

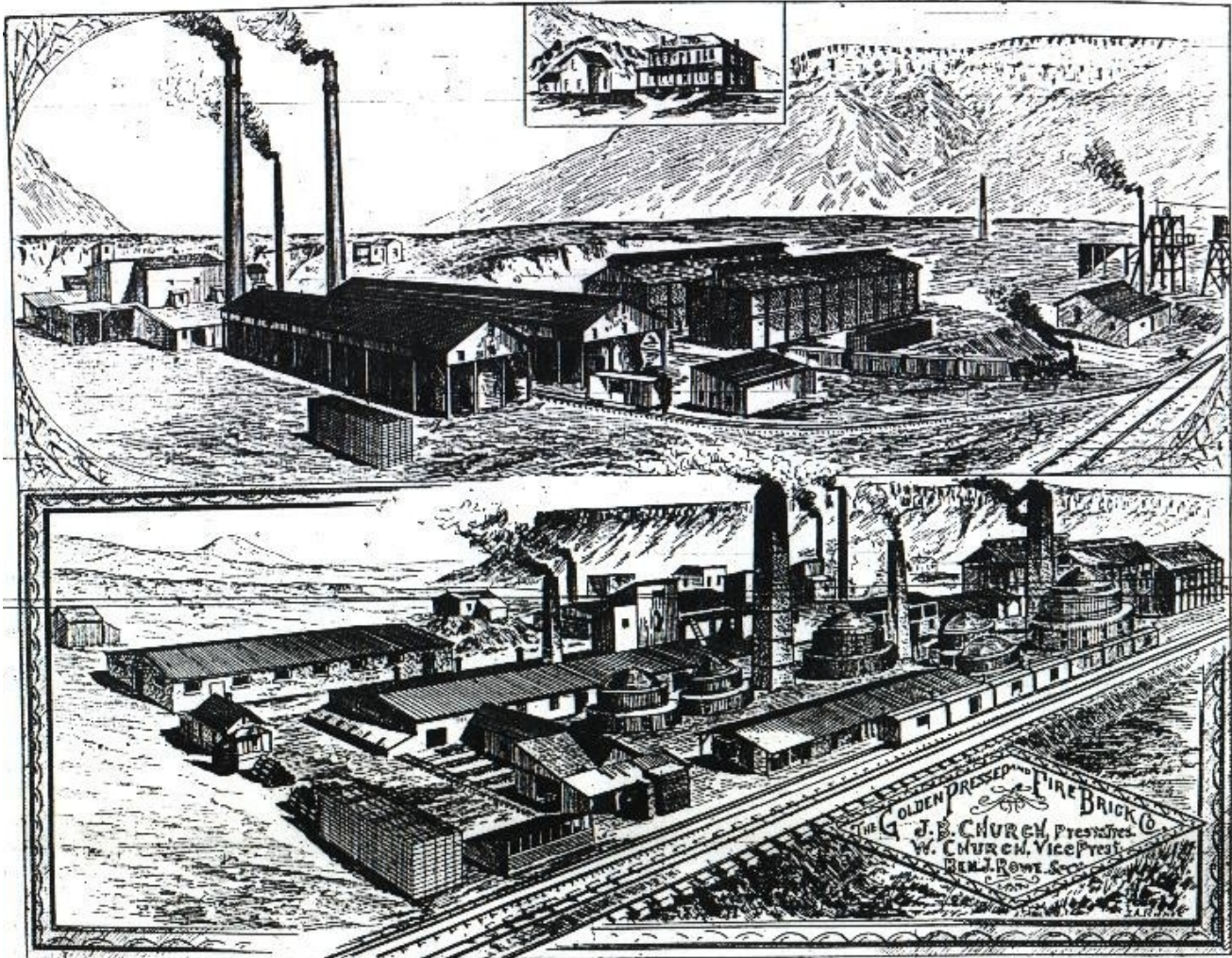
Brickyard History

History • Architecture • Preservation • Golden Brick • Diary • Home



*The workers of the Golden Fire Brick Works, at this location in the 1920s
Brickyard House is above the second worker from the left
Courtesy Gardner Family Collection*

Believed to be built between 1901 and 1914, the Brickyard House served as company housing for the Golden Pressed & Fire Brick Works, established here in 1890 by brothers John B. and William Church, who were among the most prominent industrialists and philanthropists in Colorado. This building is so far known to have housed the plant manager and later the nightwatchman, and possibly was a model house. Shaped fancy bricks, colored bricks and other innovations catapulted the works from a regional player to national renown, even shipping as far away as China. This house is today one of the few remnants of an industry of which Golden was at the forefront for a century.



