

JOHN GRASS WOOD TURNING COMPANY HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by
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Introduction – Workshop of the World

In the nineteenth century Philadelphia earned the title “Workshop of the World” and maintained this into the early part of the 20th century, yet there is no commemoration of this in any part of the city. There is no symbol of the power and presence of Philadelphia as an industrial giant, even though today we see the deserted remains of the factories and industrial sites that made this possible. The beginnings of this industrial history are in Old City – within the area north of Market Street from 2nd to 10th streets. This is the cradle of the Workshop of the World.

Initially small operations, the size of these industrial establishments grew with the development of new technologies, especially the change in power systems. In the 17th Century there were industries with individual workers such as watchmakers, shoemakers, tailors, etc. Individuals such as Betsy Ross making flags at her home on Arch Street near 3rd represent this type of early industry.

Industry progressed to the shop discipline where several men worked together in a single location to produce everything from heavy metal products to consumer goods such as refined sugar and tinware. This early industrial work relied on simple power systems, such as foot treadles. There were only a few waterpower sites within the city proper. In the 1830s with the introduction of the steam engine to power machinery, it became possible for small industrial sites to flourish within the city limits, and this was true in the Old City District on the north side of Market Street.

In 1838, the Secretary of the Treasury submitted a report to the Congress about steam engines and identified Pennsylvania as having the largest number of stationary steam engines in the nation - 383 out of a total of 1,616. Almost half of the Pennsylvania total was in Philadelphia, where there were 174 steam engines. Contributing factors were the ready supply of coal for fuel and water for steam.

Historical maps of Philadelphia from the 1860s and 1870s indicate distinct areas of similar or related occupations. The area south of Market Street was the location of publishing houses, printers, banks and the financial system, as well as mercantile operations involving shipping, etc. It was there state and local governments were situated. All along the Delaware River both north and south of Market Street there were maritime industries involving shipping, storage facilities and cargo handling. An evolving industrial character becomes evident on these historical maps in the neighborhood comprised of North 2nd Street continuing west to North 10th Street between Arch and Vine Streets.

Early in the 19th century Nathan Sellers had a shop and manufactory on Market Street between 5th and 6th Streets where he made wire for the carding of wool and also wire screens for the paper making industry, later becoming a general machine works. In St. James Court, located at the rear of Market and North 7th Street, early steam fire engines were developed by Perkins & Sellers. Oliver Evans had a store and manufactory at 9th and Market where he made steam engines, ground “plaister of Paris,” and supplied components for gristmills. Isaiah Lukens, who made the clock on Independence Hall tower in 1828, had a shop at the back of 173 Market Street, near 4th. Isaac Morris had a coppersmith shop at the rear of his home on the corner of North 3rd and New Streets. The general practice of living in the same building or near the workplace made possible the exchange of information among early mechanically-minded men. Philadelphia became noted for its skilled mechanics. The know-how of these men, the urge for industrial growth, and the available financial backing led to Philadelphia becoming an industrial giant, known throughout the world.

Later in the 19th century the influx of immigrants placed its stamp on the area around North 2nd Street, attracted by the possibility of employment and bettering of lifestyle beyond that possible in European countries at the time. With little or no capital to purchase land, these immigrants became tenants in housing near their workplace. Even earlier Elfreth’s Alley had become home to working people. Some of these small craft industries were operated in part of the home, as at No.126 which served as the place of business for dressmakers Mary Smith, Sarah Milton and Elizabeth Carr in the 18th century, followed by German shoemaker Lewis Kolb in 1847 and German shoemaker Joseph Schoendienst in 1875. As a German immigrant, John Grass established his wood turning business in this North 2nd Street neighborhood, and his home a few blocks away.

As the nineteenth century progressed, there was a veritable explosion of industrial sites within this portion of the Old City District. Concern about fire first led to recording on maps not only the physical components of buildings – whether wood or brick – but also where there were boilers for steam engines. Later maps name the industries on each site. Consequently, it is easy to ascertain and trace the locations and the types of industries over a period of time. However, towards the end of the century, with the development of new technologies, a continuing demand for manufactured products, and the construction of large factories, industry moved north to more open sections of the city where these establishments could function efficiently. Yet in the vicinity of North 2nd Street, some firms like John Grass Wood Turning Co. found there was sufficient demand to remain within the Old City and pursue work as before. The workmanship and the skill represented in the individual hand-turned object still had a viable market.

As it exists today this shop represents so much more than its own history. It is a true artifact of the “Workshop of the World.”

