

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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## ROCHESTER VIEWS THE THIRD TERM 1880

BY DOROTHY S. TRUESDALE

The strongest and most popular candidate at the Chicago Convention was undoubtedly the man who had already served two terms as President of the United States. Even before the convention, more than one opposition newspaper conceded that he would undoubtedly be nominated. On the first ballot, he was well ahead of the other candidates, with over two thirds of the number of votes necessary for nomination. Still, party opinion was far from unanimous in his support and a split in the organization threatened. In the end, after a turbulent session, the Republican Party turned to a dark horse, and Ulysses S. Grant failed to become the first American president nominated for a third term. The year was 1880.

It was far less the anti-third term sentiment which defeated Grant and prolonged the Republican convention through thirty-six hard-fought ballots, than it was the battle of the various factions for control of the party organization. Yet it was a time when party unity was vitally needed. After twenty years of wandering in the political wilderness, the Democratic Party at last saw victory within its grasp. For the first time in its history, the party faced a presidential election backed by a Solid South. Embittered by Reconstruction, and freed at last politically by the withdrawal of Federal troops, the South assured the Democrats of at least 138 electoral votes before the polls even opened. Moreover, the Democrats had already made heavy inroads on Republican

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supremacy. In 1874, they had won control of the House of Representatives for the first time since the Civil War, and captured the great stronghold of New York State. In the disputed election of 1876, they had only narrowly missed electing a Democratic president. Two years later, a Democratic majority in the Senate had given that party control of Congress.

## Factional Battles

In the face of these attacks, the Republicans encountered disension in their own ranks and a nation wearied of the scandals and corruption which had given to the period following the Civil War the unsavory epithet of the "The Nadir of National Disgrace." The Credit Mobilier, the Whiskey Ring, Black Friday, Reconstruction, and the constant evidence of collusion in business corruption had undermined the confidence of many sincere Republicans in the integrity of their party. There was a general demand for reform, evidenced within the party by the Liberal Republican movement of 1872. Although this proved a good deal of a fiasco, criticism of the Old Guard, and reform in various phases found plenty of supporters. Among the most vigorous and outspoken of them was George William Curtis, editor of Boss Tweed's nemesis, *Harper's Weekly*, who had several times lectured in Rochester during the past decade.

As if all this were not enough, a prolonged and bitter struggle was being waged within the very ranks of the party organization. Rutherford B. Hayes, to whom the election commission of 1876 had at length awarded the presidency, was a man of honest and stubborn convictions, but utterly lacking in political finesse. He soon estranged the party politicians, not only by his removal of troops from the South, but by his at least ostensible support of civil service reform. This last at once brought him into conflict with the powerful and brilliant leader of the great New York State machine, Roscoe Conkling.

If ever personality influenced political issues, that of Roscoe Conkling shaped the destinies of the convention of 1880. Arrogant and disdainful, the Senator from New York was the utter antithesis of the smiling, back-slapping political boss of popular concept. As a biographer has aptly said, "Like Pooh Bah, he was *born sneering*."<sup>1</sup>

He had no sense of humor, and not the faintest sense of conciliation. He despised crowds, and hated tobacco smoke and men who spat. No smoke-filled room for him! In appearance he has been described as "one of the handsomest men of his time." Six feet, three inches tall, broad-shouldered, with dark yellow hair and an "exquisitely curled" beard, he presented a picture that few who saw him ever forgot. He was a brilliant orator and could hold an audience spellbound while he withered his opponents with an unlimited and ever vitriolic fund of sarcasm and scorn. Above all, he was capable of deep and lasting personal animosities. Men disliked Roscoe Conkling but they admired him. He ruled the Republican Party in New York State like a king by divine right, imposing his will by the sheer force and strength of his personality.

The imperious boss of New York came to grips with the President in 1877 when Hayes attempted to intervene in the sacred fold of New York State patronage. Hayes had demanded a twenty percent reduction in the personnel of the New York City Custom House, the greatest patronage plum in the state. When this order was ignored, Hayes demanded the resignation of Chester A. Arthur, the collector of the port, and Alonzo Cornell, the naval officer. Both were Conkling henchmen, and backed by his support they refused to resign. Infuriated by the administration's trespassing upon his preserves, Conkling seized the opportunity of the approaching Republican state convention at Rochester to throw down his gauntlet to the President and the backers of what he termed "snivel service" reform. His personal scorn of Hayes was boundless. In private conversation he stingingly referred to the doubtful validity of Hayes' election by references to "Rutherford B. Hayes" and "His Fraudulency."

Rochester, at this period, was experiencing in its local politics some of the same cleavages in the Republican Party so dramatically evidenced in national affairs. Predominantly Republican though it was, the city was not nearly so unanimous in its politics as might appear. The city government was divided in its control, with a Democratic majority in the Common Council since 1874, and a Republican mayor, Cornelius R. Parsons, for an almost equal period. Two Republican papers, the *Democrat and Chronicle*, and the *Evening Express*

opposed the single Democratic organ, the *Union and Advertiser*, but they frequently reflected division rather than unity in the party ranks.

A local rivalry between Orleans and Monroe Counties, which together then composed the 30th Congressional District, was a frequent source of Republican bickering. Each county wanted a local resident as congressman. In 1876, this rivalry reached such a height that a Democrat from Orleans County was preferred to a Monroe County Republican. Feeling remained so high that in 1878 the nomination of John Van Voorhis of Monroe as congressman caused the Orleans delegates to walk out of the convention, declaring that it had been unfairly "packed" by the Monroe County men. Nevertheless, Monroe County succeeded this time in electing its Republican candidate. Things were not so satisfactory in the state legislature where the county had the "disgrace" of being represented by a Democratic senator from 1877 to 1879.

