

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: 6930 Hegerman Street

Postal code: 19135

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Tacony Baptist Church

Current/Common Name: The Grindstone Church

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: Church

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1883 to 1959

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: Construction: 1883-85; Addition: 1915-16

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: 1883 Building, designer unknown. 1915 Addition, Rev. Clarence Larkin (1850-1924)

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: 1915 Addition-Lewis Detrich, Contractor

Original owner: Land donated to the Tacony Baptist Church by Hamilton Disston

Other significant persons: Hamilton Disston (1844-1896)

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 a bibliography.

9. NOMINATOR

Organization Tacony Community Development Corporation Date November 17, 2021

Name with Title Amarynth Ruch, Consultant Email amarynthr217@gmail.com

Street Address 6742 Torresdale Avenue Telephone 484-633-0416

City, State, and Postal Code 19135

Nominator is is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 17 November 2021

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: December 17, 2021

Date of Notice Issuance: December 17, 2021

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Tacony Baptist Church

Address: 6930 Hegerman St

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19135

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: January 19, 2022

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: February 11, 2022 ; criteria for designation F and J

Date of Final Action: February 11, 2022

Designated Rejected

12/7/18

Boundary Description



The Tacony Baptist Church is located on the Northeast corner of Hegerman and Disston streets in the Tacony neighborhood of Philadelphia. The property has approximately fifty feet of frontage along Hegerman Street facing Southeast, then approximately one hundred sixty-five feet in parallel lines toward the Northwest, to approximately forty-five feet facing the Southeast side of Vandike Street.

Architectural Description

The Tacony Baptist Church, located at 6930 Hegerman Street, was constructed in two distinct periods. The Southeast (front) of the building, facing Hegerman Street, was originally constructed between 1884 and 1885 in the Queen Anne style. It included a brick base, shingle siding, and multiple gable roof forms. In the years since, the original wooden shingles have been replaced with vinyl siding and the multi-paned windows have been replaced with double panes. The Northwest (rear) of the building was constructed in 1915 in the Richardson Romanesque Style, featuring rusticated stone walls, a heavy appearance, rounded arches over doors and windows, recessed entrances, and carved stone trim.



Figure 1: Southeast entrance fronting Hegerman Street, photographed by Amarynth Ruch

Figure 1 shows the Hegerman Street entrance, facing Southeast. The Southeast façade has a masonry foundation and a brick base. Where there were once tile shingles, the exterior walls are now covered in siding. The Southeast and Southwest corners of the façade project symmetrically; the Easternmost corner hosts a Southeast facing entrance while the Westernmost corner hosts a door facing Southwest. The doorways are accessed via sandstone stairs, and are recessed with short canopies overhead, wooden trim, and decorative glass above the doors. Each of these corners includes a gabled, shingle roof and the Southwest corner contains a Southeast facing set of two double paned windows surrounded by wooden trim. In the center of the Southeast (front) of the building are four double paned windows. The center of the roof is gabled, with a short shed roof just above the windows, what was once the original bell tower on the top center, and a wooden cross. The whole of the roof includes wooden eaves, and there is wood trim separating the brick from the siding, as well as trim on the outward-facing corners.



Figure 2: Left, Northeast Side from the Southeast corner. Right, Northeast side from the Northeast corner. Photos taken by Amarynth Ruch

Figure 2 depicts the Northeast side, bordering a neighboring property. It features five double paned windows with wooden trim and four arched windows. From the Southeast corner the masonry foundation, brick base, vinyl siding, and wooden trim continues. At the meeting point between the siding portion and the grindstone portion the building projects outward by approximately two feet. From the Northeast corner, three shallow stone buttresses are visible between the arched, stained glass windows. Each of these windows has a stone trim to accentuate the arch. The roof is closed and gabled with slate shingling. Also visible is the arched window on the Easternmost wall of the church's apse.



Figure 3: Northwest exterior, photographed by Amarynth Ruch

Figure 3 shows the Northwest façade bordering Vandike Street. It is built almost entirely of grindstones. It includes three square, basement windows at street-level, a basement entrance on the easternmost wall, and four arched windows; one on the Easternmost wall, one on the Western, and two in the center facing Northwest. The windows are all recessed, and the arched ones are topped with a carved trim to accentuate their shape. This rear portion, the apse of the church, is built in a semi-octagonal shape with a hipped roof and stone chimney. It meets the closed gabled roof of the main building; above where the roofs meet is an arched, grated window. The entire roof is shingled and trimmed with wooden eaves.



