

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by BLAKE MCKELVEY, *City Historian*

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VOL. XXI

OCTOBER, 1959

No. 4

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## Lights and Shadows In Local Negro History

BY BLAKE MCKELVEY

Few if any of the ethnic groups that have contributed to Rochester's growth can match the Negroes in the dramatic quality of their local history. Though always small in number, they have from the first produced striking and often distinguished leaders. The most notable, of course, was Frederick Douglass, outstanding Negro of his day and one of Rochester's most famous citizens, but several others also merit historical recognition. The issues they or their cohorts raised generally presented a basic challenge to each contemporary generation. That certainly is true in the city today, and while Rochesterians do not stand alone in this respect, we can learn much from a sober review of the local history of our Negro fellow citizens.

### **The Negro Pioneers**

It is instructive to note that Negroes not only arrived among the first settlers but also comprised a larger portion of the village community than at any subsequent time until the present. Among the pioneers in the lower Genesee valley was Asa Dunbar, a mulatto who opened one of the first clearings in Ironde-

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ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by the Rochester Public Library, distributed free at the Library, by mail 25 cents per year. Address correspondence to the City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Avenue, Rochester 4, N. Y.

quoit in 1795 and shared the trials of all early frontiersmen. Dunbar continued to reside in the area for many years winning the respect of his neighbors as they settled near his farm on what is now Winton Road North. Other Negroes arrived and some of them quickly located in the new village at the Genesee falls. Since many of them were liberty-loving fugitives from slave masters, they gravitated to the frontier and few established permanent residences or left other enduring records. Yet two at least emerged as useful citizens.

Austin Steward, a runaway slave, came to Rochester in 1816, a year before its incorporation as a village. Claiming the status of freeman because his master hired him out to a merchant, he quickly displayed many capacities and opened a meat market on Buffalo (West Main) Street the next year. He assisted Zenas Freeman, the village schoolmaster, in conducting a Sabbath school for young Negroes for several seasons.

Among the lads enrolled in that school was Thomas James, a newcomer in 1823. Born a slave in Canajoharie, James reached Rochester at the age of 19 after a successful flight to Canada had, he thought, established his freedom. A sturdy youth, who had been traded by his master for a yoke of oxen a few years before, he soon found work in a canal freighting business and proved his capacity to manage its warehouse. He became a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Society which opened a church on Ely Street in 1823. He began to study for the ministry and taught a class of Negro children on Favor Street for a time.

Rochester's growth, stimulated by the building of the canal, had passed the 5000 mark by 1825 and included most of the 263 Negroes then resident in the county. Their number was sufficient two years later to prompt a gala feast on July 5 to celebrate the abolition of slavery in New York State. Unfortunately that system was still in force below the Mason and

Dixon Line, and slave hunters from the South occasionally tracked fugitives to Rochester. Both Steward and James recalled the fate of a girl named Ellen who was seized by her master's agents in Rochester. Though released for a time by a group of sympathetic Negroes, she was recaptured and carried off by force and finally escaped, according to the reports, only by cutting her own throat. Another local fugitive, known as Dr. Davis, outwitted his captors and fled to Canada.

Many white as well as Negro residents were outraged by these events and by similar ones elsewhere. Austin Steward took the lead locally in a movement to establish a colony across the border for refugee Negroes. He sold his store and removed to Wilberforce in Canada for that purpose in 1830. Steward had the backing of Everard Pack and other Rochester friends in this venture, and when, after five years, he returned to the newly incorporated city, they helped him acquire a new store on Main Street.

Rochester during these years had become a thriving community, the leading flour milling center in the nation, and it could not escape the current debate over slavery. One faction advocated colonization in Africa, another in Canada, while still others urged the abolition of slavery and full citizenship for all Negroes. The original African Methodist Church foundered partly because of dissension over these questions. Yet Thomas James, who had earnestly pursued his studies, was ordained as a minister, in May 1833, and erected a small church on Favor Street that year. He had earlier been associated with the African Colonization Society, headed in Rochester by Judge Ashley Sampson, but now he joined forces with William Bloss, Dr. J. W. Smith and other abolitionists who held their first anti-slavery meetings at Rochester that summer. After three hectic sessions, which opposing factions attempted to disrupt, Bloss and his followers organized an Anti-Slavery So-

ciety and established a fortnightly paper, *The Rights of Man*, as its organ.

*The Rights of Man* promptly engaged James as its agent to obtain subscriptions in neighboring communities. Its editor made a survey of the status of Rochester's 360 resident Negroes in 1834. He found a few discriminatory provisions to deplore but also some promising signs of adjustment. The town of Gates, encompassing most of Rochester, had opened a separate school in rented quarters for its Negro children in 1832, but since the owner had refused to renew the lease the school was closed. Most of the adults had found useful jobs; five were blacksmiths, one was a cabinetmaker, one a tailor, and two each were listed as shoemakers, as masons and as stonecutters; except for one merchant and two clergymen the rest were classed as laborers. They already had three religious societies, a temperance band and an anti-slavery unit, and they comprised approximately 3 per cent of the city's population.