Some of the administration's interference in the patronage was also reflected in Rochester. Shortly before the state convention of 1877, the local Republican leader, John M. Davy, had had the chagrin of seeing his friend and appointee, Jonah D. Decker, removed from the Internal Revenue Office<sup>2</sup> and the place given to a "renegade and carpet-bagger." (The phrase was the Democratic *Union and Advertiser's*, but for once that paper probably expressed Mr. Davy's opinion.) This act, of course, tended to make Davy and his patron, Lewis Selye, dean of the local Republican Party, highly sympathetic to the Conkling point of view. At any rate, they saw to it that when the state convention met the local delegates were decidedly Conkling and anti-administration.

The convention met in the City Hall decorated with flowers from the nursery of County Clerk E. A. Frost and an American eagle borrowed from Professor Ward's museum. A rebuke to the administration was expected, but apparently Rochester—or at least the press—was unprepared for the virulence of Conkling's attack. Rising wrathfully to oppose Curtis' resolution endorsing the national administration, the Senator hurled his thunderbolts at the reforming editor of *Harper's* as the representative of all that he despised. With biting references to "ladies' departments" and "man milliners" (*Harper's*

had a fashion department), he demanded to know, "Who are these men who in the newspapers and elsewhere are cracking their whips over me, and playing schoolmaster to the party? . . . Some of these worthies masquerade as reformers. Their vocation and ministry is to lament the sins of other people. Their stock in trade is rancid, canting, self righteousness. . . . Their real object is office and plunder. When Dr. Johnson defined patriotism as the last refuge of a scoundrel, he was unconscious of the then undeveloped possibilities of the word reform."<sup>3</sup>

It was a speech in Conkling's best style. It won the cheers of the convention, but it left both of Rochester's Republican papers dismayed at the party split which it indicated. The *Democrat* denounced the speech in terms which caused Conkling to brand the editor, Charles E. Fitch, a traitor to the party. The *Evening Express* commented in milder but reproving tones, "The common remark of men who heard the speech is that it was cowardly and unworthy of a man of real courage as Mr. Conkling undoubtedly is."<sup>4</sup> Only the *Union and Advertiser* was jubilant as it termed Conkling's speech "a pick-axe and shovel speech that digs the grave of himself and his party in the State of New York."<sup>5</sup>

In this prediction, the *Union and Advertiser* spoke too soon. Conkling had drawn a bitter line between his followers, the Stalwarts, and those whom he contemptuously termed the Half Breeds, but the power of the Conkling machine was little affected. In the state election of 1879, the Conkling forces drove out the Democratic administration at Albany and dealt a stinging rebuke to Hayes by electing the deposed custom house officials, Cornell and Arthur, governor and senator respectively. Rochester's Republican press rallied against the common enemy, and Monroe County elected loyal Republicans to both the Assembly and the Senate. Nevertheless, local affairs continued to reflect the patronage battle. In 1879, the very year of the Old Guard triumph, the administration appointed William T. Simpson, an old opponent of Davy and Selye, as collector of the Port of Rochester.

The presidential convention of 1880 was therefore slated to be the great battle between the warring factions of the Republican Party. It was no simple fight between reform on the one hand and corruption

on the other. Conkling had considerable justification for his sneering references to "hypocrites" and "snivel service" for George William Curtis and his fellow reformers had strange bedfellows among politicians smirched by the same tar brush which had blackened the Old Guard. Horatio Seymour expressed a realistic view of much of the reform movement of the 70's and 80's when he said, "Our people want men in office who will not steal, but who will not interfere with men who do." Indeed, as the convention approached it became clear that it was no battle for reform, but a contest between Conkling and the powerful James G. Blaine of Maine, who even then was ambitious for the presidency, for the control of the party. The third term was but another ingredient in the seething political cauldron, and it was added because Conkling and his allies, the Camerons of Pennsylvania and the Logans of Illinois, concluded in practical fashion that the candidate most likely to win for them was Grant.

### Rochester Takes Sides

Grant had employed most of the past two years in travelling around the world, and during that time he had once again become a popular hero. The American people forgot the corruption of the last Grant administration in the thrills of watching his reception at the courts of the old world. Memories of "President" Grant grew dim, and it was "General" Grant, the saviour of the union, who landed at San Francisco in the fall of 1879. Grant's appeal was heightened by Hayes' unpopularity, and many sighed for a "man of iron" to replace "the man of straw." Grant, himself, though avoiding the issue, gave signs that he would welcome a third term as president, and Conkling decided that he was the man to be nominated.

As far as Rochester was concerned, the fact that Grant's nomination involved a third term appears to have carried little weight. There was plenty of opposition in the city to Grant. The two Republican papers, the *Democrat and Chronicle* and the *Evening Express*, fought bitterly over his nomination, but they were obviously much more concerned with Conkling's defeat or victory than with the third term. As early as November, 1879, the anti-Grant *Democrat* admitted that the issue of a third term could not be used against Grant, since it

would not be a consecutive third term for him. A few months later the editor even went so far as to call the Springer resolution in the House of Representatives in 1875 against a third term "partizan clap-trap."<sup>6</sup> In these admissions the *Democrat* was undoubtedly influenced by the possibility that Grant might become the Republican nominee after all. And in that case the paper would have to defend his candidacy, for the editor made it plain that he preferred Grant to the horrors of a Democratic victory. The *Democrat's* arguments against Grant during these early months were consequently somewhat vague and centered mostly about doubts as to the strength of the Grant boom. Not once did it allude to the scandals of the Grant administration, but contended persistently that "the cry for Grant is the cry for a man, rather than the assertion of a principle."

