

ADDRESS: 2704-06 W GIRARD AVE

Name of Resource: John Decker & Son

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Mario and Natale Presta

Nominator: Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Laura DiPasquale, laura.dipasquale@phila.gov, 215-686-7660

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate the property at 2704-06 W Girard Avenue and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the former John Decker & Son Architectural Sheet Metal Works, constructed in phases between 1875 and 1900, building satisfies Criteria for Designation C, D, H, and J. The nomination argues that the property, which combined a modest Italianate rowhouse typical of the 1870s with an ornate High Victorian addition typical of the 1890s, reflects the dynamic evolution of architectural tastes in the late nineteenth century, satisfying Criterion C. The nomination contends that the property's monumental sheet metal cornice and parapet ensemble represents a surviving example of an engineering specimen that advertised the company's stock-in-trade, satisfying Criterion D, and is a unique physical characteristic that represents and established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, satisfying Criterion H. Finally, the nomination argues that the property embodies the Brewerytown neighborhood's cultural, economic, and historical heritage, satisfying Criterion J.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 2704-06 W Girard Avenue satisfies Criteria for Designation C, D, H, and J.



NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE *(must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)*

Street address: 2704-06 West Girard Avenue

Postal code: 19130

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: John Decker & Son Architectural Sheet Metal Works

Current/Common Name: _____

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building

☐ Structure

☐ Site

☐ Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☐ excellent ☒ good ☐ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: Residential and commercial

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

See attached

6. DESCRIPTION

See attached

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1875 to 1979

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1875; c.1891; c.1900

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: _____

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: _____

Original owner: Theodore Decker

Other significant persons: _____

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- ☐ (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- ☐ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☒ (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- ☒ (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- ☐ (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☐ (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- ☐ (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- ☒ (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- ☐ (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- ☒ (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See attached

9. NOMINATOR

Organization Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia Date April 8, 2019

Name with Title Ben Leech, consultant Email patrick@preservationalliance.com

Street Address 1608 Walnut St., Suite 1702 Telephone 215-546-1146

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19103

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 4/10/2019

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: 5/7/2019

Date of Notice Issuance: 5/17/2019

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Mario and Natale Presta

Address: 402 Easton Rd

City: Glenside

State: PA

Postal Code: 19038

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated

☐ Rejected

12/7/18

5. Boundary Description



The property at 2704-06 W Girard Avenue is comprised of two lots, situate on the South side of Girard Avenue at the respective distances of 40 and 60 feet Westward from the West side of 27th Street in the 29th Ward of the City of Philadelphia. Each of the said lots containing in front or breadth on the said Girard Avenue 20 feet and extending of that width in length or depth Southward between parallel lines at right angles to the said Girard Avenue 100 feet to Harper Street.

OPA Account #: 881070292

6. Description

The former John Decker & Son Architectural Sheet Metal Works is a connected complex of three three- and four-story brick masonry structures occupying the entirety of a 40-foot-wide by 100-foot-deep mid-block parcel at 2704-06 West Girard Avenue in the Brewerytown neighborhood of Philadelphia. Its primary north elevation fronts Girard Avenue, with a rear south elevation fronting Harper Street. Rear portions of the west elevation are freestanding; the entire east elevation and front west elevation are party walls.



Figure 1: North (Girard Avenue) elevation. 2704 W. Girard (c.1891) on left, 2706 W. Girard (c.1876) on right.



Figure 2: Cornice and parapet detail

Unified by a monumental rooftop signboard and ornamental pressed metal parapet ensemble, the north elevation incorporates two three-story brick rowhouses: a two-bay Italianate front (c. 1875) to the west and a three-bay High Victorian front (c.1891) to the east [Fig. 1]. Bracketed storefront cornices span the full width of both fronts, with contemporary wood and glass storefronts beneath. The western Italianate front features segmental-arched, two-over-two double-hung wood windows with marble lintels and sills. A pressed metal signboard reads “METALLIC SKY-LIGHTS” on a fascia panel below the bracketed cornice. The eastern High Victorian front features a richly-patterned facade of pressed and corbelled brick. A pedimented second-floor bay window is trimmed in scroll-cut brackets and turned pendants. Its third floor features a wide round-arched multi-light window ensemble framed by brick pilasters and tall pressed metal brackets. Tall flanking segmental-arched side windows feature simple one-over-one double-hung wood sashes on the second floor and ornate twenty-over-four Queen Anne wood sashes on the third floor, all with brownstone sills. A monumental parapet spans both facades with a signboard reading “JOHN DECKER & SON ARCHITECTURAL SHEET METAL WORKS” in dimensional pressed metal. The signboard is bracketed by ornate engaged columns crowned by globes and wrought metal finials, with a broken curved pediment bearing

an 1891 datestone. The signboard is flanked by colonnades with sign panels reading “TIN ROOFING” and “COPPER CORNICES” [Fig. 2].

