

# South Philly Refinery Complex: The Atlantic Refinery

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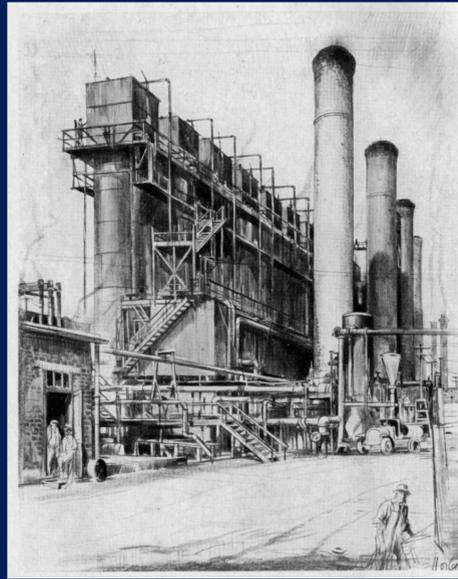


Located in Point Breeze, South Philadelphia, on the lower Schuylkill River, the Atlantic Refining Company was long a major economic player in the mid-Atlantic region and beyond. In the year 1891 after opening in 1866, the 360-acre site produced nearly 50% of the world's refined petroleum and 35% of U.S. petroleum exports. These rosy economic facts concealed darker social and environmental conditions. Behind the scenes, laborers working in the intense heat of the refinery petitioned for the right to use company water to cool themselves off. Workplace widows such as Mary Carberry and Elizabeth Sides sought justice for their husbands. In addition to dangerous on-site working conditions, the Atlantic Refinery degraded the environmental quality of the city just to the north. The refinery was responsible for acid pools, contaminated river water, and poor air quality. Based on an analysis of the company's first 50 years, the Atlantic Refinery combined innovation, efficiency, and expansion alongside hazard, injury, death, and pollution.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ATLANTIC OIL REFINERY

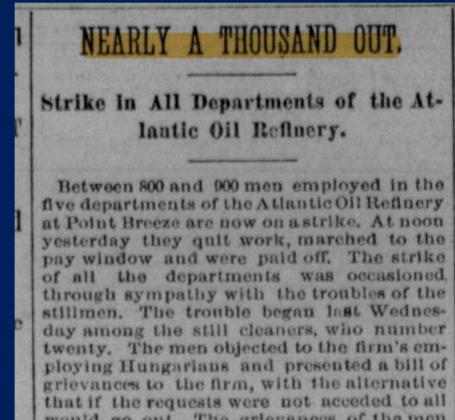


- 1866**  
The Atlantic Refining Company begins business as a storage facility, occupying a plant on the Schuylkill River, making up 560 acres, 12 1/2 miles of waterfront, and 6 miles of railroad tracks.
- 1873**  
Senate bills are proposed and passed to hold the refinery more accountable in their practices. Inspectors are given the right to investigate samples and regularly visit the location to monitor conditions.
- 1879**  
Community members call the Board of Health to implement sanitation measures. Dr. Charles Canon examines phosphate levels and finds refuse acid pools that are from the Atlantic Refinery. Company creates special fund to sustain losses from fees. Five vessels burn done, releasing a million gallons of refined oil. The entire waterfront of the Atlantic Refinery burns done and 40,000 barrels of oil are lost.
- 1882**  
The Atlantic Refinery becomes one of the largest refineries in the United States, employing 2950 people and refining over 100 million gallons of oil in one year.
- 1883**  
The Atlantic Refinery is ruled as not guilty for James Malone's death, despite the direct cause being an injury during working hours. The Gas Trust Works committee brings artesian wells after complaints from community members about undrinkable water due to the refinery.
- 1884**  
Wrightville and houses that are tenanted by employees of the Atlantic Refinery request a police force since public safety does not extend to housing around the refinery. As a result, the Police Committee of Councils furnishes a telephone system for the community.
- 1887**  
800-900 workmen from five different departments of the Atlantic Refinery engage in a strike to protest labor rights like access to fresh water during shifts and the employment of Hungarians that are believed to take their shifts. The strike ends after settling to the Superintendent's proposition.
- 1890**  
Residents of the neighborhood located on 10th and Chesnut streets are having respiratory issues due to a gas emitted from a sulfuric or nitric acid reaction originating from the oil works at Point Breeze (nearly the Atlantic Refinery). The Board of Health employed Medical Inspector J. Howard Taylor and has concluded that sludge acid from oil refineries produced this odor.
- 1891**  
Adam W. Louth sues the Atlantic Refinery to recover \$52,000 property damage caused by the company and wins the case.
- 1897**  
Members of the Japanese Department of Agriculture and Commerce visit the Atlantic Refinery to learn about efficient oil and petroleum processing methods.
- 1901**  
The city of Philadelphia is unable to pass an ordinance that restricts the storage of benzene, naphtha, and gasoline in an attempt to prevent refinery fires because the state claims that the city cannot enforce a penalty for the infringement of its own laws. Wrightville becomes a ghost town because of the constant fire hazards and destruction of residential homes. The Atlantic Refinery pleads not guilty for the death of three firemen; the verdict is that the firemen accidentally died during their shifts.
- 1960S**



