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Housing and Urban Renewal The Rochester Experience

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Few urban problems have been more baffling than housing and none has been more enduring. This has been true of Rochester, as of every city in America. The difficulties have not always or everywhere been the same, but whether they sprang from shortages of supply, deficiencies in standards, inequities in cost, neighborhood blight, or discriminatory practices in renting and sales, usually some community action was called for, and every faltering response compounded the hazards for succeeding generations. Possibly a review of the historical manifestations of these problems in Rochester will help to place its present dilemmas in perspective.

A Century of Fluctuating Growth

The housing problem dates, of course, from the arrival of the first settlers. Most of the hardy pioneers built their own houses, often with the aid of their near neighbors. Colonel Rochester, the proprietor, eager to speed the town's growth, hired workmen to erect and enclose the frames of modest houses on some of his village lots, and then offered free rent for half a year to any artisan who would plaster and paint a

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dwelling. The shortage of homes was so acute in the early days that many newcomers lived for weeks in the covered wagons in which they arrived or in tents pitched among the stumps that still dotted many town lots in the 1820's. Amidst a great clatter of hammers, "new houses sprang up overnight," as it seemed to one observer, and for a time, few were concerned with standards.

When an early fire taught the danger of unsafe chimneys, the village trustees in 1817 prescribed rules for their construction. Fifteen years later, when an attack of cholera disclosed the need for health precautions, the trustees appointed a board of health and debated a broader approach to the housing problem. Several clergymen delivered "cholera sermons," yet little was accomplished until the onset of a second and more severe epidemic in 1848 brought a revival of the board of health and the demolition of a number of noxious rookeries. The first city charter of 1834 gave the Common Council power to ban the erection of wooden buildings within the prescribed limits, but ten years slipped by before that body passed an ordinance prohibiting the construction of such buildings in the central district and requiring that all roofs there be of tile, slate, or metal. Eight years later, after a third cholera epidemic, the Council gave the Board of Health power to inspect new building plans and to establish standards for light and ventilation; again the precautions lapsed shortly after the crisis passed.

Possibly because of the city's more moderate growth after the mid-century, the annual reports to the Board of Health made only an occasional reference to housing conditions during the next three decades. Dr. William H. Briggs observed in 1860, when Rochester's 9000 families occupied some 8000 dwelling units, "We are less cursed with so-called tenement houses, perhaps, than any city of our size." Twenty years later, however, when the flood of newcomers from abroad began to

mount, forcing many to seek shelter in downtown lofts and in old blocks that had outlived their commercial usefulness, complaints of housing nuisances again demanded attention. Dr. William F. Sheehan, chief health officer, investigated a half-dozen tenements in 1882 and ordered two of them vacated. His successors moved for the correction of sanitary nuisances, sometimes in the same blocks in succeeding years, and in 1893 ordered the demolition of a cluster of buildings in "Murderer's Row," a wretched alley near the railroad station.

Some of the larger cities were expanding their housing regulations in these years. Following their example, the Rochester Common Council adopted a plumbing ordinance in 1886 and authorized the appointment of a plumbing inspector; two years later, after a disastrous fire at the Steam Gauge and Lantern Works, it gave the fire marshal power to inspect plans for new buildings. Rochester postponed action under a state law authorizing the appointment of building inspectors until 1896, when the Common Council adopted its first building ordinance and required issuance of a permit before construction could commence. Yet the Bureau of Buildings and Combustibles, organized in 1900 to enforce these provisions, relied for its direction on the fire marshal until 1911, when a new building ordinance gave it independent status. Meanwhile the file of building permits afforded a statistical gauge of the increased volume of construction, which mounted from \$1,390,000 in 1898 to over \$10 million in 1910.

The first decade of the 20th century brought the housing problems of Rochester into clearer focus. The relatively high standards of 1890 (when the city, with 24,000 dwellings to 27,000 families and with 44 per cent of the houses owner-occupied, had more adequately served its domestic needs than any other major city) had deteriorated during the depression that followed. With construction halted, many newcomers were again forced to crowd into the wretched tenements and

lofts on the fringe of downtown. This time the chief health officer, Dr. George Goler, was an outspoken man, as his frequent addresses on "The Submerged Tenth," "How Some of the People of Rochester Live," and "Slums in Our Town" demonstrated. When a New York paper picked up and published some of Goler's criticism, the city's conscience as well as its pride was pricked.

Instead of issuing an indignant retort, the Rochester Chamber of Commerce conducted a housing survey in 1901, and the Young Men's Christian Association another in 1904. Together they revealed a serious shortage in rental housing and a dearth of apartments. Successive leaders of the Chamber and other organizations urged the construction of rental housing, especially units to rent at from \$2.50 to \$3.00 a week. Workmen could not afford to pay more, one speaker declared, without a boost in wages. Neither that basic solution nor a plan to build numerous low-cost houses on the outskirts materialized, but the introduction of an easy-credit scheme to grant long-term mortgages at modest rates did help after 1904 to stimulate a new upsurge in home construction.

Unfortunately, an inadequate supply of housing was no longer the major difficulty. Ghetto-like slums had already developed in the old Front Street neighborhood and both north and south of the tracks east and west of the business district. A rapid influx of newcomers from abroad, many of them unable to speak English, had pressed old lofts and warehouses into use as makeshift rookeries where colonies of Eastern Jews, Italians, Greeks, and Ukrainians clustered into crowded quarters. Drawn there by ethnic and religious ties, they were held there in part by economic necessity and in part by the reluctance of householders in other sections to rent to people with strange customs and foreign tongues.

