

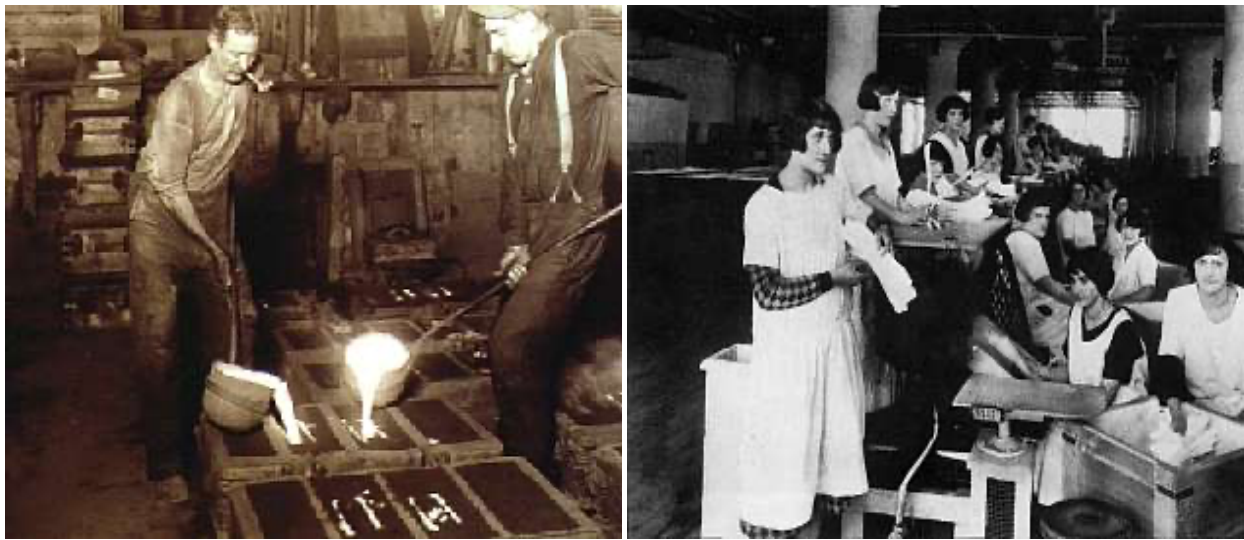
# LABOR AND INDUSTRY IN TROY AND COHOES: A BRIEF HISTORY

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A muscular worker facing a furnace spewing out molten iron, a group of workers standing and sitting on a gigantic cannon, a family of canallers on their barge, the overwhelming clatter of weaving and spinning machinery, a gigantic water wheel, laborers picketing a plant entrance, brick tenements and Victorian mansions, steepled churches and union halls, the members of the Germania Hall Association or St. Olga Society at a picnic, mothers and teenaged daughters straggling home from a cotton mill after another twelve hour day, children studying in an evening school after a ten-hour day at work—and all within view of powerful energy-producing and transporting rivers. These are all part of the rich labor history of Troy, Cohoes and their surrounding communities.

At the confluence of two major rivers and their numerous feeder streams, the two small cities of Troy and Cohoes developed a variety of industries powered by local water power in the 19th century. The region's chief industrial importance came in the early years of that century—a period marking the birth of industrialization in

America. Industrialization proceeded in stages both here and abroad; historians normally divide it into three chronological phases: first an era of small-scale, craft industries with the typical establishment employing only a few workers and run by human-powered machines or small water-powered systems; a transitional phase represented by a switch to machine-powered industry, with laborers specializing in a far narrower range of tasks and often working in factories employing hundreds—and perhaps even as much as thousand; and finally, a period of large-scale industry with thousands of workers employed by many firms, sometimes at a single site but increasingly dispersed in various shops and factories distributed throughout a state or nation. Late industrialization encompassed transnational growth of firms—with branch offices and factories scattered throughout the globe. Though contemporary capitalism includes firms typifying all these phases—that is, a move from previous phases to large-scale capitalism did not mean the disappearance of previous diminutive operations—the trend has followed the chronological outline sketched here and the most dramatic expansion and growth of the economy was led by large-scale enterprises.

Troy and Cohoes were significant during the first two phases of U.S. industrial development, the latter stages of which were typified by dramatic capital translocations—the movement, beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, of many local industries to the industrial Midwest (particularly the steel and stove industries) and to the South (the textile industries). This phase represented a period of decline for the area's industrial economy; it heralded a shift to an economy based on education, service industries, high technology, and small scale manufacturing.