A four-story brick factory addition fronts Harper Street at the parcel’s rear [Fig. 3]. The six-bay, flat-roofed block features a simple bracketed and corbelled brick cornice spanning an informal arrangement of windows and loading bays along its south elevation, including a large two-story carriage door (now partially infilled) below a column of full-height upper-story loading doors. Most windows now feature one-over-one replacement sashes, though surviving original fenestration details include wood-paneled loading doors, a wood-framed oculus window, and a multi-light transom above the carriage door. The west-facing side elevation is lit by three registers of windows on its upper three floors.



Figure 3: South (Harper Street) elevation of rear factory addition (c.1900).

7. Significance

Dominating the West Girard Avenue streetscape with a monumental pressed metal parapet designed to advertise the products made by its original owners, the former John Decker & Son Architectural Sheet Metal Works complex at 2704-06 West Girard Avenue is an architecturally and culturally significant landmark in the Brewerytown neighborhood of Philadelphia.

Incorporating two attached rowhouses and a rear factory addition, the complex was constructed in multiple phases between 1875 and c.1900. It survives today as a distinctive and evocative reminder of an industry that helped shape the architectural character of Philadelphia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when dozens of local sheet metal fabricators mass-produced ornamental cornices and other metal building components during an era of exponential urban expansion. The property meets the following criteria for historic designation as set forth in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance §14-1004 (1) and therefore merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places:

C: Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;

D: Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen;

H: Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City;

and

J: Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

John Decker & Son

In July of 1874, a young tinsmith named Theodore Decker purchased two parcels of undeveloped land along a rapidly-developing stretch of Girard Avenue three blocks west of Girard College.¹ Decker was the son and newly-minted business partner of John Decker, a tinsmith born in the Wurttemberg region of present-day Germany in 1825.² First appearing in *McElroy's Philadelphia Directory* in 1849, the elder Decker lived and worked at 220 (later

¹ Deed Book FTW, pp. 200-204, July 25, 1874. Philadelphia City Archives.

² United States Census, 1860. Philadelphia Ward 13, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, page 869.

renumbered 618) Callowhill Street for thirty years, eventually establishing a house furnishings and hardware business (as Decker & Vischer) in addition to his tinsmith trade. The younger Decker apprenticed with his father before formally partnering as John Decker and Son in 1875. Soon after purchasing the Girard Avenue parcels, Theodore constructed a three-story residence and shopfront at 2706 West Girard Avenue-- one of the first structures built on the block-- while his father remained on Callowhill Street [Fig. 4]. Through 1880, John Decker & Son appeared in city directories as a house furnishings business with two locations: 2706 Girard and 618 Callowhill.³

