

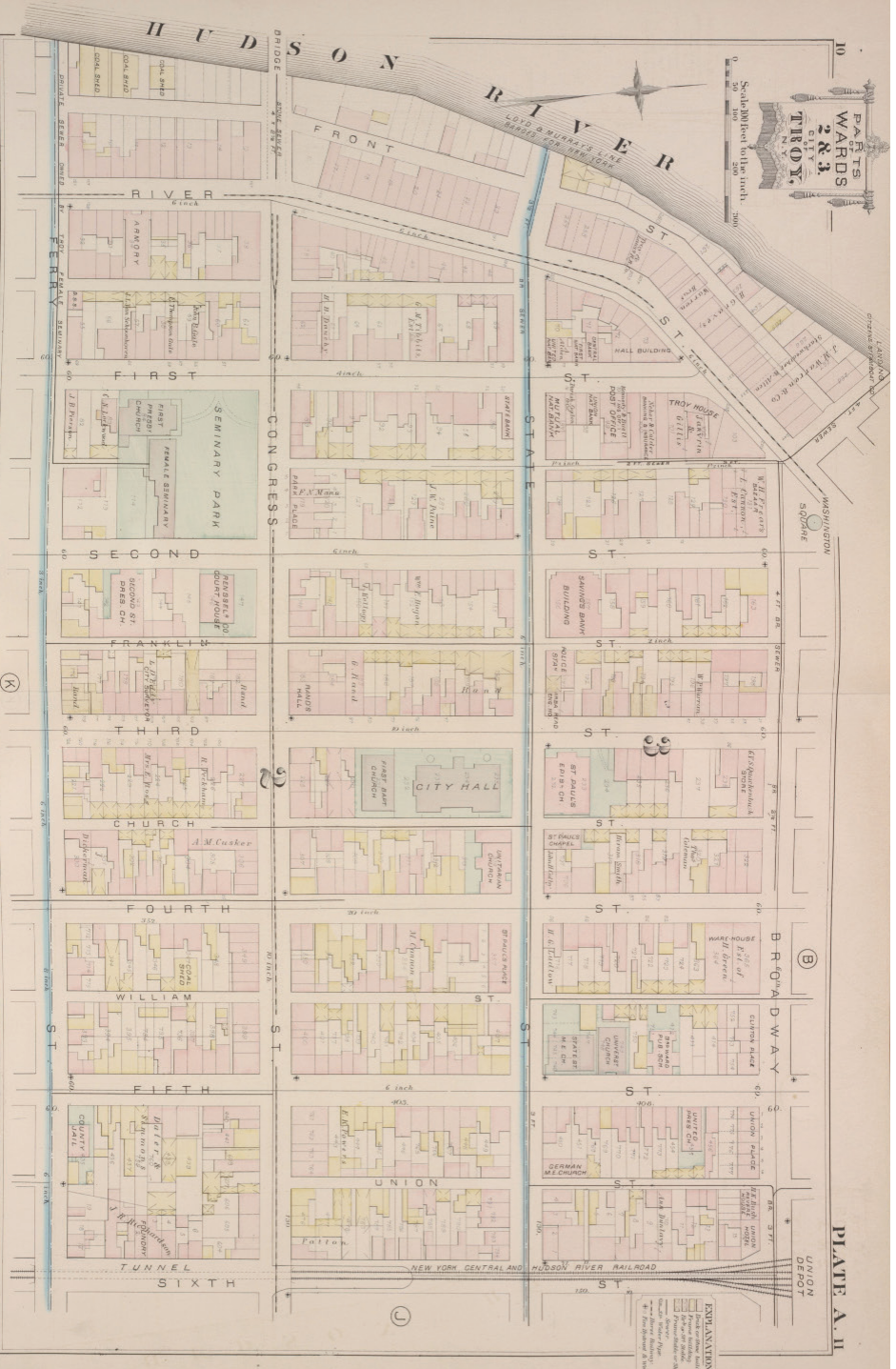
Kaleidoscope

A history of the early years of YWCA of the Greater Capital Region

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PARTS
WARDS
2 & 3
CITY
OF
TROY

