously transmitted to the Library of Congress in 2004.

Location: 6742 Torresdale Ave., Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania

Present Owner: City of Philadelphia

Present Occupant: Free Library of Philadelphia

Present Use: branch library

Significance: Tacony was one of twenty-five branch libraries constructed between 1904 and 1930 by the Free Library of Philadelphia using a \$1.5 million grant from the Carnegie Corporation. Andrew Carnegie's public library construction grants were a major impetus for the growth of these institutions throughout the country. Philadelphia was second only to New York City in the size of the Carnegie grant it received and the number of branch libraries constructed. Each jurisdiction receiving Carnegie library funds was responsible for providing a site and operating expenses equal to ten percent of the cost of construction. Prior to receiving the Carnegie funds in 1903, branch libraries of the Free Library of Philadelphia (founded 1891) were housed in a variety of preexisting structures. The Carnegie library construction campaign provided twenty-five purpose-built branch libraries for the City of Philadelphia, each designed according to new standards of library professionalism and using fashionable, but conservative, architectural forms and motifs.

Tacony was the fourth Carnegie branch library opened by the Free Library of Philadelphia. Plans for the structure were approved by the Free Library Board of Trustees Carnegie Fund Committee on May 5, 1905 and the branch opened to the public on November 27, 1906. The Tacony Branch was designed by Philadelphia architect Lindley Johnson. It was located on a corner lot donated by Jacob S. Disston of Disston Saw Works. The Disston family's involvement in establishing the Tacony Branch continued their

paternalistic role in developing amenities for this working-class neighborhood.

## PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

1. Date of erection: 1905-06, cornerstone 1905 (ceremony January 6, 1906), opened November 27, 1906
2. Architect: Lindley Johnson
3. Original and subsequent owners/uses: Free Library of Philadelphia branch library, 1906 to present.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers:<sup>1</sup>  
General contract – Jacob Myers and Son, \$25,885 (plus \$1,503 for site work)  
Plumbing and gas fitting - Robert Leinau, \$768  
Heating - Cuff and Co., \$4,662  
Electricity - Keller, Pike, and Co., \$1,189
5. Original plans and construction: Lindley Johnson's plans for the Tacony branch were approved by the Free Library Carnegie Fund Committee on May 5, 1905 and construction proceeded during 1905-1906.
6. Alterations and additions: The library retains its original appearance on the exterior with the exception of a two small brick additions. The one on the west end of the main block houses modern HVAC equipment. Another at the east side of the rear ell next to the side entrance contains an elevator. The interior spaces are largely intact but with changes in shelving, lighting and other fixtures. In 1927 the lecture room in the ell was converted into a children's reading room. The Free Library had a major initiative in 1958-1962 to modernize its branch libraries, including Tacony. Many branches received drop ceilings, new floor coverings, new fixtures, and fluorescent lighting. In 1997-98, these late 1950s changes at the Tacony Branch were largely removed and original features such as the skylight were restored.

### B. Historical Context:

During the nineteenth century most libraries in the United States were private or available only to subscribers. Starting in the late nineteenth century, many cities began to found "free library" systems with the goal of providing educational material and services to a wider array of citizens, particularly the burgeoning immigrant population. The Free Library of Philadelphia was founded in 1891 and proceeded to establish a central library and a network of neighborhood branches. Despite ambitious goals, however, these

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<sup>1</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (7 August 1905); (13 October 1905); (25 October 1905).

libraries remained rather modest affairs housed in rented space and utilizing mainly donated collections and volunteer staffing.

