HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT

Cluster 1: Frankford, Tacony, Wissinoming, Bridesburg

Prepared by Emily T. Cooperman, PhD
For the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia
July 2009
Cluster 1 consists of a group of neighborhoods closely connected to the Delaware River and the smaller waterways that formerly fed into it (Frankford Creek and its tributaries as well as Wissinoming Creek) in a portion of the city that was accessed mainly by boat and a single roadway in the first century of Philadelphia’s settlement. Like many other areas of the city, the neighborhoods of Cluster 1 were developed to a great extent because of the industries that were founded there, and their fortunes have risen and fallen with the city’s industrial growth and subsequent decay. Frankford was one of the earliest settled villages in the former Philadelphia County. Bridesburg was built on flat land made habitable by fill and bulwark along the riverfront. The land in Wissinoming and Tacony was characterized by country seats and farms until past the mid-nineteenth century when Henry Disston moved his Saw Works from Northern Liberties to land that had not yet been developed except for agriculture use.

In the twentieth century, these neighborhoods became more closely connected to Center City through the completion of the Frankford Elevated subway in 1915. As industry declined by the 1950s, the area lost population along with the rest of Philadelphia.
Topography

The section of Philadelphia that encompasses the current neighborhoods of Frankford, Bridesburg, Wissinoming, and Tacony shares many important characteristics of its physiography and history with other sections of the city of Philadelphia. Historically, the area was characterized by relatively gently rolling topography rising to the northwest from the Delaware River front, which was marshy in a number of locations. Streams in the Delaware River Watershed, including Frankford Creek and its tributaries were an important resource for early settlement and ongoing development. As in much of the former Philadelphia County, the soil was hospitable to early agriculture, and trees, stone, and clay suitable for burning bricks provided building materials.

Detail, John Hills, Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Environs, 1808, showing Cluster 1 study area at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Collection Frankford Historical Society.
Periods of Development

First Period of Development: ca. 1650-ca. 1800
Settlement, Subsistence farming, Country Seats, early Industrial Village

Like areas to the south and west that are better recognized for the importance of their historic developments, this section of the city is marked by important early settlement. The first manifestation of this was the occupation of the area around at the confluence of Frankford and Tacony creeks by subsistence farmers of Swedish and Finnish extraction by about the mid-seventeenth century. Another key aspect of the city’s history is reflected in the establishment of some of the earliest, water-powered mills in the same area. Frankford, a name for this area established by 1701, thus shares aspects of its history with other areas in the former Philadelphia County, including Germantown and Upper Roxborough.

In the period after Pennsylvania Colony was established, the Frankford village grew. It was sufficiently large in the last decade of the eighteenth century to serve as one of the locations to which portions of the federal government fled in the Yellow Fever epidemics of the 1790s. The borough of Frankford was incorporated in 1800. Around this village, small farms continued to operate in what is now Tacony, Bridesburg, Wissinoming, and beyond. In addition to this agricultural use, country seats of wealthier Philadelphians were developed along the road that paralleled the river and along the Delaware itself, creating a villa district that rivaled the one established along the Schuylkill in the same period.

Second Period of Development: ca. 1800-ca. 1860
Industry Expansion, the Arsenal, the Arrival of the Railroad

In the earlier years of the nineteenth century, larger factories began to be established in Frankford, resulting in a need for more workers, which in turn led to construction of housing and community institutions and facilities in the former borough. Frankford’s industrial base continued slow expansion until the Civil War. The creation of the Frankford Arsenal in the early nineteenth century was also a key event. With the Consolidation of the City and County of Philadelphia, Frankford’s municipal government was absorbed into the City’s, but continued to function independently in some respects.

Tacony and Wissinoming remained an area of country retreat until after the Civil War, although Tacony developed as a small hamlet with the arrival of the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad in 1849. Bridesburg, originally known as Point-no-Point because of the marshy, tidal character of the riverfront, began to develop as a town shortly after 1800, but soon became the locus of industry of particularly noxious sorts (including chemical companies), thanks to its relatively isolated location on the Delaware and the far side of Frankford Creek from the main Frankford

---

village. Not surprisingly, residential development was minimal through the mid-nineteenth century, although Bridesburg incorporated as a borough in 1848.

Third Period of Development: ca. 1860-ca. 1930
Industrial Towns within the City; the end of Industrial Prominence
Frankford continued to grow steadily in parallel with the rest of Philadelphia’s industry; like the majority of the factories in the rest of the city, most produced textiles of one sort or another. In the period just before World War I, Frankford had over 150 mills. A major change came to the former borough in the early years of the twentieth century with the opening of the Frankford El, which connected the outlying former borough to Center City as it never had been before. The advent of the Depression, however, brought the beginning of decline in the area’s industry, just as it did elsewhere in Philadelphia.

One of the largest changes came to this group of neighborhoods in 1871, when Henry Disston purchased 390 acres in the future Tacony neighborhood, moving and expanding the Saw Works he had established in Northern Liberties and creating an industrial town around it for its workers. The Saw Works flourished prodigiously, and attracted large numbers of workers to the area. Disston’s success led to other large factories being established in the neighborhood, including a number of facilities that produced glass and glass products. Bridesburg chemical plants also grew in size and number during and after the Civil War.

Fourth Period of Development: ca. 1930-present
Post-Industrial Neighborhoods
After the Depression, industry continued to dwindle in these neighborhoods with some notable exceptions: the Disston Saw Works prospered during World War II and began to shrink only after 1960. The Frankford Arsenal shut its doors permanently in 1977. In Bridesburg, Rohm and Haas, which had come to the neighborhood in 1920, continued to do well long after many other industries in the city, but also left Bridesburg in the 1970s.

Important Themes (Areas of Significance) for Cluster 1
1. Architecture
2. Community Planning and Development
3. Ethnic Heritage
4. Exploration/Settlement
5. Industry
6. Invention
7. Maritime History
8. Military
9. Social History
Important Individuals
1. Henry Disston and family

Important sites and building types
1. Churches, Civic and Social Institutions
2. Disston Saw Works
3. Factory workers and owners’ Houses
4. Frankford Village Center
5. Factories and mills
6. Frankford Arsenal

Cluster 1 Neighborhood Historic Character
The neighborhoods of Cluster 1 retain the vast majority of the historic fabric associated with the important themes of their development, including many factory buildings and a range of buildings associated with workers’ and factory owners’ housing as well as social facilities created for the planned community of Tacony. Many historic residential properties have been altered by such changes as the application of new exterior materials like form stone. While the town center of the former borough of Frankford survives intact to a great extent, the character of its pre-nineteenth century periods of growth were substantially altered by the introduction of the Frankford Elevated in 1915.
Geographical Summary

The former borough of Frankford lies in the northeast section of Philadelphia, roughly six miles from the center of the city. While its borders have shifted over time with the construction of large industrial structures and residential areas, the neighborhood is roughly partitioned by the Delaware River to the east, the original course of the Frankford Creek to the south and west, and the original course of the Little Tacony Creek to the northeast. The land in Frankford slopes up from the Delaware River and then remains level from the end of the slope.
Introduction

The growth and development of Frankford, from its earliest settlement to well into the twentieth century, can be substantially credited to industry. Frankford’s initial European settlers used the water power provided by Frankford Creek to mechanize a grist mill. Quickly, newcomers took advantage of this power to establish other types of industry in the area. A community of industry owners and workers soon appeared with a social infrastructure, such as fire and police departments and city-supplied utilities, not far behind them. Frankford’s history is well-documented through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the onset of World War I, records of Frankford’s industry and people are substantially reduced in the historical record. While hundreds of documents, from industrial surveys to Victorian-era non-fiction on the area’s upper-class, illustrate Frankford’s story during America’s industrial boom, relatively little information regarding Frankford’s twentieth-century history is evident. This dearth of records suggests that the development of the area had reached a plateau. Due to the scarcity of documentation of Frankford’s more recent history, this context study focuses primarily on Frankford’s history before World War I.

Pre-Industrial Frankford (c. 1620s to c. 1700)

In the late 1630s, Swedish settlers came to the Frankford area, laying claim to land along the Frankford Creek, then called after the Lenape name the Quessinawomink Creek. The Swedes built log houses and established farms along the creek. Because of the lack of formal roads, these settlers traveled primarily by water. In the 1660s, the Swedish built a grist mill, locally known as “old Swedes Mill,” on the northeast bank of Frankford Creek, marking the beginning of Frankford’s industrial history. Shortly after the establishment of the Pennsylvania Colony, some of these settlers sold land patents granted earlier by the Duke of York (who was crowned King James II of England in 1685) to William Penn so that the construction of Philadelphia could begin.

Around this same time, English Quakers also retained large land patents in the Frankford area, likely in association with smaller lots in the newly envisioned city. During this decade, changes to the landscape of Frankford began to occur. Commission for and construction of King’s Broad Highway, later renamed Frankford Avenue, began. This road, which was the first legally planned and constructed road in Philadelphia, stretched from the Schuylkill River, through Philadelphia, to the Neshaminy Creek. While it was a main artery through Philadelphia, it remained a dirt road until

---

7 The King’s Broad Highway was renamed Frankford Avenue sometime between 1701 and 1725. I will hereafter refer to this road as Frankford Avenue. Hallowell, “History of Frankford,” 8-9.
1804. Extensive travel along Frankford Avenue was difficult, owing to the varied condition of the
road. Numerous petitions, dating from the early 1700s through the end of the century, to the
Governor and Council of Philadelphia to clear the road of fallen timber and other debris illustrate
the hazardous travel conditions, especially when traveling by carriage.

Through the seventeenth century, Frankford remained a small enclave, with only twenty-six
taxable households in 1693. Known as the Village of Frankford, the area was located on lands
patented to Thomas Fairman, Henry Waddy, and Robert Adams. Englishman Thomas Fairman was
the first to possess land in Frankford, although his legally recognized ownership did not occur until
he received a land patent in 1688. His patent gave him ownership to 200 acres on the northeast bank
of Frankford Creek. A Quaker, Fairman held meetings at his home at Shackamaxon further south
on the Delaware River front until 1684, when he donated land from his Frankford tracts on which
to erect a log-built meeting-house, the first formal meeting-house in Philadelphia. The meeting
used this building until 1704, when the completion of a larger, brick and stone meeting-house took
its place.

Quaker Henry Waddy also hailed from England and received his patent for 305 acres in
Frankford in 1682. Known as “Waddy’s Grange,” his land occupied the northwest side of Frankford
Avenue. Waddy was a member of the first Grand Jury of Philadelphia’s first court in January 1683.
He participated in planning the layout of Philadelphia’s first roads and bridges, such as Frankford
Avenue. Waddy also ran one of the first post offices in Philadelphia, a position bestowed upon him
by William Penn in 1683. Robert Adams obtained a patent for 495 acres in 1684. His land ran
northeast from Frankford Creek, situated between Henry Waddy’s property and Castor Avenue.

