**ADDRESS:** 5250 Unruh Ave  
Name of Resource: The Tacony Worsted Mills  
Proposed Action: Designation  
Property Owner: 5250 Unruh Avenue Association  
Nominator: Alex Balloon, Director, Tacony Community Development Corp.  
Staff Contact: Megan Cross Schmitt, megan.schmitt@phila.gov, 215-686-7660

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate the property at 5250 Unruh Avenue and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the building satisfies Criteria for Designation E and J. Under Criterion E, the nomination argues that the Tacony Worsted Mills is an early and intact example of an industrial complex designed by Walter Harvey Geissinger, a prolific architect who designed several commercial and industrial buildings throughout Philadelphia. Under Criterion J, the nomination contends that the Tacony Worsted Mills was considered locally and nationally to be one of the finest and largest worsted yarn mills of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 5250 Unruh Avenue satisfies Criteria for Designation E and J.
1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)
   Street address: 5250 Unruh Avenue
   Postal code: 19135 Councilmanic District: 6

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE
   Historic Name: Tacony Worsted Mills
   Current/Common Name: Unknown

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: Cell Tower/Storage

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION
   Please attach

6. DESCRIPTION
   Please attach

7. SIGNIFICANCE
   Please attach the Statement of Significance.
   Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1886 to 1938
   Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: Buildings 1-5: 1886-87; 7: c1909; & 8: c1911-19
   Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Walter Harvey Geissinger (1859-1950)
   Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Unknown
   Original owner: Erben, Search, & Co.
   Other significant persons: Unknown
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
Please attach

9. NOMINATOR
Organization_ Tacony Community Development Corp. Date_ March 4, 2019
Name with Title_ Alex Balloon, Director Email_ alex@taconycdc.org
Street Address_ 6742 Torresdale Avenue Telephone_ 215.501.7799
City, State, and Postal Code_ Philadelphia, PA 19135
Nominator □ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY
Date of Receipt: 4 March 2019
☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 13 May 2019
Date of Notice Issuance: 14 May 2019
Property Owner at Time of Notice
Name: 5250 Unruh Avenue Association
Address: 328 Jackson Road
City: Atco State: NJ Postal Code: 08004
Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation:
Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission:
Date of Final Action:
□ Designated ☐ Rejected 12/3/18
The Tacony Worsted Mills

Erben, Search, & Company Worsted Mills (1886-1894)
Erben, Harding, & Company (1894-1901)
Erben-Harding Company (1901-1938)

 Erected 1886 - 87

5250 Unruh Avenue
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19135
5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary for the designation of the subject property is as follows:

BEGINNING at an interior point being the former Port Warden’s Line which point is measured South 66 degrees 31 minutes 10 seconds West the distance of 266.515 from a point formed by an intersection of the former Port Warden’s Line and the Southwesterly side of Unruh Avenue (40’ wide); thence extending from said point of beginning South 66 degrees 31 minutes 10 seconds West along the former Port Warden’s Line the distance of 294.002’ to a point on the Northeasterly side of former Magee Avenue (Stricken from the City Plan) (Reserved Right of Way for Reconstruction, Repair and Maintenance of Sewer); thence extending North 28 degrees 19 minutes 47 seconds West along the Northeasterly side of former Magee Avenue, crossing the Bulkhead Line approved by Secretary of War, September 10, 1940, crossing the bed of a 30’ wide Kensington and Tacony Railroad easement, crossing bed of 40’ wide Right of Way reserved to maintain Water Conduit, crossing the bed of 35’ wide Pipe Line easement and crossing the bed of a variable width Proposed Easement the distance of 557.287’ to a point; thence extending North 61 degrees 40 minutes 13 seconds East partly passing within the bed of the said variable width Proposed Easement and along the Northerly side of the said variable with Proposed Easement the distance of 288.30’ to a point; thence extending South 29 degrees 55 minutes 54 seconds East partly passing within the bed of the said variable width Easement the distance of 166.345’ to a point; thence extending South 28 degrees 19 minutes 47 seconds East along the Southwesterly said of a proposed 21.44’ wide Easement crossing the Southwesterly end of a proposed 35’ wide Easement, recrossing the bed of the said 35’ wide Pipe Line Easement, of the said 40’ wide Right of Way reserved to maintain Water Conduit, recrossing the Bulkhead Line approved by the Secretary of War September 10, 1940 the distance of 415.86’ to a point on the former Port Warden’s Line being the first mentioned point of beginning.

OPA Property Number: 884802805
Philadelphia Deed Registry Number: 111N24-0016.
6. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Originally designed and constructed between 1886 and 1887, the Tacony Worsted Mill is an impressive industrial complex at 5250 Unruh Avenue in the Tacony Neighborhood of Northeast Philadelphia. The complex is comprised of seven built components that are within a landlocked parcel that is bound by New State Road to the northwest; Unruh Avenue to the northeast; the Delaware River to the southeast; and Elbridge Street to the southwest. In addition, the property is southwest of the former Keystone Saw Works of Henry Disston & Sons.