During this same period the library construction philanthropy of wealthy industrialist Andrew Carnegie would have a profound effect on both the development of professional library standards and the evolution of the building type. The Free Library of Philadelphia received a \$1.5 million grant in January 1903 from Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Corporation to build thirty branch libraries.<sup>2</sup> Carnegie had been engaged in library building philanthropy since 1886, but the program was expanded to jurisdictions outside of his personal and business sphere only in 1898. Carnegie library historian George Bobinski calls this later period the “wholesale phase” of Carnegie’s library philanthropy. From 1898 to 1919, he gave over \$39 million to 1,406 communities. The unprecedented scale of this effort contrasts with the “retail phase” between 1886 and 1898 when Carnegie donated \$1.8 million to six communities.<sup>3</sup> The \$1.5 million gift to Philadelphia’s fledgling free library system was quite generous. Only New York City, which received a \$5.2 million grant for sixty-six libraries in 1899, built more branches using Carnegie funds. The next largest grants went to Baltimore and Cleveland; each city built fourteen libraries.<sup>4</sup>

In Philadelphia there was a delay while the various government agencies worked out a mechanism to legally accept and administer such unprecedented largesse. According to Bobinski, “the Pennsylvania State legislature had to approve an act authorizing the Philadelphia city council to enter into contracts with the trustees of the public library so that the arrangements necessary for receiving the Carnegie gift could be carried into effect.”<sup>5</sup> After a year of bureaucratic maneuvering, the state legislature finally passed the law enabling the city to officially accept the gift. The final step before the Free Library could proceed was an ordinance approving this arrangement passed by Mayor John Weaver in January 1904. John Thomson quickly sent a letter to James Bertram, Carnegie’s personal secretary and gatekeeper for the library philanthropy program expressing his relief that the Free Library could move forward with branch construction:

I have the pleasure of informing you that I have this morning received from the Clerk of Councils official notice that the Mayor has signed the Ordinance accepting Mr. Carnegie’s splendid gift to the City of Philadelphia. The matter has been one of great anxiety. . . . Arrangements

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<sup>2</sup> While the original grant stipulated funding for 30 libraries at \$50,000 each, rising construction costs caused the number to be scaled back in 1918. For the remaining branches, the Carnegie fund provided only part of the construction cost with the city or neighborhood groups making up the difference. See letter from Librarian John Ashhurst to James Bertram, Secretary, Carnegie Corporation officially changing the total number of Carnegie branches to “25 or 26,” (11 October 1918), Carnegie Corporation Correspondence microfilm, Reel 25, Special Collections, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Bobinski 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Bobinski 229, 231.

<sup>5</sup> Bobinski 44.

are on foot to accept 4 or 5 sites and it is hoped that the preliminary arrangements for locating the system of Branch Libraries, made possible by Mr. Carnegie's munificence, will be put in active motion at once. . . . I think we shall be able very rapidly to show our appreciation of what Mr. Carnegie has put it in our power to do.<sup>6</sup>

The year-long delay in officially accepting the gift gave the Free Library time to quietly prepare to construct new branch buildings and move rapidly once approval came. Carnegie did not specify architectural designs or review plans at this time, but he did express a strong preference that the branch libraries include lecture rooms.<sup>7</sup> In a letter officially accepting Carnegie's gift, Free Library Board of Trustees President Joseph G. Rosengarten noted that the Trustees "concur[red] fully" with his lecture room suggestion and planned to expand the already successful Free Library lecture program.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond a general desire for new branch buildings and an interest in including lecture rooms, it is not clear what guidelines or models informed the Free Library as they developed a fairly consistent branch library plan for their city. When Philadelphia received its Carnegie grant there was no official design review by Carnegie or his staff. By 1908 James Bertram, Carnegie's secretary, had to approve the building plans for all new grants. The Carnegie publication "Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings" [sic.] was first issued in 1911 by Bertram.<sup>9</sup> While the Philadelphia branch library designs progressed independent of Carnegie design oversight, it appears both were developing simultaneously and in harmony with the latest precepts in library planning.

