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Historic Antecedents of the Crossroads Project

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The basic definition of a city, among students of urban antiquities, is a crossroads within a wall. In modern times the wall has given way to a fixed boundary, which separates the area legally from the surrounding territory. Of course the Crossroads Project in Rochester has no boundary wall, nor is it sharply divided from adjoining portions of the inner city; yet current planners are treating the area almost as a city within a city, and the history of the district strongly supports that point of view. Just as the new plans call for the development here of modern facilities for government and trade and of accommodations for permanent and transient residents, so in the past this area has served each of these functions and in addition varied forms of entertainment.

Although in the redevelopment project a few existing buildings are excluded, the basic boundaries of the area and the project coincide. On the west side it extends north from Main Street to Central Avenue, and, on the east side, to Andrews Street; except for a few buildings at the Four Corners and one on St. Paul, it extends west from that street to State. It includes the bridges at Main and Andrews Streets and all or part of

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Front, Mill, Corinthian, Market, and Andrews streets. Best of all, it includes a long-forgotten portion of the Genesee River, which it proposes now to restore as a worthy adornment of the central city.

No part of Rochester, not even the old Third Ward, has inspired more ambitious projects and accumulated more colorful lore than the Front and Water Streets district. Its close ties with Main Street bridge, with whose redevelopment it is still linked, dominated the early decades. Ambitious efforts to make the Front Street area at once a commercial, civic, and cultural center gave dignity to its second era of growth. Disillusioned by the failure of these schemes and suffering from other recurring misfortunes, the street lost status and fell into disrepute. A concentration of low saloons and disorderly houses won it the title of Rochester's Bowery. Many poor newcomers from southern and eastern Europe found lodging in the upper stories and lofts of its aging buildings, and their strange tongues and unfamiliar customs added to the novelty of the scene.

Yet Front Street's convenient access to the busy throngs on Main Street assured its merchants a continuing trade. Spurred by the successful development of Water Street to the east and especially of State Street to the west, business interests on Front Street effected a revival of the district in the early 1900's. A rescue mission, a playground, and other welfare agencies helped to restore the area's respectability. Grandiose plans for its redevelopment stirred repeated flurries of excitement. But the failure of most property owners to rebuild or refurbish their buildings condemned the entire area to a slow decline, which has made it by the 1960's a proper subject for urban renewal.

The Village Meadow

A steep hillside on the east, sloping abruptly into the river, and a low-lying meadow on the west subject to river floods,

most of the present Crossroads tract was by-passed in Rochester's village days. Only its southern border, Main Street, displayed vitality. Yet the crush of business on that street soon brought Front Street into being and spurred the development of Water Street. Both were directly influenced by the unique character of the bridge, or rather the succession of bridges, erected there in the city's early years.

The first bridge, constructed between 1810 and 1812 at a cost of \$12,000, was a frame structure supported by wooden piers. It was built level with the eastern bank, and at its western end the roadway dipped down a ramp to the lower grade of West Main Street, then called Buffalo Street. A sandy beach under the western end of the bridge provided a convenient driveway in dry weather from the mills south of Buffalo Street to the open pasture lands to the north. On early maps this roadway was labeled Mason Street, but the "great freshet" that hit Rochester in 1817 not only weakened the western pier and ramp, but also washed away most of the sandy beach and placed the boundaries and even the existence of Mason Street in dispute.

A new bridge was urgently needed, and in 1822 the newly created County of Monroe and the newly expanded village, which now reached across to annex the improved tracts on the east bank, moved to supply it. Dispute over a proper division of the costs delayed action, and the second bridge, built on stone piers, was not completed until December 1824. Its opening brought rapid improvements on both sides. The completion of the Erie Canal in these years had prompted a great burst of activity at Rochester, giving it a tenfold growth in ten years. Property off Main Street increased in value, and John Mastick, one of the pioneer settlers, secured title to part of the low-lying tract where Mason Street had been laid out by agreeing to build a wall to protect it from river floods.