The second Rochester Directory, published late in 1834, the year of its incorporation as a city, recorded a drop in its colored population to 330 or only 2.7 per cent of the total. It also listed but one Negro church, the Abyssinian Baptist Church which had no permanent abode. Apparently the Favor Street chapel had discontinued regular services during the absence of the Rev. Thomas James on anti-slavery speaking tours, but its Sunday school and a third group, known as the Zion Society, maintained a precarious existence. The last two drew together a year later to form the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church which repaired and reopened the structure on Favor Street. James left Rochester that year to establish and conduct a Negro church in Syracuse and later at Boston, but he returned in 1856 to take charge of the A.M.E. Zion Church in Rochester. It again needed extensive repairs, and James

raised a fund of \$600 to restore and help maintain this principal center of organized Negro life in Rochester.

The need for a school was, however, the most pressing local issue during these years. Apparently the unstable Sabbath schools maintained by the struggling churches were the chief reliance throughout the late thirties, but the act creating a Board of Education in 1841 authorized it to open one or more separate schools for Negroes. The board, headed by Levi A. Ward, chose a site for such a school in the northwest quarter of the Third Ward where several Negro families resided west of the hill on which many of the leading homes stood. Austin Steward, back in Rochester as manager of a thriving commercial enterprise, was given charge of organizing the Negro school, but the loss of his store by fire prompted his removal to Canandaigua, and the Rochester school, located on Spring Alley, was continued for short seasons by successive colored teachers.

The arrangement was by no means satisfactory. The distances that Negro children on the east side had to travel by foot to attend this west-side school brought protests from their parents. The move for a second school aroused complaints by many citizens over the high costs imposed by such an arrangement. When their complaints found vent in a mass meeting at the Court House in December 1849, the board created a committee to recommend action. Several champions of Negro rights, both colonizationists such as Everard Peck and abolitionists such as William Bloss, joined forces at this point to demand admission of such children to the regular district schools. Fortunately the cause was greatly strengthened by the arrival in Rochester of a powerful new leader, Frederick Douglass.

Douglass injected a new issue, that of discrimination, into the school controversy. Determined to save his oldest daughter,

Rosetta, from the indignities of a segregated school, he enrolled her in the private school conducted by Miss Tracy on Alexander Street. When he learned that even this sympathetic lady was instructing his daughter in private in order not to affront the parents of some other pupils, he indignantly sent her to a private school in Albany, and later to Oberlin College. Few Negroes could make such provisions or undertake to employ a private tutor as Douglass did (Miss Phebe Thayer, a Quaker) for the younger children during the fifties. Yet his efforts and those of his new Rochester friends forced the board to designate School No. 13 on the east side as an integrated school for Negro and white children in the southeast district. Some of the younger Douglasses attended there for a time, and in 1857 Rochester finally recognized the stupidity of segregation and admitted all Negro children to the regular city schools.

### **Frederick Douglass in Rochester**

Frederick Douglass not only brought the school issue to a head in Rochester but also merged its Negro history with the broader anti-slavery movement. He made the city a focal center for abolitionists and an active station on the Underground Railroad. The distinguished visitors he attracted quickened the town's intellectual life and strengthened the position of the friends he won locally. Yet his triumphs, while redounding to the credit of the Negro race, were based on his remarkable talents as an individual, and in the end they left little more than heroic traditions to his fellow Negroes in Rochester—chiefly because other citizens failed for a time to recognize that individual as a man.

Born a slave in Maryland in 1817, Frederick Douglass fled to New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1838 and soon became an active agent of that state's anti-slavery society. His dramatic

personal experiences, his strikingly handsome appearance, and his talents as a public speaker quickly won many friends there and in England which he visited in 1845 and where generous sympathizers purchased his freedom and subscribed a fund to support his further work in the States. Back in America he made an extended speaking tour throughout the North with Garrison in 1847 and chose Rochester as the site for his contemplated paper, *The North Star*, an anti-slavery weekly to be printed and published by Negroes.

Already the author of a successful autobiography and well acquainted with anti-slavery leaders throughout the country, Douglass brought an array of outside resources to back his venture in Rochester. He engaged Martin R. Delany, formerly editor of a Negro paper in Pittsburgh, and William C. Nell, a Negro follower of Garrison, as his associates and set up his press in the basement of the Zion Church. An English friend, Miss Julia Griffiths, soon joined his staff and became its mainstay and chief editorial consultant for many years.

Douglass purchased a comfortable house on Alexander Street on the eastern side of the city in a setting which proved more congenial for his many visitors than for his wife and children who found few associates close by. He himself quickly developed many friends throughout the city—the Anthonys, the Posts, the Moores, the Porters, old William C. Bloss and many others. He enjoyed a cordial welcome in their homes and among the Quaker and Unitarian congregations as well as in the Zion Church where he spoke frequently. But his extended speaking tours and other journeys often kept him on the road for months at a time and checked any close identity with local affairs except those directly related to his major concern.

