

Washington Iron Works - Buffalo, NY

by Lynne Belluscio

If you walk up Main Street from Bank Street to McDonald's, you will go by the Ross Block. It's clearly marked on the top. If you tap the columns, you'll discover that they are iron and they are marked near the base "Washington Iron Works Buffalo N.Y."

I have been curious about the Washington iron foundry and did a little searching on the Internet. It appears that the old foundry building was still standing in Buffalo in 2003 at 419 Broadway and Pratt Street, although from what I can gather, the building was unoccupied. Whether it has been razed since then, I don't know. There are several buildings in Buffalo, like the Ross Block, that have facades manufactured by the Washington Iron Works, all marked in the same way. Several are on the National and State Register of Historic Buildings.

According to one of the National Register applications: "Cast iron provided greater structural strength, allowing for wider first story openings, while easily supporting the weight of the masonry above. Larger shop windows could be created, letting more light into the building and providing additional display space. Iron could be cast in a variety of designs. Use of the material became so prevalent that ultimately entire cast iron facades were constructed.

The idea was to mold all of the decorative elements - columns, pilasters, capitals, arched window lintels, dentil moldings, and cornices - out of iron and then paint the iron to resemble stone.

More common to Buffalo than the multi-storied iron front are facades consisting of ground-floor



The Ross Block.

iron columns supporting upper stories of brick in which decorative features, such as window sills and caps, are of cast iron.

As quality stone became more expensive, cast iron was an economical alternative that produced a similar effect. In the latter half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, Buffalo, strategically located between the ore fields of the upper Great Lakes and the coal mines (to fire the blast furnaces) of Pennsylvania, was a major producer of iron and steel, and several large architectural ironwork firms, including the Eagle Iron Works, Washington Iron Works, and Tift Iron Works, existed here after 1850. These names can still be found on many buildings in the city."

In addition to facades for buildings cast by the Wash-

ington Iron Works, I discovered a couple of iron garden planters, a fountain and a very ornate iron garden seat that have been for sale or for auction. (I need to search through MacPelah Cemetery to see if any of the garden planters were made at the Washington Iron Works.) I also have to wonder, if the window caps of the Washington Block on the north side of Main Street, might have been cast in Buffalo at the Washington Iron Works.



Detail of iron work.



Details of iron work on Ross Block.



Wonderful iron details above the door.



Top of iron column.



Above doorway.