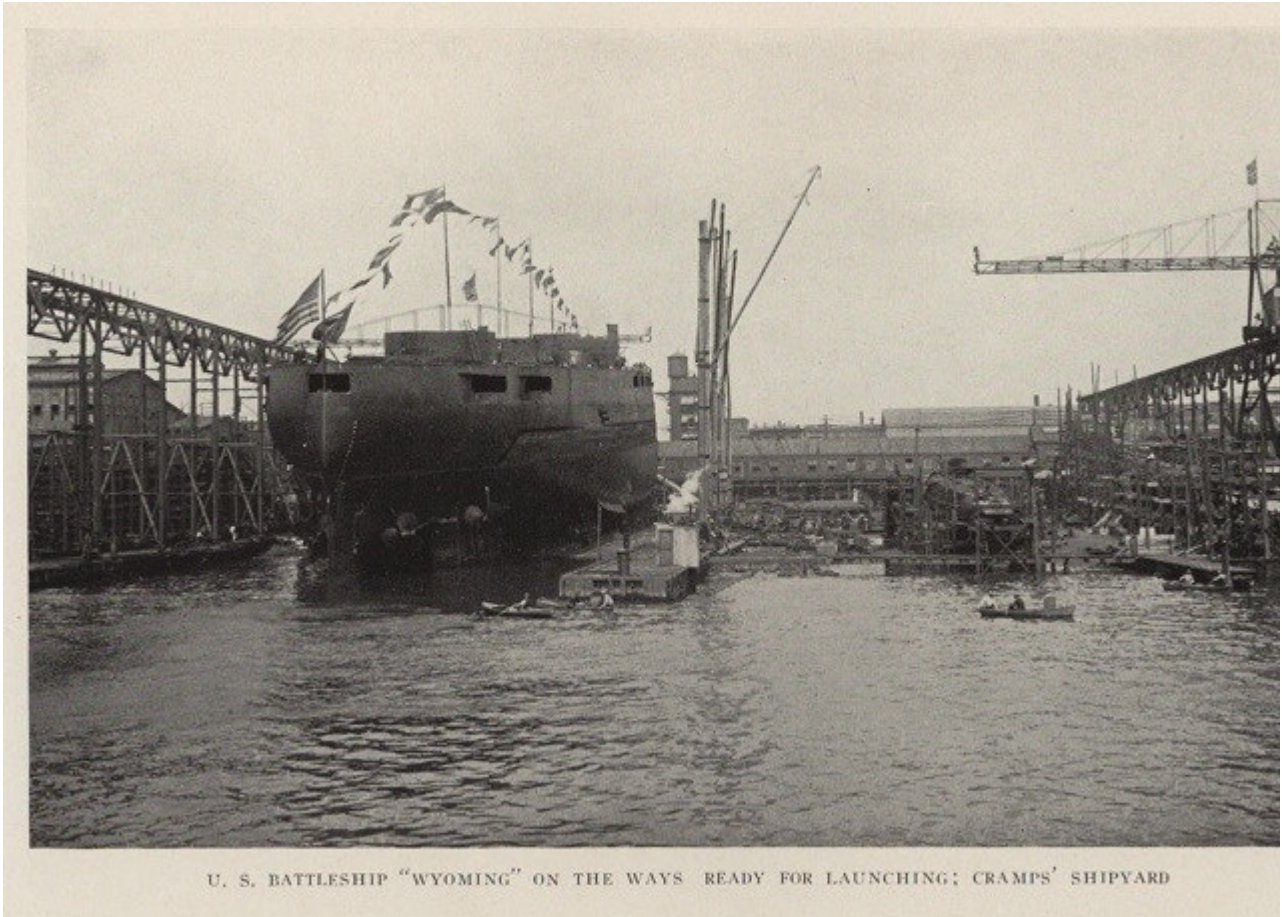


# Workshop of the World

## stories of industry in & around Philadelphia

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### FISHTOWN

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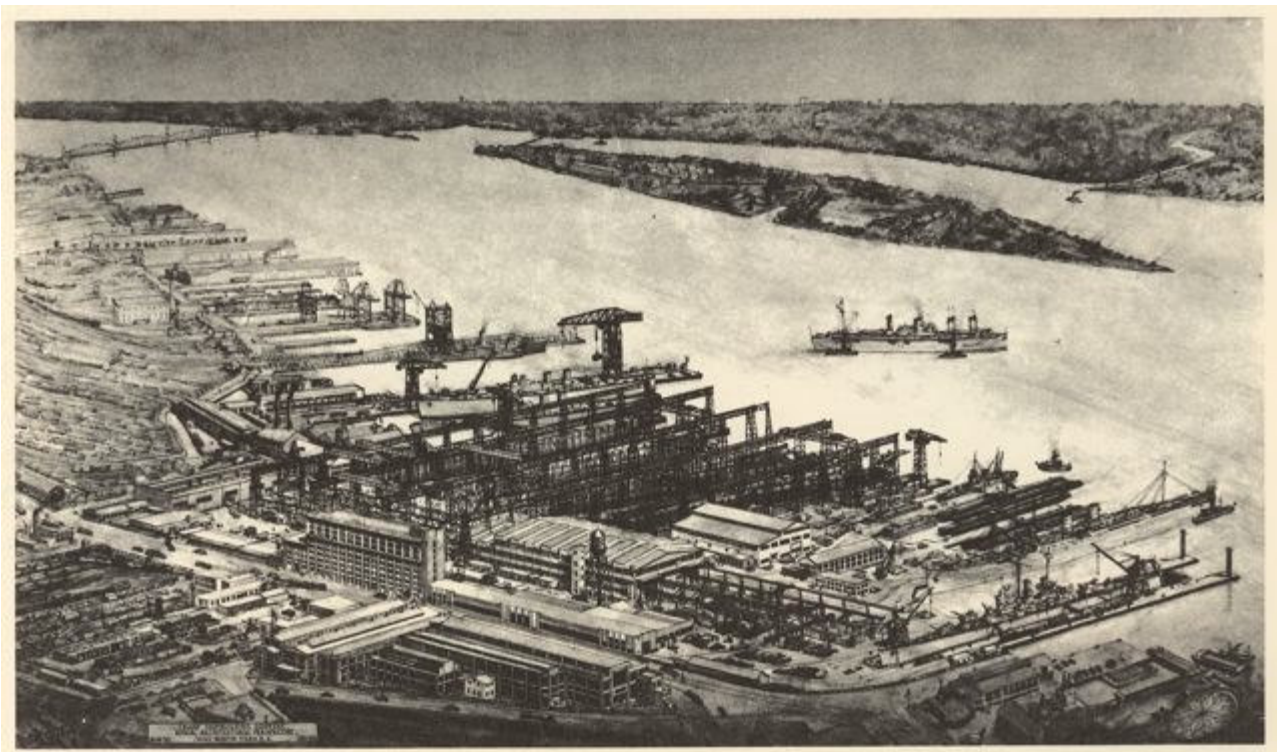
Though the Fishtown neighborhood of Philadelphia experienced some European colonization prior to Wil Penn's arrival in 1682, extensive industrial development did not occur until after the evolution of effect steam power and intensive settlement. Some marine-related activities, such as fishing, took place in th early 1700s, although a primarily agrarian culture existed during the period of earliest colonization. Sin that time, Fishtown, originally part of Kensington, has evolved into a distinct, working-class neighborho bounded by Frankford Avenue on the west, Norris Street on the northeast, and the Delaware River to t south and east. A mixed residential, commercial, and industrial community, Fishtown today mirrors its evolution from an early eighteenth-century waterfront village to a dense, urban neighborhood within Philadelphia.

The Fishtown waterfront did not witness any significant development and building activity until the 173 Squeezed out of waterfront lots nearer the city because of rising land values, owners of shipbuilding ar repair facilities began at that time to acquire riverfront lots north of East Columbia Avenue along the