Scale: 100 feet to the inch
300
200
100
0



EXPLANATIONS
 The colored lines and dots on this map represent the following:
 - Blue lines: Water bodies
 - Red lines: Streets
 - Yellow lines: Building footprints
 - Green lines: Parks and open spaces
 - Black lines: Railroad lines
 - Dashed lines: Proposed streets
 - Small squares: Fire hydrants
 - Small circles: Telephone poles
 - Small triangles: Streetlights
 - Small squares with dots: Gas valves
 - Small squares with crosses: Sewer manholes
 - Small squares with stars: Water towers

PLATE A II
UNION DEPT

YWCA of the Greater Capital Region Inc. began in Troy as part of international efforts to help people who faced radically new lives in the mid-late 19th century.

The industrial revolution pulled people from rural areas to work in factories, uprooting workers from familiar patterns. Additionally, wars and financial crises changed the texture of everyday life. Civic-minded people felt a duty to address the problems that they saw, and one answer began in London, 1855, where women formed a prayer group, and a rooming house for nurses who served in the Crimean War. Similar groups soon followed in New York City and Boston; Boston was the first to use the name Young Women's Christian Association. Education, prayer, and housing were the core work of these groups, and of the Troy Young Women's Association.

"In 1882 it became apparent to a group of conscientious women of Troy that the community had a responsibility to do something, not only to safeguard unprotected girls, but to provide recreation and elementary course of education for them," said Miss Helen L. Bull, YWCA leader in 1957, describing the organizations' beginning. Thirty-five women met in the Keenan Building, and in January 1883 officially formed a nondenominational group, led by 48 women and representing 20 different churches.

Initially, the Young Women's Association ran free classes "to meet the crying need for educational advantages among the working girls and women" from a single room in the Keenan Building. Classes were so well attended that within three months the group moved into the former Manufacturer's Bank. Courses trained women for clerical jobs and built their sewing, dressmaking, and hat-making skills. The larger goal was broader than work, though, but to support and elevate girls morally, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. "Always a friend, never a patron," was the motto.¹

At the YWA, women also had the opportunity to learn elocution, music, art, and gymnastics. Members met young women coming to Troy for work at the train station and helped situate them in local homes. The booming collar industry created a huge demand for housing and the Y began fundraising. While there was no way to provide for the thousands of women and girls working in Troy, the YWA bought 43 Fourth Street in 1888 to serve as a dormitory. Seeing the need to separate very young working girls, they bought another home on Third Street and created an independent board. This was named the Frances Nason House in honor of the organization's second president.

¹ This declaration was made by Helen Bull in 1957, referring again to the history of the org. "Never a patron" meant never patronizing. Given the class differences between the women who led the YWA and the women who needed its services, it is hard to believe that relations were equitable, and not tainted by hierarchies. The women of means who founded the group wanted to improve the people they served; within that motive could fester a belief in the superiority of one's position & perspective.

Around this time, the YWA established a Woman's Exchange, where women could sell handsewn and other goods that they made at home; this type of enterprise was a common American way to help women support themselves, particularly after the Civil War.

While the work of the young organization appears successful from afar, remarks from internal reports in 1888 reveal that the group faced public doubt. "New philanthropic and charitable projects are always looked upon with much distrust. People say that we know all about the hospitals, the orphan asylums, the relief committees. They are old and well tried and they are doing a good and necessary work but we know nothing of this new association and we will wait and see what it will do."

The YWA established itself firmly by continuing to work. They remodeled the fourth floor of 43 Fourth Street to create more housing, and in 1891, raised \$100,000 to build a new place at 33 Second Street with 54 bedrooms. The money came from textile magnates with close ties to the organization, religious groups, and from the sale of 43 Fourth Street. Other Troy businesses contributed to the fund, apparently beginning to believe that this project, the Young Women's Association, was deserving of support.