The crush of newcomers had pushed rents up 20 per cent in two years, a reporter discovered in 1904, and many poor fam-

ilies were doubling up even in small houses. As many as eight men were found sleeping in shifts in one unventilated room over a store on Central Avenue. Dr. Goler's protest had alerted conscientious citizens, and the Children's Aid Society, among other bodies, was endeavoring to alleviate the plight of some of the unfortunate. Walter Rauschenbusch, after conducting the Y.M.C.A. survey, called among other reforms, for the building of rental housing by the city if necessary. A group of German Jews, long resident in the city, met in 1906 to seek a remedy for the wretched conditions in the Eight and Tenth Wards. Some of them had previously backed the formation of the city's first settlement house on Baden Street, and they now called for an investigation of the crowded ghetto that surrounded it.

Although a second Chamber of Commerce committee, created to undertake the construction of rental housing for poor families, failed to launch its project, numerous building-and-loan societies that were actively promoting the development of outlying tracts brought relief to many families. German, Polish, and other ethnic colonies developed or quickly occupied some of these subdivisions, but the pressure on the central wards was only slightly relieved. Thus a fire in a tenement on Joseph Avenue, in April 1907, dumped the 300 members of its 48 families into the street on a chilly night. The Chamber again revived its housing committee and offered prizes for the best design for low-cost housing to rent at \$2.50 to \$4.00 a week. Builders, redoubling their efforts, pushed construction to an unprecedented total of \$6,752,000 for the year and completed over 1000 new houses, though few of them were for rent or within the workingman's price range.

Rochester's growth had brought it into the category of first-class cities, and a new building code was required. Unfortunately its drafters looked to New York and Buffalo for their model, rather than to the more spaciouly laid out cities of the

Middle West. Because of a demand for rental housing, it was necessary to draft rules for the construction of tenements, and these were defined as buildings designed to accommodate more than three families; but Dr. Goler protested vigorously when such buildings were permitted, depending on their height, to occupy all but 10 or 20 per cent of the land. He cited the model code of Columbus, Ohio, which regulated all houses designed for two or more families and required the maintenance of 30 or 40 per cent of the lots as yard space. Rochester, he declared, should adopt similarly spacious standards rather than permit the densities tolerated in New York.

The fire marshal drafted a set of instructions which he sent to the owners of 50 tenements specifying the number and type of fire escapes required on their buildings. He expressed concern, however, as to the result if many such places would have to be closed since some of them housed numerous residents. One on Front Street had 60 lodgers, another 21; where else, he asked, could they secure a bed for 15 cents a night. Not only single men but also poor families were involved, and the Women's Educational and Industrial Union engaged Mrs. Caroline Bartlett Crane to survey Rochester's housing and sanitary needs.

Mrs. Crane, a Unitarian minister from Kalamazoo who had conducted sanitary surveys in a number of major cities, reached Rochester early in May 1911. Assisted by Mrs. Mary T. Gannett and other leaders of the women's union, she spent a busy week investigating lodging houses and tenements, schools, rescue missions, and other institutions, even saloons, before preparing an extended report, which she delivered before a mass meeting at Convention Hall on Friday night.¹ It was well timed, for several of the clergymen who heard her added their endorsement that Sunday, while the numerous officials in attendance had to wait until Monday before replying to her criticisms. Mrs. Crane had found much in Rochester to praise,

but she skipped quickly over such matters and concentrated on the sanitary deficiencies. She deplored the wretched conditions in many tenements and described some of the poorer neighborhoods as slums. Rochester's fine reputation as a city of homes, with a high rate of home ownership, was besmirched, she said, by these conditions, and was further threatened by its new but unsatisfactory building code and by its parsimonious support of the health bureau.

An Era of Disillusionment

An astonishing indictment of Rochester's first century of growth, the Crane survey opened an era of disillusionment with the city's housing. Yet few but Dr. Goler and his friends found Mrs. Crane's views wholly credible. To check her findings the Rev. Edwin A. Rumball of the Unitarian Church investigated the decaying Fourth Ward, which surrounded his church. Many newcomers from abroad were crowding two and more families into modest houses, and he found 17 families living in one eight-room structure. Some owners were hastily erecting fire escapes, but few were installing the prescribed water taps and toilets.

Most builders in the city were absorbed in the construction of new houses on the outskirts. Plans for attractive subdivisions were being launched at Driving Park, Northview Terrace, Fruitdale on Spencer Road, Maple Terrace, and most ambitious of all the 23-acre Home Acres development on Highland Avenue. The new building operations topped \$10 million in 1910, and \$12 million two years later. Nevertheless, since a major portion of this construction was nonresidential, the city's steady growth in population more than absorbed its new housing. Rowland Woodward of the Chamber again emphasized the need for housing for workingmen, if Rochester's industries were not to be curbed.

