

“A GOOD AND SUBSTANTIAL BRICK BUILDING”: THE MONONGAHELA TEXTILE COMPANY BUILDING, 1896 -- 1998

By
Robert W. Novak

For one hundred years, a solitary, three-story brick building occupied what had previously been listed as “Lot 14” by the Morgantown Building and Investment Company. Today an empty lot, the original building sat along the Monongahela River with its northern boundary as Fourth Street; the southern was property of West Virginia University, and its eastern was the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad track.¹ During its existence, the building grew additions as successive owners and industries occupied the building. A single addition is all that remains of what had been part of decades of Morgantown’s industrial past. Growing from humble, yet tragic, origins as a small textile mill to housing a still-recognizable moniker of the hand-blown glass industry, the buildings that occupied Lot 14 exemplify the industrial trajectory of Morgantown’s “Beechurst Addition” and Seneca neighborhood.

On January 1, 1896, Lot 14 was purchased from the Morgantown Building and Investment Company where the Monongahela Textile Company proposed to “locate, maintain and operate . . . for the manufacture of woolen goods and woolen fabrics a factory.”² J. D. Sands, president of the Textile Company, was a Pennsylvanian who hired prominent Morgantown attorney Joseph Morland, providing him with power of attorney to discuss the terms with the Building and Investment Company.³ No doubt Morland knew many of the members of the Building and Investment Company, as men such as Richard E. Fast, Col. E. M. Grant, Dr. I. C. White, and George C. Sturgiss were all prominent citizens in Morgantown and were shareholders.⁴ The two parties agreed upon a payment of one dollar for the parcel of land and the Investment Company would invest \$25,000 immediately so that the building could be built and operations begun. By fronting the start-up costs for the building, the Investment Company required that construction begin by April 1, 1896, and be completed by the end of the year. The structure was to be “a good and substantial brick building . . . not less than forty feet in width and not less than one hundred feet in length,

and three stories in height.” Once the building was completed and inspected, the textile mill owners would receive the deed for their safekeeping. The owners complied with the specifications set forth by the Investment Company and began experimenting with machinery, training new employees, and producing woolen cloth by the middle of 1897. Their first large shipment would leave Morgantown on Friday, January 28, 1898.⁵



Photo taken before the Union Stopper Company takeover; the building sits just left of center. Photo courtesy of the West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries.

The people of Morgantown were thrilled to have the textile mill in their city. With the mill came industrialization, making theirs a town “on the upgrade.” On Friday, January 28, 1898, the *Wheeling Intelligencer* posted a small story in the middle of page six: “Why Morgantown Rejoices.” The story was taken from Morgantown’s local newspaper, the *Post*, that provided the reader with a view of the wharf that bordered the textile company. The writer noticed twenty large cases filled with blankets that had just been completed at the textile mill. The cases required “half a dozen stout deck hands” to carry them aboard the steamer *Blaine* bound for Pittsburgh by the end of that week. The author mentioned that, two years before, Morgantown did not have the woolen mill nor the “glass plant”; neither did it have gas and electric lights, railroads, and steamboat travel up the river – “But that era has passed!”⁶

