

ADDRESS: 4500 AND 4506 TYSON AVE

Name of Resource: Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Tyson PA LLC

Nominator: Tacony Community Development Corporation

Staff Contact: Allyson Mehley, allyson.mehley@phila.gov

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate the property at 4500 and 4506 Tyson Avenue, historically known as the Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church, and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The properties include the Church, Parish Hall, Sunday School, and Garage buildings. Construction commenced in 1885 with the Church. The Parish Hall was added in 1908, owing to the growth of the congregation. The additions of the Sunday School and Garage buildings from 1925 to 1927 completed the church complex.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century through the mid twentieth century, the church property served as a social hub for Tacony's Presbyterian community and the origin for dozens of clubs and organizations that were part of the development of Northeast Philadelphia. The nomination maintains that the Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church is representative of the social and cultural community in Tacony, as well as the Disston family's strong influence over neighborhood development, satisfying Criterion J.

The nomination contends that the Church building is the work of prominent architect Edwin F. Durang, satisfying Criterion E. More than 200 buildings in the Philadelphia area have been attributed to Durang, most notably churches and institutions for Roman Catholics. Durang, who had a relationship with Mary Disston, designed the Church, which was constructed in memory of Henry and Mary Disston's late daughter, Mary Disston Gandy.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the properties at 4500 and 4506 Tyson Avenue satisfy Criteria for Designation E 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: 4500 and 4506 Tyson Avenue

Postal code: 19135

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church

Current/Common Name: Disston Memorial 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 1885 to 1953

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1885-1886; 1908-1909; 1913; 1925-1927

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Edwin F. Durang; Samuel D. Milner

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Harry Zimmerman; Roy Randall

Original owner: Disston Memorial Church

Other significant persons: Mrs. Mary Disston

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 January 18, 2022

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

Street Address 6742 Toresdale Avenue Telephone 484-633-0416

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19135

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner. *Boundary description and Disston company history supplemented by Historical Commission staff.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: January 18, 2022

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: May 12, 2022

Date of Notice Issuance: May 12, 2022

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Tyson PA LLC

Address: 5400 Eadom St

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19137

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

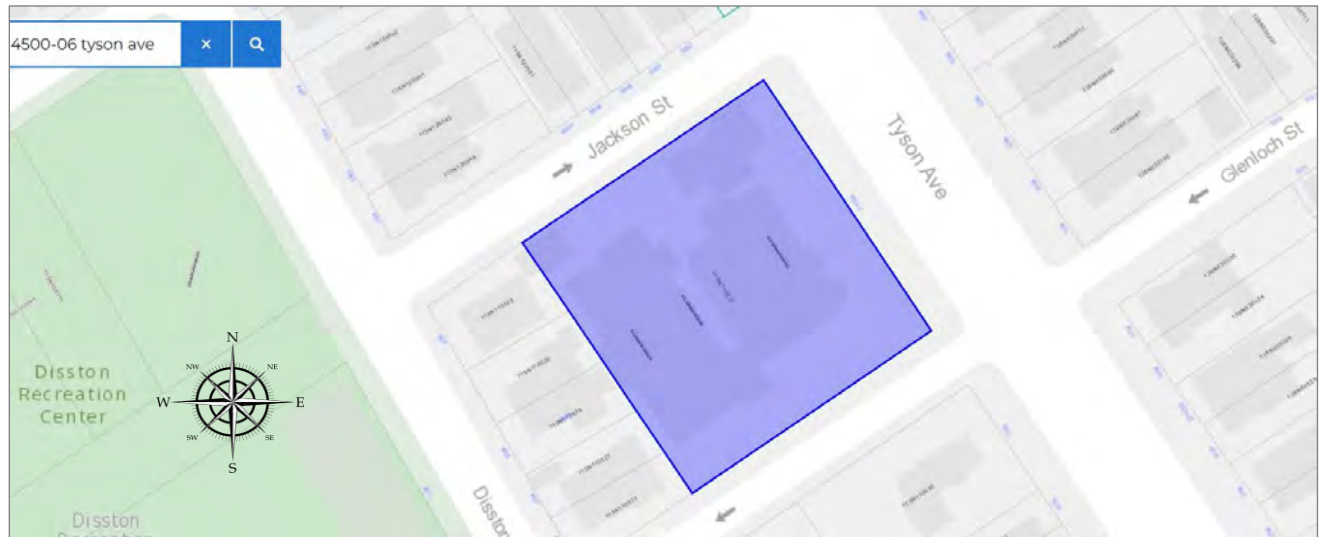
Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