---

8 Leake et. al. v. City of Philadelphia 32 A 1110 (1895).
10 Ibid., 8.
11 Ibid., 8.
12 Waddy received patents for a total of 750 acres in Philadelphia, 350 of which were located in Frankford. Hallowell,
13 Carline Smedley, “Historical Sketch of Frankford Meeting,” in Howard Lee Barnes, ed., A History of Frankford,
   compiled for the Frankford Lions Club, no date, 24.
   Frankford Lions Club, no date, 29-30.
Industrial Frankford (c. 1700 to c. 1950s)

Early Phase, c. 1700 to c. 1800

During the second half of the eighteenth century, Frankford transformed from a farming community to an industrial one. The grist mill continued to operate under the ownership of William Ashbridge, but ceased to be the sole form of production in Frankford.\(^\text{16}\) In 1769, Frankford boasted of a number of independent manufacturers and merchants: tailors George Fox, John Wood, and James Tyson, wheelwrights Jacob and Rudolph Neff, mason James Pederick, shop-keepers Thomas Silkman and John Roberts, and innkeepers Rebecca McVaugh, who ran the Cross Keys Hotel, and John Hall.\(^\text{17}\) In 1775, Captain Oswald Eve managed a powdermill; John Decatur took over administrative duties there in 1778.\(^\text{18}\) The 1780s marked the establishment of two tanneries, owned by Joseph Buzby and Joseph Scull, respectively.\(^\text{19}\)

While still somewhat removed from Philadelphia, Frankford’s population began increasing steadily. The 1800 Philadelphia County Tax Lists for Oxford Township, where Frankford was located, show a variety of types of dwellings and assessed values. For example, a one-story log house owned by cooper Jonathan Dungan had an assessed value of $150, while Waln Grove, one of Frankford’s country seats, had a value of $6000.\(^\text{20}\)

Waln Grove, owned by the Waln family, influential Quakers in Philadelphia who typically practiced law or engaged in mercantile pursuits in the city, dates to the early 1770s. Hailed as one of the most beautiful residences in the area, Waln Grove sat on higher ground than the rest of Frankford and looked over acres of farmland and the Delaware River. Robert Waln, who commissioned the oldest portion of the house, had it built in the Georgian style:

> The house itself consists of a square central part of three storeys with a hip roof and lower wings with octagon ends to the north and south. The west door, adorned with pilasters and pediment, opens into a great square hall that occupies the whole front of the house and is in reality an enormous living room.\(^\text{21}\)

Robert Waln and his cousin Jesse Waln partnered an extensive import business. Later in life, Robert became involved in manufacturing, especially in Trenton’s cotton mills and Phoenixville’s iron foundries. Through his business ventures, Robert became quite successful, adding to the fortune he inherited from his father. Robert was also a member of Pennsylvania’s General Assembly. When he died, the Waln family continued to live at Waln Grove until the encroachment of manufacturing made the house “undesirable as a place of residence.”\(^\text{22}\)

\(^\text{17}\) “Early Industries of Northeast Phila.”
\(^\text{19}\) Hallowell, “History of Frankford,” 60.
\(^\text{22}\) Ibid., 335-338.
Near Waln Grove stood Port Royal House, located on the southern side of Tacony Street, between Church and Duncan Streets. Edward Stiles built the house in the Georgian style in 1761. The building was two stories, constructed of brick and stone with a slate roof, covered with shingles. Stiles, who established a successful import business in Philadelphia in the mid-eighteenth century, grew up in Bermuda, where his father Daniel Stiles was a member of the Assembly of Bermuda. Edward Stiles decided to establish his business in Philadelphia because of the close mercantile connection between the city and Bermuda. While Stiles’ primary residence was a townhouse on Walnut Street, he built Port Royal because “it was the fashion for men of means to have a country seat as well as a residence in the city.”

His family lived at Port Royal during the summer months. In the 1850s, the Lukens family purchased the property, converting it to boarding school use. As Frankford became more industrialized, the Lukens family abandoned the home. They retained ownership of the property until George W. Lukens died in 1899. His will stipulated that the building be donated to the Grand Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons for a Masonic home, hospital, or dispensary. The Lodge declined to accept the donation as it would have required them to pay unspecified annuities.

Another of Frankford’s country seats built during the eighteenth century was Chalkley Hall, which was built by Thomas Chalkley near Frankford Creek and the Pennsylvania Railroad. The 1937 HABS report for Chalkley Hall speculates that the railroad was present at the time of Chalkley’s land

---

23 Ibid., 340; Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, Reproduction number HABS PA,51-PHILA,5-.
25 Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, Reproduction number HABS PA,51-PHILA,5-.
purchase because the deeds refer to an existing brick messuage near the site. Thomas Chalkley constructed the two-story wing of the house in 1723. In 1776, Chalkley’s son-in-law, Abol James, built the larger, three-story section of the structure. The exterior was brick and stone; the pitch roofs were covered with slate, while the flat roofs were covered with tin. The interior of the home had plaster walls and wood floors. Chalkley Hall encompassed a number of architectural styles, including Colonial and Georgian.

Chalkley Hall was an imposing square structure of cream-coloured Manchester stone brought from England as ballast. It is three storeys in height, with a hipped roof topped by full-throated square chimneys. A range of five windows extends across the broad front, the central portion of which, embracing three middle windows, stands forth somewhat beyond the rest of the front wall and is surmounted by a pediment whose summit rises to the ridge of the main roof. At the corners of the offset and of the building, pilasters rise from ground to cornice, while belt courses between the storeys traverse the field of the wall.

Chalkley Hall, who commissioned the home, was a Philadelphia merchant who settled in Frankford in the 1720s to improve his health. Born in England, Chalkley was passionate about the Quaker faith, and worked as a missionary abroad. He would often combine his missionary work with his mercantile interests. He died in 1741 while visiting the Island of Tortola. Upon his death,

---

26 Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, Reproduction number HABS PA,51-PHILA,62-.
27 Ibid.
28 Eberlein, Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and Its Neighbourhood, 325
29 Ibid., 325.
30 Ibid., 325-327.
Chalkley Hall passed to his only child, Rebecca Chalkley, who married merchant Abel James in 1747. James built the main part of Chalkley Hall in the 1770s. After his death, the house passed to the Yorke family; the Whetherill family became the owners in 1817. The Whetherills still owned Chalkley Hall in the early twentieth century, but discontinued its use as the family residence because of railroad encroachments. While the structure was torn down in the 1930s, the State Museum of Pennsylvania stores some parts of the home; selected items from the interior are now owned by the Historical Society of Frankford.

As Frankford’s country seats began to dot the landscape, the town’s population continued to climb in the late eighteenth century. One reason for the increase was the yellow fever epidemic that gripped Philadelphia particularly hard during the summer and fall of 1793. Many of Philadelphia’s wealthier residents fled the city for the outlying areas to avoid the disease. Some relocators believed that the poor physical state of Philadelphia could explain the epidemics, and so desired to find safety in less crowded, well-maintained areas. One contemporary source estimated that over 12,000 people fled Philadelphia for neighboring areas. What is even more significant about the flight from the city is that Frankford, along with Germantown, became capitals in absentia. As those who took flight settled in their new quarters, the populations of many areas, including Frankford, grew significantly, leading to the introduction of a more rounded social infrastructure. Schools were one of the first major elements of this new system in Frankford.

In 1768, William Ashbridge, Rudolph Neff, and Isaiah Worrell used money raised by Frankford’s residents to purchase property at the corner of Cloud and Waln Streets on which to construct Frankford’s first school, named the Spring House School. Built of stone, the school soon became inadequate for its purpose as the population of Frankford continued to grow. In 1798, the sale of the building earned the trustees $675. At this time, Frankford’s Quakers erected a school on the southeast side of Waln Street, while the non-Quaker members of the Spring House School trust invested the money from the sale of the old school in the establishment of the Frankford Academy on Paul Street. In 1799, the Supreme Court granted a charter for the establishment of the Frankford Academy and construction began immediately.

The stone building fronted Paul Street and was two-and-one-half stories with a frame addition on the northeast side. A large front porch stretched across the entire front of the original building, which also had a cupola with a large bell. After the two outbreaks of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793 and 1798, the Supreme Court authorized the use of the Frankford Academy for

---

31 Ibid., 328-333.
32 Brian H. Harris, Frankford, Images of America (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 65.
34 R. La Roche, M.D., Yellow Fever Considered in Its Historical, Pathological, Etiological, and Therapeutic Relations, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1855), 70.
35 The Frankford Academy is now the site of the Rehoboth Methodist Episcopal Church. Eleanor Wright and Mary Wright, “Schools of Frankford,” in Howard Lee Barnes, ed., A History of Frankford, compiled for the Frankford Lions Club, no date, 109; Hallowell, History of Frankford, 55.
36 Eleanor Wright and Mary Wright, “The Schools of Frankford,” 111.
its September Term in 1799.\textsuperscript{37} In 1800, the Frankford Academy finally contained a school. However, since the building contained the only public hall in Frankford, the practice of using the Frankford Academy as a public forum continued until 1824 when the Frankford Lyceum was built.\textsuperscript{38} In 1806, the Frankford Presbyterian Church purchased the Academy and initially used it for their educational pursuits.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 113.
Middle Phase, c. 1800 to c. 1860

In 1800, the village of Frankford became incorporated. Renamed the Borough of Frankford, the act of incorporation laid out the geographical boundaries of the area:

Beginning at a point on the Frankford Creek between lands of Rudolph Neff and Henry Rorer; thence extending down the Frankford Creek 195 rods to the mouth of Little Tacony Creek; thence up the several courses of the Little Tacony Creek about 610 rods to land of Jacob Smith; thence south 38 degrees, 15 minutes, west 409 rods to the place of beginning.\(^40\)

The act further outlined the new borough’s government: two Burgesses, five assistant Burgesses, and a High Constable. The Burgesses had the responsibilities of maintaining the streets, governing the depth of wells, and preserving the party walls. They also assessed taxes for local improvements.\(^41\)

The first decade of the nineteenth century proved a period for substantial industrial growth in Frankford. In 1807, Captain Stephen Decatur, who fought in the Revolutionary War, opened a saw and grist mill on the northeast side of Frankford Creek; he also co-owned with William Lane a powder mill manufactory located on the northwest side of Powder Mill Lane. The powder mill was one of the largest of its kind in the United States during the early nineteenth century. Irénée Dupont visited Decatur’s powder mill while touring all such facilities before the establishment of the Dupont powder mills.\(^42\) In 1809, Samuel Martin established Frankford’s first textile mill, situated along Frankford Creek. The mill, which produced primarily wool blankets, floundered until the War of 1812 when Martin acquired a large government contract.\(^43\)

The War of 1812, and subsequent Panic of 1819, forced the economy of the United States to an essential halt. One result of this interruption was the curtailing of importation of goods into the United States during the war and embargo. After the war, American manufacturers began to increase the number of goods they exported to Europe. By 1823, manufacturing in the United States surged because the overseas demand for American cotton textiles had become so great that mills could barely keep pace.\(^44\) In Frankford, the years between 1812 and 1823 were slow in terms of industrial development and production. Only three new factories opened during these years: Henry Whitaker’s textile factory began operation in 1813, Isaac English established a pottery in 1816, but, most significantly, the Frankford Arsenal opened its doors in 1817.\(^45\)

Despite its later importance, the Frankford Arsenal was an unstable and fairly obscure operation for its first twenty years of existence. Between 1819 and 1831, seven different men held the commanding post there.\(^46\) In fact, during these years, the Arsenal was essentially a warehouse for storing the government’s arms and ammunitions. In this period, the government employed the

---

\(^40\) Hallowell, “History of Frankford,” 14.
\(^41\) Ibid., 14.
\(^45\) Hallowell, “History of Frankford,” 62.
\(^46\) Farley, Making Arms in the Machine Age, 15.
contract system for obtaining weaponry. They contracted most of their orders to private manufacturers.\textsuperscript{47} As warfare became more dangerous because of the increased strength, accuracy, and variety of weaponry, the United States government started to require more standardization in weapons' construction. The Frankford Arsenal began to produce its own arms and ammunition in the early 1820s.\textsuperscript{48} Before the late 1830s, all labor came from enlisted men. But, as the government became more bureaucratic, a process that began, albeit slowly, in the early 1820s, the Arsenal began to hire civilians to handle the new mountains of paperwork.\textsuperscript{49}

In the late 1840s, the government’s Ordinance Department came to the Frankford Arsenal to ensure flawless uniformity of weapons and interchangeability of parts.\textsuperscript{50} The new requirement of standardization meant that the Frankford Arsenal needed to be expanded in order to accommodate all the new equipment and employees necessary to achieve this goal. In 1847, the government purchased additional property upon which to expand the Arsenal's production capacity.\textsuperscript{51} By 1853, the Arsenal's new shops opened. Some of the work had been mechanized, but much of the labor was still done by hand.\textsuperscript{52}

The onset of the Civil War caused Frankford’s residents to become quite proud of the Arsenal’s contributions to the war effort.\textsuperscript{53} In contrast, before the war, many of Frankford’s inhabitants found the Arsenal to be an unwelcome government presence in their lives. During the Civil War, the Arsenal further expanded production under Major Theodore Laidley’s command. In 1862, Laidley instituted a building program that significantly enlarged the Arsenal, including a new blacksmith shop, machine shop, laboratory, and rolling mill.\textsuperscript{54} By 1864, the Arsenal began taking on more civilian employees, in this case as craftsmen and laborers.\textsuperscript{55} As the war ended, the Arsenal seems to have slipped back into obscurity, perhaps due to the construction of larger and more modern facilities across the United States, until its closure in 1977.