The subject property contains the following buildings based on the Hexamer General Survey, volume 24, Erben, Search and Company, 1889. Worsted Mill: Building Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8. Building 6, a blacksmith shop appears to be one of the only that is no longer extant.
The Tacony Worsted Mills, 5250 Unruh Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Figure 4. Top: Looking west at the site of the Tacony Worsted Mills with the notable brick chimney stack and tower of the subject property on left. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2019. Figure 5. Bottom: Looking southwest at the gates of the former Tacony Worsted Mills with Building 5 and its notable brick chimney stack on left. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2019.
Building 1: Wool Warehouse
Located at the northwestern corner of the subject property, Building 1 is a large rectangular brick factory, measuring roughly 184’ in length by 78’ in width. Standing two stories with a basement, the red brick building features walls that were recorded as being 21” thick. The building features a low-slung gable roof, which spans from the northwest to the southeast. The southwest elevation is the most visible, spanning twenty-two bays. This elevation features a symmetrical fenestration of twenty-two apertures per floor, which appear to be defined by segmental arch, brick lintels and plain sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed in plywood. Originally the windows in this elevation were all sixteenth over twenty, wooden sash. The northwest elevation features eight apertures per floor, which are defined by segmental arch, brick lintels and plain sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed in plywood. The upper level of the gable end originally featured at least one window. The northeast elevation is largely obscured by Building 7, but the second floor is visible, which is also comprised of twenty-two windows. Like the southwest elevation, the windows within the northeast elevation are defined by segmental arch, brick lintels and plain sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed in plywood. The southeast elevation is largely obscured by Building 2a, but the second floor is visible, which is comprised of eight windows. Like the northwest elevation, the windows within the northwest elevation are defined by segmental arch, brick lintels and plain sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed in plywood.
Figure 8. Top: Looking west at the southeast and northeast elevations of Building 1. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018. Figure 9. Bottom left: Looking east at southwest elevation of Building 2a and the southwest elevation of Building 2. Figure 10. Bottom right: Looking west at the southeast elevations of Building 2 and Building 2a. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018.

Building 2: Wash House
Located at the south of the subject complex, Building 2 is a large, rectangular, three-part brick factory of loadbearing, masonry construction with a low slung gable roof. Measuring 51’ in width and 208’ in length, the building is constructed in three sections, about one-third of which stands one story at the southwest and the upper two-thirds of which stands two-stories.
southwestern third of Building 2, the northwest elevation is obscured by Building 1, and the southwest and southeast elevations of Building 1 are not accessible and are obscured by a loading dock at the southeast elevation. However, a clearly-story still occupies the central section of the roof. The other two-thirds to the northeast are two stories, featuring a fenestration at the southeast elevation of roughly sixteenth apertures per floor. The windows are defined by segmental, brick arch lintels and plain sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed in plywood. The second story of the southwest elevation is five bays in width, the windows being defined by segmental, brick arched lintels and plain sills. The windows appear to be sheathed in plywood. A portion of the second story apertures at the northwest elevation are visible above the roofline of Building 7. A portion of the second story apertures is also visible at the northeast elevation, the lower portion of which is obscured by Building 4. The windows appear to be similar.

Figure 11. Looking south at Building 2. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018.
Building 3: Combing Mill
Located at the northern corner of the subject property, Building 3 is a large rectangular brick factory, measuring roughly 184’ in length by 78’ in width. Standing two stories with a basement, the red brick building features walls that were recorded as being 21” thick. The building features a low-slung gable roof, which spans from the northwest to the southeast gable ends. The northeast elevation is the most visible, spanning twenty-two bays. This elevation features a symmetrical fenestration of twenty-two apertures per floor, which are defined by segmental arch lintels and brick sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed in plywood. The northwest elevation features eight apertures per floor, which are defined by segmental, brick arch lintels and plain sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed in plywood. The upper level of the gable end appears to be blind. The southwest elevation is largely obscured by Building 7, but the second floor is visible, which is also comprised of twenty-two windows. Like the northeast elevation, the windows within the northeast elevation are defined by segmental, brick arched lintels and plain sills. All the windows appear to be sheathed or infilled. The southeast elevation is entirely obscured by Building 2. At the southeast corner of the building is large Stairway & Tank House Tower, which is a prominent feature of the subject property. This building features a clerestory at the central section of the roof.
The tower stands four levels in height, projecting from the southwest corner of Building 3. At the ground floor of the northeast elevation is a large aperture defined by a segmental, brick arched lintel. Set within this opening is a double wide entrance, featuring double wooden doors, each comprised of six panels. Above the entrance is a twenty-light transom that conforms to the segmental arched lintel. The second floor features a tall, narrow aperture that is missing its window, which is defined by a segmental arch and common sill. The third level features a small window that is defined by an arched lintel in the form of a projecting brick hood. The fourth level features a similar window that is set with a recessed brick panel that features a corbel table at the top. Each facade of the tower features a continuous corbeled cornice. The tower features a hipped roof that includes a ridge, at the center of which is a low cast iron fence and a weather vane that appears to date to the period of construction. Both the northwest and the southeast elevations feature two arched windows set within recessed brick panels like the northeast elevation. The southwest elevation mimics the northeast elevation with only one opening on the fourth level.
Figure 14. Looking south at the northwest and the primary (northeast) elevations of Buildings 7 and 3. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018.

Figure 15. Looking west at the primary (northeast) elevation of Building 3. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018.
Figure 16. Looking west at the northeast elevation of Building 5; the southeast and northeast elevations of the notable chimney stack of Building 5; and the Stairway and Tank House Tower of Building 3. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2019.
Buildings 4: Engine & Dynamo Room
Appending Building 2, Building 4 is a one-story brick building of load-bearing masonry construction with low-slung roof. Measuring 28’ wide by 60’ long, the building’s northeastern elevation is three bays in width with a door at the southeast followed by two windows. The openings feature segmental arch, brick lintels and have been infilled. This section is the gable front. The northwest elevation was not accessible.