Figure 4: Southwest exterior, photographed by Amarynth Ruch

Figure 4 shows the Southwest facade of the church, which currently includes the main entrance, indicated by two intact grindstones attached to the sidewalk on either side of the door. The grindstone and siding portion meet to the right of the main entrance, where a cornerstone dated 1915 sits. The arched door is recessed into the center of a grindstone tower, accessed by sandstone stairs, and placed below a decorative fan window. On either side is a short sandstone column attached to an arched trim. Above the entrance is a small, rectangular window placed just below the stone trim of the tower. Above this is a round grated window surrounded by carved trim. This portion of the tower now contains the church bell. The roof of the tower is a combination of a flat and gable shingle roof. At the top of the gable is a small carved cross, in the rear corner where the flat and gabled roofs meet is a stone chimney.

On the Northern (left) side of the tower is a continuation of the grindstone construction. It includes three recessed, stained glass windows with carved trim as well as three square basement windows. Between each window is a stone buttress projecting outward approximately three inches. At the Northernmost end of the side facing Disston Street, the building extends back towards the East to meet the wall of the apse. On this outer corner is another arched entrance, recessed with stone trim and a decorative window above the door. The apse also includes a Southwest-facing door constructed in the same manner, with an arched window on its right side.

To the Southern (right) side of the stone tower is the original building constructed in the Queen Anne style. The masonry foundation, brick base, vinyl siding, and wooden trim of the Southeast front is continued. This portion hosts three sets of two double paned windows with wooden trim and has a gabled roof bordered by wooden eaves.

Statement of Significance

Criterion J

The Tacony Baptist Church is one of the oldest religious institutions in Tacony. The Tacony Baptist Mission was first founded in 1881, from December of that year meetings were held in members' homes.¹ In January of 1882, a Sunday School was formed by the Mission. That Spring, Hamilton Disston, the eldest son of Henry Disston and president of Disston & Sons Keystone Saw Works, donated a lot measuring about 50 by 165 feet at the corner of what was then Hegerman and Washington Streets.²

Henry Disston had relocated his Keystone Saw Works to Tacony in 1872 and began developing his vision of a town built for his employees.³ The Disston family practiced Presbyterianism, but Henry Disston recognized that his employees came from diverse religious backgrounds. Part of his vision for the town hosting his factory was one of religious tolerance and diversity; as such the Disston Estate funded and provided land to churches of several religious denominations in Tacony.⁴ Hamilton was the eldest of the Disston children. Following the death of his father, Hamilton became the controlling member of the Disston Estate. Like his father, Hamilton Disston dedicated a great deal of land and funding to the Tacony area. Land for the Tacony Baptist Church was donated early in Hamilton Disston's tenure as president of the Disston and Sons Saw Works.⁵

As participation in Sermons and the Sunday School grew, the members of the Tacony Baptist Mission engaged John Enochs, a builder, to construct a temporary wooden chapel measuring 18 by 30 feet with a vestibule and a tin roof.⁶ This was completed in May of 1882, with a Sunday School classroom added in the Spring of 1883.⁷ On November 29th, 1882, thirty-two members met to officially form the Tacony Baptist Church, which was recognized by a council of Presbyterian Church leaders on December 4th.⁸

¹ Samuel Fitch Hotchkin, *The Bristol Pike* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co., 1893), 71.

² "Religious News," *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), May 21, 1882.

³ Harry C. Silcox, *A Place to Live and Work* (Philadelphia: Penn State Press, 1994), 9.