The completion of the wall and of the second bridge enabled

the village to take one of its most novel actions. Since space on Main and Buffalo Streets was at a premium, no shop owner wanted market wagons to stand at his door. The need for a market near the center prompted the village trustees to build it in 1827 out over the river. Charles H. Carroll, who had bought Mastick's improvements, claiming title to the center of the river, hastily granted his permission. By leasing the right to rest beams for the market on the wall and on an extension of the west pier, the village not only secured the floor space for a convenient market, it also led property owners on both sides of the river to claim title to its bed. By 1830, low one-story frame buildings lined the north side of the bridge from the Globe Building, a four-story brick structure on the east, to the public market at the west end.

Floods, Fires, and New Vistas

Although still open on the south side, Main Street bridge thus provided a continuous line of store fronts across the river, linking the east and west sides into one business community. When fire swept through these frame structures in January 1834, plans for their reconstruction were promptly announced. The village, now about to become a city, decided, however, to build a more substantial market, and chose a site on the east side of Mason (Front) Street, a long block north of the bridge. On the market's completion, the city opened a new right-of-way, Market Street, west across Mill Street to State Street. A group of interested property owners joined forces to erect a second bridge to link Andrews and Mumford Streets, thus further improving communications in the district.

When in 1835 a second severe flood washed away most of the structures rebuilt on the bridge and damaged its roadway, a more substantial third bridge soon took its place. The grade of the new bridge rose gradually from Mason Street to St. Paul,

thus eliminating the steep climb to the east that had plagued stage drivers and wagoners alike. As traffic increased, the practice of farmers who had parked their loaded hay wagons along the southern side of the bridge to await buyers provoked criticism, and the city acquired a lot adjoining the new market on Mason Street for a hay scales in 1843, thus giving an additional impetus to the commercial life of the district. At the same time it widened an old cow lane, called Bugle Alley, back of the Buffalo Street properties, and renamed it Works Street because of the numerous handicraft shops developing there.

Mumford's meadow, as the tract had originally been known, was no longer hospitable to cows. The river wall of 1837 had not only blocked off their watering place, it had also afforded a sufficient footing for a row of shallow buildings on the east side of Mason, which was finally renamed Front Street in 1845. The character of its development was brought suddenly into view by the outbreak in July that year of a raging fire, which demolished some twenty shops on Front and Works Streets. Sparks from the wind-swept blaze threatened the newly enlarged Reynolds Arcade to the west and St. Paul's Church steeple on the eastern horizon, but diligent volunteer firemen saved both of them. The destruction was serious enough, for those burned out included a tinsmith, a gunsmith, a cabinetmaker, an upholsterer, a lace store and a wool shop, to mention only those overhanging the river on Front Street. C. H. Carroll, owner of the buildings, was insured, but most of the tenants there and in the shops and rookeries on Works Street were left penniless.

In addition to its destruction, the fire reopened an old controversy as to the proper location of Front Street. Earlier protests against the encroachment on that street by the Carroll buildings had prompted the Common Council to lease 20 feet to Carroll, but now a group of his neighbors demanded that further encroachments be forestalled. The city, however, was

more interested in a speedy reconstruction of the downtown shops and stores than in a new realignment of the street, which had been pushed westward by common consent in 1836, and the remonstrance was tabled.

Acrimonious outbursts over plans for the Crossroads development reflected the keen rivalries for its potential advantages. The location of the public market on Front Street in 1837 had made it a busy center for hucksters and other market men. Local militia companies secured the use of the market's north wing as their headquarters and staged frequent drills in the market court. The Cottage Hotel was opened across Front Street in 1844, when seven other small taverns already offered accommodations on that and Water Street; four major hostleries facing on Main, State, or St. Paul backed into the Crossroads district.

The construction of the Rochester and Auburn Railroad in the early 1840's, with its tracks crossing the river at the brink of the main falls and its terminal depot at Mill Street, brought a vital new activity to the district's northern edge. Adjoining property owners, who paid local assessments to finance the creation of Center Square in front of the station, protested when the city granted the Rochester and Tonawanda Railroad permission to cross that square and link its right-of-way with the Auburn, but the new Congress Hall, which appeared on Mill Street facing the square in 1846, rejoiced at the increased flow of visitors from the east and the west.