The region's early industrial development attracted the inventive genius that helped to broaden, diversify, and expand its local enterprises. Early in the 19th century, iron mills were established along the Wynantskill. Further north, mills producing textiles and other products were built along the Poestenkill. Across the Hudson River, to the west, Watervliet quickly developed into a major entrepot for goods and services—and also became the home of the nationally-famed arsenal which continues to operate today. The Gilbert Car Company was constructed on Green Island in 1852 after a fire destroyed the company's Troy establishment. Waterford was another beneficiary of canal development and, with the opening of the Champlain Canal, began to build its own mills and factories; these included flour and paper mills (using water power from the canal), knitting and textile mills, a major fire engine company, and the Cluett-Peabody Bleachery on Peebles Island.

In Troy, inventor Henry Burden developed several industrial innovations—including his famous horseshoe manufacturing machine—that stimulated new industrial enterprises. Alexander Holley brought the Bessemer steel conversion process to the

United States—and Troy. In 1851, Burden's celebrated water wheel brought increased power, helped to increase the scale of his manufacturing enterprise and, according to legend, provided the inspiration for George Washington Ferris's "Ferris" Wheel. The Civil War had an enormous impact on the area as well: Burden provided most of the horseshoes used by the Union cavalry; clothing for Union troops was produced at the Harmony Mills; and the plates for the Monitor were rolled at the Rensselaer Iron Works.

The post-Civil War era witnessed the expansion of most of the industries already here and the development of local inter-urban transit systems. Employment opportunities grew, but national economic depressions, especially from 1873 to 1877, precipitated job losses. These were short-term at first, but later—particularly in the iron and stove industries—the declines became more permanent and these industries moved from the region. The one large-scale industry that survived into the 20th century was collar-and cuff-making. Beginning with the detachable collar, supposedly invented by a Troy woman, Hannah Montague, in 1827, the collar industry grew steadily and eventually included over 20 factories manufacturing collars, cuffs, and shirts in Troy. At its peak in the 1920s, the collar industry employed over 15,000 launderers, starchers, bleachers and ironers—over 85 percent of them women.

Labor was an integral part of the development of these diverse industries, and the emergence and growth of unionization as well as the development of vibrant working-class cultures in the region are a significant part of local—and *national*—history.

Although some eras of local labor history have been recounted in detail, notably by Carole Turbin in her *Working Women of the Collar City: Gender, Class, and Community in Troy, New York, 1864-86* (University of Illinois Press, 1992) and Daniel Walkowitz, in *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-1884* (University of Illinois Press, 1972), much of the history of working people in Troy and Cohoes remains to be told. Both Turbin and Walkowitz examine events, personalities, and institutions of the late 19th century. There is very little published information about the earlier years of that century and almost nothing about the 20th-century labor history of the region—for example, about the strikes of the collar and cuff workers or traction company employees at the turn of the century. Finally, one of the central elements in the history of Troy and Cohoes, their de-industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, has also yet to be fully told.

### **Labor Unions in Troy and Cohoes**

A researcher counting the number of labor unions in Troy over the years would find just a few at the time of the Civil War. An examination of the city directory for 1905

would show a major change; sixty unions were then active in the city. Another look, in the 1931 directory, would suggest yet another transformation—a dramatic 50% decline. Only thirty organizations were active in that year. These figures summarize the story of labor unions in the region—a modest beginning, a quick rise in labor power and labor organizations, and a slow decline as many industries left the region.

The story of the organizations created by the iron molders and laundry workers has been well told by Walkowitz and Turbin. The molders and laundry workers unions, although short-lived, were the two most powerful unions in the city and provided leadership not only to their members, but to the entire labor movement in the United States. Local molders union leader Simon Mann, the first President of Local #2 and later President of the successful Cooperative Stove Foundry in Troy, became the first Vice-President of the National Iron Molders Union. Though he would later cross the line into management—becoming the superintendent of the largest stove foundry in Chicago—in his Trojan years, he and his fellow molders, with their Philadelphia brothers, helped establish the foundations of national trade unions.

In Troy, the molders and laundry workers exhibited solidarity by supporting each other during strikes and labor actions. This was particularly unusual; commonly, male workers were unconcerned with women's efforts to better their working conditions. Many male workers assumed women's work and wages to be less significant in the overall "family" economy. The molders, however, supported the laundry workers during a strike in 1864 and also donated \$200 to the Cohoes Woolen Spinners Association during a five-month lockout in the same year. The collar laundry women reciprocated by supporting the molders during an 1866 lockout.

The labor movement was weaker and slower to start in Cohoes. Cohoes was a one-industry paternalistic town; its single industry was textile manufacturing. Local mill employees were predominantly female, many of them adolescent. Most stayed in the workforce only until they married. The Cohoes workers lacked leadership, while the Troy molders and laundresses did not; they organized later and never experienced the violent episodes which characterized strikes in the iron industry in the 1880s. However, though labor turmoil was rare, a few strikes did occur in 1842 and later, in 1880 and 1881, when the threat of rate reductions and the hiring of replacement workers—Swedish immigrants—led to widespread local labor unrest and strikes. In 1881, however, Cohoes' female mill workers lost their fight and gave in to a ten percent wage reduction.