The Board of Trustees of the Free Library formed a Carnegie Fund Committee in March 1904 to oversee the details of this ambitious branch building effort. In response to a request from the Carnegie Fund Committee for instructions on how to select architects, the Board of Trustees implemented an ad hoc system. They sought to avoid the expense and complication of holding competitions so instead proposed to appoint an architect as branch sites were chosen. Selection seems to have been based on reputation and personal contacts, with many architects asking to be considered as work on the branches proceeded. The written record is thin on this point, but it is apparent that librarian John Thomson and assistant librarian John Ashhurst were instrumental in this process. John Thomson served as secretary of the Carnegie Fund Committee and the Free Library's leading staff member on all matters. Ashhurst's assistant librarian position was specifically created by the Board of Trustees "in order to undertake part of the very heavy

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<sup>6</sup> Letter, John Thomson to James Bertram (13 January 1904), Carnegie Corporation Correspondence microfilm, Reel 25, Special Collections, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>7</sup> "Carnegie Offers \$1,500,000 to City," *Philadelphia Times*, 7 January 1903, clipping in Carnegie Corporation Correspondence microfilm, Reel 25, Special Collections, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>8</sup> Letter, J. G. Rosengarten to Andrew Carnegie, (5 March 1904), Carnegie Corporation Correspondence microfilm, Reel 25, Special Collections, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Abigail Van Slyck. *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 35-36.

extra work that would now be involved in carrying out the Andrew Carnegie Branch Library Building scheme.”<sup>10</sup>

In the interest of moving quickly to open new branch buildings, projects on donated or city-owned property typically were launched first. Later branches would be built on a mix of donated and purchased sites to round out their distribution throughout the city. A new building for Tacony was one of a handful discussed at the same Board of Trustees meeting that established the Carnegie Fund Committee.<sup>11</sup> A site offered by local industrialist Jacob S. Disston made building in this location attractive to the committee. John Thomson reported on this potential donation at the first Carnegie Fund Committee meeting on April 9, 1904. The committee made plans to view the site before making a final decision.<sup>12</sup>

The Free Library accepted Disston’s gift on July 9, 1904.<sup>13</sup> The land was part of a 390-acre tract originally purchased by Henry Disston in 1872.<sup>14</sup> At that time the elder Disston’s had relocated and expanded his business ventures, most importantly Disston Saw Works. During the late nineteenth century Disston Saw emerged as Tacony’s most prominent employer and its growth brought Tacony from sleepy outpost to thriving factory town. By donating the land for a Tacony Branch of the Free Library, Jacob Disston was continuing the paternalistic tradition of his father. Worker housing, services, and institutions for Tacony were all supported by the Disstons with the goal of ensuring a stable workforce for their factories.

Another factor in the early construction of a Carnegie building for the Tacony branch was the availability of collection that could be transferred from an existing branch. The Tacony Branch has its origins in the Keystone Scientific and Literary Association Library founded in 1877 with seventy-eight books and a public reading room in the schoolhouse. The Association disbanded in 1884 but the library was transferred to the newly chartered Tacony Literary and Library Association. In 1885 the name was changed to the Disston Library and Free Reading Room. The library relocated to a rented space in the Music Hall on Longshore Avenue. Efforts to raise funds for a purpose-built library begun in 1890 and apparently met with limited success. By 1893, the 2,500-volume collection was housed across Longshore Avenue in the new Tacony Trust Company Building.<sup>15</sup> With many neighborhood groups clamoring to receive a Carnegie-funded library, priority seems to have been given to those that could provide sites and collections. Tacony was well-positioned to do both.

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<sup>10</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, (12 February 1904).

<sup>11</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes (31 March 1904). Branches for Tacony, Holmesburg, West Philadelphia, and Vernon Park were discussed.

<sup>12</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (9 April 1904).

<sup>13</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (9 July 1904).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Van Dervort, *Tacony*. (Tacony Branch Library, Free Library of Philadelphia, 1982), n.p..

<sup>15</sup> Information on this period in the history of the Tacony Branch library appears in the HABS history to which this report is an addendum. See HABS No. PA-6692-H, page 2, for original citations.