Of course the district's southern boundary, Main and Buffalo Streets, remained the most active, and the Reynolds Arcade supplied its most dominant feature. That novel structure, erected to its full four and one-half stories on the north side of Buffalo Street in 1829, had in the next decade been extended back to Works Street with a 15-foot passage hall, 99 feet in length, running down its center and rising through the suc-

cessive floors to a glass-covered roof. The lofty arcade gave access to shops and offices on both sides on the two lower floors and afforded light to the apartments above, which were reached by winding stairways at the two ends. In 1843, a separate three-story building was erected adjoining the arcade on Works Street to provide Rochester a more commodious post office than the cramped quarters that had previously served this purpose at the front of the Arcade. With an opening into the Arcade, the new post office, described as one of the most spacious in the nation, continued to make it a focal center and busy concourse for business men and other citizens eager to deposit or pick up their mail.

Other public facilities sought access to this concourse, and in 1848 its proprietor, William A. Reynolds, decided to build an additional structure, across Works Street in the rear, to accommodate the Athenaeum and Mechanics Association of which he had been elected president the year before. His architect, Henry Searle from Burlington, Vermont, persuaded Reynolds to expand his plans and add a third story to serve as a concert hall. The architect elaborately decorated the interior with Corinthian columns, which inspired Reynolds to name it Corinthian Hall. Shortly after the building's completion in 1849, the Athenaeum moved its library and reading room onto the second floor (the first was occupied by a volunteer fire company and several shops) and scheduled an expanded series of lyceum lectures in the hall above. Because of criticism of the location of such a building on modest Works Street, the Common Council decided in 1850 to rename it Exchange Place.

Whether because of that added dignity, or because of its location within easy walking distance of the city's principal hotels, with access through the busy Arcade, Corinthian Hall quickly became the cultural center of the Flour City. Jenny Lind, Adelina Patti, Ole Bull sang there in turn, while Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher,

William H. Seward, as well as Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, each lectured there on at least one occasion during the next decade.

Other important developments were occurring throughout the Crossroads district. The Rochester Gas Company, chartered in 1848, erected its works and storage tanks on the river side of Front Street north of Andrews Street bridge, a convenient and central location, but one that scarcely inspired confidence among its near neighbors. The newly organized police force appropriated the north wing of the market building for a police court and overnight lockup in 1850, crowding the military companies into the south wing where two bands had previously found lodgment. The newly chartered Western Union established its office in the Arcade in 1856, supplanting an earlier telegraph office in the Congress Hall. But the most significant changes centered around the protracted reconstruction of Main Street bridge.

Agitation for a new bridge had commenced in 1853, yet two years elapsed before the city and the county could agree on a division of the cost. A second dispute over the character and size of its structure consumed additional months, and the spring of 1856 arrived before work commenced on the east abutment. The engineers had decided upon a stone bridge of five arches, 70 feet wide, but pressure by south-side interests later persuaded the city to extend that width to 80 feet and to permit riparian owners on both sides to extend the piers still further in order to support their buildings. A narrow foot bridge afforded some access to the stores lining the north side of the third bridge during the summer of 1856; wagons and carts had to detour to Andrews or Court Street bridges. The poor conditions of the latter prompted the city to build a temporary wooden bridge at Main Street that October, only to see it washed away, together with most of the buildings on the north side of the old bridge,

by a flood of ice the next spring.

Goaded by loud complaints from all sides, the first contractor abandoned the job and, after dismissing the engineers in charge, the city gave the work of completing the bridge to G. S. Copeland as superintendent. Finally the keystone of the last arch was set late in July 1857, and the bridge was formally opened the next Saturday. Property owners on the north side had already extended the piers to support a row of three- and four-story brick buildings, which now replaced the one- and two-story frame structures of former years. Because of a dispute over the south line of Main Street, that side remained open for another fifteen years; nevertheless, with the completion of its new Medina stone pavement in 1859, Main Street bridge acquired a substantial appearance.

The completion of the bridge and the repaving of Front Street prompted Aaron Erickson, owner of the old market site at the corner of Front and Main, to erect a four-story brick building there. One of the petitioners of 1845, who had sought to assure a wider entrance to Front Street with the object of making it the major approach to the station, endeavored to revive that controversy. In three lengthy letters to the *Union & Advertiser*, he reviewed the history of the Front Street line and urged that the city compel Erickson to move the Front Street side of his building back to the proper line. But Erickson, who had purchased the site in 1854, with no doubts as to its size, saw no point in cutting his plans in half, and since the remonstrant was unwilling to take his case to the courts, the Erickson building went up as planned.