12/7/18

Boundary Description (provided by Historical Commission staff)



The Disston Memorial Church is located at 4500 Tyson Ave and 4506 Tyson Ave. The legal boundary is as follows:

All that certain lot or piece of ground, Situate in the 41st Ward of the City of Philadelphia and described according to an ALTA/NSPS Survey made by Urban Land Surveying LLC as follows: Beginning at the point of intersection of the northwesterly side of Glenloch Street (legally open 40 feet wide on City Plan) with the Southwesterly side of Tyson Avenue (legally open 100 feet wide on City Plan); Thence extending south 57 degrees 48 minutes 25 seconds west, along the northwesterly side of said Glenloch Street, the distance of 175.000 feet to a point; Thence extending north 32 degrees 11 minutes 35 seconds west, partly through a wall, the distance of 180.000 feet to a point on the southeasterly side of Jackson Street (legally open 50 feet wide on City Plan); Thence extending north 57 degrees 48 minutes 25 seconds east, along the southeasterly side of said Jackson Street, the distance of 175.000 feet to a point on the southwesterly side of said Tyson Avenue; Thence extending south 32 degrees 11 minutes 35 seconds east, along the southwesterly side of said Tyson Avenue, the distance of 180.000 feet to a point of intersection with the northwesterly side of said Glenloch Street, being the first mentioned point and place of beginning.

Containing in area 31,500 square feet or 0.72314 acres.

Boundary as described on deed documentation. PhilaDox Document ID: 53900517

Map Registry No. 115N11037

OPA Account Numbers

4500 Tyson Ave: 778311045

4506 Tyson Ave: 778311000

Architectural Description

The Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church refers to a complex of four individual buildings: the Church, Parish House, Sunday School, and Garage. Of these four buildings, the Garage is non-contributing, but the rest contribute to the social and architectural significance of church. These buildings were constructed and renovated at varying times in varying styles. The oldest among them is the Church, constructed on land donated by Mrs. Mary Disston between 1884 and 1885.



Church Building

The original church building was constructed between 1885-86 in the Richardson Romanesque style. It features sandstone masonry walls, shallow buttresses, arched entryways, and windows with carved brownstone trim. Figure 1 shows the rounded apse on the Southeast corner of the Tyson Avenue facade, a tower, the entryway, and the sanctuary. The apse, colloquially referred to as “the round room,” includes five arched windows facing out towards Tyson Ave. The octagonal gable roof also includes two dormers facing Southeast and Northwest, respectively.



Figure 1: Tyson Street Entrance, photo taken by Amarynth Ruch

To the right (Northwest) of the round room is the tower, which includes stone steps leading to an arched entrance in its center. The tower also includes four shallow buttresses: two on either side of the door facing Northeast onto Tyson Ave, and one on each of the perpendicular walls facing Southeast and Northwest, respectively. Figure 2 shows the upper portion of the tower, which includes two grated windows on each wall, and a parapet with gabled outer corners surrounding a tall gable roof. There are three dormer windows on the roof facing Northeast.



Figure 2: Tower facing Tyson Ave, from Wiki Commons

Figure 2 shows a recessed porch accessed through two arched entryways. The sanctuary on the Northwest corner of the Tyson Avenue facade includes five arched windows with carved trim below a round window with carved trim. On the Northwest wall (facing Jackson Street) there is a small arched window where the sanctuary meets a pentagonal room to the Southwest. This room includes small arched windows on the Northeast and Northwest walls. This portion of the building is adjacent to the parish house and is not visible from the street. Visible in figure 3 is the rear of the church from Jackson Street. Figure 3 shows the pentagonal room on the Western corner, with an arched window. There is an arched rear entrance accessible via stone steps, and a buttress sits to the Northeast of a red door with a decorative transom window.



Figure 3: Rear of Church and Parish house, photo taken by Amarynth Ruch

Parish House

The parish house was constructed in 1908 in an adaptive four square style with rusticated granite masonry and limestone trims. Figure 3 shows the rear of the Parish house and the church, facing Southwest. The Parish house has a basement entrance accessible via stone steps with an iron railing. Also visible is a small, paneled addition on the West corner. The rear of the Parish house has two windows on the first floor and two on the second. Figure 4 shows the Northwest facing side of the Parish house along Jackson Street. There are four windows on the basement level and eight double paned windows on the first floor. The second floor has two double paned windows on each side of a triple pane window.