Finally, on May 6, 1912, an announcement appeared of plans for a model tenement to be located off State Street near

the Eastman Kodak plant. It soon developed that George Eastman was the principal backer of the project and that his architect was applying for a variance from the new building code to permit a slight reduction in the dimensions of some of the rooms and inside fire-proof stairs as a substitute for fire escapes. These changes were necessary, Eastman maintained, to finance the construction of low-cost housing, but Dr. Goler and other recent critics of the code, who regarded its standards as too lax, could not stand by and see them further diminished.

Eastman had his defenders as both the *Herald* and the *Post Express* came out vigorously in his support. The former ran a graphic series on the wretched conditions of the inhabitants of the squalid structures on the site chosen for the model tenement and on the needs of other slum dwellers who might benefit from the new facilities. But Dr. Goler, Rev. Rumball, and other critics protested that Rochester should not permit the construction of large tenements; they argued that reduced fares on the trolley lines and modest cottages on the outskirts offered a better solution, and that any concession would weaken the fire marshal's drive to secure compliance with the code's limited provisions.

This time the health officer won his point, for it was easier to block a retreat than to force an advance. George Eastman, who was not keenly interested in housing ventures anyway, would soon clear the neighboring slums for plant expansion. Trolley fares failed to drop, but enterprising builders continued to erect houses on the outskirts in unprecedented numbers. When an English visitor, Ewart G. Culpin, secretary of the Garden City and Town Planning Association of London, addressed the Chamber of Commerce in March 1913 he congratulated Rochester on its many beautiful sections, but warned that "Your poor sections and the districts where the average citizen lives have not been given the attention that is

due them. . . In all your movements for city betterment you have got to deal with the whole city as a unit."

Culpin's speech passed without comment as Rochester continued its outward expansion. A few new apartment houses made their appearance on scattered streets, and these with the older tenements accommodated approximately 10 per cent of the city's residents in 1913, in contrast to New York where 95 per cent lived in flats. Rev. Rumball was quick to note that Syracuse, a more comparable city, had a density of only 12 per acre, to 19 per acre in Rochester, while even Buffalo had only 17 per acre, though its densest ward had 65 per acre in contrast to 55 in Rochester's most crowded ward, the Seventh.

Although Rochester rejoiced to learn that a larger percentage of its residents owned their homes than in any city of its size in the east, its builders failed to keep pace with the increasing numbers of families, and the problems faced by renters worsened. The records of 1,949 new dwellings in 1910 and 1,877 in 1912 fell off precipitously to 1,097 in 1916 and to 94 in 1918. The influenza epidemic in that year brought an investigation of health conditions in the congested wards where most of the fatalities had occurred, but when the state legislature, responding to pressure from New York and elsewhere, prescribed rent ceilings in first-class cities, Rochester, pointing to a resumption of home building, sought exemption from its control. New houses were built in increasing numbers after 1919, but again most of them were in the high-priced brackets, and they did not match the pre-war records in number until 1922. Meanwhile, the state rent controls, applied to Rochester in 1920 despite local protests, granted only minimal relief; while many renters found accommodation in newly refurbished old lofts, others had to resort to tents and summer cottages. Again a Chamber committee deplored the situation, and young Frank Gannett, new publisher of the *Times-Union*, declared that "rents must come down."

Instead, rents continued to climb and spurred a revival of home building in the outer wards. From 1,064 new houses in 1921, the permits increased to 2,039 in 1925, and the total number of new families accommodated annually mounted from 1500 to about 3000. Yet the construction, in the decade following 1915, of approximately 10,000 dwelling units did not meet the demands of an influx of 15,000 families. And while the well-to-do, who could not find accommodations in the city, could escape to the suburbs where new houses were springing up within easy reach by automobile, that choice was not available to poor renters, who were forced to share the divided-up quarters of those who moved to new homes. Their situation worsened after 1927, when the annual increment of houses and remodeled units dropped precipitously, to 230 and 558, respectively, by 1930, as the paralysis of depression took effect. It was little wonder that the city's population approached a standstill, showing the smallest rate of growth in its history.

Of course the city's population was not, in actual fact, standing still. It was, as always, milling about, and newcomers from the South were finding their places, along with many poor immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, in the congested old quarters of the Seventh and neighboring wards. The long years of the depression bore heavily on the district, discouraging efforts to improve or even maintain its antiquated properties. So wretched did some of these quarters become that social workers visiting needy families in the area protested the use of welfare money for rent payments there.

Unable in many cases to find more suitable rental units for their clients, a number of the social workers banded together in 1935 and formed the Northeast Neighborhood Conference to press the search for a solution. Led by Miss Mildred Ford, a teacher at No. 9 School, its forty-odd members met frequently to discuss inter-agency cooperation, juvenile delinquency, and other matters, but they focused their chief atten-

tion on the housing problem. After a conscientious effort to define the qualities of good, fair, and poor housing, a special housing committee made a detailed examination of 322 dwellings occupied by their clients and concluded that, while the greatest number could be rated as "fair," most of those renting for \$3.25 or less had to be described as "poor." Moreover, the units occupied by Negroes, whatever the rents, were without exception found to be "poor" houses.