When the Carnegie Fund Committee accepted Disston's land donation on July 9, 1904, they also appointed local architect Lindley Johnson to design the library. This was the early stages of working out their ad hoc system of assigning architects and apparently there was some confusion. At the next meeting on July 29<sup>th</sup>, it was recorded in the minutes that architect Horace W. Castor had prepared plans and sketches of the branch library for Disston. The committee declined to change architects but moved to appoint Castor as architect for the Holmesburg Branch instead.<sup>16</sup>

Lindley Johnson was a well-established and well-connected Philadelphia architect at the time he was designing the Tacony Branch Library. Born in 1854 in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia, Johnson had studied at the University of Pennsylvania and in the *Atelier Moyaux* in Paris. He was a founding member of the T-Square Club and a member of American Institute of Architects. This was his only known library design, with his practice mainly consisting of domestic structures with some hotels and churches. The record does not show exactly how Johnson was chosen for this commission, but clearly personal connections and professional reputation were important factors.<sup>17</sup>

The Carnegie Fund Committee minutes offer a few glimpses into the design process for the Tacony Branch. In January 1905, the committee received sketch plans from Johnson. They requested a number of changes, such as removing a bench and gates at the entrance, removing an open fireplace with benches, and placing a circular stair in the coat room instead of the lecture hall. Design guidelines for the Philadelphia branch libraries have not been located. However field examination for this HABS study indicates that the Committee, as led by Thomson and Ashhurst, was directing the designs towards the simplified architecture promoted by professional librarians and increasingly preferred by Carnegie. Features such as fireplaces were falling out of favor for modern library design as developed by the Carnegie efforts. Tacony is a key early example of the relatively consistent open T-plan library used for the majority of the Carnegie branch libraries in Philadelphia. Other suggestions made by the committee upon reviewing the sketch plans speak to shaping the form of the library, such as suggestions he reconsider the size of the lecture hall and extend the length of the library, if possible. Finally, Johnson was asked to "prepare elevations and exterior sketches."<sup>18</sup>

At the February 1905 Carnegie Fund Committee meeting, it was reported that Johnson had responded with a design placing the library and lecture hall on one floor. Unfortunately, no other details appear in the record. Johnson simply was authorized to proceed with the plans and invited to attend the next meeting. Johnson's plans were approved at the May 5, 1905 meeting, subject to approval by Jacob Disston. This was one of the few times a site donor was given this level of consideration in the process,

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<sup>16</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (29 July 1904).

<sup>17</sup> "Johnson, Lindley," in Roger Moss and Sandra Tatman, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects, 1700-1930*, (New York: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984), 416-418.

<sup>18</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (13 January 1905).

perhaps reflecting the desire to remain in Disston's good graces after reassigning his chosen architect. The committee must have been confident that consulting Disston was merely a formality since they directed Johnson to proceed with preparing detailed drawings and specifications.<sup>19</sup>

The Carnegie Fund Committee used a fairly consistent procedure for choosing contractors. The architect was asked to prepare the specifications and provide input on a list of invited bidders. As the branch construction project proceeded, the names of certain construction firms do reappear several times as invited bidders. Separate contracts were awarded for general construction, heating, electricity, and plumbing. The bids were opened at a meeting of committee members on a designated date. The contracts were subsequently awarded to the lowest bidder, although occasionally changes to the specifications required revised bids. For Tacony, a list of invited bidders was prepared for the July 10, 1905 Carnegie Fund Committee meeting. The bid opening was scheduled for August 7<sup>th</sup>. On that date the general contract was awarded to Jacob Myers and Son for a bid of \$25,885, omitting desks and shelving. Robert Leinaw received the "plumbing, draining and gas fitting contract" for \$768.<sup>20</sup>

The contracts for heating and electric were not awarded at this time. Perhaps this branch raised questions regarding standardizing the design program for the branch libraries because at the end of September, Carnegie Fund Committee member Clarence Sears Kates submitted his report on heating and ventilating in the form of a "memorandum of instructions to architects to be followed by them in all Branch Library Buildings." As this is the only such memorandum that has been found it is worth quoting at length:

1. Steam coils to be placed all around the room beneath the bookcases, at a height of a couple of inches above the floor, and to occupy as much of the space now taken by the lower shelf of books as may be necessary.
2. Where lecture rooms are on the library floor and open directly out of the library the same system is to be adopted. This will render it possible at a future time to place wall shelving around the lecture room.
3. Basement lecture rooms to be treated individually.<sup>21</sup>

This arrangement of radiators below the bookcases along the outer walls became standard for the Carnegie branches. At this same time, the plan of the libraries was becoming

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<sup>19</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (10 February 1905); (5 May 1905). The Chestnut Hill Library Association was also given review powers for that branch.

