

Sept. 1997

The Doctor Discovers Ambler in 1882

by Newton M. Howard

"I discovered Ambler one day when I was walking up the Morris Road through six inches of snow. It was on a Sunday early in February of 1882." These were the words spoken by Dr. Richard V. Mattison in 1933 when he was called by the State of Pennsylvania to testify in a suit brought against him and his firm, Keasbey & Mattison Company. He was at the time eighty-two years old and was asked to explain why taxes had not been paid on the company's rental homes.

During the cross-examination he continued the description of his first visit to Ambler, and this is more of his court testimony: "I had been getting limestone samples at a quarry in White-marsh which our company later bought. My pockets were full of specimens as I travelled about three miles to Ambler, and this is the first time I ever saw the town. I walked over to the train depot and waited for a train, in the meantime surveying the vicinity of the station. I saw a level piece of ground adjacent to the station which struck me as a very good place to start a factory, I

later found the owner of the property, and his price for the same seemed to be reasonable and therefore I purchased the property from him."

But there's more to this story than was given in Mattison's court testimony. That Sunday in February of 1882 marked a milestone in the history of the Keasbey & Mattison Company, begun in 1873 when Henry G. Keasbey and Richard V. Mattison were students at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy. They became friends and formed a partnership to manufacture pharmaceuticals. Capital for this venture came from Keasbey, heir to the fortunes of a wealthy New Jersey family, in the insulation business for several generations.

The new business was a success from the start, with the partners developing an extensive line of pharmaceuticals, the most popular being "Bromo Caffeine", available at almost every pharmacy in the United States as well as in the major cities of Europe. And now, in 1882, they were considering moving from the city, for several reasons, primarily to find a purer water source and a location closer to a



Portrait of Richard V. Mattison, M.D. Courtesy of Helen Mattison

railroad.

Recently they had added a department for manufacturing magnesia insulating products, with the future looking promising. However, the source of raw material, a form of limestone known as dolomite, was not close-by. Mattison had been

told of a quarry in White-marsh reputed to contain an almost endless supply.

With this in mind, he planned to visit the quarry and the nearby town of Ambler. Though it had snowed the night before, he began his walk early on Sunday morning from his Philadelphia home through Fairmount Park and up the Bethlehem Pike to the limestone quarry. It was a part of the Wentz estate, known as Hope Lodge. Mattison enjoyed walking and was in good condition for a man of 30 years.

Going down into the quarry, he chipped off several rock samples, putting them into his overcoat pockets. Heading up the Pike, he reached Fort Washington. Then he travelled up the Morris Road, paralleled by the Wissahickon Creek, noticing that its waters appeared to be extremely pure and free-flowing, much more so than those of the Schuylkill.

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Reaching Butler Pike, he noticed at the intersection an old grist mill no longer in operation, learning later that it was now called the Plumley Mill, and was on the site of the original Harmer mill. On his way to the train depot, he crossed over the Wissahickon Creek on what appeared to be an ancient three-arch stone bridge. He was told that this single-lane bridge was so old that no one knew who its builders were or when it had been constructed. The Doctor was advised to avoid falling through the holes in

the bridge's roadway.

Arriving at the depot with fifteen minutes to spare, he explored the town of Ambler, especially the area around the railroad, which he found was for sale by its owners the Reiff family. The price being asked was very reasonable and he agreed to purchase two acres with the land being conveyed in March of 1882.

And that is how Dr.

Mattison found Ambler in February of 1882. This marked the beginning of the largest manufacturing company ever to locate in Ambler. Keasbey & Mattison Company went on to become the world's largest producer of magnesia and asbestos products, leaving behind their huge waste piles as a constant reminder that they had been here.

Overeaters Anonymous

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