Yet the latter were sufficient to make a deep impact on the city and its Negro residents. His eloquent oratory attracted crowds not only into the Zion Church but also on several occa-

sions to Corinthian Hall, the largest auditorium in the city, and he conducted a course of lectures there one winter. He engaged that hall for the public sessions of the National Negro Convention which met at Rochester in July 1853. This important gathering attracted 140 Negro delegates from other cities and revived a movement for Negro unity which had lapsed for several years. Douglass, who had presided at the previous convention, now served as chairman of the resolutions committee and brought in a memorable "Declaration of Sentiments."

It proclaimed broad objectives for Negroes. As free Americans, they declared that "the doors of the school-house, the work-shop, the church, the college, shall be thrown open as freely to our children as to the children of other members of the community," that "the white and black may stand on an equal footing before the laws of the land," that "the complete and unrestricted right of suffrage, which is essential to the dignity even of the white man, be extended to the Free Colored Man also." The convention not only indorsed these resolutions but approved another measure introduced by Douglass for the establishment of a manual training school for Negroes. The latter proposal had been debated for many years and an abortive attempt to achieve it had occurred at New Haven. The renewed effort to establish such a school at Rochester or at Erie, Pennsylvania, likewise failed, but the Rochester meeting clarified most of the issues that would trouble Negro-white relations for many decades to come.

One issue that needed clarification was the basic question of political action. Douglass had broken with Garrison several years before partly because of this tactical issue. He had found many of his Rochester friends agreed on the possibility and desirability of abolishing slavery under the constitution by political means, and he had become increasingly identified



with local Liberty party forces and was their candidate for the assembly in 1851 and for secretary of state at Albany in 1855. The next year he indorsed, after much hesitation, the newly formed Republican party as the most practical alternative to the Southern dominated Democratic party.

While politics divided some of the anti-slavery workers, other concerns drew them together. Douglass found many of his white and colored friends ready to help in the dangerous task of aiding fugitive slaves escape to Canada. Rochester's proximity to the border, near the mouth of a long north-flowing river, made it a depot on the Underground Railroad, and the wide fame of Frederick Douglass made his home and his printing shop the first destination of many fugitives. He became the chief local agent and directed the efforts of a dozen Rochester confederates who assisted some 400 freedom-loving Negroes to escape to Canada. He worked closely with Harriet Tubman who "carried the war into Africa" and became, in Douglass' phrase, the "Moses of her people." And he valued the assistance of the Isaac Posts, the Daniel Anthonys and other Rochester followers of Garrison as well as that of William C. Bloss, Samuel D. Porter, Gideon Pitts of Honeoye and their political allies.

Their new sense of kinship was strengthened by the frequent visits in Rochester of John Brown, another old friend of Douglass. Brown's zeal not only kindled local ardor for the struggle to save Kansas, but also enlisted one Rochester follower, Shields Green, for his more desperate raid on Harpers Ferry. Douglass, who was strongly drawn to this forthright champion of Negro rights, was long a close consultant on his plans, but he drew back in 1859 from the direct attack on a federal arsenal. When Brown nevertheless pressed forward and met disaster, Douglass had to flee the country leaving his fam-

ily and associates in Rochester to carry on his papers the best they could.

Although Douglass had achieved a remarkable career, his newspaper was but a minor factor in that success. Discouraged by the response of his fellow Negroes to a journal of their own, Douglass had joined forces with Gerrit Smith and merged the latter's *Liberty Party Paper* with his *North Star* to make *Frederick Douglass' Paper* as it was called after June 1851. He added a monthly seven years later but seldom managed to meet publishing expenses without frequent subventions from Smith and his British backers. Douglass finally discontinued the weekly edition in July 1860, a few months after his return to Rochester.

The distraught editor had come back to comfort his family after the death of his youngest daughter, Annie, "the light and life of my house." He found the presidential campaign already started and took a keen interest in its development. Despite a preference for Seward, Douglass indorsed Lincoln after his nomination by the Republicans and urged his support by Negroes and abolitionists. But in August he attended a hastily called convention of Radical Abolitionists at Syracuse and impulsively joined in the nomination of Gerrit Smith. He soon, however, lost enthusiasm for a protest vote and worked actively for Lincoln's election during the last weeks. Yet his major concern was to secure a repeal of the New York law limiting Negro voters to those who owned property valued at \$250. His failure in this effort cast a gloom over the election returns.

Douglass became so despondent after his defeat on the suffrage issue that he began for the first time to support the emigration movement. He had long opposed that strategy and had encouraged local Negroes to oppose it. The continued flight of refugees to Canada had carried off many even of his

fellows in Rochester where their numbers had remained fairly stationary since the mid-thirties while the city's population had quadrupled. Douglass now gave a sympathetic word of encouragement to a band of 12 local Negro families whose 52 members set out, in March 1861, under the leadership of a Baptist Negro clergyman to find new homes in Haiti. He endorsed the efforts of his old partner, Delany, to recruit emigrants for Liberia and aided his son Lewis in plans to establish a Negro colony in Central America.