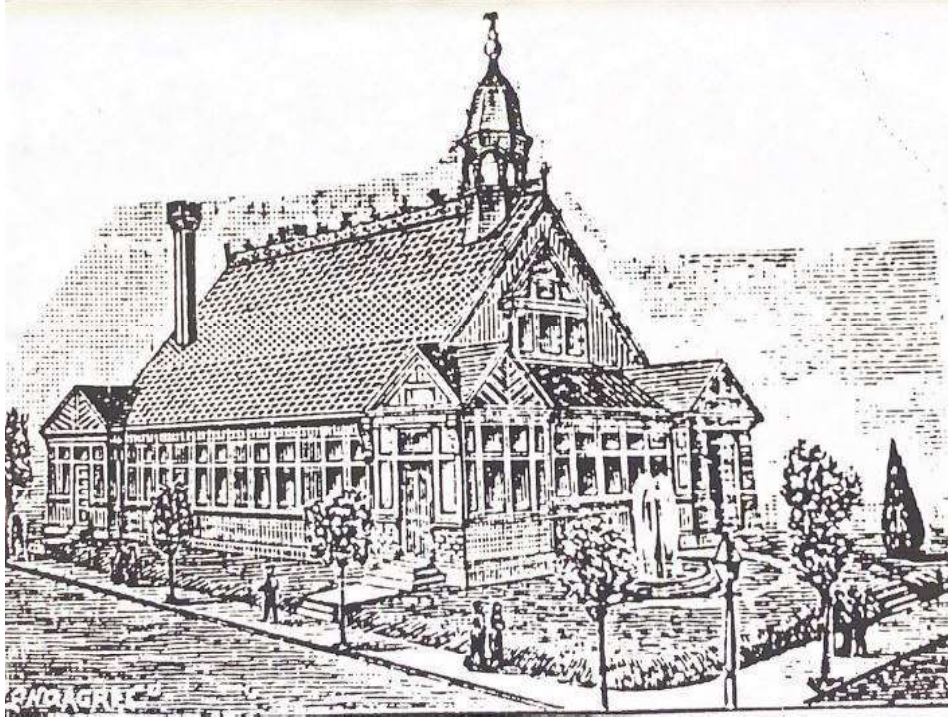
⁴ *A Place to Live and Work*, 18.

⁵ *A Place to Live and Work*, 72.

⁶ *The Bristol Pike*, 71.

⁷ "Religious News," *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), Mar. 17, 1883.

⁸ "Religious Notes of Interest Concerning the Different Denominations," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), Dec. 8, 1882.



Engraving by Andrew Longacre, c. 1886, provided by the Tacony Historical Society

A committee for planning a permanent church building formed on January 31st, 1883. The committee began collecting funds for building costs in May of that year. The ground was broken on the original building on May 12th, 1884, and the cornerstone was laid on June 21st. The church was officially opened for worship on May 21st, 1885.⁹ At the time of construction, it was reported to be the largest chapel undertaken by the Philadelphia Baptist City Mission, measuring 72 by 44 feet.¹⁰ The original building was built of half brick, with an upper portion of shingles.¹¹ The roof was slate with a bell tower, though a bell was not present in the church until 1915.¹² The bell of the church has its own unique history; it was originally cast in Philadelphia in 1860, its first recorded use was in Logan Square in 1864 before Henry Disston purchased it and had it installed in his factory on Front and Laurel Street. After the Laurel Street plant closed, the bell was kept in the Disston yard in Tacony until a member of the Tacony Baptist Church noticed it.¹³ The bell was pointed out to the pastor, Reverend Tryon, who requested permission from the Disston family to install it in the Tacony Baptist Church bell tower.

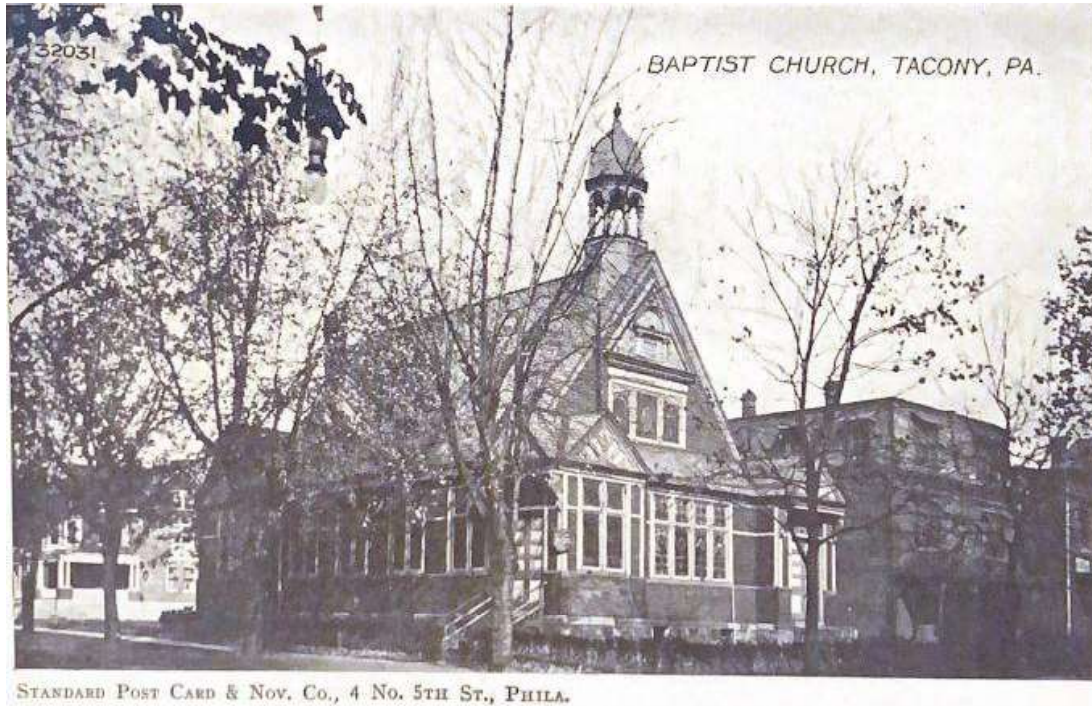
⁹ *The Bristol Pike*, 72-73.