John Grass Wood Turning Company

The John Grass Wood Turning Company is a small industrial firm in Philadelphia that specializes in wooden products that have been turned on a lathe. It has been in business in the Old City District for a hundred and forty-two years, with some of its equipment almost that old. The firm makes a wide range of products. While architects

appreciate its historically correct balusters, toolmakers have depended on it for durable wooden handles, and flag-makers for flagpoles of all sizes.

The firm has been under the management of two families throughout its existence. John Grass, the founder, was an immigrant from Germany who opened his shop in 1863 and established a reputation for good work. In 1911 it was incorporated by a group of fellow small industrialists, under the management of one of his wood turners, Louis Bower, who later became sole owner. For three generations members of the Bower family have continued to own and operate the shop. Lou Bower, the present owner, closed the shop in 2003 due to illness.

Although not in active use, the shop remains intact, with all its equipment in running order. It is located in a three-story building at 146 North 2nd Street, on the southwest corner of North 2nd and Quarry Streets. The office is at the front of the first floor, with the wood-working shop and storage area to the rear. The second floor is an expansion of the shop. The lathes and other equipment date from as early as 1870. Power for many of the machines is provided by overhead line shafting and belts, once driven by a steam engine in the basement, now replaced with an electric motor.

Investigation into the historical background for the John Grass Wood Turning Company has included research on historical maps, Philadelphia city directories, federal Census and naturalization records, interviews with current residents of the area, and general information on the industrial history of Philadelphia. Specific to the history of the shop, the focus has been on the following topics:

- 1 Locations of the Shop Over the Years
- 2 Brief History of 146 North 2nd Street
- 3 Records of Industrial Activity in the Area of the Shop
- 4 Biographical Information About John Grass
- 5 Corporate John Grass Wood Turning Company
- 6 Lou Bower Family Biographical Information
- 7 Product Line of John Grass Wood Turning Company
- 8 Operations at 146 North 2nd Street

Locations of the Shop Over the Years

The following dates are those given in Philadelphia city directories as the location at which John Grass, wood turner, worked, all within a three-block area between Arch and Vine Streets, as shown in Appendix A. In a few business directories, the shop is also listed. It is unclear what the process was for inclusion in the directories – whether there was a fee or how the names were acquired. Also, the year may not be precise if any change in information was not recorded in time for publication. Description of the industries and use of the buildings is taken from historical maps and from insurance records.

1863-1877
No Known Location

The traditional founding date of the John Grass Wood Turning Company is given as 1863, but no record was found about its existence or location. The first date that appears in the city directory is 1872 when John Grass is identified as a wood turner, with his home listed as 417 St. John Street (American Street) and no work address, although he may have worked at the rear of his house. The 1870 Census states that he had a personal estate of \$1500, possibly the value of his wood turning equipment and indicating he was active in business at that time.

1875-1901

Rear 220 North 2nd Street, probable rental

Besides wood turning, several small industrial activities are also listed at the same address on historical maps. 1875: Pearl Button Factory, Continental Card Factory. 1897: Fire Escape Factory, Toys Factory, Shirt Factory, Grinding Shop. 1903: Fire Escape Factory, Cigar Box Factory & Printing. This location is accessible from Bread Street where it dead-ends, running south from New Street. The building has been torn down for construction of the approach to the Benjamin Franklin Bridge.

1902-1915

222 Vine Street, rental

The 1897 map indicates that this building was occupied at that time by a Paper Bag Factory using a gas engine. A Plot Plan for 1908 indicates the property was owned by a man named Cox and measured 21 ft. by 75 ft. The building was similar to the adjoining three-story combination store/dwellings common in the area, as shown in the Photograph taken in 1918.. A fire destroyed the original building sometime after that date and it was replaced by a one-story, garage-like brick building. Present occupant is Josh Owens, with the motto "Big Ideas/Small Packages."

The move to Vine Street may have been the result of John Grass's close relationship with John Stortz who had a tool business at 210 Vine Street and was a customer of Grass. In 1911 Stortz became President of the corporate John Grass Wood Turning Co. By moving from shared quarters where he had been working for 26 years or more, Grass increased the scale of his operations. He was 64 at the time of the move to Vine Street. If he thought of retiring within a few years, it is possible there was a plan in 1902 for him to retire and sell the business after getting it up to steam at the new location. This would have meant attracting competent turners such as Lou Bower - and other workers - to take over operations of the shop when the change took place in 1911, while Stortz provided most of the capital. Selling a prosperous business instead of just the equipment, John Grass would have had a sizeable retirement fund. This may have been planned, or simply the result of the move.