Figure 4: Parish house facing Jackson Street, photo taken by Amarynth Ruch

Figure 5 shows the Tyson Street entrance to the parish house facing Northeast. To the Southeast of the porch is a large, decorative arched window. Above it is a double-paned window

opening into the second floor. The wraparound porch is accessed via stone steps from Tyson Street and wraps back to the Southwest along Jackson Street. It includes a large arched entrance and two oval windows on either side. Above the flat porch roof is a double paned window and a triple paned window. On the low hipped roof is a single dormer with a short double paned window facing Northeast. Also visible in figure 5 is the hall connecting the Parish House to the Church, located to the Southeast of the porch.



Figure 5: Parish House Tyson Street Entrance, photo taken by Amarynth Ruch

Sunday School

Figure 6 shows the entrance to the Sunday School, built between 1925-27, facing Southeast onto Glenloch street. The school borrows elements from the original church building and is constructed of sandstone¹ with stone trim in a restrained gothic style. The Southeast facade includes an entrance on the Northeast corner projecting out approximately two feet. The first floor is accessible via an arched entryway with a gate, above it is a triple paned window on the second floor and a single paned window on the third floor. On the Southwest wall are three narrow vertical windows. To the Southwest of the entrance are three single paned windows, one on each floor, beside them is a shallow buttress. Southwest of the buttress are three narrow vertical windows, one on each floor, a triple paned window on the second floor and one on the third floor, two single paned windows on the first floor, and an additional narrow vertical window on each floor. All of the windows are trimmed with stone. On the Southwest corner is a shallow buttress.



Figure 6: Sunday School facing Glenloch Street, photo taken by Amarynth Ruch

¹ The Philadelphia Builders Record refers to the masonry of the Sunday School as “mottled brick,” but the building was in actuality constructed from sandstone.

Figures 7 and 8 depict the rear of the Sunday School facing Northwest along Jackson Street. The roof is slate and gabled, it includes a round rose window on the third floor of the main building facing Northwest. The rear first floor visible in Figure 7 was initially constructed in 1913 from sandstone in a restrained gothic revival style. It features a sandstone wall and a slate roof, included are 5 large windows with muntin dividers and a basement entrance.



Figure 7: Sunday School and side yard along Jackson Street, photo taken by Amarynth Ruch



Figure 8: Sunday School and Garage facing Jackson Street, photo taken by Amarynth Ruch

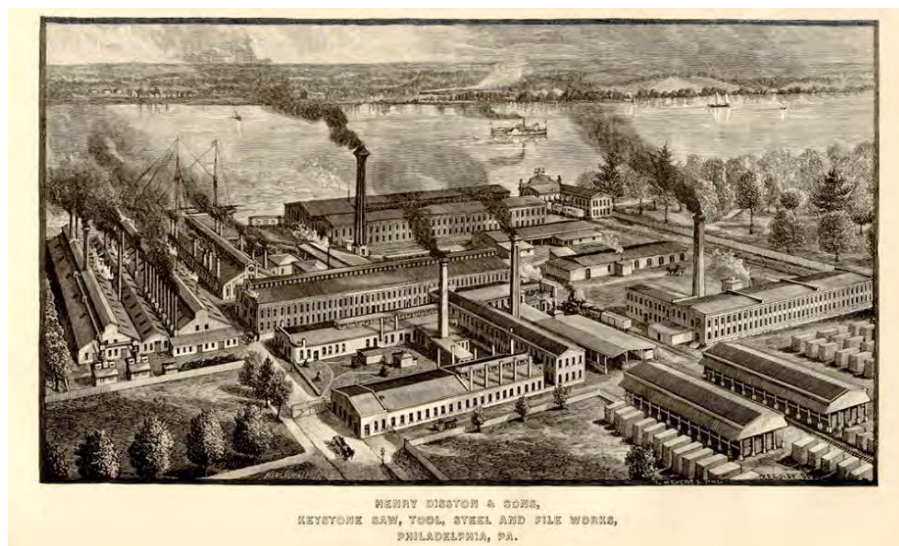
Statement of Significance

History

The construction and industrialization of the Tacony neighborhood is attributed to the Disston family and their estate. Henry Disston & Sons Keystone Saw Works resided in Tacony from 1872 to 1955. The company transformed the saw making and tool making industry, not only in Philadelphia, but throughout the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The company was founded by English immigrant Henry Disston in the 1840s in the Northern Liberties neighborhood.

