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## The City's Golden Age

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In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Rochester participated in the vast movement which completed the transformation of the United States from a dominantly agrarian nation into one in which, by 1930, urban residents comprised a clear majority of the population. This was the city's golden age. The growth of an urban, industrial economy was deflected by war and recessions only occasionally during the thirty year period, and to a degree that was mild in comparison to the dislocations of the late nineteenth century and of the 1930s and 40s. The increasing wealth of the city, in addition to drawing people toward a better standard of living, raised the city's tax base, enabling municipal authorities to accomplish a wide variety of civic projects and to expand public services. Private enterprise contributed new factories, office buildings, apartments, and hotels, transforming the city skyline. Indeed, the noise of construction and the continual appearance of new buildings served contemporaries in an important way as constant reminders—not to say concrete images—of their city's growth.

A spirit of optimism dominated the mood of city residents, in Rochester and elsewhere. This spirit of optimism, the belief that

all problems could eventually find solution within the urban community's own resources, is one element of the city's golden age most difficult for the observer of the 1970s to fully comprehend. The seemingly endless succession of crises with which American cities have had to contend in more recent times has tended to replace the excessive optimism of the earlier period with an excessive cynicism. A look at the golden age might serve as a corrective and restore some lost faith in the city as a viable means of organizing the economy and civilization of the twentieth century.

Between 1900 and 1930, Rochester's population nearly doubled, increasing from 163,000 to 325,000. The growth was fairly steady, with no five-year period experiencing a disproportionate amount of growth (Table 1). The three sources of this growth were foreign immigration, rural-urban migration (or "in-migration"), and natural increase. Population growth remained steady over the thirty-year period despite drops in the number of foreign immigrants after 1914 due to European war and legal restrictions imposed in the 1920s. These checks were compensated for by accelerated desertion of American farms and by larger natural increases within the city's population. The city's birth rate rose dramatically, from less than 3,000 births in 1900 to more than 6,000 annually in the years 1913-1928. Improved public health measures curtailed infant and child mortality, while advances in medicine and obstetrics increased life expectancy for adults.

The improvement of public health measures during these years, besides helping to account for population growth, also illustrates the increased responsibilities civic authorities were willing to bear during the golden age. A professionally staffed Health Bureau, organized under the Department of Public Safety, replaced the old Board of Health Commissioners in 1901. Until 1933, it was headed by a nationally distinguished Rochester physician, Dr. George W. Goler. Goler forcefully promoted

a variety of measures designed to curtail epidemics and improve the health of the city. These included vaccination against smallpox and diphtheria, educational programs to secure better infant care, milk inspection to lessen incidence of babies' intestinal disease, the control of flies, elimination of unsanitary nuisances (privies), forceful quarantine of sick persons, and improvement of hospital care. At the turn of the century, the city maintained a pesthouse for the confinement of persons with infectious diseases. Appropriately named "Hope Hospital," it consisted of a few ramshackle wooden structures supplanted by tents and voting booths in times of high demand, and was conveniently located adjacent to the municipal cemetery. By contrast, in 1925 the city cooperated with the University of Rochester in planning an ambitious municipal hospital to be constructed along with the new Strong Memorial Hospital and School of Medicine.

The advancing birth rate (which did peak out in the mid-1920s, due perhaps to wider dissemination of contraceptive information) was indirectly the product of optimism. Prosperity facilitated marriage and favorable decisions to accommodate offspring. The proportion of Rochester women over 15 who were married was 52 per cent in 1910, 56 per cent in 1920, and 57 per cent in 1930. In marriage statistics such as these, even small percentage changes reflect large changes in attitude because the variable is relatively inflexible; a more or less steady proportion of persons remain out of the marriage market despite economic and social trends. Increases in the number of persons applying at the marriage license bureau were a dramatic indication to contemporary observers of the city's prosperity, and the daily press frequently heralded business at the bureau as a barometer of good times.

Foreign immigrants and their offspring accounted for a substantial portion of the city's growth in this era, despite the war years and quota restrictions imposed in the 1920s. The foreign born in Rochester numbered 41,000 in 1900, 59,000 in 1910,

71,000 in 1920, and 75,000 in 1930; their offspring—excluding those of mixed foreign born and native parentage—numbered 48,000, 57,000, 78,000 and 87,000 in the same years. Compare these numbers with the figures for total city population in Table 1; nearly half the city's population was foreign born or "first generation" in 1930.