Yet Lincoln's determined stand against the secessionist states stirred his spirits. He hopefully viewed the war as a battle to free the slaves and urged official recognition of that objective. Though often discouraged by what appeared to be a vacillating policy on Lincoln's part, Douglass hailed the provisional proclamation, of September 1862, as a decisive victory and rejoiced when emancipation was proclaimed effective on Jan. 1, 1863. He accepted an appointment as recruiting agent for the 54th Massachusetts regiment, the first in the North to include Negro enlistees. He hastily signed up 13 recruits in Rochester, including his two sons, and canvassed upstate New York for a hundred more.

Douglass journeyed to Washington in July to meet Lincoln; he urged the President to grant full pay and other equal treatment for Negro soldiers. Although denied that assurance he gladly accepted the promise of an appointment to recruit Negroes in the South. He hastily terminated the publication of his *Monthly*, in August 1863, to take up that hazardous task, but when the commission failed to arrive, he continued his lecture program instead.

Douglass had moved his family from Alexander Street to a more spacious site on South Avenue just beyond the city's border in 1852. The new location had been admirable as a haven for refugees, and although that function was now terminated,

the house provided a comfortable home. But Douglass had little opportunity to enjoy its rural charms since a busy schedule of lectures kept him on the road. He was frequently mentioned for various official posts and the Democratic *Union and Advertiser* badgered local Republicans to name him for Congress in 1868 and again in 1870. President Grant did appoint him as secretary of a Commission to San Domingo in 1871 and the Republicans nominated him for the Assembly that year. He ran barely 1200 votes behind his successful opponent on that occasion, despite his absence from the district throughout the contest. The destruction of his home by fire in 1872 aroused suspicions of incendiarism and finally broke his ties with Rochester; he moved his family to Washington shortly thereafter.

### **The Negro's Coming of Age**

Douglass' departure left the Negroes of Rochester without a recognized spokesman, but not for long. The A.M.E. Zion Church still comprised their principal headquarters. It had taken the lead in sending local delegates to the National Colored Conference in the late sixties, and rallied both white and colored residents for a celebration of the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870. Although the Rev. Thomas James had again left Rochester in the late sixties, this time for St. Louis, the church carried on under a succession of Negro pastors. The organization of a Negro Tammany Society at Rochester in 1870 may have helped to alert local Republicans to cement their earlier ties. The number resident in the city was beginning to grow again and approached 600 by the late seventies. They became sufficiently numerous to prompt renewed efforts to establish a second church and to open a hotel and other commercial centers for Negroes.

Although most of these projects had to be postponed, the Negroes produced an able representative in a new field—Charles Backus of Rochester, widely famed as a talented minstrel. He received a hearty welcome when he brought his troupe to the city in 1879, and the local press mourned his death four years later.

Some Negroes got into trouble, and no local crime stirred such excitement as that of William Howard, a Negro accused of raping a young German girl. A report on New Year's Day, 1872, that Howard had been caught and locked up to await trial attracted a throng of men to the jail on Exchange Street. When the crowd increased, disorderly elements attempted to storm the door, and Warden Beckwith summoned police aid. Finally the militia was called out and directed to clear the street in front of the jail. As the milling throng backed slowly away, a shower of stones descended upon the soldiers, several of whom discharged their rifles (whether in response to an order to fire was never clearly determined). Two men were fatally wounded and several others suffered serious injury. The crowd quickly dispersed, and Howard, after a speedy trial that night in the darkened Court House, was rushed secretly out of the city to Auburn under a twenty-year sentence. The spirit of violence never reached a higher pitch in Rochester, but the city could at least console itself with the triumph of law and order.

Many Negroes continued to live along High (Clarissa) Street in the western part of the old Third Ward, but the majority were now scattering throughout the city. Every ward but one reported colored residents in the successive censuses, and the one exception was not always the same. Four wards had upwards of 50 Negro residents in 1890, five by 1910, but the total at the latter date had reached only 879, which was less than 0.4 per cent of the population. Many of the men had early found openings in the tonsorial trade and their shops for a time occu-

ped several prominent downtown corners. They lost dominance in this field during the 1880's to Italian and other competitors but invaded the hotel, restaurant and livery services, while the women had many calls for house work. Some like Jesse Stevens operated modest retail stores. A few entered the professions. Miss Patience Johnson, the first Negro to graduate from the Rochester High School in 1878, became a teacher at nearby Lima; her brother Harry was perhaps the first Negro to practice law in Rochester, followed shortly in the early nineties by Charles Lee.

The organization of a Douglass Union League early in 1888 provided a new center for Negro activity. It staged a celebration of the 25th anniversary of emancipation on August 3 with a downtown parade and a picnic at Maple Grove. When Frederick Douglass revisited the city later that month he addressed a joint meeting of the Douglas League and the Lincoln Club composed of white Republicans. John W. Thompson, who had come to Rochester in 1883 to become head waiter at the Powers Hotel dining room, was the league's most active leader and made its annual celebrations of Emancipation Day a community event. The league lightened its monthly sessions by staging an occasional boxing match or cake walk, and it joined the Zion Church in calling a mass meeting of Negroes in protest against a wave of lynchings in the South in 1893. Thompson, who chaired that meeting, proposed a year later a concerted effort to erect a monument commemorating the sacrifices of Negro soldiers during the Civil War. While the church, struggling to maintain its program, refused to indorse the enterprise, Thompson quickly formed a committee to undertake it.

