

# Troy Rowhouses

**HVVA Study tour**  
**16 May 2015**

Today's tour offers an opportunity to examine two pairs of buildings, constructed roughly 10 years apart. The first house—the Richard and Betsey Hart house, was constructed in 1827-29 as a present for one of the city's wealthiest young couples. The second house, 180 Fourth Street, was built at the same time as a rental property for the same clients.

The second pair of structures consist of two terraces, again built at the same time, by the same builders. While Washington Place was likely designed by an architect, the floor plans of each of its 10 dwellings are fairly conventional side-passage plans. Several of the mechanics—mason, tinsmith, carpenters, etc.—who worked on Washington Place constructed Franklin Place as a modest terrace of their own homes. Comparison of the two pairs of dwellings—their level of finish, scale, and amenities—is revealing of both standards of living among different classes of people of the period and expectations with respect to how status and class were publicly displayed.

## *Background*

Troy was a small city with a population of less than 8,000 people in 1825.<sup>1</sup> Its first public buildings, erected in the 1790s, were uniformly constructed in the brick vernacular Georgian style popular in the New England towns where most of the people relocating to the city had their origins. Many of the earliest houses were constructed of wood and several were built of brick. Of this second group only the house at 22 Second Street [c.1796] remains.<sup>2</sup> This three-bay two-story house built of brick laid in Flemish bond has its roof-ridge parallel to the street and is raised on a low ashlar brownstone basement about two and a half feet above the pavement. Its window lintels are now obscured by Victorian-era additions but typically were of brick or brownstone with splayed ends.

Surviving masonry houses constructed in the compact part of the city during the first decade of the nineteenth century include 12 Second Street and 12 State Street, which feature splayed brick window lintels; as well as 20-22 First Street [c.1803], 28 First Street [c.1805] and 41 Second Street [c.1803] which all share low brownstone basements and splayed brownstone lintels. The brick facades of these houses are all laid-up in Flemish bond.

The second decade of the nineteenth century saw a further increase in the scale of the city's houses and the utilization of more elaborate decorative schemes. Brownstone was used more extensively, notably in the construction of the impostes and arches of 'blind arcades.' Among those buildings featuring this device are the Bank of Troy at the northwest corner of First and State streets [1811], with blind arcades on its two street elevations;<sup>3</sup> the Wool house at 75 First Street [1812]; and the Dickenson house [c.1814] formerly at 19 Second Street, which was further ornamented with a wrought-iron balcony.

The Vail house, at 46 First Street [1818], was among the first Troy houses with a high basement, in this case approximately six feet above street level.<sup>4</sup> Although the building has ornate window lintels

with a raised central panel and incised decoration on its street elevations, the garden facade has the older splayed brownstone type. The three-bay house continues local tradition by having a brownstone basement and brick laid in Flemish bond. The Vail house contains sophisticated woodwork, marble mantles, and an elegant three-story spiral stair in its main hall. The fanlight over the entrance is a feature that first became popular in the region at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The recession of the late 1810s deeply affected Albany-Troy area building-trades practitioners. As opportunities for employment decreased, many mechanics relocated to larger cities. While information on Troy builders for the period is sketchy, several prominent Albany builders are known to have gone south to New York City at this time.<sup>5</sup> Seth and Darius Geer, Asher Riley, Lewis, Rufus, Charles and Henry Farnham, and Calvin and Otis Pollard- all former Albanians- are recorded as arriving in New York in the years following 1817.<sup>6</sup> Some of these men returned to Albany after the opening of the Erie Canal. Others, including the Pollards and [Seth] Geer & Riley, were to become among the most successful builders in New York.

A disastrous fire had destroyed much of River and First streets in 1820, but the economic impact of the opening of the Erie Canal helped compensate for this setback. As the decade proceeded, the city expanded east and south. To the south houses as far as Liberty Street were constructed along First and Second streets. To the east the city grew as far as Fifth Avenue. These buildings were typically two- or three-story structures. Many of them survive today, frequently masked by later alterations.