<sup>20</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (10 July 1905); *Ibid.*, (7 August 1905).

<sup>21</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (29 September 1905). Kates was a Free Library Trustee and not known to have any particular architectural expertise. Presumably this policy was crafted by Mr. Richard Gilpin, who was appointed consulting engineering in matters of heating, lighting, and ventilating in May 1905. See Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (5 May 1905).

more consistent, in keeping with the librarians' programmatic concerns. However a related "memorandum of instruction to architects" does not seem to be extant. The general contract for Tacony was officially awarded to Jacob Myers and Sons at this meeting, with a note that they were to use gray granite and limestone. The records do not indicate when the materials were changed to the brick and terra cotta actually used in construction. More heating bids were sought, given the new standardized specifications. The heating contract was awarded to Cuff and Co. for \$4,662 on October 13<sup>th</sup>.<sup>22</sup> The electricity contract was awarded to Keller, Pike, and Co. for \$1,189 a few weeks later.<sup>23</sup>

The cornerstone laying ceremony on January 6, 1906 earned a special mention in the Free Library Annual Report for 1905. In attendance were several library trustees, Lindley Johnson, and site donor Jacob Disston. Samuel Disston announced his intention to donate 1,000 books to the library. The report also mentioned that "considerable progress has been made with the building and is hoped will be completed so as to be used some time during next autumn."<sup>24</sup> At this time the first four branch libraries were under construction – West Philadelphia, Lehigh Avenue, Frankford, and Tacony. The Disston family continued to take a personal interest in the library project. In addition to the land itself, Jacob Disston donated grading work and a privet hedge.<sup>25</sup> Myers submitted an additional bid of \$1,503 in May 1906 for site work to include paths, curbing, and four granite steps. Interestingly the Committee left the decision regarding this additional work to the architect.<sup>26</sup>

As each new Free Library branch was completed, the official opening required that a maintenance ordinance be signed by the Mayor. In June 1906, the Carnegie Fund Committee noted that West Philadelphia, the first new Carnegie branch, would open as soon as the necessary legislation was signed by the Mayor. It was projected that Frankford would open in mid-September, Lehigh Avenue in mid-October, and Tacony during the first week of December.<sup>27</sup> Tacony's actually opening took place a bit earlier on November 27, 1906. This new Free Library branch absorbed the holdings of the Disston Library. The final cost of construction was \$43,382.59.<sup>28</sup>

Tacony represents an early example of the open plan, T-shaped library that became common for the Carnegie-funded Free Library branches, as well as Carnegie Libraries nationwide. This branch was mentioned in the 1917 publication *A Book of*

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<sup>22</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (13 October 1905).

<sup>23</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (25 October 1905).

<sup>24</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, *10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report* (1905), 18.

<sup>25</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (29 September 1905); (5 April 1906).

<sup>26</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (11 May 1906).

<sup>27</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Carnegie Fund Committee Meeting Minutes, (16 June 1906).

<sup>28</sup> This figure appears in a list of facts typed on back of a Tacony Branch photograph taken c. 1940, apparently as part of a WPA-sponsored survey of Free Library facilities. Viewed in the Directors' Vault, Central Branch, Free Library of Philadelphia.