A political issue widened the breach between the church and the Douglass League that year. Charles Lee had received an appointment as clerk of the civil service examining board, but his refusal to accept dictation from the party bosses prompted

his dismissal in 1895. Boss Aldridge had adroitly secured a statement of approval for this move from the Rev. Wesley A. Ely, pastor at Zion Church, but John Thompson of the Douglass League condemned the action. The friends of Lee and Thompson protested the expression of political views by the minister and asked that the church be closed. They formed a Colored Voters League, a frankly political adjunct of the Douglass League, and launched a campaign to secure the naming of one or two Negroes on the party ticket. The breach was healed when the former pastor, James E. Mason, now presiding elder in the district, transferred Ely to Auburn and resumed direct charge at Zion Church himself. He journeyed with Thompson and Lee and Henry A. Spencer to a conference of the Afro-American Republican League at Saratoga and brought back word that Spencer had been named to the state committee.

The Rev. Mr. Mason, who filled the Zion pulpit throughout most of the nineties, had lofty views concerning the Negro's mission. In an able address on this subject in 1896, published in full by the *Post-Express*, he declared that American Negroes, by proving the folly of slavery, had completed their first great task; they had now to show how a people can rise from the ignorance and moral degradation, which that institution had forced upon them, to the dignity and responsibility of free men able to command the respect and comradeship of their fellows. This the Negro could achieve, he predicted, through education and religion as well as by industry and political activity.

Mason saw the task as one primarily for the Negro, while Thompson was more interested in enlisting the white man's cooperation. The latter needed it for his monument committee which had determined, after the death of Frederick Douglass in 1895, to raise a worthy memorial to that great leader.

Rochester responded with an impressive display of respect and esteem at the Douglass funeral. At the special request of

the Common Council, the coffin was transported (accompanied by the mayor, the Douglass League and an official guard of honor, with a regimental band playing the funeral march) from the station to the city hall which was profusely draped with emblems of mourning. It attracted a steady procession of viewers there for five hours before its removal to the Central Presbyterian Church where the Rev. Drs. Taylor, Stebbins and Gannett, and Miss Mary Anthony took appropriate parts in the service. Thousands joined in the funeral procession to Mt. Hope Cemetery where Douglass was buried by the side of his first wife. All the papers printed lengthy accounts of his career and even "The Rochesterian" recalled him, not as a Negro, but as a man who had liked to watch baseball and shared other interesting human traits.

A benefit concert at Central Church launched the fund campaign for the Douglass monument a month later. Congressman H. S. Greenleaf accepted honorary chairmanship of the committee, but most of the work fell to Thompson, its treasurer. Numerous other benefits and small contributions added to the fund, yet it was a slow process. The city provided a site on the triangle in front of the railroad station on North St. Paul Street and erected a pedestal there in July 1898. Some \$2000 was still needed to pay for the monument, and its dedication had to be delayed until that sum was raised. Finally on June 10, 1899, Governor Roosevelt, Mrs. Helen Pitts Douglass and many distinguished visitors arrived to take part in a ceremony that crowned the patient efforts of John Thompson to commemorate the work of his great predecessor, Frederick Douglass of Rochester.

The affairs of Negroes in Rochester assumed a less dramatic character for several years after that event. The University of Rochester graduated its first Negro student, Charles A. Thompson (not related to John W.), in 1891; occasional notices of the



arrival of Negro lecturers appeared in local papers. Miss Susan B. Anthony introduced Ida B. Wells to an audience of Rochester ladies in '95, and young Booker T. Washington spoke at Plymouth Church two years later. Thomas Fortune, editor of the leading Negro journal, called a conference of his fellows to meet at Rochester in September 1898, at which the moribund Afro-American League was revived. John W. Thompson became treasurer of its National Council and served for many years as its most permanent and faithful official.

Despite repeated efforts to establish a second Negro church, the A. M. E. Zion congregation remained the only permanent body in this field until 1903. Earlier attempts to found a Baptist Society had failed to attract support, but in the early 1900's, as the number of resident Negroes began to increase, the need for additional facilities became apparent. Thompson took the initiative in 1903, launching a plan to rebuild the Zion Church and double its seating capacity; meanwhile, a Presbyterian mission opened Trinity chapel on Allen Street and engaged a Negro pastor that May. After a protracted struggle the Zion congregation raised a sufficient sum to begin the construction of their new church in 1906, and a capacity audience of 500 took part in its dedication in August a year later. The church not only cleared most of its debt but took another step forward when in 1910 it rented an adjoining house on Favor Street to provide recreational and social facilities for colored youths. The Baptists secured a Negro minister for their Mt. Olivet mission opened two years before on Caledonia Avenue.

