

INTRODUCTION:
TROY, NEW YORK, 1853



The city is in the early summer of its prosperity and industrial might. Located on the east bank of the Hudson River, six miles north of Albany, Troy faces the great river's meeting point with the Champlain and Erie canals. Since completion of the canals in 1825, raw produce from the North and West flows to Troy where it is "milled" and then re-shipped.

The Hudson itself and two tributaries, the Poestenkill and the Wynantskill, power many of the city's manufactures. There are planing mills for lumber, flouring mills for grain, and plastering mills that process chalky mounds of gypsum and lime. Live cattle disappear into Trojan packinghouses and reappear as barrels of salt beef bound for the warehouses of Troy's provision merchants. The hides head to the city's tanneries, and later to its boot and shoe factories. Animal pelts from Canada and the West supply factories devoted to the making of fur caps alone.

The endless stream of raw materials creates an almost endless number of industries in the city, though by 1853, Troy already takes its chief fame from two: iron and textiles. Troy's foundries, fed by canal barge-loads of coal and iron ore, make stoves, steam engines, railroad spikes, safes, iron fences, and many other things. The cotton and woolen factories get their bales of wool and some cotton from the canal route, too, though cotton also comes up the Hudson from New York City's seaport.

Visitors admire Troy's wide, straight streets and new brick and stone buildings. Reservoir water runs through iron pipes beneath the streets to corner hydrants as well as to fountains in private gardens and public squares. And after a disastrous experiment with an explosive substance called "camphene," the Troy Gas Company now supplies a reliable coal gas light to street lanterns and some houses in the central wards. But most visitors, and residents too, save their greatest admiration for the sheer bustle of the streets, in particular the riverfront commercial district forming the western edge of the Second and Third Wards. Here, canal-boat goods, Troy manufactures, and luxury imports are all offered up for sale along a six-block stretch of River Street. Storefronts and warehouses deal in coal, cotton,

wire, rope, ploughs, shovels, ready-made clothing, “sheetings, shirtings, and rich calicos,”¹ looking glasses, feather beds, cornhusks and straw, French and Indian china, German violins and microscopes, gold watches, silver pens, and much more. Grocers and provision merchants dispense almonds and “Madeira Nuts,” grapes and figs, oil, pickles, flour, salt meat and fish, butter, cheeses, tea, sugar, rum and whiskey. They crowd the sidewalks before their stores with boxes and barrels and hams hung from awning posts. Rafts of logs, tied up along the docks, make a floating lumberyard of much of the river, while steamboats and other craft disembark crowds of passengers at the Ferry Street and State Street boat landings, including parties of dazed Irish and Germans led along by “emigrant runners.”

The mill-owners join with an older elite of Dutch merchants and landowners to support important educational and cultural ventures: the Rensselaer Institute, a college devoted to the sciences; Emma Willard’s Troy Female Seminary, the nation’s first academic high school for girls; and the Troy Young Men’s Association, a lecture and debating society that also maintains an impressive lending library and art collection.

The new elite is very proud of the city’s success, which they generally attribute to special qualities in their own Yankee blood. The fact of Troy’s location at one end of the Erie Canal often seems to escape them. But they are not a complacent elite. They worry in print over the future of Troy’s boom and urge fellow citizens to strive onward with “unwearied perseverance,” “constant activity,” and “untiring vigilance.”²

Yet all their efforts can’t prevent a period of crisis from overtaking the city in 1853. It’s partly a crisis born out of success, the creaking and shifting of a growing community’s tectonic plates, for Troy will go on to even more industrial and commercial achievements in the 1860s and 1870s. But the creaking and shifting, shared by other antebellum cities too, is definitely unpleasant. In Troy it means a bad cholera epidemic in the spring and summer of 1853—a direct result of overcrowding caused by a bounding population—off-and-on-again strikes by ironworkers from the summer of 1853 through the fall of 1855, and a factory fire in the summer of 1854 that destroys eight city blocks as undisciplined volunteer fire companies fight each other at the scene. It also means tensions between the old and new elites, evident in a bitter January 1853 struggle for leadership of the Young Men’s Association.

The creaking and shifting of the state and nation press on the city, too. Hot-button issues of the day—slavery, immigration, temperance—split the established Whig and Democratic parties into factions, and in the spring of 1853 political infighting threatens one of Troy’s leading citizens. This is John Cotton Mather, one of three New York State Canal Commissioners, as well as a possible Democratic candidate for New York State governor in

1854. In April 1853 a faction of his own party seeks his indictment and impeachment on charges of “dereliction” and “corruption.” The Mather impeachment story fills the Troy newspapers into September.