*Carnegie Libraries*. Here author Theodore Wesley Koch points out that a large room undivided by partitions became a defining feature of Carnegie branches across the country, as was providing a space for lectures. He notes that the lecture program was particularly successful in Philadelphia, where “each branch has a recognized clientele and lecturers are always sure of a good sized audience.”<sup>29</sup> In her study of the Carnegie Library, architectural historian Abigail Van Slyck cites the Tacony Branch as a transitional example between closed stack and open plan libraries. The library profession was struggling with conflicting philosophies restricting access to reading material and newer ideals of community involvement. Van Slyck sees Tacony as “reveal[ing] some of the anxiety involved in giving readers this new freedom.”<sup>30</sup> Here the main librarians’ desk was stationed in front of the entrance and patrons filed through partitions under the “watchful eye of the library staff.” This arrangement was used in all of the Free Library Carnegie branches and continues today. Thomson was frank about the staff salary savings involved with opening shelving and an open plan that could be monitored by just a few staff members from a central location. Perhaps Tacony was less a transitional example and rather an economical solution to protecting the collection in a modern open-plan branch library.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Tacony Branch library is an early-twentieth-century Beaux Arts structure with a symmetrical form, a formal axial entrance at the center of the front façade, and Georgian Revival detailing such as Flemish bond brick walls with glazed headers. The library stands one-story high on a raised basement of cut limestone blocks. It is T-shaped in plan with a main block facing Torresdale Avenue and a rectangular ell extending from the center of the rear façade. The rear ell has a slightly different architectural character with more Arts and Crafts-inspired features such as open eaves with decorative rafter ends, wood brackets at the rear facing gable, and brick corbelling rather than contrasting limestone or terra cotta trim.

2. Condition of fabric: Good

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The overall dimensions of the library are 109 by 180 feet. The front, or main block, of this T-plan building is three bays wide and two bays deep (68 by 44 feet). Each bay is large in that it includes a grouping of three windows unified by a single white terra cotta sill. The rear ell is three bays wide and four bays deep (44 by 35

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<sup>29</sup> Theodore Wesley Koch, *A Book of Carnegie Libraries*, (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1917), 86.

<sup>30</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890-1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 122.

feet). The bays here are proportionally smaller, with pairs of windows between brick piers on the sides, and a closely spaced set of three windows set into a recessed niche flanked by two doorways on the rear façade of the ell.

2. Foundation: Tacony Branch sits on an approximately four foot high foundation of cut limestone blocks with smooth channeled joints and a lightly shot-sawn finish. The transition from foundation to the walls above is demarcated by a thick limestone water table constructed from a course of double width limestone blocks carved with a concave upper edge and convex lower edge.

3. Walls: Tacony's walls are Flemish bond red brick with glazed headers. On the main block thick terra cotta quoins at the corners and a heavy terra cotta entablature contrasts with the dark red brick. A long rectangular spandrel panel is located below each window bay. The spandrel is created by alternating courses of recessed or projecting bricks laid in common bond or turned perpendicular to the wall bond. The center of the panel has a pattern of squares created by sets of four, three, five, three, and four bricks laid vertically and flush with a surrounding course. The end walls of the main block also have a large recessed panel of common bond brick between the window bays.

The rear ell has red brick Flemish bond walls with glazed headers on the side walls and in the rear center recessed niche. The rear wall of the ell is common bond on either side of the niche. Instead of contrasting terra cotta, the decorative elements here are rendered in the same dark red brick as the walls. The rear ell has projecting piers between bays, relieving arches over openings, a belt course of vertical bricks, and corbelling at the rear gable end.

4. Structural system, framing: Tacony Branch library has load bearing brick walls supported on a limestone foundation. Metal I-beams are visible on a small section drawing of the entrance and presumably were included in construction.<sup>31</sup> The large space of the rear ell is spanned by three composite trusses with wood and steel rod members. Now visible from the room below, it is unlikely that these structural beams were originally exposed. Presumably a similar composite truss system spans the main reading room but this structure was not visible.

5. Main entry pavilion: The main entrance is indicated by a projecting pavilion at the center third of the main façade. This entrance pavilion is the most highly decorated portion of the façade with Classical details and motifs executed in white terra cotta. Decorative motifs here include a pair of engaged Ionic columns on either side of the doorway, Classical entablature, and a turned limestone balustrade at the front of the parapet. "The Free Library of Philadelphia" is carved into the frieze in the entablature. On either side of this carving is a terra cotta cartouche holding an open book motif and draped in a high relief garland. A band of egg and dart and a band of waves scroll motifs

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<sup>31</sup> *The Brickbuilder* 15, no. 11 (November 1906): Plate 153.

also ornament the entablature. "Tacony Branch" is carved into a panel directly above the door. A large console is located at the base of this panel and intersects an acanthus leaf garland that frames the top half of the doorway. The cut limestone foundation continues out perpendicular to the main block to form knee walls flanking the stairs. A pair of cast iron lamp posts that originally stood on these walls is no longer extant. A straight run of eight marble steps leads to the doorway.