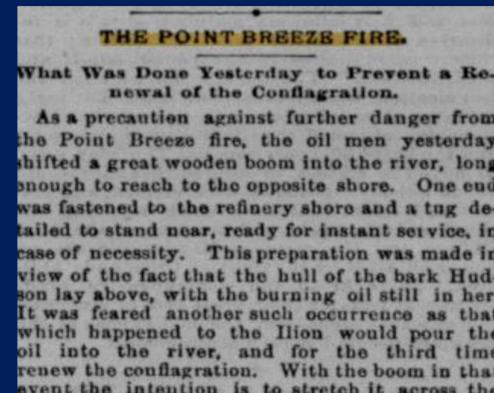
A drawing of the Atlantic Refinery's Lewis stills in the north yard to process crude oil into gasoline.

Source: Atlantic Refining Company, *The Story of Gasoline*, 1930, (Philadelphia, Hagley Museum and Library), <https://hsp.org/blogs/fondly-pennsylvania/abundance-dependence-and-trauma-philadelphia%E2%80%99s-point-breeze-petroleum>.



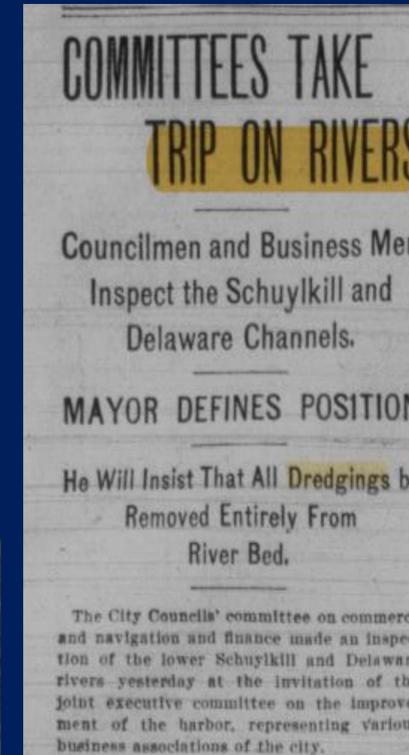
A *Philadelphia Times* article from 1887 highlighting one of the biggest labor strikes in Atlantic Oil Refinery history (later absorbed by the Standard Oil Company).

Source: "Nearly a Thousand Out. Strike in All Departments of the Atlantic Oil Refinery." *The Philadelphia Times*, 25 June 1887, p. 1.



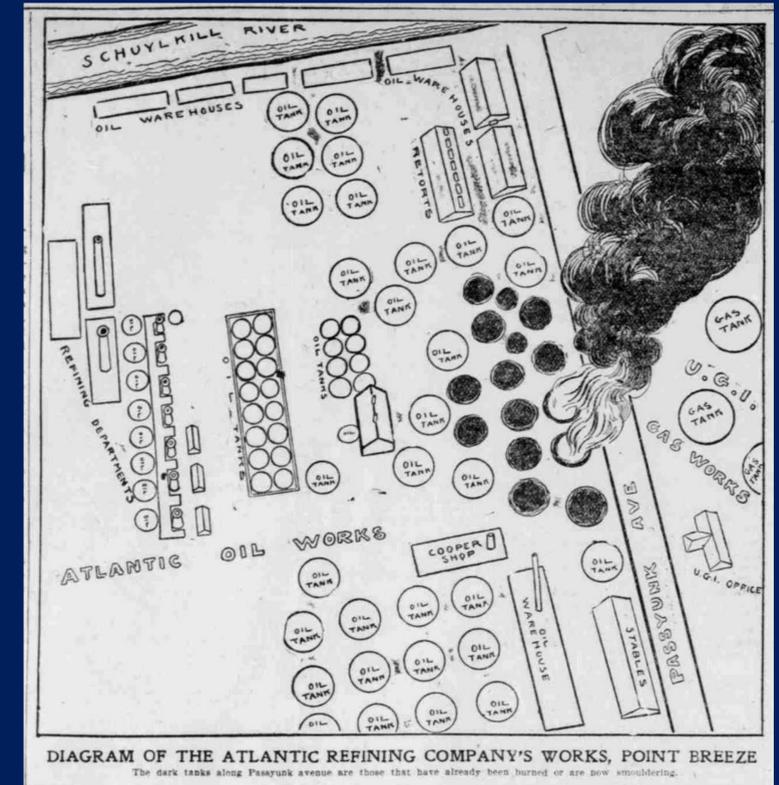
A *Philadelphia Times* article from 1879 recalling a series of recurring fires causing multiple oil tanks to explode and destroy the riverfront.

Source: "The Point Breeze Fire." *The Philadelphia Times*, 15 June 1879, p. 5.



A *Philadelphia Inquirer* article from 1901 detailing the City Council's committee on commerce, navigation, and finance inspection of the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers to determine the feasibility of deepening harbor channels.

Source: "Committees Take Trip on Rivers." *The Philadelphia Times*, 23 May 1901, p. 1.



A detailed depiction of an Atlantic Refinery explosion from 1901, revealing the layout of the refinery.

Source: "Great Fire Under Control—Two Big Explosions." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 August 1901, p. 9.