The upper and lower works of the Golden Pressed & Fire Brick Company in 1893, printed in the Golden Globe newspaper

Upper works existed 1890-1963 at Brickyard House location; lower works existed 1873-1895 on west 8th Street

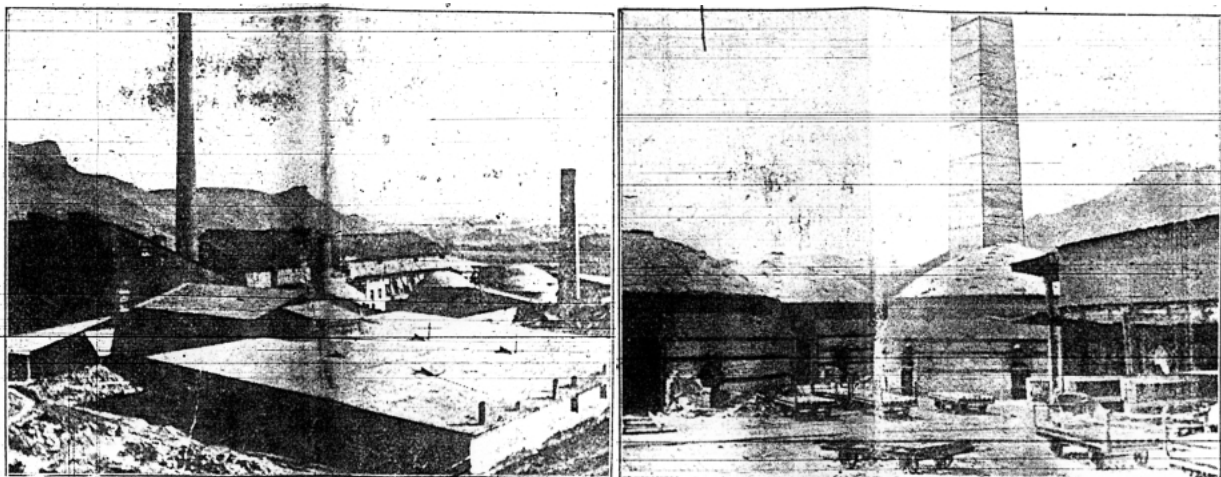
This location is at the site of the last and most prominent works of Golden's brickmaking industry. Beginning in 1874 it served as the clay quarry of the Rocky Mountain Fire Brick Works, owned by German immigrant brothers John and Rudolph Koenig. Providing the raw material for pressed building brick, the quarry as well as the works itself located (on west 8th Street inside the Golden limits) grew, taking on notable customers like the Colorado Coal & Iron Works at Pueblo and the Argo smelter in Denver as the plant became renowned for its high temperature resistant fire brick. By 1883 the plant shipped across the western United States and to Chihuahua, Mexico. This brickmaking success attracted the attention of two Denver and Arizona mining industrialists, brothers John B. and William Church, who purchased the plant and its holdings in 1890 and named it the Golden Pressed & Fire Brick Works. They quickly set their sights on taking brickmaking operations to new heights, and hired Edward L. Berthoud to survey the now played out clay quarry at this location to build a new northern works. Acquiring the nearby Star Coal Mine to fuel the plant, the Church Bros. built the new works, and in 1891 the combined operation produced 10,000,000 bricks. Touring Golden's industrial operations in 1890 prominent Colorado industrialist Horace Tabor was quite impressed, and he faced Colorado's most ornate building, the Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver, with bricks made by the Church brothers.

Pouring capital into the operation and hiring expertise as Denver was commencing a large building boom, the Church brothers propelled their plant and Golden to leadership in the region's brick manufacturing industry. Their influence on Denver and the area was profound; according to the *Denver Republican*: "Having the greatest confidence in the future growth of the city, the brothers built a plant which turned out most of the brick used in the finer residences and buildings of the city." After the Silver Crash in 1893 the capital William Church infused into Denver, including judicious buying and selling of choice properties on terms which enabled others to also profit, helped restore the city's confidence at a time many of its stakeholders had fallen hard.