1916-present

146 North 2nd Street, purchase

This building is similar to the three-story row houses in the neighborhood. Formerly a rental property, several business activities are recorded for the site on insurance surveys and on historical maps. 1846: Oyster house and Tavern. 1868: Wholesale Liquor Store. 1897: Stove Store and Shop. 1903: Steam Packing, Belting, Rubber Goods Factory. Building is in same condition as when active use ended in 2003.

1897-1911

Retail Store

125 North 2nd Street, rental

An additional location of John Grass as a retail store was 125 North 2nd Street, the Grass Manufacturing Company, operated by Harry Grass. This was next to Elfreth's Alley and it was before the wood turning shop moved to 146 North 2nd Street. In city directories the store is identified as selling "woodenware" from 1897-1909 and was operated by Harry Grass, the son of John Grass. In 1910-1911 the store was described as selling "furnishings." In addition, Harry Grass was identified as secretary and treasurer of Universal Machine Manufacturing Company, located at a different address. The store is not listed in 1912, evidently closed following the incorporation of the John Grass Wood Turning Company in 1911.

Brief History of 146 North 2nd Street

Property

The source of the following information is deed abstracts and insurance surveys included in Appendix B.

The building at 146 North 2nd Street was evidently designed to be a rental property, providing income to the Rubincam family who were the owners from 1825 to 1907. Joseph Rubincam also owned adjoining property.

The present site is a combination of two plots of land, listed as Registry Nos. 238 and 239 in the Philadelphia City Records Department. Rubincam acquired No. 238 November 17, 1825 from George Worrall. It was 20 feet wide on North 2nd Street, and extended westward 100 feet where it increased to 24 feet and ran 138 feet to Moravian Alley, now Bread Street. The second parcel of land, a strip of ground on the S.W. corner of Quarry and North 2nd Streets designated as Registry No. 239, was acquired in 1845 from Morton McMichael, Esq. and Mary L. Erwin. The width of this parcel was only 5 ft. 9 in. on North 2nd Street, and 1 ft. 3 in. at Bread Street.

As his heirs, the daughters of Joseph Rubincam, Mary A. Rubincam and Anna E. Rubincam Glentworth maintained the combined property until the death of Annie Glentworth when it was sold to George M. Costello in 1907. At that time the entire parcel of land was designated as Registry No. 238 and included the No.239 strip of land, but no longer extended to Bread Street, being 26 ft. 1-1/2 in. in breadth and 114 ft. 5 in. deep. Detailed measurements are included in the deed abstracts in Appendix B.

To purchase the land, George Costello obtained a \$5,000 mortgage from the Bush Hill Building Association No. 2. When he was in arrears there was a sheriff's sale in October 1915 and the Bush Hill Building Association No. 2 became the owner. The corporate John Grass Wood Turning Company purchased the property from the Bush Hill Building Association No.2 on November 13, 1915.

The corporate changes and ownership in the John Grass Wood Turning Company after 1927 have not been clearly determined. Tradition has it that the three generations of

the Bower family have owned and operated the wood turning business. At some point Lou Bower, the grandfather of the present Lou Bower, became the sole owner and passed it down to his son Louis Bower. In 1989 the property was deeded to this Louis Bower and his wife Dorothy W. Bower and the company was re-incorporated. In 1990 Louis Bower died and Dorothy W. Bower became the sole owner. When she died in 1996, the property passed to her son and heir, the present Lou Bower, and his wife Marcia Bower.

Building

It is not clear when the building at 146 North 2nd Street was erected. The deed to Joseph Rubincam in 1825 states, “All that certain lot or piece of ground Messuage or Tenement and Lot or piece of ground thereunto belonging . . .” (see Appendix B). The Fire Mark on the outside of the building at an upper level indicates that it was insured by the Fire Association of Philadelphia that was founded in 1817 and later became the Reliance Insurance Company. The Fire Mark is a fire hydrant with a hose wrapped around it. It is not known if the insurance surveys included in Appendix B were prepared for this insurance company.

There was a building at the site in 1846, according to a survey made for the insurance company October 2, 1846, and included in Appendix B. The survey describes the structure in detail, both the interior and exterior. The house was “20 feet front 42 feet deep Piazza 9-1/2 feet by 17 feet, both three stories high.” The interior was adapted to its use as an oyster house and tavern, with two dining rooms containing “two mantles with fluted pilasters & frieze . . . folding doors with mahogany frames & maple panels, between the dining rooms.” On the reverse, it is further identified as “Liberty of a Tavern & Eating House.” The survey is agreed to be Correct and signed by Rubincam. Possibly verifying this usage of the building, the present owner Lou Bower has indicated that oyster shells have been found in the basement of the building.