While marble quarried in Vermont had been in use in the Albany region from at least the turn of the nineteenth century<sup>7</sup> its utilization in a Troy building is dateable only to circa 1820. A row of three still-extant speculative houses at 35-39 First Street [1820] has high marble basements, windowsills, and lintels. In their original form the lintels of this row appear to have had a raised central panel not dissimilar to those used at the Vail house across the street. A pair of contemporary houses at 156-58 Third Street has marble watertables, door lintels, and windowsills.<sup>8</sup> The marble for both of these groups of houses probably came from quarries in Vermont or Massachusetts, which were supplying area markets as early as 1802.<sup>9</sup>

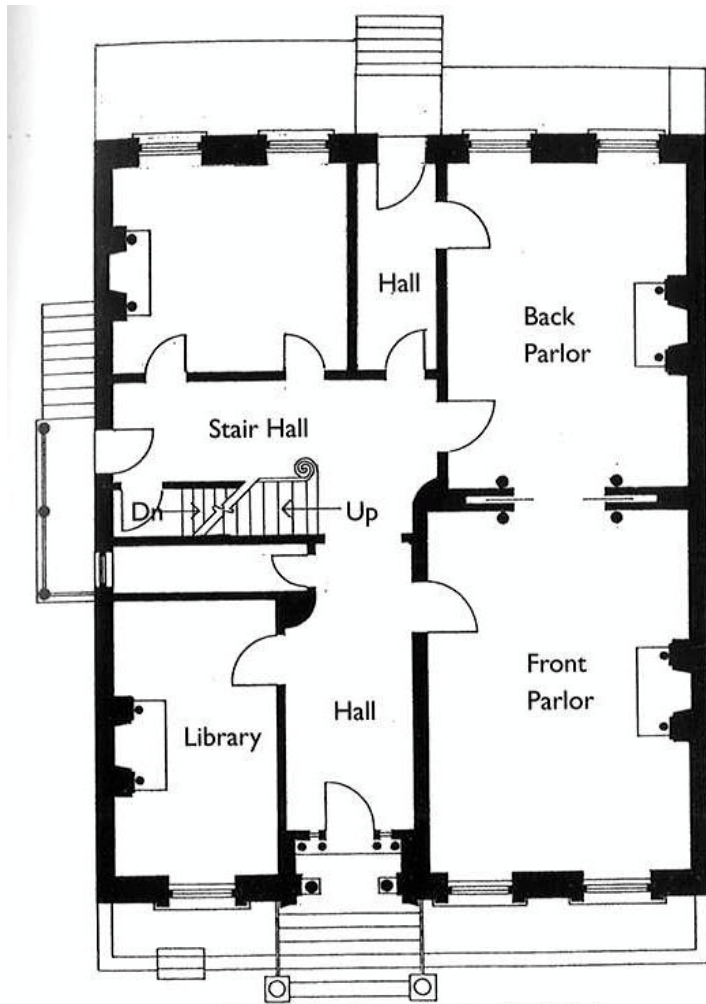
By 1825 economic prosperity had returned to the area, bolstered by the opening of the Erie Canal. A growing number of artisans settled in the city of Troy, including cabinetmakers, artists and silversmiths; there were no architects active in the city until sometime later. While a small body of artisans provided for the needs of Troy's elite, it is clear that the citizens also relied heavily on imports from American and European sources. Wealthier families purchased furniture, china, silver and art from New York City-based artisans or importers.<sup>10</sup> In this the people and merchants of Troy participated in a national trend which had been gaining force since the end of the War of 1812. By the mid-1820s a number of Troy vendors offered clothing, china, exotic foods, and beverages shipped from New York and more-distant ports.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Hart house vs the Hart tenant house*