Between 1820 and the late 1850s, Frankford’s industries began their steady expansion. At least twenty manufactories opened during these years, with approximately sixty-five percent specializing in textile production, dyeing, or finishing. Other industries included tanneries, machine and wheelwright shops, lumber yards, chemical manufacturing, and coal production.\textsuperscript{56} Despite the variety of commercial interests, textiles clearly dominated the industrial landscape of Frankford. Often, Frankford’s more prominent residents owned these operations.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 16-17.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 19-25.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 47-48.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 77-81.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 84.
Henry Whitaker opened Cedar Grove Mills in 1814, with additions through 1890. After his
death, Whitaker’s sons William and Robert took over administration of the mill. Their textiles
consisted of cotton goods, chiefly tickings. The factory was located on Tabor Street and Olney
Road, next to the Tacony Creek. The buildings sprawled over a large area. Water and eventually
steam provided power to the operations. Cedar Grove Mills employed a large number of people,
most of whom were girls.\textsuperscript{57}

Another large factory was Jeremiah Horrocks’ Frankford Dye, Bleach, and Finishing Works,
first erected in 1821. The plant produced dye, bleach, finished cotton goods, and cotton yarns and
warps. Located at Adams and Sellers Streets, the factory consisted of various stories, built with stone
walls, and used steam power.\textsuperscript{58} Jeremiah Horrocks was one of Frankford’s leading residents. An
Englishman, Horrocks came to the United States with his family and a large group of friends in
1817. He settled in Frankford in 1821, immediately opening his works, the first of its kind in
Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{59} Ten years later, the success of Frankford’s Building Association inspired the creation
of other similar groups.\textsuperscript{60}

Because so many factories and mills opened in the 1820s, a new population of laborers took
residence in Frankford at this time. These workers generally lived in homes rented from their
employers. Some of these factory owners, such as Jeremiah Horrocks and Samuel Pilling, formed
the Oxford Provident Building Association in January 1831, the first such organization in the United
States, so these workers could purchase their own homes.\textsuperscript{61} Membership cost five dollars and
members paid a monthly fee of three dollars per share of the association.

A loan of $500 per share was authorized to the stockholders offering in writing the highest
premium. No member could hold more than five shares; and at the semiannual elections
each member was entitled to one vote for each share of stock held. The association was to
continue until every member had an opportunity of purchasing a dwelling-house, after which
the assets were to be divided...The Oxford Provident matured in ten years.\textsuperscript{62}

After the completion of the first association, two others followed in its place, enabling many of
Frankford’s laborers to purchase homes. The first person to use their share from the Association to
borrow money was comb-maker Comly Rich in 1831. With his loan, Rich purchased a small house
at 4276 Orchard Street. The house was about fifteen feet square and built on a rough stone
foundation. When it was built, the home was two-and-one-half stories, with a living room on the
first floor, a second-floor bedroom, and an attic bedroom. In 1834, Rich took out another loan from
the Association, adding a lean-to kitchen to the rear of the structure.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{57} Hexamer General Surveys, vol. 29, plates 2762-2763.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., plates 1729-1730.
\textsuperscript{59} Dixon, “Frankford’s Industrial Development,” in Howard Lee Barnes, ed., A History of Frankford, compiled for the
Frankford Lions Club, no date, 202.
\textsuperscript{60} Frederick A. Cleveland, Funds and Their Uses: A Book Describing the Methods, Instruments, and Institutions Employed in Modern
\textsuperscript{61} Dixon, “Industry in Frankford,” 196.
\textsuperscript{63} Dixon, “Industry in Frankford,” 197-199.
As more of Frankford’s laboring class found housing more accessible, and as the population of Frankford continued to grow, social institutions followed in kind. Frankford’s churches were no exception. The Frankford Baptist Church was one of the first of this period in Frankford’s history. In the early 1800s, the congregation of about twenty-five people worshiped outdoors in an area called “Smith’s Woods” off of Asylum Road. In 1807, the group purchased a lot on Pine and Edwards Streets, on which they built a large stone church. That same year, the church joined the Philadelphia Association of Baptist Churches and began receiving financial support from them.64

Saint Mark’s Protestant Episcopal Church was another early church in Frankford. In 1832, the church purchased a lot on the west side of Franklin Street; construction began three years later. The finished structure was a one-story gable and frame building, which was dedicated as the Tabernacle Church. Two years later, the congregation outgrew its building and the church raised money to purchase a lot on Frankford Avenue. This building was not completed until 1848. Two wings were added onto the rear of the church in 1859.65 Frankford’s first Roman Catholic Church was St. Joachim’s, initially located at Frankford Avenue and Harrison Street in a stone church built in 1845.66 The Church of the New Jerusalem, or Swedenborgian, which was the product of the Free-will Baptists Society, purchased a lot at Hedge and Plum Streets in 1819.67

Another result of the burgeoning population of Frankford was the establishment of various schools in the borough. Prior to the establishment of the public school system in Philadelphia in 1818, most of Frankford’s educational facilities, with the exceptions of the Frankford Academy, were church-based institutions. One such institution was the Clermont Academy, established in 1806 by John and Thomas Carré, Catholics who hailed from the Alsace region of France.68 In 1821 the educational landscape of Frankford changed when the first public school in the Borough opened its doors. The school was a two-story stone building on Frankford Avenue, northwest of Foulkrod Street.69 Between 1830 and 1837, the Frankford Academy rented one of its rooms to the public school. The first formal public school in Frankford was the John Marshall School, erected in 1841 at the corner of Sellers and Franklin Streets.70 The John Marshall School building contained the Boys’ Grammar School and the Girls’ Grammar School. In 1843, the combined enrollment for both grammar schools was 204 students, although the combined average attendance was about 180 students.71 Frankford also had a secondary school for African American children, located at the corner of Meadow and Cherry Streets.72

65 “Churches of Frankford,” in Howard Lee Barnes, ed., *A History of Frankford*, compiled for the Frankford Lions Club, no date, 139-143.
67 Ibid., 41.
71 Wright, “Schools of Frankford,” 118.
Another element of Frankford’s social infrastructure was the establishment of some of the area’s first fraternal organizations. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows was the first such association in Frankford, established in 1829. The society was a beneficial and charitable organization. Members received weekly and funeral benefits, and the group also gave generously to the needy or those affected by unforeseen adversity. Frankford’s lodge was established in response to a rapid growth in the order’s membership in the 1820s. The Sons of Temperance was the next group to open a lodge in Frankford. Founded in 1844, this group passionately supported the cause of temperance. In 1847, the Patriotic Sons of America established a lodge in Frankford. This order originated in Philadelphia in the same year, and initially membership was exclusively for men under twenty-one years of age. This group’s main purpose was to cultivate strong patriotism in the American people; they also provided death benefits to members. Frankford also boasted a Mason’s lodge, with membership beginning in 1853. This lodge was one of the only chartered lodges in Philadelphia.

Another interesting social element in Frankford’s society was the Friends Asylum for the Insane (now known as Friends Hospital). Quakers founded the institution in 1811, and construction of the institute was completed in 1817. Located near the Frankford branch of the Philadelphia and Reading Railway, it was the second-oldest hospital of its kind in the United States. At first, the hospital only accepted patients of the Quaker faith; this changed in 1834, when religion no longer became a factor for admittance. The hospital was a large stone building, far from public thoroughfares. The center section of the building was three stories; this section was flanked by two wings, each three stories in height. In 1827, the hospital added a separate wing for especially disturbed patients.

In 1854, all of Philadelphia’s outlying boroughs and villages were consolidated into the city, unifying the area under the municipal government of Philadelphia. Frankford became known as the twenty-third ward. After the merger, some of Frankford’s infrastructure became part of the municipal government of Philadelphia. A police department formed, located in a stone building on Frankford Avenue, near one of the area’s many factories. Further, city water began flowing into Frankford, from a basin first located at the corner of Sixth Street and Lehigh Avenue. Later, water came from the Lardner Point pumping station in Tacony. Around 1908, Frankford’s water came through a filtration plant in Torresdale, which increased the quality of water the neighborhood received. A paid fire department formed in the early 1870s, known as the No. 7 Engine Company. They housed their equipment in the Decatur Engine House on the southwest side of Church Street. In 1903, a new fire station was built on the southeast side of Frankford Avenue, near Ruan Street.

Between 1868 and 1880, all of the unpaved streets in Frankford were lined with rough stone from

74 Ibid., 2076.
75 Ibid., 2075.
76 Ibid., 2066.
79 Ibid., 26, 33.
80 Ibid., 33.
local quarries. Since the stones used were irregular, travel on those streets did not improve. However, between 1890 and 1910, all of the uneven streets were repaved with asphalt or bricks.\textsuperscript{81} After 1885, almost every street in Frankford had a sewer running under it. Before this time, sewage would sit in the gutters until washed away by rain.\textsuperscript{82} In the late 1880s, electric street lights began to dot the once-dark nighttime streets of Frankford. The electricity came from the Frankford Electric Light and Power Company. Soon thereafter, the Suburban Electric Light Company received the contract for lighting Frankford’s streetlamps.\textsuperscript{83}

**Late Phase, c. 1865 to c. 1920s**

Frankford was about to go through another phase in its industrial and development: between the Panic of 1857 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, Frankford’s industrial growth once again ground to a halt. In 1857, when the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company failed, British investors removed funds from American banks, the fall of grain prices, and massive layoffs occurred in the industrial sector, the United States fell into a sharp economic downturn that impeded industrial production and growth in all manufacturing areas. The economic and social chaos caused by the Civil War made the early 1860s a poor time to expand or create a business. However, in the aftermath of these economic and social crises, an economic boom spurred the growth of industry across the United States, and Frankford was no exception.

In 1869, over forty manufactories lay within Frankford’s borders, with products ranging from the woolen carpets of the Tremont Carpet Factory to the steel merchandise of the Philadelphia Steel Works. During the late 1860s, Frankford’s industries were still primarily textile-focused. Richard, Alfred, and Harry Garsed owned three of these textile factories: Wingohocking Mills, Frogmore Mills, and Willow Brook Mill. Richard Garsed was the most successful and ingenious of the three brothers. His life in textiles began at the young age of nine when he worked as an operator in a mill in New Hope, Pennsylvania. His father hired him as an apprentice in 1830. In the early 1840s, Garsed inherited his father’s power-loom manufacturing business. At this time, he also began producing damask table cloths on the very looms his father had taught him to build. Garsed moved to Frankford in 1843 and became very active in the movement to improve the efficiency of textile machinery. His involvement in this movement led him to invent a way to increase the speed of looms from 80 to 140 picks per minute.\textsuperscript{84} With his brothers, he eventually owned and operated three of Frankford’s many textile mills.