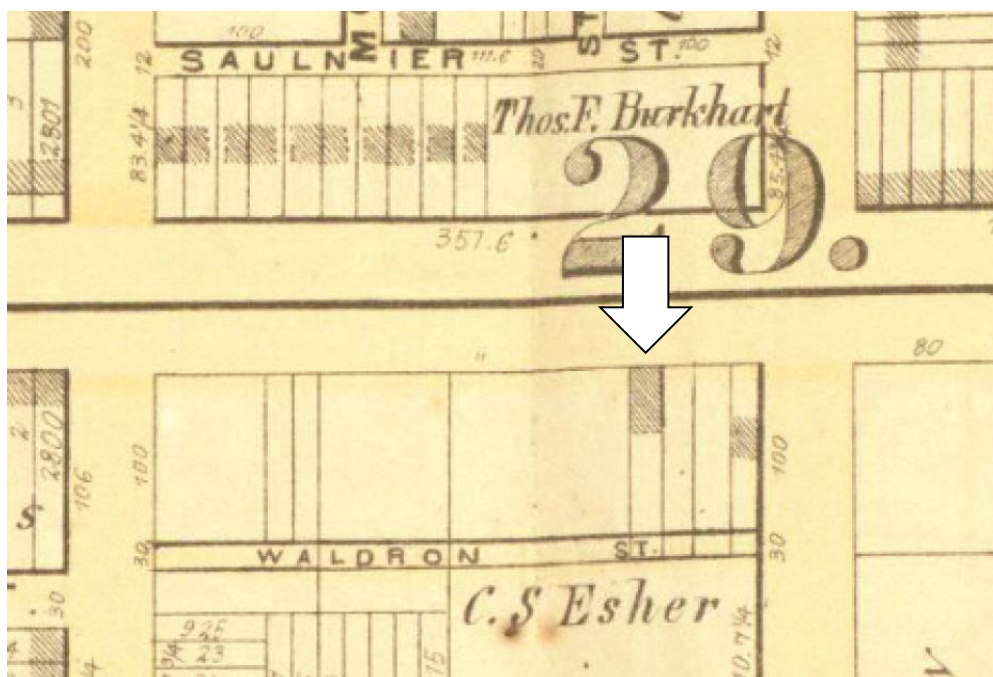


Figure 4: 2706 Girard Avenue in 1875. City Atlas of Philadelphia, Vol. 6, Plate Z. G. M. Hopkins, 1875.

The ensuing decade appears to have been both prosperous and tumultuous for the family business. John Decker disappeared from city directories after 1880, while Theodore Decker's household grew to include wife Sophia, sons John and Frank, and daughter Victoria. By 1890, the Decker family moved to a nearby residence at 2816 Girard while the Decker & Son business remained at 2706. In addition, Louis (or Lewis) J. Wahl joined Theodore as a partner in the firm, which expanded to include a new shopfront at 2704 Girard. An undated photograph from this period of time captures Decker & Son in a state of transition: 2706 Girard stands much as it does

³ Philadelphia City Directories, 1849-1880.

today, with a bracketed storefront that has expanded to fill a one-story structure next door. Large barrels line the sidewalks as grand signs advertise “HARDWARE,” “TIN ROOFING,” “TIN & SHEET IRON WORK,” and “HEATERS & RANGES.” Other signage in the shape of keys and locks, hangs from the building [Fig. 5]. By 1891, the adjacent shopfront had grown into an ornate three-story building, and both 2704 and 2706 were crowned by an even more impressive assemblage of sheet-metal ornament and signage. In this same year, Theodore passed away at the age of 38, leaving the company to his widow Sophia and former partner Louis Wahl.⁴



Figure 5: Undated photo (c.1890), private collection of Joseph Roskam.

⁴ Philadelphia City Directories, 1890-1895.



Figure 6: 1896 advertisement from *Souvenir of Philadelphia, Prepared for the Thirty-sixth Annual Convention of the United States Brewers' Convention, June 1896*.

Wahl's exact relationship to the Deckers is unknown, though he grew up next door to the family on Callowhill Street and was three years older than Theodore. The 1870 census lists him as a 19-year-old railroad clerk and the son of a Prussian-born shoe manufacturer.⁵ By 1890 he was again living next door to the Deckers at 2814 Girard. Following Theodore's death, Sophia retained ownership of both 2704-06 Girard Street, but by 1895 appears to have turned the business over to Wahl and new partner Harry B. Middleton, who ran the company for the next two decades.⁶ According to one 1896 advertisement, Decker & Son, in a logical outgrowth of the firm's Brewerytown address, also supplied specialized equipment for the brewing industry in addition to fabricating "copper and galvanized iron cornices, corrugated iron work, metallic ceilings,

⁵ United States Census, 1870. Philadelphia Ward 13 District 37, page 282B.

⁶ Philadelphia City Directories, 1890-1920.

skylights, copper, tin, and slate roofing,” [Fig. 6].⁷ By 1901, the complex had grown to include a four-story factory at the rear of the property [Figs 7-8].

