

Research question: How did the physical plant of the Gorham Company change over time? When and why did the Gorham manufacturing buildings get demolished?

The Gorham Manufacturing Company complex, formerly located at 333 Adelaide Avenue, dominated the physical landscape of the Elmwood section of Providence from its construction in 1890 until its demolition in 1997. Even now, in its absence, the complex exerts a powerful influence over the community, by way of the sustained environmental damage created by its operation.

The business that would eventually give rise to this complex began its life as a small jeweler's shop founded in 1818 by Jabez Gorham, Jr. and located at 56 Benefit Street.¹ By 1831, Gorham had expanded his business to include the manufacture of silver spoons; in partnership with Henry Webster, Gorham and Webster began operation at 12 Steeple Street in Providence.² At the time of Gorham and Webster's founding, all silversmithing was done by hand, but mechanization was gradually incorporated as sales grew and technology became increasingly available. The company was incorporated in Rhode Island in 1863, and by this time, Gorham had transformed into a complex of workshops, furnaces, and forges, with renowned gold- and silver-smithing operations.³ By 1868, a mere five years later, Gorham was grossing \$1 million in sales annually.⁴ Gorham's operations continued to expand over the next several decades – new departments manufacturing statuary and memorial works in silver, gold, brass, bronze, stone, and wood, coupled with new technologies in the form of steam engines which “powered machines for rolling, shearing, punching, shaping, embossing, dye stamping; for lathes, drills, planing machines; and for the foundry,” necessitated new facilities.⁵ As a result, plans were made to build “the largest and most modern plant in the world for fine silverwares.”

This new plant began to take shape between Mashapaug Pond and Adelaide Avenue soon after William Crins was named president of Gorham in 1888. The site, which would eventually expand to over thirty-seven acres, was deemed an ideal location, thanks to its proximity to both roads and railways.⁶ The site's main complex, consisting of an interconnected group of fourteen buildings, was built to face the railroad tracks to its east, which ran parallel to a dirt driveway that acted as the primary access road.⁷ Completed in 1890 and based on the design of Frank Perry Sheldon, a prominent mill architect at the time⁸, the plant opened as “the most modern and

¹ “Gorham Mill Complex.” *Ten Most Endangered Properties wiki*, Providence Preservation Society, 2010. 5 October 2011. <http://wiki.ppsri.org/tiki-index.php?page=Gorham+Mill+Complex>

² “Gorham Silver,” Rhode Island Art in Ruins, 2011. 4 October 2011. <http://artinruins.com/arch/?id=historical&pr=gorham> Excerpted from: Erik Carlson, Erik Gould, and Joshua Safdie. *Gorham Documentation Project, for the City of Providence Department of Planning and Development and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission*. 4 October 2011. <http://artinruins.com/arch/?id=historical&pr=gorham>

³ Gary Kulik, Julia C. Bonham, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, *Historic American Engineering Record. Rhode Island: An inventory of historical engineering and industrial sites*. (Washington: Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, *Historic American Engineering Record*, 1978) 186.

⁴ “Gorham Silver.”

⁵ Kulik 186.

⁶ Charles Hope Carpenter. *Gorham Silver: 1831-1981*. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1982) 203.

⁷ “Gorham Silver.”

⁸ “Gorham Mill Complex.”

efficient in the world for the making of silverwares and bronzes.”⁹ The complex’s orderly, E-shaped¹⁰ layout was typical of nineteenth century industrial complexes, and was comprised of over thirty-five two- and three-story buildings¹¹ with segmental-arch windows and flat roofs.¹² The majority of the structures were built on steel frames with concrete foundations;¹³ some were adorned with decorative elements including “ivy and Victorian gingerbread.”¹⁴ The metal foundry at Gorham’s new facility was one of the largest in the world of its kind, consisting of over 460,000 square feet of working space.¹⁵ Gorham opened an expanded bronze division on the site in 1894, casting both statues and ornaments;¹⁶ a large bronze statue of Vulcan soon fronted the complex,¹⁷ visually asserting Gorham’s status as both a titan and an innovator in its field. And while the complex gained recognition for the tremendous size of its metalwork facilities, it came to be known as well for the wide range of other facilities erected on the site.