The *Express*, in espousing the Grant cause, wasted no breath in arguing about the third term. It was sure that the popular desire was for Grant and that what the *Democrat* called the "Grant Reaction" was "almost wholly manufactured by politicians." We are convinced that Grant still remains the choice of Republican voters," said the *Express* at the end of January.<sup>7</sup>

A newcomer to the ranks of the Rochester press, the *Herald*, was supposedly independent in its politics, and for a time it was self-consciously neutral in its attitude toward Grant. But it very soon declared that it had no objection to a third term *per se*. On January 10, 1880, the *Herald* quoted Washington's farewell address of September 17, 1796 to show that personal inclinations rather than political considerations governed the first refusal of a third term. Furthermore, the *Herald* cited evidence indicating that Washington had been similarly reluctant to accept a second term and had only been persuaded to do so by the perilous state of foreign affairs. Thus if Washington's personal feelings were the basis of the anti-third term tradition, there should logically be a similar feeling against a second term. As for the argument that a third term would lead to "monarchy" (the 19th century equivalent of "dictatorship"), the *Herald* ridiculed it. A "Napoleonic coup" was, the editorial acknowledged, possible in the United States, but, it continued sensibly, such an event would "grow out of a series of efforts or events among the people themselves rather than any third term or any personal

ambition. . . . There is far more danger in popular ignorance and recklessness, and a weak or unprincipled president than in electing the same man any number of times.”<sup>8</sup>

Being thus in virtual agreement on the third term, the newspapers took up the cudgels on other counts. Conkling planned to take advantage of the popular enthusiasm attendant upon Grant’s return by calling early state conventions and there adopting the procedure of instructing delegates to the national convention to vote as a unit for the candidate favored by the state convention. The unit rule had been practiced in the Democratic Party since Jackson’s time, but it was still foreign to the customs of the Republicans. It was an effective method of minimizing the influence of the minority, and Conkling was taking no chances on a “Grant Reaction.”

The *Rochester Democrat*, scenting the peril to the Half Breed faction, immediately attacked these inroads on tradition as blows at “republican institutions.” (Republican papers in 1880 spoke of American institutions as exclusively “republican;” only Democratic newspapers referred to them as “democratic.”) It denounced the early Pennsylvania convention called by Boss Cameron for February 4 and urged that New York delay its convention until public opinion should have crystallized either for or against Grant. In this the *Democrat* was obviously advocating a play for time until the popular enthusiasm over Grant’s return should die down and make less plausible the claim of a popular demand for the ex-president.

The *Express* defended both the unit rule and an early convention with considerable vigor. The unit rule, it claimed, meant the rule of the rank and file of the party. The *Herald* seconded this argument: “The party does not ask or want the [national] convention to do its thinking for it. It only requires that body to make a formal announcement . . . of a choice which has been expressed in the primaries.”<sup>9</sup> Theoretically there might be considerable logic in this argument, but it was hardly compatible with the avowed oligarchic aims of the Conkling faction.

Regardless of arguments, however, the state convention was called as Conkling willed it on February 26. As Rochester Republicans turned to the business of electing delegates to the convention, the widening rift



between local Stalwarts and Half Breeds was only too apparent. The holders of state patronage and probably the rank and file of the party were for Grant, the former for obvious reasons and the latter because of Grant's very real popular appeal. The custom house and other Federal office holders, together with Congressman Van Voorhis, headed the anti-Grant forces.<sup>10</sup> The Congressman must have had his differences with the local machine for ex-Congressman Davy and Lewis Selye were for Grant.

The first step in electing delegates to the state convention was the ward caucus, which chose delegates to an assembly district convention. As Rochester comprised the entire Second Assembly District, this was to all intents a city convention and was frequently referred to by that term. This district convention in turn elected delegates to the state convention. The *Express*, which by this time was very bitter against the *Democrat*, urged an attendance at ward caucuses "by Republicans only." To make its meaning clear, it termed the Half Breed *Democrat* "the assistant Democratic organ," and warned that "the two Dromios [the *Democrat* and the *Union and Advertiser*] sometimes affect antagonism as a matter of policy, while no such feelings exist."<sup>11</sup>

The results of the ward caucuses were most gratifying to the *Express*. The Seventh and Tenth Wards started the bandwagon rolling on February 9 with the election of Grant supporters as delegates. The Seventh was the home ward of John M. Davy and such a result might have been expected there, but the other wards closely followed suit within the next few days. Of the fifteen wards in the city, eight had solid Grant delegations, and three others had majorities for Grant. Only the Second, Sixth, Twelfth, and Fourteenth returned what the *Herald* called "mixed" or "divided" delegations.<sup>12</sup> As the *Herald* had by now virtually abandoned political neutrality in favor of Grant, this probably meant anti-Grant majorities.

Under these circumstances, the outcome of the district convention of February 12 was hardly surprising. The anti-Grant men showed more resistance than had been expected in defeating a resolution instructing delegates to vote for pro-Grant state delegates. But as all five delegates from the city were acknowledged Grant men, the result was

an undoubted Stalwart victory. The *Herald* rejoiced that the result showed that the *Democrat* could not boss the Republican Party of the city, and rubbed it in by pointing out that the Third Ward, the home ward of the *Democrat's* editor, had gone for Grant.<sup>13</sup>

The *Express*, in true modern style, published minute interviews with the delegates testifying to their gratifying pro-Grant sentiments. "Why, of course, I am in favor of Ulysses," said William G. Martens. Edward A. Frost declared, "I am a Grant man 'dyed in the wool'," though he added prudently, "Of course, if I should be mistaken, I would counsel concentration upon the man sure to win."<sup>14</sup> The other three delegates could not be reached, but there was little doubt as to their sentiments. Just to make sure, however, John M. Davy and Lewis Selye accompanied the Rochester delegation to the convention.

The state convention at Utica was a triumph for Roscoe Conkling, although it was not won without some difficulty. There were signs that the tide was turning against Grant — or at least against the Boss of New York State. Some of the delegates murmured against the unit rule, and although the convention was held in Conkling's home town, the outrageous cry "Hurrah for Blaine" was heard in the balcony. The delegates, however, obeyed the Senator and voted for Grant and unit rule 216 to 183. Still, it was not an impressive result, and the Half Breed newspapers, including Rochester's *Democrat*, were quick to take advantage of it. The *Democrat* termed the convention platform "a monstrous burlesque."