¹⁰ "Religious News," *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), Jun. 21, 1884.

¹¹ The record uses the word "tiles," which is inferred to mean shingles.

¹² *The Bristol Pike*, 73.

¹³ "The Grindstone Church," accessed Oct. 12, 2021.



Tacony Baptist Church, c. 1910, provided by the Tacony Historical Society

Contemporary reports indicate that in 1915 Reverend Tryon recognized a need for a larger worship space for his growing congregation. He noticed thousands of discarded grindstones in the yard of the Disston factory and received permission from the Disston & Sons Keystone Saw Works to use 2500 of these stones to build an addition measuring 87 by 43 feet. According to entries in the Philadelphia Builder's Guide, the addition was built from a design created by the Reverend Clarence Larkin.¹⁴ Though there are few accounts of his architectural work, his experience in mechanical engineering and references to him in the Builder's Guide indicate that he had some hand in the design of several religious and residential buildings in the Philadelphia area. Records from 1915 indicate that Lewis (or Louis) Detrich, a builder, constructed the addition.¹⁵

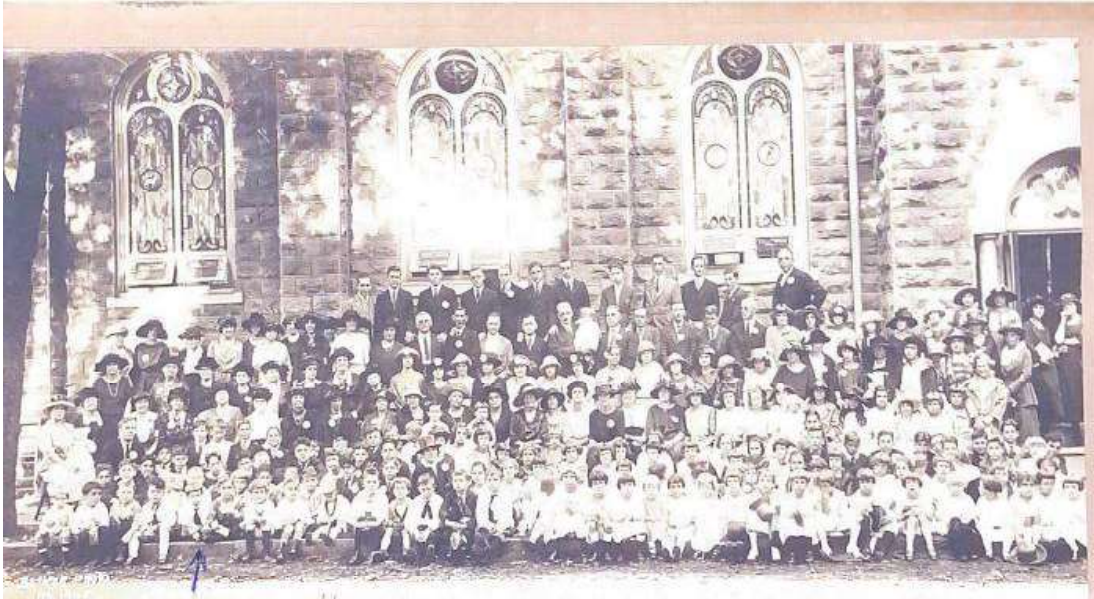
Throughout the years following its completion, the Tacony Baptist Church continued to play an important role in Tacony. Its distinct façade graced postcards and newspapers, welcomed guests and members, and served as a social hub for Baptists and other members of the Tacony community. In 1933 the church was featured in the Ripley's Believe it or not Column, and it hosted actor Richard B. Harrison, 1931 recipient of the NAACP's Spingarn medal.¹⁶ In 1959, the church provided the space to open one of the first geriatric clinics in Philadelphia. The Northeast Community Geriatric Clinic was established by and for the elderly members of the Tacony

¹⁴ *The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, v.30, (Philadelphia: 1915), 360.

