

A Private Ornamental Park

Washington Park, Troy, New York

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**RENSSELAER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
WASHINGTON PARK ASSOCIATION**

Begun as a residential development by prominent citizens barely 20 years after Troy's rise from village to chartered City, designed and built in the architectural styles of several eras, and populated by waves of old Troy families, rising Irish families and later immigrants, Washington Park reflects the social and economic history of a community. The number of Troy mayors and other civic leaders who lived on the Park is impressive, the business and marriage connections among households are intriguing, and the businesses represented by the households are a reminder of Troy's history as an important industrial and commercial center. We are pleased to offer this guide to Troy's unique historic district.

The Rensselaer County Historical Society is a not-for-profit, membership organization dedicated to connecting local history with contemporary life. RCHS offers a number of programs, exhibitions and special events during the year. Our house museum, the **Hart-Cluett Mansion**, and **research library** are open to the public February through December 23. For more information, visit the museum at 59 Second Street, call (518) 272-7232 or visit our Web site at: www.rchsonline.org. Museum hours are Tues. - Sat., 10:00 am. to 4:00 pm. The library hours are Tues.-Fri., 1:00 to 4:00 pm. and Sat., 10:00 am. to 4:00 pm.

The Washington Park Association was formed at the beginning of the Park's formal establishment in 1840. The members are the owners of the houses

on Washington Place, the houses directly fronting the Park on Second, Third, and Washington Streets, and a small number of houses just north and south of the Park on Second and Third Streets. Dues are assessed annually and are used for the upkeep of the Park. The Association is run by an elected Executive Committee and meetings of the full membership. The organization also functions as a neighborhood association to promote and improve living and working in Troy. Washington Park is a private, ornamental park, enjoyed as the quiet, scenic front yard of the neighborhood.

Cover: Hopkins *Atlas of 1881*, Quote from 1840 partition deed

WASHINGTON PARK, TROY, NEW YORK

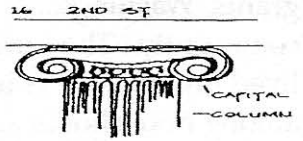
AN INFORMAL GUIDE TO THE ARCHITECTURE OF A NEIGHBORHOOD

Troy's Washington Park area is a beautiful showcase of urban architecture of the 19th century. From the 1830's through the 1880's, many of the City's prospering businessmen, lawyers and industrialists resided in houses around the park, an area convenient to downtown and to the manufacturing districts of South Troy. These houses, mostly the work of now unknown architects and builders, embody the prevailing tastes of the upper middle class at that time. When the economic means were available, advances in transportation and in construction technology enabled 19th century builders to consider the aesthetics of the structural elements and basic features that comprise a house. The perfected forms and ornament of the architecture held in high esteem at that time – from classical antiquity, medieval Europe, and the Renaissance – guided the design of the houses of Washington Park.

Greek Revival Houses

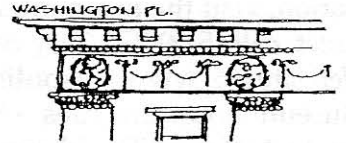
Greek Revival was the most popular architectural style when the develop-

ment of Washington Park began in the late 1830's. At 168 Second Street and vicinity



are four mid-1830's houses designed to evoke the dignity and importance of a classical Greek temple. They feature full-width porticos made up of triangular pediments originally supported by freestanding Ionic-style columns. First built as one-and-a-half stories tall, eventually each was raised to a full two stories, as the sections added to the columns indicate, and facade details were modified in the later 19th century.

The bold silhouette and austere detail more typical of urban Greek Revival style can be found at 250 Washington Street, a free-standing house built in the early 1840's (the doorway is ca. 1900) and at Washington Place, the large block along the south side of the



Park built 1839-1840. Borrowing from a concept prevalent at the time in London, Washington Place was designed to unify large individual houses into the monumental scale of a city palace. Across the entire facade, a series of pilasters supported a common entablature, all surmounted by a central triangular pediment, the remnants of which can be seen today. (Facade details were modified throughout the rest of the century; the more decorated entablature on buildings east of the pediment was added ca. 1900.)

Gothic Revival Houses

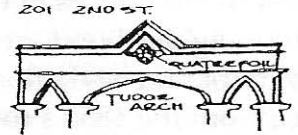
The Gothic Revival style recalled the church and castle architecture of the late Middle Ages, and was in use around the park until about 1855. Pointed arches, abstract leaf patterns (“foils”) and battlement-style parapet walls are some characteristic details.

The remarkably intact grouping of three houses at 201-203 Second Street shows a straightforward but fully developed application of Gothic Revival style to the rowhouse form, as well as its adaptation - on a modest

scale - of the terrace concept of Washington Place. (The doorways were restyled ca. 1860.)

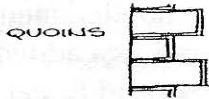
Notwithstanding numerous mid-20th century modifications, the thoroughly detailed design of the twin Gothic Revival houses at 177 and 179 Second Street is still evident. 204 Washington Street is the Gothic Revival example among the several freestanding houses around the Park.