The new home was and is a formidable structure. Four stories tall, it has a mighty stone façade, and is known as the former Christian Science Building, its YWCA history forgotten. People in Troy think of it as the longtime home of Bacchus Pizza and the former home of another popular restaurant, Daisy Baker's, but this was built for the YWA, to house the many purposes it imagined. There was a library, a grand assembly hall, meeting and classrooms, and space for 54 residents, plus a restaurant.

This location, across from the Troy Music Hall, shows that the organization was not trying to hide their work in some dingy corner, far from view. Instead, the spot declares that the Y and its work were a central part of the city. The women of means who led the YWA created a sphere where they could operate beyond the constraints they faced; a cult of domesticity had developed for the middle and upper classes in America, creating gendered limits on what they could do. Making a public space where acceptable activities for women – i.e. charity work – could occur, broke boundaries.

The space was also elegant. The Gilded Age interior was lush, and residents had the option of using an elevator to get upstairs. Ceilings were coffered, walls paneled, and windows were large. The facilities were not reserved for the membership, but also open for other groups to use – a habit that continued into the Y's next home and helped weave the organization into the fabric of the community. It is worth noting that the YWA & YWCA buildings were and are community spaces, ready for a range of socioeconomic uses, a fact that is less common in contemporary construction and use.

At 33 Second Street, the restaurant served three meals a day; men and other outsiders could eat at the cafeteria in addition to residents. Cluett & Peabody and other collar factories were too far for workers to return to the Y for lunch; Cluett, and likely other companies, had on-site cafeterias. Records show that men made as much as 80% of the diners at the Y, but where they came from is a mystery. The Y.M.C.A., which was one block away on First Street had its own dining hall. Other than proximity, there were no ties between the associations.

The YWA met the new century at 33 Second Street, and added more students – Polish, Russian, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, German, Scotch, and Irish – to their English classes. As the shape of social and work patterns kept shifting, membership numbers at the Y were falling. Leaders saw that they needed to modernize. In 1907, its 25th year, the association began imagining an expanded facility, “where cooking could be taught, also economics, and the nutritive value of foods considered.” They saw a need for a gymnasium, and for bathing facilities, to serve women who lived in “crowded and cramped conditions.” They hardly dared to dream for a swimming pool, but in saying so, they were actively dreaming. Before pursuing a new building, though, they added a new kitchen classroom to teach Domestic Science in 1909.

Meanwhile, over in Cohoes, a similar, smaller effort was underway. Women started the Cohoes Y in 1890 to offer classes, and eventually purchased a building, the Moore Mansion² to temporarily room young women as they came to town, often from Canada to work in Harmony Mills. The mansion was very near the railroad station.



In 1906, the Cohoes group was one of the earliest members of the national Young Women’s Christian Association. One of the advantages of membership was to

² For 20 years, this building was the office of longtime YWCA-GCR supporter Lauren Payne, founder of Spiral Design Studio!

Throughout its history, YWCA has been in the forefront of most major movements in the United States as a pioneer in race relations, labor union representation, and the empowerment of women

- 1883** Founding of the Troy Young Women's Association.
- First YWA Rooms in Keenan Building at Third and Broadway.
- 1884** YWA moves to rooms over Manufacturer's Bank, River and King Streets.
- 1886** Collar laundresses strike.
- 1888** YWA moves to 43 Fourth Street.
- 1889** Troy Centennial celebration in January.
- 1891** Building of the Young Women's Association building at 33 Second Street.
- 1896** Hart Memorial Library (Troy Public Library) built by Mary Lane Hart and others.
- 1898** Spanish American War.
- 1906** YWCA of USA formed from the International Board of Women's & Young Women's Christian Associations and the American Committee.
- 1907** The YWA's 25th Anniversary. The Annual Report notes:
- “Those who inspired and commenced this work in a room of the Keenan building a quarter of a century ago did not conceive of this home, its library, its restaurant. We greatly desire...to become an educational center for the women behind the machine and the woman in the home who will have a large part in the molding of our future citizenship...In imagination we see... rooms for enlarged class work in keeping with modern demands and methods, a gymnasium for the physical development of our growing girls and future mothers...We want the women of Troy to feel that this is woman's work for woman.”
- 1915** Women's Suffrage Amendment defeated.
- Troy Young Women's Association joins the national YWCA.
- 1917** United States enters World War I.
- Women's Suffrage Amendment defeated in Rensselaer County, but wins elsewhere.
 - Cornerstone laid for new Troy YWCA building at 21 First Street on April 28th.
- 1918** Dedication of new Central Young Women's Christian Association building on May 9th.
- Influenza epidemic impacts all aspects of life.
- 1920** Federal Women's Suffrage Amendment passes.
- Julia Howard Bush, Nellie Cluett and Louise Cluett Cowee purchased the land for Camp Yowochas.