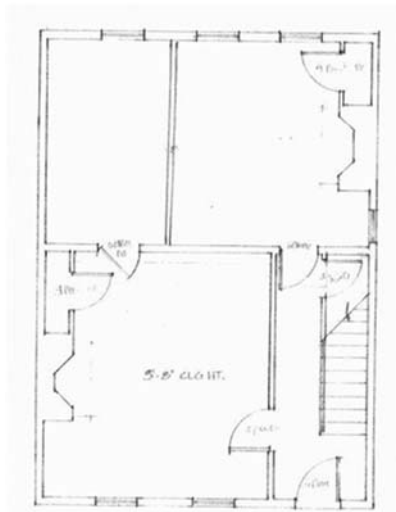
The marble front of the Hart's house served as an expensive billboard, which proclaimed the family's high economic and social status. The size and scale of the house, and details and materials used

throughout, are meant to underline and lay claim to this status. The four-bay plan features paired parlors, with additional rooms and a larger stair accommodated by the greater-than-standard width of the house. The west elevation of the house was originally five bays wide.

As originally constructed, the Hart tenant house took the form of what is sometimes called a “half hall” house, its stair hall extending only half way back, and featuring two principal rooms, offset from one another. This plan type is one frequently encountered in Albany and Troy (among other places); it is known from examples dating to as early as the 1790s and as late as the 1880s. The plan in the present example was modified early on by the removal of one of the original partitions, and the house was expanded several times.



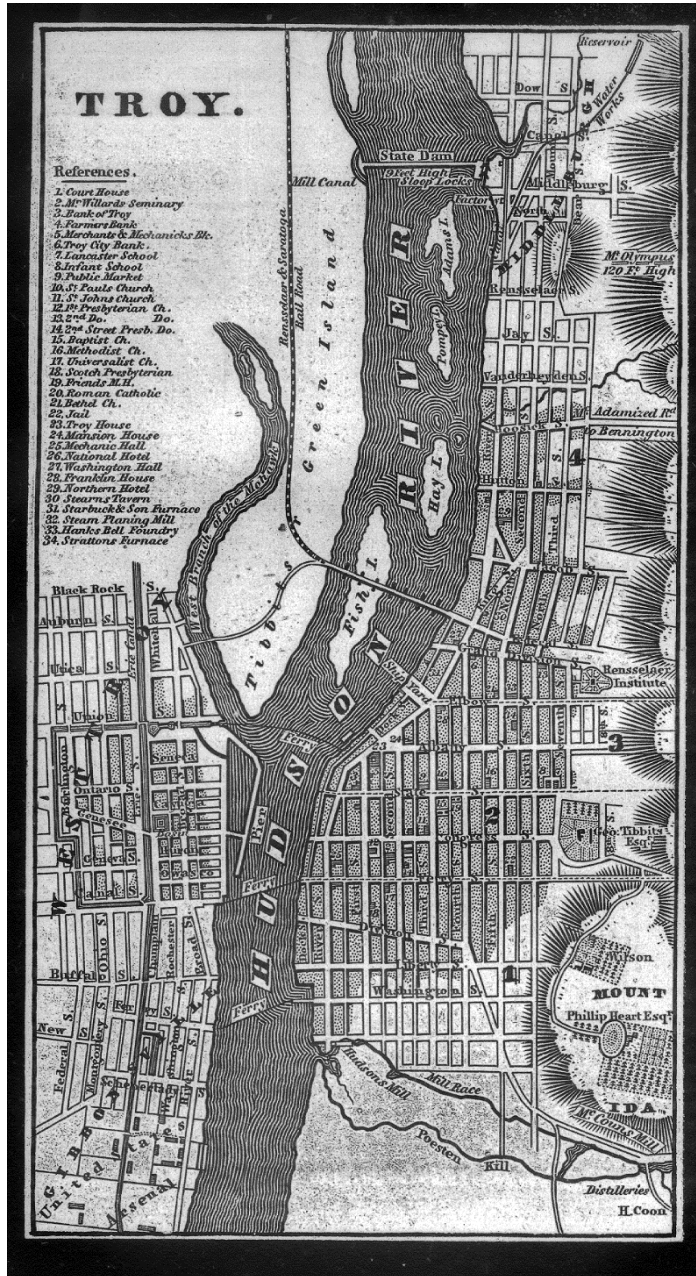
148 59 Second Street, first floor plan, 1827, D. G. Bucher, 1999.