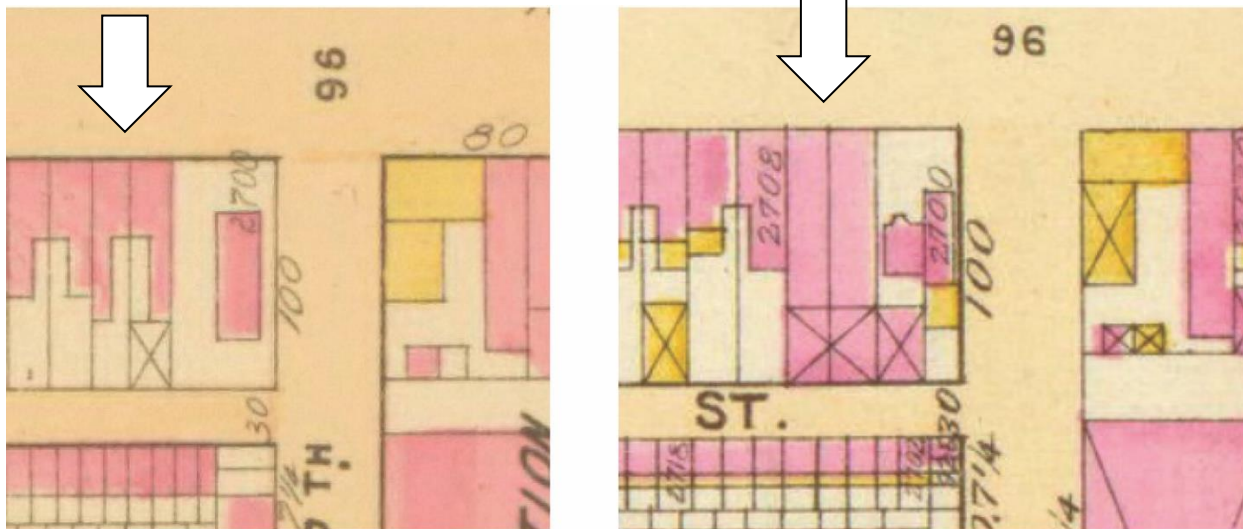


Figure 7 (left): Baist's Property Atlas of the City and County of Philadelphia, G. Wm. Baist, 1895, Plan 23.
 Figure 8 (right): Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, G.W. Bromley, 1901, Plate 11.

Meanwhile, Theodore's two sons T. Frank and John C. Decker remained involved with the family business; the 1900 census lists nineteen-year-old Frank as a cornice maker and seventeen-year-old John as a clerk.⁸ By 1920, Frank is listed as “president and manager” and John as a “roofing contractor,” and by 1926 ownership of the buildings transferred from Sophia to the two sons. Both were listed alongside Louis J. Wahl, Jr. (the son of Theodore's first business partner) as owners of John Decker & Son in *Polk's* 1930 Philadelphia directory. By this time the company advertised itself primarily as a roofing company whose projects reportedly included the new Philadelphia Museum of Art. John Decker & Son remained in business throughout the 1960s as a roofing contractor, sheet metal shop, and retail hardware store. The property remained in the Decker family until 1979. In 1997, the three buildings were converted to their present configuration of multiple residential units above and behind a Girard Avenue storefront space, which is currently occupied by a daycare center.

⁷ *Souvenir of Philadelphia, Prepared for the Thirty-sixth Annual Convention of the United States Brewers' Convention*, June 1896.

⁸ United States Census, 1900. Philadelphia Ward 32, Enumeration District 0829, page 10.

Architectural Sheet Metal

While John Decker & Son was active in numerous facets of the house furnishings, hardware, roofing, and even brewery trades over the course of its century-long existence, its surviving Girard Avenue buildings are particularly evocative of a specific chapter in Philadelphia's architectural history: the mass production of ornamental building components for the city's turn-of-the-twentieth-century rowhouse boom. Beginning in the 1840s, manufacturers began to replicate traditionally hand-crafted, usually stone or wood architectural details in galvanized sheet iron, reportedly (and perhaps apocryphally) after a Cincinnati metalworker witnessed the death of two workmen crushed by a falling stone cornice in 1834.⁹ By the end of the Civil War, sheet metal cornices and other architectural details were increasingly recognized for their light weight, durability, ease of installation, and ornamental potential. As described by one Philadelphia iron foundry in 1872:

The superior merits of Galvanized Iron Cornices are now well known to architects and builders. [...] From the experience of twenty years we can testify how gradually, but surely Galvanized Iron Cornices have come into favor. Their popularity is now so widespread we have been induced to offer to the public a catalogue of a portion of our patterns. The styles, however, are so numerous and subject to increasing improvements, that it is almost impossible to set them forth in one book. [...] We furnish Galvanized Iron Cornices of any required design, either plain or of the most elaborate description.¹⁰