- 1925** Camp Yowochas founded on White Lily Pond in Grafton.
- 1929** Great Depression begins.
- 1941** United States enters World War II.
- 1944** YWCA acquires buildings to south and demolishes them for a parking lot.
- 1950** Luncheon in honor of Dorretta Ferber and her involvement with Camp Yowochas.
- 1955** First capital campaign for building and Camp Yowochas improvements.
- 1958** Last passenger train leaves Troy Union Station.
- 1965** Cohoes YWCA merges with Troy YWCA in one of first such arrangements. Programs continue in Cohoes until 1980s.
- 1970** Camp Yowochas closes.
- 1974** New Troy City Hall dedicated.
- 1976** United States celebrates its Bicentennial.
- 1981** Ramp accessibility added to YWCA building.
- 1983** Troy-Cohoes YWCA celebrates 100th anniversary.
- 1986** Kiddie Korral opens at YWCA.
- 1988** YWCA Day Care Center established.
- 1990** Ninety Women for the Nineties membership group established to support the mission of YWCA. A capital campaign begins.
- 1996** HHAP Grant of \$1.4 million for rehab of residences plus HUD Small Cities Grant of \$500,000, City of Troy Rental Rehab Grant of \$180,000 and Federal Home Loan Bank of NY Grant of \$518,583 updates and improves facility for new millennium.
- 2000** In the Company of Women membership group is formed to support YWCA's mission and programs.
- Sally Catlin Resource Center opens, honoring long-time YW Board member, president, and community leader Sally Catlin. The Center provides the “tools to craft the lives women want for themselves.”
- 2007** Building renovation begins and is completed in 2008.
- 2008** YWCA of Troy-Cohoes celebrates its 125th Anniversary.
- 2009** Name of YWCA of Troy and Cohoes becomes YWCA of the Greater Capital Region (proudly founded in Troy, NY).
- 2010** YWCA holds its first Resourceful Women's Luncheon.
- 2021** Artist Eugene O'Neill installs At the Push of a Button mural on west-facing exterior wall of 21 First St. This “From Troy to Troy” project was a collaboration between YWCA of the Greater Capital Region and the Arts Center of the Capital Region.

participate in national women's rights campaigns, but there were problems too. To affiliate with the national org, voting privileges would be reserved for Protestants. This was controversial in Troy, which was a non-denominational group. Some members didn't want to exclude Catholics and Jews. Some did. Troy decided to join in 1914.

Religion was not the only issue the group faced.

Throughout the teens and into the 1920s, tensions about labor and unions troubled the air. The 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike lasted for two months, and across the country, people wondered if this could ripple into a movement, setting factory owners on high alert. As plans began for a new YWCA building, on First and State Streets, Troy labor leaders were suspicious of the manufacturing men who, in 1914, funded the construction, Robert Cluett & Frederick Peabody. The building opened in 1918, with four days of celebrations, the interior having been furnished by Mrs. Amanda Cluett.

Did the collar gentry in Troy, who were decidedly anti-union, make this grand place, complete with the dreamed for swimming pool, to keep collar workers satisfied? Quite possibly. Indeed, some board members wanted to remove striking workers from the YWCA when they ran out of money for rent, but fellow member Julia Howard Bush passionately and successfully argued for them to remain.

