

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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## ROCHESTER ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

By DEXTER PERKINS

### THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

In 1839 the United States was still a preponderantly agricultural nation, a nation of small farmers. In the whole settled area of our country, which then extended hardly beyond the Mississippi—except for such states as Arkansas, Missouri, and Louisiana—there were only fifteen cities with a population of over 20,000 people. The largest, New York, was about the size of Rochester today. The next largest, Baltimore, had only slightly over 100,000, while New Orleans ran a close third with Philadelphia and Boston as fourth and fifth.

In 1839 the region of Western New York, and still more, of course, the states between the mountain barrier of the Appalachians and the Great River, could still be spoken of without absurdity as the West. In this Western region cities were, of course, even less numerous and important than along the seaboard. Chicago had its future all before it. Detroit and Saint Louis were as yet of minor importance. The largest urban communities were New Orleans, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh, with a population of approximately 100,000, 45,000, and 30,000, respectively. In such a situation as this, young Rochester, with 20,000 inhabitants, could hold up its head proudly and indulge in rosy dreams that it might become one of the great cities of America.

The growth of this local community of ours had, indeed, been remarkable. In 1839 it was less than thirty years since Hamlet Scramtom had come to Rochester to become the first permanent settler on

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the Hundred-Acre Tract. Still a mere village in 1820, Rochester had thriven with the construction of the Erie Canal. Its population had increased six-fold in the decade 1820-1830; it had doubled in the decade 1830-1840. It was one of the largest cities in the country, bigger than Cleveland, bigger than Chicago.

Visitors who passed through the growing community in the decade of the thirties would have had plenty of chance, you may be sure, to observe how close it still was to its agricultural origins. Its streets were largely unpaved, and contained deep and awful mudholes. Cows and hogs wandered freely through the town, for nearly every family owned such livestock and turned it out to feed upon the public domain in a carefree disregard of local ordinances. Much of the land within the city limits was still undivided farm land. Many of the houses, simple in architecture and often suggestively rural in appearance, had their gardens which supplied the family with most of the year's supply of vegetables. Even staple crops were grown, and as late as 1845 over 5,000 bushels of wheat<sup>1</sup> were raised within the area which Rochester then occupied, an area which was, of course, only a small part—approximately one-fifth—of the Rochester of today.

But if there was much that suggested an overgrown country town, there were also signs of promise and urban elegance. On Buffalo Street, as Main Street west of the river was then called, was the Reynolds Arcade, constructed a decade before, the tallest building in town, that is, if one counted its observatory, "in the form of a Chinese pagoda," with an elevation of eighty-nine feet, from which in clear weather the lake could be seen "like a strip of blue cloud on the horizon."<sup>2</sup> Not far away, on the corner of Buffalo and North Water Streets was the Globe Building, which the same traveller's guide describes as "a majestic pile rising . . . five stories high, exclusive of attics."<sup>3</sup> The Court House was also the pride of all Rochesterians. It stood on a slight rise of ground, where the present Court House stands today, set back from the street in the midst of a square laid out with gravel walks and planted with trees.

There were private houses, too, pleasing and even impressive to the eye. The great Child mansion on South Washington Street, still standing, had been occupied the year before. The present D. A. R. house, built by Hervey Ely, and old Livingston Park Seminary, then

the residence of Dr. Frederick Backus, were amongst the finest mansions in town. Spring Street, Fitzhugh, and Troup Streets were by no means undistinguished. The Third Ward, so long the center of the social life of Rochester, was already in its heyday. No fair-minded observer or traveler could have described the Rochester of 1839 as nothing more than a frontier village.

Were one to turn from the physical appearance of the growing metropolis to the people who inhabited it, the first and most striking fact to be observed would have been the homogeneous racial character of the citizens. The great tide of migration that was to vary and enrich the cultural life of America was as yet hardly under way. The Irish had, indeed, begun to appear, mostly as day laborers upon the canal, and on the east bank of the river north from Central Avenue to the neighborhood of present Lowell Street was a section already locally known as Dublin. But the great day of the Irish was yet to come, when immigration was stimulated by the potato famine of 1846. The Germans, who were next in chronological order amongst the non-Anglo-Saxon stocks that settled Rochester, were an insignificant element a hundred years ago. The overwhelming proportion of the population, in fact, had been drawn from New England and eastern New York State. In 1845, more than three-fifths of the population had been born in one of these two regions, as had most of the very first settlers.

As striking as the homogeneity of the settlers was the preponderance of young people in the community. Despite a mortality from childhood diseases that would profoundly shock us at the present day, despite the ravages of such scourges as tuberculosis, now so largely conquered, despite a public health movement still in its infancy, the citizens of Rochester were for the most part young men and women. Seventy-three per cent of them were under thirty years of age, only 5 per cent over fifty. Compare these striking figures with those of today, when only 50 per cent of the population is under thirty, and 20 per cent over fifty, and one understands what a different world it is that we live in compared with that of a hundred years ago. Of course, part of this contrast is to be explained by the numbers of ambitious youths who came to the city to seek their fortunes from the regions to the east.