(Its front porches are ca. 1860 additions in the same style; its cornice and windows were modified in the mid-20th century.) Behind an embellishment of balconies and railings added ca. 1890 at 191 Second Street is the original facade, worth noting for the simplicity of line rather than ornament expressing its Gothic Revival design. (The doors are a late 20th century restoration.)



Italianate Houses

Based upon the Renaissance era palazzos of Florence and Rome, the Italianate style quickly rose to prominence and became the preferred building style through much of the 19th century. Its popularity derived in part due to the ease of borrowing from an urban residential precedent, as opposed to reinventing the signature forms of temples or cathedrals. Most of the houses in the Washington Park neighborhood are Italianate, given that the style flourished in the area from the 1850's to about 1870. Typical characteristics of the style include bracketed cornices, projecting lintels, heavily moulded (often arched) window and door surrounds, decorative balconies with railings, and raised edge-blocks of stone ("quoins").



189 Second Street is an early example of the Italianate style (the exterior doors were added ca. 1910). With a restrained use of architectural ornament, the massing and scale of the five-bay facade are used to convey the sober elegance of its Renaissance models. A less imposing but more exuberant facade can be seen at 206 Third Street. The clustering of win-

dows into a two-bay facade at 193 Second Street emphasizes its vertical axis and counterbalances the oversized lintels; note the faces disguised as leafy buds staring down from the cornice (the doors are late 20th century). 197 Second Street contains Gothic Revival doorway and cornice details in an Italianate facade.

By the late 1850's, moulded arch openings, e.g. 185 Second Street were used without lintels. In the 1860's, the upper portions of plain curved-top openings were often capped with shallow hoods of carved brownstone or of cast or sheet metal painted to look like brownstone, e.g. the houses south from 222 Third Street to Adams Street (except 228 Third Street). The brownstone facades among these buildings are actually brick covered with a layer of stucco, carefully applied and modeled to look like blocks of stone (e.g. 234 Third Street).

As with new construction at the time, Italianate was the style most often chosen to update earlier buildings. Every house on Washington Place, for example,

was altered in some way with Italianate detailing. Adding a second story oriel (sometimes erroneously called a "bay window") became a common way to remodel a facade. At 195 Second Street, its original late-Greek Revival appearance was substantially changed ca. 1860 by an oriel and by window sash rebuilt to look like segmental arched windows. (The doorway and side bay window are ca. 1900.)

Houses in Other Styles, and Architectural Eclecticism

By the time the Italianate style had run its course, there was little buildable space remaining around the Park. Thus, other styles are represented largely by additions and alterations to pre-existing houses. The distinguishing feature of Second Empire (a style somewhat concurrent with Italianate), the mansard roof, was integrated as a fourth story on the already substantial Italianate house at 200 Washington Street, later modified again with one-story and two-story bay windows in the Romanesque Revival style on its Second Street facade. 220 Third Street was built using some of the elements without the associated massiveness of the Romanesque Revival. 161 Washington

Street, originally a plain rowhouse facing Second Street, was completely rebuilt ca. 1890 in Italian Romanesque style.

Queen Anne and Aesthetic Revival (Eastlake) styles were essentially collections of shapes, elements and decorations from medieval and early Renaissance English architecture (including domestic architecture) and, in the Queen Anne style, classical elements and decoration (but not classical proportions). 169 Second Street is an originally built example of this eclecticism. 216 Third Street and 218 Third Street were built in the Eastlake style, while 183 Second Street is an example of extensive facade alterations in this style.

The Classical Revival (also called the Colonial Revival) style was based on mid-18th century derivations of ancient Greek and Roman designs. The facade of 228 Third Street was remodeled in this style, and it is the style of many of the alterations to buildings in the Washington Park area ca. 1900.

The Park as Built Environment
Washington Park itself expresses

mid-19th century ideals for the urban environment. In keeping with the landscape philosophies of the time, it was planted with tall-growing trees to provide a “sublime” and “picturesque” effect. The flowerbeds and ornamental trees are later improvements. A fence, paths and a fountain in the Park’s center may have been features of its 19th century design. The existing fence is ca. 1880. Most, if not all, of the houses around the Park also had iron fencing along their sidewalk frontage. Many of these fences survive, and their pattern and decoration were intended to complement the styles of their respective buildings.

For Further Reading and Information

The Troy Public Library and the Rensselaer County Historical Society library contain titles covering 19th century architecture and design, and have archives of period photographs of Troy.

ORIGINS OF WASHINGTON PARK

Peter D. Shaver

The area of Troy’s Washington Park was part of the large holdings of the Vanderheyden family, which were purchased from the Van Rensselaer family in the early 18th century and encompassed most of the present city of Troy.