The Negroes took several other forward steps in the early 1900's. George W. Burks, a porter in the Commercial Bank, sued Paul Bosso, a bootblack in the Powers Hotel who refused to black his shoes. When the County Court granted Burks \$100 in damages, Bosso appealed, and the case slowly rose through the Appellate Court to the N. Y. Court of Appeals which finally

denied Burks' claim. Burks brought suit again against the Temple Theater for refusing to sell him a ticket on the main floor in 1910. The judge held in this case that the theater, which had offered him a seat in the front rows of the balcony, had not denied Burks equal accommodations under the law.

Clearly the Negro needed an effective organization to press his claims, and Burks took the lead in forming an Afro-American Independent Political League. While its meetings soon lapsed, the Rev. William A. Byrd of the Trinity Presbyterian Church established a small weekly paper for Negroes in 1910. Named the Rochester *Sentinel*, it continued for almost two years. Byrd, who served the Trinity parish for a full decade, joined the Rev. J. W. Brown of Zion Church in support of a protest by the Rev. Dr. Crapsey against disparaging references in the *Herald* to the Negro's qualifications as a voter; yet both men stressed that the first task for their people was to improve their economic and educational position.

Several fresh efforts at practical self-education had already appeared. George W. Burns established a good-government club for Negroes in 1904. Mrs. Jerome Jeffreys, welcomed by the Anthony sisters into the Women's Political Equality Club, formed a Susan B. Anthony Club for Negro women in 1902. She also started a Climbers Club for colored children and lent her name to a group of young women who organized a Hester C. Jeffreys Club to raise funds and pay the fees of colored girls who wished to enroll in courses at Mechanics Institute. Not to be outdone, a number of Negro men formed a lodge of the Improved B.P.O.E., and while the white Elks of Rochester failed to secure a court order restraining them from using their fraternal insignia, the Negro order designed a special badge of their own.

## **The Struggle for Equal Citizenship**

Despite their reverses, Rochester Negroes had made a real beginning in self-education during the post-Civil War decades. Their experiences in the First World War would soon bring new confidence, and with growing numbers they formed additional religious and social organizations. Harder hit than most groups by the depression, they fortunately acquired a measure of economic security under the New Deal. Their continued increase, however, created new housing problems and plunged them into the center of a heated controversy over slum clearance. State and national legislation and a few court victories have produced substantive gains. Nevertheless the inequalities have continued; in some cases they have become more glaring. Thus the Negro's position in Rochester still presents a serious challenge to its democratic spirit.

The First World War brought new opportunities to the city's Negroes. The check it placed on immigration from abroad created a demand for workers from other sources. An influx of young Negroes from the South commenced shortly after the war boom started in 1916. They nearly doubled Rochester's colored population during the next few years and created a housing shortage. They launched a migration which brought skilled as well as unskilled workers, and the reverses suffered by the few educated and talented Negroes again focused attention on several old discriminatory traditions. Meanwhile the draft boards, struggling to fill their quotas, welcomed the army's decision in the summer of 1918 to recruit a proportionate number of colored men. The first local order called for a contingent of cooks and other kitchen workers, but before fifteen of these could be mustered in, Rochester gave an enthusiastic send off to forty young Negroes that August, most of whom saw active service in the 369th infantry regiment.

Back in Rochester the Negro's housing problem began for

the first time to attract public interest. Their slow increase in earlier decades had enabled most Negroes to find homes in the old Clarissa Street district or to locate unobtrusively in other wards. The new situation, with many families seeking accommodations, prompted an effort to establish a Negro settlement south of Genesee Valley Park. Though sponsored by Negroes, the project quickly collapsed when the Rev. William Byrd of Trinity branded the scheme as "Jim Crow." Unfortunately the only houses readily available to them in the city were located in the less salubrious foreign areas, particularly the one bordering the railroad on the northeast fringe of the business district. Since most of these newcomers hailed from a rural background in the South, their sanitary and other domestic standards were low and helped to blight the already poor conditions in the Baden-Ormond area, converting it progressively into a wretched slum.

As the Negro migrants crowded into this depressed area, outbreaks of violence and crime multiplied. When three of these newcomers engaged in a bloody battle on Holland Street, protesting neighbors summoned the police who found a supply of cocaine on one of the combatants and uncovered a dope ring. The next year an anti-gambling crusade produced a series of raids on some well-known club houses, including that of the Douglass Club where 19 were arrested. The press occasionally reported brawls in which razors flashed and guns discharged, even on Favor Street, but most of these disorders occurred in the rawer community across town.

Some of the older Negro residents were already developing a business district of their own on Clarissa Street. The Empire Realty & Mercantile Co., headed by John Green and Edward Jackson, projected a commercial block there with street-front stores on the first floor and accommodations for lodge rooms and a dance hall above. Other ventures appeared from time to

time and while few succeeded the Negroes did increase the value of their property holdings. At least 45 of their families in the Third Ward became home owners. Such success made them reluctant to endanger the good will that fostered it, and they refused to join in a widespread demonstration against the race riots that broke out in Detroit in 1917; yet they did register a strong protest through the press.

