

Modern Times: 1917-1946

In the interwar years, the character of the Washington Park neighborhood changed to reflect new expectations about desirable housing. The old days of large families in large houses, served by large numbers of servants, were over. The desirable city house was now compact, preferably on one floor, with a small all-electric kitchen that could be managed by a housewife with one or no servants.

Fewer than a dozen houses contained heads of more than one household in 1916, and only one (183 Second Street) seems to have been divided into four units. By 1926, half of the units in Washington Place were no longer single-family: three had been made into sets of one-floor and two-floor apartments, one was the St. Mary's church convent, and one belonged to Catholic Daughters of America. By 1946, about half the houses in the neighborhood were multi-family, and the most elaborately ornamented house on Second Street (191) housed the Italian Community Center. The number of adult residents in the neighborhood increased about 20% from 1926 to 1946.

Despite the presence of the Italian Community Center, very few names in the city directories between 1916 and 1946 are Italian. Irish names are numerous, in at least some cases representing families from South Troy who moved north as more elegant houses became available. There were also a large number of names that suggest Eastern European ancestry, possibly attracted by the synagogue on Third Street just blocks north of the park.

Downturn or Change?

Many of the new families were probably reasonably prosperous. In the 1940s, the new apartments at 204 Washington Street—steel magnate John Griswold's mansion, bequeathed to Russell Sage College by later owner George Van Santvoord and sold by the college in 1939—housed worthies such as Lester Rosengardt, vice-president of The Muhlfelder Company, which sold ladies' apparel at Third near Broadway, and Max Corbat, co-owner of the Cooper & Corbat clothing store on Congress Street. (His partner, Louis Cooper, lived in the park neighborhood at 183 Second Street.) Two doors east, 254 Washington Street, was owned by Isadore Kaufman, who ran the Up-to-Date Store, selling women's clothing and furs at 38 Third Street.

As the new century neared its halfway point, attorneys with political ambitions and descendants of captains of industry were gradually replaced by owners of smaller

commercial businesses, realtors, and white-collar office workers. A handful of doctors, nurses, contractors, and piano instructors ran businesses from their homes, as did two funeral directors (the John J. Healey funeral home, which had been at 192 Third Street since at least 1916, and the Washington Park Funeral Home, at 222 Third Street starting in the early 1930s).

Although the disparity between the wealth of Washington Park and the typical urban neighborhood had decreased during the interwar years, even in 1946 the neighborhood was more affluent than the norm. The sharp decline in Washington Park's fortunes came relatively late, after 1946.

At the beginning of WWI, the percentage of Washington Park's working residents employed in professional jobs (35%) and as managers, officials, or proprietors (35%) was more than triple the national averages in non-farm areas (7.4% and 9.1%, respectively). By the end of WWII, both the percentage of professionals (25%) and managers, officials, or proprietors (24%) had decreased, bringing it closer to a slightly increased national average (9.76% and 9.9%).

One peculiarity of this period was that Washington Park went from having half the average percentage of residents employed in sales to being slightly ahead of the national average in 1946 (10%). The percentage of semi-skilled workers had more than doubled from 1916 to 1946, and unskilled laborers had moved in at about the rate of the national average.

Were depression-era foreclosures a reason for the transfer of property at this time? Local historian Peter D. Shaver suggests this may be the case. However, it is also worth noting that some long-time home-owners bequeathed their houses to family members who were no longer interested in living in Troy, or in updating a home more than 50 years old. A combination of foreclosures and property in need of extensive remodeling probably made the neighborhood a more attractive investment for institutions, but these factors did not cause the sort of vacancies and demolitions that were seen in the adjoining Schoolhouse Neighborhood to the south.