Gorham’s large network of buildings allowed for completely integrated manufacturing, from sterling-alloy melting facilities to a pressroom where flatware and hollowware were stamped. The complex’s center building alone housed the offices, designing rooms, a library, even a museum containing plaster casts, originals, and electrotype reproductions of European and American silver¹⁸ – all within “a handsome three-story office building with a Romanesque entrance, uniformed brick cornices, and window sills with granite trim.”¹⁹ Many of the complex’s other features expanded upon this idea of self-sufficiency and integration, boasting a fire department, an “electric light plant,” an in-house photographic studio, and a building where the wood cases for silverware were made.²⁰ Some of the plant’s architectural additions, however, were more idiosyncratic – a “colonial revival casino” chief among them.²¹ The casino, originally constructed in 1895, was expanded in 1906 to include a dining room and recreation center for workers. Gorham thus became the only large Providence firm of its time to engage in “welfare work” among its employees.²² By the turn of the twentieth century, the success of Gorham’s new manufacturing complex had placed the company in a position to further expand.

In the 1900s, Gorham began to purchase other American silversmiths to consolidate its control over the silver industry, and in 1905, the company demonstrated its power by erecting a new building designed by Stanford White at 36th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York.²³ During World War I, some of the manufacturing complex’s facilities were directed towards making munitions, primarily for France and Russia,²⁴ while the 1920s saw the company further consolidate and expand under the leadership of Edmund C. Mayo.²⁵ The Gorham Manufacturing Company purchased holding company The Silversmiths Company and merged its subsidiaries

⁹ Carpenter 203.

¹⁰ Kulik 186.

¹¹ “Gorham Mill Complex.”

¹² Kulik 186.

¹³ “Gorham Silver.”

¹⁴ Bob Wyss, “Lost Luster: Once one of the greatest makers of silver products in the world, Gorham Manufacturing faces an uncertain future.” *Providence Journal*, 14 April 2002. 5 October 2011.

<http://www.projo.com/words/st061302a.htm>

¹⁵ “Gorham Mill Complex.”

¹⁶ Wyss, “Lost Luster.”

¹⁷ Kulik 186.

¹⁸ Carpenter 203.

¹⁹ “Gorham Mill Complex.”

²⁰ Carpenter 203.

²¹ “Gorham Mill Complex.”

²² Kulik 187. Further information on the casino as “welfare work” can be found in Appendix B.

²³ Wyss, “Lost Luster.”

²⁴ Carpenter 253.

²⁵ Wyss, “Lost Luster.”

between 1923 and 1925; as before, the Adelaide Avenue complex remained the company's center.²⁶ Gorham lost money only one year during the Great Depression,²⁷ but World War II forced the company to undertake drastic changes in its operations. A 1941 government order prohibited the use of copper in making civilian goods; consequently, Gorham ceased the manufacture of bronze and brass goods as well as all plated wares. The company's bronze division was converted entirely to war work, along with the majority of the silver division.²⁸ Throughout the duration of the war, Gorham manufactured millions of 40mm shell cases for the Army and Navy,²⁹ as well as such diverse items as small arms parts, torpedo components, and tank bearings. For its war production efforts, Gorham and its employees were thrice awarded the Army-Navy Award for High Achievement in the Production of War Materials.³⁰ In the post-war era, Gorham continued to expand its silverware and bronze acquisitions, and made new diversifying acquisitions including a paper company and a pen company. By 1967, Gorham had grown to twenty-four hundred employees and \$40 million in sales.³¹ That same year, Gorham – itself a rather large conglomerate by this time – was purchased by Providence-based corporation Textron, one hundred and thirty-six years after its founding. This would be a pivotal moment for the company.