Rochester's five delegates, loyal to their pledges, cast their votes on the Conkling side. But another local division appeared. The rural parts of Monroe County sided with the Half Breeds at the convention. Monroe County at that time contained three assembly districts, the units for the election of state convention delegates. The city comprised one of these, as has been said, and the east and west sections of the county the other two. Each of the rural sections was allotted only three delegates as opposed to Rochester's five, but two times three is six, and by uniting rural Monroe County weighted the county against the city.

Of course this had no bearing on the convention vote, for balloting was by delegates and not by counties, but it offered an opportunity for

figure juggling on the part of the rival newspapers. The *Democrat* cited the anti-Grant majority of county delegates to prove that it (the *Democrat*) was the true representative of local opinion. It further added up the state vote by counties and found that the majority of the counties in the state were anti-Grant. The *Express* admitted that Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, and Wayne Counties had voted against instructing for Grant, but justly pointed out that counties were not voting units and that a majority of counties meant nothing at all. People were what counted. On that basis, not only were the majority of the people of Monroe County for Grant,\* but the state was in favor of him by a majority of 85,000.<sup>15</sup>

The *Express* further struck at the Half Breeds by reiterating that the majority was the basis of government and therefore the party should abide by the decision of the majority of the convention. "Nothing was done by the majority [at Utica] which was unusual, unfair, or despotic. All parliamentary rules were observed and the right of debate entirely respected."<sup>16</sup> The *Herald* indulged in irony and mockingly advised Conkling to win the important support of the *Democrat* or face defeat.

### The Third Term Issue

With the state convention out of the way, and the issue of Grant or no Grant firmly established, the local Half Breed-Stalwart war flared to new heights. The *Democrat*, fighting single handed against the combined *Express* and *Herald* needed every argument, and for the first time urged the third term argument against Grant. While still admitting that a third term was perhaps not a danger to "republican" institutions, Editor Fitch argued that it was a very real danger to Republican success.<sup>17</sup> The party, he claimed, needed everything to win and could not jeopardize its chances by risking popular prejudice or misunderstanding. He challenged Grant advocates, and especially the *Troy Times* with which the *Democrat* was fighting a duel on the side, to state any good reason for a third term. Once, indeed, the *Democrat* denounced a third term as "against the teachings of the fathers and the precedents of government." But in general, the *Democrat* avoided such arguments,

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\*Rochester at this time contained over 89,000 of the county's 144,000 population according to the Federal Census of 1880.

mindful that if Grant were nominated, it would have to defend the third term. Rather it argued on such grounds of expediency as the loss of the German vote, which was considered to be anti-Grant, and the declining strength of the Grant boom. More and more, too, it was convinced that "the heart of the American people beats . . . responsive to the name of James G. Blaine."

Both the *Express* and the *Herald* devoted their efforts to estimating the Grant strength and hurling their optimistic estimates at the *Democrat*. The *Herald* on April 17 figured that Grant had 259 votes out of the 379 necessary for nomination. At the end of the month, the *Express* pointed out that although twenty-five states had held conventions not one had declared against a third term. "Where is this threat of ruin to country and to party," it scornfully asked, "which certain journals are professing to find in all thoughtful men?"

Yet in all this attacking and counter-attacking not a word was said about the scandals and corruption of the Grant administration. The real chink in Grant's armor was avoided both by friends and foes as though by mutual consent. Not all Rochesterians were thus blind to the past, however. In May, a number of Republicans formed the "Independent Republican Association of the City of Rochester." Among its officers were Cyrus F. Paine, Theodore Bacon, Robert Matthews, Joseph T. Alling, and A. Erickson Perkins.<sup>18</sup> The object of the organization was primarily to support Federal civil service reform by removing the power of dictating appointments from senators and congressman. In this cause, the Independent Republicans declared they could not countenance the nomination of General Grant, and threatened to vote for a good Democrat in preference to a bad Republican. They made it clear, however, that their opposition had nothing to do with any anti-third term feeling. Said Robert Matthews, "If the civil administration of President Grant had been as honest and free from error as his military record, most of the independent Republicans would support him."<sup>19</sup> At the same time he served notice on the *Democrat* that the Independents considered Blaine equally as bad and would likewise oppose him.

Lines of cleavage in the Republican Party were thus running in several directions. This, one might naturally suppose, would redound

to the advantage of the Democrats, but such was not the case. The Democrats were themselves divided and facing dissension in their own ranks. Nationally, as has been said, they were in many ways greatly strengthened. In order to win the presidency, they needed only two or three large Northern states to add to the electoral votes already assured by the Solid South. But the Democratic Party was also affected by the same sort of factional strife which tore the Republicans. In New York State the struggle between the Tilden and Tammany factions was reflected on all sides.

The *Rochester Union and Advertiser* constantly preached party unity, but was itself a bitter anti-Tilden partisan. Its editor, William Purcell, had a close connection with Tammany Hall and lost no opportunity to berate Tammany's enemy, Samuel J. Tilden, lately governor of the state and perhaps the rightfully elected president in 1876. In the spring of 1880, the *Union and Advertiser* was so busy working against the possibility of Tilden's being again nominated for the presidency that it had little venom left to waste on Grant and the third term. Other local Democrats were just as strongly pro-Tilden, with the result that the Democratic city convention of 1880 split during the process of electing a chairman. One group of delegates left and formed a convention of their own. This presented the Democratic state convention at Syracuse with the problem of dealing with two sets of delegates from Rochester.<sup>20</sup> The *Union and Advertiser*, disappointed with the outcome of the state convention, further added to the general dissension by terming it "the most machine-run Democratic state convention ever held in this commonwealth."<sup>21</sup>

