

# HISTORIC AERIAL PHOTO OF AMBLER

by Newton M. Howard

Keasbey & Mattison Company, in the early 1920's, was preparing a catalog showcasing their extensive line of asbestos products. Dr. Richard V. Mattison, company President, believed that a striking photograph should be used on the cover. The agency concurred, suggesting an early aerial photograph that showed their Ambler plants and a section of the town. Next step was to seek out the maker of this photograph for permission to use it on the cover.

They found that William Nicholson Jennings, internationally-known photographer, had made the aerial photo in 1920, and that his studio was located in Philadelphia. On meeting with Jennings, it was learned that he was well-known for his accomplishments in both photography and science. He was born into a wealthy family in Yorkshire, England, in 1860. A change in England's economic conditions caused his father to lose their woolen mills in 1876, with the family coming to America several years later to seek their fortunes in the New World.

William Jennings, on



This is believed to be Ambler's first aerial photo. Made in 1920 for Keasbey & Mattison Company by internationally known photographer William N. Jennings, it marked the start of aials taken from an airplane. Used as tile cover photo for their catalog, it was the first time an aerial photograph was used to illustrate an advertising piece. Details of K&M facilities have been strengthened by a commercial artist while subduing details of the town.

From Collection of Newton M. Howard

arrival in Philadelphia, began looking for employment in center city. His search took him to John Wanamaker's store on Market Street. He had been trained in stenography and typewriting in England, and while Jennings was being interviewed for a steno-

graphic position by Wanamaker himself, a Remington typewriter salesman entered. He attempted to sell his product for use in the store's offices. Showing interest, Wanamaker stated that he had no one who could operate a typewriter. Jennings spoke up, asking

permission to demonstrate the machine, impressing Wanamaker to such a degree that he hired Jennings and gave the Remington salesman an order for typewriters. Jennings thus became John Wanamaker's first typist.

It was but a few years later that he became interested in photography, experimenting with such subjects as lightning. It was he who first photographed streaks of lightning, showing their true form, rather than zig-zag lines. His collection of lightning photographs is today housed at the Franklin Institute, of which he was a lifetime member.

In 1889 he photographed the Johnstown Flood, using equipment given him by George Eastman, founder of Eastman Kodak Company. Around this time, he became fascinated with photography being done from free-floating balloons. Believing he could improve upon the quality of these photographs,

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(Continued on page 33)

APRIL - 1998



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(Continued from page 30)

he approached a balloonist, arranging to accompany him on his flights. The highlight of his aerial photography career came on July 4th, 1893, when he was the first person to successfully photograph Philadelphia from a free-floating balloon. This was the first city in the world to be photographed in such a fashion. Boston had been photographed earlier, but from an anchored balloon.

Following his success in aerial photography, he was contacted by steamship lines anxious to secure better photographs aboard ships on the open sea. His photographs showed a marked improvement in quality, with the result that he crossed the Atlantic for the next six years, making photographs aboard all the major liners, such as the Lusitania and Mauritania. He was away for weeks at a time from his wife and three children back in the United States.

While working for the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company, out of England, he followed with interest White Star Line's activity in having the world's largest fleet of ocean-going passenger steamships built at Belfast. Because he had been away from home for some time, he purchased a ticket to New York on the maiden voyage of one of these ships. It was called the "Titanic" and was

both fast and luxurious, as well as being described as "unsinkable". He looked forward to this adventure and his luggage was packed long before the maiden voyage scheduled for April 10th of 1912, from Southampton. He planned to do much photography aboard the ship and was in Southampton a week before its departure. Here he was contacted by Charles Stokes, representative of his employer, the Canadian Steamship Line, who asked

him to stay in England longer to do more shipboard photography aboard the Empress of Britain. He was told that if he did not stay, he would lose his contract with the Canadian Line.

Regrettably, he turned in for refund his ticket for that trip aboard the "Titanic". Days later when he was at sea aboard the "Empress", Jennings learned of the Titanic disaster. For the remainder of his life, he remembered the feeling as

the Titanic news was posted by the ship's purser.

William Nicholson Jennings died in 1946 after having lived life to the fullest. It was in 1949 that his son Ralph Jennings, with wife Lois, purchased a home in Fort Washington where they raised two sons. One of the sons, "Nick" Jennings, is well-known and resides today in Fort Washington. It was Lois Jennings who contributed much toward making this article possible

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