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The Population of Rochester

By BLAKE MCKELVEY

So many factors have contributed to the cumulative march of Rochester's citizens down through the years that any review of this pulsating human parade involves a broad knowledge of the city's history. The geographic location, so important at the start, exerted an ever changing influence through successive decades, as merchants and newcomers shifted from horseback and oxcart and sailboat, to stagecoach, steamboat and canal packet, to railroad cars, automobiles and airplanes. The city's relationship with its valley hinterland, while no longer so easily defined as a century ago, when the Flour City was the market town for the wheat farmers of the Genesee, became increasingly complex as Rochester assumed the functions of an urban center for a richly varied producing, consuming and cultural region. Of course the population of this region, particularly that of its urban center, was ever dependent on developments elsewhere throughout the country and abroad, and the emergence of larger cities and broader regions in the American West altered but at the same time sustained the population on the Genesee.

No less important throughout all stages of Rochester's growth has been the character of its citizens. It was from their vigor, courage and resourcefulness that fresh enterprises sprang, or at less propitious times failed to spring. On them depended the advantages reaped locally from developments elsewhere—whether in the fields of technological change, population movement or cultural advance. And if these matters seem irrelevant to a study of population trends (usually distilled and presented as abstract graphs and charts) let us remember that human communities are neither ant hills nor sedimentary drifts. Let us hold fast to such

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qualities of choice as we have on occasion exercised, and while admitting (indeed boasting) that both emotion and reason sway us, give due recognition to leadership and to all other human qualities that have promoted the increased social affinity displayed in this city's growth.

Rochester's Beginnings

That human qualities, so essential in our complex modern society, were possessed in abundance by the pioneers has never been doubted. Indeed, in their case, personality has sometimes been overstressed, to the neglect of environmental circumstances which conditioned developments. The failures and the footloose who passed quickly from the scene have frequently been overlooked, with a resultant distortion of the population picture.

Ebenezer Allan was too colorful to be forgotten. This pioneer miller, who located at the Genesee Falls in 1789, possessed more courage than caution, more restless vigor than social adaptability. Like a fellow frontiersman at the mouth of the Genesee, who pulled up stakes when another settler commenced a clearing within five miles of his hut, Allan (though for an opposite reason) soon moved on leaving no lasting imprint except the discouraging report of his failure.

Four families, comprising twenty persons, were accredited to the present Rochester area in the census of 1790,¹ but all quickly disappeared. Their efforts to develop a mill site and a trading port were premature. A few distant neighbors at Pittsford, Scottsville and elsewhere within the bounds of present Monroe County and up the valley were employing their time to better advantage clearing away trees for pioneer corn rows, burning logs for exportable potash, and building snug cabins for protection against the elements. The first census takers found only 1075 settlers in Ontario County which then comprised all of New York State west of Seneca Lake. Most of these were located at Canandaigua and along that lake's outlet to the east, or at Bath and on the Cohocton route to the south. Their number increased fifteenfold during the next decade and reached 70,000 by 1810.² Only then did the prospects for a stable town on the lower Genesee revive.

If the establishment of Rochester awaited the development of a productive hinterland, local efforts to chop a road from Allan's old site at the small upper falls, five miles through a thick forest to a dock below the lower falls, opened a potential route for trade to the north.

Gideon King and several of the others who took the lead in this work, and in the establishment of a port on the west bank below the lower falls in the mid-1790's, were cut down by Genesee fever, but some of the 1,192 pioneers who had located in the Monroe County area by 1800 made good use of that road. Few of the 2,448 settlers in the Livingston County area by that date boated down the river, for their trade outlets were to the east and the south, and most of those who did come north still followed the old Indian trail from the river above the rapids east to a small hamlet known as Tryon City at the head of Irondequoit Bay. Batteaux carried their produce over the sandbar at the bay's outlet and westward to Charlotte at the mouth of the Genesee where a half-dozen cabins appeared in the early 1800's.

New vitality was breathed into this area after 1808 when the Jeffersonian Embargo and Non-Intercourse acts glutted eastern markets and prompted the increasing number of settlers up the valley to send their potash, staves and corn down the Genesee for shipment to Canada. The census of 1810 found 4,683 residents in present Monroe County,³ less than half the number in the Livingston area and barely a fifth that of Ontario County (as later reduced) where the thriving village of Canandaigua already contained 120 houses. That leading town and several other promising villages had small water falls and crude boating outlets over shallow streams to the east or the south, but none could rival the water-power facilities available at the Genesee falls, and none combined such an excellent trade feeder, as the Genesee then afforded, with an outlet over Lake Ontario. Nathaniel Rochester's hesitancy concerning the development of Allan's old hundred-acre tract, acquired nearly a decade before, disappeared in 1811. A town site was surveyed that fall on the west bank with its principal street, known as Buffalo Street, heading west from the point where a frame bridge was under construction connecting with a partly cleared but marshy road leading eastward to Pittsford and Canandaigua.

The first permanent settlers arrived early in 1812 shortly before news of the outbreak of war reached the frontier. Trade with Canada was of course disrupted, but the demands of the military forces stationed on the New York frontier stimulated the shipment of food and other supplies down the Genesee. Many settlers at exposed points, such as Charlotte at the river's mouth, fled inland, some locating at Rochester, which thus acquired a population of 331 by the end of hostilities.