Rochester, indeed, in 1839 was a city which offered every promise to industry and thrift. Most of its inhabitants were small mechanics and small merchants who, moving with the great tide of western migration, had come to carve out a new destiny for themselves along the Genesee. They belonged to a generation which asked no favors of destiny, which was self-confident, intensely individualistic, and eager to get on. Their political, economic, and social preconceptions were those of a new and fresh society formed in the crucible of nineteenth century thought and feeling.

### POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

One hundred years ago the great American democracy was in the first flush of its youth. In 1826 New York State, to the great horror of conservatives, bestowed the right to vote on white male citizens of the age of twenty-one. By the end of the decade the interest of the masses in politics had reached fever heat, and had swept Andrew Jackson into the White House. Old Hickory, while somewhat unreliable at times in his intellectual processes, was beyond all question a vigorous and forthright personality. Around his striking figure crystallized a political party which called itself the Democratic Party; in opposition there formed another political organization which, ringing the changes on one of the most often repeated cries in American party struggles, the cry of presidential despotism, gave itself the name of Whig. In an age when other outlets for intellectual and mass activity were undoubtedly less numerous than they are today, the contest of Whigs and Democrats took on tremendous importance, even though, then as now, it was sometimes difficult to tell precisely what the parties stood for.

Party allegiance in America has always been strongly influenced, naturally enough, by heredity, by social alignments, and by sectional origins. In Rochester some of these factors undoubtedly influenced the situation. Many of the settlers of the city, as we have seen, came from New England. New England had been for the most part formed in the Federalist, anti-Democratic tradition, and was attracted to the Whig party in due course. Hence Monroe County tended away from Jacksonism. In particular the more prosperous classes, and those who imitated them, aligned themselves for the most part, though not exclusively, with the Whigs.

It must not be imagined, however, that there was any such preponderance on the part of one political party as characterized Rochester in the halcyon days of Republican ascendancy. The Democrats were not by any means a weak and feeble minority. They captured the mayoralty three times between 1834 and 1840, and the Council twice. They made a respectable showing in the two presidential elections of 1836 and 1840.

Both the political parties by 1839 had well lubricated party organizations, existing throughout the state. Thurlow Weed directed the Whig machine from his seat of power at Albany. The local Democratic paper of a hundred years ago commented darkly on the activities of this "Mephistopheles," as it frankly called him. He was, it appears, gliding about the state "like a troubled spirit . . . the very ghost of Hamlet—oiling the wheels, screwing on the screws, and finishing off the rivets in the highest style."<sup>4</sup> To charges such as these, the Whigs retorted by pointing out that the Democrats had organized sinister secret clubs, and asserted, not without justification, that the interest of the Democratic postmaster, Henry O'Reilly, in the various young men's literary and debating societies, was far from being exclusively cultural.

In one respect the Democrats had the advantage when it came to patronage. The national administration in 1839 was of their political persuasion. But locally, on the other hand, the Whigs were more likely to control the offices. What Democratic spokesman, moreover, could rival the brilliant Clay or the godlike Webster, especially the latter, who came to Rochester in 1837 and spoke in the Court House square with such fervor and conviction that even an editor of opposite political faith described him as speaking in a style "which excites attention even from those whose judgment rejects the argument."<sup>5</sup>

In an age when many of our modern forms of rivalry had not been invented, Americans took their politics with a verve and gusto rarely paralleled today. Torchlight parades, floats, marching and singing clubs, liberty poles, violent newspaper controversies, all made for a color and excitement that can hardly be equalled in political history. Take, for instance, the exploit of the Second Ward Tippecanoe Club, the Saucy Second, as they called themselves, in the campaign of 1840,

the famous hard cider campaign, in which the Democratic candidate Van Buren went down to defeat before William Henry Harrison. The Saucy Second, amply sustained by doughnuts, cheese and hard cider, erected the first Harrison log cabin in Rochester on the corner of Platt and State Streets. Deservedly, they felt, the whole county should turn out for the dedication, and the whole county nearly did. The ceremonies began with a parade two miles long. The Greece delegation, we are told, came in a canoe (on wheels) sixty feet long and drawn by eight horses. Unfortunately this magnificent creation was too long to go around corners and had to be left out of the procession. Between seven and eight thousand people, said the papers, listened to speeches and joined in drinking hard cider in front of the cabin. One fears that Rochester's limited police force was hardly equal to the strain of this occasion and the merry-making continued far into the night.

The Whigs, as we have already noted, were, in general, the party of the well-to-do. All the more reason for emphasizing their democratic simplicity. Indeed, they went further than this. They managed to pin the badge of snobbery on the Democrats, and in the contest of 1840 they were aided by ill-timed Democratic sneers at log cabins and hard cider. One worthy citizen describes how he was converted to the Whig cause. "Thinks I," he said, "I am poorer [even] than the General; wonder if I am an object of contempt to my rich brother Democrats." Answering this query in the affirmative, he cast his vote for William Henry Harrison.<sup>6</sup> And he was on the winning side. Rochester by a small margin went for the hero of Tippecanoe.