As the factory grew Disston dedicated himself to realizing his vision of a town built by and for the employees of his company.² The overall welfare of his employees was a concern and he dedicated himself to realizing his vision of a town built by and for the employees of his firm.³ Following Henry Disston's death in 1878, his wife and children maintained his legacy by continuing to build up the Tacony community. Part of this vision included places of worship for all of the religions represented by the community. Nearly every church in Tacony was constructed on land donated by members of the Disston family.⁴

Workers were loyal to the company, and it was not unusual for multiple generations within a family to work at Keystone Saw Works. The Tacony neighborhood developed along with the success of the company and involvement of the Disston family. As a result, Tacony was viewed as a company town.



1884 engraving, Library Company of Philadelphia

² Silcox, Harry. "A Place to Live and Work: The Henry Disston Saw Works and the Tacony Community of Philadelphia." 1994: 9-10.

³ Silcox, Harry. "A Place to Live and Work: The Henry Disston Saw Works and the Tacony Community of Philadelphia." 1994: 9-10.

⁴ Silcox, Harry. "A Place to Live and Work." 23.



Mary Disston c. 1890, from the Historical Society of Tacony

The Disston Memorial Church was constructed between 1885-1886 and established by Mary Disston, the wife of Henry Disston, in memory of their late daughter Mary Disston Gandy, who died at 26.⁵ The Disston family were prominent members of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, located at Oxford and Broad Streets. Though the majority of the Keystone Saw Works employees were Roman Catholic and not Presbyterian, Mrs. Disston chose to erect a Presbyterian Church to honor her daughter. This particular church was of special importance to Mrs. Disston, though she was not a member.⁶

Mrs. Disston called on the architect Edwin F. Durang to design the church building. She was familiar with his work as he had designed the Oxford Presbyterian Church, of which she was a member, and the home of her son, Albert. Durang was a prolific architect in Philadelphia and mostly designed buildings for the Roman Catholic Church.⁷ It is a testament to the importance of the Disston name that he agreed to design the Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church. Interestingly, Durang's records refer to the church as the "Cumberland Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church," suggesting that this congregation was of the more conservative Cumberland denomination of Presbyterianism at the time of founding.⁸ The cornerstone was laid in 1885, and the church was officially organized under the Philadelphia Presbytery North in

⁵ Housworth, Rev. Paul E. "A Brief History of Disston Memorial Church." *Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church*, Apr. 14, 2011: 5.

⁶ Silcox, Harry. "A Place to Live and Work." 23.

⁷ Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior. "Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church." HABS No. PA-6692-E.

⁸ E. F. Durang & Son, Inc. *Trinity College*, 1909.

April of 1886.⁹ In June of 1886, the Reverend David W. Woods, Jr. was installed as the first pastor. At the time, there were only 12 members of the church and two elders.¹⁰



1887, from Tacony by Historical Society of Tacony

⁹ Kearns-Preston, Rev. David C. "Chronological Record." *Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church*, Nov. 3, 1993.

¹⁰ Housworth, Rev. Paul E. "A Brief History of Disston Memorial Church." 5-6.



1895, by William P. White and William H. Scott, from *The Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia*

By 1891, Reverend David Wills was installed as pastor and there were 141 members, as well as 181 participants in the Sunday School headed by Elias Naudain Moor.¹¹ The Reverend Reeve became pastor in 1902, during his residence he began the Dorcas Society, the Home Department of the Sunday School, the Ushers' Association, and the Cradle Roll of the Sunday School.¹² In 1908, construction on the parish house began. It was contracted to Harry Zimmerman and completed in time for the Rev. McBride to take residence in 1909.¹³ In 1911, an organ was installed and dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Mary Disston, who had passed away in 1895.¹⁴

¹¹ White, William Prescott, and William H. Scott. *The Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia: A Camera and Pen Sketch of Each Presbyterian Church and Institution in the city*. Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, 1895: 189.

