

THE DOCTOR'S UNIQUE TANK HOUSE

by Newton M. Howard

Established by Dr. Richard V. Mattison in 1892, the Ambler Spring Water Company was part of his estate known as Lindenwood Farms. He and his partner Henry G. Keasbey had brought their Chemical Works to Ambler in 1882, with the result that their success led to a rapid expansion in both the residential and commercial areas of Ambler.

This growth made it necessary in 1903 for the Water Company to supply more water and at greater pressure, in order to reach Ambler's higher elevations. To alleviate these conditions, plans for a most unusual stone building were announced by Mattison's superintendent, William 'Billy' Devine, who had this to say of the plans, "The building will contain five huge water storage tanks on the top floor, each with a capacity of 20,000 gallons. These will be made of cedar, and each one will be 16 feet in diameter by 16 feet high." He stated further that, "This structure will be erected next to Loch Alsh reservoir, which was named by Dr.

Mattison after a lake in Northern Scotland, home of his ancestors. Elevating these tanks will give us more pressure to reach all parts of town. Before the operations begin, though, we must tear down the old frame water tower and tank on that spot. Also in this building, and located under the tanks, will be four housing units, each one four stories high, with eight to ten rooms and a bath.

When excavation for the foundation began, not many onlookers were present, but as word about Mattison's unusual building began to spread around town, many more appeared on the scene. Some couldn't believe that four homes were to be located in this large building, with 100,000 gallons of water "up in their attics".

Among those watching the operations was a gentleman wearing a faded blue Union Army cap. The stranger, whose name was Charlie, walked with the aid of a cane, and mentioned to his companion that he knew Billy Devine, and just 38 years ago they were mustered out of the Army together. Speaking of the building under construction,



Photograph by Newton M. Howard

Dr. Mattison's Tank House, also known as the Tower House, on Loch Alsh Ave. The top floor held five water tanks, each with a capacity of 20,000 gallons. Beneath these tanks were four apartments, actually four complete homes, one at each corner of the building. Each was four stories high, with the first floor partially below ground level. The tanks were hidden from view by the dormers on the roof and the top row of windows, all of which were dummies.

he said he'd never in all his travels seen a structure quite like this. "I don't think I'd feel safe livin' in a house with all that water upstairs. Why, what would you do if the tanks sprung a leak while you're asleep? You'd drown before you ever woke up, that's what you'd do!"

his acquaintance with Billy Devine, the two having served together in the Fifth U.S. Light Artillery during the Civil War. Continuing, he said, "Billy and I didn't keep in touch after the War, and it wasn't until about 1888 that we met by chance at Hotel Ambler, down by the railroad.

Then he spoke further of

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The Doctor's Unique Tank House

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Billy had just come to work for Mattison as a carpenter. He could do anything, and it wasn't long before the Doctor recognized this talent and made him superintendent of all of the farm operations, and all of the company houses too. He has charge of everything except the plants over at the Chemical Works."

Mattison's stone quarry, a short distance down Farm Lane,

was to furnish all the stone used in construction here. The stone walls would be thicker than normal because of the tremendous load they must carry. Evidently not everyone was afraid of living below so much water, for large numbers of applicants had already signed up to rent these four unusual homes before the masons had reached the second story.

As fall approached, workers had reached the fourth story, with the 20-inch iron beams

being installed to carry the weight of the filled water tanks. This floor received a thick coating of cement, and over this a solid asphalt floor, guaranteed against leakage for a period of 10 years. By early fall the masons were working on the top row of windows, and soon the roof would go on the building.

It was now a year since construction began, and the tenants began moving into the four homes. They must have been pleased with what

they found, for many of these families lived there for a period of twenty to thirty years.

Mattison gave his new building the name "Tower House". The public, however, soon replaced that with the more appropriate name of "Tank House", for obvious reasons. The location of the tanks at this higher elevation increased the water pressure dramatically, allowing for better water distribution to all parts of Ambler.

It was in 1973 that the Tank House was torn down, the five tanks having been removed some years before. It was replaced by a large capacity metal storage tank.

Bereavement Support Group

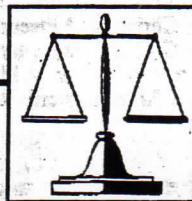
Wissahickon Hospice offers support groups for adults grieving the death of a parent or a spouse/partner after a terminal illness. These bereavement support groups give participants an opportunity to learn about the healing value of grief and a safe place to work out feelings in the supportive presence of others who have experienced similar losses. Professionals with experience in grief and loss lead the groups. Registration is required for the weekly groups which will meet for ten consecutive weeks throughout the summer. Please call Barbara Davis at 215/247-0277 for more information.

Wissahickon Hospice also offers a support group for people 55 years and older who are coping with the loss of a family member or friend. This group will take place at Center in the Park, in Germantown and will meet from 10-11:30AM on the first Tuesday of July and August. Pre-registration is not required.

In addition to these special groups, free monthly support groups are being offered. Pre-registration is not required for the groups which meet monthly at Chestnut Hill, Norristown and West Philadelphia locations. Please just stop in. For more information, and for dates, times, and places, call Barbara Davis at 215-247-0277.

Established in 1982, Wissahickon Hospice is one of the oldest and largest programs in the region. Wissahickon Hospice is now a part of the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

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