*Golden Pressed & Fire Brick Works as it existed on July 22, 1901 when they were destroyed by fire,
courtesy Gardner Family Collection
Smokestack of continuous kiln, which survived, stood 132 feet tall*

On July 22, 1901 the brick works were destroyed by fire, just after most of the workers had left for the evening. A hot box on one of the elevators of a pressed brick machine caught fire, and as the plant had no water supply or firefighting apparatus, the blaze quickly gained headway throughout the works. Many Goldenites watched the blaze helplessly from the crest of Cemetery Hill while a bucket brigade managed to save the kilns and drying rooms. The destruction of the brick works threatened a devastating and demoralizing blow to Golden and its economy, which in recent time had also lost the lower brick works to fire (1895), paper mills to fire (1900), and had the last smelter torn down (1900), and last operating coal mine shut down and burned (1901). Nearly 80 men were thrown out of work by this latest calamity, which came only months after the death of William Church. The plant was not insured, because after the lower works burned in 1895 the Church brothers soured on using insurance, having been able to recover only \$8,000 of \$40,000 worth of policies. However, John Church immediately vowed to rebuild and improve with his own money, which helped galvanize the city. Instead of an irreparable loss Golden was propelled to new heights in the brickmaking industry.



*Golden Pressed & Fire Brick Works as they appeared in 1905, and later closeup of the kilns of the brick works
Scooters in the foreground transferred bricks between molding, kilns and drying rooms
Courtesy Colorado Transcript and Golden Globe*

The fire was an opportunity to rebuild the brick works with new and improved with state-of-the-art equipment, and quickly the works were back in business under manager Herman S. Rankin and superintendent Daniel L. Cressman. Its bricks were not only shipped throughout the west, but now were exported as far as Japan, China, Mexico, Canada, and South America. Rankin, a second generation brickmaker from Keokuk, Iowa, was an inventive creator who constantly pursued new innovations for the plant, which helped revolutionize the regional brickmaking industry. Using his own experiments he perfected manufacturing long sought after colored bricks including red, speckled, buff and gray, the latter two of which had long eluded perfection in the efforts of many area brickmakers. The plant's fire brick, made from fire clay mined from the south end of the hogback nearby, was sought after by smelters and other industrial facilities for its high resistance to heat. The arrival in 1901 of the Berg brick shaping machine introduced ornamental shaped fancy brick to the area brickmaking industry, and a raw materials pulverizer helped speed manufacture. These innovations helped revolutionize area brickmaking, and with it area architecture by providing a new selection of many desirable and beautiful bricks. The Brickyard House was a prime example of some of the brick works' popular new products.

On March 25, 1911 the plant changed hands, sold by Church for \$225,000 to the Fairview Brick Company. Fairview was headquartered in Denver and brought in new vice president and general manager James C. Knox. The rechristened Golden Fairview Brick Works retained superintendent L.D. Morris, who had been in charge since 1908, and also made him secretary and treasurer. The new company set about to modernize the brick works and its modus operandi. Many changes had already taken place under Morris including new kilns and equipment, including a new 100,000 brick kiln that was the first in the area capable of burning all its bricks to a uniform color and hardness. Under Morris the plant's fire brick, a hand pressed brick now capable of withstanding 4,000 degrees, came to be in great demand. It was used extensively by the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company, American Smelting & Refining Company, and major orders from Spokane, the Coeur d'Alene District of Idaho, Arizona, Mexico and New Mexico.