¹⁵ *The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, v.30, 454.

¹⁶ "Actor Occupies Pulpit," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), Jan. 16, 1933.

community.¹⁷ Its success contributed to the development of similar clinics throughout the city. **Today, the building remains a solid reminder of the industrial and cultural history of Philadelphia's Tacony neighborhood.**



Tacony Baptist Church congregation, c. 1921, provided by the Tacony Historical Society

Criterion F

The most significant addition to the Tacony Baptist Church is the sanctuary built of discarded grindstones. It's from these materials that the church earned its nickname "The Grindstone Church," it remains the only known sandstone church built of industrial by-products in the United States.¹⁸ The stones came from the Disston Saw Works, where they were used to sharpen saws. Originally circular and measuring seven feet in diameter, after just a few months of use the grindstones would measure just four feet and be replaced.¹⁹ 2500 of these stones now make up the sanctuary of the Tacony Baptist Church.

¹⁷ "Clinic for Golden Age Set is Opened as 82-Year-Old Passes All Tests," *The Mercury* (Pottstown, PA), Jun. 23, 1959.

¹⁸ Ron Avery, "The Grindstone Church," *Philadelphia Oddities*, accessed Oct. 12, 2021. <https://www.ushistory.org/oddities/grindstone.htm>

¹⁹ "The Grindstone Church," accessed Oct. 12, 2021.



Tacony Baptist Church, c. 1920, provided by the Tacony Historical Society

Grindstones are wheels usually made from sandstone that have been used to sharpen knives and tools across the world since the Middle Ages.²⁰ In the United States, the majority of the grindstones used through the 19th century came from Ohio and Michigan.²¹ A typical grindstone would have a diameter of about six feet with a metal handle in the center. It would be mounted in a wooden or metal frame so that the handle could be turned with one hand while a blade was held against the stone with the other (*see figure 5*). The friction of the stone's grain would sharpen the tool.

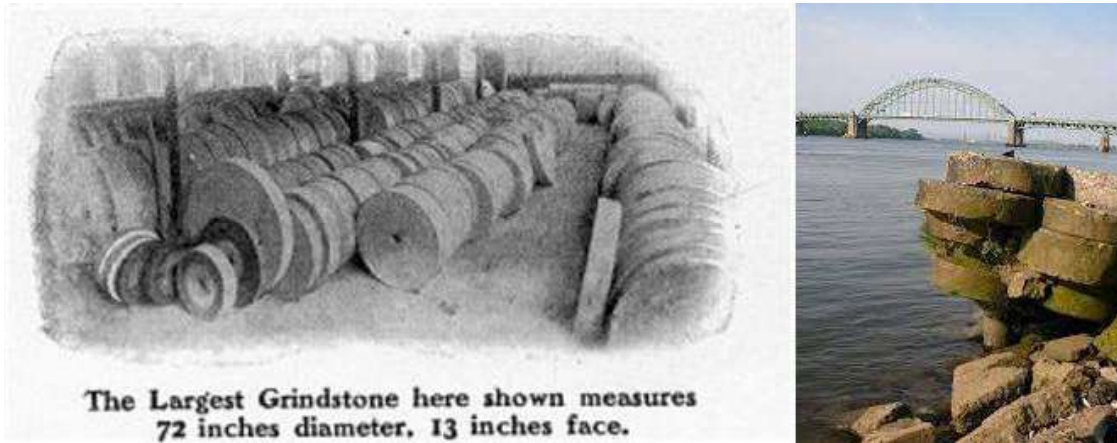


Figure 5, illustration of a grindstone and frame, from Lost Art Press

²⁰ Paul J. Gans, "Grindstones," *The Medieval Technology Pages*, Oct. 8, 2002. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060117023109/http://scholar.chem.nyu.edu/tekpages/grindstone.html>

²¹ Michael Hardy, "History Of Michigan Thumb's First Industry At Grindstone City," *Thumbwind*, Apr. 12, 2021. <https://thumbwind.com/2021/04/12/history-grindstone-city/>

At the Disston Saw Works, the grindstones were used up so quickly that a department of 10 men was established for the sole purpose of replacing worn grindstones.²² The spent stones were stacked all over the Disston factory's waterfront, where they were spotted by Reverend Tryon and can still be seen today. To construct the church addition, old grindstones were broken into pieces, then squared (*see figure 6*).