Building 5: Boiler House
Appending Building 2 at the southwest and Building 4 at the northwest, Building B is a one-story brick building of load-bearing masonry construction with a low-slung roof. Measuring 60’ by 60’, the building features a massive brick stack that stands 150’ in height. The chimney is stylized by elaborate brick corbeling. The northeast elevation features a fenestration of five large openings that are defined by segmental, brick arches, some of which are infilled. The side gable roof appends Building 4 and faces southeast towards the Delaware River. This elevation is largely obscured by a shed addition.
Figure 19. The northeast elevations of Buildings 4 and 5; the Tank House & Stairway Tower of Building 3; and the southeast and northeast elevations of Building 8. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2019.

Figure 20. The east elevation of Building 4. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2019.
Building 7
Located in the court formed by Buildings 1 and 3, Building 7 is a low, rectangular shed of brick construction. Measuring roughly 55’ in width by 184’ in length within the entire court space, the building is two parts the southeastern portion being the lowest and the northwestern being the highest. The northwestern portion features a high brick parapet wall from which a clerestory spans the center of both roofs, featuring at a central window at the southeast elevation.

Figure 21. Looking south at Building 7 at center. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018.

Figure 22. Looking west at Building 7. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018.
Figure 23. The southeast and northeast elevations of Building 8. Note the railroad line that ran through the yard of the complex, a contributing feature of the proposed designation. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2019. Figure 24. Inset: Looking south at the northeast and northwest elevations of Building 8. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2018.

**Building 8**

Detached from the larger complex within yard to the northeast of Building 3, Building 8 is a small rectangular brick building of loadbearing masonry construction with a side gable roof. The primary (northeast) elevation features five apertures per floor with a central doorway that is flanked by two windows on each side. These and the five windows that define the second-floor fenestration are defined by segmental brick arches and common sills. The southeast elevation features two windows per floor, defined by segmental arched windows. All the apertures appear to be sheathed. The northwest elevation also contains two apertures per floor. The southwest elevation features a skybridge to the second floor of Building 3. The roof is very poor condition.
7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
The Tacony Worsted Mills at 5250 Unruh Avenue is a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The subject property satisfies the following Criteria for Designation, as enumerated in Section 14–1004 of the Philadelphia Code:

(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; and

(j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

The period of significance dates from the time the Tacony Worsted Mills purchased and began construction in 1886 until operations were discontinued and the property was leased to Sears, Roebuck & Company in 1938.
Figure 26. Technology of textile design: being a practical treatise on the construction and application of weaves for all textile fabrics, with minute reference to the latest inventions for weaving: containing also an appendix showing the analysis and giving the calculations necessary for the manufacture of the various textile fabrics. (Philadelphia: E.A. Posselt, 1892).
The Tacony Worsted Mills at 5250 Unruh Avenue is a significant industrial complex in the Tacony neighborhood of Northeast Philadelphia. Established on the site by Erben, Search & Company, the subject property consists of seven buildings, five of which date to the original period of construction between 1886 and 1887 with two additions in the early twentieth century. The Tacony Worsted Mills is representative of the advancement and evolution of the local textile industry, which was an important economic driver of the city during the period of significance. Known to be one of the “finest” and “largest” worsted yarn mills in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both locally and nationally, as well as a leading manufacturer of worsted yarns nationwide, the Tacony Worsted Mills showcases a significant development in the textile industry, when the advent of modern combing techniques enabled yarn manufacturers to create a diversified and modern product that served a growing demand in the textile marketplace. Originally confined to the “Lister” method, the worsted yarn industry was expanded with the advent of the “English” and “French” Systems for worsted yarns, which were improved manufacturing processes employed at the Tacony Worsted Mills. In addition, the firm also

(j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

4 Tyrone Daily Herald, 21 February 1898, 51.
produced “Woolen, Mohair, Merino, and Genapped Yarns.”\(^5\) Outside of Henry Disston & Sons’ Keystone Saw Works as the local economic powerhouse, the Tacony Worsted Mills also represents the culture of manufacturing as an important component of the economic and social heritage of the Tacony neighborhood.\(^6\) The location was no doubt chosen to allow for the construction of a large, purpose-built, and modern plant; to enable future expansion of the mills; to secure a localized workforce; and to be near a railroad lines and a water source, the Delaware River.\(^7\) With employment fluctuating between 150 to 250 persons, the Tacony Worsted Mills was one of the larger employers in the neighborhood, being further distinctive as a local employer of females—a noted deficiency of the mammoth Keystone Saw Works in its earlier days.\(^8\)

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\(^5\) Technology of textile design: being a practical treatise on the construction and application of weaves for all textile fabrics, with minute reference to the latest inventions for weaving: containing also an appendix showing the analysis and giving the calculations necessary for the manufacture of the various textile fabrics. (Philadelphia: E.A. Posselt, 1892).


Figure 29. An improved combing machine, dated May 5, 1856. Source: James Burnley. The History of Wool and Woolcombing (Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1889).

**Historic Context: The Development of the Combing Industry and the Manufacture of Worsted Yarns in Philadelphia, 1857-1885**

Prior to the advent of improved combing machinery and technologies, developed in Europe in the 1840s and 1850s, “the worsted business” and the worsted yarn manufacturing industry in America was limited to the use of the solitary method known as the “Lister” comb type. The process to produce worsted yarn was required a single wool type, known as “wool of a long staple.” 9 With the development and patenting of improved combing machinery and technologies, such as the Noble and Heilmann combs, the worsted industry was enabled to manufacture products using “almost any kind of wool that is grown on the face of the earth.” 10 During the third quarter of the nineteenth century the worsted yarn industry in Philadelphia adapted to compete in this new and improved marketplace. In fact, with the rapid expansion of the textile industry, as well as the increased capability to produce higher quality goods more expeditiously, the demand for worsted and other yarns, especially by small shops, led to the establishment of “dozens of separate spinning plants” in the 1860s and 1870s. 11 These mills went on to

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9 James Burnley, The History of Wool and Woolcombing (Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1889).
manufacture worsted yarns using the “English” and “French” Systems. These manufacturers produced “Woolen, Mohair, Merino, and Genapped Yarns.”

