

# Brewing in Norristown, Pennsylvania

By Rich Wagner

## "Should we have a brewery tour?" Is that even a question?

When asked, "Should we have a brewery tour?" I quickly assured the local chapter of the Society for Industrial Archeology that a tour of the new Von C Brewery in Norristown was not only possible, but that we could also see Stony Creek Office Center which stands as a shining example of preservation of Adam Scheidt's Valley Forge Brewery.

Descendants of Christian Schmidt, the Von Czoernigs were the last family members involved with the Schmidt brewery before it closed in 1987. The current generation recently returned the family to its brewing roots.

We could certainly get a tour at Von C, but my first thought for an SIA tour was to start at the Scheidt brewery complex which was a five-minute drive away. It was the largest brewery just outside Philadelphia and was Schmidt's Plant #2 for 20 years.

I first photographed the Scheidt brewery in August of 1981 and again six years later after the renovation. It was the first stop on the Philadelphia Brewery Tour that I conducted for the BCCA Convention in 2010.

It was time to revisit Norristown, so I returned to photograph the site and spent a few days at the historical society, re-examined my own files and searched what was available online.

Collectors continue to be a valuable resource and when I ran into Jeff Bednar at a breweriana show he told me a friend had an office in Scheidt's 1906 office building. Jeff had contacted me back in the mid-nineties when he was writing his masters thesis on brewery preservation. I knew he had an interest, so I kept bugging him and about a month or so later we got the "nickel tour" of the office, and the magnificent 1938 brew house!



Wagner 1981



Wagner 1981

Glass block tower on the side of the building illuminated the reception area on the first floor and the brew house and mezzanine on the second and third floors.



Wagner 1981



Wagner 1981

The remains of the Schmidt Plant #2 in 1981



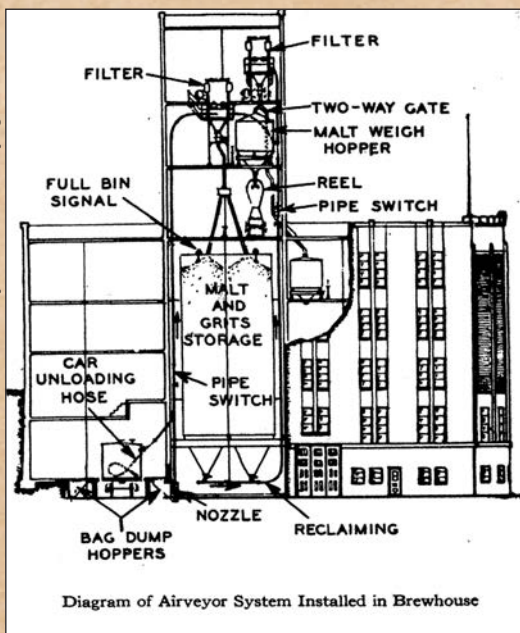
Evans Collection



Wagner 2010

The porcelain sign from the family crest on the side of the building was recently struck by lightning. Photo on right is from the BCCA Convention Tour in 2010.





Facing the front of the Scheidt brewery, the 4-story structure on the left contained a "6-Pak" of malt silos. A pneumatic system could empty a rail car in four hours.

Norristown is the seat of Montgomery County and is located twenty miles upstream from Philadelphia on the Schuylkill (aka SKOO-Kill) River. The Schuylkill Canal was completed in 1829 providing water transportation for coal from Pottsville to Philadelphia. Railroads soon followed and Norristown became a center for commerce and industry.

### Scheidt Brewery

In 1866 the Moeschlin Brothers established a brewery at Marshall St. just upstream from A.R. Cox on Stony Creek. Charles Scheidt purchased the brewery four years later and, as the story goes, brewed beer for his saloon across the street. He probably purchased his malt from Cox. His brother Adam came from Germany in 1878 and became partner then took over six years later when Charles died.

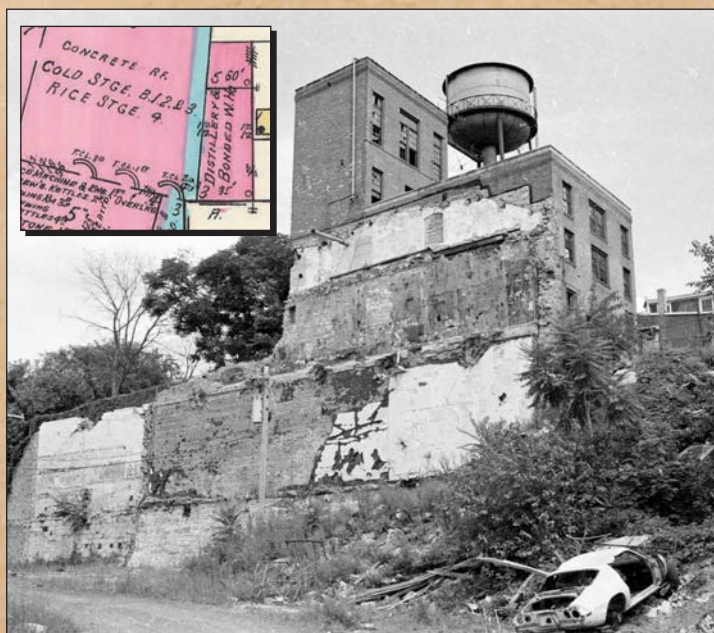
A little further upstream Stony creek was dammed to create a millrace for a flour mill located across Marshall Street from the brewery. The resulting pond was a convenient source of ice to provide refrigerated storage for the brewery.