Not until late in May, convinced that Grant would be the Republican nominee, did the *Union* endeavor to rally the opponents of a third term to the Democratic standard. It asserted darkly that the *New York Herald's* support of Grant was due to the fact that its owner, James Gordon Bennett, lived in London and preferred the British monarchical system "to the plain and simple ways of government in our republic."<sup>22</sup> And it implied that other Grant supporters were similarly motivated. But the *Union* also warned that unless the Democrats had a strong candidate "the cry against a third term and the bolting that may follow will come to naught."<sup>23</sup>

As for public opinion concerning Grant's candidacy outside the warring editorials of rival papers, it is hard to discover. The country in general had become so weary of quarrels which had no bearing on the nation's real problems that it faced the election with indifference.<sup>24</sup> Probably Rochester shared that lethargy. At any rate surprisingly few letters from readers appeared in the papers, although the few that did were featured highly. One Grant supporter, mindful still of the Civil War, quoted from John Quincy Adams' memoirs to show that the two term precedent had been "foisted" on the nation by the Virginia presidents; therefore the North should certainly reject it.<sup>25</sup> "Irish-American" argued that the two term tradition was no more valid than the tradition that the majority of presidents came from Virginia.<sup>26</sup> The few anti-Grant letters contained less original arguments, and were based for the most part on the oft-repeated "dangerous to republican institutions" theme. This was frequently coupled with a threat to bolt the party. Most people, however, were not moved enough apparently to write letters.

In spite of the factional clamor in the Republican ranks, the Stalwarts and Conkling seemed to have the practical advantage. They had the votes. But then, in May, came the disconcerting declaration of Judge William Robertson of Westchester County, one of the delegates elected to the National Convention. After more than two months, he discovered that he could not in conscience obey the instructions of the state convention and announced that he intended to vote for Blaine. This announcement came on May 6 and was followed by similar declarations from almost a score of delegates. The bolters justified their disavowal by claiming that their districts were for Blaine. Even if sincere, they thus disregarded the fact that they had been elected by the state convention to represent the Republican Party of the entire state, not of their individual constituencies.

The *Express* was quick to point this out as an evidence of betrayal of the party by these delegates. The *Herald* went even further and agreed with the *New York Times* that the revolt was dictated by "self-interest." Said the *Herald*, "Robertson and Woodin [another bolter] claim to represent the sentiment of their districts. Bah! They represent Robertson and Woodin and both men are working for places which the generous people little suspect."<sup>27</sup> This accusation may not have been entirely

unfounded for Robertson had been deprived of the gubernatorial nomination in 1872 largely through Conkling's agency; and significantly enough he later obtained the lucrative appointment of collector of the Port of New York from Garfield in 1881. The bolt was, however, a definite sign of revolt against the Conkling rule and therefore against the nomination of Grant.

## Rochester Watches the Convention

Thus the Republican Convention met in Chicago amid an atmosphere of impending battle. Conkling had girded himself for a life and death fight and it was clear that the Senator would admit no compromise. He would stand or fall with his candidate. Grant's personal popularity was undoubted and the Conkling-Logan-Cameron machine was prepared to do its utmost for him. Unfortunately for the former President, however, the opposing factions, headed principally by Blaine and John Sherman, Secretary of the Treasury, hated Conkling more than they hated each other, and in the end they united against him.

The representatives of the Rochester pro-Grant press at Chicago began to sense that Grant's opponents were ganging up on him. The *Express'* correspondent reported a marked anti-Grant feeling among the unofficial attendants at the convention, and the city of Chicago itself seemed unfriendly. This he attributed largely to "machine manufacture" but feared that it might influence some of the delegates. The *Herald* noted gloomily that two hundred custom house employees had been given vacations — presumably to go to Chicago and campaign against Grant. Its correspondent wrote, "If unit rule holds, Grant has a majority, but there is every prospect now that it will be beaten. . . . How will New York go?"<sup>28</sup> By June 3, the *Express'* reporter was full of fears for Grant's defeat and wrote home pessimistically, "It is pleasant to think that in such a contingency, Mount Hope is the most charming of cemeteries."<sup>29</sup>

These fears were justified. Conkling's battle was really lost before the balloting for a nominee began. It was lost when the rules committee, chaired by James Garfield, decided against admitting the unit rule into the proceedings of the convention. This gave an opportunity to

Robertson and the other recalcitrants to make good their declaration to split the New York State delegation. Although a meeting of the state's delegates still voted overwhelmingly in favor of casting a single vote for Grant, this minority withdrew and established separate headquarters. There they erected a sign over the door saying, "New York is NOT solid for Grant."<sup>30</sup> Conkling turned scornfully on Woodin, one of the bolters, demanding his reasons for acting in defiance of both his district and state conventions and contrary to his own declaration on the floor of the state senate. Faced by Conkling's devastating anger, Woodin cringed. He was not, he said, breaking his word. If he appeared in the convention, he would vote for Grant; but he planned to stay away and let his alternate, an anti-Grant man, cast his vote.<sup>31</sup> Conkling's contempt for "hypocritical" bolters certainly had its moments of justification.

The two delegates from the Rochester area, Edward A. Frost of the city, and Henry A. Bruner of Orleans County, presumably remained among the fifty-one New York State delegates loyal to Conkling and Grant. Certainly they could hardly have bolted without shamelessly betraying their previous sentiments. Frost had declared, "I am for Grant for president, first, last, and all the time. . . . On the other hand, had I favored in our [ward] caucus some other candidate than General Grant, and then been selected at the state convention at Utica as a delegate to the national convention at Chicago by and through the courtesy of the state convention, I should have felt doubly bound to vote for General Grant; that my individual preferences had been superseded by their action and it was by their courtesy and magnanimity alone I had been permitted to be their agent to carry out the views and wishes of the majority of the state convention."<sup>32</sup> Mr. Bruner was similarly emphatic in his opinions in the editorials of his paper, the *Orleans American*.