The development of union solidarity in Troy and Cohoes came early. Craft unions were established in mid-century with the cigarmakers and typographical workers among the first to organize. Other craft unions were founded later, in the 1880s and 1890s. They included the Carpenters Union #78, Brushmakers Union #8, Papermakers

Union #17, and the Musical Mutual Protective Union #13. In Troy, in contrast to Cohoes, strikes occurred on a regular basis among the collar and iron workers. They continued well into the new century. For instance, 234 ironers struck Cluett, Coon and Company in 1897. Forty-five starchers were locked out as well for their sympathy with the ironers. The strike was caused by repeated decreases in wages in the early and mid-1890s—until, by 1897, the women were making about one dollar per day for a ten-hour day. Troy militancy led once again to organization. In January 1901, the International Shirt, Waist and Laundry Workers Union was formed in New York City. The meeting which had planned its formation took place in Troy two months previously. In 1903, the collar starchers went on strike against the hiring of non-union starchers and a proposed wage reduction. Another strike in 1905 was lost when the Troy Collar Manufacturers Association won a court injunction against picketing and boycotts.

Although the iron industry had already been in decline since the late 1880s, iron workers continued to strike for better conditions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1897, the coopers at Burden Iron Company struck because of the importation of scab labor from Pennsylvania. The iron workers also complained because of the company's intentional practice of putting workers in mixed-nationality gangs; because many of these men were recent immigrants, they were not only suspicious of one another, but often could not communicate because of language barriers. This practice impacted job safety and labor solidarity, and for these reasons it was severely criticized by union leaders. In addition, there was the matter of pay; workers got 12 1/2 cents per hour for twelve-hour days. William Sleicher, the proprietor of the Malleable Iron Company, who was well-known for his infamous shut-out of the molders in 1882, was still active in 1898 when he won an injunction against striking union locals #2 and #108 molders at his Westside Foundry in Colonie. These and other labor struggles continued into the first decade of the 20th century. In 1903, for example, foundry helpers struck for a nine-hour day.

Nineteenth and early 20th-century labor organization in the region transcended individual craft and trade union organizations. It encompassed wider groups of workers. A regional trades assembly was formed in 1864 with fourteen unions as members. The loss of union members due to the Civil War and anti-labor activities of local manufacturers thinned out the ranks of labor, but by 1873 enough labor unions had been formed to create a central unifying body. An Industrial Council was formed in that year. Unfortunately, it was often in competition for members with the local Knights of Labor District Assembly. The Knights of Labor, with a large membership made up of unskilled and semi-skilled labor, sought to bring together workers of various trades in a large industrial organization; but its vision challenged the loyalties and sense of pride of many skilled craft unionists and their leaders. The competition

between autonomous but federally-minded craft unions and the universalist and industrial-oriented Knights of Labor led to the defeat of the latter. Craft union conservatism was just too difficult to defeat in the 1870s and 1880s. Industrial unionism would not triumph until the coming of the CIO in the mid-1930s. Instead, the quest for organizational strength and labor solidarity took the route spearheaded by the American Federation of Labor, formed in 1881. The same year, delegates from Troy unions met and formed the Workingman's Trade Assembly. In 1886 its name was changed to the Central Labor Council—later, in 1893, to the Central Labor Federation of Troy and Vicinity.

Service workers, too, felt the need and the urge to organize. Unions such as the Retail Clerks Union and the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees were formed around the turn of the century. While the Retail Clerks do not appear to have been involved in any major strikes or other labor actions, the Street Railway Employees of Troy (and Albany) were involved in several strikes—at times violent—in the early years of the century. In January 1900, the Troy motormen and conductors struck for eight days until the United Traction Company conceded to their demands. In May 1901 over 1,000 employees of the company in Albany and Troy went out on strike. This strike was also won by the union with a twenty-cents per-hour raise and other concessions, but not before a bayonet charge in Albany against the strikers caused several injuries. Additional strikes by the street railway workers against the U.T.C. occurred in 1916, 1918, and 1921.

The first two decades of the 20th century witnessed considerable labor activism. Local papers were filled with news of contract disputes, labor strikes, and other industrial actions: telephone linemen in 1902 struck for higher wages and reduction of hours; the Team Drivers Union #222 in Cohoes struck in 1904 for an increase in wages to twelve dollars per week (it was arbitrated and a settlement was reached for eleven dollars); an agreement was signed by the "boss painters" of Troy with the District Council of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of Troy, Cohoes and Vicinity which included a closed shop, thirty cents per wage and eight hour day; the Master Plumbers Association agreed with Local Union # 174 of Cohoes to a nine-hour day, wages of \$2.70 per day, double time on holidays and other stipulations; and a 1903 strike against the Delaware and Hudson Railway and New York Central Railroad by freight handlers from Troy and Green Island culminated in an increase in workers' wages to two dollars per day.