The prosperity of the 1920's benefited the city's Negroes in many ways. Adding approximately 900 to their number, an increase of nearly 60 per cent, they formed several additional societies, erected new church edifices, and helped to maintain a local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. established in 1919. In recognition of their increased activity, both the Y.W.C.A. and the Y.M.C.A. opened small branches in the Clarissa Street district. The Rev. James E. Rose brought able leadership and new vitality to the Mt. Olivet Baptist congregation which erected a new church in 1927. The A. M. E. Zion Church celebrated its centennial that year with the friendly collaboration of many whites; Father Frank L. Brown, newly appointed head of St. Simon's Episcopal mission, received an unsolicited gift of a shiny new automobile from J. Foster Warner, a total stranger who heard him remark how much it would assist in his work. Young Mordecai Johnson completed his studies at the Rochester Theological Seminary in 1921, and Robert N. Dett pursued his at the Eastman School of Music, while several other young Negroes attended city high schools and business institutes.

But these happy developments were seriously interrupted by the great depression which started in 1929. The Negroes, often the first to lose their jobs, had the greatest difficulty in finding new ones. They suffered many privations until the work-relief agencies came to their assistance. The deterioration of their residential quarters progressed as landlords economized on maintenance costs and permitted tenants to double or treble

the density in order to pay the rent. The N.A.A.C.P. endeavored to correct some flagrant forms of discrimination, but little was accomplished in this field until the issue broke into the headlines with the creation of a State Temporary Commission Against Discrimination in 1938.

Yet several indications of a new awakening had begun to appear. Young Howard and Elsie Coles had established a weekly paper, *The Voice*, in 1935 to champion the Negro's cause. Its four- or six-page editions waged an unceasing battle for civil rights, equal job opportunities and housing reforms. The editor devoted many columns to a review of the illustrious history of Rochester's Negroes; he rejoiced when young William C. Warfield won a high school prize and went on to triumph in a nation-wide song contest in 1938. Coles helped to organize an Afro-American Cooperative League which pledged its members to patronize merchants who employed Negro as well as white clerks. He supported the efforts of his brother, John Coles, and other Negro ward committeemen to secure civil service appointments for their constituents, and he publicized the accomplishments of other Negro leaders. Among the latter were Father Brown who became head of the Episcopal Deanery of Rochester in 1939; Dr. Rose who won the cooperation of many of his fellows in the Federation of Churches; and Dr. Charles T. Lunsford, a highly successful physician who served as president of the local N.A.A.C.P. for several years.

These and other Negro representatives presented much firsthand testimony at the public hearing conducted in Rochester by the State Temporary Commission Against Discrimination in December 1938. Dr. Lunsford blasted the University of Rochester for refusing to admit Negroes into the School of Medicine; he declared that the public schools employed but one Negro teacher and had discouraged colored students from

entering the city normal school. While Superintendent Spinning defended the schools by citing the cases of two earlier Negro teachers who had resigned after several years of service and by noting that few teachers of any color had been employed recently, President Valentine of the university upheld the Medical School's policy as based on its inability to give adequate instruction to Negroes in some subjects. A heated exchange of views erupted in the press, and when Dr. Mordecai Johnson, now president of Howard University, returned to Rochester two weeks later to address the City Club, he discarded his prepared speech and attacked the city for permitting discrimination to gain a foothold in its educational institutions and to win full sway in its great industries and commercial firms.

The sensational hearing and its aftermath produced quick results. The Federation of Churches hastily arranged an interracial banquet at Gannett House and invited Rev. Paul Schroeder, chairman of the Citizens Committee which had sponsored the hearing, to present a report. Schroeder recognized some of the difficulties integration presented but urged that Negro as well as white students should be free to pursue their chosen studies at their own risk. Meanwhile the *Democrat & Chronicle* sent its ace reporter, Jean Walrath, out to canvass the evidence of local Negro talent. She found a surprising degree of gaiety on Clarissa Street on Saturday nights and a thrilling devotion to education among its residents. Her best illustration of that faith was the achievement of a 15-dollar-a-week janitor who had sent four children through college.

Such perseverance inevitably had its reward. Howard Coles was able to list several specific gains in his "Directory of Negro Business and Progress" published in October, and four years later, when he again reviewed recent accomplishments, he noted many improvements in the local employment of Ne-

groes. The Rev. Max Kapp made a similarly favorable report to the Federation of Churches, and Dr. Lunsford was able to rejoice, at his retirement as president of the N.A.A.C.P. in 1947, that many doors of opportunity had been opened to Negroes, including the School of Medicine and Dentistry and all the city's nursing schools.