When the leaders of this hamlet announced plans in 1815 for the establishment of a new county, the representatives of Canandaigua blocked action at Albany. Other Canandaiguans, recognizing the greater advantages of a port on Lake Ontario, where trade with Canada was quickly reviving, laid out a town site on the east bank of the Genesee below the lower falls. A road was surveyed to the new site, by-passing Rochester, and a great single arch bridge was constructed of logs over the gorge connecting with the natural ridge road to the west. The first steamboat on the lake drew up to its dock in 1817, proving that Carthage, as it was named, had displaced Charlotte and the old west-side landing as the Genesee port. Unfortunately (for its promoters) the bridge crashed of its own weight in 1820, fifteen months after its completion, and Carthage, renamed Clyde, became the lake port of Rochester rather than Canandaigua.

The crucial decision in Rochester's favor had been made in 1817 scarcely a month after its incorporation as a village on March 21. The state's decision to build an inland canal from the Hudson to Lake Erie, rather than the shorter connection with Lake Ontario at Oswego as originally proposed, cast a shadow over all ports on that lake. And when the surveyors routed the canal over the Genesee a few hundred feet south of the Rochester bridge, the future of this town was assured.⁴

The canal's impact on Rochester's development was much greater than anyone anticipated. Old Colonel Rochester finally moved his family to the falls in 1818. A weekly paper had already been established here, a frame church erected, a bookstore opened and a Masonic society organized to supply a ritualistic grandeur to the several score of merchants, millers and professional men who bustled about the two taverns and the 200 houses and shops which accommodated the 1,049 residents of 1818.⁵ The application for a new county was renewed and a petition for a bank circulated. Everyone confidently believed that Rochester would, within a decade or so, match even Canandaigua in size and importance.

As a matter of fact by 1820, before work on the canal had yet commenced at Rochester, the town's boom was well launched. Not all of the 1,502 residents on both banks of the river at this date were adequately housed, for builders could not keep up with the demands of newcomers, many of whom had to camp in the covered wagons in which they arrived. But sawmills as well as flour mills were running early and late, processing the great log rafts piled high with produce from up the river. Shipments to Canada were booming, requiring the service of

a score of ox teams between Rochester and its lake port. Shortly after the establishment of the County of Monroe in 1821, work on a stone court house was begun. Work on a stone aqueduct to carry the canal across the river commenced the same year, creating such a demand for masons and stonecutters that a force of convicts who had just completed the first cellblock at Auburn was brought to the Genesee to help out.

Rochester's population leapt ahead of Canandaigua's 2,000 that year, reaching 2,700 in September, 1822, when a local census enumerated those found in a proposed annexation which soon brought the total acreage to 1,011 on both sides of the river.⁶ The start of canal traffic to the east a month later, and westward to Buffalo by late 1825, prolonged Rochester's boom for several years, boosting its total to 9,489 by 1828. Never before, at least in modern times, had a village of 1,000 experienced a growth of 804 per cent within a span of ten years.⁷

Of course this boom was occasioned by the unprecedented opportunity for cheap exports suddenly made available at a point where mills operated by an apparently inexhaustible water power were processing the raw products of the forests and fields of a fertile valley now filling up with settlers. The valley's population of approximately 50,000 in 1810 had increased nearly threefold in twenty years and all the newcomers at least were busily producing potash, lumber and grain for export through Rochester as payments on their lands. Although the seven flouring and nine lumber mills of 1824 did not employ many men, their construction and that of several still under way did, as did the erection of numerous shops and stores, three large taverns and many homes—a total of 352 new buildings in 1827 alone. A half-dozen boat yards began to turn out boats for as many Rochester-owned canal freighting lines. Blacksmith shops grew into foundries or tool shops, and the first village directory, issued in 1827, listed 134 "manufactories."⁸

In these and many other ways the opportunities presented by Rochester's fortuitous situation were seized upon by a vigorous population comprised in 1820 chiefly of Yankees from New England and a lesser number of Yorkers, Pennsylvanians and Southerners. Young men predominated, most of them well under forty, and they greatly outnumbered the women. Children under five were numerous, as the 343 births of 1825,⁹ accounting for a third of the increase that year, indicated, but children of school age did not yet comprise as large a portion as in older settlements. The town's opportunities attracted many vigor-

ous young men from the surrounding territory—from farms and villages alike—and some of the Irish who came in with the canal construction crews found permanent homes in an Irish settlement known as Dublin on the east bank of the river just beyond the village limits. With the opening of the Erie Canal Rochester received its first sizable quota of new immigrants from Germany and the British Isles, most of them likewise young and ambitious. Adult alien males (not yet naturalized) numbered 674.¹⁰ Rochester's polyglot population of the late twenties would later be recognized as characteristic of a long succession of American boom towns, several of which, indeed, experienced longer and more violent booms than that of the Genesee canal port.