Peaceful but Not Collegial

What remained was a family-oriented neighborhood inhabited largely by ethnic groups that would have been viewed with mild suspicion by the original owners of their homes. Perhaps most striking to anyone familiar with today's park neighborhood is how few college

students there were (perhaps a dozen, all living with their parents) and how many children there must have been. Not only was P.S. 10 still operating on Adams Street, directly behind Washington Place, but St. Mary's Church built a new school at 212 Third Street in 1916.

Among the many things we don't know at this point in the project is how the various ethnic groups viewed each other. They did not necessarily live side-by-side. Third Street was Irish, from the Connors of Connors Paint Manufacturing at 216 to the Hannans, Darbys, and Murnames at 238. The Irish tended to be police officers or small business owners, and at least half of the Irish families lived in single-family dwellings. Troy's Irish population had been large since the mid-1840s, and it was not uncommon for the more skilled laborers in the iron mills to have a second career in the police force. It seems most likely that these residents were not first-generation immigrants—and that a once-despised ethnic group had fulfilled the fears of the largely Presbyterian and Episcopal original residents and moved up from South Troy, in the direction of St. Mary's, as their incomes allowed them to purchase larger houses.

The names that might be presumed to be Jewish concentrated on Washington Street and the northern reaches of Second Street, and these residents typically

worked for or owned clothing-related businesses downtown. These Washington and Second Street buildings were generally both older and grander than Third Street houses. Where Washington Park's Jewish residents came from, when, and how they were received is an issue that requires additional research. The synagogue they most likely attended, Berith Sholom on Third between Division and Ferry, had existed since the 1870s, but where did its members live before 1936?

The reasoning behind placing the Italian Community Center in Washington Park is likewise currently unknown—and it may have been nothing more complex than the availability of an extravagantly Venetian building. Italians did not follow it to the neighborhood in significant numbers until after World War II. In 1946, the noticeably Italian residents lived at 205 Second Street, where the Franzoni, Vertone, and Verdile families shared a house. Is it significant that this house lies near where Washington Park meets the working-class Schoolhouse Neighborhood? Did Italians have somewhat of the downscale reputation that the Irish had endured two generations earlier? If they did, they would soon overcome it; the Irish and Jewish populations were largely replaced by Italians in the 1950s.

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

City directories from 1916, 1926, 1936, and 1946 were surveyed to trace broad changes in home ownership. These directories are available at the Troy Public Library.

Peter D. Shaver is a local historian and Washington Park resident frequently interviewed by local newspapers.

Walkowitz, Daniel J. *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana : University of Illinois, 1978). Walkowitz documents the upward mobility of the more skilled Irish laborers (molders and puddlers) into the Troy police force during the prior generation.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1960). This is our source for changes in national and local employment patterns.

Architectural and Urban History

Bare, Colleen Stanley. *The McHenry Mansion* (Modesto, CA: McHenry Mansion Foundation, 1985). This book, devoted to a Victorian mansion in a mid-sized California city, is unusual in covering how the mansion was converted into elegant apartments in the 1920s.

Clark, Clifford Edward Jr. *The American Family Home: 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1986). The development of the ideal of efficient living in a smaller, often single-storey, house is discussed in chapters five and six.

Warner, Sam Bass Jr. *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1995). In chapter six, Bass argues that the children of Irish immigrants in cities advanced in social class, and that their place as

“new” immigrants was taken early in the 20th century by a surge of Italian and Eastern European immigrants. This pattern seems to be illustrated in Washington Park.

Research Questions

- What proportion of properties changed hands in this period due to foreclosures, versus due to inheritance by people who did not wish to live in Washington Park?
- How did the Irish, Italian, and Eastern European Jewish populations interact? Were the Irish residents largely descended from iron mill workers? Why did the Italians and Eastern European Jews come to Troy?
- Did “grand” neighborhoods in other, similarly sized cities, see similar changes from single-family to multi-family living? Were changes related to whether a mid-sized city had grown since 1870? (In 1870, Troy was the 21st largest city in the U.S. By 1920, it was one of a much larger number of middle-sized cities.)