Even many of the more fortunately situated homeowners felt the impact of the depression. Widespread unemployment so curtailed the incomes of some householders that they were unable to meet their mortgage payments. Reluctant to make foreclosures under such circumstances and eager to stimulate borrowing for improvements, several Rochester bankers organized a Home Mortgage Advisory Committee in 1932 to promote a safe use of credit. Overwhelmed by the flood of appeals, the bankers rejoiced a year later when the newly established Home Owner's Loan Corporation opened an office in Rochester to extend federal assistance to homeowners. By October 1934, when the agency marked its first birthday, some 2440 householders had secured loans totalling \$8,204,000 from the HOLC to enable them to retain their homes; over 600 of them had received loans to make improvements. This activity was soon overshadowed by the larger program of the Federal Housing Administration, which after 1937 gave a powerful impulse to the revival of the homebuilding industry throughout the country.

Unfortunately these programs did little for the inhabitants of the wretched slums in the Seventh Ward and elsewhere in the inner city. A *Times-Union* editorial, in January 1933, generously praised a pioneer move in Cleveland to use P.W.A. funds to clear an ancient slum in that city; a year later the Chamber of Commerce organized a Better Housing Committee to explore possible moves in Rochester. The committee

staged a public meeting that November at which the urgent need for government action on housing was stressed by a few participants, but no further steps were taken for several years.

It was Mrs. Helen Jones, president of the League of Women Voters, who reopened the question in 1937. After a first-hand survey of some of the wretched houses in the Seventh Ward, she secured a League resolution favoring the appointment of a housing authority in Rochester. A much more detailed study undertaken early that year by the Council of Social Agencies supplied ample documentation of the poor quality of housing available to clients of the city's family agencies, both public and private. With almost a tenth of the 5000 welfare families in the survey found to be living in bad housing, Oscar W. Kuolt of the Council joined Mrs. Jones in prodding City Manager Baker to appoint a Housing Advisory Committee, in March 1938, to explore the situation and recommend action.

The Committee, headed by Arthur M. Lowenthal, consisted at first of five businessmen and three councilmen; later the City Manager added Mrs. Jones and three others to represent women, labor, the Negroes, and the clergy. Following the practice in other cities, the committee launched a housing inventory with W.P.A. funds and secured the loan of Harold Rand from the Bureau of Municipal Research as its director.

Rand's staff soon indentified six inner-city blighted districts for intensive study. Conditions there seemed to justify an application for public housing funds, and shortly after the inventory was completed, in December 1938, Rand recommended that, since Rochester would need at least one housing project, a move should be started before available federal funds were exhausted. City Manager Baker, however, aware of Rochester's mounting opposition to the New Deal, as reflected in the November elections, decided to await the report's evaluation.

Excitement mounted as the time for a decision neared. Although Editor Gannett of the *Times-Union* backed Rand's

recommendations for action in January, by April, when the Chamber released a statement opposing public housing, he was ready to welcome its proposal that the city give immediate attention to the efforts of the Home Builders Association to launch a building boom. Leading representatives of the various groups visited both Syracuse and Buffalo, where public housing projects were already in operation, and their conflicting reports intensified the controversy. As a result the Housing Advisory Committee split sharply over the question, with the citizen members voting 5 to 4 in favor of creating a housing authority. Baker, however, observing that two of the three councilmen, who had not voted, were opposed to such action, took it as a tie.

Frustrated by this stalemate, the friends of public housing, headed by Mrs. Jones, met in March 1939 and organized a Rochester Housing Council. The Building Trades Council (AFL) announced plans to erect with FHA funds a cluster of small cottages on the outskirts to be sold or rented at modest rates; in contrast, the local CIO council came out strongly for a housing authority. When the City Council finally held its hearing on the housing question, Mrs. Jones and others spoke for the Housing Council, Vilas Swan for the Council of Social Agencies, Julius Loos for labor, Howard Coles for the Negroes, urging the creation of a housing authority; representatives of the Chamber, the banks, and the Real Estate Board spoke in opposition. The Citizen's Tax League presented a petition signed by 2598 residents who opposed a housing authority, and after a further delay of several weeks the City Council voted down further action.³

Unfortunately the housing boom predicted by the Chamber and its allies did not materialize, at least not within the city limits. Rochester's 132 new residential units of 1938 increased to 232 in 1940 before falling off to 23 in 1943, when the ban against all but war-industry housing went into effect. The out-

break of war in Europe in 1939 had checked the suburban movement, too, and the addition of approximately 1000 new houses annually within the entire metropolitan area did not rival the yearly housing increment of the city proper during the mid-twenties.

The war affected other aspects of the housing problem, too. As industrialists with defense orders began to seek additional workers in 1939, they found many unwilling to locate in a city where most of the vacant residential units were in the decaying central wards. Unable to disregard such a situation, the Chamber created a new Low-Cost Housing Committee as well as a Rehabilitation Committee and in September 1940, William H. Stackel brought these and several other groups together into a Coalition Housing Committee, which proposed to find a solution for the problem within "sound American traditions."

It soon became evident that any solution required the formation of a revitalized planning commission. Again Mrs. Jones took the lead, in October 1940, by drawing friends of city planning, business leaders from the Coalition group, and supporters of her Housing Council into a new Citizen's City Planning and Housing Council. With Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein as president, Mrs. Alan Valentine, wife of the President of the University of Rochester, as vice-president, Mrs. Jones as executive vice-president, and Kenneth Storandt of the Council of Social Agencies as secretary, the new council tackled its dual problems with great vigor.