Von Mechow Collection  
(sodasandbeers.com)

### A.R. Cox Brewery

Morgan James and David Bryan established a brewery and malt house at Main and Markley Streets in 1831, two years later it was James & Eschbach. It was a good location with a nearby canal, and later direct rail service for handling bulk shipments of barley and malt. In 1860 Eschbach formed a partnership with Abraham R. Cox which lasted for a decade when Cox became proprietor.



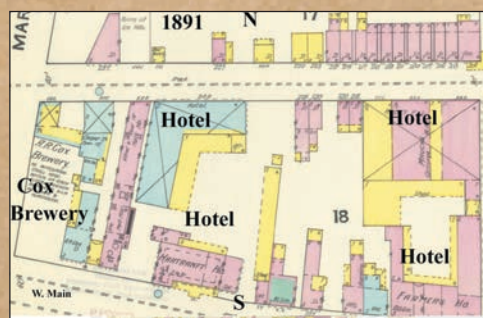
Distillery and bonded warehouse. Scheidt installed a dealcoholizing apparatus for making near beer during prohibition. They built a still and bonded warehouse building at that time. (Inset: 1920 Sanborn Map)

Adam Scheidt purchased Cox's brewery in order to expand and ran it for five years. He built a modern brewery complex in 1894 and closed the Cox plant. When prohibition came in 1920 production stood at nearly 100,000 barrels a year.

Adam Scheidt died right after beer came back in 1933 a year when they produced nearly a quarter million barrels. His son Karl, a Wharton School graduate, brought production to a half million barrels in just over a decade. The company adapted to the post WWII business climate with an emphasis on packaging and advertising - they sponsored radio and television broadcasts of the Phillies and the A's home and away games - and their territory covered a dozen states or more.

Schmidt's purchased the brewery in 1954 and ran it for twenty years, adding 500K barrels of production to their capacity.

The Cox brewery and malt house had four hotels within a block to supply with beer. (1891 Sanborn Map)





# The Norristown, Pennsylvania Tour

Historical Society of Montgomery County



Scheidt built a modern brewery in 1894 that included a large refrigerated stock house and boiler house.



Razing the 1894 brew house in 1975.

Historical Society of Montgomery County

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1906 Adam Scheidt Office building.



Jeff's friend Sean, in Adam Scheidt's office.

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1906 Hexagonal "tower" housed the lab.

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Adam Scheidt's office backed up to a door leading to this balcony from which polka bands performed overlooking a hall with two fire places.



Observant people on the tour noticed the vanity manhole cover.

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## The Tour

We had perfect weather for the tour as we gathered in front of Scheidt's magnificent 1906 office. There, carved in stone: Adam Scheidt Brewing Co., just over a balcony from which Adam Scheidt himself, could gaze down at Marshall Street.

As we walked in towards the complex, a beautiful wrought iron fence guarded us from the precipice of the creek bank. We saw the tasting room/executive dining room which was built to resemble an English Tudor tavern after repeal. It straddled the mill race, affording those inside a splendid view of the valley created by Stony Creek.

Past the tavern there was a stone building off to the right which probably started as an ice house, but what beckoned us was a magnificent "early modern" brewery building with its beautiful tower of block glass rising four stories. And that was just the side of the building!

We walked around and saw the building from the front with its giant portico and the central part of the building rising two stories above the rest. To our left was a four-story building that once housed six malt silos.

The large parking lot behind us was space formerly occupied by the 1894 brew, stock and boiler houses, and the assortment of buildings: office, stables, bottling house, and warehouse. What surprised me was that Scheidt had built a large stock house in 1924 in the midst of prohibition. There are remnants of a wall right next to the 1956 stock house that still stands.

From there we crossed the creek over a bridge. To the right there was once the pipeline that transported beer across the creek to the bottling house. We walked down the drive and could see the modern bottling house which had been built in 1914 as well as the huge addition made during post-war expansion in 1948.