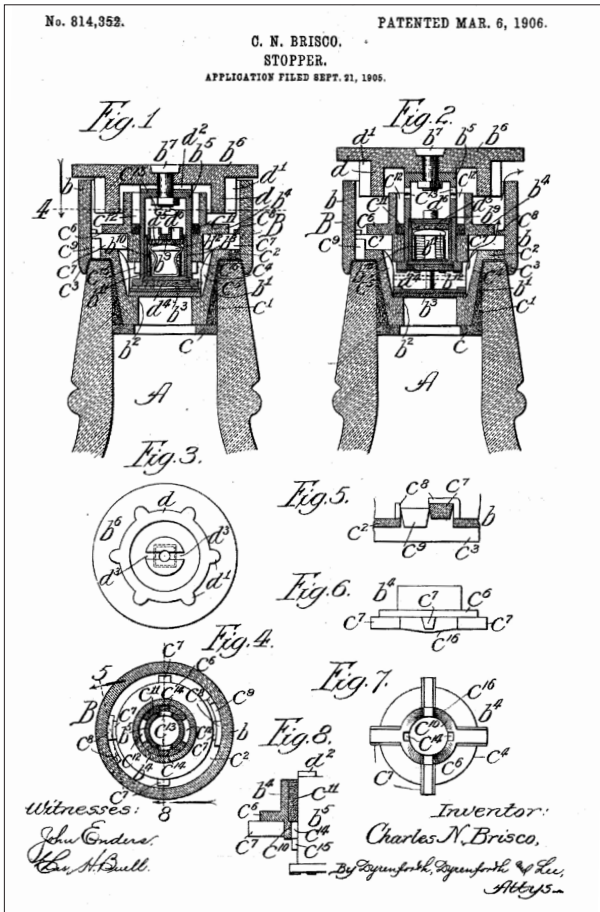
Their excitement would be short-lived. Less than two weeks later, at 11:00 p.m. on February 9, 1898, a fire erupted in the Chautauqua Lake Ice Company – a six-story cold storage

warehouse on the wharves along the Allegheny River in Pittsburgh.⁷ The cause of the fire was unknown, but the blaze consumed most of the building. By 11:15 p.m., 8,000 barrels of whiskey from the Economy Distilling Company exploded, blowing out the southern wall of the warehouse that ran along Mulberry Alley (modern-day Mulberry Way). Unfortunately, the city's firefighting crews, policemen, newspaper reporters, and owners of the houses near the warehouse were all standing in this alley and received the brunt of the explosion. Eighteen people were killed by the blast, including captain of the police, "Captain Berry." Many more were injured. The blast caused the fire to spread to the W. A. Hoeveler & Co. warehouse that sat opposite the Chautauqua Lake building and was very quickly believed to be beyond saving. It is unknown which of the two warehouses held the twenty cases of blankets that had recently been sent to Pittsburgh, but the Monongahela Textile Company's name was listed among a few other companies as those who had "lost the most" – 125,000 pounds of wool. While the reaction to the fire in Morgantown is not recorded, there is little doubt that a wave of despair must have covered the city that not two weeks before was so excited to have their first shipment of wool from their evolving town sent north. Although this was a major setback, the company still clung to the banks of the Monongahela River for five more years before being forced to close its doors on January 1, 1903, no doubt in part because of the losses from the 1898 warehouse fire.⁸

On March 26, 1903, the deed to the Monongahela Textile Company was signed over to the Bank of the Monongahela Valley. A lawsuit was settled in November 1903 against the woolen mill where the bank purchased the land, buildings, and "appurtenances" for \$20,000.⁹ The building then sat empty and abandoned for two years until the Union Stopper Company came to Morgantown. Incorporated by New Englanders Howard H. Nieman, Thomas L. Waters, John Z. Middleton, and by R. H. Waddell of New York and A. A. Kelley of Montclair, New Jersey, the men bought the land and buildings for \$17,500 from the Bank of the Monongahela Valley on March 8, 1905. Interestingly this deed includes an engine and "peiler" that were left behind by the Textile Company, perhaps equipment that could not be moved or sold.¹⁰ The company claimed that its "objects and purposes" were to "manufacture, buy, sell export, import, and generally deal in" glass, glass bottles,

