

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

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Jeanne M. Keefe-Watkinson [a.k.a. Jeanne Spring], *Washington Park, Troy, N.Y.: Its Evolution and History*, unpublished senior thesis (1980).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

Jonathon Barnett, *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.

Charles Lockwood, *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)?