¹² Kearns-Preston, Rev. David C. "Chronological Record."

¹³ McNamee & Bright. *The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, v.23. Philadelphia: McNamee & Bright, 1909.

¹⁴ Kearns-Preston, Rev. David C. "Chronological Record."

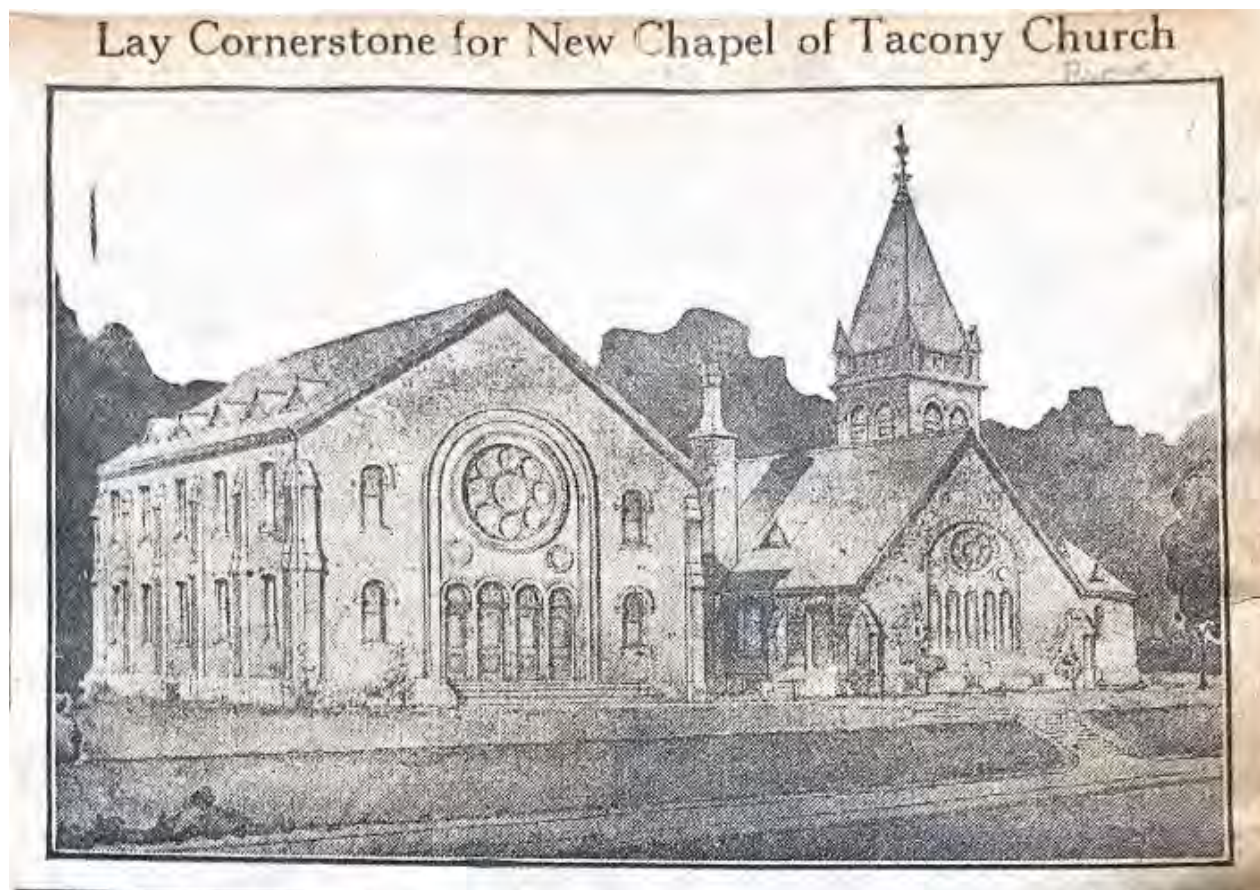
Membership continued to grow through the years, and in 1913 a new Sunday School became a necessity. At that time, there were 580 students at the Sunday School and 250 members of the Rev. McBride's Bible class.¹⁵ Philadelphia's Mayor Blankenburg laid the cornerstone for the new Sunday School on September 20, 1913. It was initially constructed as a 1 story building with a basement and cost about \$12,000. The exterior was sandstone with stone trimmings, and the interior was finished with chestnut wood. The first floor contained an auditorium with a capacity of about 600, and the basement contained a gym and recreation room. The parish house was also included in the 1913 construction project; it was fully furnished with electricity for the comfort of the Reverend McBride.¹⁶



Church and Parish House c.1913, from Tacony by Historical Society of Tacony

¹⁵ "Mayor Lays Cornerstone." *The Philadelphia Record*. Sep. 21, 1913: 4.

