

Midvale Steel Company records

02

Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Jack McCarthy through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories.

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Summary Information

Repository	The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute
Creator	Midvale Steel Company
Title	Midvale Steel Company records
Call number	02
Date [bulk]	1920-1978
Date [inclusive]	1873-1978
Extent	20 linear feet
Language	English
Abstract	<p>Midvale Steel was originally established in the Nicetown neighborhood of North Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1867 by William Butcher under the name Butcher Steel Works. Renamed Midvale Steel Works in 1873, it was one of the main steel suppliers to the United States military from 1875 through World War II and was also where Frederick Taylor developed his theory of scientific management. The Nicetown plant closed in 1976. Midvale Steel Company records, 1873-1978 (bulk 1920-1978), consist of photographs, glass plate negatives, scrapbooks, and printed matter from or relating to Midvale Steel. There is a small amount of manuscript materials, including a company activity log book, 1876-1889, and a notebook from Charles Brinley, 1873.</p>

Biography/History

Midvale Steel operated in the Nicetown neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from 1867 to 1976. The company was established as Butcher Steel Works in 1867 by British immigrant steelmaker William Butcher, with the assistance of iron merchant Philip Justice. Butcher remained president of the company until his death in 1871 when the Steel Works was taken over by the principal stockholders, which included Samuel Huston, who served as the company's president from 1871 to 1873, Philadelphia banker Edward Clark, and William Sellers (1824-1905), a successful local machine tool builder who succeeded Huston as president in 1873. In 1872, the company's name was changed to Midvale Steel Works and that same year Sellers hired chemist Charles August Brinley, who used applied science to make the company's processes more consistent and efficient. Midvale became known for applying a scientific approach to industrial problems, leading the company to a period of prosperity.

Originally founded to produce steel wheels for locomotive cars, in the 1870s and 1880s Midvale expanded its customer base and signed contracts with Baldwin Locomotive and the Pennsylvania Railroad, as well as with John A. Roebling's Sons Company, builders of the Brooklyn Bridge. Additionally, Midvale obtained a contract in 1875 to produce armaments for the United States Navy. Military contracts with the United States Navy and Army would make up a large part of Midvale's business from 1875 to the 1950s. In 1880, the company's name was changed again, to Midvale Steel Company. Sellers remained the company's president until 1887.

In 1878, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915) began working at Midvale as a day laborer. By the time Taylor left Midvale in 1890, he had become chief engineer of the steel works. In the twelve years that he worked at Midvale, Taylor became a pioneer in labor efficiency and conducted studies that led to the development of his philosophy of "scientific management," an influential and controversial theory in the field of industrial engineering often called "Talylorism". Taylorism is a management theory that analyzes and synthesizes workflows in order to improve economic efficiency, with an emphasis on labor productivity. From 1898 to 1901 Taylor worked at Bethlehem Steel, after which he focused on promoting his theory and methods more widely.

In addition to being known as the location of Taylor's initial management experiments, in the late 1890s Midvale Steel became known for hiring a large number of African American workers. At the time, this was unusual in a city where skilled jobs were largely restricted to white workers. The number of African Americans working at Midvale further increased with the plant's expansion during the early 1900s.

In order to meet the demand for steel during World War I, Midvale expanded rapidly. In 1915, a change in ownership and management led to the acquisition of additional steel plants, including Cambria Steel Company (Johnstown, PA) and two other steel companies located near Philadelphia. At this point, Midvale Steel Company became known as Midvale Steel and Ordnance Company. After World War I ended, business slowed dramatically and in 1923 Bethlehem Steel Company acquired the Midvale Steel and Ordnance Company, except for its flagship plant in Nicetown, which reorganized itself as the Midvale Company. At this time, Midvale experimented with and produced new and innovative products. Eventually, Midvale shifted its focus to specialty steel production and became one of the largest

producers of armor plate steel for ships and tanks. The company also produced other parts for ships such as propellers and shafts and marine engines.

Despite these changes at Midvale, the Great Depression affected the company and significantly shrunk its workforce until the late 1930s and 1940s, when World War II brought a sudden increased demand for steel products, especially for the military. The heightened activity at Midvale continued through the duration of World War II. However, as with the period following World War I, the demand for Midvale's products declined after the war ended. In December of 1955, the Heppenstall Steel Company of Pittsburgh, PA merged with the Midvale Company to become Midvale-Heppenstall Company. The Nicetown plant continued in operation until it was closed in 1976.

Bibliography:

Dougherty, Frank. "Forging A Name For Itself Nicetown Plant Answered America's Call For Arms." *Philadelphia Daily News* (Philadelphia, PA), April 29, 1986. Accessed June 3, 2016. http://articles.philly.com/1986-04-29/news/26077462_1_steel-guns-owner.