Established as a village in 1789, and chartered as a city in 1816, Troy grew rapidly. By the early 1830’s one of the primary residential sections extended along First, Second and Third Streets between River Street and Division Street, just two blocks north of the site of Washington Park. In 1834, Thaddeus Bigelow and Sylvester Norton bought a 14-acre tract of land from Lewis and Jacob Gebbard of Philadelphia for \$13,000. The rectangular tract was bounded on the north by Washington Street, on the west by First Street, on the east by Hill Street, and extended 750 feet south to present-day Adams Street. During the next six years other partners bought interests in

Originally prepared by T. Opalka and S. Draper of the Hudson-Mohawk Industrial Gateway; revised September 2000 by Wende Feller and Joseph Abbey of the Washington Park Association.

the property and some sold off their interests.

Transactions among the various park partners reveal that soon after 1834 there must have been discussions about the development of an exclusive residential area surrounding a park. The New York State precedent for such a scheme was the 1831 establishment of New York City's Gramercy Park, a private, urban park to be owned by and enjoyed by the surrounding property owners who would pay for its upkeep.

On March 30, 1840, the six owners of the 14-acre parcel encompassing today's Washington Park formally divided their property among themselves. It formally divided the park and surrounding area into building lots, established the setback of the houses within the park boundary and set aside a central square section as a private park. It also described the park boundary and defined which properties would be assessed for its construction and upkeep and would thereby benefit from its use. This partition deed and its accompanying map became the basis for all subsequent property transfers in the area.

The lots owned by the partners extended beyond today's park, and were located on First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Hill Streets between Washington and Adams Streets. Only 66 of the 124 lots were to be included in the park: 46 of the lots bordered the new park and another 20 adjacent to the park were included in the park boundary. (Sixty-six is also the number of lots on Gramercy Park.) The lots fronting the park are larger than those in the surrounding area. Those on the south on Washington Place are the largest, 28 by 170 feet, and lots on the Second and Third Street fronting the park are 27 by 130 feet. The lots on Washington Street conformed to the street grid north of the park.

Little can be derived from the 1840 partition deed or map about specifications for the park's initial design. It describes a "private ornamental park for the use and recreation of the lots fronting said park" and states that the owners would be charged for "fencing, improving, ornamenting, planting, keeping, and maintaining said park and the walks and streets

around the same." There are no details about the landscape design on the 1840 map, except for the curved corners indicated on the map which are still reflected in the park's iron fence. The first fence around the park, mentioned in the 1839 deed, could have been iron or wood; there is no documentation as to its material or cost.

The partners at the time of the 1840 partition deed included six prominent Trojans and their wives: Sylvester and Eliza M. Norton, John P. and Maria J. Cushman, Griffith P. and Phebe A. Griffith, Jonas C. and Catherine Heartt, Albert P. and Emily F. Heartt, and Joel and Caroline Mallary. All of the men were prominent businessmen or professionals in Troy and were active in banking, transportation interests, and city government. It is difficult to provide a profile of their wives, but there is some evidence that some of them had independent means, possibly providing substantial funds for their husbands' park venture. Only the Heartt brothers were born in Troy, but all of the partners were well established and most lived in the affluent neighborhood near downtown Troy.

By 1840, the park was "in fence" and most of the row of brick houses on Washington Place was completed. These were the earliest buildings actually fronting the park. That they were planned to be the most important buildings on the park is evidenced by the wider and deeper lots and the fact that four out of the six partners chose Washington Place as their place of residence. It is likely the row was architect-designed as it rivals most of the so-called terraces built in New York City at the time, but no contracts have yet been found regarding the architect.

Once the partition deed was executed, the partners began selling off their lots in a dizzying array of transactions which lasted for another 25 years. By 1860, the lots on Washington Place, Second Street, and Washington Street were all occupied by buildings. Third Street was much slower to develop and only had seven buildings facing the park. All of the buildings were built of masonry, either of brick or brick with stone fronts, as specified in most of the property deeds.

The annual assessment of properties for the maintenance and improvement of the park seems to have been the primary function of the Washington Park Association as established in 1840. The earliest assessment found to date is for 4 Washington Place, \$5 for the year 1856. As a full assessment, this would mean that the total amount collected for all properties that year was approximately \$275. It is likely that during the 19th and early-20th centuries the assessments paid for at least one full-time gardener and a helper.

Washington Park was probably well maintained for the first 75 years, but in the early 20th century the park began to decline along with the sur-

rounding neighborhood and much of downtown Troy. Most of the houses were divided up into flats or apartments. It appears that by the mid-20th century the park itself was in disrepair despite a few responsible owners still maintaining their houses. At some point, assessments were no longer collected by the Washington Park Association. In the 1960's the association was revitalized and since then the park has once again been maintained by the surrounding property owners. In 1973, the Washington Park neighborhood was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and, in 1977, was designated as Troy's first historic district.

WALKING TOUR OF WASHINGTON PARK

Buildings, People, and Events

The tour begins at the northern end of the park boundary on Second Street north of Washington Street, continues south on Second Street, east on Washington Place, north along Third Street and continues across Washington Street back to Second Street.

Note: Dates given for buildings may differ from those on house plaques. This may be due to more recent research or because a plaque commemorates the residency of a particular family.