"Lecture Room" entrances: A straight run of five wide concrete steps leads to a landing at the side entrance on the east side of the rear ell. They do not appear to be original but would have replaced another external stair in this location. There are metal pipe railings on either side of this stair.

Two low stairs with knee walls lead to round arch openings in the rear façade of the ell.

6. Chimney: A pair of tall brick chimneys flanks the projecting center bay at the rear façade of the ell. These chimneys were connected to the coal burning boiler in the basement.

#### 7. Openings

a. Doorways and Doors: The main entry has a pair of glazed metal frame doors that replaced the original wood panel ones. The original three light wood frame transom and external wood panel pocket doors are still extant. See above for description of the decorative neoclassical surround.

The "lecture room" entry doorway is a round arch opening set directly in the side wall of the ell. The metal doors are recent replacements. The wood frame semicircular fan light is original.

The round arch doorways on the rear façade of the ell have been entirely closed up with plywood.

#### b. Windows:

The main block has rectangular wood sash windows set directly into the brick walls. Sets of three windows on the main block share a single terra cotta sill. Diagonal muntins divide each sash into eight triangular lights. The ell has similar windows set into a round arch opening and grouped into pairs. There is one oculus window at the gable end of the rear ell with diagonal muntins.

8. Roof: The main block of Tacony branch has a hipped roof hidden by a terra cotta parapet, and a heavy terra cotta entablature with a dentilated cornice. The rear ell has a gable roof with open eaves. This area has exposed curved rafter ends and copper gutters.

#### C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Tacony branch library has a T-shaped plan with minimal interior partitions on the main level. It is a bright and airy space with high ceilings. The main entrance pavilion has an oval vestibule with a sloped floor leading up to the main reading room. Originally low shelves served to demarcate different departments within the library (children's, reference) while still allowing personnel at the central desk to see the entire space. Some private work spaces and a new stairwell have been created by walls approximately seven feet high along the west side of the ell room near the opening to the main room. The original circulation pattern of patrons entering through the entrance vestibule and walking around the central charging desk to enter and exit is still in use although the original desk, rails, gates and other fixtures have been replaced.

The lecture room in the ell was designed to hold 350 patrons. The small niche and platform at the end of the room date from the original period of construction. In 1927 this space was converted into a children's reading room.<sup>32</sup>

The basement contains staff spaces such as a kitchen, lunchroom and bathrooms.

2. Stairway: The original internal stairway was a small circular stair at the southwest corner of the ell. A new larger stair is now in the same location and enclosed by later partitions.

3. Flooring: The floors are now covered by modern carpet inside the main spaces. The original material is unknown.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The interior of the entrance vestibule has plaster walls painted orange and thick crown molding. A pair of bronze plaques framed with Classical molding face each other on either side of the vestibule. One plaque reads "This Building Was Given To The City Of Philadelphia By Andrew Carnegie Esq. To Be Used For Ever As The Tacony Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia. MCMVI [1906]" The other plaque reads "The Land on Which this Building was Erected was Presented to the City by Jacob S. Disston, Esq. For The Tacony Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia. MCMVI [1906]."

The walls and ceiling of the first floor library spaces are plain plaster painted pale yellow. In the main reading room the ceiling is flat with a heavy plaster crown molding and Doric pilasters at the corners. The ceiling features a large square skylight and a series of thick paneled beams. In the children's reading room in the ell the walls are plaster with a heavy crown molding and pilasters. The semicircular arch at the rear platform is framed by two lines of molding separated by approximately 12 inches of plaster. The ceiling features exposed rafters and trusses covered with a dark stain. It is likely that the exposed ceiling structure is a later change, particularly given the more formal finish of the walls below.