Wingohocking Mills, which was constructed in 1853, was located at the northwest corner of Ashland Street, adjacent to Frankford Creek. The mill produced cotton yarn using steam power to run the machinery. The mill consisted of one large L-shaped building and a number of smaller, separate buildings. In the main building, there were areas for warping, spinning, reeling, carding,

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 33.
spreading, and picking. The smaller buildings held a dye house, a machine and carpentry shop, a blacksmith, an office, and a stable.\(^85\)

The Garsed brothers also owned Frogmore Mills, which was located on Powder Mill Road abutting the Frankford Creek. The machines used steam and water power to create wool and cotton textiles. This factory was the largest of the three owned by the Garsed brothers. It was a large complex of brick and stone buildings. The main house was three stories with a basement. The basement held the warping, spooling, and finishing operations; the first floor contained the weaving equipment; carding took place on the second floor; and the third floor was reserved for mule spinning. The mill also had separate buildings that bore a machine shop and engine room, a cotton picking a spreading house, a drying house, a boiler room, a dye house, a storehouse, an office, and a stable.\(^86\)

Willow Brook Mill was the smallest of the three Garsed operations, located at the northeast corner of Church Street, next to the Little Tacony Creek. The mill used steam power and produced wool and cotton textiles. One large stone building held the spinning, weaving, cotton picking and spreading, warping and finishing, and carding operations. There were also separate structures containing a dye house, a waste house, a carriage house, a stable, and a coal pit.\(^87\)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Frankford’s industry had expanded even further. In 1912, over 150 factories and mills were situated in Frankford. Textiles remained the dominant industry; however, a plethora of new businesses joined the ranks, such as the Yarrow Candy Company, M. L. Shoemaker and Company’s fertilizer factory, and the Keen-o-Phone Company which manufactured talking machines.\(^88\) This era marks the peak of Frankford’s industrial history.

Frankford’s social and municipal framework also expanded during this period. Through the end of the nineteenth century, numerous complaints about the long travel times and inconvenience Frankford residents faced while traveling into the city persuaded the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company to create the Frankford Elevated Passenger Railway Company in June 1901.\(^89\) The FEPRC received permission to build a double track on the following route: beginning at South Street, running along Delaware Avenue to Vine Street, then along to Front Street, to Callowhill Street, and to New Market Street, then to Laurel, and finally to Frankford Avenue.\(^90\) Construction initially began in 1912, but the arrival of World War I forced its postponement.\(^91\) Finally, in 1915, construction of the Frankford “El” was slated to continue in September of that year. The FEPRC awarded the contract for its erection to James D. Dorney for the amount of $142,590.\(^92\)

---

\(^{88}\) Hallowell, “History of Frankford,” 63-64.
\(^{90}\) S.D.V. Burr, Rapid Transit in New York and in Other Great Cities, prepared for the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York, 1905, 250.
\(^{91}\) Edmund Stirling and Morris Llewellyn Cooke, “The Fate of the Five-Cent Fare,” National Municipal Review 10 (1921), 178-179.
\(^{92}\) “Railway Construction,” Railway Age Gazette 59 (July-December 1915), 449.
While building the Frankford El, engineers developed two major structural advances in order to make the railway quieter for the residents of Frankford. First, laborers filled the interstices of the H-beam uprights with concrete, which diminished the tremors caused by passing trains from traveling down the metal supports and creating loud vibrations. Further, the supports for the rock ballast in the road bed were constructed from poured concrete, preventing the same acoustic nuisance. After a decade of waiting, the Frankford Elevated Railway opened on November 4, 1922.

---

Post-Industrial Phase, c. 1930 to c. 1950

In October 1929, the stock market crashed, sending out aftershocks for the next ten years. Frankford did not feel the rumblings of economic hardship immediately after the crash. In November 1929, a new industrial section in Frankford along Erie Avenue became available for development. According to the Northeast Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, “millions of dollars have been invested in grounds, buildings and equipment. Hundreds of workers are employed.”\(^94\) Despite this seemingly encouraging sign of economic growth, Frankford and the city of Philadelphia began to suffer under a tightening economic recession. While Frankford boasted of a new industrial section, the sheriff of Philadelphia auctioned off almost 12,000 properties in the city.\(^95\)

By 1931, growing taxation and unemployment began to encumber the industrial growth of Northeast Philadelphia. In this year, the Northeast Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce conducted a survey to determine the number of businesses closed due to the economic depression. In their journal, *The Nor’easter*, they declined to reveal the results of this survey because “if given publicity [they] would do Philadelphia no good.”\(^96\) In fact, the Chamber of Commerce mostly avoided discussion of the economic hardships of the 1930s in their journal. The most obvious indications of distress are the quotes that grace most of the covers of *The Nor’easter*. In April 1931, the cover proclaims that “The Sage of Somerton says – ‘No fortunes were ever made selling the country short. Think, talk, act for prosperity – it’s just around the corner.’”\(^97\) Six months later, the cover displays the following: “Aid progress by judicious spending – Burlhome businessman.”\(^98\)

Frankford’s citizens tried to assuage the difficulties faced by many of the area’s families. Relief societies cropped up, providing clothing, food, and even money to the most disadvantaged. The Emergency Relief Committee of the Twenty-Third Ward established a soup kitchen at the Frankford police station. They served over 30,000 people and donated almost 2,500 pieces of clothing to families with absolutely no income.\(^99\)

Housing data and maps from J. M. Brewer’s 1934 map of Philadelphia and from the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation’s 1936 and 1937 provide a bleak view of Frankford during this period. Brewer’s map distinguished ethnicities such as Italian, African-American, and Jewish by color-coding every neighborhood in Philadelphia. He also highlighted every industrial area in the city an obvious red. Brewer took his work a step further when he classified the blocks within neighborhoods with A, B, C, or D. Areas marked with an A were desirable. B areas were still considered habitable, just not as fashionable. C areas were zones in obvious decline. D sections carried the stigma of being hazardous. In Brewer’s 1934 map, Frankford is primarily classified under C and D, although some areas away from the most industrial parts of the neighborhood received a B.\(^100\)

---

\(^{94}\) “Industrial Employment in the Philadelphia Area,” *The Nor’easter* (December 1929), 17.


\(^{96}\) “City’s Backbone Threatened,” *The Nor’easter* (May 1931), 3.

\(^{97}\) Front Cover, *The Nor’easter* (April 1931).

\(^{98}\) Front Cover, *The Nor’easter* (October 1931).

\(^{99}\) “Relief Committee Great Help to Needy Families,” newspaper article from the scrapbook collection at the Historical Society of Frankford, vol. 27, p. 30.

\(^{100}\) J. M. Brewer’s Map of Philadelphia, 1934, [http://cml.upenn.edu/redlining/brewer.html](http://cml.upenn.edu/redlining/brewer.html) [accessed 21 May 2009].
The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, a federally-created entity which protected consumers from predatory lenders and offered assistance to lenders who had many mortgages in default, created residential security maps for over two hundred cities in the United States during the 1930s. Three such maps were created in Philadelphia in 1935, 1936, and 1937. The data from this map diverges from Brewer’s map regarding the Frankford area. The report grades Frankford and Bridesburg as the two “Still Desirable” areas in the 23rd Ward. The report further explains this classification: “Houses are chiefly modern and fairly modern five and six room, brick, row type. Inhabitants are mostly native whites of white collar and skilled mechanic class.”

As the Great Depression lifted and the United States’ participation in World War II began, many of Frankford’s men left the area to fight in Europe and Asia. Residents supported their troops in a number of ways. New inductees participated in at least one celebratory send-off, which consisted of a march from Frankford High School to the Frankford Elevation Railroad terminal, where they began their journeys to war. The Frankford Boys Club also aided the local war effort by collecting scrap metal for use in weapons and ammunition manufacturing and by sorting ration slip for the local soldiers. The Frankford Hospital hosted a Victory Garden Fete in the summer of 1943, raising over $74,000 in donations. The United States Navy even opened a supply depot in Frankford at the corner of Martin’s Mill Road and Oxford Avenue.

After World War II, life in Frankford continued. To make way for new construction, historic Chalkley Hall was demolished in 1952, only after the woodwork, the elegant staircase, and the floor beams and joists were removed. Some factories from Frankford’s peak of industrial development were still in operation. Globe Dye Works celebrated its ninetieth year of service in the early 1950s. Smedley Brothers, a retail lumber yard originally located at the southwest corner of Tacony and Church Streets, maintained its business in Frankford after seventy-five years of existence.

Conclusion

103 “Selectees to Get Big Send-Off Next Wednesday,” newspaper article from the scrapbook collection at the Historical Society of Frankford, vol. 30, p. 30.
107 “Chalkley Hall Being Razed after 228 Years,” newspaper article from the scrapbook collection at the Historical Society of Frankford, vol. 33, p. 43.
While Frankford's more recent past is not well documented, its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history is abundantly available. Swedish settlers came to the Frankford area in the mid-seventeenth century; English colonists soon followed and realized that Frankford Creek could supply enough water power to sustain profitable businesses. Frankford was a small hamlet with a variety of small-scale entrepreneurs when Oswald Eve opened his powder mill there in 1775. After the War of 1812 and the Panic of 1819, Frankford transformed into a center of manufacturing for the Philadelphia area. Textiles proved the most popular choice for individuals who wished to establish private industry. Because of the expansion of manufacturing, and the concurrent increase in numbers of employees, Frankford's population climbed steadily in the early nineteenth century. This population growth, and the lack of proper housing to support that growth, led to the establishment of the United States' first building association, the Oxford Provident Building Association, in 1831. Philadelphia's consolidation in 1854 provided Frankford with city services such as water and electricity, as well as a city police force and fire houses.

After the Civil War ended, Frankford underwent another peak in industrial growth and diversification. The area continued to attract new industry. While textiles continued to be the most commonly-produced goods, many other types of products began to come out of Frankford's mills, such as toys, wigs, and lumber. Frankford continued to expand through the early twentieth century. However, after World War I, documentation of Frankford's history and industry becomes less apparent. Frankford's industries suffered through the Great Depression and probably experienced another small boom during World War II. Clear documentation of the losses of the 1930s and growth of the 1940s is unavailable. The shortage of primary documents describing Frankford in the early twentieth century is in stark contrast to the incredible number of sources from the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century was a time of great prosperity and growth in Frankford; local histories glowingly describe how wonderful the area is. The lack of twentieth-century sources suggests that Frankford went through a significant decline and community pride began to wane. Despite this shortage of information regarding Frankford's more current history, the most significant eras have been well-documented and demonstrate that Frankford's industries and residents contributed significantly to Philadelphia's nineteenth-century economy and history.
Geographic Summary
The former borough of Tacony lies in what is conventionally called near Northeast Philadelphia on the Delaware River. The river, Cottman Avenue, Frankford Avenue and Levick Street act as informal borders to the area. Wissinoming Creek previously ran through the area, but
the creation of an extensive sewer system culverted the creek by 1902.  From Frankford Avenue, which runs parallel to the Delaware River, the land slopes gently and evenly down to the river, in sharp contrast to the more topographically varied neighborhoods to the northwest.

Tacony is roughly rectangular in shape, with the slightly longer edge of Cottman Avenue and Levick Street running perpendicular to the Delaware River. Two distinct zones exist within Tacony. The first is an industrial section, starting at the river and ending at the combined boundary of State Road, the railroad, and Interstate 95. Disston Park runs for eight blocks between the railroad and Keystone Street from Levick Street to Princeton Avenue. Continuing inland from the park, Tacony becomes almost entirely residential, with commercial corridors along Torresdale Avenue and Frankford Avenue. Tacony has a wide variety of residential buildings, including one- and two-story rowhouses, twins, and single family dwellings. The neighborhood is also peppered with pocket parks and churches.

Pre-Industrial Tacony (c. 1700 to c. 1870)

Transportation, manufacturing, and a reformist industrial patriarch characterize the history of the neighborhood of Tacony. Changes in transportation continually reshaped Tacony, from the arrival of the first railroad in the mid-1800s to the trolley lines at the beginning of the 1900s and the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge a few decades later. Tacony might have become just another industrial town if not for the direction of Henry Disston (1819-1878), whose paternalistic views shaped the physical and social landscape of the area. Other manufacturers poured into town shortly after Disston set up his saw works in 1871, diluting Disston’s control. The interplay of manufacturing — both paternalistic and capitalistic — and transportation molded Tacony from rural farmland into a diverse residential and industrial neighborhood.