In addition to natural increase and foreign immigration, another source of Rochester's population growth was the in-migration of "native" Americans from rural areas. The golden age of American cities paralleled a chapter in the decline of the family farm. Nationally, farm population stood at 32,078,000 in 1910, dropped to 31,614,000 in 1920 and 30,445,000 in 1930. For the individual city, precise statistical measures of the rural-urban migration are lacking. Rochester's surrounding County of Monroe, despite a long-standing reputation for agricultural productivity, showed only slight population gains outside the city between 1900 and 1930 (Table 1). The trend in the column "Percentage of County Population in City" shows that urbanization of the county was making steady inroads on its farm population. After 1920, it is true, the proportion of city to county residents drops off, but this is because the city began losing its ability to annex urbanized areas on the outskirts. The result was that increasing numbers of metropolitan residents were counted as part of town populations rather than city population.\*

Migrants from foreign lands and rural America, as well as Rochester's own young people, were attracted to life in the city

\*In a sense, municipal annexation could be considered a "fourth" source of a city's population growth. This author prefers, however, to count residents of the districts Rochester was annexing as a portion of the city's population growth from the three sources cited. From the time of its organization as a village in 1817 until the mid-1920s, Rochester steadily expanded its boundaries to take in urbanized or urbanizing territory. In this sense, annexation is not so much an addition of new population to a city as it is a political adjustment to the fact that some of a city's new growth always takes place outside its boundaries.

first by economic opportunities, and secondly by a wide variety of features of the urban life, ranging from ordinary municipal services to cultural activities such as art and music. The quality of life which attached persons to the city was made up of many elements, some of which it would be impractical or inappropriate to deal with at length in this essay. The city's cosmopolitanism, for example, which gave the individual the opportunity and choice to associate with large numbers of similar individuals, cultivate friendship with diverse types, or remain anonymous, was not something restricted to the golden age. What *was* most distinctive about the golden age was the city's expanding economy which facilitated employment and provided the wherewithal for such things as better housing, expanded cultural and social activities, and improved municipal services directly affecting the way people lived. The expansion of Rochester's economy in this period is easily understood in terms of its many industrial success stories.

A key factor underlying Rochester's wealth was, of course, the continuous growth of the Eastman Kodak Company. Nationally, the burst of urbanization in the early part of the twentieth century was a consequence of a "new phase" of the industrial-commercial revolution which included the appearance of new city-building industries. Just as Detroit grew with the demand for automobiles, Schenectady with electrical apparatus, and Cleveland with refined petroleum, Rochester grew with the expanding markets for photographic apparatus and supplies. George Eastman launched his enterprise in the 1880s. By 1901, when the present Eastman Kodak Company was formally incorporated in New Jersey, Eastman had finished securing sufficient patents and control of rivals to insure the company's success. Eastman employed five men in 1882; in 1898 there were about 1,200 employees and in 1908, 6,130. In the latter year the company's annual earnings were \$7.5 million, more than three times what they had been in 1900. Earnings rose to \$9 million

in 1910 and \$15.7 million in 1915. By this time employees numbered 8,000, and Kodak had become the city's largest single employer. After 1915, Kodak's announced earnings grew at a reduced rate, reaching \$18.5 million in 1920 and 1925 and \$20.3 million in 1930. No doubt this was largely due to increased expenditures for plant expansion; Kodak Park, the main manufacturing facility, grew from 54 acres in 1910 to 235 in 1920 and 408 in 1930. By 1934 Kodak employed 23,000 Rochesterians.

Behind these statistics of growth lies one of the most extraordinary success stories in American industrial history. At the turn of the century, some Rochesterians may still have thought of Kodak as "the novelty works on State Street," as it was termed in 1892. Within a timespan of less than a generation's duration, Rochester had become "Kodak City."

The nickname never found much acceptance with Rochester's spokesmen, and with some justification. Despite the emergence of Kodak as the dominant industry, Rochester remained a city of diversified industrial interests. At the end of the golden age, literally hundreds of small companies still accounted for a major share of its payrolls. A striking example is provided by the metalworking industry: 85 small foundries and machine shops in 1899, 104 in 1925. In the latter year, metalworking was still among the five largest industries in Rochester. Another major enterprise in Rochester, the clothing and shoe industries, similarly remained fragmented despite some consolidation and attrition among companies during the golden age. More dramatically, Rochester retained its claim as a city of diverse industries because of the appearance of new, major manufacturing concerns.