By the early 1860's, Front Street was fully built up, with solid rows of two-, three-, or four-story buildings flanking it on both sides from Main to Andrews and beyond. H. A. Palmer closed the last gap on the west side in 1861 by erecting a private market extending through to Mill Street, which was now also

built up. Seth Green's fish market occupied the basement of the public market, while a number of other market men sold meats from the stalls above; many of the hucksters who had parked their carts along the street during the 1850's now moved into Palmer's Market, clearing the sidewalks for easier passage.

The replacement of old Andrews Street bridge by a new one built by the city in 1857 further promoted the area's commercial growth. East of the river, Water Street was now also substantially built up, at least on the river side, where only two gaps remained open to the river. South from Mortimer Street to Main it presented a solid row of three- and four-story blocks with shops and restaurants on the street floor and a variety of establishments above. From Mortimer north to Andrews, however, between Water and St. Paul, a half dozen spaciouly laid out residences stubbornly resisted the march of commerce, supported by St. Paul's Episcopal Church and a row of residences on the east side.

Floods, Fires, and Assorted Follies

Unfortunately, the fair prospects enjoyed by merchants and property owners on both sides of the river north of Main in the early 1860's were suddenly blasted by the great flood of 1865, and when the Front Street property began to recover from its soggy blow, a succession of fires and other misfortunes oppressed the era. Earlier floods and fires had cleared the way for improvements, but this time a series of ill-fated plans for new developments miscarried. In the general decay that followed a number of disorderly houses and shady practices found root in the district, giving it the name of the Rochester Bowery.

By turning its back on the river and by encroaching at various points on its bed, Rochester and especially Front and Buffalo Streets courted its revenge. The Genesee lashed out at the bridge on several occasions. It dealt its greatest

blow early in March 1865 when a warm, hard rain up the valley loosened a heavy blanket of snow, sending a mounting flood down on the city. Completely filling the seven arches of the aqueduct, it spilled over into the canal and rushed east and west in near tidal waves that broke through the banks at several points. The main stream, after passing under the aqueduct, quickly filled the four arches of Main Street bridge and overflowed its open south side, swirling into Buffalo and Front Streets. As the water rose to a depth of several feet in stores and shops bordering these streets, it ruined most of their stock and wrought havoc on all sides. The collapse of the rear walls of several buildings on the bridge and along Front Street eased the pressure elsewhere but focused the current of escaping waters into that street, ripping up its flagstone pavement and creating an appalling scene of destruction.

When, after several hours, the waters began to recede, curious onlookers from higher ground enjoyed the sight of men rowing boats into the Arcade and around the Four Corners, but shopkeepers and property owners in the Crossroads district failed to see any humor in the situation.

A few months saw much of the physical damage repaired on Buffalo Street (renamed West Main Street in 1870), but confidence in the future of Front Street was shaken. Several shoe manufacturers who had assembled numerous workers in small shops there and on Exchange Place during the war moved over to Water Street in the late sixties and early seventies. Market men no longer favored the public market, and few, if any, protested in 1871 when the Common Council voted to demolish the old building. Indeed, rather than protesting, friends of Front Street rejoiced, for the Council majority was contemplating the erection of a new city hall on that site to cost an estimated \$150,000.

The prospect did not please all citizens, however, and a

powerful minority slipped a bill through the legislature creating a state-appointed commission to plan and build the city hall elsewhere. Blocked in that direction, the Council proceeded with the construction of a new city building on Front Street. When Acting-mayor George W. Aldridge, Sr., vetoed the appropriation for architect's fees, the builders decided to follow the plans of the old market building, increasing the dimensions slightly in order to gain space. Its speedy construction became doubly urgent in April 1873 when another flood filled the river basin back of Front Street. The swirling waters undermined the partly constructed foundations of the city building, tumbling a group of curious onlookers into the river and claiming at least two lives. Disregarding the dispute over its functions, the Council ordered an immediate resumption of construction in order to close the gap in the river wall. Despite sharply reduced appropriations, the new building provided accommodations for the fire companies and other quasi-public services, but the renewed hopes of the Crossroads district were again dashed by the outcome.