In the middle of this slow-motion earthquake of change, something else happens. The new event—actually a series of events—springs from the environment of transition. The affair couldn’t have taken shape anywhere else but in one of the United States’ new industrial cities of the 1850s—at least, it couldn’t have taken shape in the same way or to the same degree. Within a twelve-hour span on May 25–26, 1853, two Irish immigrants die in a riverfront neighborhood of Troy’s Tenth Ward, after drinking poisoned beer. Suspicion falls on their drinking companion and neighbor, a single woman known as Mrs. Henrietta Robinson. After her arrest one explosion of scandal follows another. Robinson is the mistress or ex-mistress of John Cotton Mather, then just beginning to battle for his political life against the corruption charges.

As if this isn’t sensation enough, little more than a week into June 1853, a rumor about another facet of Robinson’s identity breaks into print. Mrs. Emma Willard of the Troy Female Seminary writes to the *Troy Daily Whig* newspaper to deny that Robinson is one of her former pupils: specifically that she is not one of four sisters, the Misses Wood, who attended the school in the 1830s and 1840s.

Everything seems to grow curiouser and curiouser as the imprisoned Henrietta Robinson, who proclaims her innocence, takes to wearing a heavy veil over her face—even within her jail cell—and her trial is repeatedly postponed.

What a situation! Today’s *National Enquirer* and *The Star* would have been all over it, and Troy’s papers and others farther afield in the 1850s did give the case a lot of play, especially throughout Robinson’s trial in May of 1854 (at which she was found guilty) and then during renewed questions about the Wood family link which lasted at high intensity from end of trial through the summer of 1855. But for a range of reasons, reporters of the 1850s weren’t all that thorough. They certainly didn’t dig out the truth of the Veiled Murderess affair, as the scandal became known.

Sentenced to death in July of 1855, Robinson escaped hanging at almost the last moment thanks to a governor’s reprieve. She then lived out her life in a series of New York prisons. She was very long-lived for her day, reaching either 79 years or 89 years—according to different accounts of her age—and she survived every other principal of her trial, except one: her most active defense counsel, Martin I. Townsend.

Up until Robinson’s death in 1905, her story resurfaced from time to time in the newspapers with the focus always on the identity issue. Who

was the Veiled Murderess? By the 1890s, an early (1855) rumor had crystallized into widely accepted fact. This rumor named the convicted woman as Charlotte Wood Elliott, Wood daughter No. 3 as well as runaway wife of Sir William Francis Augustus Elliott, Seventh Baronet of Stobs, Roxburghshire, Scotland. Rutherford Hayner, author of *Troy and Rensselaer County, N.Y.: A History* (1925), reconfirmed this view³ though he also included a more cautious account of the affair in his three-volume work. Mrs. Della E. Stuart penned this second piece:

In 1851 a woman calling herself Mrs. Henrietta Robinson came to Troy ostensibly looking for a position as teacher, which she failed to procure. She dressed well, but made few friends, living much by herself. After a few years of residence she was arrested for the peculiar murder of her grocer and his young woman clerk. Throughout her subsequent trial she aroused much curious comment by insisting on wearing a heavy blue veil [sic] which she refused to remove and came to be known as “the veiled murderess” . . . She served fifty-two years in Sing Sing prison, in Auburn State Hospital for the Insane and at Mattewan and at no time revealed her identity. It is said she never wrote a letter and never signed her name, but spent her days in reading, making fine lace and playing with much talent on the prison musical instruments. She died in 1905 and was buried in the Potter’s Field at Mattewan. Her grave is marked only by a pine stake bearing the number “88” and the mystery of her life has never been solved.⁴

Stuart’s paragraph represents the ultimate “tidying up” of the Veiled Murderess affair, with *all the sex* and *all the politics* edited out. But behind her vanilla-bland narrative, as behind Hayner’s spicier legend, the real story still lives. And we can uncover it, in all its meaning and in most details, by operating like police detectives: gathering background information about players in the affair while working to establish a clear timeline. The timeline will hold important clues. We are police detectives with a difference. Our field of operations lies in a foreign country, the past, and the help of “local authorities” is absolutely necessary. These authorities are modern-day historians of antebellum society who supply insights into the world of the investigatees.

In the end, we see how political divisions, unease about women’s changing roles, and just the “slipperiness” of identity in new urban centers combined to bloom one shocking crime into a half-century-long scandal and mystery. The sources of the crime itself come clear as well. A desper-

ate situation, alcohol abuse, and (perhaps) past trauma overwhelmed one woman, semi-predictably in a way, but always *against* and *shaped* by the exotic nineteenth-century backdrop.

Yet this woman's, Robinson's, personal story actually recedes before the struggles of those around her: John C. Mather; Emma Willard and her son, John; earnest Canadian gentleman William Wood; feisty Troy editor John Francis; feminist celebrity Elizabeth Oakes Smith; and, as a shadowy presence, all-powerful Albany political boss Thurlow Weed; plus still more eminent people (the trial lawyers and doctors, in particular). The responses of these VIPs to the scandal make the chief drama, the scene that holds our eyes.