ExplorePAhistory.com. "Philadelphia [Steel] Historical Marker." Last modified 2011. Accessed June 3, 2016. <http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-24E>.

Spaulding, Harold E. "Nicetown." *Workshop of the World-Philadelphia*. Last modified 2007. Accessed June 3, 2016. <http://www.workshopoftheworld.com/nicotown/nicotown.html>.

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Scope and Contents

This collection consists of photographs, glass plate negatives, scrapbooks, and printed matter from or relating to Midvale Steel. There is a small amount of manuscript materials, including a company activity log book, 1876-1889, and a notebook from Charles Brinley, 1873. Most materials in the collection date from 1920-1978. The collection has been divided into eleven series, described below. A box listing is available on-site.

Series I. Manuscripts consists of technical manuals, booklets, and product pamphlets with specifications, 1914-1930s; handwritten and typed company technical notes and reports, 1919-1921; analysis cards related to the properties of steel; company activity log with orders, 1876-1889; centennial history, 1967, and other histories of the company; report to stockholders, 1939; meeting reports, 1937; work orders, 1949; samples and proofs of annual reports, 1928 and 1938; Midvale Bulletins (company newsletter), 1950s; newspaper clippings and photocopies of articles about the Nicetown plan closing and reopening, 1976-1978; product catalog in Spanish, 1913; information and research notes; and Charles Brinley notebook, 1873.

Series II. Index card collection, prints and negatives consists of 3x5 and 5x7 black and white prints and negatives of the Midvale Steel plant in Nicetown, employees, machinery, and activities, 1930s-1950s. An image index on card stock is also in this series.

Series III. Prints consists of black and white prints, 1890, 1940s-1960s, and scrapbook pages with images depicting machinery, the architecture of the plant, activities and events, employees, and other aspects of Midvale Steel. Some of the prints are 8x10 in size. Photographs in boxes 2 and 3 of this series are organized by subject, person, or event and date from the 1940s to the 1960s. The images in box 4 are unorganized and a majority of images depict machinery or products.

Series IV. Glass plate negatives, 1924-1925, consists of images of people, including trustees, as well as aerial views of the plant.

Series V. Photographs (binders) consists of 13 binders with black and white images depicting the steel plant, employees, machinery, and events and activities, 1926-1953. Some of the photographs include employee names. The images have been indexed.

Series VI. Scrapbooks, 1921-1946, consists of 8 scrapbooks that mostly contain images, but some other types of materials relating to activities at the plant, employees, and other subjects related to Midvale Steel. Several of the photographs are stamped with captions.

Series VII. Scrapbooks consists of scrapbooks with photographs, promotional postcards, corporate ephemera, and scans of printed text and documents related to the company or used for promotional purposes. Some of the scrapbooks had loose photographs, which have been foldered.

Series VIII. Pensioned employee photographs, 1919-1922, includes a couple dozen images of pensioned employees. Information with the photographs includes the employee name, date pensioned, age, reason for pension, last occupation, and number of years of service.

Series IX. Pre-1920 prints, consists of late 19th century and early 20th century prints related to Midvale Steel, as well as a promotional book.

Series X. Advertising prints, 1943-1945, consists of scrapbooks with Midvale product and other advertisements pasted on to the scrapbook pages.

Series XI. Research and reference materials includes research related to Midvale, box listings for the collection, and photograph indices to the collection.

Administrative Information

The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute
Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Jack McCarthy through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's
Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories.

Sponsor

This preliminary finding aid was created as part of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories. The HCI-PSAR project was made possible by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Access Restrictions

Contact The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute for information about accessing this collection.

Processing Information Note

Summary descriptive information on this collection was compiled in 2014-2016 as part of a project conducted by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to make better known and more accessible the largely hidden collections of small, primarily volunteer run repositories in the Philadelphia area. The Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories (HCI-PSAR) was funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

This is a preliminary finding aid. No physical processing, rehousing, reorganizing, or folder listing was accomplished during the HCI-PSAR project.

In some cases, more detailed inventories or finding aids may be available on-site at the repository where this collection is held; please contact The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute directly for more information.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials Note

The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute: William Sellers papers on machinery, 1845-1893.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania: Midvale Steel Company photograph album, circa 1905, D0222.

Controlled Access Headings

Corporate Name(s)

- Midvale Steel and Ordnance Company
- Midvale Steel Company

Geographic Name(s)

- Philadelphia (Pa.)

Personal Name(s)

- Brinley, Charles A. (Charles August), 1847-1919

Subject(s)

- Iron and steel workers
- Steel
- Steel industry and trade