

A.T. Stewart and the Quarry Workers 1869

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Labor strife between stonecutters and quarry owners, ethnic tension between native born Americans and newly arrived Irish immigrants, and the unstable nature of demand for marble made the life of the quarryman a difficult one. The quarries were by far the major employer in the town. In good times the industry employed between 300 and 500 men. A shutdown or even a slow down was devastating to the ordinary quarry workers who were semi-skilled at best.

When layoffs did occur, the quarrymen unable to find work were restricted to their neighborhoods adjacent to the quarries. Life became so tenuous during these periods of high unemployment that the Congressman William Stahnecker feared to go into the areas where the quarry workers lived. In 1869 the residents of Sebastopol (named after a slum-ridden section of Russia during the Crimean War, 1854-1855), that today is located along Water Street north of Eastchester High School between White Plains Road and California Road, came up with a solution. Three hundred people living in Sebastopol presented a petition to Alexander Turney Stewart who owned the nearby quarry to reopen his quarry by leasing it to the quarry workers.

Who was A.T. Stewart? Stewart was not merely the owner of the quarry who kept his summer residence nearby Sebastopol on White Plains Road but was one of the richest men in America. Back in 1846 Stewart developed one of the largest and most elegant stores of his day, the forerunner of the first department store. The store made exclusively of Tuckahoe marble became known as the Marble Palace. Today, Sears, K-mart, and Wal-Mart have built upon and refined Stewart's ideas of distribution, merchandising, manufacturing, and payment methods. Later Stewart built a two million dollar mansion on Fifth Avenue and 34th Street out of Tuckahoe Marble from the quarry.

Stewart rejected the request of the workers to lease his quarry even though the quarry was not in use. The *Yonkers Statesmen*, a local newspaper, claimed he rejected their request for two reasons. His experience in labor negotiations with the Journeymen Stonecutters' Association had embittered him. He was also angered when residents from nearby Sebastopol had vandalized idle sheds on his quarry. But his refusal to deal with the unemployed workers was probably much more than that.

Tension between the Irish immigrants and the native-born residents of Eastchester had been building. Soldiers returning from the Civil War must have resented the behavior of the Irish mob in Eastchester that tore up the train tracks of the New York and Harlem Railroad along the Bronx River during the New York City draft riots of 1863. A mob from the marble quarries went on a march into Mount Vernon (then a newly formed village in the town) armed with sticks, stones, and other makeshift weapons with the avowed purpose of burning down the houses of all the Republicans in the place.