180 Fourth Street, as originally built, to the same scale.

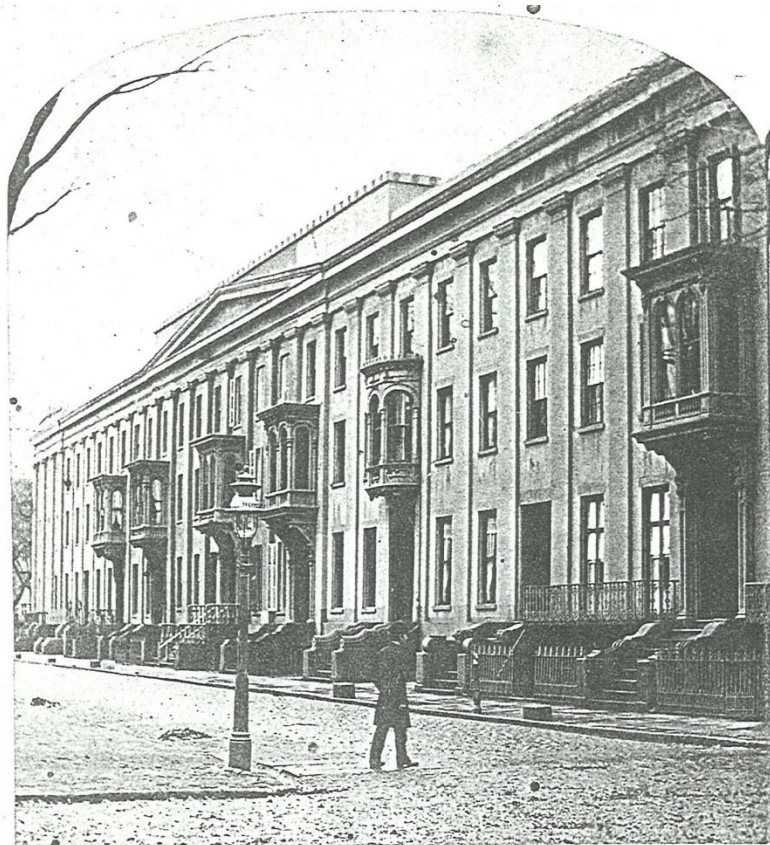
## Places of Troy

The city increased in population and wealth subsequent to the opening of the Erie and Champlain canals in the late 1820s, and one of the first areas to be developed was the southernmost of the three Vanderheyden farms, which occupied most of the area south of today's Division Street.



A direct result of the decision to lay Troy out in a system of gridded streets was the creation of standardized lots, and the availability of groups of lots as blocks were laid out. This fueled speculative building, and resulted in the construction of a number of block long rows of houses—alternatively called “places,” “terraces,” or “rows,” throughout the city. A similar phenomena was occurring contemporaneously in New York City, as the metropolis expanded northward into areas that were more regularly gridded. Frequently these rows were named after national heroes or historical figures, Troy rows bore names such as “Clinton Place,” “Irving Place,” and “Harrison Place.” The largest of these rows in the city was Washington Place.

Troy, 1836. From Gordon's Gazetteer.