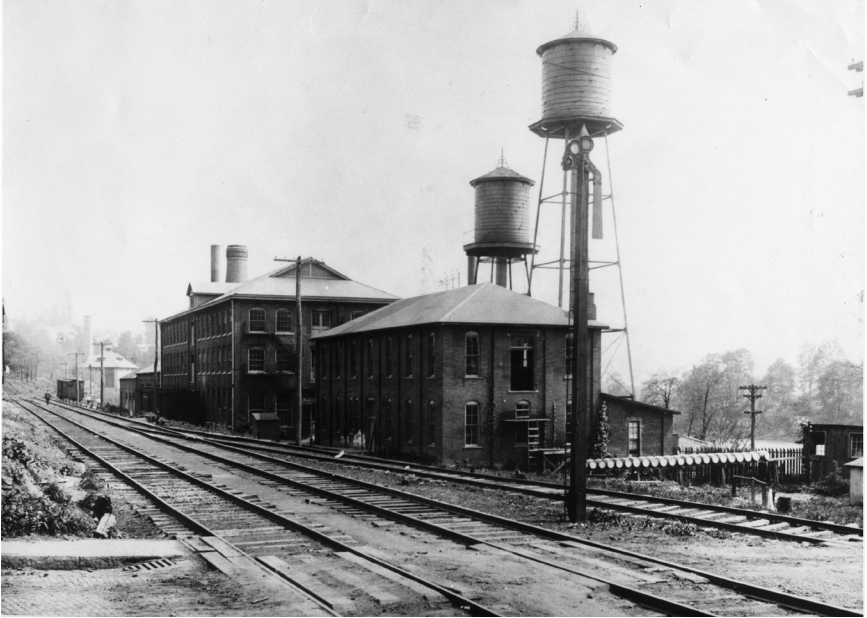
cement, and chemicals used in pharmaceuticals.¹¹

The president of the plant, Charles N. Brisco, filed for a patent not six months after the company acquired the old textile mill building; he received confirmation of the patent on March 6, 1906. In the long and complicated application, Brisco explained that his patented stopper was an improvement on previous stoppers because of a spring-loaded top that was released by the pressure of the liquid inside, allowing the bottle's contents to pour out, but it did not allow the bottle to be refilled, and it could be used on any bottle.¹² This stopper was used in many of the company's products, even going so far as to have a "Special Stopper Department" headed by John L. Sellers.¹³



President Charles N. Brisco's drawing included in his patent. Image courtesy of the U.S. Patent Office.

In 1906 the Union Stopper Company hired a new manager, Percy J. Beaumont. Beaumont was an Englishman whose glassmaking career began when he immigrated to the United States with his sister in 1882; she married Harry Northwood, who had worked at the Northwood Glass Company in Kingswinford, England. Northwood trained Percy Beaumont who, by 1890, opened his own glassblowing company in Martins Ferry, Ohio; it moved to Grafton, West Virginia in 1902. By 1906, Percy had accepted the job at the Union Stopper Company.¹⁴



This was probably taken ca. 1920, shortly after the name was changed to Beaumont Glass Company. Photo courtesy of the West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries.

Near the same time, in 1908, the National Child Labor Committee hired Lewis W. Hine to investigate and photograph child labor conditions throughout the country.¹⁵ That same year, Hine visited the Union Stopper Company where he took a number of pictures of the conditions inside the plant.



Photo by Lewis Hine from inside the Union Stopper Company. Upton [sic] Stopper Co., Morgantown, W. Va. Plenty of Small Boys The one by the machine is a "catching up boy He seemed about 10 yrs. old. Oct. 1908." Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Records of the National Child Labor Committee.



Photo by Lewis Hine from inside the Union Stopper Company. Morgantown, WV Oct. 1908 Girls, boys and men, polishing and wrapping, working together: morals in glass factory are proverbially bad... Several young girls and many small boys working here. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Records of the National Child Labor Committee.

By 1913, Percy Beaumont was reporting over \$150,000 in annual profit and the company employed 175 people – 50 percent men, 30 percent boys, and 20 percent girls, and with over 40 percent of the total workforce being “skilled.”¹⁶ As the company became a staple of Morgantown’s glass industry, Beaumont built successive additions onto the building through his tenure as president. By 1918, the company’s name had changed to Beaumont Glass Company.¹⁷



Union Stopper, Now Beaumont Company, Seneca, Morgantown, W. Va. This was probably taken after the Percy Beaumont takeover, showing the expansion along the riverfront. Photo from the West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries.