The gently sloping land and the winding Wissinoming made the area that would become Tacony an attractive place for early subsistence farming settlement and would eventually become an area for country seats for wealthy Philadelphians. Records for the earliest period are scarce, but by 1679 Tacony was described as a “village of Swedes and Finns.” Three years later, the Englishman Thomas Holmes arrived in the area on official business of surveying the land for patent by William Penn. At the time, “several purchasers [were] already seated and placed” and the survey served to formalize boundaries in the area. In 1683, William Penn gave authorization to Henry Waldy to set up the first post office in the Philadelphia area in Tacony. Penn also authorized Waldy to supply horses to travelers destined for New Castle (Delaware) or “the falls” (of the Delaware River, or Trenton), suggesting that Tacony was a stopping point on the main route from Philadelphia.

---

111 Jasper Danckaerts, Journal of Jasper Danckaerts, 1679-1680 (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 100. It should be noted that in early settlement villages, existing Lenni Lenape villages in Philadelphia and its immediate surroundings were at first shared by Europeans. There does not appear to be any literature that indicates that the village of Tacony was a native encampment, but the name Tacony, like Wissinoming, are both from the Lenape. See John L. Cotter, Daniel G. Roberts, and Michael Parrington, The Burried Past: An Archaeological History of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 29.
In 1760, Lynford Lardner, brother-in-law of William Penn, built a Delaware River-front mansion on the north side of the mouth of the Wissinoming Creek, and called his new property Tacony. The Lardner's maintained a summer home at Tacony for many years. Lynford’s son John Lardner established Magnolia Hill on river-front property adjacent to his father’s on the north. John Lardner fought in the Revolutionary War and crossed the Delaware with George Washington as part of the First Troop Philadelphia City Calvary. From the perspective of the late nineteenth century, a descendant of Magnolia Hall owners recalled the life in the area in the eighteenth century, noting that “You must not judge [the period] by what you see now at Tacony. The state of society then was more like what it now is in our Western States. Land and provisions were plenty and the laborers married young.”

Even the first stagecoach that turned the forest trail known as King’s Highway into Frankford Avenue in 1776 seems to have little impact on the growth of the town. Early histories of Tacony lack substantive information regarding the earliest phases of the town, suggesting little development. The area remained a small hamlet of farms and country seats and summer homes well into the 1800s.

Further evidence of Tacony’s early life as a place of retreat is evidenced by the formation of the Tacony Cottage Association. Formed in the mid-1800s to support building St. Vincent’s Orphan Asylum, the association bought up 49 acres of farmland in Tacony and used half for land for the asylum and sold the other half as speculative lots for summer cottages.

1832 marks the beginning of the story that set Tacony on its course to becoming a remarkably significant company town. In that year the Pennsylvania Legislature passed an act to incorporate the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad Company, effectively connecting Philadelphia directly to New York City. Residents of Philadelphia reacted negatively to this announcement, and opposed the idea of a railroad terminus near Market and Front Streets. Accounts from 1840 tell of angry mobs harassing rail workers, tearing up tracks as they were laid down, arson, and the ensuing riots preventing fire fighters from extinguishing the blaze so that the building burnt to the ground. The protesters were so vehement in their objections that plans had to be abandoned to bring the railroad all the way into town. In 1846, Tacony became the terminus for the railroad and passengers had to take a ferry to complete their voyage into Philadelphia.

---

120 Ibid., 2184-2185.
For all the intense protestation, by 1849 the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad ran all the way into Philadelphia. Tacony retained the railroad depot, and several hotels were built to accommodate railroad travelers. Despite the railroad, Tacony remained a relatively small hamlet clustered around the depot, although a grid of streets appeared soon after the depot. Country seat estates were scattered across the land north of the railroad, but development was slow. An early drawing shows the relatively undeveloped nature of the town even after the railroad. The drawing depicts a hotel with a wharf to accommodate railroad and ferry travel; small boats line the riverbank to the north, and a multi-story tree house, consisting of several levels of wooden decking encircling the tree, can be seen next to the hotel. While the presence of the tree house may seem like artistic license, a photograph from 1870 confirms that the drawing depicted a built condition, including the

---


The similarities between the photograph and the drawing are so striking that it seems as if the drawing was made from the photograph. An 1862 map shows that Tacony grew only slightly in thirteen years, retaining its pastoral setting.

In 1855, the first member of the Disston family arrived in Tacony, not for work, but for recreation. Thomas Disston bought land for a summer house from the Tacony Cottage Association and often entertained his family at his country seat. He was not alone—many wealthy Philadelphians used the city’s outlying areas, including Tacony, as areas to escape from Philadelphia proper. It was not until nearly twenty years later when Thomas’s brother Henry purchased land in Tacony for entirely different reasons, the pursuit of industry and the creation of an ideal company town.

---

124 The location of the original drawing and photograph are unknown. Copies of the drawing and photograph are in the collection of the Historical Society of Tacony.

Industrial Tacony (c. 1870-c. 1970)

Disston Saw Works, ca. 1917, image courtesy of the Tacony Historical Society

_The Disston Saw Works_

In 1871, only 75 families lived in the Tacony area and in 1875 the population was less than 200 people.¹²⁶ The arrival of Henry Disston’s industrial and social enterprise would change that and establish Tacony as a leading example of a company town. When the Pennsylvania Secretary of Internal Affairs sought an example to counter balance the labor troubles plaguing the state, he found an example in Tacony. The 1887 report sites Henry Disston’s company and town as a shining example of harmony between workers and management.

A visit to this well ordered healthful village, a peep into the homes of the workingmen, and inspection of the factories, the evident attention to light, air and other sanitary arrangement, the fair treatment which the employed has always received, these things must convince the visitor that at Tacony sure progress has been made in solving the “labor question.”¹²⁷

Disston emigrated to the United States with his family in 1833 from England at the age of 14. The death of his father three days after their arrival pushed young Henry into an apprenticeship

with a saw maker. By 1840, Disston saved enough capital to start his own company and after false starts and unfortunate accidents, including fire and dishonest landlords, he was able to make a name for himself producing high quality saws. He expanded his business and greatly increased his profits when he began to make his own steel, a trade that was almost the exclusive province of the highly skilled English steelworkers. Soon, Disston's factory outgrew its original site at Front and Laurel Streets in what is now known as the Northern Liberties neighborhood of Philadelphia. With capital earned from the production and sale of products for the Civil War, including swords, bayonets, and plate steel, Disston purchased a large tract of farmland in Tacony.  

Disston had been to the Tacony area before while visiting his brother’s summer house. Tacony would offer Disston the ideal location for expanding his steel works. The railroad provided easy access to and from the site and the open land was a blank slate upon which Disston could create his ideal town. Disston was a deeply religious man heavily involved in the Presbyterian church. Motivated by his religious beliefs as well as the principals of Victorian industrial paternalism, Disston sought to improve the station of the common man. In 1871, he finally purchased cheap farmland, 6 acres for factory works and 390 acres for worker housing.

With such a small population, Tacony could not accommodate the large work force Disston would need. At first, he moved small portions of the factory to Tacony, housing his workers in the Buttermilk Hotel. In 1876, Disston began construction of the first worker housing at the intersection of Knorr and Keystone Streets. These first buildings consisted of one block of rowhouses on Knorr and about four blocks of double, or semi-detached, houses surrounding this block. These double houses were of particular importance to Disston social engineering, as he saw the spacious lots as way to provide families with air and light, element he found crucial to a person’s well being. Some of these houses were later destroyed during the creation of Disston Park in 1894. Housing built on Disston land eventually compromised the majority of residential space in the Tacony community. The deed restrictions placed on this housing and the workers brought over as Disston’s workforce would shape the community for decades to come. The deed restrictions included banning the sale or production of alcohol, any business using steam power, stables, and any business which may have been physically noxious to the surrounding community. While some of these may seem overbearing, they helped fostered a healthy community focused solely on the Disston Saw Works.

An 1876 map of Tacony shows the slow beginnings of the town’s growth. Disston’s original worker houses are the only substantial residential buildings north of the tracks, and only then by a stone’s throw. The town huddled south of the railroad on either side of the depot with two churches and a public school. However, by 1882, 1600 men worked in the saw works, most of whom resided within walking distance to the factory.

132 Hopkins, plate 47.
133 Scharf and Wescott, 3: 2268.
The Post-Disston Industrial Boom

Tacony did not remain an island of saw manufacturing for long. Disston made improvements to the town beyond housing for his workers. He was responsible for street and utility improvements, making Tacony a very attractive place for other manufacturers. The last part of the nineteenth century welcomed many manufacturing firms to Tacony and they all chose land along the Delaware waterfront.

Many of the businesses opening in Tacony moved from other parts of Philadelphia in order to take advantage of the space and public utilities. France’s Packing Company produced steam packing machines. South & Caven Company was in the business of stone and sand crushing. Delany & Company produced curled hair and hide glue. Gillinder Glass, with 225 employees, made gas and electrical glassware. Despite being the largest glass works in the country, the firm did not survive the Great Depression. In 1885, Erben Search Company worsted mill moved to Tacony. In 1893. L. Marten’s Black Company moved to Tacony after outgrowing their original factory in Germantown. They manufactured lamp black, a crucial ingredient in printers ink and vital to Philadelphia’s growing printing industry.

Several of the factories in Tacony are significant beyond their simple part in the post-Disston industrial explosion. In 1881 the Tacony Iron Works opened on land directly south of the Disston saw works. The Iron Works were renowned for their skilled steel workers, and the firm provided structural iron work for dome of the new Philadelphia City Hall as well as casting the enormous statue of William Penn that crowns the dome. The owner of the company, Francis Shumann, was indirectly responsible for another feather in Tacony’s cap: his nephew Frank Shuman. The elder Shumann called the inventive young Frank to Tacony to assist in the work on Philadelphia’s City Hall.

Frank Shuman invented a way to electroplate iron with aluminum, drastically reducing maintenance needs for City Hall. His success with the project won over high ranking official in Philadelphia and Tacony. With social and financial ties solidified, Frank Shuman was able to open two companies. The American Wire Glass Company was formed in 1891 in order to capitalize on a patent he had previously worked on that involved imbedding wire into glass. The Simplex Concrete Piling Company arose from work done in Tacony on concrete pilings. Shuman’s work on electroplating and safety glass merited two cover appearances in *Scientific American*, drawing international attention to Tacony as a hotbed of innovation.

The enormous financial success of the safety glass allowed Shuman to become a full time inventor. In 1894, he built a large inventor’s compound at 4600 Disston Street that included a house with two detached workshops. It was in these workshops that he turned to his life’s passion: solar energy. He spent many years developing his idea for a low-pressure steam engine and solar

135 Commemorative “Tacony” program held at the Tacony Historical Society.
energy and built the first successful solar powered steam engine. His ideas would eventually carry him to Egypt where his solar powered steam turbines were used to irrigate land surrounding the Nile River.

Even though the majority of Tacony residents welcomed the growth of the town and infrastructure improvements with open arms, there was occasionally protest. Notably, William Gatzmer, the man who secured the original charter for the Trenton Philadelphia Railroad 1846, directed his lawyer to send an angry letter to South & Caven Stone Crushing regarding the dirty state of their operations. The 1906 letter complains that the crushed gravel “amounts to the same as broken glass” and is “very detrimental to the health of Mr. Gatzmer and his family.” The letter demanded immediate action, but as it was sent by a tax attorney it is doubtful that South & Caven took much action. A souvenir program from 1906 bemoans the loss of the Buttermilk Hotel, destroyed in 1878 to make way for Disston’s growing factory while lauding the ever expanding manufacturing capability of Tacony.

After Henry Disston died on March 16, 1878, the business carried on under the management of his sons. In 1899, the sons of Disston moved the last of the saw works to Tacony from the original Northern Liberties site at Front Street and Laurel Street, twenty-seven years after their father broke ground for his factory. Disston’s arrival transformed Tacony from a sleepy railroad terminus known for its undeveloped setting into a thriving manufacturing hub.

The industrial landscape was not the only thing changing in Tacony. Growth of industry brought enormous growth in population and these new residents needed roads, utilities, and improved transportation.