Flour City Growth: 1830-1855

Rochester's first boom ended in 1829, a year of uncertainty throughout most of the country. Local speculators in real estate and other ventures were suddenly forced to curtail their holdings, and many decided to make a fresh start further west. The town may have suffered a drop in population that year. Newcomers were constantly arriving, however, and the census of 1830 found a total of 9,207 within the village limits, with many more just beyond its borders. Monroe County, established only nine years before, already numbered 49,855 residents, well ahead of older Ontario and all other counties west of Seneca Lake.¹¹ The local recession was in fact less real than it seemed, and as soon as the significance of a slower tempo of growth was grasped, stable advancement was resumed. The town's application for a city charter, designed to enable it to perform civic functions more adequately, was renewed and pressed through the legislature in 1834. Under its terms the municipal area was increased threefold, reaching out in all directions and including Dublin and the lake port of Clyde (old Carthage) at the lower falls. By annexation and other increases the city's population had grown to 12,252 and the state census a year later added another 2,200.¹²

Small as the Rochester of the late 1830's appears today, it was nevertheless the largest city west of Albany and north of Pittsburgh. Despite its youth, it ranked eighteenth in size among American cities in 1840 (when, it is well to recall, even New York City itself had not yet attained the population of present-day Rochester). Buffalo and St. Louis outstripped Rochester during the forties, as did four booming suburbs

of Philadelphia, but its own growth in that decade placed it ahead of three other eastern cities, with a rank of twenty-first in 1850.¹³

The depression of the late thirties did not seriously affect Rochester until 1839, and while its suffering was for a time acute, the mid- and late-forties brought a new surge of growth to the Flour City. The milling industry attained its peak, and flour shipments from Rochester exceeded those from any other city in the world. Sawmills, on the other hand, were being converted into furniture and carriage factories, machine shops were specializing in farm and household implements. Rochester was entering the first stage of an industrial city in which mechanics' associations assumed important roles in community affairs, maintaining libraries, lecture programs and scientific courses. If these and other cultural developments (such as the establishment of a college in 1850) did not contribute in any positive way to the population growth, they nevertheless helped to make Rochester a congenial place in which to live and brought it more fully into association with other urban centers which were then for the first time enjoying a variety of inter-city relationships.

Of course these developments, as well as Rochester's growth in numbers during the forties, were greatly influenced by the progress of the new steam railroads. The first local railroads were constructed largely by Rochester capital and displayed an enterprising determination to improve communications with the old state-road villages by-passed by the canal. Batavia was reached first, in 1837; Canandaigua, Geneva and Auburn in the forties.¹⁴ Although these first railroads were of flimsy construction, intended primarily to carry passengers, a volume of commercial traffic developed which soon required their reconstruction and inspired plans for similar lines designed to strengthen Rochester's ties with its rich valley hinterland.

Rochester's attraction to newcomers now included plenty of job opportunities but offered few of the speculative features characteristic of boom days. The more reckless spirits of earlier days had already headed west to Chicago and other new boom towns. Many of the young men who were still coming to Rochester from surrounding towns, full of hope for quick fortunes, soon felt impelled to try their luck in some newer community further west. This practice, so characteristic of most Americans of the period, had its inevitable effect on the character of Rochester's population, which was, except for a few firmly established

residents, perennially renewed every five or ten years. Thus but nineteen per cent of the names in the 1827 directory reappeared in that of 1838, although the total listed increased more than a third. This imperfect ratio of stability advanced to twenty-nine per cent in the next decade, but when the increased size of the latter directory is considered it becomes apparent that but one-tenth of the adult males listed at Rochester in 1849 had resided here (as adults) a decade before and only one-fourth of the total as long as five years.¹⁵ Boys born in Rochester were now growing to maturity, but many even of those whose parents had gained secure places were striking out elsewhere on their own. Thus, of old Colonel Rochester's twenty-two grandsons who reached manhood, only ten remained at Rochester in the fifties, five of them still as lads living with their parents and soon destined likewise to break away.¹⁶

The places left vacant by these out-migrants were more than filled by newcomers from the surrounding territory and, most strikingly in the fifties, from abroad. The per cent born in New England dropped from ten to five between 1845 and 1855 while the per cent born abroad increased from twenty-nine to forty-four and almost equalled by the latter date those born in New York State, including of course their own American-born children.¹⁷ Coming almost exclusively from Ireland, Germany and Great Britain, and in that order at the mid-fifties, they were attracted to the Flour City chiefly because of its easy accessibility by canal from the New York port of entry. Rochester's hospitable reception of strangers, learned during the boom period, made it a congenial residence, and the slight flurry of nativism and hostility towards Catholics, which marred the local scene during the mid-fifties, was soon repudiated and outgrown.

Indeed, the contributions brought by these newcomers, both of enterprise and skill, quickly won respect even for their strange customs. When discontented with the job opportunities available, they generally developed new enterprises. Thus it was Ellwanger and Barry from Germany and Ireland who, along with several horticulturalists from England, established Rochester's great nurseries. It was Cunningham from Ireland who introduced large-scale carriage manufacturing, Bausch and Lomb from Germany who founded the local optical industry, Mire Greentree and his fellow Jews from Germany who developed the men's clothing industry in Rochester.

The youth of most of these newcomers preserved Rochester's heavy

concentrations of population in the most-vigorous-age group, 15-45, with the median age at 21 or 22. Women now outnumbered men even in these categories within the city but not in the country, and children of school age likewise formed a larger portion of city than county residents. These striking shifts from earlier years indicated, among other things (such as the care now provided for orphans at Rochester), the increased stability of Rochester's homes and families. Indeed, with the number of dwellings listed as 7,408 in 1855, the 8,557 families were more adequately housed than ever before; already the boast appeared that there is "no city in the country (perhaps in the world) where so many citizens own their own homes" as in Rochester.¹⁸

Flower City Expansion: 1855-1920

Many factors combined to check the growth of Rochester's population in the late fifties, and nearly a decade passed before the solution of several internal difficulties and changes in the national situation launched the city on a new growth cycle. Economic depression in the mid-seventies and again in the nineties failed to stop the city's mounting numbers, which continued upward for more than half a century. This prolonged development, unexpected in the 1850's when the old Flour City seemed to have attained its maximum girth, was of course only the local phase of a nation-wide urban trend, accentuated by the arrival of millions of newcomers from abroad. That great causal factor, the industrial revolution, which had commenced before the Civil War, was now accelerating. Cities such as Rochester, which had exhausted the possibilities of their original functions, gained a new lease on life—a new measure of growth—by developing fresh specialties.