Of course, the enthusiasm generated by presidential elections was rarely present in the same degree in municipal contests, but these were by no means tame affairs, none the less. The most exciting election of the period was probably that of 1835, turning on a well-known local issue. The Whigs had followed a restrictive policy in the matter of liquor licenses. The Democrats, whose following had perhaps less opportunity for domestic drinking than the rival elements, proceeded to challenge this policy. In the election of 1835 they won a tremendous victory, a victory that was followed by the resignation of Mayor Child, who courageously refused to be the instrument of the

Common Council in carrying out a program of which he stoutly disapproved. But the Democratic victory was by no means lasting. Next year Rochester returned to "respectability," and remained for the most part under Whig government throughout the late thirties and the early forties.

The party contests we have been describing are the more remarkable when one considers how small was the function of government, and how simple its organization, one hundred years ago as compared with today. It is a curious fact, indeed, that interest in political life may well have declined as the role of the state has widened. At any rate, in 1839, Rochesterians had a municipal set-up which would look ridiculous beside that of our own epoch. This set-up is well worth examining. Nothing, indeed, more effectively points the contrast between those days and these.

In structure, the city government of 1839 was extremely simple. The major governing body was the Common Council, composed of ten members elected from the five wards of the city for a two-year term, five being chosen each alternate year. It was this body, through its committees, which actually performed most of the duties of government. There was a mayor, but his functions were extremely limited. He was, in fact, elected by the Council, and in a sense responsible to it. He had no veto over its acts of legislation. Until 1838 he had not even been paid a salary. In that year he was granted the munificent sum of \$400 a year, out of which he was to pay his office rent!<sup>7</sup>

The organization of the municipal government reflects, of course, the simplicity of function which characterized it. Most of the services which we exact of city government today were non-existent in 1839. It was not by any means taken for granted that all the streets in the city should be paved, although an extensive program of street improvement had recently been undertaken. Public health service was almost a negligible factor, except perhaps in periods of threatened cholera epidemic, when the Council might order the streets cleaned and lime sprinkled throughout the town. The collection of garbage and refuse was still a matter for the future. The schools of the city had little connection with the city government, being run, and for the most part ill-run, by the various school district committees which each

had its own small area of activity. Fire protection was in the hands of volunteer companies, which raced to fires over the sidewalks, dragging their engines behind them, to the great danger of life and limb of the rest of the populace, and sometimes let the fire burn merrily on while they contended with a rival fire company for the valued privilege of extinguishing it. Water supply there was none, in the modern sense of the term. Street lighting was confined to whale oil lamps in the center of the town. The permanent police force of Rochester numbered exactly twelve in 1839.<sup>8</sup>

Taking all these facts into account, it is perhaps no wonder that the cost of city government was not great, and seems to our own age ridiculous and even minute. It had mounted, one hundred years ago, to a peak just over \$100,000 per annum.<sup>9</sup> Yet even then there were those who complained of the high cost of government, and strenuously resisted new forms of expenditures, urging that the city keep its outlay within its \$17,500 tax limitation. Not even these grumblers, however, could complain of the outrageous salaries by enjoyed municipal officials; the salaries of the city's part-time officers amounted to less than \$3,000;<sup>10</sup> virtually all expenditures were in connection with the street paving program and other meager public services that were rendered to the citizens.

It must not be imagined that in the character of its municipal government Rochester was in any sense peculiar. It was, on the contrary, quite typical. The times were simple ones; and seriously as Rochesterians took their politics, they took still more seriously the business of getting a living, and suspected any political philosophy which deprived them of the fruits of their toil. For them that government was still best which governed least, which, in Thomas Jefferson's phrase, did not take from the mouth of labor the bread which it had earned.

### ECONOMIC LIFE OF ROCHESTER

One hundred years ago the economic organization of Rochester life was in many respects hardly less simple than the political. The great Industrial Revolution that was to transform the face of American society had, of course, already begun, and the American people were already earning the admiration of other nations for their inventiveness and ingenuity. The development of a system of credit



through banking institutions was on its way, but its major developments were, of course, still in the future. The corporation was already known, but it was an uncommon instead of the commonest form of business organization. There were already some fortunes that might be considered large even by modern standards, but the gulf between the very rich and the very poor was infinitely narrower than it appears today. The labor union movement was still comparatively feeble. The average workingman cherished the laudable and wholly attainable ambition of some day possessing a business of his own. If he failed in such ambition and found his job an arduous one, or his master over-exacting, there was always the great West beckoning to him, and plenty of land for him to take up, to be purchased at the low price of \$1.25 an acre at the government land offices. The future of the country seemed a rosy one, and not even the depression of the late thirties, of which we shall later have something to say, was likely to alter or materially change the impression, the correct impression, that great days lay ahead.

In comparison with other communities of 1839, Rochester had, of course, already felt the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Its milling industry, to which the city owed its prosperity, and which was in a sense as old as the city itself, was, for those days, a highly mechanized one at the end of the decade of the thirties. Visitors to the city exclaimed with admiration at the great "hydraulic wheels," and at the process by which the wheat was ground and put into barrels with the assistance of "a very small number of operators." They might have admired, too, the large number of mills themselves, no less than twenty-two of them in 1840, with a capital of nearly a million dollars, and an annual product in some years of almost 500,000 barrels with a value of over two million dollars. Nor was the milling industry the only one which was putting machinery to work on a considerable scale. Rochester was already busy spinning and weaving wool and cotton into fabrics valued at over \$100,000 in 1835, but as yet the clothing industry was confined to the limits of the tailor shop and housewife's shears.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these signs of future growth, however, Rochester was a city of small business activities, taken as a whole. Even the factories and mills, of whose size the city was so proud, were each comparatively small enterprises owned by individuals or by partnerships.