Another insurance survey in 1868 indicates several alterations and additions to the property at 146 North 2nd Street, see Appendix B. At this time the building was occupied as a wholesale liquor store and not as a dwelling. Extensive changes were made to facilitate its current use, with hatch doors in the floor and a hoisting machine. This survey made on May 25, 1868 was agreed to be correct by Charles A. Rubincam, Attorney.

An added notice on the 1868 survey indicates there was loss by fire on Monday evening, October 4, 1875, but does not record the extent of the loss.

Historical maps contain identification of the use of individual sites. In 1897 the building was a Stove Store and Shop. In 1903, it was identified as being used for Steam Packing, Belting, and a Rubber Goods Factory.

In 1993 John Bowie described the building as a “simple, three-bay, three-story row house. It has an office in the front where business is conducted, and then as you work your way to the back you pass an early traction elevator, and then you get towards the rear of the building – it’s a row house so it’s not very wide, but it is very deep – you get to where the machinery is located, and an awful lot of wood storage.” Drawings of the building in 1993 by John Bowie are included in Appendix C.

Records of Industrial Activity in the Area of the Shop

In the 19th Century industrial activities pervaded the three-block area in which the shop was located over the years. This area is from Arch to Vine Street and North 2nd to North 3rd Street. The area is broken up with several intermediate smaller streets, such as Bread Street between Arch and New Street, and Quarry Street between North 2nd and North 3rd Streets. Several maps include identification of these activities and illustrate how the John Grass Wood Turning Company represents this industrial past.

Although not considered a major industry, wood turners provided essential elements for other industries and for general use. Within the area of Philadelphia studied, - that is, the Old City District and the locations of the residences of John Grass a few blocks north of Vine Street - there were many wood turners listed on maps in the nineteenth century. Of particular interest is the 1875 listing of the "Turner Society" at 440 North 3rd Street with John Grass residing at 480 Dillwyn Street (now North Orianna Street), only a block away.

As early as 1801, the City Directory listed two turners in Elfreth's Alley, although it is not clear as to their place of business. From this Directory a list of those residents of North 2nd Street who were involved in industrial pursuits, is given in Appendix D. In the two blocks between Market and Race Streets, 48 residents engaged in some type of industry, ranging from a silk dyer to a tin manufacturer and a cabinet manufacturer. A review of occupations from North 3rd through North 7th Street shows that the general nature of the neighborhood continued with residents working in industry.

An 1860 map of the Sixth Ward does not identify the specific industries, but does indicate where there were steam engines, with a special notice of "specially hazardous" industries. This probably served as an alert to fire companies in case of an emergency. In the area of Old City under consideration, we can judge that there were many industries, for the map shows sites having from one to four boilers. In the immediate vicinity, on Bread Street there was a tin works, a beer brewery, and sugar refining, with an iron works on Quarry Street.

By 1875 the mapmakers carefully recorded the industries on sites. A list of those industries with a one-block area of 146 North 2nd Street is included in Appendix E. While North 2nd Street contained only two industries – both two tin factories - the largest number of industries was to its rear, on Bread Street, which runs north/south between North 2nd and 3rd Streets. Here there was a wide variety: machine shop, sugar refinery, spice mill, tin ware factory, tin factory, chair factory, malt house, confectionary factory, shovel factory, machine shop, tin & sheet iron factory. Quarry Street had a copper works, shovel works, machine shop, confectionery factory and a tobacco factory. Beyond the limit of one block on North 2nd Street, is found the first mention of John Grass Wood Turning Co. – in the rear of 220 North 2nd Street, identified only as a "Turning Mill." He stayed at that location for 26 years until 1902 when he moved to 222 Vine Street, finally moving to 146 North 2nd Street in 1916.

On the Hexamer Insurance Map for 1897, it is evident that there has been an upsurge in industrial pursuits on North 2nd Street. There are a total of 91 industries, with the majority being metal works (32) and another large number engaged in the wooden trade and furniture (25), see Appendix F. The Metal Works include Iron, Tin, Brass, Nickel, Machine Shops. The Wooden Trades include two Wood Turners, Furniture, Upholstery, and Harness. Other miscellaneous industries are Drugs, Whiskey, Oils, Lamps, Shirt Factory, Tailoring, Shoe Factory, Barber, Laundry, Bakery, Cotton, Buttons, Glass, Brush, Paper, Printing and Electrical. In the immediate vicinity on Quarry Street there were a number of small industries: Hat Block Factory, Machine Brass Shop, Pearl Button Factory, Glass Cutter, Screw Factory, Brush Factory, Nickel Plating, Wood Box Factory, Chair Factory, Carpenter & Hat Block Factory, Pattern Shop.