Among the mills founded to manufacture worsted yarns, the most successful firms used and improved upon the aforementioned machinery and technologies. By the 1870s and 1880s, firms, like the Tacony Worsted Mills, were being modernized and enlarged to serve a growing demand in the evolving textile marketplace. As part of this shift, many firms removed from the old industrial neighborhoods of Philadelphia to establish new plants for specialized production processes and purposes; to gain additional space; and to attract a localized workforce. During this period, Erben, Search & Company purchased the subject property, and established the Tacony Worsted Mills.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Philadelphia continued to grow as “the leading city in the United States, if not the world,” in the “manufacture of woolen and worsted goods.” According the Manufacturers’ Census, Philadelphia had an output of $12 million in woolen goods and $27 million in worsted goods, totaling $39 million. In 1904, there were 136 factories engaged in the manufacture of woolen and worsted goods in Philadelphia, employing roughly 17,000 men, two-thirds of whom were employed in manufacturing worsted goods. Less than ten years later, in 1910, there were nearly 200 factories engaged in the “combined industries.” At that time there were 80 firms engaged in the manufacture of yarn.

According to the Textile Industries of Philadelphia (1911), the following was stated on Philadelphia’s position in the realm of textile manufacture:

This is the great center for the manufacture of yarns for the carpet and woolen industries; and in the manufacture of worsted yarn Philadelphia has overtaken Bradford, England.

This culture continued through the 1920s and it wasn’t until the Great Depression that specialized firms like the Tacony Worsted Mills were forced to close their doors due to the larger economic climate in the United States and abroad.

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13 *Technology of textile design: being a practical treatise on the construction and application of weaves for all textile fabrics, with minute reference to the latest inventions for weaving: containing also an appendix showing the analysis and giving the calculations necessary for the manufacture of the various textile fabrics.* (Philadelphia: E.A. Posselt, 1892).
14 Scranton, Proprietary Capitalism, 317-19.
16 Macfarlane and Hicks, *Textile Industries of Philadelphia*, 12.
Figure 30. Leased by Fiss, Banes, Erben & Company in 1875, this is the Fairmount Worsted Mill, built in 1865, 1867, and 1869, during the ownership of J.&W. Yewdall, Spring Garden Street between Taylor and Osprey Streets. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

**Historic Context: The Tacony Worsted Mills**

The buildings and structures that comprise the surviving Tacony Worsted Mills within the proposed boundaries of the subject property were largely constructed between 1886 and 1887 with two additional building components added between 1909 and 1920. Henry Erben (1845-1906), Theodore Corson Search (1843-1916), Charles Henry Harding (1842-1920), and Walter Erben (1854-1931), partners in Erben, Search, & Company, were manufacturers of worsted yarns, who purchased the subject property from John Yewdall (1828-1901), a co-founder of the original company; his wife Ann Yewdall; and other family members on January 2, 1886.18

Figure 31. Left: Henry Erben. Figure 32. Middle left: Walter Erben. Figure 33. Middle right: Theodore C. Search. Figure 34. Right: Charles H. Harding. Source: Moses King, Philadelphia and Notable Philadelphians (M. King, 1902), 46, 47, and 55.

18 Deed: John Yewdall, et. al. to Henry Erben, et. al., trading as Erben, Search and Company, 2 January 1886, Philadelphia Deed Book G.G.P., No. 78, 527, City Archives of Philadelphia (hereafter CAP). Henry Erben and Walter Erben, partners in Erben, Search and Company, were also brothers, being the children of Peter C. Erben and Mary Davis. The life dates of John Yewdall were obtained from the following source: Find A Grave. http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi.
Erben, Search & Company also owned the Fairmount Mills, a concern that opened its labors when Samuel Yewdall “set up his first power combing-machine in Philadelphia” about 1857. The life dates for Samuel Yewdall were obtained from the following source: *Find A Grave*. http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi.

Samuel Yewdall’s brother, John Yewdall, later operated a second machine about 1860, manufacturing “fine yarns from merino wool.” By 1860, the Yewdall brothers appear to have founded the Fairmount Mills. The firm was apparently quite successful even in its early years, requiring 250,000 pounds of worsted wool for yarn manufacture in June 1866. The untimely death of Samuel Yewdall, that same year, may have hastened the eventual sale of the business. In 1870, John Yewdall sold the Fairmount Mills to the newly established firm of Fiss, Banes & Erben, a partnership between George Washington Fiss (1835-1925), Charles Henry Banes (1831-1897), and Henry Erben. The firm operated for two years until Theodore C. Search was admitted to the partnership, creating Fiss, Banes, Erben & Company. Around 1881, George Washington Fiss “began making a collection of … micro minerals,” which led him down an alternate path. But it was only when Charles H. Banes decided to retire from active partnership to become a special (likely silent) partner in 1883 that another reorganization of the firm occurred. The new partnership of Erben, Search, & Company was form in 1883, at which time Henry Erben became head of the firm.