Following the Textron merger, Gorham's production initially remained centered at the Adelaide Street complex. The facilities there hosted expansion into chinaware, crystal, collectibles, giftwares, and jewelry, while stainless steel and pewter flatware and brass and pewter hollowware patterns were added to the company's traditional silver, sterling silver, and electroplated wares.³² In part because of its rapid expansion into new fields, the Textron era came to be associated with a general reduction in the quality of Gorham's products; at the same time, the industry was rocked by soaring silver prices and a declining demand for fine silverwares. Jobs, especially for skilled silversmiths, dwindled; by 1985, there were only six hundred and thirty-five workers left at the complex. That same year, Textron, calling Gorham "a troubled company in a troubled, shrinking industry," decided to close the formerly-bustling Providence campus and move its operations to Smithfield, Rhode Island.³³

The Gorham Manufacturing Company's thirty-plus acres on Adelaide Avenue were sold to the Winoker Group for private development in 1986, then again to Adelaide Development, and finally to Seaman Equity Group,³⁴ but a tax foreclosure enabled the City of Providence to purchase the property in 1990.³⁵ The following year, the remaining Textron properties in Smithfield changed hands once again, when they were taken over by Brown-Foreman.³⁶ While the City of Providence evaluated options for the old Gorham Manufacturing plant, serious

²⁶ Carpenter 254.

²⁷ Wyss, "Lost Luster."

²⁸ Carpenter 265.

²⁹ Wyss, "Lost Luster."

³⁰ Carpenter 265.

³¹ Wyss, "Lost Luster."

³² Carpenter 271.

³³ Wyss, "Lost Luster."

³⁴ "Gorham/Textron Disposal Area," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Waste Site Cleanup and Reuse in New England, 2006. 6 October 2011.

http://yosemite.epa.gov/r1/npl_pad.nsf/8b160ae5c647980585256bba0066f907/e05d104ae2da713685256b4200606cf5!OpenDocument

³⁵ "Former Gorham Manufacturing Company Site Cleanup." State of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. Retrieved 5 October 2011.

<http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/benviron/waste/gorham/d70620d1.pdf>

³⁶ Bob Wyss, "Gorham Mfg. Co. to shutter plant in Smithfield." *Providence Journal*, 24 April 2002. 5 October 2011. <http://www.projo.com/words/st061302.htm>

concerns were raised about the site's environmental safety. Textron agreed to a site cleanup for the City's commercial and industrial use redevelopment plan in 1994, and in 1995, the plant was officially named a "Superfund" site.³⁷

In May of 1997, the Providence City Council approved a \$50 million dollar bond issue, \$1 million of which was to be dedicated to redeveloping the Gorham site. That summer, the City – along with the Providence Preservation Society – mailed out 1,600 marketing brochures soliciting proposals from developers across New England. Ten developers expressed interest by the August 30th deadline, but none of their proposals included plans to reuse any of the old Gorham buildings. As a result, the City determined that the Gorham Manufacturing plant could no longer be marketed for rehabilitation; demolition for all of the buildings, with the exception of the Carriage House, was set in early September of 1997.³⁸

With the former plant now demolished, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) approved Textron's workplan and cleanup efforts for soil and groundwater were launched – those efforts continue today.³⁹ Later that year, the YMCA of Greater Providence announced a plan to build a \$10 million complex on the site. Plans for the 50,000 square foot recreational facility included a gymnasium, swimming pool, and family center, which the YMCA hoped to begin developing following a successful cleanup.⁴⁰ In 2002, the Gorham Manufacturing plant (now owned by Brown-Foreman) in Smithfield closed, officially ending the company's presence in Rhode Island – but Gorham would remain a topic of conversation and debate in the state, particularly at the Adelaide site.⁴¹

Those debates intensified in 2006, when the City approved plans to build Alvarez High School on a parcel of land next to the cove of Mashapaug Pond.⁴² In 2007, the YMCA officially dropped its plans to build a complex on the site, citing continuous delays, escalating costs, and neighborhood opposition to the Alvarez High School project.⁴³ Though the YMCA backed out in the wake of neighborhood protest, construction on Alvarez High School continued and the school opened in 2008.