Rochester's participation in these broad developments was influenced as in the past by the circumstance of its situation and by the energies of its people. For a time the circumstances seemed unfavorable. Successive crop failures in the Genesee wheat fields during the mid-fifties weakened the position of local millers now faced by strong competitors in the west. The consolidation of several up-state railroads into the New York Central in 1853 had brought numerous efficiencies, but, as this company and its southern competitors extended their systems west to Chicago, the sharp contest for control of the long-haul freight enabled western shippers to gain preferential rates, with consequent injury to intermediate points like Rochester. The Genesee Valley Rail-

road, which had ended as a spur connecting with the main line of the Erie, running from New York to Buffalo, never developed competitive strength. Moreover, none of these railroads connected directly with the coal fields, and while the Genesee's water power had sufficed the Flour City, the new industry of the fifties and sixties demanded coal. Confronted by all of these handicaps, the city fathers hesitated to build the long-needed water system or to make other urgent improvements.

The Civil War prolonged Rochester's period of stagnant growth but at the same time infused new vitality.¹⁹ The leather, shoe, and clothing industries gained strength from army orders. When the small local foundries and machine shops were unable to accept large war contracts because of the inadequate supply of coal, attention was focused on this problem; a chain of events was started which eventually produced the coal-carrying Rochester & Pittsburgh Railroad two decades later. Only a city that had developed new vitality in the interim could have persisted in this undertaking over such a long period.

Fortunately Rochester was again in a resilient mood. The remarkable success of the local organizers of Western Union proved to many of their neighbors that the opportunities awaiting the promoters of technical inventions far exceeded any to be found on the frontier. John Jacob Bausch picked up a piece of hard rubber and saw it as the material for better and cheaper spectacle frames. William Gleason invented a gear-cutting machine which assured him a key position in the expanding industrial world. Scores of similar inventions, if not all so important, supplied Rochester with prosperous technical industries that required less coal or ore than mechanical skill. Eastman Kodak was of course the prize example of the great profits and still greater community benefits to be derived from scientific as well as technical knowledge, and the city's educational emphasis moved increasingly in these directions.

It was however the heavy-industry cities, enjoying lake or large river transport advantages, proximity to coal and iron deposits, and served by competing railroad networks, which experienced the great bursts of growth during the sixties and seventies. Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee and of course Chicago sped ahead rapidly, as did Kansas City and one or two others.²⁰ Buffalo stepped completely out of Rochester's class, which was apparently so hard for the Flower City to take that, by common consent, historic old Buffalo Street, so honored since village days, was renamed West Main Street in 1871.²¹ Rochester need

not have felt chagrined by the more rapid expansion of several of its western neighbors, for their increased size and prosperity proved beneficial to its own technical and consumer industries which prospered with the expanding urban markets. It was, for example, the cities rather than the villages of the early twentieth century which established and filled the early motion picture house, consuming film made at Kodak Park. Rochester's accelerated growth and its advance from twenty-fifth to twenty-third position between 1910 and 1920 demonstrated the benefits derived locally from urban developments elsewhere.

While thus acquiring a new and broader marketing region, Rochester developed at the same time a fresh relationship with its hinterland. The conditions of soil and climate which sustained the enterprise of its nurserymen favored the growth of fruit trees throughout the area, and Rochester became the center of a prosperous fruit belt. The farmers' papers and fairs of earlier years became horticultural journals and exhibits, still centering at Rochester, now appropriately named the Flower City.²² While the population of its Genesee hinterland had grown little since 1845 (except for the half-dozen small urban centers of 15,000 or less, among them Canandaigua with 7,356 in 1920) and barely matched the city's total of 295,750 by the latter date, the ties that bound them together were becoming stronger.²³ Rochester's milk shed and summer resort area extended beyond the county's borders; even its daily papers reached into thousands of homes in seven counties.

The city's relationship to its Genesee hinterland was still quite distinct from that developing with the adjacent suburban area. Renewed growth in the late sixties had compelled the municipal authorities to assume several long-neglected functions. Street improvements had to be undertaken on a more permanent basis and extended over additional streets; finally in the seventies two water systems were laid, one for household use, the other to combat fires. The private horse-car company was reorganized and several of its lines were extended, greatly increasing the radius of convenient settlement. As these improvements progressed, the promoters of subdivisions beyond the borders began to agitate for annexation so that their properties would be assured municipal advantages. Accordingly in 1874, with the hearty approval of nearly all concerned, the boundaries were extended to encompass an area of 10,368 acres, practically doubling Rochester's former size and adding six or seven thousand residents.²⁴

