

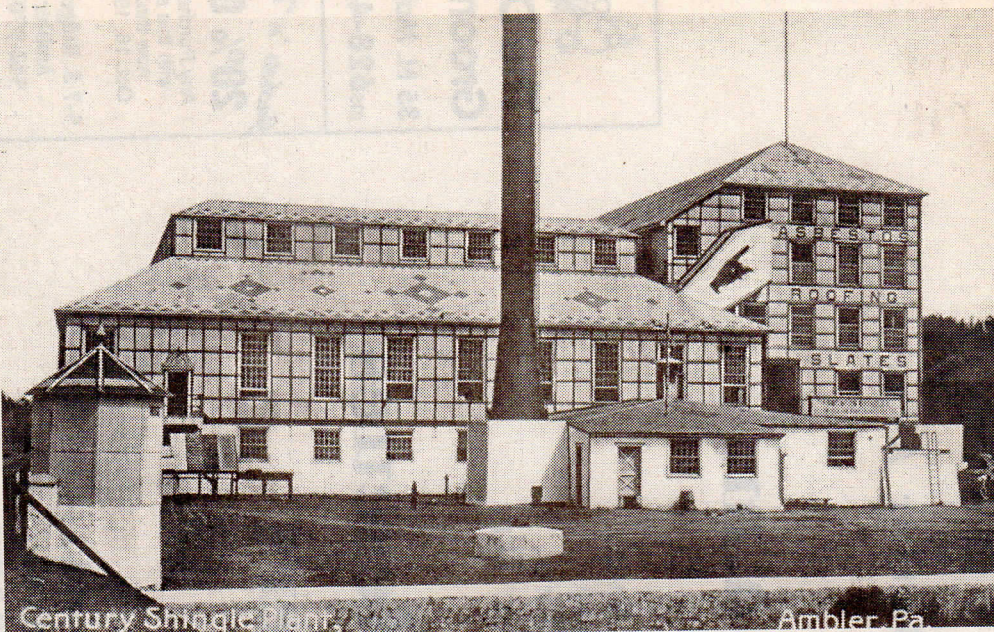
Dr. Mattison's Shingle Plant

by Newton M. Howard

"Ambler will soon have a new manufacturing facility, for we have just received our charter from the State". These were the words spoken by Keasbey & Mattison president Richard V. Mattison in the summer of 1905. He was referring to the "Asbestos Shingle, Slate & Sheathing Company of Ambler", formed with capital stock of \$1,000,000.

Mattison further stated it would most certainly furnish employment for many workers in the Ambler area for years to come. He said, "I have given one of our products the name 'Century Asbestos Shingle', because of its ability to withstand the wear of both the elements and of time. Just last year, an experimental batch of the shingles had its first application ever on my new structure, the 'Tank House'. We are now ready to begin large-scale production".

The mammoth factory was to be built just north of the railroad station on the site of the old mill-pond that serviced the Reiff family's grist mill on Butler Avenue for years. The Reiff family owned all the land west of the railroad, and in 1882 sold to Richard Mattison and



An early view of the "Asbestos Shingle, Slate & Sheathing Company of Ambler", an affiliate of Keasbey & Mattison Co. Known locally as the Shingle Plant, it was built in 1905 and furnished employment for many years to residents of Ambler and vicinity. Believed to be completely fire-proof, the structure was destroyed by a spectacular fire in May of 1989.

Photograph from collection of Newton M. Howard

Henry G. Keasbey a small portion of land next to the railroad. They soon after moved their pharmaceutical works from Philadelphia to Ambler, beginning the rapid growth of what was to become Ambler's largest employer ever. The pond,

many years before, was a favorite ice-skating spot in the Village of Wissahickon, later called Ambler Village.

In addition to the new manufacturing facilities, a huge warehouse 224 x 120 feet was to be constructed

with adequate switches and sidings being furnished by Reading railroad.

The building products about to be manufactured here, while new to this country, had been extensively manufactured and used in Europe for years. It was just the year before that Mattison had sent his elder son, Richard, Jr., along with Plant Superintendent Thomas Rose, to Austria. Here, in Vienna, they consulted with a gentleman who had been working on the same process for asbestos shingles as Doctor Mattison.

Both Mattison and the gentlemen from Vienna had applied for patents for the same product. The Doctor invited the Austrian to "Bushy Park", his mansion at Newport. Here they evidently worked out any differences that might have existed, for production at the new Shingle Plant would soon begin in Ambler.

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Although the company would eventually manufacture a wide variety of products for the building trade, it would for all time be known locally as the "Shingle Plant".

It was during this same period of the plant's establishment that construction of a large group of company homes was about to begin. This gave a very valuable boost to the production output of the new plant. These homes were located at lower Church Street, Ambler Road and a section of South Main. This ground had been purchased from the estate of George K. Knight several years earlier. Since it was formerly swamp land, it had

been undergoing a process of drainage, preparatory to starting the building operations. Here at this housing project would be the first large-scale application of roofing shingles produced at the new Shingle Plant.

Many of these homes have their original "Century" shingle roofs, and before long will be heading into their second century of use. Composed of cement, a resin binder and a minimal amount of asbestos fiber, they withstand the elements, as Mattison predicted back in 1905. Completely fire-proof, they are however fragile if walked on or otherwise abused.

Soon after production began, orders were received for covering the roof of the new \$60,000 Cheltenham High School, as well as the

tower of the church at Trumbauersville.

Finally, a word about the old Shingle Plant. In 1905, Mattison stated that his new factory building would be completely fire-proof, since both the exterior and interior would be covered with their fire-proof asbestos sheathing. "As the steam heating and power will be generated in a building completely separated from this plant", he continued, "the danger from fire will be reduced to absolutely nothing". Generated in the company's boiler house, steam for heating was to be carried underground to the new facilities.

In May of 1989, however, a spectacular fire claimed the building which was being used in its final days as a giant warehouse. In all

fairness to the Doctor's prediction, cause of this fire was due to its flammable contents rather than the building itself.

Chamber Award Winners

Stacey Hurt, a secretary for the Upper Dublin School District, and Edward Johnson were recently honored by the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce. Hurt was named "Future Community Leader" for her work as a volunteer EMT with Ambler Ambulance and the Seeing Eye, Inc.

Johnson received the "Law and Order Award" award for his work as a police officer and security consultant for the Upper Dublin High School.