Several hundred dedicated citizens enrolled as dues-paying members, and a number pledged larger sums to open an office downtown. If perhaps the majority were chiefly interested in strengthening the city-planning program, many saw its close relation to the housing problem. William G. Kaelber, the architect, called attention to the passage of a new law authorizing the formation of an urban redevelopment corporation with power to assemble land by condemnation in slum areas

for redevelopment on a limited-dividend basis as rental housing.

Spurred by that possibility, Mrs. Valentine got the University to sponsor a study that produced a plan for the redevelopment of the Manhattan and Union Street tract in the blighted Fourth Ward.⁴ When the bankers to whom she presented the plan tabled it as impracticable without a subsidy because of the land acquisition costs, the demand for public housing revived. Construction of new houses practically disappeared during the next two years. The Homes Registration Office, opened by the W.P.A. in 1941 and maintained for a year by the city, was ordered closed for lack of homes for rent or sale.

When a local effort to institute voluntary rent controls faltered that summer, Rochester was included in the expanded rent-control order of the Federal government. A survey of available housing facilities made by the Bureau of Municipal Research, in May 1942, revealed a total of 1333 vacancies in the county, many of them lake cottages and other units uninhabitable all or part of the time.⁵ The Chamber, too, sensed the gravity of the situation, but it was not ready to endorse a recommendation that Rochester establish a housing authority. Instead it began that summer to focus attention on the problems of reconversion at the war's end. The Council on Post-War Problems, created in June 1942, divided its work into four divisions and charged a dozen sub-committees with the study of specific problems, yet none of them was directly concerned with housing. Mrs. Jones and other leaders of the CCPHC endeavored to present their concern to the new council, but the best they could do was to encourage an increased emphasis on planning, which now became a respectable concept.

As a result, both the Chamber and its Civic Improvement Committee endorsed the CCPHC's drive for a stronger planning board. Under their prodding the City Council adopted an amendment, in April 1944, reorganizing the old board as a

commission which engaged Floyd Walkley, a landscape architect, as its chief planner, but his functions did not include housing or residential planning.

Hesitant Moves Toward Community Action

Gratified by this accomplishment, many of the members of the CCPHC voted in February 1945 to disband, but Mrs. Jones and others chiefly concerned with housing transformed themselves into the Better Housing Association to carry on that fight. Servicemen returning from the European battlefield were already making this question the crucial one, and by August, when 6,000 of them took part in the city's celebration of V-J Day, Rochester had an acute housing shortage. The city opened a Service Housing Bureau in November and appointed C. Storrs Barrows as chairman of a Housing Advisory Committee, but its hastily devised plan to convert an abandoned school into apartments for veterans quickly proved inadequate.

The increasing dimensions of the problem became evident at an all-day discussion of the housing question held at the Chamber of Commerce on January 22, 1946. Sponsored by the Gannett Press but organized by Mrs. Jones, this unique conference gave the rostrum successively to friends and opponents of public housing and heard the views of a score of local and state experts on the subject. Chaired by Dr. Mark Ellingson, president of the Chamber, and officially reported by Dr. Earl Koos of the University's sociology department, it covered a wide spectrum of opinion. If advocates of free enterprise predominated on that platform, they were only slightly represented at a mass meeting on housing in Convention Hall a week later. There, spokesmen for returned veterans, for unemployed workingmen, for Negroes, and for others who faced difficulty in finding shelter, joined in a dramatic call for action and named a committee of citizens, headed by Mrs. Harper Sibley, to carry the meeting's resolution to the Mayor.

The committee saw but could not move Mayor Samuel B. Dicker to action. The formation of a Veterans Housing Committee did, however, prompt him to order the Service Housing Bureau to redouble its efforts. Soon three old school buildings and an abandoned fire station were converted into temporary quarters for veterans, and a site on Lyell Avenue was chosen as the location for a number of war-surplus barracks to serve veterans and their families. Yet the 300 or more housing units thus provided scarcely made a dent on the host of returning servicemen, many of whom were eager at last to establish homes of their own.⁶

Fortunately a group of bankers, led by Elmer B. Milliman, was preparing at last for action. Under the state law of 1941, they created a non-profit organization to build and operate with FHA backing a low-rental housing project for veterans. Organized in February 1946, they rushed construction on a lot made available by the city and opened the first of the 152 units of Fernwood Park in November. These and the temporary housing units provided in converted buildings added 943 units to the residential inventory of the Rochester area—which was at least a sharp increase over the previous three years. But the demand was rising more rapidly, and a report prepared by the Roy Wenzlick Co. of St. Louis for the Rochester Planning Commission estimated the city's needs over the next four years to be 13,600 housing units.

Skeptical of the community's ability to meet such a quota and aware that it would not relieve the plight of its welfare clients, the Council of Social Agencies again, in December 1946, endorsed a call by the Better Housing Association for the creation of a housing authority. Instead, the city welcomed an offer by the leading department stores to sponsor a second limited-dividend project, Norton Village, for which ground was broken that October. Its completion in 1948 and the launching of two other limited-dividend projects, a third for

veterans and one for students, helped measurably to ease the rental shortage, while home builders hastily tooled up and added an average of 3000 houses a year in the late forties, plus another 1000 rental units, making a total of 17,000 by the close of 1950, which should adequately have filled the needs as predicted by Wenzlick.