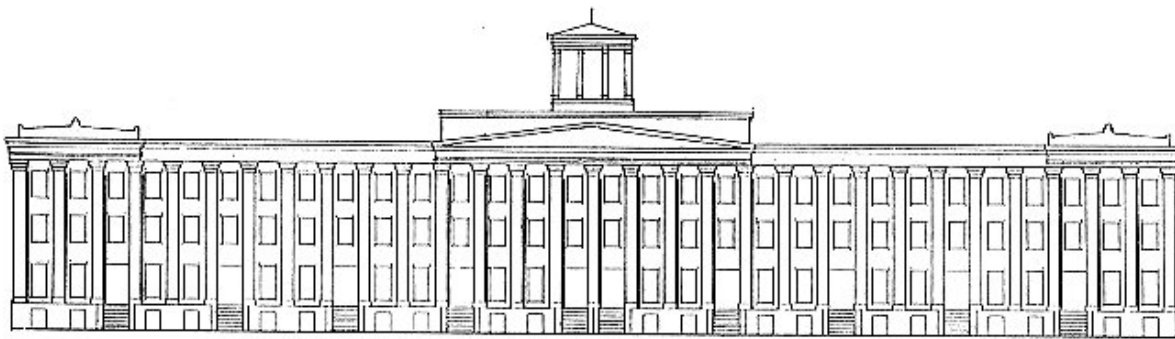


View of Washington Place, c. 1875 (Collection RCHS).

### *Washington Place*

This group of ten large rowhouses was constructed c.1836-42 by various builders, including John B. Colegrove, builder of the Hart house. The project was a speculative one, and its completion was no doubt delayed by the Panic of 1837. The earliest views of the row we have show an enormous cupola straddling the center two houses; in the form of a Greek temple, it appears to have served as a belvedere. Close examination of the houses as they exist today confirms the accuracy of the reconstruction

drawing below: both the end houses and the central two houses of the row project slightly, and add a subtle quality to the row, modulating it a bit. The original paint scheme appears to have been white for the columns and dove gray for the background- which would have accentuated its temple-like appearance.



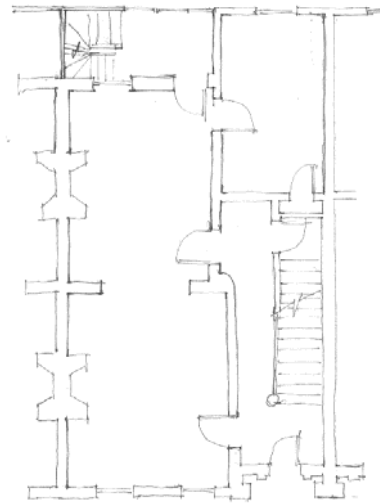
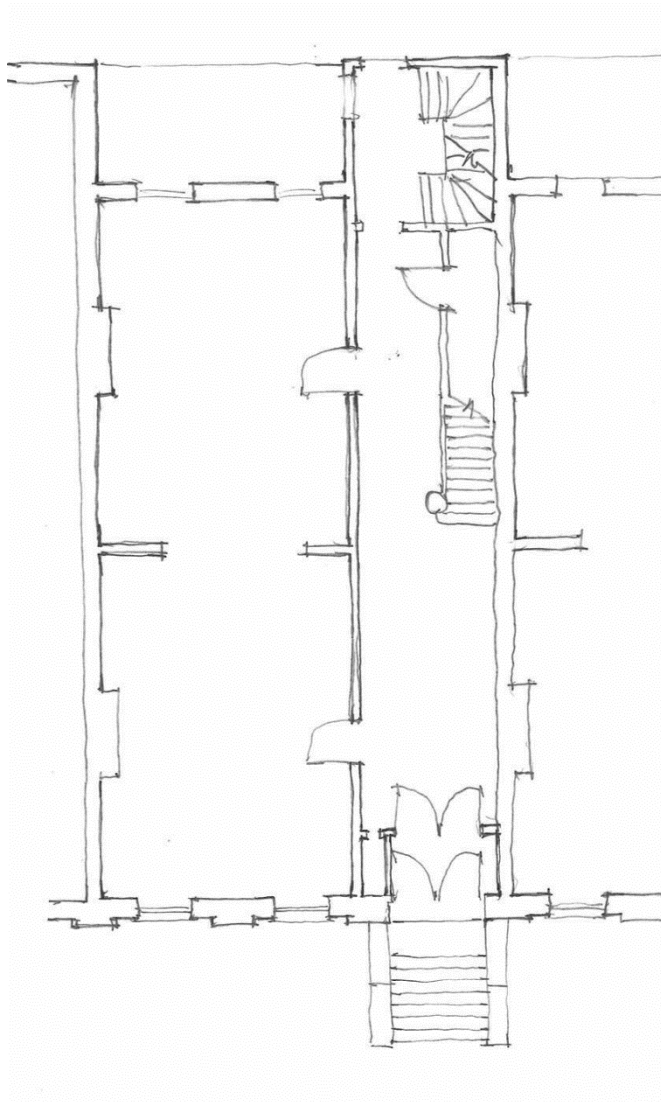
Reconstruction of Washington Place as originally built (Doug Bucher).