If Conkling was defeated at Chicago, he went down with colors flying. On June 5, he rose to nominate Ulysses S. Grant while the convention waited breathlessly for his thundering eloquence. Whatever his shortcomings, Roscoe Conkling was the chief attraction at the convention. The Blaine-Sherman forces, with Conkling's defeat virtually assured, were nevertheless uneasy for the Senator's oratory was credited with the power to sway men's votes. Standing on a reporter's table, his



head thrown back, his left thumb hooked in his waistcoat pocket in characteristic pose, Conkling began:

"When asked what state he hails from  
Our sole reply shall be,  
He comes from Appomattox  
And its famous apple tree."

The convention burst into cheers. Appomattox was still a word to conjure with.

Continuing, Conkling declared that he nominated Grant "in obedience to instructions I should never dare to disobey." The New York bolters must have shriveled in their seats. He struck at the office holders, Blaine and Sherman, as he praised the private citizen, Grant. "Without patronage and without emissaries, without committees, without telegraph wires running from his house to this Convention [Blaine had a private wire from his home in Washington] . . . this man is the candidate whose friends have never threatened to bolt unless this Convention did as they said."<sup>83</sup>

As for the anti-third term argument, Conkling demolished it with scathing words. "Having tried Grant twice and found him faithful, we are told we must not . . . trust him again.

"My countrymen! My countrymen! What stultification does not such a fallacy involve! . . . There is, I say, no department of human reason in which sane men reject an agent because he has had experience making him especially competent and fit. From the man who shoes your horse, to the lawyer who tries your cause, the officer who manages your railway or your mill, the doctor into whose hands you give your life, or the minister who seeks to save your soul, what man do you reject because by his works you have known him and found him faithful and fit? What makes the Presidential office an exception to all things else in the common sense to be applied in selecting its incumbent?"<sup>84</sup>

When Conkling finished his speech the convention was in such a tumult that Garfield, the next speaker, described it as "a human ocean in tempest." Men still admired Roscoe Conkling. The *Express*' correspondent, who confessed that he was often annoyed by the Senator's

high-handed manners, told Rochester readers that New York State at least had a boss "of which she may be proud."

But it needed more than a speech to bring Conkling victory. On the first ballot, the vote stood Grant 304, Blaine 284, Sherman 93. And there it swayed back and forth through thirty-three long drawn out ballots. Had Conkling been of a more conciliatory character, he might still have come off with considerable spoils, for he was in a splendid bargaining position and any candidate to whom he threw his three hundred votes would have paid dearly for them. But Conkling had determined on all or nothing, and it was psychologically impossible for him to bargain with an enemy. On the thirty-fourth ballot, Wisconsin started the move to Garfield, and on the thirty-sixth ballot, the "dark horse," the man who had come to the convention as Sherman's campaign manager, was nominated. On the same ballot Grant still had 306 votes. Years later men boasted of having been one of the loyal 306 who stood firm with Conkling.

To conciliate Conkling and win his help in the coming campaign, came the quick nomination of Arthur, Conkling's lieutenant, for the vice-presidency. But Conkling refused to make peace and ordered Arthur to drop the proposal as he would "a red hot shoe from the forge." Arthur, however, with a view to party peace, accepted the nomination, and with it, though of course he could not know it then, the presidency of the United States. Conkling went fishing.

Rochester's reaction to all this was varied. But in general the battling Republican press accepted the bid for party harmony. The *Democrat*, of course, was enthusiastic. The *Express*, although surprised and grieved at Grant's defeat, accepted Garfield in good part. The *Herald* was less easily mollified, and considered that the convention had failed to satisfy the voters either as to platform or candidate. It feared that the black spots on Garfield's record would necessitate an up hill fight. With this pronouncement, the *Herald*, retreated at least temporarily to its claim of political independence. Needless to say, the *Union and Advertiser* thought Garfield outrageous and assailed him as a "bribe-taker" who had taken the bribes of the Credit Mobilier.

Superficially at least, Garfield's nomination conciliated the local Republican factions. The Independent Republicans, who had been so

particular about the records of Grant and Blaine, were not at all disturbed by Garfield's "black spots." They came back into the fold and at a ratification meeting in the City Hall endorsed the nominations and guaranteed party harmony. The *Democrat* led the way in a campaign chiefly distinguished by energetic waving of the "bloody shirt" and threats of having to fight the Civil War all over again if the Democrats won. Even Conkling and Grant were prevailed upon to speak in Rochester in behalf of Garfield. Nevertheless, we may suppose that the wounds of party schism still smarted in November, for Monroe County, although voting for Garfield, gave him one of the smallest pluralities in the history of the local Republican Party. It was barely 3,000 in a vote of over 30,000. Not until 1912, when the Bull Moose movement gave the county to Wilson, were the Republicans to come so near defeat in a presidential vote.

The third term, of course, bore no part in the campaign. Its role, even in the pre-convention battles of the Republican Party was a minor one — definitely over-shadowed by the rivalries of warring politicians. Just what part it would have played in the election had Conkling won and Grant been nominated is, of course, impossible to say. But judging from the opinions expressed in 1880, one must conclude that Rochesterians at least were more concerned with "practical" politics than with the two-term tradition.