There were numberless small merchants and mechanics. There were quantities of blacksmiths and carriage makers. There were many persons who combined two or three separate trades in their own persons, and refuted by their activities the notion that a Jack-at-all-trades was good at none.

The road to wealth in Rochester might lie along a variety of roads. Abelard Reynolds, one of the most respected citizens of the rising community, sought to build up a fortune, as did many another American of his generation, through land speculation and purchase. Hervey Ely, a colorful figure whose great house still stands on Livingston Park, the seat of the D. A. R., was a flour merchant. Judge Addison Gardiner, for whom Gardiner Avenue is named, accumulated a comfortable competence at the law, and retired to his estate on the street now named for him, which was then "in the country," in the literal sense of the term. Elisha Johnson was a builder and a contractor, the city's fifth mayor in 1838, the constructor of Main Street Bridge (built in 1824 at half the cost of the one of 1812),<sup>12</sup> and the chief figure in the building of the Tonawanda Railroad.

For men of this stamp, bold, acquisitive, ambitious, there were, of course, often vicissitudes. American life in the thirties was full of chances, chances that were inherent in the spirit of the age, in the speculative temper that has marked American life almost from the earliest period and that distinguishes it so sharply from the temper of modern France, shall we say, or even of contemporary England. There were dark days, therefore, at times, for these men of affairs. Hervey Ely was alternately rich and poor. Abelard Reynolds had his moments of embarrassment with his heavy mortgages on the pride of Rochester, the Arcade. Many other individuals than these no doubt felt the pinch one way or another in the hard times of the late thirties. One of the most interesting things that we have to tell about economic Rochester in this epoch is that it was passing through a period of depression, one of the first great depressions of our national history.

The depression had begun in 1837. It is easy, of course, for many Americans to blame depressions on the folly or stupidity of politicians, and there still exist historians who teach that this particular one we shall examine was caused by the malign antagonism of Andrew Jackson towards the Bank of the United States. But it seems sounder

to trace the collapse which took place in the late thirties, in part to a European business reaction over which this country had no control, in part to the steep drop in cotton prices which followed on the decline of British takings, and in part to the speculation which in those days found expression, not, of course, in the stock market, but in the purchase of land. The bubble burst only a few months after President Martin Van Buren had taken office. The resulting reversal was to last for more than four years, and to be a large factor in bringing about the election of the Whig candidate for the presidency in 1840.

In our own day it has been observed that Rochester, from the character of its people, and the variety and nature of its industries, has been better equipped to stand the stresses and strains of depression than most urban communities. The same thing was true one hundred years ago. Of course the reasons for Rochester's comparative toughness of resistance were different then than now. Let us examine them for a little.

There were few areas more favored by fortune in 1839 than the one in which we live. The greatest wheat growing region in the country was at our doors. The "Genesee Valley" was described as the bread-basket of New York, and Rochester was hailed as the Flour City. In those days when the thick prairie sods of northern Indiana, Illinois, and trans-Mississippi were as yet largely unbroken by the plow, the wheat farmers of up-state New York gloried in their supremacy. Each fall brought millions of bushels of wheat to Rochester where it was milled, and packed for shipment to eastern markets. The transportation facilities which ministered to this important commerce were, for their day, unrivalled. In 1839 the railroad era was still for the most part in the future. The greatest of all routes to the East was the Erie Canal, affectionately described as Clinton's Big Ditch. So great was the traffic along this artery of commerce that even in the midst of the bad times the cry went up for an enlargement of the canal, due to increasing congestion. In 1838 a bond issue of \$4,000,000 was floated by the state to meet the situation.<sup>13</sup> Some of this money was spent in Rochester and helped to give employment when it was badly needed.

The city was also benefitting from other enterprises in the field of transportation. In 1834 and the years immediately thereafter

improvements made at the mouth of the river had rendered the Port of the Genesee an attractive point of call for sailing and steam vessels on Lake Ontario. The construction of the horse-drawn railroad on the east bank of the river from Carthage Landing to the aqueduct facilitated the import of hundreds of thousands of bushels of Canadian wheat, and stimulated an export trade worth between \$4,000,000 and \$5,000,000 in 1838. Curious visitors paid twenty-five cents for a round trip ticket to visit Rochester's port where they could watch the loading of the lake vessels, which sometimes numbered as many as seventeen. For a few years, indeed, the lake trade over-topped that of the canal so far as Rochester flour was concerned, and Rochester millers calculated their bills in pounds for the convenience of their Toronto and other Canadian customers.

But it must not be imagined that because Rochester was more fortunate than many other communities, it completely escaped the effects of the depression. The contagious paralysis of fear and the nation-wide deflation of credit checked local enterprises sufficiently to throw many out of work. Municipal expenditures, under pressure of an increasing demand for economy, were cut to the bone, with the consequence that the situation was aggravated among the poorer class which had labored on the streets during the paving boom of previous years. In the winter of 1837-38 a municipal soup-kitchen had to be opened to ameliorate the suffering of the destitute, and in the spring of 1838 it was necessary to provide some measure of public employment by breaking stone.