Despite these issues, life at the Y & its many programs continued. Until 1927, women lived at both the new building and at 33 Second Street, making a total of 137 rooms. The rooms on First Street featured hot and cold running water, and both locations had a homelike atmosphere, with open fireplaces. Residents could 'entertain their men friends' in large parlors. The pool was the only in the city for the exclusive use of women. In addition to actual swimming, YWCA clubs often closed meetings by members taking a plunge. The gymnasium was used for classes for residents, and members who didn't live at the Y, some of them for quite young children; there were health classes, too. Physical movement was a big concern, and in factories, the Y ran noontime exercise classes. In 1920, Julia Howard Bush, Nellie Cluett and Louise Cluett Cowie bought land for a summer camp in Grafton, building Camp Yowochas there, which ran until 1970.

Creating opportunities for adventure and socialization was important, as this accounting of activities in winter 1917 shows.

February 7,	Sleigh ride to Melrose,	present	23
" 8,	Onion party	"	20
" 12,	Supper	"	68
" "	extra for lecture	"	18
" 14	Valentine party	"	21
" 22	Bible Class	"	46
" 26	Miss Dingman, supper	"	203
February, total			393

The Central YWCA, as First Street was dubbed, was a busy hub. All kinds of people ate at the cafeteria, used the gym and participated in events. Classes were well-attended, and non-Y groups used the building for their own activities. Yet beyond these numbers,

In the 1920 Campaign, 1,686 contributors gave \$24,294. 40% of this amount was given by eighty people, 54% given by 154 people, 41,371 were new contributors .

A Few Facts From The Year 1920

paid up membership for the year February 1st, 1921

80% membership in classes, clubs and volunteer work

139 permanent guests in both residences.

16 transient rooms in both residences.

1231 Transients accommodated at both residences.

711 persons assisted by Traveler's Aid Secretary.

184 houses listed) Room Registry
434 applicants)

1394 attendance at 134 committee meetings

3615 library circulation

178,975 attendance Cafeteria Department

2444 " social events

2146 " educational classes, dressmaking, millinery, basketry, Glee Club, etc.

5614 " gymnasium

4450 " plunges) Swimming pool
1266 " in lessons)

632 " basket ball

5748 " Girls' Department, clubs and classes

1920
1921) Bible Classes and Sunday afternoon meetings.

assembled for a fundraising campaign in 1922, and beyond the boosterism of speeches board presidents made on significant occasions, the YWCA was, like all human endeavors complicated. Less rosy portraits occasionally surfaced in newspaper articles, or in reports that the national YWCA made annually.

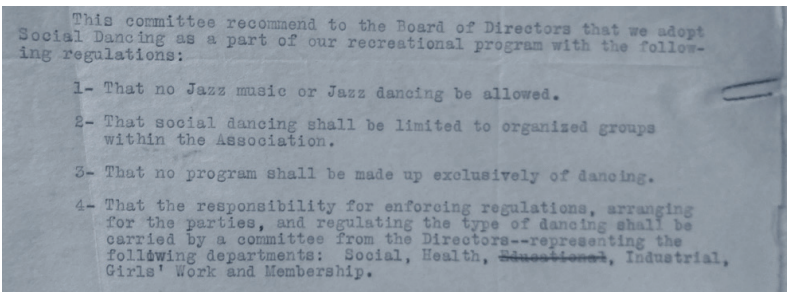
Archives of the national YWCA are housed at Smith College, and records of Troy and Cohoes from 1915-1950 make up an 824-page digital document. The file contains non-YWCA materials, such as a report on the decline of the collar industry in Troy in the early 1920s, and what appears to be human resource paperwork from Cluett & Peabody/Arrow Shirts, detailing their hiring and firing practices.

The bulk of this information, though, is reports that offer an interesting perspective on the city. Staff from New York, where the association was headquartered, came to Troy and interviewed people about operations. These reports offer outside

opinions of what was happening in the Y, and in the city, and the dynamics of how the local organization didn't meet the progressive standards of the national association. The national organization was moving into a political stance, standing clearly for women's rights, workers' rights and racial justice. The YWCA had a mission to organize their charter members toward the same goals. Troy was not seen as cooperative.