¹⁶ "Mayor Lays Cornerstone." *The Philadelphia Record*. Sep. 21, 1913: 4.



Sunday School (left) and Church (right) 1927, from The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Between 1925 and 1927, the Sunday School and a garage were completed from the plans of architect Samuel D. Milner by the contractor Roy Randall.¹⁷ The new construction, containing 2 stories and 2 galleries, was dedicated in 1927. It was constructed in brick and stone with a slate roof and ornamental ironwork.¹⁸ In 1928, chimes were added to the church organ which had been installed in 1911 in memory of Mrs. Mary Disston.¹⁹ The organ was electrified in 1953 and rededicated in memory of Dr. Josiah Linton, who served as Pastor for the church from 1915 to 1952.²⁰

Through the late 20th Century and into the 21st, a core group ranging between 80 and 150 members remained active until a decline in membership and an aging congregation led to the church's dissolution in 2020. The Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church congregation was dissolved on November 17, 2020, and the building sold in the Spring of 2021. At the time, the church's membership had declined to fewer than 80 members.²¹

¹⁷ McNamee & Bright. *The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, v.42. 1927.

¹⁸ "Will Lay Cornerstone." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jul. 23, 1927: 11.

¹⁹ Kearns-Preston, Rev. David C. "Chronological Record."

²⁰ Housworth, Rev. Paul E. "A Brief History of Disston Memorial Church." 8.

²¹ Presbytery of Philadelphia, Stated Meeting, April 20, 2021.



Organ c. 1915, from Tacony Historical Society

Criterion J

Throughout its long history, the Disston Memorial Church has served as a social hub for Tacony's Presbyterian community and the origin for dozens of clubs and organizations that helped to build up Northeast Philadelphia. It's been the site of events that brought the entire community together, and it still stands today as a reminder of the Disston family's influence in Tacony, both in its name and in its construction. **The Disston Memorial church exemplifies the sociocultural scene of a religiously diverse community and represents the Disston family's influence on the development of Tacony, satisfying Criterion J for designation.**

This church could not have existed without the generosity of Mary Disston, as a result its history is deeply tied to hers and her family's. Following her death in 1895, every church in the area except this one was closed for Sunday Worship so that hundreds of people could attend the service held for her at the Disston Memorial Church.²² The organ which had been dedicated in her honor was so important to the congregation that when it suddenly died on Easter Sunday in 2010, a century after its installation, rather than replace it entirely they raised more than \$5000 to rebuild the motor unit.²³

The Disston family was integral to the industrialization of Tacony and to Philadelphia's reputation as an international industrial leader. But more than that, the Disstons can be credited for nearly every culturally significant building in the Tacony neighborhood, including the Tacony Club, the Tacony Baptist Church, and the Tacony Music Hall.²⁴ It was through the family's generosity that Tacony grew into a thriving, religiously and socially diverse "factory town."

Today, the Disston Memorial Church exists only as a building and in the memories of those who were once members of the congregation. Though it is still used for church services, it is no longer operational as the Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church, but as the Victory Outreach Church of Philadelphia, which began operating in the Spring of 2021.²⁵ Despite the changes brought on by time, its buildings still bear the name of the Disston family and serve as a longstanding physical reminder of Northeast Philadelphia's history.

²² "In Memory of Mrs. Disston." *The Times*, Sep. 16, 1895: 3.

²³ Housworth, Rev. Paul E. "A Brief History of Disston Memorial Church." 9.

²⁴ Jaffe, Alan. "Look Up! Henry Disston's Company Town." *PlanPhilly*, May 3, 2010.

²⁵ *Victory Outreach Church*. n.d. <https://vophila.org/> (accessed December 7, 2021).