North 2nd Street has always been a thoroughfare, providing an easy route to the city from its northern sections. Front Street was always congested with maritime activities as ships were built and repaired, loaded and unloaded. It was North 2nd Street that became a place where shopkeepers could display their wares, close to the open markets on Market Street, but far enough away to be reasonably clean and easily accessible. This area was a place where immigrants could find lodging and work

In the three-story row houses built on North 2nd Street, a variety of shops were opened on the first floor, with dwelling space above. In other buildings, stores occupied the front of the first floor with a workshop in the rear. In many cases these were rental properties, as was true for the early history of the building at 146 N 2nd Street, which was purchased in 1915 by the John Grass Wood Turning Co. A historic 1860 photograph from the City Archives shows activity the corner of Market and North 2nd Street with the trolley and retail stores. As the city grew, the No. 5 Trolley route was established on North 2nd Street, which morphed into the current bus route. A historic 1860 photograph from the City Archives shows activity the corner of Market and North 2nd Street with the trolley and retail stores. In more recent times, the Merchants' Association on North 2nd Street awarded prizes for the Thanksgiving Day Parade in the 1950s.

Today, although the area has a rich history of an active industrial community, many of the buildings have been taken over by art galleries and restaurants. The recent removal of old row houses has made space for the construction of condominiums. The John Grass Wood Turning Co. represents the historic industrial past of the Old City District in this modern era of change.

Biographical Information about John Grass

The life of John Grass is a success story of the immigrant in the 19th Century. He arrived in the United States at an early age, became trained in a skilled craft, adopted his new country as a young man and established a successful business. He married another immigrant from his native country and they had four children. Also, the record of their neighbors over the years illustrates the nature of the waves of immigration – 1870 a German neighborhood, 1880 Irish and German, 1900 Russian.

John Grass was born in April 1838 in Bavaria. He emigrated to the United States

in 1853 at the age of 15, arriving at the port of New York, see Appendix G. From his age, we can assume that he served his apprenticeship as a wood turner after arrival. He was naturalized on September 24, 1860 in Philadelphia, at the age of 22. Although of proper age, there is no record of his having served as a Volunteer in the Civil War. In 1862 he married Catherine, also from Bavaria, born in November 1841. Their first child, Henry/Harry, was born in June of 1863, with New York given as the birth location 1870 Census, and changed to Philadelphia in 1880 and 1900 Census. In Philadelphia a second child Catherine was born in 1864-65, a third child Matilda was born in 1869, and a fourth child Clara was born in 1871.

It is not clear when John Grass moved to Philadelphia, whether for his apprenticeship or when he was married and his first child was born. Tradition has it that he established his wood turning shop in 1863. The location has not been established. However, at the time of the 1870 Census, John Grass's personal estate was listed as \$1500, probably the value of his wood turning equipment, indicating that he was active in business at that time. This was a considerable sum at that date. He either earned it in his seven years as a wood turner, or he may have had family money from Germany. In 1872 his home address was 417 St. John Street (now American Street). The family lived in a neighborhood of German immigrants and had two young men as boarders, both from Wittenberg, who worked as sugar bakers – Nicholas Bauman (23) and Sebastian Young (32). There were several sugar refineries in the area.

In 1878 the city directory lists John Grass as a turner, working at 220 North 2nd Street, and living at 161 Wilmer Street. The 1880 Census of the 11th Ward lists the Grass children as Harry (17) salesman, Catherine (15) at home, Matilda (10) at school, Clara (9) at school. There were no boarders. The neighborhood now had some Irish families.

In the 1880s John Grass moved his family to 480 Dillwyn Street, and by 1887 the street was renamed North Orianna where he remained until after 1900. The 1900 Census indicates that all the daughters had left home and only Harry, age 37, remained at home. A young woman servant, Margarette Moss from Bavaria, was a member of the family. John Grass owned his home free of mortgage. At this date the record indicates that his wife Catherine Grass had become a naturalized citizen of the United States. The Census lists that she had four children and all were living. Harry was a woodware dealer with a shop at 125 North 2nd Street.

The 1910 Census indicates that only John Grass and Catherine Grass were living at home, but this is incorrect for Catherine died in 1909. The city directory for 1910 lists John Grass, turner, 222 Vine, and home 1526 East Montgomery. In 1911 the corporate John Grass Wood Turning Company was formed. In 1912, when he was 74 years old, John Grass is simply listed as a turner, with his home at 1526 East Montgomery. This location is near present-day Temple University buildings and it was the first time he lived more than a few blocks from his business. John Grass died in 1914 and is buried with his wife in West Laurel Hill Cemetery in Bala Cynwyd, a suburb of Philadelphia in Montgomery County.