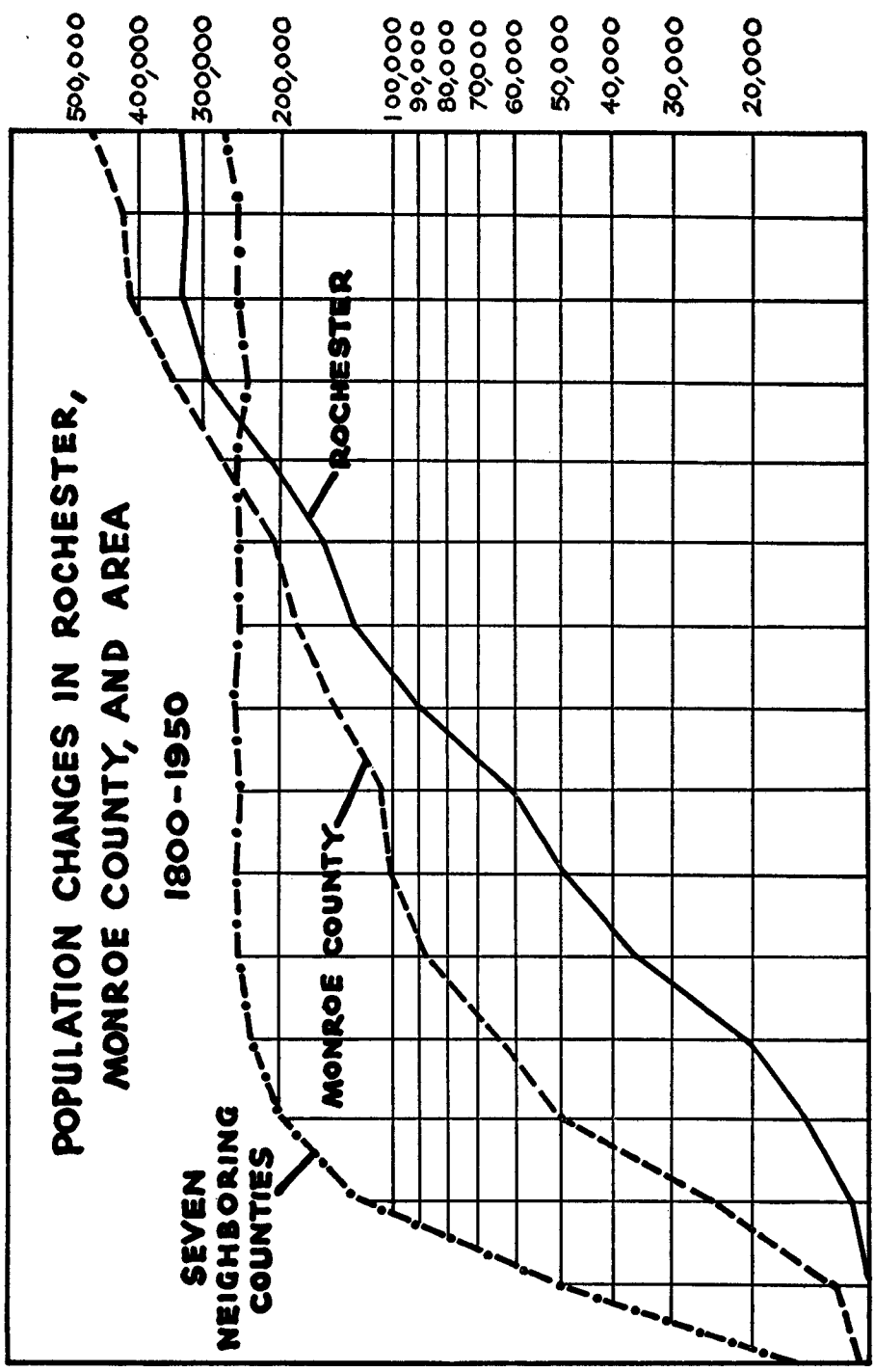
The new area sufficed Rochester during its horse-car days, but with the substitution of electric trolleys in 1890 the city began again to spill over into adjacent subdivisions. Again the desire for an extension of the water mains, of transport, gas and electric facilities, and now of sewers as well, brought pressure for annexation. Several small additions were made between 1891 and 1918, culminating at the latter date with the annexation of Charlotte, which extended the city down to the lake, giving it control of Ontario's beaches and of the Genesee port which had long since been shifted nearer the mouth of the river. Two or three of these later annexations had to be carried over the protests of old residents in the districts involved, but in each case the votes of the city's overflow, eager for an extension of city services, predominated. In the case of Charlotte, where an old established village was absorbed, the opposition was so bitter that the annexation was condemned as "the big steal." Yet many even among the old villagers had divided feelings toward the measure. They were disturbed because of the inability of the village authorities to control the reckless elements from the city who thronged the beach every warm Sunday. To some of these it seemed better to accept annexation and enjoy the firmer police controls and other services proffered by Rochester.²⁵

Despite these annexations, which finally doubled the 1874 area by 1918, Rochester like most cities of its size and larger was spreading as an urban unit far beyond its prescribed boundaries. The construction of inter-urban trolley lines in the early 1900's not only supplied new contacts with distant cities but made it possible for residents of Pittsford, Fairport, Webster and other old regional villages to commute to jobs in Rochester every day, or to come in frequently to shop. A few residents of Rochester moved out in search of opportunities for more spacious living. The automobiles and the improved roads of these years greatly speeded this movement. Local industrialists, by planting a new East Rochester as a satellite industrial community four miles beyond the city limits, by extending power and telephone lines to neighboring villages, also contributed to this trend.²⁶

The Federal census first recognized the situation in 1910 when it introduced a new population unit, the metropolitan area. Rochester was generously assigned six townships: Brighton, Gates, Greece, Irondequoit (which had been within its sphere for some years and from each of which portions had already been annexed) and Pittsford and Perin-