The last remaining Gorham building at the site, the Carriage House, had been spared from demolition in 1997; plans were undertaken by firefighters to turn the space into the Providence Fire Museum. The Carriage House, initially used to keep horses and carriages, later became a garage and a company store while the plant was in operation. Restoration of the Carriage House was underway until 2009, when a fire "of suspicious origin" destroyed the building. In an interview with the Providence Journal, Jeffrey Herman, who worked as a silver designer at the complex during the early 1980s emphasized the significance of this final loss: "At the turn of the [twentieth] century, Gorham was the world's leading silver manufacturer... This building was the last visible vestige of what was."⁴⁴

³⁷ "Former Gorham Manufacturing Company Site Cleanup."

³⁸ "Gorham Silver."

³⁹ "Former Gorham Manufacturing Company Site Cleanup."

⁴⁰ "Greater Providence YMCA Project," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Waste Site Cleanup and Reuse in New England. 17 May 2002. 6 October 2011. <http://www.epa.gov/region1/brownfields/success/providence.html>

⁴¹ Wyss, "Gorham Mfg. Co. to shutter plant in Springfield."

⁴² Frank Carini, "Still Contaminated Gorham Site Frustrates Residents." *Rhode Island Future*, 18 May 2010. 6 October 2011. <http://rifuture.org/still-contaminated-gorham-site-frustrates-residents.html?blogger=Frank+Carini>

⁴³ Linda Borg, "Y drops plans for \$10-million facility off Adelaide Avenue." *Providence Journal*, 2 November 2007. 5 October 2011. http://www.projo.com/ri/providence/content/mc_ymca_11-02-07_KA7NB2O_v15.359d6e6.html

⁴⁴ Dujardin, Richard C. "Suspicious fire destroys last of the Gorham buildings." *Providence Journal*, 16 April 2009. Retrieved 6 October 2011. http://www.projo.com/ri/northprovidence/content/gorham_fire_04-16-09_H0E27A1_v10.378f29f.html

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http://library.brown.edu/find/Collection/Home?collection=Gorham%20Collection&collection_id=44
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<http://artinruins.com/arch/?id=historical&pr=gorham> Excerpted from: Carlson, Erik, Erik Gould, and Joshua Safdie. *Gorham Documentation Project, for the City of Providence Department of Planning and Development and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission*.
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http://yosemite.epa.gov/r1/npl_pad.nsf/8b160ae5c647980585256bba0066f907/e05d104ae2da713685256b4200606cf5!OpenDocument
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Research/Source Limitations and Options for Further Research

While I was able to find a wealth of information both on the initial development of the Gorham site and its demolition, I found little information about substantial physical changes in the building during the twentieth century. I was able, however, to find information about changes in the building's use throughout this period, as well as larger structural changes that affected the Gorham company as a whole. I visited the John Hay Library's Gorham Collection during my research and was able to find some valuable resources, but a more exhaustive search could turn up additional materials to address these questions.

APPENDIX A: Images of Gorham Manufacturing Plant



VIEWS, EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR, OF THE WORKS OF THE
GORHAM M'FG CO., SILVERSMITHS, AT PROVIDENCE, R. I.
PLATE II. OFFICE BUILDING.

Office building at the center of the Gorham complex, which housed a library and museum.

Gould, Erik. "Gorham Documentation Project." Eric Gould Photographic Projects. Retrieved 6 October 2011.
<http://www.erikgould.net/gorham/gorham1.html>