## NOTES

1. Donald Chidsey, *The Gentleman from New York: A Life of Roscoe Conkling* (New Haven, 1935), p. 1.
2. *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, September 21, 1877.
3. As quoted in Chidsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 246, 247.
4. *Rochester Evening Express*, September 24, 1877.
5. *Union and Advertiser*, September 27, 1877.
6. *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, January 20, 1880.
7. *Express*, January 30, 1880.
8. *Rochester Morning Herald*, January 10, 1880.
9. *Ibid.*, February 26, 1880.
10. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1880.
11. *Express*, February 7, 1880.
12. *Herald*, February 10, 11, 12, 1880.
13. *Ibid.*, February 13, 1880.
14. *Express*, February 13, 1880.
15. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1880.
16. *Ibid.*, February 26, 1880.
17. *Democrat*, February 27, 1880, March 29, 1880.
18. *Union and Advertiser*, May 11, 1880.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, April 17, 1880; *Herald*, April 17, 1880.
21. *Union and Advertiser*, April 21, 1880.
22. *Ibid.*, May 24, 1880.
23. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1880.
24. Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos* (New York, 1938), p. 287.
25. *Express*, February 11, 1880.
26. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1880.
27. *Herald*, May 12, 1880.
28. *Ibid.*, June 2, 1880.
29. *Express*, June 3, 1880.
30. *Ibid.*, June 2, 1880.
31. *Ibid.*; *Democrat and Chronicle*, June 3, 1880; Chidsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.
32. *Herald*, May 14, 1880.
33. As quoted in Chidsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 288-289.
34. As quoted in Thomas C. Platt, *Autobiography* (New York, 1910), pp. 108-109.

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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VOLUMES 1 and 2

1939 AND 1940

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## CONTENTS OF VOLUMES 1 and 2

### Volume 1 — 1939

- No. 1. January—*Historic Aspects of the Phelps and Gorham Treaty of July 4-8, 1788*, by Blake McKelvey.  
Documents Relating to the Treaty.
- No. 2. April— *The Younger Generation: Their Opinions, Pastimes and Enterprises: 1830-1850*, by Dorothy S. Truesdale.  
Elias Green's Essay on Rochester.
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### Volume 2 — 1940

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- No. 4. October—*Rochester Views the Third Term: 1880*, by Dorothy S. Truesdale.  
Index to Volumes 1 and 2.

## INDEX TO VOLUMES 1 and 2

- Abolition movement, in Rochester,  
July, 1939, pp. 18-19, July,  
1940, pp. 2-4
- Allan, Ebenezer [Indian]: role in  
Phelps and Gorham Purchase,  
Jan., 1939, pp. 5, 8; mills of,  
Oct., 1939, *passim*
- Anthony, Susan B., vote of, July,  
1940, pp. 21-22
- Antimasonry, Thurlow Weed and,  
April, 1940, pp. 14-21
- Athenaeum and Mechanics Assoc-  
iation, library of, July, 1940, p.  
18
- Banks: locations of early, Jan.,  
1940, pp. 12, 19, 20; first,  
April, 1940, pp. 5-6
- Baseball, early in Rochester, April,  
1940, p. 3
- Butler, John, Genesee speculations  
of, Jan., 1939, pp. 4, 21-22
- Carthage, mentioned, Jan., 1940,  
pp. 4, 8
- Civil War, Rochester in, July,  
1940, pp. 5-7
- Commerce, routes of, July, 1939,  
pp. 11-12, Oct. 1939, p. 17,  
Jan., 1940, p. 8
- Conkling, Roscoe, political boss,  
Oct., 1940, pp. 2-3, 4-5, 6, 8,  
10, 15, 16-18, 19
- Court House, first, July, 1939, p.  
2, Jan., 1940, pp. 9-10, 13-14
- Davy, John M., local Republican  
leader, Oct., 1940, pp. 4, 5, 9,  
10
- Depression, of 1837, July, 1939,  
pp. 10-11, 12-13
- Douglass, Frederick, abolitionist,  
July, 1940, pp. 2-3
- Driving Park, Rochester, July,  
1940, p. 20
- Dugan, Christopher, in charge of  
Allan's mills, Oct., 1939, pp.  
3, 7, 9
- Economic life, of Rochester in  
1839, July, 1939, pp. 8-13
- Elections. *See* Politics
- Erie Canal: commerce of, July,  
1939, p. 11, Jan., 1940, pp. 15-  
16, 18; enlargement of, Jan.,  
1940, p. 19, July, 1940, p. 9
- Every Ready Neptune Bucket Com-  
pany, volunteer firemen, April,  
1939, pp. 16-18
- Finney, Charles G., in Rochester,  
July, 1939, p. 15
- Fire department: volunteer, April,  
1939, pp. 16-18; growth of,  
July, 1940, p. 14
- Fitzhugh, Robert, letter of, April,  
1939, p. 3
- Flour industry: in 1839, July,  
1939, pp. 9, 11; in 1818, Jan.,  
1940, p. 6; in 1838, Jan., 1940,  
p. 18; decline of, July, 1940,  
p. 10. *See also* Mills
- Frankfort, mentioned, Jan., 1940,  
pp. 8, 20
- Frontier, influence of Phelps and  
Gorham Treaty on, Jan., 1939,  
pp. 9-16
- Gardner, Clidinia, letters of, April,  
1939, pp. 7-8
- Genesee Valley Canal, construction  
of, Jan., 1940, p. 16
- Gould, Jacob, controversy with  
Thurlow Weed, April, 1940,  
pp. 18-19
- Government, municipal, July,  
1939, pp. 7-8, July, 1940, pp.  
12-14
- Grant, Ulysses S., Rochester atti-  
tude on candidacy of, Oct.,  
1940, *passim*