As evidence of population growth during the time of industrial expansion, the late nineteenth century saw the founding of many fraternal organizations. The Odd Fellows started the Henry Disston Lodge in October of 1885, and the Free Order of the Masons founded Lodge No.600 on November 27, 1893. The St. Leo Parish Knights of Columbus started a chapter in early 1908. In addition to these fraternal organizations, the Tacony Club was founded in 1891 and acted mostly as a social club for business men in the area. It was one of the few places alcohol could be served in Tacony, particularly after they constructed their own building in 1909. The Tacony Fathers’ Association started in 1917 with the objective of “bettering living conditions” in town. By the turn of the century, Tacony also supported a boater’s club, originally known as the Keystone Club Boat House and still operating today as the Quaker City Yacht Club.

139 “Tacony” souvenir program, collection Tacony Historical Society.
140 Silcox, History of Tacony, 8.
142 Silcox, A Place to Live and Work, p. 70, Dates for founding of fraternal organizations also found in Tacony Historical Society archives “Fraternal Organizations” collection.
In order to serve the growing community, the Tacony New Era commenced publishing in 1881 and remained a strong voice for the town for nearly 40 years, ceasing publication in 1918. Interest in improving the community stretched beyond a community newspaper. Henry Disston did not allow a town hall to be built, mostly out of fear of worker uprisings. Instead, the Tacony Music Hall served as the focal point of the town. Built in 1885 by local entrepreneur Frank W. Jordan, the Music Hall housed commercial space on the first floor, contained a music hall on the second floor, and housed the town’s first library on the third floor. A wide variety of entertainment could be seen at the music hall. During the theater season, actors would perform four different shows, one each on Wednesday and Friday and two on Saturday. The library existed primarily due to the largesse of the Disston family, whose donations paid for rent in the Music Hall. In 1906, on land given by the Disston family, a Carnegie library opened on the corner of Torresdale Avenue and Knorr Street, almost exactly at the geographic center of Tacony. In 1894, Jacob Disston, Henry’s son, donated land for the creation of a park. The public park between the industrial site near the river and inland residential areas created a buffer and included playing fields for the many baseball and soccer games played in Tacony. One block deep and later expanded from five to eight blocks long, Disston Park became the physical marker between the living and working spaces in Tacony.

By 1894, the de facto northern boundary of Tacony had shifted from the railroad and its station, the early focal point of the town, to Torresdale Avenue as homes filled in the Disston property. The original Disston land purchase stopped at the Wissinoming Creek but was expanded to Frankford Avenue. Land not owned by the Disston family, to the east and west of the Disston tract, remained relatively undeveloped.

Improvements to Tacony

Although Tacony had been part of Philadelphia since the 1854 Consolidation, urban infrastructure largely did not arrive through efforts on the city’s part. Since their arrival in Tacony, the Disston family showed a logical interest in providing utilities for the area as part of their development and control of it. They built a water pumping station in 1876 at Sandy Ford Springs, a tributary of Pennypack Creek and sold the pure drinking water to Tacony residents through the Tacony Water Company. In 1897, the family took over a small gas works company that had already been established by somebody else in Tacony in the mid 1800s. In addition to the Suburban Light Company organized by Tacony builder Peter E. Costello in 1891, the Disstons sold excess electricity produced by their factory back to the community by 1911. In 1878, a Disston-controlled water plant provided clean drinking water to the factory as well as the town. It was sold to the city of Philadelphia in 1922.

144 Scharf and Wescott, 3: 2060; van Dervort, 7.
146 Bromley, plates 9-12.
148 Silcox, A Place to Live and Work, 36.
149 Ibid.
Changes in transportation had the largest impact on the shape and character of Tacony. A souvenir program from 1906 proclaims the trolley as “promising to do more for the growth of the place than any other event which has happened for many years.”

Before major trolley lines connected Tacony to Center City, Philadelphia, the majority of the community lived and worked within walking distance of the factories on the Delaware. Transportation lines established primary connections to nearby communities rather than to downtown or to other parts of the city. In 1901, Peter Costello established the Holmesburg, Tacony, and Frankford Railroad Company. The privately owned trolley line ran north and south on Orthodox Street through Frankford, east and west on State Road through Bridesburg, Wissinoming, and Tacony, and again north and south along Rhawn Street through Holmesburg. The line ran on one track and was notorious for being late, slow, and uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the line was the beginning of a much larger connection between the neighborhoods of northeast Philadelphia. Shortly after the “Hop, Toad, and Frog” line began operation, as this first trolley came to be known, the Rapid Transit Corporation of Philadelphia began operation of another trolley line along Torresdale Avenue. A rider could catch the trolley in Tacony, ride to Frankford, and connect to Center City via trolley. Next came the No. 58 trolley (still operating as the No. 56 SEPTA trackless trolley route) which runs on Torresdale Avenue. These improvements in surface transportation lessened the community’s dependence on the Delaware River for transportation and provided greater access to Center City Philadelphia.

Finally, the connections to surrounding neighborhoods included the link to the community on the other side of the river in Palmyra, New Jersey. In 1922, a ferry was launched to provide Philadelphians traveling by car easier access to the Jersey shore in addition to opening up a market for produce grown in the New Jersey counties of Burlington and Camden to Philadelphia markets. Demand far outstripped the limited supply of the two ferry boats and only seven years after the ferries carried their first cars over the Delaware, construction began on the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge. The bridge to New Jersey increased traffic in the area and forced roads improvements along all the major thoroughfares, including Frankford and Torresdale Avenue. No longer would Tacony stand as an isolated industrial community.

Changes in Demographics

In the beginning of Tacony’s history, the population was mainly composed of Disston’s workers and their ethnicity was largely English. This was due to Disston’s own English heritage and his penchant for bringing over skilled workers from the steel producing areas of the England. Saw making was a highly-skilled craft traditionally passed down by apprenticeship from father to son and was thus a time-consuming process to learn. Therefore, recruiting skilled workers was virtually a necessity for Disston in establishing his business, rather than attempting to train an uneducated workforce. In 1884, a new supervisor was charged with hiring “Swedes, Hungarians, and in a few cases Italians” in the Tacony plant. Whether or not this was true, the nature of the accusation sheds light on the highly insular nature of life inside the factory. Since ninety-eight percent of

---

150 Commemorative “Tacony” program held at the Tacony Historical Society.
151 Silcox, A Place to Live and Work, 63.
152 Ibid, 25.
Disston’s workers lived in Tacony, it is likely the life outside the factory mirrored life inside, a tight-knit community fiercely proud of their connection to the Disston saw works.  

This would soon change as other manufacturers needing less skilled labor set up shop in Tacony. By 1910, the Erben Search Company worsted mill had gained a reputation for hiring Polish and Italian immigrants from Bridesburg.  

By 1906, the population of Tacony had swelled to 12,000, resulting not only from increased employment opportunities in the factories but from the cycle of growth. More factories meant more people, and the rise in population created a larger demand for homes, roads, and utilities, which in turn attracted in more people to Tacony. Since almost all of the residents of Tacony already had jobs in the factories, outside workers were needed to supply labor for the growing town. This need led to an influx of Italians, Poles, Jews, and African Americans. Many stayed in Tacony, seeing the open land as an escape from the cramped quarters of Philadelphia.  

When these groups arrived in Tacony, they generally settled outside of the original Disston tract and away from the deed restrictions. In particular, a group of Italians immigrants from south Philadelphia made a concerted effort to relocate to Tacony, founding the United Independent Italian American Club of the City of Philadelphia in 1896. Italians began settling at the end of the No. 58 trolley line at Cottman and Torresdale after helping to building it in 1907. The efforts of the club brought even more families to the area. They flourished in the area, opening a social club in an old German Catholic farmhouse. In 1917, owing to the hostility of the largely ethnic Irish Catholic St. Leo’s church already established in town, the Italians opened their own church school, Our Lady of Consolation, at Princeton Ave and Tulip Street.  

Another ethnic group attempted to infiltrate Tacony without success. World War I created a large labor shortage as men who would have normally worked in the factory enlisted to work in the battlefields. Following the lead of the Pennsylvania Railroad, William Disston enticed 400 African-American workers from Remington, Virginia to fill his workforce shortages. They lived either in converted boxcars on Disston industrial property or on the 6900 block of Wissinoming Avenue. As a testament to the strength of their faith, the Star of Hope Baptist Church was formed months after their arrival in Tacony in 1916. Even though most of the transplants lost their jobs to returning soldiers after the war, they stayed on and built up the church, eventually finding a permanent home in 1961 after being forced out of their last building by the construction of Interstate 95.  

The 1920s marked the beginning of extensive Jewish settlement in Tacony, although Mt. Sinai Jewish cemetery had been established on Bridge Street in Frankford in 1853. The population remained very small, and mostly worked in or owned stores along Longshore Street.  

A leading member of the Tacony Jewish community was Hymen Rubin, who was one of the few Jewish residents to leave Tacony for higher education. Rubin returned to his family’s neighborhood after 

---

153 Ibid, 27.  
154 Ibid, 60.  
155 Ibid, 88-89.  
156 Ibid, 53 and 67.  
receiving a law degree from Temple University in 1919. After returning to Tacony, Rubin opened the Forty-First Ward Savings and Loan Association, in order to assist World War I veterans with home purchases. Rubin’s savings and loan provided loans for properties throughout the entire northeast section of Philadelphia. Rubin’s wife Miriam was an integral force behind forming the first Jewish congregation in Tacony, the Temple Menorah Keneseth Chai, dedicated in 1952. Both Miriam and Hymen remained an important social force in the community throughout their lives, not only caring for the small Jewish community but reinforcing a sense of pride and history in the community at large.

Despite Rubin’s visible social position as a lawyer and a banker, Tacony remained something of a closed society to its Jewish residents. His daughter remembers that “the deepest disappointment to my father, who loved Tacony, was that he was denied entrance into the homes of his Tacony friends.” Census data can shed some light on the ethnic prejudice prevalent in Tacony. Even with the influx of workers, Tacony remained largely Caucasian and heavily English in ethnic background until the early 1900s. Data compiled by Harry Silcox from various sources gives the best estimate of the ethnic variety of Tacony from 1880 to 1920. In 1880, the population was entirely white, with a 55% majority claiming English heritage, followed by 25% Irish background and 18% German ancestry. Twenty five years later, Italians immigrants accounted for 5% of the population, but Tacony remained heavily English. In 1920, Tacony was becoming more pluralistic, with a 10% Italian population and 1% each Jewish and black. Even at 39% of the population, English ethnicity remained the clear majority.

Census data available from 1940 onwards does not delineate between Irish and English heritage but nevertheless paints an interesting picture. From 1940, the African-American population of Philadelphia increased steadily, from 13% in 1940 to 55% in 2000. In contrast, the population in Tacony has remained 99% Caucasian through the 1990 census. Only in 2000 did the Caucasian population decrease to 95%. Of the non-Caucasian section of Tacony, only 3% is African-American.

Post-Industrial Tacony (c. 1945-present)

Disston Saw Works and the surrounding factories prospered through both World Wars. While some companies did not survive the Great Depression, the wars proved very lucrative for many of the businesses in the area, particularly those that could easily convert their factories into making war related products. Disston Saw Works was one of the many factories in the area to receive the Army-Navy “E” Award, which was given to a factory and its employees for excellence in production of war goods.

160 Silcox, A Place to Live and Work, p.67.
161 Ibid, 69.
162 Census data gathered from SocialExplorer.com
By the late 1950s, the neighborhood of Tacony had been fully developed: the last of the empty lots were filled and the town finally connected to Frankford Avenue. The town reached the zenith of its development at this time. The 1950s marked a slow but steady decline of population in Philadelphia. Tacony was no exception, although the area’s population decline began in earnest in 1960, by virtue of the slow death of the Disston Saw Works. For many years financial troubles plagued the Disston company, compounded by labor issues, poor executive decision-making, and the increased burden of supporting the large Disston clan. In 1955, the executive board at Disston decided to sell the company. After 115 years as a family-owned and -operated business, the company was sold to Sam Mellon Evans of H.K. Porter, a company that manufactured light-duty railroad locomotives until they were bought out by Evans and eventually turned into a general tool making company. Evans closed section after section of the original saw works until a mere shell remained, holding onto the saw works as little more than a tax shelter.\textsuperscript{163}

The Disston Saw Works changed hands twice more before winding up as part of R.A.F. Industries. A handful of workers continue to make specialty saws in parts of the old Disston factory, looking much the same as they did 100 years ago.