The situation may have been better in 1838 and 1839. But in the spring of 1840, 1,389 persons, or 6 per cent of the total population (a far larger percentage, no doubt, of heads of families), were on relief. Foreclosures were numerous, though it is difficult to get the precise figures. Tax defaults were also common. In 1841, in fact, the collector advertised a half-column list of lots to be sold for tax arrears running up to \$126.90 a lot. There can be no question that Rochester suffered in common with, if not proportionately to, other urban communities.

In general, the striking thing about the depression period is the very meager assistance that was rendered to the unfortunate. The explanation lies in part, of course, in a fact that was true throughout the nineteenth century, namely that in bad times the unemployed

could, in many instances at least, return to the farms from which they came. But even when this fact is taken into account one is struck with the fact that the aid given to those in need of relief in the winter of 1839-40 was only \$7,191, or little more than five dollars per person.<sup>14</sup>

As for borrowing to meet relief needs, no one raised the question so far as the city was concerned in the depression of 1837. The situation in the state, it is true, was slightly different. Governor Seward, Whig though he was, at a time when drastic economy and deflation to the necessary limit were the almost universally accepted prescriptions for economic depression, persistently sponsored a policy of substantial expenditure, and of widespread public improvements. But there was widespread criticism of this inconsequent optimism, and when the Democrats came into power they promptly reversed Seward's course of action. Of course such spending as there was would appear minute indeed as compared with that of our day.

Recovery from the depression was undoubtedly slow and anything but spectacular. For some time there was no boom but only the courageous opening of new enterprises which were to make their way, and provide the impetus for a new expansion of trade. In the midst of the bad times, in 1838, George Ellwanger purchased the seed store of Reynolds and Bateham and, joining with Patrick Barry, founded the Mount Hope nurseries. The forwarding merchants pushed their boats out onto the lakes and despatched their agents through the new settlements of the Northwest. Rochester capital at the beginning of the next decade went into the Pomeroy and the Fargo express companies, ventures of a new kind. The young city of the West faced the future with a hope that was to be justified by experience.

## RELIGION AND REFORM

The America of the ante-bellum period was profoundly and almost universally religious. There had already been periods of scepticism in American history. Many of the thinkers of the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin among them, had been deeply touched with the rationalism and the scepticism which in part characterized that era. To some extent this point of view had carried over into the early nineteenth century. But by the end of the fourth decade

it was less rather than more important than it had been forty years before. The church was a central institution in every American community. It was the principal source of social as well as religious life. It played a dominating role in the lives of most Rochesterians.

And for the most part, the church in 1839 meant the Protestant church. The first Catholic church, St. Patrick's, had, it is true, been built as early as 1823, but the period of Catholic expansion was in the future, and in 1839 the Catholics composed not more than one-fifth of the total population. There existed towards them in many quarters a most deplorable bigotry, which was more characteristic of that day than of our own, and which was tied up with the fact that many Catholics were what the New England-born Rochesterians would have still described as "foreigners." As for the third great religious group which inhabits Rochester today, that is the Jews, it appears to have been non-existent one hundred years ago. So far as one can tell, the first Jewish name appeared in the city directory in 1844, and it was not until 1848 that there was a sufficient number of Jews to organize the first synagogue of Berith Kodesh.

The Protestant Christianity of the Flour City in 1839 was of the type which today would be described as fundamentalist and evangelical. One of the striking developments in American religious life in the first half of the nineteenth century had been the growth of revivalism, never more vigorous and widespread than on the frontier. From the first outbreak of strong religious emotion in Kentucky just at the turn of the century, down to 1840, the country was swept by wave after wave of feeling. Western New York had a conspicuous part in the whole business, so conspicuous, in fact, that it was sometimes known as the "burnt-over district," having been singed so often by the hell-fire preachings of the itinerant leaders of the movement.

The first great revival in Rochester had come in 1830-31. But from that time forward nearly every succeeding year until 1842 saw some sort of religious outpouring, while no less than thirteen new churches were founded in Rochester between 1834 and 1844, six of which still exist today.\*

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\*Zion Lutheran; Baptist Temple; Asbury Methodist; Central Presbyterian; Monroe Avenue Methodist; Trinity Evangelical.

Of the evangelists who visited the city during these years, by far the most important both for the magnetism of his personality and his effect upon the religious thinking of the day was Charles Grandison Finney, a stone to the memory of whom may be seen at the corner of Meigs Street and East Avenue where the Third Presbyterian Church now stands. Finney was as much a product of the new West as Andrew Jackson, and he brought the spirit of frontier democracy into religion. To the more conservative divines, Finney was anathema. They accused him of being unduly emotional, of holding protracted revivals which lasted days and even weeks, and of using the simple language of every day instead of the current lofty and learned style of preaching. All this was true, but Finney was logical as well as emotional, and it is significant that in Rochester his influence was greatest among the more intelligent elements of the community whom other evangelists found hard to move.