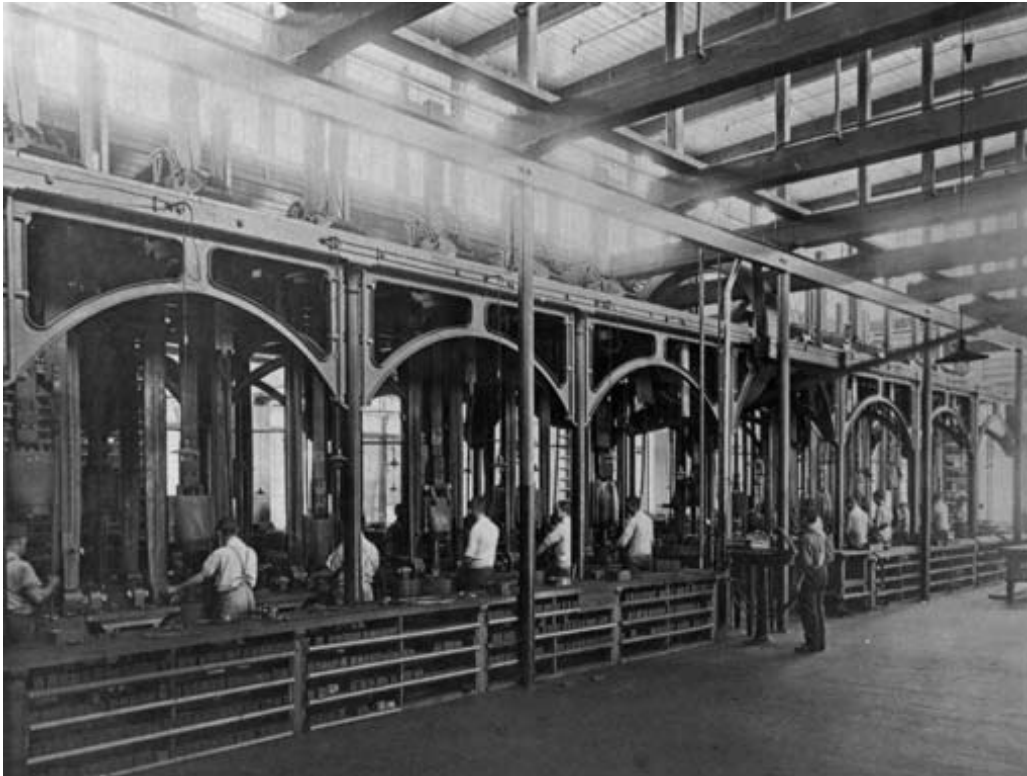
The casino built by Edward Holbrook as a gift to employees.

Gorham Collection, John Hay Library. Gorham Manufacturing Company, 1904. Retrieved 4 October 2011.
<http://library.brown.edu/find/Record/dc124214399778125>