One development of the mid-seventies that promised some protection from floods received little publicity at the time. It was in these depression years that property owners on the south side of the bridge finally built a row of four-story brick stores over the extended piers on that side. Although these structures by no means lessened the danger of serious floods, they did provide a shield to obstruct the flow into West Main and Front Streets. Yet at the time they seemed merely to offer rival and more modern accommodations for merchants sorely needed in the old district.

Still another development that affected the area was the removal of the railroad station from Mill Street to St. Paul Street east of the river. This action, prompted by the city's demand that the tracks be elevated to eliminate grade crossings at these

streets, and at State, Clinton, and Main Street East, left the Brackett House and the Congress Hall at Central Avenue and Mill Street facing the blank wall of the elevated tracks with no patrons in sight, thus forcing them to compete for the less affluent trade of the district. The old hope of making Front and Mill Streets the principal avenues to the station was lost to St. Paul. Property owners there quickly demolished all but one of the remaining residences and erected four- and five-story blocks in their stead. Only J. Sherlock Andrews held on stubbornly in his family homestead at the southwest corner of Andrews and St. Paul, disdainfully taking late morning exercises in a nightcap and gown before his open window and in full view of grinning clerks watching from office windows across the street, until his death in 1921.

As the prospects along Water and St. Paul Streets brightened, those on Front Street declined, yet some men retained faith in the area. When a need for funds to clear the Arcade's mortgage in 1879 forced Reynolds to sell Corinthian Hall, Samuel Wilder bought and remodeled it as the Academy of Music. Encouraged by good crowds at his popular programs, Wilder again remodeled the hall in 1884, adding a second gallery in order to increase the capacity to 1600, and a new entrance and exit to insure their safety. Among numerous entertainers, Tony Pastor, the vaudeville star, drew enthusiastic crowds in 1888 and 1889 when the regular season continued without a break for 44 weeks. Rival halls were however bidding for favor, notably the Opera House on South St. Paul, and when fire gutted the old Academy in 1898—luckily when no one was in the building—Wilder delayed its reconstruction.

Amusements of a less formal sort had meanwhile taken root in the area. Many of the modest taverns of the early years had degenerated into low saloons and the hotels into disreputable houses under the loose management of notorious characters

luridly identified in the press as “Scar-Faced Fannie,” “Morphine Liz,” “One-Eyed Susan,” and the like. Reporters, looking for salacious copy, had only to stroll down Front or Mill Streets or to explore the gambling dives on North Water to find “color” in abundance. Businessmen in the area protested the penchant for pornographic details, and no doubt many cub reporters as well as some of their jaded elders took a special delight in describing the Rochester “Bowery.” Yet the police, too, were well acquainted with the area; whenever pressed to display their hostility to prostitution or gambling, they had only to raid one of the many dens there to come up with a wagon load of wayward girls or a collection of gambling wheels and other illegal devices.

Apparently some of the accounts of these numerous raids and the reminiscent stories they inspired displayed a measure of poetic license. To clear the record the *Herald*, in response to numerous protests from merchants in the area, sent a reporter in 1897 to examine the police files on such cases. No instances of the murder of guileless visitors or of rebellious girls could be found in the forty-year records, nor any reports of the robbery of slumbering patrons, though the fleecing of many avaricious citizens who were reluctant to give their names was amply documented.

The need for remedial action to back up the temperance campaigns and anti-gambling drives produced various responses. A Christian Reform Association had maintained a Coffee House Mission on Mill Street for a time in the early 1880's, and in 1888 the newly organized People's Rescue Mission opened its doors at 173 Front Street. In addition to a hall for religious meetings, it provided lodging for homeless men on the upper floors. In the depression of the mid-nineties, it added a soup kitchen and a woodyard where the unemployed could prove their worthiness. In time it also provided a shower room, an old clothes depot, a

reading room, and even a game room as the Rev. Albert E. Hines, the manager, endeavored to supplement his religious services.

Some merchants blamed the Mission for drawing destitute characters to the area, but others welcomed the opportunity to get derelicts quickly off the streets. And, indeed, despite its unsavory reputation in some quarters, the Front Street or Crossroads district maintained a lively business activity and achieved a special distinction of its own. Osmer Hulbert, who maintained the Oyster Bay restaurant at the west corner of Front and Main Streets from 1865 until his death in 1886, was a jovial host whose culinary standards won popular favor. Seth Green's fish market had three successors, and one, operated by Dwight Palmer, attracted a wide patronage. Five private meat markets on Front Street drew discriminating customers from other parts of the city. Other specialty shops included six tailors, four on Mill Street, and two breweries as well as three wine merchants who helped to support the area's economy during the eighties and nineties.