The relationship and interaction among immigrant families plays a part in the story of John Grass. Johannes Stortz (1817-1887) came to the United States from

Wuertenburg, Germany, and in 1853 established a cutlery business in Philadelphia. This business continues as Stortz Tool Company and is located at 210 Vine Street, between North 2nd and North 3rd Streets. Besides being immigrants from Germany, the nature of the two businesses brought the two men together, Johannes Stortz and John Grass – one making tools and the other tool handles. In the 1880s or 1890s, his son Henry Stortz (1868-1954) married Matilda Grass (1869-1857). In 1802 it may be that the Stortz family was instrumental in the move of the John Grass Wood Turning Co. to 220 Vine Street, just a few doors from the tool company. In 1911, John T. Stortz (1853-1934), another son of Johannes Stortz, became the President of the incorporated John Grass Wood Turning Co., with Henry Stortz as Secretary.

Corporate John Grass Wood Turning Company

The Bower family became part owners of John Grass Woodturning Company when it became a corporate entity in 1911. Subsequently three generations of the Bower family were the active managers/superintendents and are listed as one of the corporate officers. Since the Bowers have the same given name, they are referred to as Louis Bower 1, Louis Bower 2, and Louis Bower 3. With the incorporation in 1911, Louis Bower 1, who had worked as a wood turner at the shop, became Secretary. At the present time the sole owner is Louis Bower 3 and Marcia Bower, his wife.

The purchase and incorporation of the John Grass Wood Turning Company in 1911 may well illustrate the close interaction of industries possible due to the proximity of their operations. The corporate officers were men who were engaged in businesses located near the shop at 222 Vine Street and may have been customers of John Grass. In any case, they were thoroughly familiar with the shop and probably knew John Grass personally. The amount of investment is unknown. At the time of the change in ownership, John Grass was 73 years old. It may have been that he wanted to retire and personally was involved in setting up the new corporation, approaching those individuals who might be interested.

The corporate structure over the years changed very little. The original officers were John T. Stortz, president; Louis Bower, vice president; Frederick Schiller, treasurer; and Henry L. Stortz, secretary. John Stortz, the new president of the corporation, operated a tool business at 210 Vine Street, a few doors from 222 Vine. Today a large sign remains on the building, "Stortz and Son - Cutlers." A toolmaker, Stortz ordered handles from Grass and was familiar with the operations of the company. As indicated with his office as President of the new corporate entity, John Stortz may have contributed the largest amount in purchasing the company. His brother, Henry Stortz - who was married to Matilda Grass - was named secretary. Fred Schiller, the treasurer, was a machinist whose business was located a few blocks away at 323 North 3rd Street. He could easily have been another regular visitor to the wood turning shop, which was located between North 2nd and North 3rd streets, just around the corner. Schiller was removed from the listing in 1921 for unknown reasons (death?) and Louis Bower 1 became vice pres. and treasurer. In 1924 Henry Stortz took over as secretary-treasurer and Louis Bower retained only the vice president office. In 1925 John P. Mager became vice president and Bower was once again treasurer. The corporate officers remained the

same until 1935-36, the end of research. However, in the 1929 listing of individuals, Bower is stated as being "Supt. and Treas." The identification as superintendent confirms that it was Louis Bower 1 who was the wood turner among the officers, and it was he who ran the shop.

The above is based on the Philadelphia City Directories and details are given in Appendix H. However, the Directory was an annual publication and these dates may not be completely accurate because the submission date was previous to the year cited and changes are not immediately reflected. Changes in the corporate structure after 1936 have not been researched except as indicated in interviews with Louis Bower 3. He recalls that the Stortz family was bought out and in the 1960's the only other investor was John Mager, the secretary-treasurer. When Mager was very ill in the 1960s, Louis Bower 2 bought his stock and gained complete ownership of the company. Bower plans to verify this by looking at Journals at the office.

Lou Bower Family Biographical Information

Louis Bower 2 was born August 17, 1911, the father of the present Lou Bower 3. The family has a photograph of Louis Frederick Bower (Louis Bower 1) holding his son (Louis Bower 2) as a baby in 1912. Louis Bower 3 was born in 1944. All three men were wood turners and were the active managers of the shop, serving as officers of the corporate entity. Lou Bower remembers that John Mager, who became the secretary-treasurer, served as the bookkeeper and office worker until he died in 1963-4. After this time his mother Dorothy Bower worked in the office, first for two days a week, then full time for five days.

