

## Prosperity: 1864 to 1916

From about 1830 to 1864, the most prosperous sector of the Trojan economy had consisted of merchants who took advantage of new opportunities for commerce that emerged first with the Erie Canal and then with the railroads. These improved means of transportation allowed East Coast cities to trade more easily with the farmers who were rapidly settling in the Great Lakes region. Strategically located at the head of navigation on the Hudson River, near the point where the Erie Canal joined the river, Troy profited by moving finished goods and commodities produced elsewhere. Troy's industries in this period were mostly small manufacturers that served largely local needs. The wealthy forwarding merchants of this new economy, who profited from canal traffic and railroad speculation, were the people who built and lived in the homes around Washington Park.

### The Iron Boom

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Troy industrialists discovered ways to profit from the developing national transportation grid. They found that they could manufacture durable goods on a large scale, and, because of the availability of rail transport, sell them to a national market. Industry replaced commerce as Troy's chief vehicle for producing wealth, and the industrialist, not the merchant, became the typical Washington Park resident.

Troy's first break-through industry was iron and steel manufacturing. Small-scale forges near the Lake Champlain ore fields transported their pig iron south, down the Champlain Canal, to be processed in Troy's mills and foundries. Here the pig iron was cast into stoves, puddled into wrought iron, or transformed into steel. The wrought iron and steel fed Troy rolling mills that produced nails, horseshoes, and rails.

As they became prosperous, many of Troy's ironmasters chose to live in the Washington Park neighborhood. Officers from each of Troy's three largest iron-and-steel-related companies made their homes there at some point in the late nineteenth century. John Griswold, who co-founded the Albany and Rensselaer Iron and Steel Company and introduced the Bessemer steel-production process to the United States, lived at 204 Washington from 1847 to 1872. The company's vice president, Chester Griswold, lived at 1 Washington Place from 1868 to 1875. Joseph W. Fuller, co-founder and president of the Fuller and Warren stove foundry, lived at 197 Second from 1871 to 1889. Burden Iron Company founder Henry Burden lived on the hill above his works, but his son and heir, Peter Burden, lived at 2 Washington

Place in 1853 (his short tenure is most likely due to his wife's tragic accidental death in their home).

### The Boom Loses Its Bounce

The same process of nationalization that initially boosted Troy's iron and steel companies also limited their ability to grow. Conditions at the end of the nineteenth century favored large organizations, and western iron and steel mills enjoyed better access to the raw materials needed for large-scale production. Troy's rail mills attempted to reorganize in the 1890s, but could not compete with technologically more advanced facilities along the Great Lakes. Although the stove foundries remained viable into the early twentieth century, and the manufacture of detachable shirt collars and cuffs grew in importance, Troy's leaders of large companies largely made their homes elsewhere.

Washington Park's period as the preferred place for the wealthy to live seems to have peaked about the mid-1870s. John Griswold lived in Washington Park until his death in 1872, but Chester Griswold moved out of Troy in 1875. Joseph Fuller, in 1871, was the last prominent industrialist to move into the neighborhood in the nineteenth century.

This peak coincides with a nation-wide depression that began in 1873. Although not particularly severe, the depression lasted about six years. Rail production fell, with 1874 production at 73% of 1872 production, and eastern rail mills suffered most severely. Were Troy's iron and steel companies affected particularly hard? Unfortunately, the readily available secondary sources do not provide an answer. Little has been written about the history of Troy in the twentieth century, the boosterish late nineteenth century sources ignore any indications of decline, and histories of the iron and steel industry cannot substitute for good local history.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw a minor resurgence of interest in Washington Park among the officers of Troy's most important companies. Fuller and Warren president Walter Phelps Warren lived at 200 Washington from 1909 until his death in 1914, and his widow and son continued to live in the neighborhood into the 1920s. Although no one from Cluett Peabody, Troy's leading collars and cuffs company, lived in the neighborhood, the industry was represented by James Ide, of George P. Ide & Company, who lived at 161 Washington from 1907 to 1923.

As Troy's industrial growth sputtered, many ambitious Trojans looked to larger cities to make or preserve their fortunes. Russell Sage, the most significant Gilded Age

magnate to have come from Troy, set the pattern when he moved from Washington Park to New York City in 1863. Although already both wealthy and influential in local politics, Sage hoped to amass a staggering fortune in railroad speculation. He succeeded, and only his money ever returned to Troy (after his death, through the philanthropy of his widow, Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage). James Burden, an officer in the Burden Iron Company, followed suit. In 1869 he bought a home in Washington Park for the orphaned children of his late brother Peter, but had moved to New York City by 1902, when he build himself a beaux-arts mansion there.

Park was home to great, but not spectacular, wealth. The grandest houses were built during the previous period. Most new construction served to fill in empty lots on Third Street, and was relatively restrained. A handful of buildings received fourth floor additions during this period, and two were updated with mansard roofs in the 1860s. Only two buildings had extensive façade changes, both during the 1880s. The most common improvement, the addition of a oriel window above the door, was done almost exclusively to the one-lot and smaller row houses with side halls. Here they served to expand cheaply the size of the small room immediately above the entryway.

This period of Washington Park's history survives most visibly in its buildings. They confirm that Washington

### **Sources**

While the analysis above is our own, it inevitably starts from a number of sources. Information on residents comes partly from our survey of Troy city directories. Information on James Burden's removal to New York City can be found at <http://www.cshnyc.org/rentals.htm>, as the Convent of the Sacred Heart makes his mansion there available for special events. Several other useful starting points for the researcher are:

Peter D. Shaver and Lorraine E. Weiss, "Walking Tour of Washington Park," in *A Private Ornamental Park: Washington Park, Troy, New York*, unpublished booklet (2000). Produced visitors to Washington Park during Troy's annual Victorian Stroll, this booklet presents the most recent primary-source research. Although the data presented contains gaps, this is an excellent starting point for understanding when homes were built or renovated, and who lived in the neighborhood from the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century.

Jeanne M. Keefe-Watkinson [a.k.a. Jeanne Spring], *Washington Park, Troy, N.Y.: Its Evolution and History*, unpublished senior thesis (1980). Although largely superceded by Shaver and Weiss, this work contains some data not available in other secondary sources. A copy of the report is available at the Rensselaer County Historical Society library.

Peter Temin, *Iron and Steel in Nineteenth-Century America: An Economic Inquiry* (1964). The standard source on the topic. Contains the best secondary account of how Griswold, along with his partners John Winslow and Alexander Holley, brought the Bessemer process to the United States.

Kenneth Warren, *The American Steel Industry, 1850-1970: A Geographical Interpretation* (1973). Argues the geographical reasons for the westward shift of the steel industry in the late nineteenth century. Contains the best secondary account of Troy's decline during the steel rail competition of the 1890s.

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.

A.J. Weise, *Troy's One Hundred Years* (1891). Yet another paeon to all things Trojan and laudable.

### **Research Questions**

- What happened to Troy's industry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? The primary sources needed to answer this question are not readily available.
- Many writers have argued that the middle class of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was more cautious and less entrepreneurial than the "robber barons" of the Gilded Age. To what extent was this true of Washington Park's residents, and to what extent did it affect the character of Washington Park?
- How were bay windows promoted in Troy, a center of the same iron industry that produced them? Were they economical space extenders, "modern" touches of elegance, or what?
- Why were a handful of houses updated, rather than their neighbors?