Of course, most of the new houses were built in the suburbs where they facilitated the flight from the city of many old families. Newcomers, crowding in to take their places, maintained and slightly increased the city's population in the 1940's, and transformed it at the same time in unexpected ways. Thus, although the Republicans, who had controlled the city since 1938, had grown accustomed to seeing national elections go to Franklin D. Roosevelt, when President Truman carried the city in 1948, their confidence was shaken. Perhaps something should after all be done, a few argued, to correct the inner-city blight, as a petition signed by 3000 residents suggested. Although that petition and earlier pleas by the Better Housing Association and others had asked for the creation of a housing authority, as required under the federal law, the Republicans chose to act under state provisions, which would permit the City Council to serve as the authority with full power to proceed using local and state funds. The procedure had the merit of speeding action, and by May 1949 the city was ready to break ground for a 300-unit housing project at a publicly owned site near Benjamin Franklin High School—when another aspect of the housing question suddenly burst into view.

The plan to locate a public housing project on the tract of relatively undeveloped land on the city's northeastern outskirts would normally have aroused some opposition from the adjoining residents, most of whom owned their modest free-standing houses, but the outburst in 1949 was aggravated by the fact that many of the prospective tenants would be Negroes. The objection would not have existed a decade ear-

lier, when Rochester's Negro population, representing but one per cent of the total, was fairly widely distributed with its heaviest concentration in the old Third Ward where many had lived for generations and owned their own homes. In the forties, however, a new migration from the South had more than doubled the city's non-white population, with most of the newcomers settling in the Seventh Ward. That old immigrant district, which had for decades sheltered the poorest newcomers of each new migration, was now frankly recognized as a slum. Leaders of the Twenty-second Ward proposed that rather than moving slum residents out to blight another district on the outskirts, the city should clear part of the slum and build the new housing project there.

That scheme, which promised to give the rest of the Seventh Ward a new chance, appeared to be a reasonable one, and the leaders of the adjoining Baden Street Settlement heartily endorsed it. Unfortunately, by the time the cluster of seven-story apartment houses was opened in 1953, the continued influx of Negroes had made the area even more predominantly non-white and practically branded the project as a colored one. In order to reduce the cost per unit, the authority had increased the number of dwelling units on the six-acre site from 137 to 392, thus practically tripling the density of an already congested area. The City Council, absorbed with other tasks, had little time to devote to its new responsibilities, and the management displayed little understanding of its problems. Efforts to keep the teeming flood of children "off the grass" proved ineffective, and soon the whole neighborhood suffered an appalling decline.⁷

Many home builders and other opponents of public housing cited the Hanover Houses as proof that one such project was enough. A new building boom had, in fact, developed, at least in the suburbs where upwards of 3000 houses were built annually in the late forties and early fifties. An increased num-

ber of rental apartment units was included, most of them within the city, but except for the subsidized units (which no longer included the Lyell Avenue project, closed and sold in 1953) and the limited-dividend projects for veterans and senior citizens, they did not serve any poor families.

Urban Renewal

So many poor people crowded into the Seventh Ward that a new approach to its problems became imperative. Fortunately a redevelopment program under the urban-rental provisions of the 1949 housing law offered a possible solution. Pressed to take such action by the Better Housing Association, now led by Milton Grossman, by the Better Rochester, Inc., a new citizen's body headed by Joseph P. Wilson, and by Dr. Albert Kaiser, the popular City Health Officer, City Manager Louis Cartwright requested the Planning Commission to draw up a plan for the redevelopment of the 156-acre tract surrounding the Hanover Houses. Thus Rochester prepared in 1955 to embark on its first renewal program.

To secure federal assistance it became necessary at last to create a housing authority, but the City Council, wishing to emphasize its broader function, named it a Redevelopment Commission and Housing Authority. Public opposition by the Citizen's Tax League prompted the Federal Housing Administration to release details on some 30 rental projects it had backed in the Rochester area, with an investment of \$19,435,000 guaranteed. FHA-secured loans had financed much of the private home construction, too, and it seemed less and less defensible to deny the benefit of federal assistance to those who could neither buy nor rent the more expensive units. Indeed, once the decision to redevelop the area had been made, it began to appear desirable to upgrade the administration of Hanover Houses. A Citizens Advising Committee appointed by Mayor Peter Barry engaged the services of James W. Gaynor,

an experienced housing administrator from Denver, as consultant. His criticisms, after a survey of Hanover Houses in 1958, brought numerous changes and finally placed the project under the administration of a separate Housing Authority headed by Manuel D. Goldman.⁸

Hopes for the successful completion of the Baden-Ormond Redevelopment project, as it was named, depended on the cooperation of groups interested in supplying low-rental housing on a limited-dividend basis to take the place of the demolished slums. Fortunately responsible business leaders were now ready for such action. A detailed study by the Temporary State Housing and Rent Commission, of the rental supply and population needs of Rochester and Monroe County had disclosed such a critical shortage of low-cost units that a prolongation of rent controls seemed desirable in 1956 unless new facilities could be provided particularly for aged persons living on small fixed incomes. To relieve the situation and permit a partial de-control, a group of bankers, headed again by Elmer Milliman, formed a corporation that year to erect 110 additional units on Norris Drive in Cobbs Hill Park where a number of senior citizens had found shelter in some surplus military barracks. When, in its second year, the waiting list of applicants for admission to Cobbs Hill Houses lengthened, the Senior Citizens Housing Co., Inc., decided in 1958 to build a cluster of apartments on Seth Green Drive overlooking the Lower Falls. Five years later a third senior-citizen project, this one a high-rise block of apartments, was erected across the Genesee from the River Campus.⁹