The same period, and the preceding two decades, also witnessed considerable organization-building by labor. New unions were formed, including organizations of street railway workers, maltsters, retail clerks, barbers, brewers, and beer-drivers. The local labor paper, *The Troy Labor Advocate*, advertised the names of non-union businesses and manufacturers (to encourage workers to "buy union") and promoted

labor candidates for political office. It announced fund-raising events on behalf of strikers—such as the play in April 1897 staged for the benefit of striking starchers. It ran regular columns about the activities of local unions, discussed pending labor legislation at the State Capitol, and generally provided a useful communication medium for the labor movement in the region.

Unfortunately, the histories of the above-mentioned unions—and at least another fifty trade unions in Troy and Cohoes, as well as the working-class communities that sustained them—have yet to be written. Daniel Walkowitz notes, in discussing union development in the 1880s, that "Additional information concerning this important transition period in the Troy labor movement, if available at all, lies hidden in the histories of area labor unions." (*Worker City*, p. 232).

One of the reasons for the lack of published information on the numerous unions of Troy and Cohoes was the tragic destruction of so many local union records. Probably the most significant loss of records occurred in 1921 in Troy. The Central Federation of Labor had its headquarters in the Labor Temple on Congress Street since 1908, but on October 16, 1921 the building was consumed by fire. As the *Troy Record* stated the next day, "Though the records of several 'locals' were either destroyed or badly damaged, the papers of other locals remain intact." Unfortunately, the *Record* was too sanguine in its initial assessment of the fire, for it reported on October 20th that of forty union charters stored at the Labor Temple, only five were saved and the charters of the three oldest unions—the cigarmakers, typographers, and molders—were all lost. Other union records stored in the building were lost as well: minutes, contracts, letters, and more.

The Federation recovered well from the loss of its building and many of its constituent unions' records; by January of 1922 it was in a new building on Congress Street. Yet, from 1922 until the recent past, union and labor records continued to be lost due to neglect and carelessness, private hoarding, over-zealous housekeeping, water damage, and—of course—fire. Fires burned not only single buildings, but whole blocks of buildings. They had occurred in the 19th century—in 1820, 1854, and 1862—and they continued well into the 20th. Large or small, they destroyed the records of many businesses and institutions which may have shed more light on the lives of laborers at work and off the job.

Efforts were made in the 1980s by local archivists and union officers to uncover and preserve what *was* left of the region's labor past; they were partially successful. Also on a positive note, many of Cohoes' and Troy's labor records did not stay in the local area. Since many of the area's unions were part of national organizations and regularly corresponded with central offices, a search of national union headquarters'

files and academic archival repositories have uncovered, and will undoubtedly continue to uncover, important insights into Troy's and Cohoes' labor past.

### **Workers' Lives in Troy and Cohoes**

Because industry in Troy and Cohoes was diversified—unlike many, if not most, New England mill towns—workers in the region varied to a great extent in the types and levels of skills which they possessed and in the sort of working class cultures they developed. As suggested earlier, the work and community cultures they forged shaped and influenced their class consciousness and led to different levels of labor solidarity and militancy.

The ethnic makeup of the region originated first with Dutch, English and African-American settlement, and expanded during the next two centuries to include Irish, Scotch, Germans, Danes, Ukrainians, Italians, French-Canadians, Poles, and newer African-American migrants. These different ethnic and racial groups resulted in a wide range of subcultures within the larger communities of which they were a part. Many, though not *all*, of 19th-century immigrants to Troy and Cohoes had come from economically deprived rural backgrounds. They now entered an industrialized society and were forced to face some wrenching changes. Their sense of time and work was rooted in a rural, almost medieval, sense of labor—based on the rhythm of the seasons. In becoming industrial workers and part of a highly industrialized community, their days were now ruled by clocks and the hum of machinery. Although the shock of this and other changes must have been traumatic, many immigrants to the region adapted rapidly. The Irish, in particular, were able to effectively navigate this transition, enlarging their presence and elevating their status in local industries—as well as in the broader civic community.

Labor confronted head-on the rapid changes brought on by industrialization and the radical transformation of work. From small, craft-based shops with few employees, direct contact with the owner (who often worked alongside his employees), and with a hand in the entire manufacture of the product, laborers were placed in situations where they rarely saw the owner, worked by a clock at jobs which entailed a single or only a few tasks, and in plants with hundreds of co-workers. The size and complexity of these industries increased the difficulty and certainly unhealthiness of factory work, and made it downright dangerous. The noise of textile machinery, the heat and danger of iron puddling and molding, and the general lack of safety precautions along with exhausting days which could last up to sixteen hours per day for the commonly worked six-day week, made workers responsive to trade unionism.