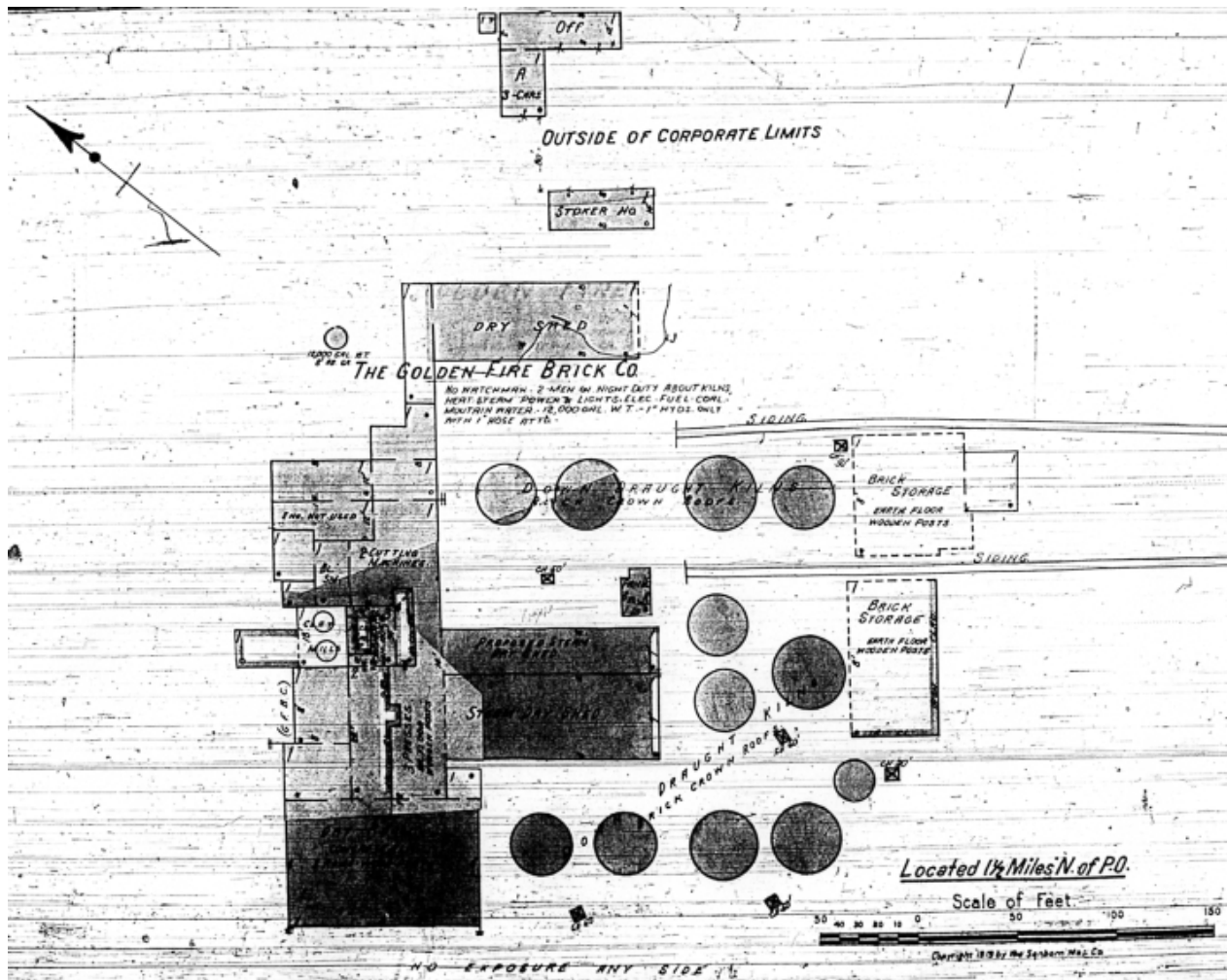


*1930s postcard of the Golden Fire Brick Works
Courtesy Gardner Family Collection*

On December 21, 1915 the brick works were destroyed again by fire, with only the kilns escaping destruction this time. Although the works had a water system by this time, the fire broke out in the boiler room, immediately putting the water system out of commission and a blowing wind quickly burned down everything but the kilns. This house and nearby Boarding House, being windward and further away, were spared, but the greatest loss was most of the machinery which was partially covered by insurance. However, even in this catastrophe the plant proved its resilience, according to the *Transcript*:

It has developed that the big mud brick machine at the pressed brick works has now gone through four fires, and apparently has suffered but little harm. The machine was first installed at the Rowe yards, near the Rock mills. This plant was destroyed by fire twenty years or so ago. The machine was moved to the plant north of town and passed through the fire which destroyed the works in 1901. The mud machine was fixed up and sold to a firm in Cripple Creek, and was only in operation a short time until a fire destroyed that plant. It was then moved back to Golden and has been doing splendid work until last week, when the Golden plant was burned.

Like Church before him, Knox was also resilient, resolving immediately to rebuild the plant, bigger and better than before, only this time with buildings made of cement and iron. The plant continued to thrive, and by 1919 demand was so great as to prompt Knox to make arrangements for even greater modernization and doubling of its manufacturing capacity. The works were converted from steam to electricity, and a new office was built at the eastern end. However, there also came the loss of the prominent area landmark at the works, the great smokestack of the continuous kiln, which towering over the works was one of the tallest structures in Jefferson County's history. Large cracks had developed in it and it needed to be taken down. Around this time the place became known as the Golden Fire Brick Works.



1947 Philadelphia Fire Insurance map of the Golden Fire Brick Works

Brickyard House and Boarding House are not included in map, which would have been positioned below this image

The brick works continued to modernize its products which were used in the Denver area's suburban boom, including

pavers, raked bricks, Norman and Roman bricks, and more. During the latter 1950s the plant was purchased by the Denver Brick & Pipe Company and annexed into their operations. In 1963 it was finally shut down after 73 years in operation. Over the course of its history this brick works contributed the material to build uncountable places throughout the American West and beyond, and influenced the built environment of this region, in materials and in architecture. The Brickyard House is the only building now remaining of the many that have been part of this plant, and one of the few things remaining from the brick works of Golden history.