Among these was the North East Electric Company, later renamed and far more familiarly known as Delco. Today, *cognoscenti* may think of Rochester as one of the industrial satellites of the Detroit automobile industry. Fewer are aware of the fact that Rochester was one location of pioneer efforts to equip automobiles with self-starters and other electrical apparatus. The

humble origins of Delco in Rochester began as late as 1909, when the city directory of that year ran an advertisement for the Rochester Coil Company on North Water Street. As the name suggests, the Rochester Coil Company began business rewinding and re-insulating field and armature coils for the primitive electric motors of the day. Edward A. Halbleib reorganized the business as the North East Electric Company in 1910. The following year North East Electric introduced a self-starter system, mountable in front of an automobile's radiator where the hand-crank was normally located. It was not until 1929 that North East Electric was sold to General Motors. By that time the company employed over 3,000 Rochesterians.

The success of other companies was similarly dependent on the innovative application of new technology. Thus the Pneumatic Railway Signal Company, which was organized in 1897, renamed itself the General Railway Signal Company in 1904 following several years of successful patent acquisition and consolidation. The year before it had perfected a signal device to be operated entirely by electricity. This invention enabled the company quickly to become a world leader in the production of signal devices. The Stromberg-Carlson Telephone Manufacturing Company began in 1895 with five employees as a producer of magneto-type telephone instruments. The development of a dial telephone system by a Rochester inventor became a factor after the turn of the century in complex business maneuverings which resulted in Stromberg-Carlson's becoming a Rochester owned and based firm (the original office and factory had been in Chicago). In subsequent years, not without some reverses, the company became an important manufacturer of equipment for independent telephone companies. In the 1920s, Stromberg-Carlson was a pioneer in the new radio industry.

Another of the major firms which emerged during the golden age, incorporated as the Pfaudler Company in 1902, supplied industrial customers in every part of the nation with glass-lined metal tanks and distillation apparatus. Its customers included

food processors, chemical producers and pharmaceutical manufacturers—industries directly engaged in twentieth century “eotechnics,” to use Lewis Mumford’s term. The technique of lining steel with glass had been an innovation associated with the needs of Rochester breweries in the 1880s.

Other Rochester concerns, large and small, which either originated or experienced unusual growth during the golden age included Todd Protectograph (business machines), T. H. Symington (railroad equipment), Vacuum Oil (refining), Bausch and Lomb (optical equipment), Ritter (dental equipment), Yawman and Erbe (office furniture, voting machines), Taylor (scientific instruments), and Gleason (gear-cutting machinery). The success of these and many other industrial ventures was celebrated frequently and ecstatically in the newspapers and, of course, in pamphlets, essays, advertisements, and speeches written by leaders of the Chamber of Commerce.

Two such pamphlets—really fact-sheets—appearing in 1916 and 1928 were titled, “Rochester, the City of Varied Industries.” A comparison of the two shows that capital investment in Rochester manufacturing grew from \$143 million in 1916 to \$210 million in 1926. Although the pamphlets acknowledge Rochester’s status as “world headquarters for photographic goods and supplies,” they take pains to prove that Rochester is not just the home of Eastman Kodak; they describe Rochester as the “largest manufacturer in the world” of enameled steel tanks, filing devices and office systems, soda fountain supplies, optical equipment, thermometers, and high grade buttons, and “one of the largest manufacturers” of clothing, shoes, and foundry and machine shop products. In 1934, by which time the theme had become somewhat tired, Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice-President Roland B. Woodward summarized the reasons businessmen felt such diversification was important:

Diversification of industry is one of Rochester’s outstanding attributes. It makes possible an important means of leveling



the peaks and valleys of prosperity and depression, resulting in steadier employment and more even purchasing power. It has, on the whole, given Rochester a more stable life than belongs to those communities which are dependent for their welfare upon one or two major industries.

Although it profited immensely from the presence of Eastman's industrial giant, Rochester was not, in the eyes of its admiring boosters, a "company town." Rochester could have it both ways: prospering along with its dominant industry while maintaining the sense of independence and security which normally accrued only to cities without a single dominant industry.