But unions were just one way of confronting the oppressive conditions of labor in local industries. Workers found other ways, too. There were many cultural, ethnic,



and neighborhood networks which nourished working-class life; some promoted solidarity and collective action.

**Religion** was a major glue that held and sustained working-class communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For many, the church was not only a place to rest and contemplate greater things than the earning of bread, but also the center of community life. It remains so today for the remnants of these ethnic communities. The churches provided many of the necessary social welfare services which today are provided for by government agencies. The first hospital in Troy was begun by the Catholic Church; four of the five orphanages in the region were founded as church-related institutions; and homes for the aged and sick were also established by churches.

Many of the social and cultural activities of immigrant communities may have centered around their churches, but soon such activities found more secular and broader foundations in the community at large. Germans formed the Germania Hall Association, while Irish workers found aid in various Hibernian orders, Italians in their Italian-American Community Centers, and Danes and Ukrainians in their clubs. The records of these organizations as well as those created by local churches and church-related institutions provide detailed information on the role they played in the life of local working people.

### **Women's Working Lives in Troy and Cohoes**

Women played significant roles in the history of work and the labor movement in the region. They were full-time permanent employees in the collar and textile industries, housekeepers, part-time employees in many local industries—prior to marriage and often after as well, boarding house managers, industrial homeworkers, and a dominant part of the clerical workforce in the 20th century. They actively participated in, and were an integral part of, the local labor movement as well.

Although working life for women was similar to that of laboring men in some ways, chiefly in the extreme length of the work day and the often unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, women's work also had some unique features. For instance, women generally had more interrupted working lives than men; they entered and left the workforce more often than men. Far fewer of them were permanent employees. Until recent decades, many ceased their participation in the market labor force after marriage, or worked only when supplementary family income was needed—particularly during strikes or layoffs of their spouses. Major changes in family composition such as the death of the husband or other wage earner often brought these women back to the workforce.

Generally, women's work here as elsewhere in the nation was undercompensated. Only in the collar industry, where women posed no perceived threat to working men, did they achieve wages that approximated "male" pay rates. Where the presence of women posed a threat, industry quite often had the support of the male-dominated unions in keeping women *out* of specific "male"-identified jobs and *in* low-paying employment. By the end of the 19th century, state legislation had been passed regulating women's employment by controlling where and when women could work. Ostensibly for the protection of women workers, laws such as the night work laws of 1913 and 1919 prohibiting women from working between the hours of 10:00 pm and 6:00 am were disastrous for women printers and transit workers who then could not work during important parts of the working day.

Laws such as these—along with the slow decline of textile manufacturing and the collar and cuff industries in the region—led to a shift in women's labor market participation; increasingly, women left blue-collar jobs and entered clerical occupations. In Albany in 1900, for instance, there was one white-collar clerical job for every thirteen manufacturing jobs, while the ratio was one clerical job for every six manufacturing jobs in 1919. Although the opportunities for clerical employment were not as great in Troy, Cohoes, and Watervliet as they were in Albany—due to the increasing size of state government in the Capital city and the related growth of ancillary businesses—there was nevertheless a corresponding increase. Nonetheless, the persistence of the collar and cuff industries also provided continuing blue-collar employment for women—longer than in Albany and other places. Thus, there was less incentive for women to enter the clerical force in Troy, Cohoes, and Watervliet—at least during the first two or three decades of this century. In any case, clerical work, although it provided some immediate benefits to women such as greater status, shorter hours, more benefits and greater job mobility, proved to be a dead-end for many women as their opportunities to enter the upper reaches of management were strictly limited. This situation has just begun to change in the last few years.

The textile industries of Cohoes and Waterford, and the collar industry of Troy provided the chief blue collar employment for women in the 19th and 20th centuries. These industries were dominated by female employees. The collar industry workers, at least 85 percent female, assembled, stitched, finished, washed, starched, laundered, and ironed millions of collars during the nearly century-long history of the industry. In addition, most of the employees in the collar industry were Irish and often passed jobs down from mother to daughter so that whole families were employed either at the same time or for overlapping periods of time.

