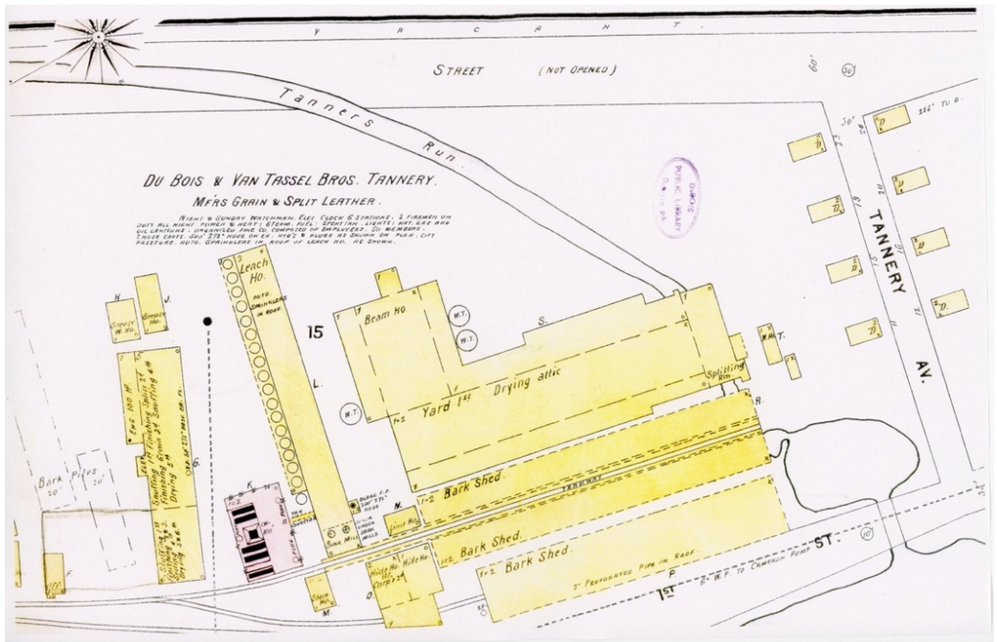
Van Tassel Tannery Spurs Early Lumber Economy In DuBois







Alexander Ruben Van Tassel

Lumber was DuBois' first business and, as with all industries that involve primary products, there will be waste material. In many cases this provides an opening for a second industry. Such was the case in DuBois with the development of tanneries using some of the hemlock bark from the lumber mills.

The first and most prominent of names to step into the local tanning industry were brothers Alexander Reuben (A. R.) Van Tassel (1853-1921) and Edward D. Van Tassel (1854-1923). A. R. played the more prominent role in the area remaining in DuBois from 1884 until his death in 1921; while Edward would leave to run the family's business interests in Boston, Massachusetts.

Their parents were Reuben Sherwood (1827-98) and Elizabeth (Higgins, 1828-79) Van Tassel. A. R. was born on March 31, 1853, and Edward on October 26, 1854, both in Brooklyn, N. Y. Educated in the Brooklyn school system Alexander learned the tanner's trade in Wobern, Massachusetts. He worked in both Wobern and New York City before locating in Bolivar, N. Y., where he established a small tannery. He sold that business and moved to DuBois in 1883.

Van Tassel's attraction to the DuBois area stemmed from the advantage of locating a tannery in a newer lumbering area. Tanning is the process of treating skins and hides of animals to produce leather. A tannery is the place where the skins are processed. Tanning hide into leather involves a process which permanently alters the protein structure of skin, making it more durable and less susceptible to decomposition, and also possibly coloring it. This process was considered a noxious or "smelly trade" and relegated most tannery areas to the outskirts of town.

Alexander and Edward, then living in Boston, Massachusetts, formed a partnership with John DuBois to form the firm of DuBois-Van Tassel. DuBois' lumbering operations provided the bark used in the tanning process.

A 40-foot by 65-foot building was constructed on First Street near the current location of Juniata Elementary School and Third Ward Hose Company. It went into operation in September 1884. The plant later expanded in 1892, to seven acres and took on finishing departments, which turned out 2,000 sides of leather per day while employing approximately 400 men. According to an 1898 report the currying building was 40 feet by 320 feet and five stories in height, plus an "L" of 112 feet by 64 feet was also five stories high. Production changed to include harnesses, gloves, belts and other necessary leather items of the time period.

The brothers' partnership with John DuBois was quickly interrupted by DuBois' death in 1886. Fortunately, the partnership was continued by John DuBois' nephew and inheritor John E. DuBois. That partnership lasted until October 22, 1901, when A. R. Van Tassel sold out his interest in the firm to John E. DuBois. John E. DuBois bought out the share of E. D. Van Tassel in 1901 making him sole owner of the renamed DuBois Tannery. The operation continued at this location until 1904, when the buildings were torn down.

A. R. could not leave the tanning industry behind. He built his own tannery on 3.75 acres on DuBois Street, later the location of H. Shakespeare and Sons. The main building of the new tannery was enormous by DuBois standards being 450 feet by 65 feet with a capacity of 300 hides daily by a work force of about 100 employees.

Following the Great Fire of 1888, the A. R. Van Tassel Hose Company was organized about 1892 for special service at the tannery. Van Tassel, looking toward his own business interests, located it on East Second Avenue close to tannery. The tannery was torn down in 1904 and the hose company members asked John E. DuBois to leave one building standing for a hose house. The newly rechristened J. E. DuBois Hose Company Number 3 occupied a part of the old tannery until the current building was completed in 1960-61.

With his health declining, A. R., who was also president of Union Bank, died on December 6, 1921, at his home. A. R.'s obituary in the December 7, 1921, edition of *The Courier-Express* described him in this fashion: "Mr. Van Tassel was a man of commanding appearance, usually pleasant personality and he was universally esteemed throughout the city. As a resident of DuBois since 1884, he had been prominent in the industrial and social life of the city, and formed an association of friends that is legion. As an employer of labor he always had the most friendly relations with his men and in his death they felt a personal loss."

Panel design by Tom Schott,
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