- Hartford, agreement of, Jan., 1939, pp. 3-4
- Immigration, effect on population, July, 1939, p. 3, July, 1940, p. 20
- Independent Republican Association, of Rochester, Oct., 1940, p. 12, 18-19
- Indians: treaties with, Jan., 1939, pp. 2-4, 10-11, 15; confederation of, Jan., 1939, p. 3; land sale to Phelps and Gorham, Jan., 1939, pp. 5-9; barrier state of, Jan., 1939, pp. 12-16; Seneca memorial to Congress, Jan., 1939, p. 20
- Industries, of Rochester, July, 1939, pp. 9-10, Jan., 1940, pp. 8, 21, July, 1940, pp. 1-2, 10-11
- Kirkland, Rev. Samuel, missionary, Jan., 1939, pp. 5, 8, 11
- Lincoln, Abraham, Rochester vote for, July, 1940, p. 4
- Labor unions, beginnings of, July, 1940, p. 22
- Land speculation, Oct., 1939, p. 8. *See also* Phelps and Gorham Purchase
- Library associations, in Rochester, July, 1939, pp. 22-23, Jan., 1940, pp. 19-20
- Livingston, John, lease of Western New York, Jan., 1939, p. 4
- Lyceums, or debating societies, April, 1939, pp. 14-16
- Market, described, Jan., 1940, p. 21
- Massachusetts, claim to Western New York, Jan., 1939, p. 3
- Military companies, social activities of, April, 1939, pp. 19-20
- Mills: *Indian Allan's Mills*, Oct., 1939; early, Jan., 1940, pp. 2-3, 4, 18, 20; Aqueduct Mill, July, 1940, p. 10. *See also* Flour industry
- Moral Reform Society, Young Men's, April, 1939, p. 14
- Morgan, William, abduction of, April, 1940, pp. 12-13, 15-16
- Mount Hope Cemetery, newly acquired, Jan., 1940, p. 24
- Music, in early Rochester, Jan., 1940, pp. 9, 17
- Newspapers: early, Jan., 1940, pp. 9, 11, April, 1940, p. 4; anti-masonic controversy in, April, 1940, pp. 14, 17, 18; attitude on election of 1880, Oct., 1940, *passim*
- Niagara Genesee Land Company, in Western New York, Jan., 1939, p. 4
- Nurseries: Ellwanger and Barry, July, 1939, p. 13; subdivided, July, 1940, p. 11
- One-Hundred-Acre Tract: origin of, Oct., 1939, pp. 2, 8; purchased by Marylanders, Oct., 1939, pp. 21-22
- O'Reilly, Henry: guide to Rochester, Jan., 1940, pp. 12-24; controversy with Thurlow Weed, April, 1940, p. 18
- Paine, Cyrus, diary of, April, 1939, pp. 8-11
- Peck, Everard, and Thurlow Weed, April, 1940, pp. 1, 3, 9, 11
- Phelps, Oliver: land purchases of, Jan., 1939, pp. 4-5, 6, 7-8, 9; bond of, Jan., 1939, pp. 18-19; and Indian Allan, Oct., 1939, pp. 2, 4
- Phelps and Gorham Treaty; article on, Jan., 1939; text of, Jan., 1939, pp. 17-18
- Police department, growth of, July, 1940, p. 14
- Politics: alignments, July, 1939, pp. 4-5; national, July, 1939, pp. 5-6; local, July, 1939, pp.

- 6-7, 8; antimasonry, April, 1940, pp. 13-21; antislavery, July, 1940, pp. 3-4; effects of Civil War on, July, 1940, p. 7; election of 1880, Oct., 1940, *passim*
- Population: character of, July, 1939, pp. 3-4; increases in, July, 1939, pp. 1-2, Jan., 1940, p. 3, July, 1940, p. 8
- Powers Art Gallery, establishment of, July, 1940, pp. 19-20
- Public improvements, increase in, July, 1940, pp. 13-15
- Pundit Club, meetings of, July, 1940, p. 19
- Railroads: in 1838, Jan., 1940, pp. 15, 22, 23; Rochester as center for, July, 1940, p. 9
- Religion: influence of, April, 1939, pp. 7-8, 11, July, 1939, pp. 13-16; churches, Jan., 1940, pp. 7-8, 14, 15, 20, July, 1940, p. 16
- Reynolds, Abelard, letters of, April, 1939, pp. 2, 4
- Reynolds, Clarissa, letters of, April, pp. 3-6
- Reynolds, Mortimer, father's advice to, April, 1939, p. 2
- Reynolds Arcade, described, April, 1939, p. 22, July, 1939, p. 2
- Rochester, Nathaniel: One-Hundred-Acre Tract purchased by, Oct., 1939, pp. 21-23; guide to Rochester, Jan., 1940, pp. 2-11
- Rochester, appearance of (1839), July, 1939, pp. 2-3, (1818) Jan., 1940, pp. 1-11, (1838) Jan., 1940, pp. 11-24
- Rochester Lyceum, or Youth's Debating Association, April, 1939, pp. 14-16
- Schools: in 1839, July, 1939, pp. 19-22; Sunday, Jan., 1940, p. 8; earliest, Jan., 1940, p. 10; in 1838, Jan., 1940, pp. 14-15; first high school, Jan., 1940, p. 24
- Selye, Lewis, local Republican leader, Oct., 1940, pp. 4, 5, 9, 10
- Second Ward Tippecanoe Club, in campaign of 1840, July, 1939, pp. 5-6
- Semi-Centennial, Rochester, July, 1940, pp. 22-24
- Seward, William H., speech in Rochester, July, 1940, p. 3
- Silliman, H., letter of, April, 1939, p. 13
- Simcoe, John G.: governor of Upper Canada, Jan., 1939, p. 10, 12-13, 14, 16; memorandum of, Jan., 1939, pp. 22-23; letter of, Jan., 1939, p. 23
- Taverns, locations of early, Jan., 1940, pp. 3, 7, 11-12, 17, 22, 24
- Temperance movement, activities of, July, 1939, pp. 16-17
- Theater, conducted by Mr. Edwin Dean, April, 1939, p. 3
- Third term, Rochester attitude toward, Oct., 1940, *passim*
- Tucker, Luther, controversy with Thurlow Weed, April, 1940, p. 18
- Union Grays, volunteer military company, April, 1939, pp. 19-20
- Water works, establishment of, July, 1940, p. 14
- Weed, Thurlow, in Rochester, April, 1940, *passim*
- Williamson, Charles, agent for Pulteney estate, Oct., 1939, pp. 8, 9, 14, 20
- Women, status of, July, 1940, p. 21