Experienced in the construction and operation of both the veterans and senior-citizen projects, Rochester bankers were ready in 1959 to form a corporation to bid for part of the cleared land on the Baden-Ormond site and to erect a cluster of low-rental apartments, called Chatham Gardens, to provide housing for 284 families on an integrated basis. The old fear

that subsidized housing would blast the efforts of private builders was forgotten as a survey of new apartment projects listed 22 under way in the Rochester area, most of them now in the towns, designed to add 1370 dwelling units in 1960. Since the rents asked at most of these projects, like the down payments required to purchase one of the 2600 new houses erected that year, discouraged low-income families from applying, no competition from Chatham Gardens was expected. Even the promoters of the 33 trailer camps that accommodated 1300 families within a 20-mile radius of the Four Corners in 1958 expressed no concern.

Other factors spurred an increased public interest in the redevelopment of the inner city. A study of race relations in five major New York State cities revealed in 1958 that Rochester had the most rigid barriers against the sale of houses in the suburbs to Negroes. The State Commission Against Discrimination, in presenting its evidence, also alluded to a parallel circumstance that Rochester's economy was attracting a greater influx of non-whites, proportionately, than any city in the state.¹⁰

Stung by charges of discrimination, several church groups and civic bodies rallied to correct the situation. While church leaders gathered signatures pledging a welcome to Negroes in many residential neighborhoods, John A. Dale, executive director of the Rochester Rehabilitation Committee, secured an agreement by the nine local banks to approve mortgages under Section 221 of the Federal Housing Act, thus enabling some 40 Baden-Ormond district residents whose houses were being demolished to buy homes in other parts of the city. Since 32 of these were Negro families, an opening wedge was made in the barriers, though several of those displaced again located in the inner city.

When the Republicans, who had slowly come to recognize the need for public housing and urban renewal, lost control of

Rochester in November 1961, the Democrats who replaced them embarked on a more forthright program. Under the leadership of Henry E. Gillette as mayor, they organized a new Department of Urban Renewal and Economic Development and brought William F. Denne from a similar post in Buffalo to head it. Denne, in conjunction with Mrs. Ann Taylor, head of the Planning Commission staff, undertook a comprehensive review of the city's housing and neighborhood needs and submitted in 1963 a proposed Community Renewal Program in which nine urban-renewal districts in the inner city were delineated and outlays in the neighborhood of \$120 million over a twelve-year period were projected.¹¹

This impressive program incorporated renewal projects already in the planning stage under the Republicans, notably the Genesee Crossroads Project, which had previously won federal approval and has since advanced to the demolition stage. Although the ambitious scope of the comprehensive program stirred minor expressions of opposition, Rochester seemed ready at last for a frontal attack on the ring of decay that threatened the heart of the city.

Several developments strengthened the new public attitude. The slow but steady progress in the construction of the Inner Loop of traffic arteries around the business core had made many residents more conscious of the neighborhood blight on its periphery. The popularity of the new Midtown Plaza, opened in 1962, had given downtown Rochester a fresh injection of vitality, rekindling citizen aspirations for a wholesome and beautiful community. The construction and opening of the first two buildings in the spacious Civic Center focused public interest on the redevelopment of neighboring portions of the old Third Ward.

Thus a renewal of the Third Ward, once the city's prize residential neighborhood, became the keystone of the comprehensive urban-renewal program. Determined that its origi-

nal character should be restored, the project planners welcomed the cooperation of the Landmark Society of Western New York, which had its headquarters in one of the ward's most distinguished old mansions, in identifying buildings worthy of retention. The planners also welcomed the views of householders who hoped to see their properties retained as integral parts of a restored community. Denne and his staff met frequently with neighborhood groups and with representatives of its institutions; in due course they opened an office in the district to encourage residents to drop in with questions or suggestions concerning the area's future.

The urgency of the housing and other inner-city problems was suddenly and unexpectedly demonstrated in the summer of 1964 by the eruption of riots in the Third and Seventh Wards. Although a minor incident, the arrest of a drunken disturber of a street dance in the Seventh Ward, precipitated the outbreak and focused attention on the smoldering hostility of many Negroes toward the police, the ferocity of the rioting and its spread on the second night to the Third Ward clearly indicated deeper causes. The astonishing spectacle of hundreds of Negroes roaming the streets, smashing the windows of neighborhood stores and looting their contents, while part of a wide urban scene that summer, forced Rochesterians, white and black, to reappraise their situation.

A series of probing articles by Desmond Stone in the "Times-Union" supplied the most balanced account.¹² If poor housing was not the direct cause, it was, he discovered, a major contributing factor and one seriously aggravated by the rapid influx of Negroes during the two previous decades, when Rochester's non-white population had mounted from 5000 to 30,000. Largely confined by prejudice and other customs to the decaying inner-city wards, they had crowded and further blighted the aging properties there and threatened to overwhelm both Hanover Houses and Chatham Gardens. A succession of stiff-

ingly hot nights had transformed the disgruntled inhabitants of these teeming districts into frustrated and uncontrolled rioters whose plight obviously demanded correction.