Its most distinctive personality in the mid-nineties and for the next three decades was Peter Gruber whose quaint and fantastic saloon on Mill Street captured international interest. Arriving from Oil City, Pennsylvania, in 1893 with a small cage full of rattlesnakes, Rattlesnake Pete, as he was familiarly known, quickly developed a museum of curiosities in the corridor of his saloon that attracted wide-eyed visitors of all types. Frequent accounts by admiring reporters, privileged to accompany him on occasional snake hunts; rumors of his incredible cures of goiter, snake bite, and other maladies; reports of orders received from Pasteur and other scientists for samples of snake venom, all added to his fame and to that of the Crossroads district where he made his home. A choice assortment of native and foreign wines and cigars contributed to his profits.

Plans for the Area's Rejuvenation

These varied enterprises sufficed to maintain the district and, in fact, gave it, in the early 1900's, an illusion of prosperity. Samuel Wilder rebuilt his old Academy on Exchange Place in 1904, renaming it the Corinthian Theater, and the city rechristened the place as Corinthian Street. When burlesque and variety performances began to pall a decade later, he installed a screen for occasional motion pictures. Several other local enterprises made modest adjustments to the new commercial and industrial developments that were transforming Rochester in these years into a technological center of high quality. North Water and St. Paul became, for example, a wholesale district after a destructive fire there in 1908 cleared out several old rookeries. But little money was available for remodeling operations on Front Street, and no new building occurred even when fire gutted an old block. Indeed the only hopeful projects involving the western portion of the district came from outside its borders and were finally defeated with little reference to local opinion.

A new interest in city planning found expression at Rochester as in other cities around the turn of the century. When pressure for a street parallel to Main Street prompted City Engineer McClintock to propose an extension in 1896 of Mortimer Street through to Church Street, with a new bridge midway between Main and Andrews Streets, property owners on Front and Mill Streets objected, fearing the extra assessments. Five years later, some of them thought better of that plan when the possibility of erecting a new public market over the river between the proposed bridge and Main Street was suggested, but City Engineer Fisher, who had replaced McClintock, rejected it as an additional flood hazard. When renewed flood threats in 1902 and 1903 brought that problem to the fore and McClintock offered, as a possible solution, a plan to create an open flood basin north of Main Street to Central Avenue, with sloping flagstone sides

replacing the buildings along Front and Water Streets that backed on the river, several of the owners announced their willingness to sell. Yet property holders facing the proposed basin displayed little interest in undertaking the improvements necessary to make the project a success, and no action resulted.

A second opportunity for a major transformation of the area developed in 1907 when word leaked out that the New York Central, dissatisfied with its St. Paul Street station, was contemplating the erection of a new one. A group of prominent businessmen, some from the east and some from the west side, brought William J. Wilgus, a New York consulting engineer, to Rochester to explore the possibility of building the new station over the river in order to draw the two halves of the city together again. The Wilgus plan, as submitted that fall, revived the flood basin proposed by McClintock but bordered it with boulevards extending from Main Street north to Central Avenue where trolleys and cars could drive into a trolley station on the level of the Central Avenue bridge and passengers could mount to the railroad station above. Main Street would be open on the north side to afford a view of the river and the boulevards lined with classical arcades and new buildings of appropriate scale leading back to an impressive station overlooking the falls. George Eastman and the trustees of the Chamber of Commerce announced their approval of the plan, which was variously estimated to cost the city between \$700,000 and \$1,000,000. Property owners again expressed their willingness to sell; Mayor Edgerton was preparing to take the plan to Vanderbilt of the Central when the latter released plans for a new station east of Clinton Avenue.