The present Lou Bower 3 took over the shop from his father in 1989, re-incorporating it as Bower, Inc. and trading as John Grass. Louis Bower 2 died in 1990. Louis Bower 3 is the current owner and he ceased active operation in 2003 due to illness. I do not know the present corporate structure. Lou Bower 3 indicates in his conversations that he is the sole owner with his wife, Marcia.

Lou Bower 3 started working at the John Grass Shop in 1962 after graduating from high school. He served in the U. S. Navy from 1964-68 and then returned to work in the shop. He found wood turning suited him because it often was an art and a challenge to make something different from everything else. During production he would finish 15 or 20 items and then work on something else – two or three things a day. The variety attracted him, "not day after day on the same thing. Now, with automation, there are thousands alike, maybe a million pieces." He estimates that he may have designed more than a hundred balusters.

Lou Bower 3 stated that flagpoles were a specialty. For forty years the shop made flagpoles and banner poles for various companies, employing a work force of from ten to twelve men. The poles were made of ash because there was not much breakage. In 1962 they made 1,000 flagpoles a week. A long-time customer, the Detra Flag Company, went out of business 1972-74. This was a major blow to the company and workers went down to six people, and then four. The bulk of the poles were made in two pieces, joined by

brass screw plates, because this was easier to carry around. The longest pole made in one piece was 25 ft. long, made circa 1985. The measurements of the poles were as follows:

Basic Flagpole was 1-1/4 inch diameter at base

Banner Poles were usually 8 ft. - made in two pieces – for schools

3 ft. bottom + 5 ft. = 8 ft. pole

4 ft. bottom + 5 ft. = 9 ft. pole

5 ft. bottom + 5 ft. = 10 ft. pole

An advertisement issued by Harry Grass in 1898 provides details of the flagpoles and flags to go with them and is reproduced in Appendix I.

In 1989 the John Grass Wood Turning Shop operated with Lou Bower 3 as proprietor and four people working for him. An important member of this team was the “sawyer,” an older experienced man skilled in knowledge of wood, its qualities and best use. At this time, the wood turners in the shop had been trained in the Dominican Republic and Cuba. One went back to school and another quit, leaving only two workers in 2002 when Lou Bower had a heart attack. In 2003 the shop ended production after Bower was injured in an accident and the sawyer had a stroke. As a result the shop was closed, much to the sorrow of local architects who for years had relied on John Grass Wood Turning Shop for historical replications of balusters and the tool makers who needed handles.

Lou Bower married Marcia in 1967 and lives in the northeast. They have three daughters and one son. None of the children want to take over the business. He wishes to sell the building and is interested in the proposal to establish the John Grass Wood Turning Shop as an industrial museum.

Product Line of John Grass Wood Turning Co.

The lettering above the entrance to the John Grass Wood Turning Company at 146 North 2nd Street reads: Manufacturer of Wood Poles, Rollers, Handles, Mallets, Mauls, Lignum Vitae Blocks.

Lou Bower 3 described the product line in an interview March 21, 2005:

FOR GENERAL USE

- 1 Balusters – could be thousands of kinds. Lou Bower 3 designed over 100. These were made for all over the country. Porch columns and rails.
- 2 Woodenware – bowls, spoons
- 3 Collection plates
- 4 Police clubs
- 5 Chair spindles and legs
- 6 Lamp bases
- 7 Four poster beds
- 8 Doorknobs
- 9 Handles – tools: ax, chisel, files, screwdrivers, etc.
- 10 Handles – brooms, rakes, drawer pulls
- 11 Gavels for courts (one made of ivory, which was painted black)
- 12 Croquet mallets and balls

- 13 Poles
- 14 Flagpoles – A specialty

FOR INDUSTRIAL USE

- 1 Mauls
- 2 Mallets
- 2 Rollers (for moving heavy weights, such as Navy's depth charges)
- 3 Damage control plugs (e.g. for gas company)

HISTORICAL USE

- 1 Indian Clubs – used in 19th Century physical fitness craze

Operations at the Shop

The basic operations of the company have not differed greatly over the years. An order was placed, an estimated price was given, the wood was selected, the product was manufactured, the order was delivered, an invoice was provided, and payment was made. Often the customer would bring in a sample to be copied, as for balusters. A sign in the office indicates a minimum charge of \$25.00.

The office is at the front of the building at 146 North 2nd Street. At one time an office worker was there, but now Lou Grass, the proprietor, answers the doorbell coming from the shop area. The office contains a large safe, three desks, chairs, a counter and two file cabinets stuffed with records of the business. Throughout the room, along the upper part of the walls, there is an extensive display of samples to be used as patterns if the customers wishes.