As with other aspects of its golden age, Rochester was sharing somewhat disproportionately in a national trend. The twentieth century brought with it multiplying demands for new types of industrial products. Moreover, increased efficiencies resulted in greater industrial productivity; nationally, the number of factory jobs actually decreased during this era while industrial output multiplied. Particularly after World War I, trade, clerical, and professional occupations began accounting for larger shares of the non-farm labor force. Increased productivity also meant higher wages. In Rochester the average industrial worker's income was \$600 in 1914, \$1,000 in 1919, and \$1,400 in 1924.\* Higher wages, combined with increased leisure, generated demands for a variety of consumer goods and services, further stimulating business diversification.

\*Thus, the average industrial worker's wage in Rochester increased 133% between 1914 and 1924. In the same ten years the national cost of living index increased about 76%.

The cost of living index is a useful guide to dollar inflation, and will serve the reader in interpreting the degree of real gain contained in the assorted growth statistics both in the tables and text.

Cost of Living Index 1890-99=100

1900	106
1905	115
1910	128
1915	136
1920	286
1925	240

Source: Paul H. Douglas, *Real Wages in the United States, 1890-1926* (Boston & N. Y., 1930), p. 60.

Larger numbers of families now had the wherewithal to display a better standard of living in the most dramatic fashion possible, with the purchase of new, substantial houses in the city's expanding residential neighborhoods. Rochester, like most other cities, never eliminated its perpetual shortage of adequate housing. The sheer volume of new construction in the golden age seemed at times, however, to hold the promise of an eventual solution to this chronic problem. Not all the activity in the construction industry, of course, was residential. A large share of it was taken up with the need for new factory and office space. The period witnessed the erection of many impressive new buildings in the downtown section: hotels, banks and office buildings, and retail stores. Expanding population and increased educational standards demanded constant construction of newer, larger school buildings in all parts of the city. In fact, construction of buildings of all types in itself became one of the important growth industries of the golden age. Activities related to the growth of the physical city—the extension of private and public utilities, bridge building, street paving and the like—were also important economic energizers. An appreciation of the phenomenal growth and maturation of the physical city in all its aspects is central to the understanding of this period as a golden age. New residential subdivisions, office towers, schools—even sewer and water main extensions—served contemporaries as symbols of progress and as justification for continued optimism.

The dimensions of Rochester's building boom are eloquently described in the figures for real estate valuation during this period (Table 2) and for value of new construction during the years 1903-26 as reflected by issuance of building permits (Table 3). It is interesting to note that the rate of building condemnations shows little change during these years, unlike the present period, when ever-increasing demolition of aged and neglected structures has seriously affected the number of available housing units. The houses that are now being torn down are the ones

located in the oldest residential sections of the city; it was these same houses that provided shelter for poorer elements of the city's population during the golden age, when members of the expanding middle class vacated their old neighborhoods. This variegated middle class, ranging from skilled workers made prosperous in the new industries to minor executives and professional people, chose to live in the new subdivisions being developed in every part of the city's periphery.

The large-scale construction of new homes, which we associate today with development of suburban towns, took place in the city proper or its adjacent outskirts during most of the golden age. Promoters of the new subdivisions took pains to demonstrate that lot purchasers would not be cutting themselves off from the city life. For example, the 1913 announcement by a real estate partnership of an ambitious plan to subdivide four large tracts in or near the city included the following message:

The plan is to develop all the tracts into acre plots and to make small settlements on each site. This plan has been adopted around Boston with material success and gives *an air of country life with the added feature of being practically within the city confines.* (italics added)

Similarly, an advertisement for the Brighton Terrace subdivision, appearing in 1923, featured a photograph surrounded by these captions:

All Improvements—Street Paving—Sewers—Sidewalks—  
Electricity—Gas—Hemlock Water.

The advertisement's copy described Brighton Terrace's easy access to car lines and the future rapid transit system then under construction in the Erie Canal bed.