Although constructed over a six year period, and by different builders, a basic agreement with respect to the overall form of the row, and with respect to the plan of each house appears to have been part of the development scheme. With minor variations, each house was constructed with a side passage plan featuring two large rooms on each of the principal floors. While the first floor rooms were connected through the interior partition by a large pilastered arch, small service rooms including pantries, closets, and wash rooms were located in between the front and back rooms on all the other floors. A



projection behind the main staircase is believed to have housed a service stair, and in the upper floors served as a tea room.

Because of their status and large size, houses in the Washington Place row were subjected to many alterations and additions. Most were subdivided by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and many of the interiors were altered by the updating of their finishes to reflect the latest styles. By the 1980s, the large size of the houses became a disincentive to their maintenance, and most of the row fell on hard times. Today all of the houses have been renovated.



Sketch plans of a typical house in Washington Place and Franklin Place, to the same scale.

### *Franklin Place*

Troy carpenter Norton Sage purchased the property that is today Franklin Place in 1835.<sup>12</sup> His involvement in the project is unknown, however, as he acted as neither builder nor carpenter for the row. Rather, the builders of the row were some of the men then engaged in constructing Washington Place. The Franklin Place houses were probably begun in 1838 or '39—possibly during a hiatus in work on the larger row—and were substantially complete by March 1840 when Warner E. Cheney

[mason for the project, who moved into number 5 Franklin Place] and Stephen Coby [carpenter, who later occupied number 2] petitioned the Troy Common Council for leave to cover a “New Block of Brick Buildings at the Corner of Liberty and Fourth Street with Shingles” and “procured evidence of the notice of the intended application being published and the consent of the owners of the surrounding property.”<sup>13</sup> This was necessitated by a recent fire code passed by the city. Sage appears to have initially retained ownership of the lots before selling them outright to the occupants after completion of the row.

The interiors of Franklin Place vary slightly, just as they do at Washington Place. Differences in woodwork, hardware and styles and forms of mantles used in each house vary according to the occupants’ taste as well as pocketbook. Some of the details used in the row were taken directly from the Washington Place houses.



“Egyptian” marble mantle in first floor of 3 Franklin Place.



Painted wood mantle in first floor of 2 Franklin Place.

The plan of each house in the row was identical, featuring a side passage extending two-thirds of the depth of each house, with a small room behind the stair. This room projected beyond the brick bearing wall, and served to partially enclose a porch, which also included a small service stair. Only one of the houses retains this feature today.



Service stair in 3 Franklin Place, previous to its removal.

Kitchens and family dining rooms were located in the basements. Some variation between the houses exists in the arrangement of rooms on that floor—at least one of the houses was built with interior pantries, and one of the houses features a larger kitchen fireplace with a bake oven.

When originally constructed, the elevation of Liberty Street (Franklin Place) was much lower; the present basement was at or near grade at that time. A landslide on nearby Mt. Ida resulted in a large amount of earth traveling as far west and south as Washington Park, and resulted in the decision to raise the elevation of this formerly low-lying area. The original grade is preserved behind the houses, in the small—now sunken—yards.

The second floor plan of each house is nearly identical to that of the first floor, except a single door originally connected the front and rear rooms, and a small dressing room is located over the stair hall. All of the houses in Franklin Place were subdivided into flats in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, except number 2. In each case the second floor was altered so that the front room on the second floor could be used as a parlor. Additions of various shapes and sizes were added to the backs of each of the houses, to accommodate additional bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms.