Finney first visited the city in 1830 when the revival period began, and again in 1842. On his first incursion, the results had been truly remarkable. Thousands flocked to hear him, until the fame of the Rochester Revival spread throughout the country and brought listeners from distant cities. Six hundred and thirty-five persons joined the three Presbyterian churches in the city; 203 were added to the First Baptist Church; and the Methodists were so uplifted that they felt justified in building a church capable of seating 2,000 people. The revival of 1842 was only slightly less enthusiastic. This revival was especially famous for its wholesale conversion of the lawyers of the city, who were unable to resist a series of lectures in which Finney, an ex-law student himself, applied all the logical and proven methods of the courts to the cause of salvation. It is related that one lawyer afterwards presented the evangelist with a legal deed complete in every detail "in which he quit-claimed to the Lord Jesus Christ all ownership of himself and of everything he possessed."<sup>15</sup>

In the years between Finney's two visits other revivals stirred Rochester, in 1833, in 1837, in 1838, and 1839. One of the revivalists was Glezen Fillmore, pastor of the Methodist Church and brother of Millard Fillmore, a future President of the United States. Others were travelling preachers, such as the Reverend Jedediah Burchard who labored in the vineyard in the first of the years just mentioned, and Elder Jacob Knapp who held forth in the last of them with

such eloquence that it is said he made every listener feel that the constable was after him and that the exposure of his most secret sin was impending.

No doubt it would be easy to exaggerate the importance of these movements as compared with a more restrained form of religious feeling. There were those who deprecated as well as those who encouraged this highly emotional expression of the religious spirit. Yet on matters of doctrine those who disapproved and those who approved were probably not widely separated. There was beyond all question a rigorous orthodoxy amongst Protestant Christians that does not exist to the same extent today.

Nowhere was this temper more obvious than when it came to the question of Sunday observance. The running of trains, packet boats or stages on the Lord's Day was a source of concern to most people who believed strictly in the Fourth Commandment. In the preceding decade, indeed, a group of men including Josiah Bissell, Ashbel Riley, and Aristarchus Champion had started a line of Sabbath-keeping stages, confident that they would win the support of a large public by their godliness. About the same time a smaller line of packet boats, the Hudson and Erie, appeared. The first of these enterprises was a failure, but the packet line fared somewhat better, and in spite of vicissitudes was still carrying on in 1838. The question of carrying the mails on Sunday also agitated Rochester, and when in 1841 the enlargement of the Erie Canal necessitated the labor of twenty to fifty men on the Sabbath, the community's indignation boiled over in angry protests. In 1842 a convention of church people in Western New York deliberated upon ways and means of keeping the New England Sunday inviolate, and the First Presbyterian Church severely disciplined a member who hauled wood on the Lord's Day.

Closely connected with the religious life of the community was the spirit of moral reform. It was an age of increasing concern with the evils of society, an age filled with glowing hope for the future, and with an optimism that nourished the faith that all things might, with good spirit, be made whole. The churches sustained this optimism, and played their part in many a movement of reform.

Of these movements, by far the most widespread and the most popular was undoubtedly the temperance movement. It is not generally realized that the decades of the 30's and 40's saw a widespread



interest in the liquor problem that culminated in a wave of state prohibition in the period just before the Civil War. In 1839 the emphasis was still on personal self-discipline, rather than on restraint by law. But temperance societies of all kinds and degrees of abstinence flourished. The Monroe County Total Abstinence Society, made up of numerous local organizations, had over 2,000 members in 1838, and a little later the Benevolent Total Abstinence Association boasted an impressive enrollment of 4,000 members. The churches of every denomination took part in this movement, and St. Patrick's Church is distinguished as being the first Catholic church in America to organize a temperance association.

The temperance forces attacked the demon drink with many weapons. Exhibitions, lectures, newspaper articles, and even melodramas depicting the fate of the drunkard were marshalled against liquor. One Rochester citizen, Aristarchus Champion, financed the gathering of statistics from almshouses and prisons showing how alcohol was largely responsible for the filling of both. The cost of drunkenness was carefully reckoned and shown to take an appalling amount of money from the community in days' work lost, and in charity for the support of drunkards' families. A strong ally was found in the Monroe County Medical Society, and pictures of the condition of the inebriate's interior reinforced the medical theory of internal combustion. According to this theory, it was dangerous for the tippler to stand too near a stove or an open flame since he might explode at any time if he did so. This striking illustration of the perils of drink appears actually to have been believed.

The liquor question was only beginning, however, to make its incursion into politics. It influenced municipal elections, as we have seen. In 1836, it is interesting to note, five hundred Rochesterians signed a petition urging that Congress do something about the problem. But in the main the temperance forces were not strong enough to get their way when it came to decisions at the polls. They did, indeed, prevent a reduction in the price of licenses in 1842, but most of their political efforts were unsuccessful.

There were other forms of social activity probably no less generally approved by the reforming type of mind than temperance. The distribution of tracts and Bibles to the godless, especially to the

proverbially rowdy workers on the canal, was one of these. There were numerous organizations concerned with aiding the poor, of which the oldest and most prominent was the Rochester Female Charitable Society, still in existence today. There was both a Young Men's and a Young Ladies' Moral Reform Society which strove to improve the standards of relationships among the sexes. The *least* important of all reform movements, judged by contemporary standards, was anti-slavery.