Criterion E

The Disston Memorial Church is the work of the architect Edwin F. Durang, who specialized in ecclesiastical design. More than 200 buildings in the Philadelphia area have been attributed to E. F. Durang, most notably churches and institutions for the Roman Catholic Church.²⁶ **Durang's contributions to the architectural landscape of the city of Philadelphia satisfy criterion E for historical designation.**

During was born to a distinguished family in New York City, he began working as an architect in Philadelphia around 1855. In 1857, he began working for the architect John Carver. Upon Carver's death in 1859, Durang took over the firm and built a successful architectural enterprise specializing in ecclesiastical design.²⁷ In 1909, Edwin Durang was joined by his son F. Ferdinand Durang, who took over the firm upon his father's death in 1911. The Durang firm was one of the most successful architectural firms specializing in Catholic Churches in Philadelphia. Some of the more well-known buildings designed by Edwin Durang include the Roman Catholic High School at Broad and Vine Streets, and the Church of the Gesù on Girard Avenue.²⁸

While Durang's records provide the initial indication of his connection to the Disston Memorial Church, his influence can be confirmed through comparison to other churches attributed to his firm. Durang's architectural style featured square towers, masonry construction, and arched doors and windows. Figure 9 depicts the Grace Epiphany Episcopal Church, designed by Edwin Durang, and located in the Mt. Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia. Like the Disston Memorial Church, a square tower, masonry walls, and stone trim are visible. In figure 10 is the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Messiah, located in Port Richmond, Philadelphia and also designed by Durang. Like the Disston Memorial Church, it features high, arched doors and windows. Figure 11 depicts another church attributed to Durang, the St. James Episcopal Church in Atlantic City New Jersey, like the Disston Memorial Church, features masonry walls, arched entrances, and a square tower.

There are more than 200 buildings in Philadelphia that would not exist without the vision of Edwin F. Durang, and the Disston Memorial Church is one of them. Though Durang prioritized religious buildings, he did not often diverge from designs for the Roman Catholic Church. It was the importance of the Disston family name and his previous interactions with Mary Disston that led to the construction of the Disston Memorial Church, which can now be ranked among the many historic buildings from the mind of Edwin F. Durang.

²⁶ Tatman, Sandra. "Durang, Edwin Forrest (1829-1911)." *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*.

²⁷ Tatman, Sandra. "Durang, Edwin Forrest (1829-1911)." *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*.

²⁸ Tatman, Sandra. "Durang, Edwin Forrest (1829-1911)." *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*.