The attic, or third floor level of each house was finished according to the needs of the owner. In some of the houses the space was left undivided; in others, it was divided into two or more small bedchambers.

--W. R. Wheeler





Franklin Place in 1848 (seen at center, looking northwest). View shows the rear (south) elevation of the row, and the east end house, now gone.



Detail from a stereoview taken in 1860, showing Franklin Place. The earliest known photograph of the row.

Portions of this text were previously published in 1999 in a series of articles I wrote on Troy architecture. Additional passages are reproduced from my essay in *The Marble House in Second Street*.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur James Weise, *History of the City of Troy*. Troy: William H. Young, 1876, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> David Buel, Jr. in his "Troy for Fifty Years" published in the *Trojan Sketch Book* [Troy: Young & Hartt, 1846, p. 16] says that among the first five houses constructed of brick were the James Spencer house [1795], and 31 First Street, 20-22 Second Street and the house at the corner of River and Washington streets [1796]. Twenty Second Street was razed at about the time Buel wrote. Construction dates cited throughout this essay have been determined using four basic sources: deeds, city directories, local histories and personal assessment based on a knowledge of early nineteenth century construction techniques and technologies.

<sup>3</sup> The Bank of Troy building was principally a residence, with two rooms on the first floor reserved for banking activity.

<sup>4</sup> The City of Troy passed an ordinance in 1816 prohibiting the extension of stoops more than six feet from the front of a building. [*Laws and Ordinances...of the City of Troy*. Troy: Parker & Bliss, 1816, p. 41, cited in Diana S. Waite. *Ornamental Ironwork: Two Centuries of Craftsmanship in Albany and Troy, New York*. Albany: Mount Ida Press, 1990, p. 25. This was likely a reaction to proposals to construct houses with high basements. The first dwellings constructed with tall basements thus turned their stairs to run perpendicular with the street, or spiraled down to the sidewalk. Among these early houses are the Vail house, the houses at 35-39 First Street [1820], noted below, 42 [now razed], 45 and 54 Second Street [c.1825-28], and 132 First Street [c.1831]. See Waite, *Ornamental Ironwork*, pp. 24-36 for more on this type of ironwork.

<sup>5</sup> A contemporary account by Henry Bradshaw Fearon notes that "A large body of mechanics recently left here for want of employment;- the wages given to those who remain are the same as at New York..." suggesting that they left for want of employment only. [Joel Munsell, comp. *Collections on the History of Albany* 2. Albany: J. Munsell, 1867, p. 334.]

<sup>6</sup> *New York City Directory* for the years 1817-27.

<sup>7</sup> See Peter McNab's account book. The now-lost original was photocopied and has been deposited at the Albany Institute of History and Art, McKinney Library, Albany, New York and in the Philip Hooker Research Collection [SC20924], New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Albany, New York.

<sup>8</sup> These houses were originally two stories high and built of brick laid in Flemish bond on a tall basement, and featured jack arches for window lintels.

<sup>9</sup> Gravestones of marble dating to the eighteenth century are known in the area.

<sup>10</sup> The Hart Papers do not extend as far back as the 1820s, but it is clear that they participated in this trend. The purchasing habits of a contemporary Rensselaer County Family are preserved in the Akin Family Papers [14723], New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Albany, New York.

<sup>11</sup> For example *The Troy Sentinel* for the year 1825 carried advertisements by Southwick, Cannon & Warren, for clothing and cloth from England, France, India and America, purchased in New York; Lockwood & Redfield for imported carpeting from Great Britain; Miss Eliza Flack and Miss C. Sheldon for the latest fabrics from New York; and French & Hart for imported teas and sherry.

<sup>12</sup> Deeds, Rensselaer County Courthouse, [28 July 1835], 37: 36.

<sup>13</sup> Troy Common Council Minutes, 19 March 1840.