Home buyers in these decades sought a balance between access to city advantages and the questionable delights of a more sylvan setting. Parents preferred sending their children to city schools rather than to schools in the unevenly developed outside districts, where free high school was not available, and where grade schools were often located some distance from the home. The average householder was not eager to maintain a quarter

acre or larger house lot in the days before the widespread introduction of power lawnmowers. He was attached to the idea of using the city's Hemlock water, praised for its reliability and purity, rather than well water or water supplied by the Lake Ontario Water Company, which drew for its source from the same lake where the city's sewage was discharged. He and his fellows were not, for the most part, as yet ready to abandon the streetcar lines in favor of the dubious privilege of commuting daily to work in an automobile. After World War I, it is true, as vehicle registrations increased geometrically, the automobile began to stimulate development of outlying towns; however, the trend toward "automobile suburbanization" was still in an embryonic stage in the 1920s. In short, a variety of factors served as a brake on the centrifugal dispersion of city population later characteristic of post-World War II suburbanization.

The result was the emergence of a residential pattern which permitted many residents a way of life combining the best features of the city with the advantages sought by modern suburbanites—advantages which the latter often find elusive. The city remained *relatively* compact, while it afforded people the opportunity to live on attractive, tree-lined streets. Houses were set on small-to-moderate sized lots, combining privacy with the opportunity for some neighborliness. The streetcar system gave easy access to parks, lakeshore resorts, stores, theaters and other cultural attractions. City merchants provided free delivery of food-stuffs and a variety of other consumer goods. The homeowner's sense of safety was reinforced by the nearby presence of professional fire and police forces. Contrast these conditions, enjoyed by most of the moderately well-to-do during the city's golden age, with the present split-level and shopping-center pattern produced by automobile suburbanization!

Contemporary observers regarded the city's physical growth with great satisfaction. The *Herald*, reacting to increases in building activity up to 1907, predicted a city population of over

500,000 by 1940 and 1,000,000 by 1980. The paper noted that literally hundreds of new houses were planned by builders during April of that year. Higher wages, according to the *Herald*, were enabling many families to buy or rent homes who used to "double up," and, as the newspaper put it, *even Italians* now want houses. Observations of the city's growth sometimes generated descriptive theories to explain its shape or direction. As a feature writer for the *Evening Times* explained it, the "Population of A City is Not Unlike Water in Seeking Level." In the article following this banner, he stressed that Rochester's growth was now (1912) taking place in outlying districts and seemed to move in all directions; hills and other barriers acted as effective, but only temporary, obstacles to this human flood. Another, frequent, observation found in contemporary news stories explains that new residential growth follows the direction of new industrial locations. Thus Kodak Park drew residential development to the northwest; the Gleason, Stromberg-Carlson, and Todd factories—among others—drew it east; and the large number of industries locating in or near Lincoln Park drew it west and southwest.

The city's physical growth was graphically displayed for its residents with the issuance of new atlases or plat books in 1910, 1918, and 1926, necessitated by street extensions and the large number of additional buildings. A newspaper story which accompanied announcement of the new atlas for 1910 noted the appearance of 20,000 more buildings in that volume than had been shown in its predecessor, issued in 1900. The story also contained these prophetic words:

*The mapmakers have anticipated a great growth of Rochester in the next few years and have surveyed large areas outside of the present city lines, a proceeding heretofore never attempted. . . . The city officials will make continuous use of these maps during the next year or so when selecting territory for annexation. . . . There are many comparisons possible between the business area of ten years ago and that of today. Then it was the custom for all factories to locate as centrally as possible.*

The new atlas shows that this is no longer the fashion; that factories are dotted all over the city.

Fortunately, at this time City authorities maintained the belief that the city's boundaries must encompass the urbanized area, and, during most of the period, they were successful in annexing substantial pieces of the adjoining towns. The city's area as politically defined nearly doubled due to annexation within the thirty year period. As a result, residents escaped many of the problems and expense associated with fragmented metropolitan government, such as have plagued the urban area in recent times.

A variety of new buildings in the downtown section balanced the extensive development of the outer wards during this period. Many of the new buildings were built on a monumental scale, and instantly became symbols of the city's vitality. Foremost among these was the Kodak office tower, erected on State Street in 1913. A partial list of other buildings constructed between 1900 and 1917 would include the Memorial Art Gallery, the Rochester hotel, the central YMCA, the Eastman Dental Dispensary, the main portion of the Sibley, Lindsay, and Curr department store, the Chamber of Commerce building, and the New York Central railroad station. A hiatus in new construction during World War I and the brief post-war recession was followed by an unprecedented building boom. Plans for more large-scale buildings followed one after another, helping to swell the annual estimated value of building permits issued for new construction to over \$26 million in 1924. Two famed elements of the Rochester skyline, the Lincoln-Alliance and Genesee Valley Trust buildings—the latter topped with its attention-drawing “wings of progress”—made their appearance in the 1920s. The impressive size of these two banks for a time seemed to threaten the preeminence of the Kodak tower's place in the skyline; whether for this or some more pragmatic reason, George Eastman added several additional stories and a pinnacle roof to his office building. Among other products of

the 1920s boom were the Masonic Temple and auditorium on East Main; the Eastman School of Music; the Sibley, Temple, and Rochester Gas and Electric office buildings; the Sagamore and Seneca hotels; the Jewish Young Men's Association and Knights of Columbus buildings; and the Gannett newspaper building.

