

BRICK MAKING IN MARS, PA.

CA. 1870s to 1970s

This document is courtesy of the Mars Area History and Landmarks Society.
Information was obtained from Society archives as well as Internet sites, ca. 2022.

For approximately 100 years there was a brick making factory (aka. "Brickyard") in Mars, supplying quality construction brick for new buildings in Western Pennsylvania.

This brickyard was located at the present (2022) site of the Vogel Disposal Co., about ¼ mile southeast of Mars between Brickyard Rd. and Rt. 228.



This particular site also included a large deposit of brick making raw material sometimes referred to as *Niagara Shale*, which provided very high quality brick. The type of brick made was referred to as "Devonshire". Also on the property was a natural gas well that provided fuel to operate the brick kilns.

Following is a brief timeline and history of this brick manufacturing facility in Mars, Pa.

Ca. 1870s - the initial brick kiln was built by brothers J.A. and W. T. Anderson on the farm of Samuel Parks, one of the four original family farms of Mars.

1898 - The Anderson's sold the Brickyard to Mr. Christian Gelbach, who was also listed as President of the Mars National Bank in 1907. The name of the company was Mars Brick & Tile Co.

1905 - According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, the brickyard consisted of (3) rectangular Kilns, plus a long drying tunnel building and other buildings. The *B&O RR* is shown passing near the facility, however there was no railroad siding access. The name of the company was listed as Mars Brick & Tile Co.

1911 - According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, the brickyard consisted of the same (3) rectangular Kilns, plus a long drying tunnel building and other buildings. The *Pittsburgh & Butler Shortline (Interurban) Railroad* and the *B&O* railroads are shown, however there was still no railroad siding access. The name of the company was identified as "property" Mars National Bank. No details are given nor found to date about this listing.

1918 - Mr. Gelbach sold the Brickyard to the Wynn and Starr Co. of Trafford, Pa. This company was an established building products and brick manufacturing company owned by Mr. Henry Wynn and Mr. Albert Starr.

1925 - According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps (see at right), the Wynn and Starr Co. brickyard in Mars had changed significantly from 1911, consisting now of (3) round, and (2) rectangular brick kilns, plus several material mixing and drying buildings.

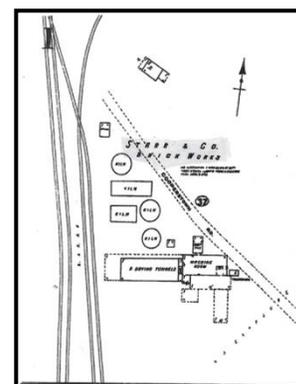
As seen at left of facility, the company also had siding access to both the *Pittsburgh & Butler Shortline (Interurban) Railroad*, and the *B&O Railroad* systems. Both of these railroads, as well as trucks were used to deliver the bricks to area construction projects. Brickyard Rd. is also shown at right of the facility.

The Shortline was used to transport the bricks for the Jefferson Street Apartment Building in Butler. It was also used to transport the brick for the original St. Barnabas Home in Gibsonia. In fact a temporary siding was built to deliver the bricks directly to the building site.

1931 - Upon the passing of Albert Starr, the company was sold and merged with the Houston Bros. Co., an already established building products company in the Pittsburgh area. (The Starrs and Houston's were related). The result was a new company name, *Houston-Starr Co.*, a building products supplier that still exists in the Pittsburgh area in 2022.

Note: at this time it is not known if the logo on the bricks manufactured in Mars was changed, however it is very likely that it was.

1955 - Well known Mars resident and trucking company owner, Scott Borland bought the Mars, *Houston - Starr* brickyard. Mr. Borland merged and consolidated his long established trucking business with the brick manufacturing operation. After a year of remodeling work, all the kilns were rebuilt and machinery was replaced with modern equipment. According to a 1956 Butler news article, the Borland Brickyard had the capability of producing 30,000 high quality brick per day, with 30 employees. The brick were delivered to customers by the extensive fleet of Borland trucks. (Contd. on page 2)



According to a former employee who worked at the brickyard in 1962, it was very dirty and hot work. A pair of jeans lasted about a week.

After the shale was retrieved from the on-site quarry, it was mixed with water in a "Pug Mill". The mix came out of the Mill as a long, thick sheet. A wire cutter came down on the sheet and cut the bricks to size. The bricks were then put on carts and moved on rails to a drying tunnel for a period of time. After drying, the bricks were placed in the kilns to bake. Stacking the hot brick on shipping pallets after baking required special mittens that employees had to buy. The brick making process required about 12 people.

At some point during the Borland ownership, the natural gas well on the property became unuseable. Fueling of the kilns was then switched to purchased and hauled-in coal, which greatly increased the cost of making the brick.

1972 - Mr. Borland sold the brickyard to Vogel Disposal Co. The brickyard was dismantled and replaced with new garages and shops to maintain and house the Vogel Disposal business.

Interesting pictures of the Mars Brickyard during the *Borland* era.