After purchasing the subject property in January 1886, Erben, Search & Co. later applied for building permits in the fall of 1886 for what was referenced as a “3-story woolen factory” at Tacony. The company appears to have commissioned Walter Harvey Geissinger (1859-1950), architect, to design the Tacony Worsted Mills. While little has been written about Geissinger’s career specifically, he primarily designed “manufacturing and business buildings.” Incidentally, around the time he was commissioned to design the Tacony Worsted Mills, Geissinger went into partnership with Edward M. Hales (1855-1923) to form Geissinger & Hales, Architects, Engineers, & Building Superintendents. The firm would go on to become what is known today as Ballinger Co.
By October 1887, most of the buildings and structures that comprise the subject property were constructed. In fact, The Philadelphia Inquirer provided an update on the “Improved Mill Property” in October 1887 when “the finishing touches” were being completed at “the new mill.” By October 1887, Building 1: Woolen Warehouse, Building 2: Wash House, Building 3: Combing Mill, Building 4: Engine & Dynamo Room; and Building 5: Boiler House appear to have been completed at a total cost of $150,000.28

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28 “Improved Mill Property,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, 6 October 1887, 3.
Newspaper announcements stated that Erben, Search & Company would begin operations on December 1, 1887. According to the Hexamer General Surveys, c. 1889, the Tacony Worsted Mills were manufacturing “scour and comb wool,” and were spinners of “worsted yarns by the French system.” At this time the firm employed roughly “165 hands.” Machinery in the new plant included the following: “22 worsted cards, 17 Noble combs, 6 backwashers, 2 card grinders, 1 Yankee grinder, 40 grill boxes, 3 wool scourers, 1 set French drawing, 4 mules, 2 twisters, 2 reels, 1 winder, 2 lathes, 1 planer (metal), 1 drill press.”

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Even in its early days, the Tacony Worsted Mills was a formative concern in the local community, offering employment to females, which was often a bonus for families that lived near textile firms. 31 Located immediately below the colossal industrial giant that was Henry Disston & Sons’ Keystone Saw Works, the Tacony Worsted Mills served as a positive counterpart to the male-dominated, restrictive field of saw manufacture, which, being one of the few large employers in Tacony, had left women, that might otherwise find work in the older manufacturing districts of Philadelphia, without an option for local employment. 32 According to an interview in 1988 with Marguerite Dorsey Farley, a native of Tacony, “when [the] “Erben-Harding Woollen [sic.] Mill came to the community, a large number of people moved into the area, so they could get work at the textile mill.” 33 As explained by Emily T. Cooperman, Ph.D., Architectural and Landscape Historian, in the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form: Tacony Disston Community Development Historic District, the Tacony Worsted Mills was one of a few firms, unrelated to the Disstons or the Keystone Saw Works, to have influence over the development and economics of the neighborhood. The other important concerns to locate in Tacony were Gillinder and Sons’ Franklin Flint Glass Works, arriving in 1883; and the Tacony Iron and Metal Company, arriving in 1887. 34 With the Keystone Saw Works as the largest employer in Tacony, as well as the arrival of both the Erben, Search, & Company and the Tacony Iron and Metal Company by 1887, it is no surprise that plans for a new or enlarged railroad station near the subject property were mentioned in The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builder’s Guide late that year and on G. M. Hopkins’s 1887 Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, 23rd Ward. 35 Interestingly, by 1910, the Tacony Worsted Mills was known for “hiring newly immigrated Italian and Polish women from nearby Bridesburg.” 36

By 1892, the Tacony Worsted Mills was producing worsted yarns with the “English” and “French” systems. 37 The firm was producing “Woolen, Mohair, Merino, and Genapped

33 Silcox. A Place to Live and Work, 87.
36 Silcox. A Place to Live and Work, 60.
37 Tyrone Daily Herald, 21 February 1898, 51.
Yarns.”38 For many years the firm also manufactured Germantown yarn until it was no longer profitable.39 The Tacony Worsted Mills operated under the partnership of Erben, Search & Company until 1894, when Theodore C. Search was offered a position at the John B. Stetson Company. Search removed as an active partner in the firm. Reorganizing yet again, the newest partnership was between Henry Erben, Walter Erben, and Charles H. Harding, establishing Erben, Harding & Company in 1894. Charles H. Harding had joined the firm in 1872 as a bookkeeper, and, over time, would become one of its important wool buyers. In 1894, Harding was Vice President and Treasurer of the company—he would later become the first non-New Englander to be President of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers.40

*The Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers* describes the management of the firm as follows:

In 1894 the firm became Erben, Harding & Co., Henry Erben managing the Fairmount Mills, Walter Erben managing the Tacony Mills and Charles H. Harding directing the buying, selling and financial departments.41

In May 1895, Erben, Harding & Company commissioned a one-story office building, measuring 30’ by 40’, located “bet[ween] Unruh and Satter Lane.”42 This building appears to have been located near Unruh Street, north of the subject property and its survival is unclear. That same year architects Hales & Ballinger were engaged to design a large $15,000 warehouse at the growing Tacony Worsted Mills. This warehouse was a one-story building, measuring 100’ by 208’, for the storage of wool.43 J. Sims Wilson was selected as the contractor and began work in August 1895.44 This building appears to survive immediately adjacent to the northwest of the subject property, but is located on a separate parcel and not included in the proposed designation. The construction of this massive warehouse is a further testament to the continued success of the firm into the mid-1890s. This also confirms that Geissinger, Geissinger & Hales, and the later firm, Hales & Ballinger, were involved in the original design and its continual progression through 1895.