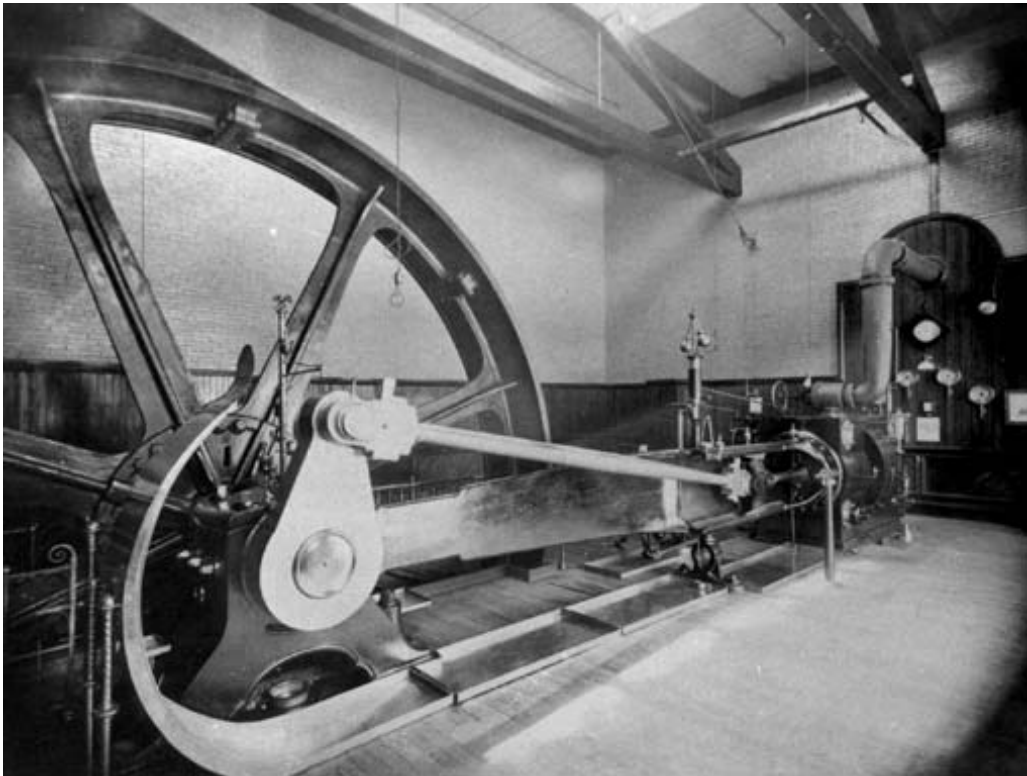


“The largest silverware plant in the world:” A line drawing of the Gorham Manufacturing Plant.

Gorham Collection, John Hay Library. Gorham Manufacturing Company, 1904. Retrieved 4 October 2011.
<http://library.brown.edu/find/Record/dc1242143138703125>



Interior of Gorham Manufacturing Plant



Gorham's Engine Room

Both images from "Gorham Silver." Rhode Island Art in Ruins, 2011. Retrieved 4 October 2011.

<http://artinruins.com/arch/?id=historical&pr=gorham>



The shell of the Goreham Office Building in 1997.



The Carriage House, which burned in 2009.

Both images from Gould, Erik. "Gorham Documentation Project." Eric Gould Photographic Projects. Retrieved 6 October 2011. <http://www.erikgould.net/gorham/gorham1.html>



Interior detail of a spiral staircase from the first floor to second floor showrooms, circa 1997.

Gould, Erik. "Gorham Documentation Project." Eric Gould Photographic Projects. Retrieved 6 October 2011.
<http://www.erikgould.net/gorham/gorham1.html>

APPENDIX B:

Bureau of Labor Statistics' 1913 write-up on Goreham's welfare work and employee casino

GOREHAM MANUFACTURING CO.

The Gorham Manufacturing Co., near Providence, E. I., employing 2,000 persons, has surrounded its plant with a large park of 30 acres, kept in perfect condition. Part of the grounds overlook a small lake, so that the expanses of green and water make a beautiful sight. There is a large athletic field for employees.