The company relied greatly on word-of-mouth to advertise its products, but at times advertised in various ways. A framed letter to the public at the time of its 75th anniversary in 1938 clearly indicates the mind-set of the owners:

JOHN GRASS WOOD TURNING COMPANY
1863 – 1938

Established 1863
Incorporated 1911

75 Years of Continuous Wood Turning

This is our 75th birthday. We are proud of the record our history shows . . . a history marked by thousands of friendships formed through years of satisfactory business dealings.

If you are one of those whose orders made this Anniversary possible, we thank you. We appreciate the business you have given us in the past, and look forward to serving you with the same exacting care throughout the years to come.

If your name is not among those of our many friends, may we suggest you send us a trial order. We would welcome the opportunity to serve you regularly as we have faithfully served our other customers for three-quarters of a century.

Simply telephone Market 0305 or Main 7085. An experienced estimator will call at once.

Grass Superior Wood Turning – Made in America by American Craftsmen

To watch the fulfilling of an order is a true experience of seeing the genius of a master craftsman at work. With a sample of the baluster to be copied, from his pile of stock lumber Lou Bower selected the wood to be used. At the lathe, he fastened the sample in front of him parallel to the square wood block to be turned which was anchored on the lathe. He laid out the lines from the sample/pattern, marking it and using a gauge for the diameter. The idea is to take off the big pieces and shape the wood – that is, to go from the square to the largest diameter and then to the end piece turning. Tapering was done judging by the eye. Under his skilled hands and eyes, the baluster took shape – using hand tools of gouges and chisels and checking measurements by templates and the sample before him, sometimes pausing to sharpen the hand tool. When the product is finished and compared with the sample, it is time to sand the baluster and tidy up. Bower says much of his technique he learned from a German turner when he was fifteen. Master craftsman that he is, Lou Bower “talks” to the wood, and the wood appears to answer him.

The company also makes items that are of practical use and are not in the artistic realm. During its lifetime, John Grass has made millions of tool handles of every description. One long-time customer is the John Stortz Tool Co., which has been in business since 1853. Each tool requires a specially designed handle, such as the straight tool handle for a paint scraper ordered by Stortz. Another little-known tool made by the company is a “hoop driver” used to assemble wooden barrels. This recognition of the quality of work done by John Grass throughout its history continues today within both the architectural and industrial firms with which it has done business.

The workshop on the rear of the first floor of 146 N 2nd Street continues on the second floor is described in detail by John Bowie. See Appendix C for plans of the building. On the first floor there is a turning bench with six work stations, although only two of them now contain a lathe. These are on the window side of the room where the light is best and where the public can watch the turning from outside – to the delight of many young boys who have had that opportunity. The area also contains other machinery including saws, drill presses and a grindstone. Perhaps the most striking thing about the shop is the system of line shafting and belts that is overhead. Originally powered by a steam engine in the basement, this antiquated system is still in use, powered now by a large electric motor in the basement. It is a true link with the past when an operator deftly engages the line shaft to run the machinery. This personalizes the operation as much as the turning.

It is rare that machinery of a by-gone era is preserved except in special interest museums. It is even more rare for these machines to be in operable condition and run by a line shaft and belts. They have required little maintenance, but Lou Bower states that occasionally he oils them. At John Grass, seven of the 24 machines listed by John Bowie bear a date before 1900, the oldest going back to 1870, and the latest dated 1940 – sixty-

five years ago.

Conclusion

The history of the John Grass Wood Turning Company points out the great changes that have taken place in the manufacturing process over the past century and a half. The fact that the structure and machinery are in essentially the same place and condition as when the firm was founded is remarkable. Both the skill and the work-ethic of the men involved are also a part of the story. We are stronger in going ahead if we know where we have been.

The challenge to preserve the John Grass site with all its components is a serious one and is not to be taken lightly. Today's method of computer-controlled mass production of wood turned objects is a far cry from what was the norm at the time when the John Grass Wood Turning Company was a flourishing industry in the Old City District of Philadelphia. Without action at this time, this part of our industrial history will more or less disappear, only to be read about in books.

[To be completed]

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[This material is to be added to report. Some are scanned original documents.]

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – Locations of John Grass Wood Turning Company

APPENDIX B – Deed Abstracts and Insurance Surveys

APPENDIX C – Drawings by John Bowie of John Grass Wood Turning Co.

APPENDIX D – 1801 City Directory Lists

APPENDIX E – Lists of Industries from 1875 Map

APPENDIX F – Lists of Industries from 1897 Map

APPENDIX G – Federal Census Information and Naturalization Papers

APPENDIX H – Chronology from City Directories

APPENDIX I – Flagpole Advertisement