Viewed from our own perspective, the abolition movement has an obvious and large significance. To most Rochesterians of 1839, it was a question best let alone. One has only to read the newspapers of that day to realize that "abolitionist" was a word of much the same sinister connotation that "communist" is for many people today. The city felt no love for the negro, and although there were few of the race in Rochester, they were carefully segregated. Negro children attended separate schools, and even in church negroes were allowed only in the balcony. In 1841, the Second Baptist Church (the Baptist Temple) created a sensation when it admitted them to the body of the church.

All the more credit must therefore be given to the small but active anti-slavery group in Rochester. By 1840 the "underground railroad" was already functioning and escaped slaves found shelter in the home of William Bloss on East Avenue where the Cutler Building now stands, and in Samuel Porter's barn in the heart of the Third Ward. Myron Holley had already begun his distinguished career in behalf of the abolition cause. In 1838 he made a series of speeches throughout Monroe County in which he advocated abolition as a political issue. He sold his farm near the outskirts of the city and devoted the proceeds to the publication of the *Rochester Freeman*, a small and unpopular anti-slavery newspaper. In 1840 he assisted in the organization of the Liberty Party which in the same year nominated James G. Birney for the presidency, and in 1844 drew enough votes from Clay, the Whig candidate, to give the state to James K. Polk and thus ensure his election. This anti-slavery party also engaged in local politics, and for a number of years Samuel Porter ran regularly for mayor of Rochester, undeterred by the fact that he rarely polled more than thirty votes.

But the triumph of the anti-slavery cause was in the future. The Rochester of 1839 was touched by the reforming spirit, but in common with other communities it dreaded the disruptive effects of the abolitionist agitation. It was preoccupied with many other causes, such as we have outlined, and with one more, one that went to the heart of the democratic problem, the question of improving the intellectual quality and the social opportunities of its citizens, the problem of education. This question deserves a heading to itself.

## EDUCATION AND THE LIFE OF THE MIND

In nothing has the progress of the last hundred years been more remarkable than in the field of education. No ideal is more deeply rooted in American society than the ideal of opportunity expressed in our schools. It seems difficult to believe that there was a day when free education was by no means taken for granted, and when a large population had only one or two years of schooling, and that of a very unsatisfactory kind.

Yet if one looks at the Rochester of a hundred years ago one finds a situation very far from satisfactory. In 1839 nearly one-third of the children in our city did not receive even the most elementary education. Of those who did attend, half went to one or another of the numerous private schools that flourished in those days. The so-called public schools which then existed were not public schools in the modern sense of the term, for the meager funds derived from state and local sources were supplemented by tuition fees required of the parents for each child in school. Only the very poor were entitled to the *charity* of a free education.

The organization of the schools, if organization it could be called, hardly made for very effective results for those who attended. Nominally the city charter of 1834 had constituted the Common Council as school commissioners. In reality, however, the authority reposed in the school trustees of the thirteen school districts. It was they who administered the expenditure of school money, supervised the repair and erection of school houses, determined teaching qualifications and appointed teachers. A worse system could hardly have been devised. Uniformity, of course, was impossible. Some schools would have excellent buildings; Rochester School Number One, on the site of the present Education Building in Fitzhugh Street, on a lot given

many years before by the original proprietors of the village, was the pride of the whole community. It was built of stone, was two stories high, and was described as a "spacious and beautiful building which might advantageously be used as a model for other districts." But School Number One stood almost alone. Many of the schools were the ordinary one-room buildings built of wood that have lasted in the country down to our own time. In 1839 districts four, five, and twelve did not even have schoolhouses.

As for instruction, the situation varied with each of the districts. School was "kept" only as long as funds lasted, and while the more prosperous districts maintained classes for eight months or more, others were obliged to close after only two or three months. The teachers were often chosen on a basis of petty patronage. Even with the best will in the world, with the poorest kind of salaries to offer and with no systematic form of teacher training in existence, school boards would have been hard put to it. As for attendance, this rested upon the whim of the parents. Compulsory attendance was unthought of—it would have been regarded as an infringement of individual rights. Many of the children came and went most irregularly, and many of their fathers and mothers were apt to consider school secondary to home chores and odd jobs.

But in 1839 there were already signs of a coming change. The decade of the thirties saw in all the North and West a remarkable agitation looking to the improvement of our educational system. Among reformers of the epoch, no faith was more potent or more widespread than faith in the schools. Man was a rational being; if only he was provided with the necessary enlightenment he would be equal to all the demands that were put upon him. Democracy itself rested upon the intelligence of the citizens; the very future of our institutions rested upon the diffusion of knowledge. So ran the argument all over the nation, and so it ran in Rochester. In 1836 a group of public-spirited citizens formed the Committee for Elevating the Standards of Common School Education. In November of 1838 the committee recommended that there should be established "an entirely free common school system supported by a general tax on real and personal property."<sup>16</sup> A month later the committee supplemented its progressive program by calling for the creation of a Board of Education, and the appointment of a Superintendent of Schools.

Let no one believe that these suggestions met with the unanimous approval of the community. We are apt to think of the reforms of the past as easy and natural, as having been achieved without much effort. There could not be a greater misconception. A veritable storm of protest answered the committee's recommendations. Odd as it seems today, a free school system was denounced as socialistic and undemocratic. Why should one man be forced to pay for the education of somebody else's children? Why should those who had no children at all, or whose children were well looked after in private schools, be compelled to contribute to the instruction of others? What need was there for so sweeping a program? Would not education make many of the less fortunate in the community restless and dissatisfied? Might it not create more evils than it solved? Most Rochesterians, despite the clamor, apparently thought not. In 1841 a new school law *did* establish a free school system, and made Rochester the fourth city in the state and among the first in the country to adopt so radical a measure. This law also gave the city for the first time a central educational authority in the form of a Board of Education, and a superintendent of schools, but it did not entirely abolish the district system which remained to plague the community for another decade.