According to sources describing the glassmaking industry in the 1920s through the 1960s, the Beaumont Company “was known for its light shades, inkwells, and light globes,” producing glass throughout the Great Depression and becoming one of the county’s premier glass lighting and light-fixture manufacturers. Percy died in 1947, leaving the Beaumont Company to his grandson Arthur B. Beaumont, who served as manager until 1962.¹⁸

The company remained in Beaumont hands until 1988 when it was bought by Michael Carlow, who also owned the L. E. Smith Glass Company of Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania. Carlow was accused of running a check-kiting scheme in the early 1990s. In 1996 he was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison.¹⁹ While the Smith Glass Company is still producing glass today, Beaumont was not so fortunate as it was forced to close its doors in 1991 because it could not pay any of its loans, in part, no doubt, because it was one of the many victims of Carlow’s check-kiting scheme. Henry Clew, then president of the Beaumont Company, defaulted on a \$355,000 promissory note granted to the company by the One Valley Bank of Morgantown. At 10:00 a.m. on June 30, 1994, the Beaumont Company building and all its contents were sold to SME Industries, today a steel contracting firm, for \$625,000. Four days later, SME sold the property to the Frank V. Carlow Irrevocable Trust for the price they had paid for it just a few days before. The Trust

sold the property again one year later for just \$10.²⁰

It is unknown why the land changed hands so many times, but one explanation is contamination of the soil from the chemicals and harmful substances used in the glassmaking process at the site for nearly one hundred years. In 1989 the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center conducted testing on the soil along the river and found no significant amounts of harmful chemicals except in the soil underneath the Etching Room at the Beaumont factory. The Beaumont Company began remediation work and found large amounts of lead and twelve drums worth of hazardous material that had to be removed. By 1991 the cullet pile (refuse glass that is too small to be recycled) and the Etching Room had become serious environmental and conservation concerns, bringing pressure from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other organizations. In 1996 the EPA Criminal Investigation Division conducted more testing and, rather than try to save the building and its contents, settled for demolition of the main building, which was carried out in 1998.



Image taken by activist George S. Bedell of all that remained of the main building at the Beaumont Glass Company after its demolition in 1998. Photo courtesy of George S. Bedell.

Further tests were conducted in 2000 of the additions that were built by the Beaumont Company on the northern end of the property (where the cullet pile and Etching Room were located) and excavated more lead and cadmium from around the cullet pile site.²¹ While it was suggested in 2004 to demolish the building at the northern end of the property to make way for a recreational park, further tests showed high levels of arsenic, antimony, cadmium, lead, and “polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons,” all of which tested in such high levels that remediation costs soared above \$200,000.²²

From promising textile mill to contaminated Brownfield site, Lot 14 has served as a prominent Seneca landmark for over one hundred years. The businesses that occupied the three-story brick building employed hundreds of Morgantown’s skilled and unskilled laborers and provided opportunity for investment and financial gain for men like Percy Beaumont. Even within the last decade, some of Morgantown’s investment companies and university students have tried to figure out a way to use such a prime piece of real-estate for parks and recreational areas, but the contamination of the soil and its location surrounded by buildings and the Personal Rapid Transit system guideway has thwarted them at every turn. For now Lot 14 will remain an empty lot, but Seneca should not forget one of its most important industrial sites.

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ENDNOTES

¹This empty lot is the overgrown lot next to the Surplus City, behind the Beech View Place apartment complex.

²Monongalia County County Clerk, Deed Book 43, 415.

³Monongalia County County Clerk, Record of Corporations vol. 1, 203-204

⁴Monongalia County County Clerk, Record of Corporations vol. 1, 88-89; and Earl L. Core, *The Monongalia Story: A Bicentennial History*, vol. 4: *Industrialization* (Parsons, W. Va.: McClain Printing Company, 1982), 164.

⁵Monongalia County County Clerk, Deed Book 43, 425; and "Why Morgantown Rejoices," *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, January 28, 1898.