Disillusioned by the collapse of these grand schemes, property owners on Front and Water Streets felt somewhat harassed when Dr. George Goler as chief health officer demanded improvements in the sanitary facilities of their markets and en-

deavored to inspect the living quarters in the tenements above. Wretched conditions and overcrowding had long persisted, and the Italians and other recent newcomers who now thronged the area could not understand the new regulations. The police had the continuing problem of enforcing the Sunday closing laws and other regulations on saloons in the district, and low gambling dens still existed, but most of the disorderly houses had moved elsewhere. More symbolic now of the area was the People's Rescue Mission, which moved to larger quarters in the old Richmond Hotel at Front and Market Streets in 1914.

A fresh new approach to the needs of the district appeared in 1908 when the Children's Playground League opened a playground on Front Street. Granted the use of a small lot scarcely a tenth of an acre in size, the league's volunteer staff soon attracted an average of 130 children a day to use its familiar swings and sandboxes and its more novel slides and parallel bars. When after the second season the first lot was appropriated for other uses, the city purchased a new one adjoining the hay-market and fitted a shower bath into a small building left standing on the site. The city now annually refurbished its equipment while the league paid the salary of part-time attendants who, assisted by volunteers, circulated a children's book collection, distributed flowers once a week from their own gardens, and taught songs and supervised games. For a dozen years the playground brightened the lives of many children in the district and supplied a link between it and the more affluent parts of the city. But as the number of children resident in the area declined, interest waned, and the playground was finally closed at the end of the 1920 season.

Proof that the flood hazard had not disappeared, after the abortive schemes of the early 1900's were shelved, was supplied in 1913 when its second most devastating flood inundated Front Street almost to the depth reached in 1865. Again its paving

stones were ripped apart and much damage was suffered by dismayed property owners. When an even larger volume of water rushed through the city during the spring thaw two years later, fortunately a cold spell slowed the runoff, but Rochester could not always expect such luck. What point was there, many Front Street property owners reasoned, to improving their properties while this threat existed?

Of course the flood threat did not apply to the high ground east of the river. Its Main Street stores, which had benefited from the eastward migration of the retail trade in earlier decades, suffered as that choice function moved farther east after the great Sibley fire of 1904, but the city's growth enabled them to maintain a marginal position. Wholesalers continued to prosper on North Water and St. Paul even after the opening of the third New York Central Station made Clinton rather than St. Paul its principal approach. The decision of George Eastman to erect a handsome new building for the Chamber of Commerce on the northwest corner of St. Paul and Mortimer Streets gave that area new stability. Moreover, the Chamber's continued growth not only called for an expansion of its building in 1926 but also provided a demand for parking space that supplied an economic return on neighboring lots when other uses failed and the owners pulled down old buildings to save taxes.

Unfortunately, the demolition of old structures to save taxes began to spread like a blight through the entire Crossroads district in the 1930's. The owners of the Corinthian Theater considered a plan to remodel that structure as a five-story garage in 1928, yet the next year they razed it for a parking lot. Other property on the interior streets followed that example, but on Main and State they endeavored to maintain the exteriors of their buildings and in some cases remodeled the interiors. Only the trustees of the Reynolds estate had the courage to replace the historic old Arcade with a modern new office

building, 10 stories high, with a first-floor hall faintly reminiscent of the Arcade running back through its center to Corinthian Street. Completed in 1933, it represented almost the only hopeful accomplishment in that depression year.

W.P.A. crews repaved old Front Street in 1937, and the district may have gained somewhat in status as other parts of the city suffered the ravages of hard times and neglect. Herbert L. Paddock, manager for many years of Tessie's Restaurant and familiarly known as the Mayor of Front Street, would later recall the relative prosperity of these years when the street's low rentals attracted enterprises unable to meet the tariff elsewhere. But as the city's economy revived in the mid-forties some of the more successful of these merchants moved to more attractive locations in the new suburban shopping centers. Only a few markets, secure in the reputations they had won over many years, hung on, while vacant store fronts and parking lots increased in number.

A steady stream of homeless men, swollen by the long depression years, continued to crowd the facilities of the People's Rescue Mission every night. Reorganized after the death of Rev. Hines in 1948 as the Men's Service Center, the institution acquired an imaginative new leader, the Rev. Thomas B. Richards, who redirected its program towards the rehabilitation of its unfortunate clients. The Center soon opened new quarters in a remodeled structure at Front and Andrews Streets and established a Halfway House in another part of the city to further that effort, but the hope that its function would gradually fade from the social picture, or from the Front Street area, seemed far in the future.