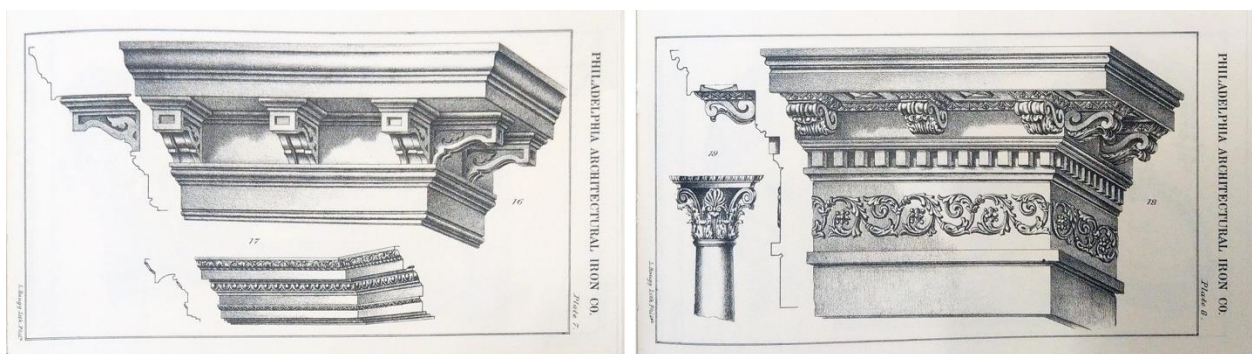


Figure 10: Examples of galvanized sheet iron cornices from the Philadelphia Architectural Iron Company's 1872 catalogue, reproduced in *Architectural Elements: The Technological Revolution*. Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1972.

⁹ Gayle, Margot and Look, David W. *Metals in America's Historic Buildings*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, 1992, p. 18.

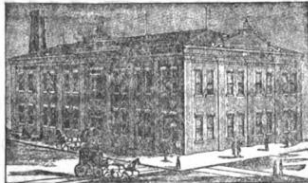
¹⁰ Waite, Diana S. *Architectural Elements: The Technological Revolution*. Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1972.

AMERICAN CORNICE CO.,

ARTHUR S. ARNOLD, Manager.

Galvanized Iron and Copper Cornices.

Skylights,
Finials,
Brackets,
Window Caps,



Oriel Windows,
Awnings,
Iron Ceilings,
Fire Doors.

TIN ROOFING, &c.

ESTIMATES FURNISHED.

S. E. Corner 17th and Lehigh Avenue.

FRAND & CO.,

—MANUFACTURERS OF—



Stamped
Zinc,
Copper and
Ornamental
Work,

110, 112, 114, 116 ARCH
ST.

CAMDEN, N. J.

Estimates Cheerfully given on all Decorative Metal
Work and Metal Ceilings.

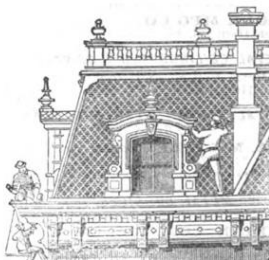
A. & G. BOHEM,

COPPER AND GALVANIZED IRON

CORNICE WORKS

VENTILATING PIPES A SPECIALTY.

MANUFACTURERS OF



Brackets, Buttress Heads,
FINIALS, WINDOW CAPS AND
SILLS, CORRUGATED IRON
AND TIN ROOFING.

SKYLIGHTS

Office and Factory, 15th and Federal Sts., Philadelphia.

S. A. BACHMAN, - Proprietor.

SIGNS, DOORS AND WINDOW CAPS.



ORNAMENTAL FRONTS in Copper and Iron.

FIRE-PROOF DOORS AND SHUTTERS

As per requirements of the Philadelphia Underwriters' Association a specialty.

AGENTS FOR

Penn Metal Ceiling and Roofing Co.
and Caldwell & Peterson's Patented Steel Ceilings.

SQUARE * CONDUCTORS

EIGHT FEET LENGTHS.



SHEET IRON WORK.

COPPER AND GALVANIZED

Telephone Connection.

H. A. GARTHAUS, Manager.

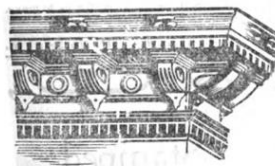
SIXTH AND BERKS STS

WEST PHILADELPHIA

COPPER AND GALVANIZED IRON

Cornice Works

JAMES P. KING, Proprietor,



MANUFACTURERS OF
METALLIC
SKY LIGHTS,



Brackets, Buttress Heads,

CORNICES

Window Caps and Finials, Corrugated Iron
Roofing, Awnings, &c.

ESTIMATES FURNISHED.

Office and Factory, 3420 Market Street, Philadelphia.

Figure 11: Various cornice manufacturers' advertisements from Boyd's Co-Partnership and Residence Business Directory of Philadelphia City, 1900, pp. 1291-94.