The City School District, faced with a burgeoning student population who now more often demanded education beyond the elementary level, found the Free Academy on Fitzhugh Street inadequate. East and West high schools were constructed during the first decade of the century. Still more schools were needed; Washington, Jefferson, and Madison junior high schools appeared in 1915, 1919, and 1922 respectively. Monroe and Benjamin Franklin, built in 1923 and 1930, began as junior high schools but were quickly converted to junior-senior high schools. The number of elementary schools in the city increased from 35 in 1900 to 44 in 1930, and a large number of modern school-houses replaced many of the antiquated and overcrowded structures of the nineteenth century. The needs of higher education also contributed to the building boom of the golden age. The University of Rochester constructed its River Campus, School of Medicine and Dentistry, and Strong Hospital during the 1920s. At the same time, the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School established its new campus, also on the south side of the city.

Another aspect of physical growth, one that was concomitant with new construction and with the city's geographical expansion, could be categorized as "the provision of urban services." The city extended and paved streets, laid water and sewer lines, expanded the water supply and built a sewage treatment plant, improved bridges, provided new parks, built new fire and police stations, and even undertook to build a subway system. Private companies extended gas, electric, and telephone service, laid trolley lines, and provided street lights under municipal franchise. All of these improvements and extensions of services were

a measure of urban maturation, as well as a reflection of the city's sheer growth in size. Some of the improvements undertaken by municipal officials, for example the construction of a sewage treatment plant, a municipal hospital, and additional schools, represented obligations which nineteenth century leaders had too long deferred. Encouraged by the city's prosperity, and particularly by its expanding tax base, leaders during the golden age now commissioned many necessary or simply desirable large-scale projects. Eventually, the cost of these projects when combined with ever-growing outlays for "local improvements" resulted in substantial increases in the municipal debt.

Between 1900 and 1928, the mileage of improved\* streets in the city more than tripled, from 110 to 378. The proportion of unpaved to total street mileage had meanwhile declined from 63 to 26 per cent, despite the frequent addition of unpaved roads in newly annexed districts. These figures for the installation of pavement give a fair notion of the rate at which some other services were being extended, where only fragmentary statistics are available. One municipal service which did frequently "precede pavement" was water service; the city's domestic and fire-fighting water systems had been established in the 1870s. The extension of city water into neighborhoods was largely completed for older sections by the turn of the century and accompanied new development thereafter. Water service inevitably led residents to install flush toilets, a step which in turn necessitated sanitary sewer installation; the use of cesspools was a temporary expedient at best in the city, where nearby neighbors if not the Health Bureau soon intervened to halt pollution of the air and soil. The extension of sanitary sewers into all parts of the city was well started, but by no means completed, at the dawn of the golden age. Nearly all residential neighborhoods were served by sanitary sewers or had sewer projects underway by

\*As defined by the city engineer, an "improved" street had at least a gravel cover.



World War I. In the 1920s, the extension of sewer service had caught up with the city's growth and pipes were lacking mainly in undeveloped areas or in a few newly annexed districts. The statistics that could be culled from the voluminous records of local improvements have not been assembled. However, a pattern similar to sewer extension was probably also true of other services, e.g. pavements, sidewalks, and electrical street lights. Development was not even, but by the early 1920s, the campaign to provide a full range of urban services in all parts of the city had reached a "mopping up" stage.

Enlargement of the park system during the golden age included doubling of the size of Genesee Valley Park, the donation of over 500 acres by Dr. Henry S. Durand and George Eastman for a lakeshore park (1907), the landscaping of the hillsides around the new Cobbs Hill reservoir (1908), and creation of playing fields and other recreational facilities throughout the city. The total acreage of park and recreational land was approximately doubled during the period—much of it through municipal annexation of outlying land donated by philanthropists. For the first time in the city's history, there were public zoos, a public beach and bathhouse, and publicly sponsored park band concerts. Park authorities were actively promoting use of their facilities, an endeavor in which they were enormously successful.