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38 *Technology of textile design: being a practical treatise on the construction and application of weaves for all textile fabrics, with minute reference to the latest inventions for weaving; containing also an appendix showing the analysis and giving the calculations necessary for the manufacture of the various textile fabrics.* (Philadelphia: E.A. Posselt, 1892).
42 “Building Permits,” *PRERBG* 10, no. 18 (1 May 1895): 237.
In 1899, the Tacony Worsted Mills was classified as among the top twenty-one spinners of worsted yarns nationwide.45 The firm operated under the partnership of Erben, Harding & Company until the formal incorporation of the business as the Erben-Harding Company on July 1, 1901, which had a capital of $1,300,000.46 At the time of incorporation Henry Erben retired as an active partner, remaining somewhat involved due to his interest in the firm as a stockholder.47

According to the *Directory of the Textile Establishments in the United States and Canada* (1905), the firm then specialized in the following worsted yarns: Bradford System, Fancy Mixtures; French Spun, ¼ to 3/8 Blood, White or Natural; French Spun, Fine Qualities; and French Spun, Fancy Mixtures.48 The French system was the name often give to the improved

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combing methods and technologies of the 1840s and 1850s, and the other systems no doubt stemmed from that original period of improvement.49


In September 1906, the Tacony Worsted Mills commissioned a four-story and basement manufacturing building of reinforced concrete construction, measuring 101’ by 153’, constituting “the largest in Tacony.” The building was constructed by William Steel & Sons Company at an estimated cost of $110,000. This building survives on a separate parcel to the northeast of the subject property and is not included in the proposed designation.50 Construction began after October.51 Regardless, this construction project and a latter addition is another testament to the continual eminence of the firm. Plans to double the building in size were underway by November 1916.52

After the retirement and death of his brother, Walter Erben would go on to be both President and a Director of the firm. Charles H. Harding remained the Vice President and Treasurer of the firm until July 1919.53 George K. Erben was also a Director of the firm.54

51 *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1 October 1906, 14.
Figure 42. Top: Looking north at the Tacony Worsted Mills. Source: https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/kt029012ss/. Figure 43. Middle: Looking south at the Tacony Worsted Mills. Source: https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/kt029012ss/. Figure 44. Bottom left: 1910 Bromley Philadelphia Atlas.
By March 1909 it appears that Building 7 had been constructed, at least in part, being the only one-story building on the site, measuring 50’ in width and containing 150’ in length. Building 7 is a long, shed-like structure that was constructed within the court created by Buildings 1 and 3. Containing the degreasing machinery, storage tanks, and the distilling apparatus, Building 7 appears to have been constructed for employment of the “new continuous process” of wool degreasing, which required both a “new method, and the [degreasing] machine.” The improved process of degreasing led to greater efficiencies and decreased costs.\(^5^5\) Between 1911 and 1919, the Erben-Harding Company another improvement was made to the property with the construction of Building 8.\(^5^6\) Building 8 is a small rectangular building that was constructed to the northeast of Building 3, the two of which were later connected by a wooden hyphen between the second floors.

In 1913, the Tacony Worsted Mills was compared to seventeen firms, at which time it ranked tenth in the number of combs it was operating. The largest company at that time was the American Woolen Company with 430 combs. Ranking second through ninth in the number of combs being operated went as follows: Arlington Mills, 96 combs; Pacific Mills, 85 combs; United States Worsted Co., 65 combs; Far Alpaca Co., 50 Combs; Cleveland Worsted Mills Co., 50 Combs; Amoskeag Manufacturing Co., 44 Combs; Lorraine Manufacturing Co., 40 Combs; Forstmann-Huffman Co., 36 Combs. The Tacony Worsted Mills had 27 Combs, being the largest in Pennsylvania.\(^5^7\)

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According to Historian Harry C. Silcox, the Tacony Worsted Mills was forced to file for bankruptcy in the 1930s, implications of the Great Depression.\(^58\) However, the firm was still operating using both the “English System” and the “French System” for manufacturing worsted yarns in 1933.\(^59\) Even in 1935, the firm was still employing workers, when one of the foremen committed suicide, and on January 21, 1938, George H. Erben was elected President of the Tacony Manufacturers’ Association.\(^60\) Eight days later the firm announced its “Liquidation Sale” for March 3, 1938.\(^61\) Later that year, the subject property, then 130,000 square feet of space, was leased to the Sears, Roebuck & Company.\(^62\)

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\(^58\) Silcox. *A Place to Live and Work*, 60.
\(^59\) The Pennsylvania Museum’s School of Industrial Art. (Circular of the Textile Department, 1932-33).
(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.

Architecturally, the Tacony Worsted Mills is an early, intact, impressive, and important example of an industrial complex designed by Walter Harvey Geissinger (1859-1950), a largely forgotten, but significant architect, who’s work greatly influenced the commercial and industrial built environment of the City of Philadelphia during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Practicing throughout The Gilded Age, from the time he entered the field of architecture in c1878 through his retirement in 1894, Geissinger was a dominatable force in field of commercial...
and industrial architecture and engineering. At the time of its construction, the Tacony Worsted Mills was purported to be one of the “finest” and “largest” worsted yarn mills in the United States, a contention that no doubt held merit given the firm’s high stature among its competitors.63

Figure 51. The Tacony Worsted Mills. Source: Philadelphia Architects and Buildings.

Geissinger was noted as the architect in a lien notice in October 1887, just two months before the completion of Buildings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, which proves him to be the architect of the Tacony Worsted Mills. This attribution is further justified in 1895, when the successors to Geissinger’s firm, Hales & Ballinger, were commissioned to design additional warehouse space. 64

Figure 52. The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide 2, no. 38 (26 September 1887): 452.