More than thirty metal cornice manufacturers were active in Philadelphia alone between the 1870s and the 1920s, producing myriad iterations of the ubiquitous rowhouse cornice in galvanized iron, tin, and bronze. Most also produced metal skylights, patterned roofing, stamped ornaments, and other building components popular at the time [Fig. 11]. Unfortunately, no catalogue or inventory from John Decker & Son survives to illustrate that company's specific output, but the design of its own building was surely intended as a demonstration project. As such, it is almost certainly the most intact and elaborate example of its type still standing in Philadelphia. Other known examples include the recently-demolished W.G. Schweiker Metal Cornice and Skylight Works building at 2623 West Jefferson Street, also in Brewerytown [Fig. 12], the former A & G Bohem Cornice Works at 15th and Federal Streets [Fig. 13], and the vestigial cornice and parapet of a tin roofing manufacturer at 524 West Girard Avenue [Fig. 14]. While all used a combination of pressed metal ornament and integrated signage to advertise their companies'



Figure 12: W.G. Schweiker Building (now demolished), 2623 Jefferson Street. Parapet signage read "CORNICES SKYLIGHTS & ROOFING." Photo by author, 2016.



Figure 13: A & G Bohem Cornice Works, 15th and Federal Streets. Photo by Michael Bixler, Hidden City Daily, 2015.



Figure 14: 524 W. Girard Avenue, photo via Google Streetview, 2018.

products, none match the heights (both literally and figuratively) of the Decker facade's rich ornamental panoply.

The building vividly reflects both the technological advances and the stylistic impulses that shaped the built environment of its era. "The influence of machine production is strongly evident in designs.... from the late 1870s until the turn of the century," notes historian Christopher Macneal in discussing the evolution of sheet metal cornices. "The economics of mechanized production allowed designers to ignore traditional limitations on the decoration of manufactured objects imposed by the high cost of hand labor, feeding the late Victorian enthusiasm for displays of technical proficiency in endless mechanical replication of ornate designs."¹¹

West Girard Avenue and Brewerytown

Today, the former John Decker & Son Architectural Sheet Metal Works building is an iconic and highly recognizable feature of Brewerytown's historic Girard Avenue commercial corridor, an area that was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2011 as the West Girard Avenue Historic District.¹² Identified in the nomination as "one of the most visually prominent businesses on W. Girard Avenue," the property's quarter-decade evolution from a single three-story workshop and residence to an ornate three-building factory complex mirrors the rise of Brewerytown itself as a prosperous, primarily German-American working-class neighborhood whose expansive blocks of workers' rowhouses were embellished by the very cornices manufactured in factories like Decker's. The company's Germanic roots and its secondary association with the brewing industry-- Brewerytown's eponymous main industry-- only amplify the property's exceptional neighborhood significance.

¹¹ Macneal, Christopher. "The Sheet Metal Cornice, 1860-1920." *The Metal Cornice: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, Levy, Alan G., ed. Philadelphia: Center for Environmental Design and Planning, 1985, p. 53.

¹² Ferguson, Logan I. "West Girard Avenue Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Philadelphia: Powers & Company, Inc., July 9, 2010, sec. 8, p. 16.

Conclusion

“The factory production of building components brought about a major reorganization of the construction industry in the space of several decades,” notes Macneal’s study of the cornice industry in Philadelphia and beyond. “Tens of thousands of metal cornices remaining today document the progressive industrialization of the building trades, and provide an index to changes in popular architectural tastes during the birth of mass-marketing in American consumer culture.”¹³ The John Decker & Son Architectural Sheet Metal Works complex at 2704-06 West Girard Avenue is a rare surviving example of a once-thriving industry that profoundly impacted the character of Philadelphia’s built environment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Incorporating a modest Italianate rowhouse typical of the 1870s with an ornate High Victorian addition typical of the 1890s, the property reflects the dynamic evolution of architectural tastes in the closing decades of the nineteenth century (Criterion C). In addition, the property’s monumental sheet metal cornice and parapet ensemble represents an almost singular surviving example of an engineering specimen that advertised, both literally and symbolically, the company’s stock-in-trade (Criterion D). As both a visual icon of West Girard Avenue (Criterion H) and as an embodiment of Brewerytown’s cultural, economic, and historical heritage (Criterion J), the building’s architectural and cultural significance is even further enhanced by its local setting and context. For these reasons, the property merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

¹³ Macneal, p. 31.

8. Bibliography

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United States Census, 1900. Philadelphia Ward 32, Enumeration District 0829, page 10.

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