The Disston Saw Works shaped much of the history of Tacony. The arrival of Henry Disston in the sleepy hamlet along the waterfront catapulted Tacony into the industrial limelight. Disston’s patriarchal development prevented the borough from becoming another overcrowded manufacturing neighborhood. The growth of Tacony diluted the Disston vision as less socially-minded companies moved into the area, bringing with them workers uninterested in the social confines of the company town. Despite the differences between the Disston Saw workers and new populations, Tacony thrived until the mid-twentieth century, when it would succumb to the general trend of deindustrialization and population loss felt in major cities across the country. In the face of the losses, local pride has helped Tacony retain much of its sense of history and the town remains an excellent example of a successful company town.

\textsuperscript{163} Silcox, \textit{A Place to Live and Work}, 186-190.
BRIDESBURG

By Aliya Turner, M.S.

Geographic Summary

The Borough of Bridesburg is located in the near Northeast section of Philadelphia. Bounded by the Delaware River, the Betsy Ross bridge, Interstate 95 and the remnants of Frankford Creek, this notably flat section of Philadelphia is part of the Delaware River floodplain. Early maps
show the area as marshland—a characteristic unchanged until the arrival of industry. In the original plat map of the town from 1800, the difference between the high and low tide marks range from negligible in sections along the Frankford Creek to almost 400 feet along the Delaware. Changes in the waterfront of Bridesburg -- through construction of piers and wharfs -- mitigated any fluctuations in the actual waterline. While Frankford Creek still empties into the Delaware River, it is the minor remnant of what was once a large stream system that extended deep into the northeast and northwest areas of Philadelphia. The vast majority of this stream system has been culverted in underground sewers. What remains of Frankford Creek was diverted in the mid-twentieth century to flow along the course of the abutments of the Betsy Ross Bridge, opened in 1976. A vestige of the original creek remains, but it now dead ends approximately three quarters of a mile upstream from the Delaware River at Ash Street. Interstate 95 was a later addition, but as it generally follows the path of rail lines through the area, the boundary of the neighborhood has not shifted much since times of early settlement. In 1956, the city of Philadelphia straightened Frankford Creek at Aramingo Avenue as part of a comprehensive flood control plan.

Today, Bridesburg is a residential island surrounded by industrial sites. The only exception is the old Philadelphia Coke Company site, currently an empty lot extending from Richmond Street to the river front. In 2005, this site has received special designation as a Water Redevelopment District, which according the Philadelphia Zoning code can include any kind of building use so long as there exists an “approved Master Plan of development.” Small commercial zones exist along Orthodox Street, one of principal roads connecting Bridesburg to Philadelphia. Today, only two roads are two-way streets: Bridge Street connects the northern section of Bridesburg to Frankford, and Richmond Street connects the southern part of town to Port Richmond. Orthodox Street is a one-way thoroughfare running from the heart of Frankford into Bridesburg, while Lefevre Street, two blocks east, provides the main exit from Bridesburg. The lack of connection to greater Philadelphia, the warren of one-way streets, and the many industrial sites ringing the neighborhood make Bridesburg seem a very isolated place.

Early settlement began near the confluence of Frankford Creek and the Delaware River, spreading downriver as Bridesburg grew. The residential buildings in Bridesburg are characterized by two-story rowhouses set close to the street, although the relatively deep lots provide property owners with large back yards. For such a small community -- just barely one square mile -- Bridesburg boasts a large number of large churches, eight total, including two Catholic churches, testifying to the different ethnic groups that have settled in the community as a result of its industrial

165 “Plan of Point Farm, property of William Geisse,” surveyed by Roading Heswell, January 1800. Available at the Historical Society of Frankford.
The churches include the smaller wooden First Baptist Church on Lefevre (c. 1900) and the soaring All Saints Roman Catholic church on Thompson and Buckius Streets (1861). The industrial complexes, are typically characterized by a utilitarian sensibility, and are frequently nothing more than long metal sheds. Much of the manufacturing has left Bridesburg and many industrial sites are abandoned and their buildings and structures demolished. Despite the decline in industry, Bridesburg remains a neighborhood largely free of the empty house and abandoned lots that characterize other former industrial areas of Philadelphia.

Pre-Industrial Bridesburg

Today, Bridesburg is visibly part of the extensive industrial corridor extending along the Delaware waterfront that developed beginning in the early nineteenth century. What distinguishes the history of Bridesburg is the way in which industry originally began in this section of the city of Philadelphia.

Swedish settlers lived in the general area as early as 1643 but scant evidence remains of their time in Bridesburg. By 1699, settlement was sufficiently developed in what is now the Old City and Society Hill sections of city that the stench from tanneries located inside the original boundaries of Philadelphia (around Dock Creek and other small waterways that fed into the Delaware), become offensive to those living nearby. Early tanning involved the long-term exposure of raw hides to heated animal excrement (usually from dogs or horses). This procedure not surprisingly produced a powerful odor inimical to dense city settlement. Seeking to improve this situation, the city authorities insisted the tanneries be removed. In 1703, the first tannery was dismantled and removed to the Bridesburg area, where land was primarily in agricultural use, and local residents where thus not in as close proximity to the smell. Additionally, the industry provided a ready market for manure. This location of undesirable manufacturing in Bridesburg marked the beginning of industrial development in Bridesburg.

Access to, and thus life in Bridesburg changed when Joseph Kirkbride established a ferry across Frankford Creek in 1795. The Kirkbride family had a long history of running ferries in Philadelphia. Joseph Kirkbride’s grandfather (also named Joseph Kirkbride), received authority to run a ferry across the Delaware in 1729, likely at a point further north than Bridesburg. Until the arrival of Kirkbride, the area had been known as Point-No-Point, a reference to the outcropping of marshy land at the mouth of the creek, which seemed disappear and reappear to those traveling up and down the Delaware River. Navigators used it as a reference point for when to change headings. There was even a short rhyme associated with the point:

171 James Tyndale Mitchell, Henry Flanders, Jonathan Willis Martin, and Hampton Lawrence Carson, The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801: Compiled Under the Authority of the Act of May 19, 1887 (Harrisburg: State Printer of Pennsylvania, 1897), 4: 129.
I’ve been to Point Lookout
Point Look in
Point no Point
And point agin.

The town was then named Kirkbridesburg, but owing to its cumbersome pronunciation, the name was eventually shortened to Bridesburg.

After the ferry opened, settlement began in earnest in Bridesburg. A survey of 1800 shows the first evidence of a town layout in the form of a street grid, with roads 50 feet wide running parallel to the Delaware river and those running perpendicular 40 feet wide.172 The map divides land owned by William Geisse into twenty-one plats, extending from the mouth of the Frankford Creek to Kirkbride Street, about one-third of a mile down the Delaware River. The map also shows Point Road, which was later named Richmond street, as well an unnamed road running perpendicular, likely Bridge Street. This map shows tidal marshes, some extending about 450 feet into the Delaware. By the end of the nineteenth century, these marshes would be entirely replaced by static piers and bulkheads to accommodate the high volume of industrial traffic, first boat traffic and then the railroad, along the Delaware River.

1800 plat map of Point Farm, owned by William Giesse. Collection Historical Society of Frankford.

In 1805, Kirkbride bought one of the tanneries that first opened along Frankford Creek, likely with his profits from the ferry.173 Only six years later, the city of Philadelphia granted
permission to Kirkbride to replace the ferry with a bridge. In the same years, John Harris opened a sulfuric acid facility in Bridesburg. The steel and paper industries make wide use of sulfuric acid, but its production can be quite noxious, as the first step is to burn sulfur so that the gas can be absorbed by water. Anyone who has ever burned their own hair knows the unmistakable scent. In 1815, the Frankford Arsenal opened just on the other side of Frankford Creek. Originally called the Bridesburg Arsenal, it provided employment for the surrounding neighborhoods, particularly Bridesburg.

### Industrial Bridesburg

**Early Industry**

In 1819, Alfred Jenks moved his company from Holmesburg, PA to Bridesburg, renaming it the Bridesburg Manufacturing Company. Jenks produced a myriad of items in the factory, and “to attempt a recital of the various inventions and improvements which this firm have made for the benefit of cotton and woolen manufacturers, would carry us far beyond out limit.” Generally, Jenks produced cotton mill machinery, eventually producing equipment that would cover the entire range of milling from cotton picking to cloth making.

Jenks took a keen interest in the community. His strong faith led him to help organize the First Presbyterian Church in Bridesburg in 1837, and the congregation met at his home until a proper church could be built. Jenks donated the land and the money necessary to build the first Presbyterian church in Bridesburg. His family carried on the Presbyterian faith for many generations with several Jenks men serving as pastors or elders.

Despite the increase in factory production in the area, only twenty five houses had been built in the neighborhood by 1827. Early maps of the area show Bridesburg as a small cluster of houses clustered in a crook of Frankford Creek with a string of farms extending down river along Point Road (eventually Richmond Street). These may have been country seats for wealthy Philadelphians, since many of the properties depicted are given names other than the land holders, including Pine Grove and Holly Hall. Additionally, these holdings are labeled in the same fashion as others known to have been country estates, such as Waln Hall and Chalkely Hall, both located in Frankford.

Point Lane, soon to be known as Wheatsheaf Lane, provided another route to points north. It originally ended at Frankford Avenue, the main thoroughfare connecting the neighborhoods of

---

177 Thomas Murphy, The Presbytery of the Log College: Or, the Cradle of the Presbyterian Church in America (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1889), 349-349.
179 M. Dripps, “Map of the Township of Oxborough, Boroughs of Frankford and Bridesburg, 1849.”
180 For a discussion of the country seats of Frankford, please consult Claire Schmiederr’s paper on Frankford.
northeast Philadelphia to Center City. A small cluster of buildings, including a hotel and tavern, sprung up at the intersection of Richmond and Wheatsheaf by the mid 1800s. This corridor would become entirely industrial by the mid twentieth century.

Charles Lennig moved his chemical company to Bridesburg in 1842. The Tacony Chemical Works, formerly the Lennig & Company Chemical Works occupied a large piece of land along the Frankford Creek designated as meadow in the 1800 plat map. The site would remain one of chemical manufacture into the early twenty-first century. Lennig attracted many Germans to the area, substantially effecting the original character of the town by creating a large concentration of German immigrants. There is some speculation that he actively brought Germans over to work in his factory, and Lennig constructed a row of houses just outside the chemical works known as ‘Dutch Row.’ These houses were likely constructed at the same time Lennig built his factory, as the earliest maps that show the factory also depict this row. By 1889, the facility had grown from a few buildings into a sprawling facility with elevated tramways for coal, several different ‘houses’ for the production of chemicals, and a spur off the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Middle Phase

1848 saw Bridesburg incorporated as a borough, just six years before the city-wide Consolidation. At the time, there were still only 80 houses in the Bridesburg area. During this period, Bridesburg became “accustomed to industrial accidents and funerals.” By 1863, Bridesburg added a lamp black and barrel factory to its growing roster of industries.

Despite the 1854 incorporation of the City and County of Philadelphia, Bridesburg (like other outlying former villages) continued to function in a number of respects as a separate entity. This separation is evidenced by the construction of a Town Hall near Thompson and Pratt Streets in 1851 that served as a school, jail, church, movie house and museum until it was demolished in the latter half of the twentieth century. The same year the Town Hall was completed, residents added the Bridesburg Methodist Church. All Saints German Roman Catholic church followed in 1861 and the Emmanuel Reform German Protestant Church was completed in 1864. The Presbyterian congregation erected a larger church on Pratt Street in 1868 after Barton Jenks, son of Alfred Jenks, contributed $32,000, equivalent to $712,000 in today’s (2009) currency. From 1853 to 1870, the town’s population increased from 915 to over 2100, a 130% increase in size.