These collar laundry women had created the first strong women's labor union in the United States in 1864. With over 600 members at its peak, the union consisted largely of Irish women and was begun by ironers, who held the highest status job in the

laundry trade. Since most of these laundresses worked at least some time during their lifves, or intermittently, and were part of a complex network of community, family, and ethnic relationships, they were aware of the need to make a decent living wage. Because they had skills which could not be easily replaced and worked in an area where there was little competition with men, they could strike and withhold their labor successfully for wage increases. The union was successful throughout the Civil War era until 1869 when the collar laundry owners and collar manufacturers worked together against a major strike. The owners offered a wage increase if the women left the union. So many quit that the union was dissolved in September, 1869. The laundry workers and collar workers formed other organizations before the end of the century and carried on successful strikes for increased benefits. The textile industry in Cohoes was made up predominantly of unskilled female workers and they worked for a paternalistic company, the Harmony Mills, which controlled much of their personal and working lives. These women workers were largely unskilled, Irish, unmarried and young; most quit full-time work after they married. By the eighties, French-Canadian women had come to dominate the trade as that immigrant group came to Cohoes by the thousands.

As suggested earlier, there was less unionization in the Harmony Mills than in the collar industry. This was true for several reasons: the women were generally unskilled and could be replaced more easily; they did not stay in the workforce as long or as permanently; they lived in a paternalistic environment with company housing, company stores and even restrictions on where and when they could leave the company property. The company also provided some educational and social services, such as the Harmony Hill Union Sabbath School, and supported the Children's Aid Society which tended to quiet some complaints about the working conditions in the mills. There had been minor strikes at various times ever since the 1840s, but the first major strike was in 1880 when the weavers, the most skilled workers in the mills, struck Harmony Mill #1. This turned into a general strike with the men employed by the mill taking over leadership and winning a ten percent wage advance, extended lunch breaks, and other benefits.

### **Working Lives of Iron Workers in Troy**

The majority of male blue collar workers in Troy worked in the iron and steel trades, which included iron puddling, molding, bell manufacture, weapons making, and other related jobs. These workers came from a variety of ethnic groups but especially in the molders trade, were overwhelmingly Irish. These Irish molders quickly developed the skills necessary to handle the various operations of the trade and grew in status in their jobs and in the community as a result. They were among the earliest supporters of unionization and soon dominated the molders locals as well as the trade itself. The iron workers were often married to collar and cuff workers or laundry workers and

their mutual union developments meant that there was usually equally mutual support for strikes and other labor actions in their respective trades. They lived in specific neighborhoods in South Troy—the Scotch on Scotch Hill, the more skilled molders in the northern wards of the district, and the less skilled laborers in the more southern wards. They usually rented their homes, sometimes from the Burden Iron Company itself which had rental property for its workers, but quite often they were able to purchase homes as they grew in job status and obtained higher incomes. The majority of the unskilled iron workers, however, remained propertyless and many lived as boarders in the houses of women married to other iron workers. Yet more than a few commonly left the iron trade entirely as their income and ambitions grew—to become policemen, saloonkeepers, and politicians.

Life in the iron mills was difficult and dangerous and remained so into the 20th century. The handling of heavy machinery and molten metal led to almost daily accidents; the heat of the summer months was so bad that the mills were often closed for weeks at a time. Compensation for on-the-job accidents was, of course, non-existent, and mill owners' concerns for safety were negligible. To alleviate these conditions the iron workers formed several strong unions: the Molders, the Stove Mounters, the Iron Rollers, the Puddlers and the Heaters. These organizations provided support for increased wages and better working conditions for their members. The iron workers also began a cooperative stove foundry in 1866 and began workingmen's stores and reading rooms.

By the end of the 19th century many of the jobs which these ironworkers held were disappearing as the iron industry moved to midwestern cities such as Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. In fact, the Ironmolders International Union eventually made its home in Cincinnati, where many of the Trojan iron molders had relocated. The decline of the industry reduced the power of the labor unions in the iron trade in Troy.

There were other male-dominated jobs in the region, such as cigarmaking (employing mainly German workers), carpentry (mainly English and Canadian workers), police work (dominated by the Irish) and brewing (again, mainly Irish). These local trades and jobs—and their unions—have yet to find their historians; little has been written and little is known about them.

### **Child Labor in Troy and Cohoes**

Child labor was a persistent reality in Troy and Cohoes. The labor of children was exploited by owners from early in the history of the region, particularly in the textile industry. Children, commonly from their early teenage years—and often younger—were an everyday sight in the mills. The great majority of working women in the Harmony Mills were really working "girls" since they were aged from about fifteen to

twenty-five years and unmarried. In addition, even younger children were sent into the mills by their parents—with the complete support and encouragement of the owners of the mills—in order to supplement family income. Children were also the most frequent victims of accidents in the mills; one 19th-century physician noted that between 25 and 50 children lost fingers and arms in the Harmony Mills between 1867 and 1882.

Young boys were employed in the iron mills at about the same age that girls went to work in the Harmony Mills. The work in the iron mills was especially dangerous to these boys and the long hours, heat and heavy tools put their life and limb in regular jeopardy. Even after the passage of factory labor laws, the parents of these children sent them into the mills, often in blatant violation of child labor restrictions, for the same reason that children were working in the Cohoes mills, to supplement family income. Children often disguised their real ages, sometimes with the complicity of mill owners.