⁶"Why Morgantown Rejoices," *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, January 28, 1898.

⁷Interestingly this is now the site of the Senator John Heinz History Center, and one Pittsburgh newspaper calls the building a nearly exact replica to the warehouse that originally stood on the property (Lillian Thomas, "Fire, Ice: A Chilling Tale," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 3, 2002).

⁸Core, *The Monongalia Story*, vol. 4, 289; The explosion was covered nationally throughout February 1898. A few examples are: "Fire Fatalities," *Wheeling Intelligencer*, February 10, 1898; "Blown Up," *Topeka State Journal*, February 10, 1898; and "In the Morgue," *Los Angeles Herald*, February 10, 1898.

⁹Monongalia County County Clerk, Deed Book 72, 179-180. The rewritten deed seems to have a mistake for the year of the chancery court case where it says "November 1903" "in a suit in chancery therein pending." If the deed was signed in March 1903, there should not be any mention of the chancery court case; however the later deed to the Union Stopper Company includes the same November 1903 date. Also the records of the lawsuit do exist, but court records were being moved to a new building at the time of this research, making access to them a near impossibility. Future iterations of this research will include records of the court proceedings.

¹⁰Monongalia County County Clerk, Deed Book 82, 466-467; and Record of Corporations, vol. 3, 70; and "The Fabulous Monster: Owens Bottle Machine," Corning Museum of Glass, www.cmog.org/article/fabulous-monster-owens-bottle-machine, accessed April 26, 2016. A "Peiler" was a machine developed by Karl Peiler in 1915 that collected a gob of glass that was the correct size into the mold, making the use of human glassblowers in this dangerous process unnecessary.

¹¹Monongalia County County Clerk, Record of Corporations, vol. 3, 69-70.

¹²Charles N. Brisco, "United States Patent: 814352 A - Stopper, March 6, 1906. www.google.com/patents/US814352, accessed April 8, 2016; and Core, *The Monongalia Story*, vol. 4, 314.

¹³Core, *The Monongalia Story*, vol. 4, 314.

¹⁴Beaumont Glass Company Bio, Glass Lovers Glass Database, estatesalestore.com/gallery2/main.php?g2_itemId=1817, accessed April 8, 2016.

¹⁵Barbara Orbach Natanson, *Introduction – National Child Labor Committee Collection*, Web, /www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/nclc/background.html?loclr=flik, accessed April 8, 2016.

¹⁶Ray V. Hennen, David B. Reger, and I. C. White, "Union Stopper Company," in *West Virginia Geological Survey: Marion, Monongalia, and Taylor Counties (Wheeling, W.Va.: Wheeling News Litho. Co., 1913), 20-21.*

¹⁷Also known simply as the Beaumont Company to Morgantown locals and the company's employees.

¹⁸"Percy John Beaumont," *Find-A-Grave Database*, www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Beaumont&GSiman=1&GScid=1646496&GRid=141287759&, accessed April 8, 2016.

¹⁹Len Boselovic, "Pittsburgh White-Collar Criminal Michael Carlow Sentenced," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 15, 2013. Carlow was convicted again in 2013 for tax evasion and was sentenced to another thirty-five months in prison.

²⁰Monongalia County County Clerk, *Deed Book 1093, 594-598; Deed Book 1101, 632; and Deed Book 1133, 674.* Aside from Carlow's check-kitting, the employees of Beaumont Glass went on strike in 1991, most likely due to wages owed to them by Clew.

²¹These buildings are the Surplus City store today.

²²M. Jualiana Lloreda, "Beaumont Glass Morgantown West Virginia: Sustainable Urban Redevelopment through Interpretive Design, Brownfield Reclamation, and Mixed Uses," (master's thesis, West Virginia University, 2013), 34-40. This master's thesis did fantastic work in rendering 3-D models of the site, using the information provided by the Sanborn maps and is a fantastic resource for understanding the sprawling nature of the property's industrial past.