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<sup>32</sup> See Tacony Branch History at [www.library.phila.gov](http://www.library.phila.gov); and floorplan published in *The Brickbuilder* 15, no. 11 (November 1906): Plate 153.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors:

Main entrance: The interior door of the entrance vestibule features a pair of swinging wood doors with glazing on the top half. This doorway has a large three light fixed transom. From the interior of the main reading room this entrance is framed by a large wood entablature with fluted Ionic pilasters.

The large rectangular opening between the main room and ell is now unornamented and partially blocked by the added office and stairwell partitions. Historic photographs show that this opening was originally cased with a heavy Classical entablature with Ionic pilasters.<sup>33</sup>

b. Windows: The windows are framed by wide molding featuring Neoclassical motifs. The triple groupings of windows in the main reading room have a typically classical notched molding. The window groupings on the rear of the main block have two windows and one blind opening grouped in a single surround to maintain symmetry. The round arch windows in the ell have wide molding with a band of egg and dart carving starting at the spring of the arch.

6. Decorative features and trim: Simple wood book shelves line the outer walls below the windows and are either original or similar. This arrangement was typical for the Philadelphia branch libraries and allowed maximum use of wall space for shelves while still allowing for considerable natural light.

7. Mechanical equipment:

a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: It is likely that the original boiler system has been replaced. Radiators are located along the outer walls below the book shelves and covered by simple metal grilles. Additional metal grilles are located at the top of the book shelves and in the side walls of the skylight opening. The arrangement of radiators and vents follows the recommended standard established by the Carnegie Fund Committee in 1905.

b. Lighting: Historic photographs indicate that a series of six metal chandeliers with round globes hung from the main room ceiling.<sup>34</sup> These electric chandeliers had eight sets of upward and downward fixtures arranged around an open hoop with s-curve arms and round glass globes. In addition, sconces with one upward and one downward round globe were mounted along the top edge of the outer wall book shelves. The original fixtures were replaced with modern fluorescent ones during the late 1950s renovation. The latest renovation in 1997-98 saw removal of the fluorescent fixtures and replacement with vaguely historic incandescent lights that bear no resemblance to the originals. A

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<sup>33</sup> Interior photograph published in Free Library of Philadelphia *Annual Report*, 1906.

<sup>34</sup> Interior photograph published in Free Library of Philadelphia *Annual Report*, 1906.

pair of cast iron light standards originally flanking the exterior entrance is no longer extant.

c. Plumbing: The library would have been built with basic bathroom and kitchen facilities, which have now been upgraded.

D. Site: The library's status as a public institution is communicated by its elevated site placement in a small fenced yard in a corner lot on Torresdale Avenue. Torresdale Avenue is an important commercial thoroughfare in the Tacony neighborhood. Modest rowhouses are still located to the side and rear of this branch library.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings: A rather schematic first floor plan and a few entrance details were published in *The Brickbuilder* 15, no. 11 (November 1906): Plate 153.

B. Early Views: William Rau photographs in the 1906 Free Library of Philadelphia *Annual Report*. These views (one exterior and one interior) were reprinted in Theodore Wesley Koch, *A Portfolio of Carnegie Libraries*, (Ann Arbor: George Wahr, Publisher, 1907), Plates 35-36. An early exterior view was published in *The Brickbuilder* 15, no. 11 (November 1906): Plate 149.

#### C. Bibliography:

The records of the Free Library of Philadelphia are located at the Central Library on Vine Street. The *Annual Reports* are located in the Municipal Reference Division, Cities P53-1154; and the Carnegie Fund Committee Minute Books are located in the Director's Vault (access by special permission).

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#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the Tacony Branch Library was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the Heritage Documentation Programs of the National Park Service, Richard O'Connor, Chief, during summer 2007 as part of a larger initiative to record the Carnegie Funded branch libraries of the Free Library of Philadelphia. The project is sponsored by HABS in cooperation with the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, John A. Gallery, director; and the Free Library of Philadelphia, William J. Fleming, Administrative Services Director, and made possible through a Congressional appropriation for recording in Southeastern Pennsylvania. The historical reports were prepared by Lisa P. Davidson and Catherine C. Lavoie. Large-format photography was undertaken for HABS by Joseph Elliott.