POPULATION CHANGES IN ROCHESTER, MONROE COUNTY, AND AREA

1800 - 1950



1800 1850 1900 1950

ton which contained three suburban villages. Except for distant Brockport and Spencerport, these were the only towns in the county which had shown any appreciable growth since the completion of rural settlement fifty years before. Three-fourths of the 22,000 residents of the six towns were still rural in 1900, but by 1910, despite small annexations to Rochester, their population had increased a third and most of this increment was urban in character.²⁷

* * *

The stable character of the city's growth was reflected in many ways. Except during the depression of the seventies and again in that of the nineties, the percentages of out-migrants showed a slow decline after 1865. The proportion of new additions to the annual directory lists was likewise decreasing, and a striking drop in the number added (as well as in those deleted) persisted for a full decade after 1893. Both of these tendencies contributed to a rising stability ratio which reached a figure of 41.4 by the turn of the century when slightly better than four out of ten adult males listed in the 1899 directory retained their places a decade later.²⁸

Some of the credit for this increased stability must go to the newcomers from abroad. Having made the big jump across the Atlantic, they seemed inclined, after finding an interior location, to give it a fair trial. They were building churches, forming neighborhoods and mutual benefit societies, and raising large families. Moreover, they were creating their own occupations, at least in part, some as already mentioned above and others ranging from the manufacture of beer in large breweries to the weaving of baskets in private homes. Even the latest newcomers, the Italians and eastern Europeans, finding Rochester congenial, were bringing over wives, establishing homes, and sinking roots in the rich soil of Rochester.

Perhaps the best statistical evidence of the increased stability of these new groups is to be found in the mounting number and increased proportion of their American-born children in the city's population. In 1890 when the census first made such statistics available, the native born of foreign or mixed parentage numbered 53,655, which greatly exceeded the native born of native white parents (39,930) or the practically equal number of foreign born. Yet this was necessarily a transitory situation, for the American-born sons and daughters of the immigrants were themselves producing children who swelled the ranks of

the native born of native parents until by 1920 this group slightly exceeded the size of the first American-born generation. Numbering 111,976 and 110,792 respectively at that date, they overshadowed the 71,411 foreign born in Rochester although that group was then at flood tide. The steady decline in the proportion of those born in other states than New York finally halted in 1900 at five per cent and then began a slow rise to 7.5 per cent by 1920.²⁹

A factor which for many years made Rochester especially congenial to all its residents was the housing situation. Newcomers were not, as in some cities, herded into old tenements or confined to slum areas. The moderate size of the Flour City had encouraged the erection both of modest cottages and more sumptuous homes within easy walking distance of the central Four Corners. A few flimsy rookeries had appeared in the central area during boom days, but their crowded residents had moved out as soon as the shortage of houses was overcome. The establishment of the horse-car company in 1863 and its electrification in 1890 were both well timed from the homeseeker's point of view, for they each in turn extended the territory suited to single, free-standing houses just at the moment when congestion threatened to encourage the building of row houses, three deckers or other tenements. The earlier rookeries had long since been demolished to make way for commercial or industrial structures, and except for the dwelling units located above or in the rear of most of the small retail stores, Rochester's residences throughout the nineteenth century were separate family homesteads, frequently owned by their occupants.³⁰

Rochester compared favorably with most other large cities in this latter respect, though it was no longer unexcelled. Indeed the housing situation began to deteriorate around the turn of the century. Rochester's ratio of families per dwelling increased from 1.14 in 1890 to 1.2 in 1900, and the percentage of families doubled up mounted from 14.2 to 17.2 during the next two decades. However the per cent of homes owned by their occupants increased from 37.8 to 42.5 in the same period. Only two large cities showed a more favorable situation in the latter respect, but several now had more adequate accommodations.³¹ The fact was that cities throughout the country were tolerating the development of blighted and slum areas with inevitable effects on the vitality of the population, although the results did not become fully apparent until the next period.

Still other aspects of this trend were to be seen in the city's increasing density and in the advancing age of its buildings. Neither was as yet acute, but the practice of erecting a second house in the rear of an earlier dwelling, or between two comfortably spaced cottages, was blighting several sections. The population was likewise growing older. Children under five were becoming relatively less numerous, dropping from one-seventh to one-tenth of the population between 1855 and 1920, despite the efficiency of the new health services which chiefly benefited the very young. This drop also reflected the longer life span enjoyed by many and the great influx of new young adults from abroad. But young women now outnumbered young men among these newcomers, attracted of course by the city's many opportunities for women workers. The result was a larger surplus of unmarried young women than ever before, and a greater proportion than in most cities of Rochester's class. The ten per cent whose ages fell between 45 and 65 in 1855 doubled by 1920,³² but here again it was the number of unmarried or widowed females that increased most rapidly. It was hardly strange that women should have become increasingly impatient for the right to vote or that they should have assumed a more active part in civic affairs.³³ They initiated or helped to carry forward many of the movements for the amelioration of social conditions in Rochester during the early years of the century, and although the aggravated urban problems seemed ever a jump or two ahead of the best efforts of men and women alike, Rochester entered the next period of its population history in a confident mood.