Geissinger was no stranger to designing large, modern plants for manufacturers across the city. In 1880 alone, just two years into his career, he designed a substantial “Iron Manufactory” for William H. Bilyeu; a large factory for Campbell & Richards; and another sizable complex for E.A. Glenson; as well as St. Michael’s Lutheran Church in Trenton Avenue, all of which were located the mill district of Kensington.65 Another large commission occurred in 1882, when

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63 “Improved Mill Property,” The Philadelphia Inquirer. 6 October 1887, 3.
64 “Architects’ News,” PRERBG 10, no. 31 (31 July 1895): 453.
Geissinger was commissioned as the architect for eight separate buildings for Stinson, Brother & Kurlbaum’s Mill, said to be “…a tapestry Brussels carpet and rug manufactory of large proportions.”


Around the time that Geissenger was commissioned to design the Tacony Worsted Mills, he went into partnership with Edward M. Hales, architect, to form Geissinger & Hales, Architects, Engineers, & Building Superintendents. During this partnership, Geissinger & Hales, as well as Geissinger, individually, was prolific, designing numerous commercial and industrial buildings, one of which included a seven-story factory for John B. Stetson in 1890, which was purported to be one of the largest hat manufacturing buildings in the country. Geissinger went on to design “one of the largest factories and office buildings in the city” at 19th Street and Allegheny Avenue for William G. Warden in 1893.

That same year The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide summarized Geissinger’s work:

Walter H. Geissinger, Twelfth and Chestnut Streets, may be noted as one of the busy men in construction of several large factories and mills in which he is quite a specialist.

The above-referenced commissions are just sampling of the notable works that comprise Geissinger’s significant oeuvre. This nomination documents what is perhaps the most comprehensive list of works by Geissinger and Geissinger & Hales, designed between c1878 and 1894. This list presents roughly fifty projects, among which roughly thirty-two have been

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67 PRERBG 5, no. 24 (18 June 1890): 354.
68 “Architect Notes,” PRERBG 8, no. 23 (7 June 1893): 349.
69 “Architect Notes,” PRERBG 8, no. 35 (30 August 1893): 553.
The Tacony Worsted Mills, 5250 Unruh Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, were demolished; ten are of an unknown status, though may likely be demolished; and roughly four appear to be extant, not including the subject property.

The firm would go on to become what is known today as Ballinger Co.  

