



The Disston History photographs 1977.227

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Audiovisual Collections

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Wilmington, Delaware 19807

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Summary Information

Repository:	Audiovisual Collections
Creator:	Henry Disston & Sons, Inc. (Philadelphia, Pa.)
Creator - aut:	Satterthwaite, Elizabeth B.
Title:	"The Disston History" photographs
ID:	1977.227
Date [inclusive]:	circa 1850-1920
Physical Description:	102 item(s)
General Physical Description:	102 photographic prints : b&w ; 8 x 10 in.
Physical Location:	GL Box 1.
Language of the Material:	English .
Abstract:	Henry Disston & Sons, Inc. was a major manufacturer of saws and other woodworking tools and one of the largest industrial firms in Philadelphia. Henry Disston (1819-1878), the founded the company in 1855. The firm remained in family control until 1955. The collection consists of images copied from "The Disston History," a genealogy of the Disston family and a company history of Henry Disston and Sons, Inc., compiled by family members and genealogist Elizabeth B. Satterthwaite (1856-1948) in 1920.

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Biographical Note

Henry Disston & Sons, Inc. was a major manufacturer of saws and other woodworking tools and one of the largest industrial firms in Philadelphia. Henry Disston (1819-1878), the founder of the firm, was born in Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire, in 1819 and emigrated with his father to Philadelphia in 1833. His father died soon after, and Disston was apprenticed to Lindley, Johnson & Whitcraft, saw manufacturers. The firm failed in the depression in 1840, and young Disston took the tools and stock in lieu of back wages and established his own shop. Disston introduced the Sheffield practice of using crucible steel with the assistance of skilled workers imported from the Sheffield district.

In 1855, Disston brought steel workers from England to open the first mill in the United States devoted to producing steel for saws. A rolling mill was added in 1862. As Disston expanded the line of tools he manufactured and business grew during the 1860s and 1870s.

Disston's sons Hamilton Disston (1844-1896) and Albert Disston (1849-1883) joined the firm in 1865 and 1870 respectively. In 1872 fire destroyed a large part of the original factory, and Disston sought a new location for his works, settling on the village of Tacony, north and east of Philadelphia along the Delaware River. Construction on Disston's new saw works began in 1872 and by 1876, Disston was also building a large number of houses for employees to rent or purchase and contributing funds and materials for the building of schools and churches.

The firm remained under the control of Henry Disston's extended family after his death in 1878. The firm was incorporated under the laws of Pennsylvania in 1886. The Disston family sold the company to the H.K. Porter Company, Inc. of Pittsburgh in 1955. Operated by Porter as a subsidiary, Disston, Inc., the operation was sold to Sandvik AB of Sweden in 1972. It was sold to R.A.F. Industries, Inc., in 1984 and reorganized as Disston Precision Incorporated. The new company still manufactures saws and other flat steel products in custom lots under the Disston brand name in Philadelphia.

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Scope and Content

The collection consists of images copied from "The Disston History," a genealogy of the Disston family and a company history of Henry Disston and Sons, Inc., compiled by family members and genealogist Elizabeth B. Satterthwaite (1856-1948) in 1920. Images in the collection include portraits of Disston family members, board members and employees, as well as interior and exterior images of the Disston Saw Works in Tacony, a suburb of Philadelphia. Images of employees at work show all stages of saw production, beginning with the pouring of steel and ending in the shipping room. Also included are images of branch offices of Henry Disston and Sons, Inc. from across the nation as well as in Canada and Australia. Five photographs of public buildings erected by Disston in Tacony, such as schools and the first town hall are also part of the collection. A final series of images features displays of Disston saws, files and other tools created for national and international exhibitions and parade floats.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research.

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Related Materials

Related Material

Henry Disston and Sons, Inc. photographs (Accession 1994.335), Audiovisual Collections and Digital Initiatives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

The Disston history, by William Dunlop Disston, Henry Disston, William Smith; compiled by Elizabeth B. Satterthwaite, historian and genealogist, 1920 [microfilm and photoprint]. (Accessions 1567), Manuscript and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

Paul W. Morgan papers (Accession 2044), Manuscript and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

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Controlled Access Headings

- Saw industry
- Tools
- Steel-works
- Iron and steel workers
- Exhibitions
- Genealogies
- Disston, Henry, 1819-1878
- Panama-Pacific International Exposition (1915 : San Francisco, Calif.)