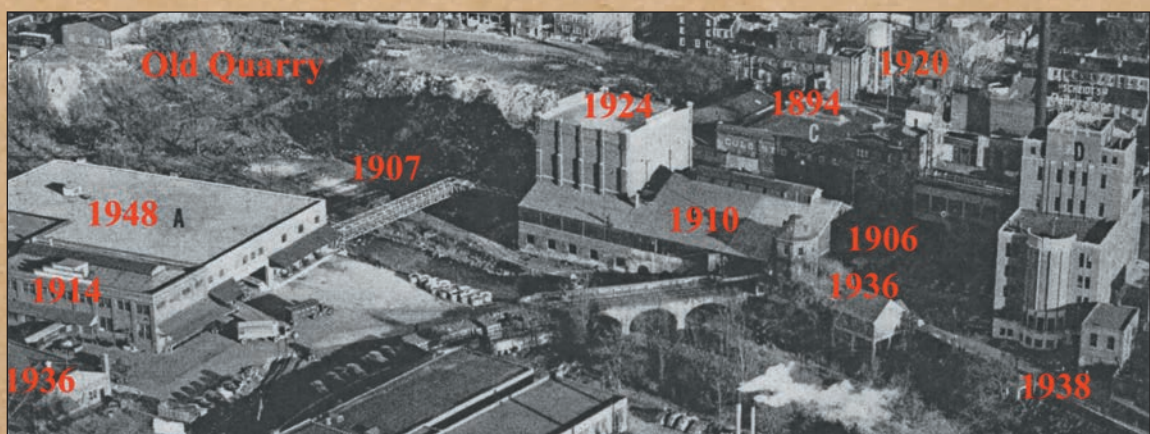


Scheidt's English Tutor Tavern

The 1938 Brew House designed by Harley Ellington & Day of Detroit increased production capability by 33%.



The 1916 Bottling house was executed by Peuckert & Wunder, Philadelphia Architects and Engineers. Post-WWII additions greatly expanded the footprint of the building. Terra cotta signage and figure.



Here is my reconstruction of the plant complex.



## The Norristown, Pennsylvania Tour

### The Tour (cont'd)

We walked around to see the front of the bottling house, now a U-Haul storage facility. The large garage and paint shop off to the left was built in 1936 to service the fleet. And as we looked back, perched on the hill, was that beautiful 1938 brew house gleaming down at us from above.

Greg Evans joined us on the tour. He's a breweriana collector who I've gotten to know on Facebook. He put me in touch with the property manager for the site who told me that the complex is up for sale again.

### Brewing in Norristown Today: Von C Brewing Company.

It was a short drive to Norristown's current brewery which made quite a splash as Breweries in Pennsylvania's "Best New Brewery 2021" winner. We were met by **Rick Von Czoernig**, who pointed out during his introduction that his son had just joined the team, making it a seventh generation brewing family.

They are located in a portion of what had been a large knitting mill with a high ceilings and large windows providing natural light.

The brew house is a 40-barrel Pub System. That and all the tankage was purchased used. There is also a 3-barrel pilot brewery.

A mobile canning company that rents space in the brewery takes care of packaging, and of course there is a keg line.

In the short time they've been open, Von C has packed the house with a full schedule of events and established a substantial number bar and restaurant accounts. The beer lineup is extensive, but my personal favorite is O.G. Pils, made with the original Schmidt's recipe.

Von C has hosted two of my slideshows: one on the Schmidt's brewery and the other on Scheidt. Larry Handy organized breweriana shows around each presentation.



A large knitting mill was subdivided, providing space for Von C Brewing Co.

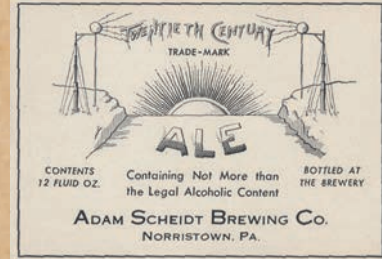
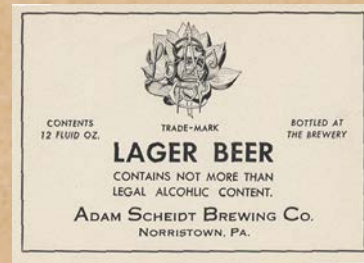
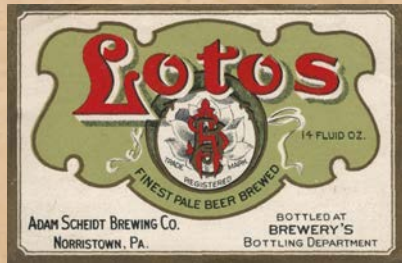


Rick Von Czoernig was our tour guide.





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