Delaware. As Fishtown entered the nineteenth century, maritime trades dominated the community. Occupational listings for Fishtown residents in city directories show that more than one-half earned the living as shipbuilders, shipwrights, ship joiners, ship smiths, and ship carpenters. Others worked as rop makers, mast makers, caulkers, wharf builders, carpenters, fishermen, and blacksmiths. "Shipyards" was printed across the entire Fishtown waterfront in an 1843 map.

Manufacturing not related to maritime commerce started in Fishtown in the late eighteenth century. In October 1771, Robert Towars and Joseph Leacock erected a glass furnace on the east bank of Gunner's (now Dyott Street) along Bank Street (Richmond Street). Thomas W. Dyott, and later Henry B. Benner operated the glass furnace, known as the Dyottville Glassworks, throughout the nineteenth century. In 1779, John Hewson, Sr., established a calico and linen printing factory on land neighboring the glass furnace. Hewson manufactured gowns and blue handkerchiefs with white spots.

Extensive industrial manufacturing in Fishtown commenced in the 1830s, a period when steam power was changing America's urban spaces and economy. William Cramp started his shipbuilding business in 1833 on the foot of Otis Street (now East Susquehanna Avenue). Known as the William Cramp and Sons Ship and Engine Building Company, Cramp's business grew into one of the world's largest manufacturers of iron ships. It was Fishtown's biggest employer well into the mid-twentieth century.



Aerial Architecture Perspective of Cramp Shipbuilding Company in 1943 by Adiel Martin Stern, R.A.