Child labor became more regulated after an 1882 investigation of the Harmony Mills, but as noted above, it continued to occur regularly and often in violation of these regulations. A 1923 survey of child labor in Troy done by the New York Child Labor Reform Board indicated that nearly 300 children were still working at various jobs late into the evening hours. A great deal of additional information about local child labor is scattered in various federal- and state-level government reports and statistical studies, but few scholarly examinations of child labor in Troy and Cohoes have appeared in print..

The early and strong development of unionization in Troy and Cohoes and the diversity of the working life in several trades make this region a microcosm of the life of workers in 19th- and 20th-century America. The widespread and long-term employment of women in blue collar trades and later in clerical jobs offers insight into the transformation of women's work from the 19th through the 20th centuries. Although much is already known about the working experience and labor union development in the region, a great deal remains unknown and will provide a fertile field for historians and students of working-class culture for many years.

### **Labor History Sites**

An important element for recapturing working life is the ability to understand the physical environment in which people worked and lived. The region is fortunate in the variety and amount of architectural heritage that has survived relating to 19th- and 20th-century industrialization and working life. Many buildings from earlier periods survived because they were of a size adaptable to the smaller space demands of the lighter industries that followed the exodus of heavy industry. In addition, the growth

of a larger middle and upper class in Troy and Cohoes in recent years has resulted in a re-use of home sites rather than the destruction of downtown housing areas.

Equally important are sites where workers congregated and formulated strike plans, where they relaxed, and where they lived. Unfortunately, many such sites have been lost. One of the most tragic losses was of the Federation Hall, which for a long time was the major meeting site for area unions. The Hall's destruction by the 1921 fire (noted earlier) was a major loss. Union leader's homes have also been lost. They have fallen victim to urban renewal. For example, both saloons and homes identified as being owned by Dugald Campbell were in the areas where the Uncle Sam Atrium and low-income housing now stand.

The following list of existing sites provides examples of the types of structures that have survived to form part of the rich physical legacy of labor in Troy, Cohoes, and surrounding communities.

\* \* \*

**The Empire Foundry/The Empire Stove Works.** Located at the corner of Second and Ida Streets in Troy, early stove manufacturing took place in this structure from 1840-1905. The Empire Stove Works specialized in cooking and heating stoves, as well as train car wheels. The structure is now owned by Lindy's Hardware.

**The Albany Iron Works.** The Albany Iron Works site is at the foot of Mill Street on Burden Avenue. It is now occupied by Portec. The site was originally established in 1826 as the Albany Nail Factory, succeeded by the Albany Iron Works in 1838, the Albany and Rensselaer Iron and Steel Company in 1975, and the Troy Iron and Steel Company in 1885. Erastus Corning (the first) was an owner of the Albany Iron Works.

**The Rensselaer Iron Works.** The first use of the Bessemer process in the United States took place at this site. Located on River Street at the foot of Adams Street, the site was later occupied by Ludlow Value Manufacturing Company. It is now owned by Scolite.

**Fuller, Warren and Company. (Clinton Foundry).** The company occupied this site located at 257 River Street at the foot of Monroe Street in Troy from 1846-1932. As one of Troy's predominant iron foundries it produced Stewart stoves, ranges, and warm air furnaces. It was the site of numerous stove industry molder's strikes. It is currently owned by Bruno Machinery.

**Burden Iron Works.** Several physical sites remain from Burden Iron, perhaps the premier iron foundry in Troy. The Burden Office Building is located at the foot of Polk Street, and the site is on the National Register. Currently owned by the Hudson

Mohawk Industrial Gateway, substantial financial resources have been devoted to restoring and preserving the building.

**Another Burden Iron site still in existence is the Horseshoe Storage Plant** which was part of the Burden Lower Works. The long building located on South River Street between Centre and Sullivan was used as a storage building for the famous Burden horseshoes.

**Wilbur, Campbell, and Stephens Company.** Located in Troy at 599 River Street on the corner of Jay Street, this was a nineteenth century shirt and collar factory. It is now occupied by Mooradian's (furniture) Warehouse. The home of the company president, George W. Wilbur, is located at the corner of Spring Street and Maple Avenue, providing an interesting contrast in physical structures.

**Cluett Peabody and Company.** Several sites also have survived relating to this dominant shirt and collar manufactory. The present building at 433 River Street in Troy was built in 1917, replacing the nineteenth century collar shops on that site.

**On Peebles Island in Waterford, the Cluett Peabody Bleachery** still stands. Constructed in 1910, it is currently unoccupied. The State Historic Preservation Office owns the property, and it trying to determine whether it can find a use for the building or whether it should be demolished.