Suburban Advance: 1920-1950

Amidst the buoyant optimism which animated most Americans in the 1920's, many indications of a shift in urban trends were overlooked. The inevitable effects of new immigration restrictions were not anticipated, and like many other cities, Rochester, in its first determined efforts to plan for the future, projected earlier growth curves confidently ahead. When the depression brought sudden and painful disillusionment, most of these plans were shelved. And when, after several years of hard times, the census of 1940 revealed a slight decline in the city's population, gloomy forebodings gripped many citizens. The fact that the metropolitan area continued to enjoy a healthy growth was disregarded, and the city endeavored to curb its municipal aspirations and to bring its budget within the capacities of a depressed economy. The city's

failure in these years to take action in line with its master plan for street widening discouraged realtors from improving their commercial properties, while areas of urban blight which had already commenced in several congested wards became progressively worse as normal building operations were suspended.³⁴ Thus both economic and human factors retarded growth during the thirties.

Again it was the stirring experiences of a great war that restored confidence and at its close focussed attention on such crucial community problems as inadequate housing and antiquated traffic accommodations. Fortunately an awakening realization of the city's growing metropolitan strength, of its increased interdependence with state and national developments, cleared the way for a broader and more co-operative approach to these problems at the same time that a resurgent vitality within its homes and factories launched a new growth cycle.

Recognition of the city's urgent need for a planned development of its facilities first took hold in the twenties. Earlier efforts, sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and other groups at various times since 1904, had failed to win official support, though a planning commission had been created for advisory purposes in 1918. The great cost of a proposed civic center and rivalry between two proposed parallel streets, one north and one south of Main Street, forestalled action on the grand scale recommended by the Brunner-Olmsted plan of 1911. Piecemeal planning effected some improvements in the street system and other municipal services during the next fifteen years. Finally a number of enterprising architects and industrialists, who predicted in the mid-twenties that Rochester would reach a population of 678,000 by 1950 and would need greatly enlarged services, persuaded the city, under the newly adopted city manager charter, to engage a planning expert to draw a master plan for Rochester. Harland Bartholomew of St. Louis was selected, and his plan, when released in May, 1929, called for vast new street and transit improvements and for other civic developments which a city expected to reach 600,000 by 1950 would need. The Common Council eventually accepted the proposed zoning and street setback recommendations, but the onset of the depression forestalled further action.³⁵

The calculations of population growth on which these plans were based had failed to consider several important factors. The improved roads and the increased number of automobiles (which jumped from

perhaps 1500 in 1910 to 50,000 in 1922, more than doubled in the next decade, and reached 159,533 by 1949)³⁶ speeded the movement into the suburbs where now the efficiency of septic tanks and the spread of telephones, radios and other conveniences, freed householders from the old desire for an early extension of municipal facilities. Indeed the independent provision of water mains and sewers in more fully developed suburban areas, coupled with the much publicized concern over the city's debt and tax rates, created such a strong opposition to annexation during the thirties that the municipal authorities could no longer anticipate an extension of boundaries to include the city's overflow. The predictions of the twenties had of course assumed continued annexations, and it is interesting to note that the forecast for 1930 was still well below the actual urban growth of the metropolitan area by that date. The total figure for the area, 398,591, represented a 21 per cent growth during the decade, but part of the increase in this case did result from an expansion of the metropolitan area to include three additional townships with their approximately 8,000 former residents. This was not, however, unreasonable, for the city's centripetal growth was even more far reaching during the twenties.

This vigorous growth did not continue during the thirties, however. The city actually lost 3,157, and although the metropolitan area added 13,379, and the county 18,275, even the latter's total of 438,230 fell short of the 450,000 predicted for the city by 1940.³⁷ The forecasters had not taken account of the new immigration laws, passed in 1921 and 1924, and of course they had not foreseen the depression. The slower growth of the thirties clearly reveals the cumulative effect of these factors.

The influx of newcomers from abroad, which had mounted steadily for almost a century, was checked but not halted during the twenties—indeed it was never entirely halted and Rochester continues to attract hundreds of new immigrants every year, more proportionately (during the thirties) than any comparable inland city. The rate of increase dropped suddenly in the twenties when the total advanced only from 71,411 to 74,839. The next decade saw a positive decline as deaths and the out-migration of some of the foreign born exceeded the new immigrants by 14,601—a loss four times the size of that in the city's total. Some of these out-migrants were perhaps fleeing to the suburbs, but the county's total number of foreign born likewise dropped during this decade and at almost the same rate.³⁸

Of course the most important aspect of this situation was the drying up of the city's stream of replacements, and it was in the depression years of the thirties, when as in former periods of hard times the number of out-migrants increased, that the absence of a steady flow of newcomers from abroad effected a positive loss in the total population. The federal census authorities first made a check of internal migration movements for the years 1935-1940, discovering that of a total of 17,553 newcomers to the city in these years only 1,041 were from foreign countries—a mere trickle compared with the net gain of 30,663 in foreign born during the two decades prior to 1920. Most of the in-migrants now came from the rest of New York state, but approximately a third hailed from other states, greatly strengthening Rochester's ties with other parts of the country. Yet the city's out-migrants almost doubled its in-migrants during these five years.³⁹ A goodly portion of these moved only to near by suburbs, yet a slightly larger number went to other states than the city received from them in return. This last movement had long been in effect, but now the declining number of newcomers from abroad has made it a serious matter.