The only hope for the district "Mayor" Paddock could see, when interviewed by a *Times-Union* reporter in 1954, was that a substantial investor would clear the tract between Corinthian and Andrews Streets and erect a large new hotel on a spacious

river plaza extending through to Mill Street with new shops replacing the wrecks on its other side. Another Front Streeter had proposed a city park for the site eight years before, and in 1951 a citizen committee headed by Edward Harris II had launched a study of the possibility of securing Federal funds for the urban redevelopment of the area. A Front Street Improvement Association appeared and endorsed the proposal, but city officials failed to respond and Paddock concluded that "Front Street is dying."

That death notice was at least premature. Charles Adams, manager of a barber's supply shop on the street for many decades, celebrated his seventy-seventh birthday with a group of Front Street friends in 1956 by reminiscing of the early days. At the request of the Health Department, the police had evicted 30 migrant Negroes from a wretched tenement earlier that year when its owner refused to bring it up to minimum standards. A few months later the police pressed the cleanup drive further and rounded up some 246 vagrants who had found shelter in hidden nooks and crannies previously boarded up. Clearly a bold surgical operation was needed to eradicate this cancerous growth so near the heart of the city.

Encouragement for Front Street redevelopment was supplied in 1952 by the completion of the Genesee storage dam at Mt. Morris some fifty miles up the river. It promised a final release from the flood hazards that had long paralyzed the district. Only a dearth of leadership could account for further delays.

The Crossroads Redevelopment Project

Rochester was finally ready in 1959 to consider forthright action. The City Planning Commission launched a study of the area for possible condemnation. William R. Coates, an enthusiastic advocate of private redevelopment, endeavored to interest outside investors. Webb & Knapp of New York and promoters of large building projects in other cities sent agents to Rochester

to explore the possibilities. It soon became evident that no satisfactory development could be made of the Front Street area without a simultaneous rebuilding of the Water Street side. The I. M. Pei architectural firm prepared a detailed rendering of a proposed development for Webb & Knapp and included both sides of the river in its "Twin Bridge" concept. The city delayed its proposed application for Federal funds, hoping that private investors would take on the job. But the latter needed public assistance in acquiring the land, and in June 1959, Rochester officials reached a tentative agreement with the two leading firms to press ahead in that direction.

Over a year slipped by before Rochester Park (as the group of private investors, headed by Eugene Tanner of New York, was named) was ready to submit its proposal. Its offer to expend \$130,000 in the preparation of a project plan, with the Federal Government contributing another \$240,000, seemed to assure careful planning, but many in Rochester protested the stipulation that Rochester Park would have preferred status in bidding on the actual construction. Coates, supported by Lee McCanne of the Chamber, urged that Rochester men be given a share in the project, and Coates claimed a Kansas City developer as his backer. Efforts to work out a division of capital participation and control consumed another year without satisfying all contestants, but the City Council finally moved in May 1961 to approve a revised contract with Rochester Park for assistance in the preparation of a plan for the project, naming it as preferred bidder but exacting the deposit of a \$150,000 guarantee.

An unexpected shift in the City Administration, when the Democrats took control of the City Council in January 1962, caught this planning study in mid course. A few months thereafter, the Housing and Home Finance Agency, which had to approve the contract before it could become effective, declared the contract illegal. The City Manager notified Rochester Park

to that effect and returned the \$150,000 guarantee. Rochester Park accepted the refund of its deposit but brought action to enforce the contract. The City Law Department petitioned for summary judgment in order to dispose of the matter quickly. It now appears, however, that it will be required to go to trial before final disposition can be had.

In the meantime, Rochester has contracted to sell to the General Services Administration of the United States a large portion of the Front Street area for the construction of a new Federal Building. The Department of Urban Renewal and Economic Development, headed by William F. Denne, has prepared and launched a schedule of acquisitions and has consulted with property owners concerning temporary leases and moving plans. It has drafted tentative plans for possible uses and construction designs in the non-Federal portions of the site and is considering applications from interested developers. Thus the Crossroads Project, as it is officially designated, presents a grand opportunity for the reconstruction of this historic part of the central city—a redevelopment that will reopen the river to public view, restore its basin and its bridges as beautiful urban features, and pump new vitality into the civic and economic life of the community.