### Table of Projects of Walter H. Geissinger and Geissinger & Hales

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<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<td>Abram Cox Stove Co.</td>
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<td>American and Dauphin Streets (Demolished)</td>
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<td>John W. Bromley</td>
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<td>Garnet Street south of Somerset. (Demolished)</td>
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<td>Factory</td>
<td>Howard and Huntingdon Streets (Demolished)</td>
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<td>Carey Bros. Mill</td>
<td>Mill</td>
<td>10th Street and Susquhanna Avenue (Extant)</td>
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<tr>
<td>George Miller &amp; Son Company</td>
<td>Factory (Six Stories)</td>
<td>259-63 S. 3rd Street (Demolished)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hoyle, Harrison &amp; Kaye</td>
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<td>Indiana, Front, Fillmore, and Tuscuium Streets (Extant)</td>
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<td>Ivans, Deitz &amp; Magee</td>
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<td>Marshall Street and Lehigh Avenue (Demolished)</td>
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<td>Factory</td>
<td>Trenton Avenue and</td>
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71 PRERBG 7, no. 9 (2 March 1892): 987.
72 PRERBG 7, no. 18 (4 May 1892): 1132.
73 PRERBG 8, no. (27 June 1887): 292.
74 “Summary of the Week,” The American Architect and Building News 7, no. 218 (28 February 1880): 88
75 “Builders’ Items,” PRERBG 1, no. 37 (20 September 1886): 437.
76 “Architect Notes,” PRERBG 8, no. 47 (22 November 1893): i.
79 “Builder’ Items,” PRERBG 1, no. 37 (20 September 1886): 437.
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<th>Location</th>
<th>Address Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>John H. Bromley &amp; Sons Mills</td>
<td>Same Location</td>
<td>Sargent Street (Unknown)</td>
<td>6 April 1892^80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Weiseman and T.F. Wallace</td>
<td>Syrup Refinery</td>
<td>Front Street above Poplar near Canal (Demolished)</td>
<td>9 November 1892^81</td>
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<tr>
<td>John G. Caruth</td>
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<td>NE cor. Indiana Avenue and Rosehill Streets (Extant)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keystone Watch Case Company</td>
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<td>Nineteenth and Brown Streets (Demolished)</td>
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<td>Mr. Long</td>
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<td>3rd and Ontario Streets (Demolished)</td>
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<td>Marks Brothers</td>
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<td>Eighth and Arch Streets (Demolished)</td>
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<td>May &amp; Bro.</td>
<td>Store</td>
<td>Arch Street below 8th (Demolished)</td>
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<tr>
<td>McNeely &amp; Co.</td>
<td>Factory</td>
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<td>Richardson &amp; De Long Brothers</td>
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<td>Broad Street and Indiana Avenue (Demolished)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stinson Bros., &amp; Kurlbaum</td>
<td>“...a tapestry Brussels carpet and rug manufactory of large proportions.” “eight separate buildings”</td>
<td>Huntingdon Street between Fairhill and Reese. (Demolished)</td>
<td>January 1882^89</td>
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<tr>
<td>William G. Warden, Esq.</td>
<td>“one of the 19th Street and”</td>
<td>1893^90</td>
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^81 “Architect Notes,” *PRERBG* 7, no. 45 (9 November 1892): 1581.
^82 “Architect Notes,” *PRERBG* 8, no. 49 (6 December 1893): i.
^83 “Among the Architects,” *PRERBG* 2, no. 5 (7 February 1887): 55.
^84 “Architect’s Notes,” *PRERBG* 4, no. 5 (6 February 1889): 55.
^86 “Builders’ Items,” *PRERBG* 1, no. 37 (20 September 1886): 437.
^87 “Architect Notes,” *PRERBG* 2, no. 48 (5 December 1887): 575.
^89 *The Record of Growth* 1, no. (January 1882): 23.
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<th>Location</th>
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<td>William H. Bilyeu</td>
<td>Iron Manufactory</td>
<td>Trenton Avenue and Margaretta Street (Unknown)</td>
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<td>Geissinger &amp; Hales</td>
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<td>Barnes &amp; Beyers</td>
<td>Factory</td>
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<td>Deborah A. Jay</td>
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<td>2002 N. Broad Street (Extant)</td>
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<td>Bristol, Pennsylvania (Unknown)</td>
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<td>George V. Cresson</td>
<td>Foundry &amp; Machine Works</td>
<td>18&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Street, Allegheny Avenue, Westmoreland Street (Largely Demolished)</td>
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<td>German Lutherans</td>
<td>School House</td>
<td>Trenton Avenue and Dickerson Street (Demolished)</td>
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<td>Hebrew Education Society</td>
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<td>SW cor. 10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; and Carpenter Streets (Demolished)</td>
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<td>Cadwallader Street, south of Montgomery Avenue (Demolished)</td>
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<sup>90</sup> PRERBG (1893).
<sup>91</sup> American Machinist (11 September 1880): 10.
<sup>92</sup> “Building and Real Estate Notes,” PRERBG 6, no. 6 (11 February 1891): 82. The construction was being completed by William H. Steele & Son.
<sup>93</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 4, no. 50 (18 December 1889): 597.
<sup>94</sup> “Architects Notes,” PRERBG 6, no. 39 (30 September 1891): i.
<sup>95</sup> “Architects Notes,” PRERBG 3, no. 13 (2 April 1888): 149.
<sup>96</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 5, no. 19 (14 May 1890): 274.
<sup>97</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 5, no. 24 (18 June 1890): 354.
<sup>98</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 4, no. 12 (27 March 1889): 55.
<sup>99</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 5, no. 24 (18 June 1890): 354.
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<td>John Bromley &amp; Sons</td>
<td>Mill</td>
<td>Lehigh Avenue and Leamy Street</td>
<td>7 August 1889</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Lehigh Avenue and Leamy Street)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>E.A. Glenson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florence Cotton Mill</td>
<td>Cotton Mill</td>
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<td>Building</td>
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<td>L. Solomon &amp; Sons</td>
<td>Dye-House</td>
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<td>(Unknown)</td>
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100 “Architects’ Notes,” *PRERBG* 4, no. 31 (7 August 1889): 367.
102 “Architects’ Notes,” *PRERBG* 5, no. 36 (10 September 1890): 545.
103 “Architects’ Notes,” *PRERBG* 5, no. 2 (15 January 1890).
105 “Architects Notes,” *PRERBG* 6, no. 38 (23 September 1891): i.
106 “Building and Real Estate News,” *PRERBG* 6, no. 9 (4 March 1891): 130.
108 “Architects Notes,” *PRERBG* 6, no. 34 (26 August 1891): i.
111 “Architects’ Notes,” *PRERBG* 4, no. 13 (3 April 1889): 55.
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<td>Thomas Devlin &amp; Co.</td>
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<td>Stable</td>
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<td>William Sullivan &amp; Co.</td>
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<sup>112</sup> “Building and Real Estate Notes,” PRERBG 6, no. 51 (23 December 1891): i.
<sup>113</sup> “Building Permits,” PRERBG 7, no. 47 (23 November 1892): 1619.
<sup>114</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 5, no. 2 (15 January 1890): 15.
<sup>115</sup> “Architects Notes,” PRERBG 6, no. 37 (16 September 1891): 591.
<sup>116</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 3, no. 42 (22 October 1888): 498.
<sup>117</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 4, no. 24 (19 June 1889): 283.
<sup>118</sup> “Architects’ Notes,” PRERBG 5, no. 44 (5 November 1890): 685.
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Funded and sponsored by the Tacony Community Development Corporation with specific input by Alex Balloon, Director and Corridor Manager, this nomination was completed by the Keeping Society of Philadelphia. The primary author was Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist. Assistance was also provided by J.M. Duffin, Archivist and Historian.

Specific Bibliographic References


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*Journal of the Franklin Institute* 143 (1897): 307-10.


Statement of Facts Relative to Canada Wools and the Manufactures of Worsted (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1866), 9.


5250 Unruh Ave

Correspondence Received by the Philadelphia Historical Commission

19 June 2019
Philadelphia Historical Commission  
One Parkway, 13th Floor  
1515 Arch Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102

Attention: Jonathan E. Farnham, Ph.D., Executive Director

Dear Dr. Farnham:

The purpose of this letter is to convey the strong support of our organization regarding the nomination of the Tacony Worsted Mills property to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Located at 5250 Unruh Avenue, this complex has been a fixture along our industrial riverfront since the days when Philadelphia was known as the “Workshop of the World.”

Situated just south of the sprawling Disston Saw Works complex and designed by Architect Walter Harvey Geissinger, this seven (7) building complex played a significant role in Philadelphia’s thriving textile industry of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The property retains much of its historic character, including the prominent chimney stack and tank house tower.

This designation will help to assure that this historic array of structures can continue to be used as industrial space or adapted for alternative uses. On behalf of our membership and Board of Directors, I would like to thank Oscar Beisert and Alexander Ballon for their fine work on this nomination and thank the Historical Commission for its consideration.

Very truly yours,

Louis M. Iatarola  
President

cc: Alexander Ballon  
Oscar Beisert

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Tacony-Disston Community Development National Historic District