Fountain, Prospect Park, Troy, N.Y.
When a street was named in September in honor of Garnet Douglass Baltimore, Class of 1881, the City of Troy and Rensselaer celebrated the life and legacy of a trailblazer.

HONORING A SON OF TROY

When Garnet Douglass Baltimore quietly celebrated his 84th birthday in April 1943, the Troy Record published an article lauding the distinguished civil engineer and landscape architect as “one of the best known residents of Troy.” Three years later his death was front-page news, and the Times Record followed up his lengthy obituary with an editorial eulogizing this first citizen of Troy who, born into a family of barbers, and grandson of a slave, became in 1881 the first African-American graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He then built his accomplished engineering career around the city that was his lifetime home. “There are citizens who become so valuable that race, religion, ancestry or any other divisive attribute is merged in the standard of service,” wrote the Record. “Garnet D. Baltimore is not thought of in Troy by any narrower conception than that of Trojan. He was born here, educated here, practiced here, served the public here, died here. He represented Troy; he helped to develop it; he bet on it from birth to death.”

By Meg Gallien
Samuel fled north, promising freedom to slaves who fought in the war, his owner refused to honor an agreement.

Family and Community Roots

Garnet Douglass Baltimore was born April 15, 1859, in a cottage at 162 Eighth Street, the same address he occupied at the time of his death.

The sentiments of his contemporaries were echoed in September when the City of Troy renamed in his honor a section of the street on which Baltimore was born, lived for many years, and died. At a ceremony announcing the naming of Eighth Street between Federal and Ferry Streets “Garnett Douglass Baltimore Street,” Mayor Harry Tutunjian said Baltimore was “one of the first believers that the City of Troy was a jewel that should be cherished by all those who live in upstate New York.”

The section of Eighth Street chosen to bear Baltimore’s name ends at the foot of Prospect Park, which secured Baltimore’s fame as a landscape designer.

Jannie Gibson Daggs, a descendent of Baltimore’s who lives in Cohoes, N.Y., and attended the ceremony, says she is happy that Baltimore, who also was recently inducted into the Rensselaer Alumni Hall of Fame, is finally being recognized in a very public way.

“The street was more than I ever dreamed of,” says Daggs, who has been researching Baltimore through published sources as well as stories handed down through the family. Daggs’s great-grandmother Annie Baltimore was a cousin of Garnet Baltimore.

“He was the first one in the family to go to college,” she says. “This was important. There is a lot of pride.”

Elegant Nature

Baltimore took on a wide variety of engineering assignments—building bridges, railroads, canals and waterways, designing cemeteries and, most notably, creating Prospect Park in Troy. He was a noted surveyor and consulting engineer throughout his career.

According to newspaper accounts, Baltimore started his first job the day after graduation from Rensselaer when he was appointed assistant engineer on construction of the Albany and Greenbush Bridge, between Albany and Rensselaer. He then was engaged in several assignments with the Sandy Hill, Granville & Rutland, and Greenwich & Johnsonville railroads.

For eight years he was employed by the state department of public works. It was in this capacity that he made notable accomplishments in his
At Prospect Park, Baltimore created a circular landscape with winding roads and pathways, gardens, tennis courts, a pond, and a scenic overlook, made out of red cedar in an Adirondack style, on the western edge of the plateau... The park was described at its completion as 84 acres of elegant nature.
work with New York state waterways. After serving as assistant engineer and surveyor on the Erie Canal, Baltimore was put in charge of the Shinnecock and Peconic Canal on Long Island.

His most renowned work with canals came in 1884, when he supervised the extension of the Oswego Canal known as the “mud lock.” Confronted with quicksand on the site, Baltimore devised a system of cement testing that became a standard for the state. The state engineer’s report noted: “Although the masonry was built in sections, and the character of the material so soft that bearing piles, 20 feet in length, often floated out of place, no settlement sufficient to show a crack in the cement could be found, the quicksand being so confined that a solid foundation was formed.”

The focus of Baltimore’s work returned to Troy in 1891 when he was hired as assistant engineer for the city’s Public Improvement Commission. Three years later he became assistant city engineer, and in 1906 he was named engineer for the city’s Department of Parks.

It was in 1903, when he was appointed landscape engineer for the public park system at a salary of $2,000 a year, that Baltimore was engaged to draw up plans for the park on what was then known as Warren Hill. Today this prized asset of Troy, transformed by Baltimore into the popular Prospect Park, stands as testament to the blossoming of Baltimore’s talents as a landscape engineer.

