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## 05 West Chester's First Factory Still Stands

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# ***West Chester's First Factory Still Stands***

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When local officials talk about proposals for building, a concept often comes up called "adaptive reuse." That's what occurs when a developer takes an old building and, instead of tearing it down, converts it into something new while retaining the basic structure of the old. It has been a common practice in European cities for decades and is becoming more common in the United States, or at least it is in the East where there are buildings old enough to attract public support for their preservation. For example, the expansion of the West Chester Public Library in 2006 preserved the entire building by enlarging the basement, instead of knocking it down to start over.

Although the motivation may have been different, it appears that the concept of adaptive reuse existed already in West Chester in the 19th century. Although the existence of West Chester's first factory was no secret, its location was something of a mystery and everyone with an interest in local history had assumed that it was demolished in the 19th century. As it turns out, the factory was preserved and remodeled into a row of houses that still stand today.

The historic factory was Enos Smedley's pottery. Smedley moved his pottery-making business to the Borough from Downingtown in 1831, and created a successful business that used clay imported from Philadelphia by wagon and railroad to produce dishes, pots and other utensils that he sold locally. Over the years, several writers have referred to Smedley's pottery as the first manufacturing site in the Borough (other than clothing and blacksmith shops), but no one ever tracked down its precise location. In his book West Chester to 1865: That Elegant & Notorious Place, Doug Harper wrote that it was on the south side of Gay Street west of New Street. That placed it in the 300-block of W. Gay Street in the area called "Pottery Row," but that was all that anyone knew about its location until now.

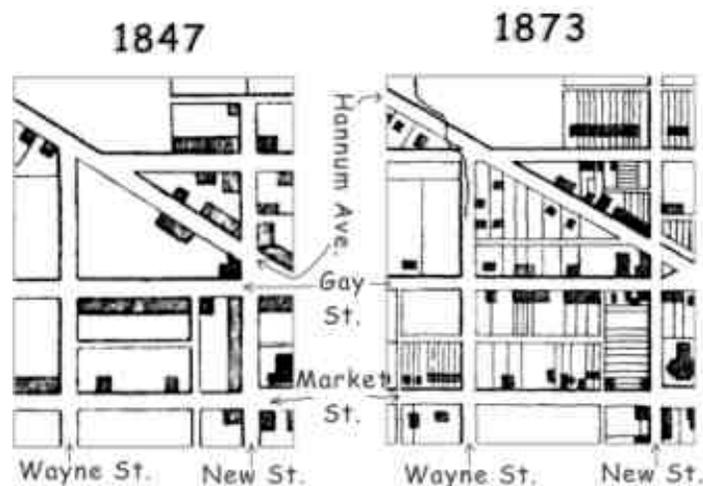
Part of the research involved looking at deeds for all of the properties on the block -- over 600 deeds dating from 1809 to the present. There was such a large number because the lots are so small as they face Gay Street, one of the two oldest streets in the Borough. Although each deed contained a description of the property being sold, as well as the names of the owners of the properties on each side, for the first eighty years, it was rare for a deed to include a house number that could be used to locate it. Instead, they provided descriptions like the following:

*Beginning at the southeast corner land belonging to so-and-so, thence eastwardly along the north side of the road to Jefferis' mill 240 ft 3 inches to a corner of land owned by someone else, thence along the west side of said land northwardly about 288 ft. to the Strasburg Road, thence along the south side of the same westwardly ...*

A number of deeds contained references to Smedley's pottery. By plotting their location with respect to Gay Street, New Street, Wayne Street, Harmony Alley and Potters Alley. Gradually, it became possible to identify the location of the buildings that currently sit on the pottery property. Instead of the bottom of the street near Wayne Street, where an old stream might have served as a source of clay, the pottery was located farther up the hill towards New Street. Eventually, a property description from an 1861 sheriff's sale that helped to locate it precisely, and provided a physical description of the pottery factory itself:

*The improvements are a two-storied brick pottery about 60 1/2 feet front by 22 1/2 feet deep, cellared, and containing clay mill, glazing mill, 3 potters wheels, and scaffolding and shelving for drying purposes; a brick kiln-house attached to said pottery about 25 by 25 feet, containing the latest improved kiln for burning ware; frame shed attached to Pottery and kiln house, a new brick stable and wagon house with hayloft and garners, a frame carriage house with stone foundation and hayloft and well of water and pump.*

A comparison of the dimensions of the pottery and the dimensions placed it at the corner of Potter's Alley and W. Gay Street, in the vicinity of the house currently numbered 314. Confirmation was provided by a newspaper clipping that described how, in 1869, builder Lewis Shields had his workers convert the pottery into three houses. On-site measurements revealed that the oldest parts of the three houses at 314-318 were exactly 22 1/2 feet deep and 60 1/2 feet wide, and after inspecting the brickwork and talking to the owners, it became clear that the three houses were in fact Smedley's pottery.



**The development of E. Gay St. between 1847 and 1873. Shaded rectangles are buildings**

While they are not the oldest building still standing in the Borough, they are probably the earliest example of the adaptive reuse of a building that was originally constructed for a different purpose. And although Washington never slept there, the old pottery is a significant part of the Borough's history, just like the Yearsley property. Local historian Jane Dorchester said it best when she reminded Council that history is not architecture, it's what people do, but that buildings (like many other things) are the evidence of what people did. Council heard her, as well as the issues raised by the McCools, and voted accordingly.