But this educational advance had to do, it must be understood, only with the elementary schools. The first genuinely public high school did not appear until 1857 and secondary education, for those rich enough to pay for it, remained the undisputed domain of the private academies. Of these academies the most distinguished was no doubt the Rochester Collegiate Institute, on the site of the First Unitarian Church at the corner of Temple and Cortland Streets. This institution was deservedly admired, and it owed its position to a really great teacher, Dr. Chester Dewey, later to become professor of natural science at the University of Rochester, and to give his name to one of the great buildings to be erected on the River Campus long after his death. Dewey was a Williams man, a born teacher, and lover of knowledge. Scorning traditional methods, and keenly alive to the importance of natural science, Dewey established in his Institute a chemistry laboratory, the odors from which were not always agreeable to passers-by, but which doubtless proved interesting and intriguing to his students. There were other evidences of his modern outlook as well. One observer noted that Clay and Webster (was

Dewey a Whig?) had usurped the place of Cicero and Demosthenes in the favor of youthful orators at the annual school exercises.

The Collegiate Institute maintained a "female department"—on the third floor—for not even Chester Dewey was bold enough to go in for coeducation. Even this contact of youths and maidens seems to have been looked at a little askance, for most parents preferred to send their daughters to the more refined academies devoted exclusively to young ladies. The oldest of these schools in 1839 was that of Miss Sarah T. Seward, who had studied under Emma Willard, the great pioneer in higher education for women. The Seward Seminary was located on the outskirts of the city on Alexander Street, and Miss Seward advertised among its advantages the quiet rural surroundings and healthful country air!

Miss Seward was not without competition, however. In the Rochester Female Academy, the particular school of the daughters of the Old Third Ward, located on Fitzhugh Street in a stately mansion which still stands, reigned Miss Araminta Doolittle, Rochester's ideal of a fine lady. To turn out replicas of Miss Doolittle was the primary purpose of the Female Academy, and so well did it succeed that the city's feminine society bore for a generation the stamp of her personality.

Rochester's educational facilities, however, were not confined to the public or private schools. There was a good deal of interest in what today would be termed "adult education"—an interest all the more pronounced because in that busy age there was scant time for formal learning. For ambitious mechanics and laborers there were a number of private evening schools which offered instruction in a variety of subjects from writing to bookkeeping and surveying. District School Number One even supplied for a time free evening sessions four nights a week—although voluntary contributions of three dollars per person were encouraged. More indirect, but none the less earnest efforts at self-improvement were encouraged through the library associations of the period. The most important in 1839 were the Mechanics' Literary Association and the Rochester Athenaeum and Young Men's Association, which gave lecture courses, instituted debates, and got together the most important collections of books which Rochester possessed in this early period. The Athenaeum, in particular, performed an important social service.

It had reading rooms on what is now State Street, open to the public, with borrowing privileges extended for a small fee. On Thursday afternoon it was devoted to the exclusive use of the ladies, who might otherwise not dare to invade its masculine portals. By 1844 it possessed over 3,000 volumes, and furnished, as Henry O'Reilly, one of its most active members, declared, "intellectual and moral attractions to counteract the vicious allurements to which the young men of the city were largely exposed."

In spite of the rival attractions, life at the falls of the Genesee in 1839 was no doubt less varied than it is today; but it offered plenty of opportunities for those who knew how to seize them. And one thing seems particularly clear. The characteristic of Rochesterians of a hundred years ago was faith in their country, in their city, and in themselves. The age was an age of optimism, of ready adaptation to circumstances, of willingness to press forward gallantly toward the unknown future. May it not be that in this respect Rochesterians of 1939 have something to learn from those dim figures that walked our streets when America and Rochester were young?

## NOTES

1. New York State Census (1845).
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3. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
4. *Rochester Republican*, July 15, 1839.
5. Robert D. King, "Webster's Alchemy of Words," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 15, 1939.
6. George M. Fennemore, "The Growth of a City: The History of Rochester from 1839 to 1843," MS. in the University of Rochester Library, p. xix.
7. Donald W. Gilbert, "The Government and Finances of Rochester, New York," MS. in University of Rochester Library, pp. 58-59.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 72; W. Earl Weller, "The Development of the Charter of the City of Rochester, 1817 to 1938," MS. in the University of Rochester Library, p. 62.
11. *Directory* (1841), p. 3; Henry O'Reilly, *Settlement in the West: Sketches of Rochester with Incidental Notices of Western New York* (Rochester, 1838), p. 361; New York State Census (1835).
12. Rochester Historical Society, *Publications*, X, 179.
13. Henry W. Hill, *Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State* (Buffalo Historical Society Publications, XII), p. 223.
14. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.
15. Charles G. Finney, *Autobiography* (New York, 1876), pp. 362-363.
16. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, December 5, 1838.