---

181 Dripps; Charles Ellet Jr., “A Map of the County of Philadelphia from Actual Survey, 1843.”
182 Bishop, 568-569.
183 Farley, 90.
186 Randall, 78.
188 Ibid.
189 Farley, 92.
Like most manufacturing towns along the Delaware River, Bridesburg prospered during the Civil War as companies experienced an increase in demand for their products or converted to the production of war-related goods. Not surprisingly, the chemical works and the Arsenal benefitted particularly from the increased demand, and the Bridesburg Manufacturing converted the factory to the production of muskets.

Bridesburg continued to welcome other industries into the neighborhood, including Edwin H. Fitler and his cordage factory in 1880. Fitler’s factory was one of the largest rope makers in the world at its peak production. About the same time, the character of Bridesburg began to change with the large influx of Polish immigrants. Robert H. Foederer opened a large tannery toward the end of the nineteenth century, occupying the old Bridesburg Manufacturing site, adapting the existing buildings as well as building new facilities as his business grew. Most laborers in Philadelphia found tannery work unacceptable, but recent Polish immigrants, barred from working in most other factories as a result of their ethnicity eagerly accepted the work. The outbreak of World War I prevented these immigrants from returning to Poland. Thus, men originally in America as temporary workers stayed in Bridesburg, eventually bringing over their families and establishing a strong Polish community, building St. John Cantius Roman Catholic Church in 1893.

By 1910, there were two other tanneries operating along Frankford Creek at Buckius Street, as well as an oil works along the Delaware River, downstream from the chemical site. By 1889, a bridge near the mouth of Frankford Creek connected Bridesburg to the Frankford Arsenal and allowed the railroad to run unimpeded up and down the Delaware River. By 1910, two railroads ran through Bridesburg, the Kensington and Tacony Railroad along the Delaware and the Pennsylvania Railroad on the northern edge of town. Most of the factories along the Delaware had spur lines connecting directly to the main line.

In 1886, the Redemptorist Fathers of Philadelphia opened the Most Holy Redeemer Cemetery, stretching from Frankford Creek south to Richmond Street and only one block wide west of Orthodox Street. The cemetery did not belong to a particular church in the borough but was instead opened when the Redemptorist Fathers church ran out of room in their original cemetery. The cemetery would act as the de facto western boundary for the borough until the mid 1920s.

Improvements in trolley lines in the early part of the 1900s increased the connections between Bridesburg and the surrounding community, allowing residents of Bridesburg to travel into Center City. A 1908 unidentified newspaper article titled “Attractive Country Seat Along Delaware to be Replaced by Busy Mills at Bridesburg” gives a positive account of Bridesburg’s transformation into a thriving industrial town and details the activities of the Bridesburg

191 Scharf, 2311.
195 Theresa Pyott (president of Bridesburg Historical Society), in discussion with the author, February 2009.
Improvement Association. In 1911, another unidentified newspaper article describes Bridesburg as “a thriving little manufacturing suburb.” Manufacturing at the time included the Tacony Chemical works and a paper mill along Frankford Creek and an oil works and smelting company along the Delaware River.

John B. Lennig, the grandson and last living heir of the founder of Tacony Chemical Works, died in 1920. At that time, Rohm and Haas stepped in to purchase the company, and in doing so, bought out their biggest competitor. The arrival of Rohm and Haas marked the final phase of industry in Bridesburg. Over the next sixty years, Rohm and Haas would come to dominate the community, employing much of the town and taking an active role in community life.

Late Phase

Otto Haas and Dr. Otto Rohm founded their company in Germany in 1907, using their talents as a banker and chemist to create a prosperous enterprise. Two years later, Haas moved to Philadelphia to start the American branch of the company based on their success with artificial tanning chemicals. First opening a facility in Pittsburgh, Rohm and Haas soon opened a factory in Bristol, Pennsylvania, about twelve miles up the Delaware River from Bridesburg. The purchase of the Lennig site was just the beginning of a long and interesting relationship with Bridesburg.

In 1930, the Philadelphia Coke Company opened a facility in the borough extending from the Delaware to Richmond Street between Orthodox and Buckius Streets. Consistent with the types of industry that have settled in Bridesburg since its development, the production of coke can be a very dirty process as it is the transformation of coal into a harder, cleaner fuel by driving off impurities. Many anecdotes survive of Bridesburg residents having to clean black ash from the exterior of their houses on a regular basis because of the coke production and smelting in the borough.

While industry was continually on the rise in Bridesburg, industrial safety was not, of course. In the Bridesburg News section of the *Frankford Gazette*, several explosions are mentioned during the year of 1929. These events are recorded in the same register as local gossip about who went where for vacation. It seems that accidents were an expected part of daily life in Bridesburg, as they were in industrial communities throughout the country. Although factory life entailed ever-present danger, Bridesburg residents found ways to enjoy their proximity to the river. Photographs from the early 1920s show lines of fishing shacks along the Delaware River. These ramshackle buildings at the water’s edge were usually two stories, housing boats and fishing equipment in the first floor and with a deck on the second, overlooking the river. They were built directly adjacent to rail lines along the river and were likely located between Reynolds and Buckius, where the railroad ran along the very edge of land.

197 Historical Society of Frankford, scrapbook collection, 4: 11.
198 Historical Society of Frankford, scrapbook collection, 6: 43.
199 Randall, 22.
As might be expected, the Great Depression hit Bridesburg hard, like so many other manufacturing towns in Philadelphia. During this period, the generosity of Rohm and Haas solidified the bond between the giant chemical company and the community. The factory would have its workers tear up a street and relay it just to keep them busy. Rohm and Haas also distributed food and coal to local residents.\(^{202}\) While the early part of the Depression was just as hard for Rohm and Haas as any other large manufacturer, the chemical company fared better than most thanks to the invention of Plexiglas.

Plexiglas, the brand name for polymethyl methacrylate, a layer of plastic sandwiched between two sheets of glass, was first produced in America at the Bridesburg plant in 1936. It had been invented in the late 1920s a German scientist working for Rohm and Haas invented. The burgeoning demand for the miraculous shatter-proof material created jobs at Bridesburg at a time when jobs were at a premium everywhere else.\(^ {203}\)

During World War II, the American Rohm and Haas plant sold Plexiglas to Allied forces so they could equip their fighter planes. The German plant also sold Plexiglas to the military, but to German forces instead. Ironically, Rohm and Hass equipped British planes are said to have been responsible for the destroying the Rohm and Haas factory in Germany.\(^ {204}\) Despite the financial troubles created for Rohm and Haas by the Trading with the Enemies Act, profits from World War II were so great that Haas was able to take $30 million in cash to Germany to rebuild the German plant.\(^ {205}\)

In 1941, with a generous donation from Rohm and Haas, the Bridesburg Boys Club opened, providing recreational activities for local children.\(^ {206}\) In 1944, Otto Haas introduced the first full pension plan in Philadelphia.\(^ {207}\) As another example of his beneficence, Otto Haas and his wife Phoebe established the Phoebe Waterman Foundation as a way to address social problems created after the end of World War II. The foundation went through several name changes before becoming the William Penn Foundation. Today, the William Penn Foundation has $1.4 billion in assets and awards almost 700 different grants every year.\(^ {208}\) The largesse of Rohm and Haas created a community that was fiercely loyal to their employer, even as workers suffered the consequences of working in a chemical factory under very hazardous conditions.

Rohm and Haas benefited greatly from the post-World War II demand for plastics and Bridesburg responded accordingly. By 1958, the borough had reached the limits of expansion.\(^ {209}\)

\(^{202}\) Randall, 49
\(^{203}\) Ibid.
\(^{204}\) Ibid, 50.
\(^{205}\) Ibid.
\(^{206}\) Historical Society of Frankford, scrapbook collection, 29: 108.
\(^{207}\) Randall, 61.
Long time resident Teresa Pyott had to wait six months before her and her new husband could find an appropriate place to live.  

**Post-Industrial Bridesburg (c. 1975-present)**

A 1965 *Sunday Bulletin* article describes the borough as “sandwiched between the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Delaware River. [This] position makes them seem isolated from adjoining communities.” Despite this seeming isolation, or maybe because of it, Bridesburg has become a very tightly knit community. The boundary created by the diversion of Frankford Creek in 1956 was simply a physical manifestation of an existing boundary, as the area was a no man’s land of heavy industry and a waste water treatment facility. When construction of the Betsy Ross Bridge began in 1969, further isolating the borough from its neighbors to the southwest, Bridesburg residents vehemently opposed off-ramps from the new bridge to Richmond Street, insisting that bridge connect to Interstate 95 before it opened. Their protests delayed the opening of the bridge for two years so the connection between the Betsy Ross Bridge and I-95 could be completed.

The residents of Bridesburg supported the construction of the Pulaski Highway, a road connecting the Betsy Ross Bridge with Roosevelt Boulevard, a major artery through northeast Philadelphia running roughly parallel to I-95. The Pulaski Highway died a slow and bureaucratic death at the hands of neighborhood opposition and increasingly tough federal environmental regulations. Still extant today are the dead-ended connections between the Betsy Ross and would-be highway. Some of the connections were eventually incorporated into the Aramingo Avenue interchange. Bridesburghian support for the highway stemmed from a desire to keep traffic flowing past the neighborhood, not into it.

The 1970 census confirms the insular nature of Bridesburg. 80% of owner housing was owner-occupied, one of the highest percentages in the city. There was only a 4% vacancy rate and the borough was entirely Caucasian, reporting a 0% black population.

By 1974, Rohm and Haas had grown into a huge chemical corporation, and the local paper was filled with articles about the tight-knit community. Unfortunately, the tide was about to turn for Bridesburg. In 1977 the Frankford Arsenal closed for good. As a large employer of Bridesburg residents, the shutdown was enormous blow to the area. The end of the 1970s saw Rohm and Haas removed from their pedestal in the community. After years of investigations, testing, dodges, and feints, Rohm and Haas finally admitted that one of the chemicals used during production was highly carcinogenic and officially attributed 27 cancer deaths to exposure. Other people involved in the investigation contend that the rates were considerably higher, claiming of the 221 worker deaths between 1954 and 1971, 54 were cancer-related.

---

210 Theresa Pyott (president of Bridesburg Historical Society), in discussion with the author, February 2009.
214 Randall, 166.
With tighter environmental controls in place, residents began to take on other manufacturers in the borough, including the Philadelphia Smelting and Refining Company, operating on the same site as the Philadelphia Coke Company. Eventually the plant was shut down and the entire site razed. It is currently zoned as a Waterfront Redevelopment site. A plan exists to turn the empty site into a mixed use area with residential and commercial spaces, but depends on the extension of Delaware Avenue, a main alternative route to I-95 along the waterfront.215

Geography and sensitive noses of the Quakers wrote the beginning chapters in the history of Bridesburg. The land surrounding Bridesburg would become home to some of the more noxious industries in Philadelphia, from the age-old practice of tanning leather to the space-age production of plastics. The geographic isolation from greater Philadelphia made Bridesburg an ideal location for unsavory manufacturing but also created an intensely tight knit community, proud of their heritage, and fiercely loyal to the companies that called the area home. Even though the borough has not escaped the larger trend of deindustrialization and population loss, the residential sections of Bridesburg retain much of their original character.

KEY BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnes, Howard Lee, ed. *A History of Frankford*. Compiled for the Frankford Lions Club. N.D.


*Frankford: A Souvenir Booklet in Connection with the Historical and Industrial Celebration, October Twenty Seventh to November Second, Nineteen-Hundred-and-Twelve*. 1912.


LaRoche, R. *Yellow Fever Considered in Its Historical, Pathological, Etiological, and Therapeutic Relations.* Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1855.