Left: stored grindstones at Disston Saw Works, from the Disstonian Institute; Right: used grindstones stacked on the waterfront, from Workshop of the World



Figure 6, broken and refined grindstones, from the British Museum

The use of grindstones in the construction of the 1915 addition exemplifies the industrial roots of the Tacony neighborhood and the ingenuity of the church's members. The salvaged grindstones have been carved and crafted to appear like ordinary masonry, but two intact stones remain in front of the Disston Street entrance as a reminder of where the materials came from. **Nearly every piece of the addition was found, improved, and reused to create a truly unique and innovative place of worship.**

²² "The Grindstone Church," accessed Oct. 12, 2021.

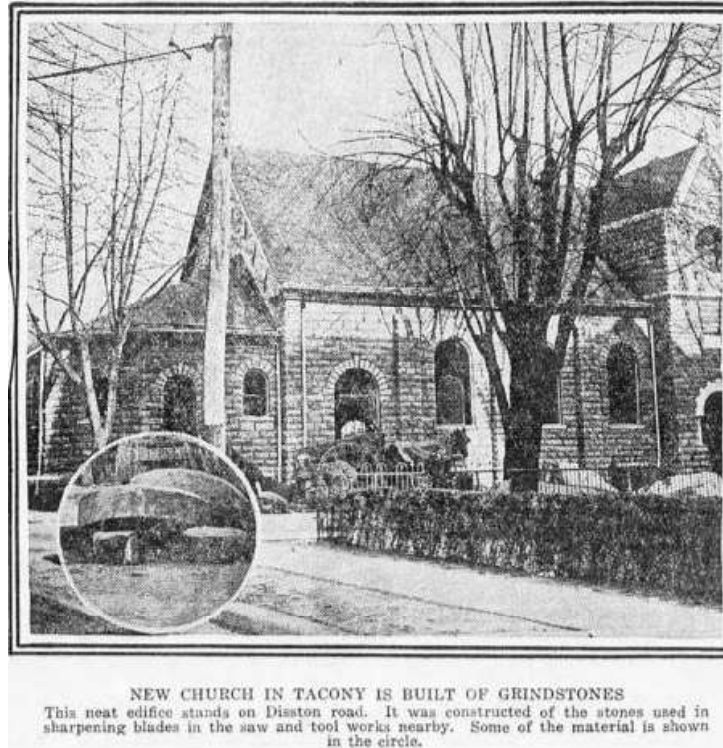


Photo of church from the Evening Public Ledger, Philadelphia, PA, Dec. 13, 1915



Photo of Disston Street Entrance, featuring grindstones, from the Tacony Historical Society

Conclusion

The Tacony Baptist Church has been a part of Tacony's religious, social, cultural, and industrial history for more than a century. Through its connection to the Disston family, who were significant figures in the industrialization of Philadelphia; significance as a gathering place for community members, hosting famous speakers and one of the first geriatric clinics in the area;

and its recognizable construction which has drawn visitors and graced postcards, the Tacony Baptist Church satisfies criterion J for historic designation. In addition, its unique construction from grindstones connects the church even further to Tacony's industrial roots and to the historic Tacony-Disston Waterfront District. It has earned the nickname "The Grindstone Church" and is still considered to be the only sandstone church constructed from industrial byproducts in North America, satisfying criterion F for historic designation.

Bibliographical References

- Avery, Ron. "The Grindstone Church." *Philadelphia Oddities*. n.d.
<https://www.ushistory.org/oddities/grindstone.htm> (accessed October 12, 2021).
- "Clinic for Golden Age Set is Opened as 82-Year-Old Passes All Tests." *The Mercury*. Pottstown, June 23, 1959.
- Fitch Hotchkin, Samuel. *The Bristol Pike*. Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co., 1893.
- Gans, Paul J. "Grindstones." *The Medieval Technology Pages*. October 8, 2002.
- Hardy, Michael. "History of Michigan Thumb's First Industry at Grindstone City." *Thumbwind*. April 12, 2021.
- Marysville Journal-Tribune*. "Has Church of Grindstones." July 7, 1916.
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