Figure 9, Grace Epiphany Episcopal Church, from Google Maps

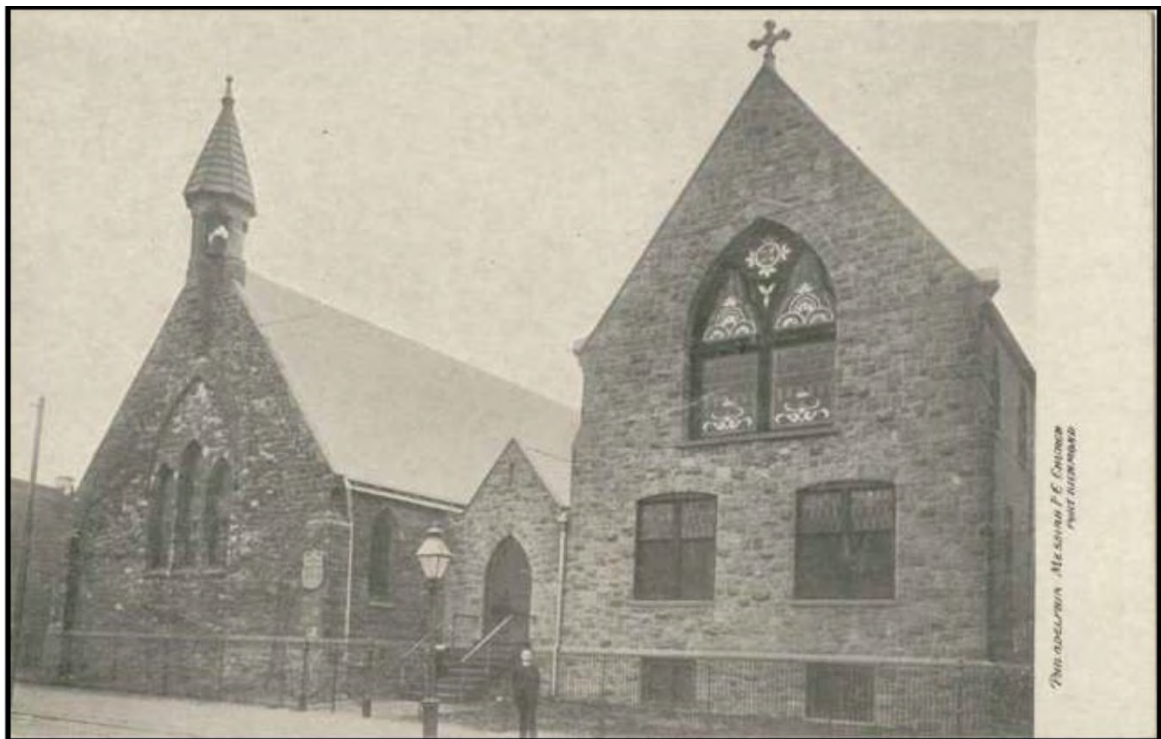


Figure 10, Protestant Episcopal Church of the Messiah, from the Library Company of Philadelphia

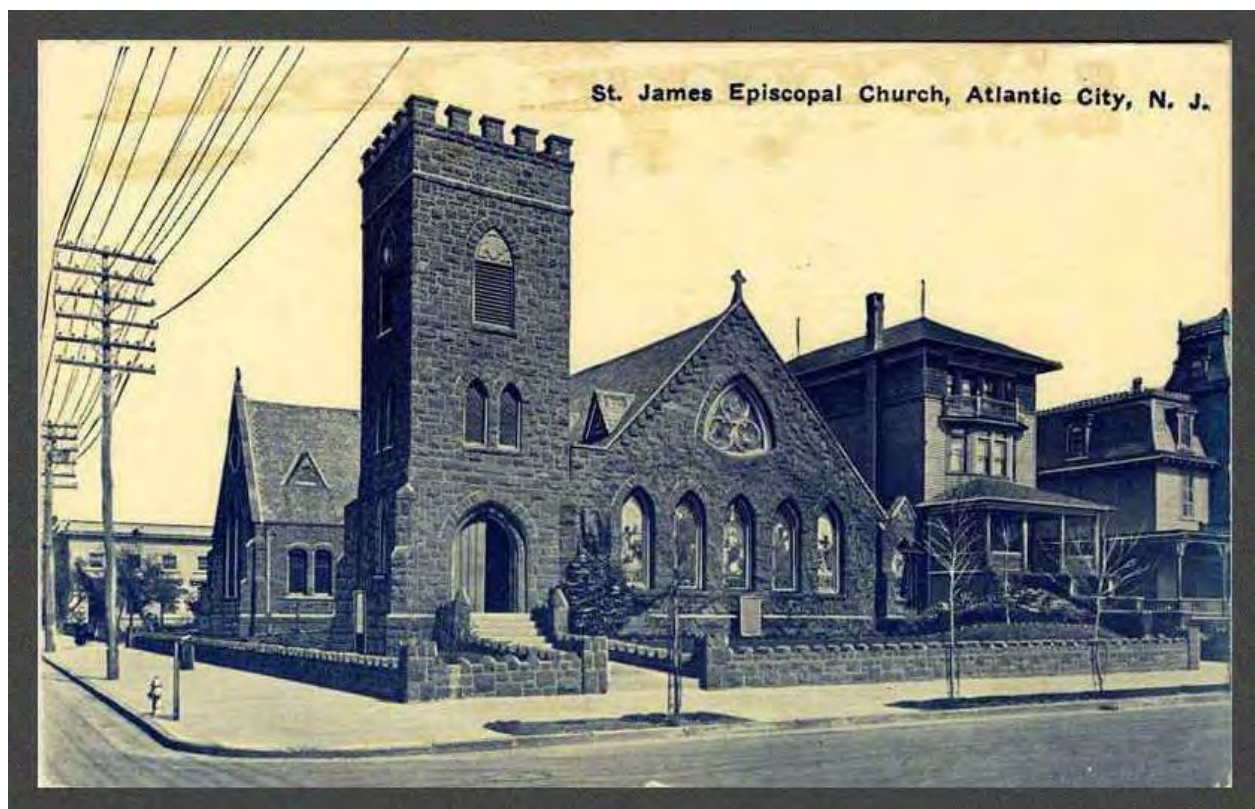


Figure 11, St. James Episcopal Church, Postcard

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