Jonathan Wainwright and Samuel Gillingham's steam-powered sawmill and lumber business started at Beach and Hanover (East Columbia Avenue) Streets during this period; this extensive business, later known as Gillingham & Garrison, survived until the 1940s.

Several other firms established in the first half of the nineteenth century further illustrate the growing diversity of Fishtown's industries. In 1838, the Reaney and Neafie Penn Steam Engine & Boiler Works began manufacturing steam engines and boilers at the corner of Beach and Palmer Streets. Reaney and Neafie later Neafie and Levy, also made iron boats, propellers, forgings, and brass and iron castings until the 1900s. Bancroft & Sellers began manufacturing machine tools and mill gearing on Beach Street opposite Penn Treaty Park in 1848. Bancroft died in 1855, and the firm became William Sellers & Company. Sellers & Company was highly regarded for the quality of its teeth cutting wheels, lathes, planing machines, steam hammers, and screw stocks and dies.

In the early 1850s, Fishtown began to participate in the accelerating industrialization of Philadelphia's textile trades. Martin Landenberger's Hosiery Mill on the corner of Frankford Avenue and Wildey Street and the

Henry Becker Hosiery Mill on Moyer Street stand as testimony to this heritage (both companies are documented in this chapter). Much textile production in Kensington focused on hand-loom carpet and hosiery weaving. "Outworking," or domestic manufacture, persisted in Fishtown into the early 1900s. Domestic manufacturing ranged in size from S. C. Ridpath & Co.'s 55 hand-loom, with "15 of these lo at homes of weavers," making 25,000 yards of carpet per month at 1242 Day Street, <sup>1</sup> to William J. Crowe's three looms producing 1,500 yards per month at 401 East Girard Avenue. (Crowe's hand-loom manufactory is documented in this chapter.)

After the Civil War, the markets of the western frontier helped spur Fishtown's industrial and communit growth, peaking in the period between 1880 and 1900. Among the businesses that began during this e industrial expansion were the Ajax Metal Company and the A. J. Reach & Co., manufacturers of sportin goods (both companies are described in this chapter). These concerns remained in Fishtown until the n twentieth century.

Although somewhat unreliable because of enumeration by districts as opposed to wards, the 1870 indu census listed 213 industrial establishments in Fishtown. In 1883, Lorin Blodget described an industrial landscape not much different from the one that existed 13 years earlier:

*"The southern and central portions of these wards [the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 20th; Fishtown composec entire 18th ward during this period] are densely occupied and almost exclusively manufacturing, while Delaware river front, from Poplar street to Lehigh Avenue, is in part occupied with lumber and coal yar with several shipbuilding establishments and iron-works."* <sup>2</sup>

According to Blodget, Fishtown's larger non textile industries included three brass and bronze smelters, brewery, one alcohol distillery, three furniture manufacturers, three glass houses, five rolling mills, two shipbuilders, three iron foundries, one wire works, three saw mills, one sugar refinery, one wharf build and thirteen wrought iron manufacturers. <sup>3</sup>

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Fishtown began to experience a shift to more modern industri technologies and processes. In 1911, the American Can Company, a concern newly formed as a collect of small can factories, erected a general line manufacturing plant on the corner of Beach and Palmer Streets. Although American Can was a leader in developing sanitary cans, the process of packing foods in tin cans without atmospheric leakage leading to spoilage, the Fishtown plant focused on non- food c; American Can stopped production in March 1989.

The advent of effective electrical power and the subsequent demand for electrical power by industrial a residential groups gave the Philadelphia Electric Company the impetus to construct a power-generating station in Fishtown in 1919. Located on the corner of Beach Street and East Columbia Avenue, the Delaware Station generating plant quickly required expansion in 1923. Further demand for electricity necessitated additional expansion and construction in 1953.

In 1935, in a former carpet-cleaning complex on East Columbia Avenue, the Electro-Nite Carbon Comp began manufacturing carbon-graphite brushes for electric motors. After World War II, Electro-Nite focu on the production of disposable thermo-couples for use in the steel industry's electric crucibles. Electro soon outgrew its shop on Columbia Avenue and moved to larger quarters on Torresdale Avenue and Mercator Road. Electro-Nite's thermo-couples continue to be used throughout the world, especially in Japan's steel industry.

A microcosm of the city around it, Fishtown has experienced the same kind of industrial decline that effected Philadelphia and other large industrial cities after the Depression and again after World War II the last half of the twentieth century, the manufacturing bases of Fishtown and Philadelphia are dramatically smaller than those of the previous century. However, Fishtown still has a large number of industrial sites that reflect its rich and diverse industrial past and the pattern and extent of its industri development.

1 Blodget, Lorin. *The Textile Industries of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1880), p.49.

2 Blodget, Lorin. *Census of Manufactures of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1883), pp. 64-65.

3 Blodget, 1883, pp. 65-75.

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**Resources:**

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