Amidst a host of community responses, the planners, early in 1965, released their tentative plan for the Third Ward. It incorporated some of the best ideas of all groups. Most of the substantial houses were to be retained in order to preserve as far as possible both the variety of architectural styles and the human scale of neighborhood life. That latter aspect was to be enhanced by rerouting heavy traffic around rather than through the district and by developing a playground and a new school in a park setting in its midst. Clusters of moderate-priced row housing were to replace the worst slum buildings, while park-like walks leading to parking courts were to displace the alleys and barns of former years. In this less cluttered setting the planners made room for two or three high-rise blocks of medium rental apartments in order to accommodate approximately the same number of families as were presently resident in the ward. Thus the planners hoped to make it a model inner-city neighborhood, one that would attract a variety of inhabitants and create a wholesome integrated community.

The Third Ward Renewal plan, while sufficiently detailed to permit its representation on a model, had still to win acceptance from the area's residents and approval from the Federal Housing Administration. Two crucial dilemmas awaited resolution. In the first place, since many of the residents were renters and since they occupied and in fact crowded the very properties that because of dilapidation were slated for removal, new low-cost housing, including public housing, would be needed to accommodate them. And secondly, since many of the ward's residents were Negroes, a move either to relocate them in other parts of the city or to rehouse them in the Third Ward would invite criticism.

Yet the city could no longer mark time. The riots had finally

alerted Rochester to the seriousness of its inner-city problems, housing among them. Thus the city's five settlement houses banded together, early in 1965, to undertake the construction of moderate rental housing under Title 221 in order to supply more adequate accommodations for residents in their neighborhoods. A group of bankers and real estate men organized Better Rochester Living, a non-profit corporation which undertook to assist Negroes who wished to buy homes by giving free counsel and modest loans. A second group enrolled a number of One-for-One Family Housing Sponsors, each agreeing to purchase a house for rental at modest rates for a large family and to sponsor its settlement in the neighborhood. While each of these philanthropic efforts assisted a dozen or more families in their first few months of operation, the flood of requests for assistance revealed more clearly than before the extent of the demand for low-cost housing. A series of articles in the "Democrat and Chronicle" exposed the neglect of several slum lords and further documented the plight of many inner-city residents prompting the editor to chide the city on its slow progress in supplying public housing.

Rochester had in fact lagged behind most cities in the construction of public housing. Although the old opposition had officially been removed with the creation of a housing authority in 1959 and the subsequent rejuvenation of Hanover Houses, a dispute within the authority over the proper location of an additional allotment of 500 housing units provoked the resignation of two of its most experienced members who favored a wide scattering of public housing units rather than the construction of large institutionalized projects in slum areas. An outburst of indignation over this situation prompted the remaining directors to reaffirm the policy of dispersal and to register Rochester's bid for 500 additional housing units when these became available early in 1965.

Yet despite the wide acceptance of low-cost housing as a

proper responsibility of government and the new impatience to see Rochester adequately equipped in this respect, racial aspects of the program made progress difficult. If some outlying neighborhoods did not welcome the location in their midst of even a small number of poor Negro families, some of the latter did not want to be moved out of the old Third Ward. While many citizens, fearful of the consequences for Rochester if a solid ring of non-white districts should develop around the central business core, looked to the urban renewal programs as an opportunity to revive these districts as integrated neighborhoods, their tardy profession of a readiness to accept Negroes as neighbors in the outlying areas did not appear too convincing to many embittered Negroes.

The Inner-City Ministry of the Rochester Council of Churches, which had previously encouraged church groups to collect pledges of neighborhood support for open housing, moved late in 1964 to bring Saul Alinsky, head of the Industrial Areas Foundation of Chicago, to Rochester to organize its Negroes for the improvement of their lot. When a heated controversy erupted over the wisdom of this course, the job of organization was greatly simplified, and the new grass-roots body known as FIGHT (for Freedom, Integration, God, Honor & Today) was formally launched in the summer of 1965.

In a 19-point policy statement adopted at its first Convention on June 11, the two longest and most detailed resolutions dealt respectively with housing and urban renewal. Under "housing," FIGHT pledged a ten-pronged attack on slum lords and segregation; under "urban renewal," it affirmed the Negro's right to a decisive voice in formulating plans for the Third Ward. Specifically it favored spot clearance instead of massive bulldozing of the slums; it demanded the construction of low-rise public housing on scattered sites and the provision in advance of other moderate-priced housing adequate for the accommodation of Negroes evicted from the slums.

Since the city planners, the urban-renewal authorities, and various community organizations are already committed in principle to these policies, it seems possible that FIGHT, by exerting organized pressure, may hasten their application to the Third Ward. Of course the historian can never predict the future turns of historic forces. The record in this case is full of sudden shifts that have frustrated well-laid plans or delayed action. Yet city officials, responding to the current pressures, have recently initiated court action against slum lords; with federal concurrence they have signed a contract for the construction of the 132-unit project at Edith and Doran Streets; and the Housing Authority has announced plans to erect 100 additional units in scattered groups, many on sites in or near the Third Ward to help supply accommodations for poor families displaced by the renewal program there. These developments suggest that the city is ready to press ahead with its plans for that area conscious as never before that the results will greatly influence the character of Rochester's growth.

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