The reports contain frequent remarks about how the philanthropy of the factory owners hamstrung labor relations; a single union meeting – not even for collar workers – was held in the YWCA, causing a prohibition on any union activity. In solidarity, union men refused to eat in the cafeteria.

A 1926 document states concerns about “the colored community.” A group of 40-50 women of varying ages and jobs had started a club in 1924 or 1925, and had to meet at 33 Second Street, because they could not, as people of color, meet at the central building on First. The report said that membership had dwindled and the club seemed inactive, but advised that the issue be taken up because it surely would surface again.



This committee recommend to the Board of Directors that we adopt Social Dancing as a part of our recreational program with the following regulations:

- 1- That no Jazz music or Jazz dancing be allowed.
- 2- That social dancing shall be limited to organized groups within the Association.
- 3- That no program shall be made up exclusively of dancing.
- 4- That the responsibility for enforcing regulations, arranging for the parties, and regulating the type of dancing shall be carried by a committee from the Directors--representing the following departments: Social, Health, ~~Recreational~~, Industrial, Girls' Work and Membership.

Another report on Troy said that “The board is hesitant to take action on controversial matters. It has approved the anti-lynching bill, but for the most part, they feel that in spite of the way, it looks on the face of it, there is something sinister about most bills. They are afraid they will get into politics. Not ready to act on child labor bill.”

Here are quotes from other reports that cast shadows on what was happening in Troy and at the Y:

“Troy is a conservative community and the traditions of the association are much in line with the psychology of the city. The YWCA has received much help and support for manufacturers in the collar industry, and the building was financed in large part by them.”

“It is interesting to know that it has been almost impossible to develop any leadership among the actual industrial workers of Troy. They are a complacent, self-satisfied group of girls, who have never grasped the idea of bigger things outside of their own factories, outside of their own Young Women's Christian Association city. The industrial women of Troy do not have vision. They have never been given an opportunity. The whole system is archaic and feudal.”

A report from 1932 said that Troy's joining the national YWCA created antagonism that reverberated for decades, because people didn't agree with restricting religious affiliations. This same report noted that the association had a Protestant feel, but 65.7% of members of the industrial clubs and 51.1% of the Girl Reserves were Roman Catholics.

In 1962, the Cohoes Y merged with Troy to become the YWCA of Troy-Cohoes. Both organizations were vital resources in their communities; Cohoes was a Head Start site, and reproductive health clinic for Albany Med. Troy and Cohoes hosted childcare, key to women's ability to work. Generations of kids learned to swim at the pool in the basement of the Y. And yet, in suburbanizing America, where community centers were shifting, the connective tissue that worked so well in the first part of the 20th century at the Y were out of date. How the Y, nationally, internationally and locally shifted focus to keep serving women, even as needs changed, is another story, too big to fit in this little book, which will close by studying the facts gathered in these pages.

What should we do with this kaleidoscope of information? Twist the past one way, and you can see visitors to Troy appalled at the socioeconomic structures and limits they saw, the living anachronism of our city. Twist the kaleidoscope again, and you can see the words of people who were proud of, and cared about their work, noble, hopeful undertakings for the betterment of women who didn't have as many resources as them. Twist it again and wonder about the thousands of women in Troy and Cohoes who have called the Y, at some point in its history home. These perspectives are nearly silent.

History is a collection of newspaper articles, meeting notes and reports. It is diaries, too, and for the most part, the lives of the women who have lived here are not archived. So we leave you with your imagination open, and invite you to consider the life of one person who called this place home. Listen for their thoughts. See if you can sense their feelings. This place is their home.

Sources:

Record Group 11. Microfilmed headquarters files, YWCA of the U.S.A. records, Sophia Smith Collection MS324, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Massachusetts.

YWCA-GCR archives at the Rensselaer County Historical Society, Troy, New York.

Waite, Diana S., *The Architecture of Downtown Troy: An Illustrated History*, SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 2019.



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