

Service Spaces

Changes in kitchen and bathroom technology may have been part of what drove the socio-economic decline of the neighborhood. Significant updates to services are expensive.

Heat

Although fireplaces appear in virtually every “important” room in Washington Park houses, it is doubtful whether these were ever used as the major form of heating in most houses. Stoves were already in use when Washington Place was built in 1840, and stoves continued to be the most popular form of heating in the U.S. through the nineteenth century. Between 1830 and 1870, while the U.S. population tripled, the number of stoves manufactured increased 80-fold. Troy was a major manufacturing center for iron stoves, producing 40,000 stoves in 1845 (about 20 percent of total national stove production).

Central hot-air heat had been available since 1820, and hot-water heat became available in the late 1860s. Neither system was as common as stoves. Hot-air heat started with a coal-fired basement furnace; the air was distributed by ducts that were often incorporated into the chimney breast. Hot-water heat also started with a coal furnace and used piping similar to today's radiators.

The presence of radiators does not indicate that the house has always had hot-water heat. Radiators were a common retrofit in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as stoves fell out of fashion. Very plain radiators indicate that the heating system was updated after WWI, though that may not have been the first update.

Light

Gaslight came to Troy in the late 1840s, almost a decade after Washington Place was built. Before that time, having light at night meant relying on candles or oil lamps. The oldest houses in the neighborhood would have been retrofitted for gas after it became available, but newer construction after the Civil War probably had gas from the beginning.

Gas fixtures hung from the center of the ceiling or were mounted to walls (very common in halls). No matter how attractive and “Victorian” the light fixture, if it does not have a central pole (rather than a chain), it is not the original gas fixture. Until quite late in the gaslight period, bowls on gas lamps had to point up to control the flame; very late globes may be enclosed. A downward pointing, unenclosed bowl is never a gas lamp, no matter what the renovation supply catalog claims.

Gas lighting was an improvement over candles for ambient light, but it was useless for task lighting, as the fixtures were stationary. A house lit by gas almost certainly used kerosene lamps as well, since the smaller lamps were portable.

To hazard a guess about when your house switched from gaslight to electric lamps, look for a change in ownership between 1885 and 1925. As the population of Washington Park aged in place, they were less likely to be able to afford an expensive retrofit with new technology--but new owners wanted modern conveniences. Early electric fixtures often mimicked gas fixtures (and were sometimes combined with them) or kerosene lights, though some “modern” fixtures made a point of showing off the bulbs. Electric fixtures generally have bowls that point downward, and a chain rather than a pipe connecting them to the ceiling.

Indoor Bathrooms

A very modern and affluent house might have a fitted bathroom as early as 1860. But don't use Washington Park's reputation as a ritzy neighborhood as proof that your house must have had a bathroom early! Check the fire maps for outbuildings, as the smaller houses probably had outhouses throughout the 19th century. Evidence is very difficult to assess, as bathrooms tended to be completely renovated, removing traces of earlier plumbing.

Clawfoot tubs most likely date from the 1880s through 1910s. The truly modern tub of the 1920s was formed in one piece, with a porcelain “skirt” where the claw feet used to be. By the 1930s, bathtubs looked essentially as they do today, and were available in a variety of fashion colors.

Pedestal sinks replace vanities during the era of the clawfoot tub. 1920s pedestal sinks are less elaborate than earlier ones. The 1930s sink is more likely to be wall-mounted, and it may have sharper, squarer lines as well. Sinks were colored to match the other fixtures.

The modern toilet appears about 1915 and looks so much like today's toilets that it is probably unwise to attempt to determine the date without a set of old catalogs in hand.

While the 19th-century bath was decorated as if it was a regular room, the 1920s bath is “hygienic,” with white tile and few ornaments. Masonite, plastic tiles, and other deformities of bathroom design are not necessarily post-WWII “improvements.” Masonite panels were touted as a stylish bathroom update in women's magazines of the 1930s.

Kitchen Design

The “decorated” kitchen is a post-WWII invention. It simply does not appear in earlier decorating books, except for injunctions to keep the room scrupulously clean and organized. The original kitchens in Washington Park homes, located in the back and most likely in the basement, probably had scrubbed pine floors (possibly covered with oil cloth), plastered and whitewashed walls, and little decor other than a rag rug and a comfortable chair for the cook.

Although cooking was rarely a job for the lady of the house in a neighborhood of Washington Park’s class--she might help out with dainty pastries if the cook could not be trusted--it is likely that most kitchens boasted the convenience of an enclosed cookstove. These coal-fired stoves, with their built-in ovens and water reservoirs, were modern, convenient, and locally made. The kitchen probably also had a sink connected to its pump, and an icebox.

Stove technology improved periodically throughout the late 19th century; look for evidence of stoves mounted one in front of the other, as the newer superseded the older. Linoleum replaced wood planks in the 1880s. But the real change came after 1900, with the rise of the efficient kitchen.

Sources

While the analysis above is our own, it inevitably starts from a number of sources, including many older decorating and entertaining books. The most useful starting point for the researcher is:

Merritt Ierley, *The Comforts of Home: The American House and the Evolution of Modern Convenience* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1999). This well-researched book is the central source for our speculations about household technology in Washington Park.

Research Questions

- When did electric power become widespread in Troy? Which neighborhoods embraced electricity first?
- How early did indoor plumbing become commonplace in Washington Park?
- How did the rise of the all-electric kitchen change floor plans in individual houses?

The old kitchen had been a large room of tables and cabinets. The new kitchen was designed to save steps, and its cabinets were fitted and permanent. The new kitchen took advantage of the availability of bakery bread, laundry services, and other conveniences; it was not designed for cooking large or complicated meals. Convenience foods, and a norm of serving fewer and plainer courses even at formal dinners, combined to make the old kitchen obsolete. The new kitchen could move upstairs into a small room or large hallway, and with apartment conversions, many did. Thus a kitchen with “old” looking cabinets may not be original at all!

The new kitchen was initially hygienic but soon became a center of decorating in “gay” color schemes such as red and white, green and white, or peach and gray. By the time Washington Park houses acquired modern kitchens, the lady of the house was doing her own cooking (helped by a range of new electric appliances), and she wanted a nice place to do it. All else being equal, relatively neglected Washington Park houses will have kitchens from the teens or twenties (with new appliances squeezed in), while homes that were continuously occupied are more likely to have kitchens that reflect the immediate post-WWII boom in consumer goods. Unless the house belonged to an owner-occupant or there was a catastrophe such as a fire, kitchens were rarely updated after about 1955; the neighborhood was not prosperous enough to justify updates.