Recreational use of river and lake-side lands was made possible by the city's decision to halt its pollution of the Genesee River. In 1904, Mayor James G. Cutler commissioned a leading sanitary engineer, Emil Kuichling, to develop a plan for the relief of this problem. The Kuichling plan, presented in 1907, called for the partial purification of the city's sewage by screening and settling and its discharge through an outfall pipe extending some distance into Lake Ontario. The great cost of this plan, combined with objections from quarreling experts who differed over details of design, served to delay start of the project

until 1911. A great interceptor sewer then had to be constructed to connect all the existing large and small outlet sewers which emptied into the river and carry their discharge to the new Irondequoit sewage disposal plant, which began operating in 1917.

The interceptor sewer and the Irondequoit plant were civil engineering on a grand scale. As the expansion of the model water works system in 1907 had done, and as the construction of a subway through the city in the abandoned Erie Canal bed in the 1920s would do, the sewer project drew national attention as a bold and ingenious solution to a difficult municipal problem. Other projects, already alluded to, which also required initiative and the outlay of substantial sums of money, included construction of large school buildings, the municipal hospital, and park expansion. In addition, the city established a public library system in 1912 and built a terminal at the lake port in 1922.

Contemporary observers, impressed by the rate of private and public improvements, at times pressed beyond a realistic affirmation of their city's progress. A small book written by Edward Hungerford, a local booster, appeared in 1923 with the title *Rochester: A Good Town to Live In*. According to its author, the Eastman Theater is not simply an excellent addition to the city's cultural life, it is "the finest theater in all the land; if not, indeed, in all creation." Similarly, Hungerford exaggerates more than a little in declaring Rochester "(a) city which has no tenements, and practically no apartment houses, but her homes everywhere set in broad open lawns."

Despite great material progress on all sides, Rochester was not without serious problems during the golden age. Perhaps the most striking of these problems was the chronic shortage of low cost housing. To be sure, the expanding middle class benefited as never before from the extensive residential development characterized by "broad open lawns." The city's spokesmen

doggedly maintained Rochester's claim to be a "City of Homes"—a slogan which, because of numerous revelations of inadequate housing for the working poor, was becoming shopworn. In fact, Rochester *had* claimed a pre-eminent place, in terms of home ownership and the ratio of dwellings to families, among cities of its size and type before the depression of the 1890s (44% of houses owner-occupied; 24,000 dwellings to 27,000 families). These inspiring statistics had, however, obscured the plight of thousands of recent immigrants and other poor whose families occupied tenements, houses converted from single-family use, or tiny "workingman's cottages" packed densely on numerous side streets. The burgeoning population of the 1890s and the golden age continually outstripped the rate at which new houses went up, and few of the new single-family, detached houses of which city boosters were so proud were economically suited for poor families. Successive surveys by the Health Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce, the YMCA, the Unitarian Church, and the fire marshal revealed that slums existed in Rochester and that they were growing in size. Simple appeals to the building industry that they exert energy toward providing low rent housing accomplished nothing. The well-intentioned efforts of the Health Bureau to implement and maintain strict building codes exacerbated the problems, as they discouraged the construction of cheap multiple-unit dwellings. Many years would pass before Rochesterians began to overcome the ideological barriers to publicly subsidized housing.

Another serious problem encountered during the golden age was the ever-increasing cost of municipal services (Table 2). The annual cost of local government (including schools) more than doubled between 1900 and 1915; by 1930, the annual outlay was more than triple the 1915 level. It is not difficult to account for these increases. The level of services provided by the city increased along with the city's size and with the maturing sense of public obligation. The city school district, which was fiscally

dependent on the city, serves as an illustration. Besides modernizing its physical plant and making classroom space available for a growing student population, the school district assumed new responsibilities in the areas of vocational training, student counseling and medical inspection, and overall improvement of its educational program. The annual expenses of the city schools were less than \$700,000 in the year 1900. In 1910 they were over one million dollars, in 1920 close to four million dollars, and in 1930 about nine and a half million dollars. School expenses accounted for the largest share of the increase in the city's budget during the thirty year period.