Important as these more or less impersonal factors were in checking the city's growth, they could easily be over-emphasized. As this actually occurred in the reasoning of many observers during the late thirties and early forties, a false sense of stagnation, or stabilization as it was called, developed. This attitude was in itself enervating and contributed still another restraint on the forces working for renewed growth. The fact that some other cities continued to expand during the dark years of the depression seemed to confirm the belief in local quiescence. Even during the war years, when most urban communities became alarmed over the problems presented by internal growth, Rochester continued to assume a stabilized population.⁴⁰

This attitude may have slowed but it could not stop a new surge of growth which hit the city and especially the metropolitan area during the late forties. Out-migration had been checked by the war-time industrial activity in Rochester, and even migration to suburban tracts was discouraged by the gasoline shortage. The metropolitan area made its gains during the war years by attracting newcomers from more distant rural areas. These gains of the city and the area, imperfectly measured by ration-book counts and other methods, were not as great as in many cities, but the quick reconversion after the war to peacetime output avoided the expected period of population decline, and Roches-

ter in 1950 has made a new advance to 331,292. This increase of 6,317 within the decade, supported by an increment of 40,350 in the rest of the county, now the metropolitan district, making a total gain of 46,667 or 10.6 per cent for the metropolitan area, clearly indicates a renewed surge of population growth. Moreover the seven near-by counties tributary to Rochester, after a slow growth of 5000 in sixty years, jumped 25,000 [or 10 per cent] in a decade.⁴¹

A major portion of this urban increase has come from the restored vitality of the city's families. The old assumption that the city could not maintain its own population has been discarded as more intensive examination of birth and death ratios, age and marital characteristics, has revealed that Rochester, like most other cities of its class, produces a positive surplus each year. Close analysis discloses, however, that with the advancing age of the population, which reached a median of 32 years in 1940 (contrasting with the 21 a century before), the ratio of increase has tended to drop. This can have an important bearing on the future not only of Rochester's population trends but on the character of the community as well.

The importance of this factor has not been overlooked by the Planning Commission, reorganized in 1944 and endowed at last with real powers. Under its direction studies have been made on many matters, and a population study of 1947 contributes directly to our analysis. After a careful examination of age and sex data, of birth and death rates, this report concludes that the city's existing population will enjoy a slow natural increase to 362,490 in 1965 before it tapers off slightly and reaches stability at 360,000.⁴² The 1950 figure was to be 353,883 (less out-migration to the suburbs). In similar fashion the county's natural growth was expected to reach 489,363 by 1970, or 474,964 in 1950, which is 9,953 less than the actual count (with in-migrants included).

The report of the Planning Commission recognizes of course that the actual totals are always subject to the ebb and flow of human migration. An effort was accordingly made to measure the probable needs of the city's industries and the possible effects of these forces on the population trends. From these and other considerations the conclusion was reached that the county would attract a net in-migration of 41,000 by 1970, which would bring its population up to 530,000 by that date. Of this, Rochester would retain within its present borders only 330,000—much less than its own natural increment and slightly less even than its present numerical strength.

The preparation of estimates of future growth is essential to long range planning, yet the human factor will always remain unpredictable. The free flow of newcomers from abroad, which made all prognostications unreliable before the 1920's, has been eliminated, or at least drastically checked, but the incessant motion of internal migration continues. Thus the stability ratio based on the names appearing in successive city directories, after rising by the eighties to 38 per cent for ten-year periods and 62 per cent for five-year periods, fluctuated a few points up and down in good times and bad, ending at 61.8 per cent for the 1945-1950 period. As the population has grown older, death has accounted for an increased portion of the names removed each year, but out-migration and the in-migration of replacements are both likely to remain important. No methods have yet been devised to predict the number of new young couples who will be attracted by or lost to the city annually. Nor is it possible to foretell what effect the development of new industries here *or elsewhere* will have on the local employment situation or what effect that situation will have on the marriage age and through it on the birth rate. We will have to leave the discovery of these conditions and the formulation of relevant decisions to the future.

It is worth noting, however, that Rochester's sudden drop during the last decade from twenty-third to thirty-first place among the larger cities of the United States is not a sign of approaching decline but a promise of local stability. The rapid growth of other urban centers and of an urban society generally is the best guarantee Rochester industrialists can have of a steady market for their highly technical products. And if, in time, some enterprising cities invade Rochester's specialties, it will not be a new experience, for that happened long ago in the field of flour milling, and again in the nursery and shoe industries. Local enterprise and skill were sufficient in each case to develop new and more advantageous lines here, and the city's future will continue to depend in the last analysis on the vitality of these qualities.

Yet the decisions we make or fail to make or to carry into effect as a community in the 1950's will have their influence, just as they are being determined in part by the actions of our predecessors. A vast program for the modernization of our highways has already been launched by state and city authorities, and the manner in which it is carried forward will help to determine not only the number of people who can live comfortably in the Rochester metropolitan area, but also the por-

tion of them who will continue to reside within the city limits. If, by careful planning, desirable residential areas are protected; if present and potential commercial areas are developed through the provisions of adequate highway and parking facilities; and if blighted areas are converted to desirable commercial, industrial or recreational uses, or rebuilt for suitable residential occupancy, Rochester proper will retain its vitality and will continue to supply leadership, unity, and the amenities of life to an expanding metropolitan area and to its broader Genesee hinterland as well.

But if these and other decisions to be made in the decade of the fifties will help to determine the number and the contentment of Rochesterians of 1960, it is well to recall that the Rochester we know today is the creation of its present 331,292 residents, assisted by some 150,000 more in its metropolitan area, building on the inheritance received from successive generations who have contributed for longer or shorter periods to its development in the past. A rough count of the numbers who died here or migrated from Rochester in each five-year period gives a total of approximately one million former Rochesterians. Adding these to those here today and in the metropolitan area we get a total of nearly a million and a half people who have taken part in Rochester's great population parade down through the years.

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