**International Shirt and Collar Company.** Located at 2 River Street, on the corner of Adams Street in Troy, this company operated from 1893-1906, then became the Troy Underwear Company. The large building is now owned by Nelick's Furniture, and operated as a discount warehouse outlet.

**Van Zandt, Jacobs, and Company.** This collar and cuff factory were well-known as makers of Triangle collars. The site located at 621 River Street in Troy, is now owned by Hill's Stationery, and used as a warehouse.

**C. Walter Ferguson Collar Company.** Occupying a building located at 383-393 Third Avenue in Lansingburgh, this company manufactured collars, cuffs, canvas, jersey, and leather palm gloves. The site is now partially occupied by Ready Fund Raising.

**Lion Collars and Shirts, Inc.** From 1884-1897, this company occupied the building at 742 Second Avenue, between 120 and 121st Streets in Lansingburgh. The building was constructed by James K. Pine Company. The company later was formed into the United Shirt and Collar Company, which continued operation until 1922.

**Miller, Hall and Hartwell Company.** This company manufactured shirts, collars, and cuffs in the building at 547 River Street in Troy from 1880-1943. The site is now used as a warehouse for Standard Furniture.

**Harmony Mills.** The Harmony Mills Complex on North Mohawk Street in Cohoes contains a number of buildings. Surviving mill buildings include the Mastodon Mill No. 3, at the time of its construction the largest mill building in the world. Worker housing still survives on Cataract Point. The factory sites are occupied by a variety of warehouse/outlet stores. Worker housing remains as rental units. The overseer's house, Johnston Manor, located on the bluff on Manor Street, is now occupied by the Cohoes School District Administrative Offices.

**Laughlin Textile Mill.** Located at 31 Mohawk Street in Waterford, this mill was occupied by several other companies including Waterford Knitting Company and Ormsby-Morris Company. It is currently occupied by a local dress manufacturer, Ursula's of Switzerland, but may be vacated soon as the company is seeking larger quarters.

**Troy Cooperative Foundry.** The Cooperative was located at 867-869 River Street in Troy. It was established in 1866 by the Cooperative Iron Founder's Association, and consisted of seventy members. Later it was known as the Cooperative Stove Works; operation ceased in 1891. The building is currently unoccupied and is for sale. The building exterior has not been altered significantly, but would require restoration.

**Druids Hall.** Located at 197 River Street, in what is now part of the Quayside Apartment complex, is Druids Hall. This site is where the Iron Molders' International Union No. 2 met beginning in 1865. In 1910 the building was taken over and operated at Whitehurst Publishers. The building is in excellent condition, since it was rehabilitated as part of the Quayside complex.

**Home of Kate Mullaney** (c. 1845-1906), labor leader. Located at 350 Eighth Street, on the corner of Hoosick Road, is the Mullaney family home. Kate Mullaney lived here with her mother, Bridget, and several sisters and brothers during the time she was active in the Laundryworkers Union. The modest three-story brick house is the only surviving building associated with Mullaney. In 1864, she organized and led the all-female "Collar Laundry Union" labor union. Even though the women laborers of Lowell, Massachusetts and elsewhere had been organizing unions to protest working conditions and wages since the 1840s, early women's unions often only lasted as long as the particular issue under debate. The Collar Laundry Union, unlike so many other unions, remained an organized force in the industries of Troy, New York more than five years after its inception. The origins of Kate Mullaney's union date back to the 1820s, when entrepreneurs established the nation's first commercial laundry in Troy to



wash, starch, and iron a local invention, the "detachable collar." By the 1860s, Troy supplied most of America's detachable collars and cuffs, employing over 3,700 women launderers, starchers, and ironers. Working 14 hour days for \$2 a week, the women launderers labored in oppressive heat. When owners introduced new machinery that increased production, but worsened working conditions, a young woman named Kate Mullany organized a union to demand change. In February of 1864, Mullany and 200 other workers formed the Collar Laundry Union. The well organized union struck and demanded a 25 cent raise, and the laundry owners capitulated a week after the strike began. The Collar Laundry Union remained active in Troy, often assisting other unions, and even attempted to establish an employee cooperative. Mullany herself gained national recognition in 1868, when National Labor Union President William Sylvis made her the first female appointed to a labor union's national office.

**Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.** This more modern structure was designed for the Clothing Workers Union. Located at 484 River Street in Troy, it is now occupied by the Association for the Retarded.

**Workingmen's Store.** In 1865, a grocery, clothing store, and free reading room was established on King Street by the Workingmen's Cooperative Association. The probable site has been narrowed to within a few blocks, and further research will likely be able to verify the exact location.

**Working Girl's Home.** Located directly across the street from Miller, Hall and Hartwell, this building at 548 River Street in Troy was used as a boarding house for working women in the 1920s.

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