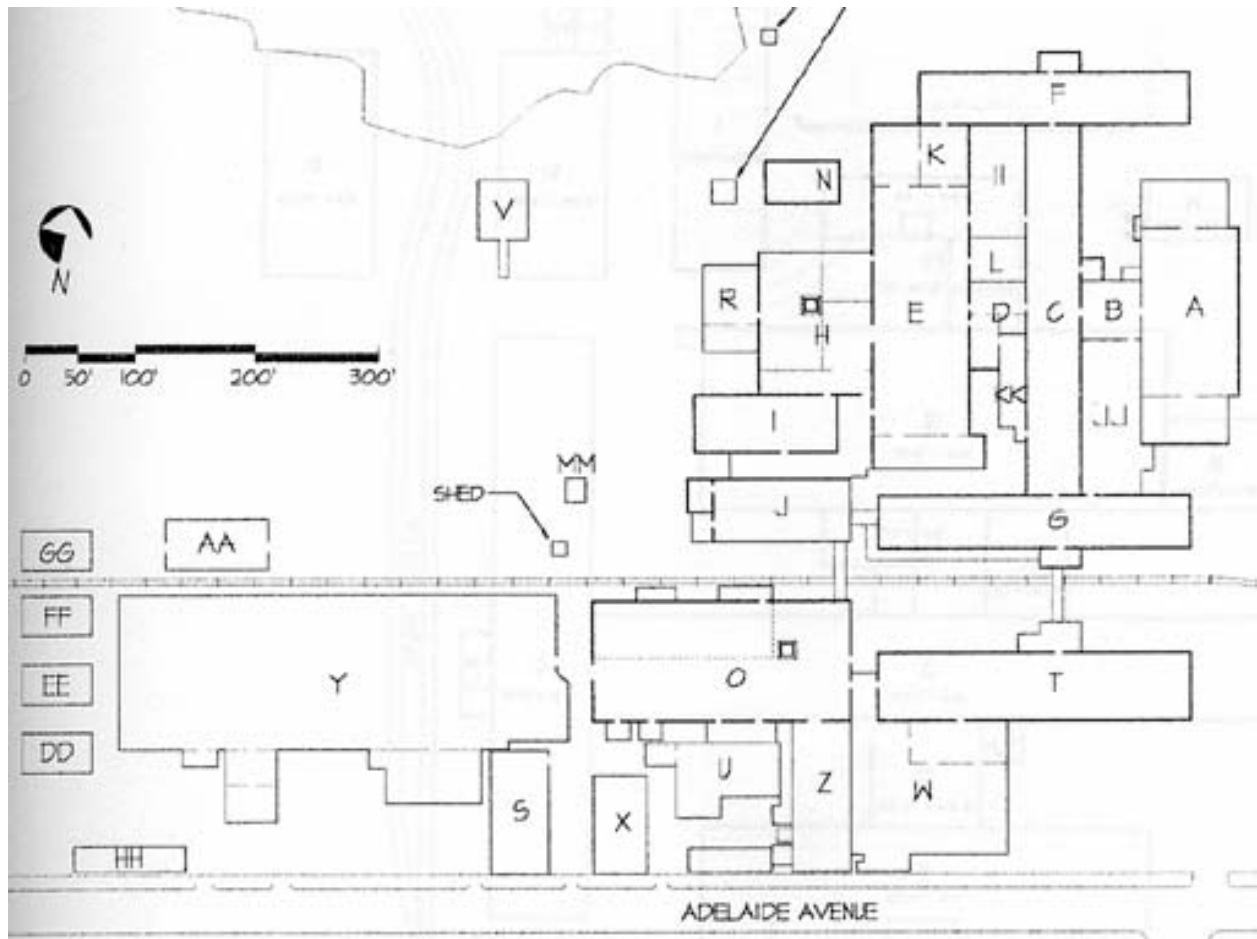
Over 20 years ago the company built for the employees a club house—the casino—to which it has later added considerably. The casino is a large, low, rambling, brick and shingle building of pleasing appearance. Downstairs there is a large lunch room for employees where they can buy their lunch or eat the lunches they bring with them, a table d'hote dining room, a ladies' dining room, and library. The food is sold at low prices. Upstairs there is an officers' dining room and several sleeping rooms for traveling salesmen. The library has several thousand volumes and is particularly cozy and comfortable. In the ladies' dining room there is a piano. Sometimes entertainments and dances are given in the main hall. There is no welfare secretary to take charge of the work, but there is a committee of employees and members of the company.

A savings bank has been started to encourage thrift and to lend money to employees who wish to build their own homes. The savings bank pays 4 per cent interest. In addition, there is a workmen's loan association which lends money at reasonable rates to employees desiring to borrow. This has suffered no losses. Most of the stock, the par value of which is \$5. is owned by employees.

Since 1903 the company has been pensioning its employees who have been disabled through age or ill health. Persons on reaching 70 years of age who have been 25 years in its employ may be pensioned in the discretion of the company; also persons 65 years of age, after 30 years of service; and of 60 years, after 40 years of continuous service. The monthly pension rate is 1 per cent for each year of employment of the wage paid at the time of enrollment in the pension system. No pension may exceed \$1,000 a year, however. There are 18 pensioners on the list, receiving an average pension of \$40 a month. The maximum pension is \$80 and the minimum is \$13.50.

U.S. Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Volume 6456, Bulletin 123: *Employers' Welfare Work*, pp. 43-44. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913.

APPENDIX C: Map of Gorham Manufacturing Company



Map depicting the configuration and location of buildings at the Gorham Complex.

“Gorham Silver.” Rhode Island Art in Ruins, 2011. Retrieved 4 October 2011.
<http://artinruins.com/arch/?id=historical&pr=gorham>