It is gratifying to note that Rochester had thus made some real progress in this field before the creation of the federal Fair Employment Practice Committee in 1943 and the State Commission Against Discrimination two years later. The FEPC, responding to a war-time emergency, prodded Rochester, along with other communities, to make full use of its Negro and other minority group resources. The city's renewed growth had indeed attracted an increased influx of Negroes, some of them highly educated and ready to fill specialized posts in its institutions and factories. Despite occasional complaints, the FEPC codes apparently received due respect in Rochester.

Other problems, especially housing, presented grater difficulties. An undercurrent of racial prejudice strengthened Rochester's resistance to proposals by the Better Housing Association and other bodies that it organize a housing authority to tackle the slum problem. Discouraged by the city's inactivity, the Negroes, who were most directly involved, formed a Housing and Planning Council of their own and elected Coles president. Yet its plan to promote an FHA financed project, to be known as the Frederick Douglass Houses, attracted criticism from Dr. Lunsford and Rabbi Philip Bernstein who opposed segregated housing. Coles dropped the project and endeavored instead to secure Negroes a share of the city's veteran housing. When Rochester finally determined to launch a public housing project on vacant land near the outskirts, protests from residents in the area who did not wish an influx of Negroes prompted a change of site. The six-story Hanover Houses were



accordingly built on cleared land in the Baden-Ormond district. While the project served both Negroes and whites, its high density and that of the surrounding area created many new problems which finally prompted Rochester to set up a housing authority and undertake a broader slum clearance program.

The continued influx of Negroes intensified their housing problems. As their numbers doubled during the forties, and doubled again in the fifties, the pressure for homes increased in the old Negro district along Clarissa Street and in other scattered pockets. The city's redevelopment program in the Baden-Ormond area has, moreover, made it necessary to find at least temporary homes for its displaced residents, many of them Negroes. The State Commission Against Discrimination has increasingly emphasized the housing aspect of its work, and the Citizens Council organized at Rochester in 1950 to promote acceptance of its principles has devoted many sessions to this problem. Dr. Hugh C. Burr, for a time its chairman, has taken the lead in many efforts to advance inter-racial brotherhood. A champion of integrated churches, a movement which is gaining in practice in Rochester, he has staunchly opposed segregated housing either in public or private projects or on the neighborhood level.

Few candid proponents of discrimination have appeared in Rochester during recent years and yet the difficulties confronting Negroes persist. Many newcomers, whose search for suitable homes has extended throughout the city and its environs, have met discouraging repulses. Despite resolutions in their behalf by various bodies, a recent study by two university students uncovered only 57 Negro families who have successfully located in 98 per cent white neighborhoods. Meanwhile the colored percentages in their three major settlement districts has mounted steadily. The N.A.A.C.P. has urged the establishment

of a SCAD office in Rochester to counteract the effect of discriminatory agreements and to investigate other unfair practices, but so far that proposal, though widely supported by other groups, has been tabled. Volunteer efforts to assist Negroes in finding homes have failed to check the trend towards segregated districts.

Fortunately the outlook is brighter in some other fields. Negroes now enjoy free access to all of the city's educational institutions, and Rochester has repeatedly met its quota, of \$15,000 or more annually, for the United Negro College Fund, headed locally for many years by Frank E. Gannett. The city schools increased the number of Negro teachers to 29 by 1955, not as a proportionate quota but because of the increased supply of talented applicants from that group. Able Negroes have found jobs in other civic departments, in the private as well as the public welfare field, and in the medical and legal professions. A new generation has taken over the work of earlier clergymen, and one of these youthful newcomers, Father Quintin E. Primo, Jr., at St. Simon's, spoke for most of his fellows when he declared that the Negro housing problem was his gravest concern.

The Negroes of Rochester have made great progress in establishing institutions of their own and they have taken an increasingly active part in other civic and cultural affairs. A Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, organized by four groups in 1926, opened a club house on Adams Street in 1949 and increased the number of its affiliates. Three Negro churches maintain social halls and many of these young people participate in the programs of the city's five settlement houses as well as in those of the Y.M. and Y.W.C.A. Indeed it was a decision of the Y.W. to discontinue its segregated branch on Clarissa Street in 1950 that prompted the establishment of Rochester's youngest settlement, the Montgomery Neighborhood Center,

to serve the mixed residents in the expanding southwest district and to promote their progressive integration.

While the problems have not disappeared, a clearer understanding of them is emerging. Even in the field of crime, a recent study indicates that, despite an influx of migrant farm workers, many of whom soon exhaust their summer earnings, a decline in the number of arrests of Negroes for offenses against property has occurred over the past ten years. An opposing trend, disclosed by the increasing number of offenses against persons, is in part due to the added density in the Negro residential districts; it thus re-emphasizes the unitary character of their problems.

As the late Mrs. Mary T. Gannett, long the beloved friend of Rochester Negroes as of other victims of intolerance, once observed, Rochester may never solve all the problems and surmount all the difficulties arising from its racial and cultural diversity—they are part of the price of freedom—but the city can reduce the bitter hostilities and harsh experiences to a minimum by abolishing racial and other divisive categories from its collective consciousness and by treating each individual on his own merits—as the city has finally learned to do in honoring Frederick Douglass.