The City of Troy purchased the lands for the park from the Warren estate for $110,000. In the 1700s, Samuel Wilson, the meat supplier who became known as “Uncle Sam,” settled there and opened a brickyard and slaughterhouse. A century later, prominent Troy families, the Warrens and the Vails, had built homes on the site. The 84-acre plot included an impressive 25-mile panorama of the Hudson Valley. Baltimore’s charge was to create a public park for use by people of all ages.

“It is the calling and duty of the Landscape Engineer to devise ways of arranging land and its accompanying landscape so that whatever the particular purpose in view may be, the result shall be as thoroughly beautiful as possible,” wrote Baltimore in his July 10, 1903, Report of The Landscape Engineer On the Examination of the Parks Systems of Various Municipalities.

The report was the result of an ambitious tour Baltimore made in preparation for his work in Troy of several model parks, including Central Park in New York City, the Bronx Zoological Gardens, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and parks in New Haven, Hartford, Providence, and Boston.

He noted that the attractions found in the parks outside of their landscape beauty included music, boating, tennis, croquet, swings, sand courts, and even the agreeable presence of gray squirrels. But he remained convinced that the most important goal in designing a park was to enhance the landscape’s natural assets.

To provide for “the refreshment of the bodies and souls of great numbers of people,” he wrote, it is desirable to “follow as far as possible the dictates of poetic and artistic feeling for breadth of composition and picturesqueness of detail.”

He concluded: “It is a law of nature, which must not be forgotten, that satisfying beauty springs from fitness or adaptation to purpose, much more surely and directly than from added ornament or the most careful imitation.”

At Prospect Park, Baltimore created a circular landscape with winding roads and pathways, gardens, tennis courts, a pond, and a scenic overlook, made out of red cedar in an Adirondack style, on the western edge of the plateau. A playground provided areas to play croquet and other sports, and a sand court, where children could dig with spades and shovels. The park was described at its completion as 84 acres of elegant nature.

Baltimore’s long career included cemetery design, including Troy’s Forest Park Cemetery (which subsequently suffered bankruptcy and was unable to complete his plans), Graceland Cemetery in Albany, and cemeteries in Hoosick Falls, Glen Falls, and Amsterdam. He was a consulting engineer at Troy’s impressive Oakwood Cemetery for 30 years. Baltimore is buried at Oakwood, along with his parents, three siblings, and his wife, Mary Lane, about whom very little is known. He had no children.

In his later years he made surveys and maps for attorneys of scenes of accidents and crimes, and testified in court about those measurements. The Times Record hailed Baltimore as “probably the greatest surveyor of the city’s history.”

There is little evidence that Baltimore suffered discrimination. Accept for one incident in which someone tried unsuccessfully to have him removed from a position by changing the job qualifications, Daggs is aware of none.

“This man has never been discriminated upon,” she says. “He was well into his job with the city of Troy before anybody tried to ruffle his feathers.”

With the street dedication and Baltimore’s induction into the Rensselaer Hall of Fame that same weekend in September, Daggs sees a future for her illustrious ancestor as a role model not only for Rensselaer students, but for the local youth.

“This comes at a time when the children of Troy need someone to look up to,” says Daggs, who accepted the Hall of Fame award on behalf of the many family members attending the ceremony. “There’s Frederick Douglass, who was a great man, and Martin Luther King, who was a great man, but they weren’t Trojans. Now when these kids go by that street sign, they will know about Garnet Baltimore.”

Garnet D. Baltimore Lecture Series

The Garnet Baltimore Lecture Series was established at Rensselaer in 1991 to focus on issues of equality and multicultural diversity. The 2005 lecture was delivered by Sylvester James Gates Jr., director of the Center for String and Particle Theory at the University of Maryland at College Park, who spoke on “Thoughts for a Third Millennium United States.”

1991 Johnnetta Cole
President, Spelman College

1992 H. Patrick Swygert
President, University at Albany, SUNY

1993 Sharon E. Sutton
Associate Professor, University of Michigan

1994 Col. Charles Bolden
Astronaut, NASA

1995 Freeman Hrabowski
President, University of Maryland

1996 H. Carl McCall
New York State Comptroller

1997 Shirley Ann Jackson
Chair, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

1998 Yvonne D. Cagle
Astronaut, NASA

1999 Gregg L. Watson
Xerox Corp.

2000 Shirley Malcolm
Directorate for Education and Human Resources Program of the AAAS

2001 Neil de Grasse Tyson
Frederick P. Rose Director, Hayden Planetarium, American Museum of Natural History

2002 Eugene M. DeLoatch
Dean, School of Engineering, Morgan State University

2003 Morris H. Morgan III
Dean, School of Engineering & Technology, Hampton University

2004 Julian M. Earl
Director, Glenn Research Center, NASA
Baltimore remained convinced that the most important goal in designing a park was to enhance the landscape’s natural assets.