

Beginnings: 1830-1863

Planned development in the Washington Park area appears for the first time on an 1835 map of Troy. At the time, only one house had actually been built in the park area: a Greek Revival townhouse belonging to Albert P. Heartt at 171 Second Street. The planned new development lay south of downtown but immediately north of an existing industrial area. Local historian Peter D. Shaver notes that the Troy Common Council minutes for the 1830s show a number of discussions about improvements needed (including removing buildings that did not conform with the planned street grid) if development was to proceed.

These plans came to fruition in 1840, when a group of investors, all prominent Trojans, drew up a deed that defined the park itself, identified each investor's share of the property, and committed them to completing the Greek Revival rowhouse block that is Washington Place, at the south end of the park. The area divided by the investors was roughly H-shaped, extending up Second and Third Streets from Adams to a point past Washington Street, and along Washington Street from Third to just west of Second. The building of additional houses proceeded piecemeal, with Third Street still substantially undeveloped as late as 1860.

The Washington Place Enigma

The investors—merchant Sylvester Norton, lawyer John P. Cushman, forwarding merchant Griffith P. Griffiths, stove manufacturer Joel Mallary, and hardware merchants Jonas C. and Albert Heartt—were local worthies but hardly the people expected to be architectural innovators. So where did they get the idea of building a private park and a rowhouse block with a unified “single mansion” façade?

Although Washington Park has been compared to New York City's Gramercy Park (the only other privately owned urban ornamental park in the U.S.), it is unlikely that the big-city park directly inspired the small-city park. Both were planned at about the same time (as was public Washington Park in St. Louis), and development around Gramercy Park proceeded much more slowly, and along typical U.S. rowhouse lines, with rows of identical units *not* unified to look like a single mansion.

What Washington Park and Washington Place most strongly resemble are the fashionable London “squares” of the 1820s. There, large townhouses for the aristocracy and the new industrialist upper-middle-class were designed in blocks intended to resemble palaces, and set around ornamental parks intended for use only by the

residents of the square. Planbooks were available for builders who created these terraces in the fashionable classical and Greek Revival styles, which may explain why no record of an architect can be found for Washington Place.

It is unclear why the original developers of Washington Park would have wished to imitate a London model in a city of fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. Similar rowhouse blocks do not appear in other major U.S. cities, so if such plans were widespread, they failed more often than not. The belief that Troy would be one of the great cities of the world was entirely in character with the fervent, even cut-throat, civic boosterism of the time. But where did the developers learn of the model?

One possibility is that they learned of it second-hand, via some New York City development other than Gramercy Park. A *New York Commercial Advertiser* article of September 1835 refers to development south of downtown as filling up “after the manner of the recent improvement of the Stuyvesant meadows in New York.” However, this reference may have nothing to do with Washington Place itself, as building did not commence until 1838.

A second possibility is that the plans arrived, along with a builder, in the Scottish influx of the early 1830s. The Scottish immigrants of the time tended to be skilled laborers, making building a plausible trade.

A third possibility is that one or more of the developers had been to London, seen the fashionable developments, and been moved to emulate them. Of the partners, the most likely to have traveled were the Heartt brothers, who unlike their cronies were not entirely self-made men. The family fortune had been made by their father, Philip Heartt, who had also built himself a mansion atop Mount Ida. It is not implausible—though it cannot be verified from readily available records—that one or both of the younger Heartts might have been sent abroad to develop some polish, possibly on the occasion of William IV's coronation in 1830.

Whose Neighborhood?

Just as Washington Place was completed, development of an upper-middle-class neighborhood received a setback. In June 1843, under the leadership of tireless missionary Father Peter Havermans, the cornerstone for St. Mary's Roman Catholic church was laid at the corner of Washington and Third streets. The building of the church was opposed by nearby residents, who believed that its presence would lower property values. This fear

was not entirely baseless, as survivors of the Irish famine would pour into Troy from 1845 to 1848. Few houses were built in the Washington Park area in the 1840s and 1850s, and the Third Street side of the park later developed with smaller and more modest homes.

Landslides & Other Disasters

Other circumstances may have combined to continue to delay development. Landslides caused by careless removal of earth from Mount Ida (in some cases to continue filling and leveling the park neighborhood) destroyed residences as far west as Fourth Street in 1842 and 1853. Two devastating fires, in 1848 and 1854, also meant businessmen's dollars were likely to be tied up in rebuilding factories and stores rather than in building new homes. The 1848 fire destroyed businesses along commercial/industrial River Street, while the 1854 fire destroyed commercial and industrial districts along

Front, River, and First streets from Liberty Street as far south as Jefferson.

A third fire seems to have led to a building boom in Washington Park. On May 10, 1862, a spark from a locomotive ignited the bridge over the Hudson River between Center Island and Troy. The fire rapidly spread through downtown, moving up Grand Division (now Broadway) as far east as Eighth Street. More than 500 homes, stores, and civic buildings were destroyed, at an estimated total loss of \$3 million. As residents rebuilt (a process probably helped by Civil War-era prosperity as a center of iron milling), they tended to move off the edges of Mount Ida and into the lowlands south of downtown. As a result of the fires, much of historic Troy is Italianate in style and dates from 1860 or later.

Sources

While the analysis above is our own, it inevitably starts from a number of sources. Several useful starting points for the researcher are:

Troy History

Jeanne M. Keefe-Watkinson [a.k.a. Jeanne Spring], *Washington Park, Troy, N.Y.: Its Evolution and History*, unpublished senior thesis (1980). While there are gaps in Ms. Keefe-Watkinson's data, this report is an excellent starting point for understanding who lived in the neighborhood from 1840 to 1900. A copy of the report is available at the Rensselaer County Historical Society library.

Peter D. Shaver, "Origins of Washington Park," appendix to the preliminary landscape report prepared by Doell & Doell of Syracuse (January 1992). Mr. Shaver is a local historian who has done extensive research about the early owners of neighborhood properties.

A.J. Weise, *History of the City of Troy* (1876). Commissioned on the occasion of the national Centennial, this "booster" history is a standard source for business and government facts that can no longer be verified in primary sources.

Architectural History

Barnett, Jonathon. *The Elusive City: Five Centuries of Design, Ambition, and Miscalculation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986). The first chapter discusses the popularity of the "square" or "crescent" in England a generation earlier.

Richard Russell Lawrence and Teresa Chris, *The Period House: Style, Detail & Decoration, 1774 to 1914* (London: Phoenix Illustrated, 1996). A copiously illustrated book on British rowhouses, showing on page 17 a Bath building similar in style to Washington Place.

Lockwood, Charles. *Bricks and Brownstones: The New York Row House, 1783-1929, an Architectural and Social History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972). The New York City rowhouses in Lockwood's book are uniform rather than monumental.

Research Questions

- Why did Troy's wealthy choose the urban square form? Had explosive growth between 1810 and 1840 led them to expect to become a major metropolis, or was there some other reason?
- What are the true origins of Washington Place's unusual design? (Keefe-Watkinson was unable to find an architect.)
- Why was development so slow along Third Street? Was the problem economic, social, or both? Were there additional buildings on Third Street that are poorly recorded because they were torn down and replaced (very likely with 220 Third, a property that existed in the 1850s but now shows an architectural style of 30 years later)?