However, increased school expenses were not the only factor accounting for the growing tax levy. Ordinary services—fire and police protection, pavement repair, health and building inspection, refuse collection—became more expensive as municipal salaries rose and citizens continually expected greater sophistication on the part of the city's housekeepers. In 1900, annual street-lighting expenses were less than a quarter of a million dollars; by 1930, streetlighting was costing the city close to three quarters of a million dollars. Larger areas, after all, had to be illuminated—and with modern, brighter equipment sufficiently ornamental to suit the neighborhoods which had petitioned for it.

While the increases in the tax rate of the golden age may seem paltry by today's standards, they struck many contemporaries as indications of profligacy. In 1922 the United States Census Bureau reported that Rochester's per capita cost of government was higher than that of any other city with a population greater than 30,000. Information like this supplied opponents of the city's long-standing Republican dynasty with valuable political ammunition, and caused leaders and sympathizers of the machine some embarrassment. The Republican machine, which had provided a continuity of leadership facilitating the decisions for expensive civic improvements, began to disintegrate after the deaths of its two leaders in 1923. In the following years the large

municipal debt and rising tax rate served as restraints on decisions to launch new projects. The *Democrat and Chronicle*, though sympathetic towards the Republicans who picked up the fallen mantle of Hiram Edgerton and George Aldridge, nevertheless featured a series of news reports and editorials on the rising cost of government in the fall and winter of 1923-24. The editors judiciously refrained from fixing specific blame for the state of municipal finances, pointing out that the rising cost of services in Rochester paralleled similar developments on the state and federal level and in other cities. The newspaper avoided drawing conclusions from the facts it presented, while at the same time it deplored the burdens that taxpayers were being called upon to bear. Still, the item titled "That Extra Mortgage" in the "Facts for Taxpayers" series, describing the municipal debt as an additional ten per cent mortgage on every piece of real estate in the city, must have led many taxpayers to conclude that the city should refrain from making further capital improvements.

Objectively speaking, the financial crisis of the 1920s was not as severe as some critics argued. The municipal debt, stated as a proportion of total valuation, was not much higher in 1925 than it had been in 1900; the debt was 7.9% of total valuation in 1900, and 9.7% in 1925. Considering the many added services and improvements that the city financed, increases in the tax rate were entirely reasonable. Some of the difficulty lay in the fact that politicians were not willing to raise the tax rate *far enough*; in the years 1921-24, the city borrowed an average of \$2,000,000 a year to meet current expenses—a deficit resulting from an unwillingness to raise the tax rate a sufficient amount.

Given the reluctance to raise taxes, not enough money was available to pay for every useful project proposed in the 1920s. The construction of a central library was deferred until depression years, when federal subsidies became available. Acquisition of a larger upland watershed was also delayed, so that the city

was eventually compelled to resort to Lake Ontario for additional water. The Rochester subway never became more than a half-finished dream—an expensive one at that—a point-to-point rail line convenient for obsolete trolley cars which remained an open ditch except in the downtown section. The city's golden age entered its twilight period in the 1920s. Comprehensive plans for the downtown section, featuring plazas over the Genesee River, union railroad stations, great public buildings, and new boulevards paralleling Main Street were first advanced in 1904 and were common features of public discussion thereafter; yet in 1924 the city gratefully accepted George Eastman's offer of the use of the Kimball tobacco factory (present site of the War Memorial auditorium) as a temporary shelter for city offices. The many renderings of awesome civic plazas supplied by different architects during the golden age today are poignant evidence that the city's reach exceeded its grasp.

Despite its shortcomings, the city's golden age witnessed unprecedented progress in many areas. A majority of the city's growing number of residents were able to take advantage of modern conveniences and live in pleasant neighborhoods. The city provided all its citizens with educational and recreational opportunities undreamed of in the nineteenth century. The scourge of epidemics was largely banished, due to improved sanitation, medical knowledge, and vigorous public health measures. Pavement everywhere replaced rutted dirt streets which had been swamps in wet weather and sources of dust storms in dry weather. In many respects, the city seemed to continually become a more comfortable place in which to live. No small part of the sense of comfort which Rochesterians enjoyed was a feeling of security provided by the regular appearance of new industries and the constant expansion of old ones. In 1924, it would have been easy to agree with George Eastman that Rochester "... is well started on its way toward being the finest city in the world to live in and bring up families. . . ."

TABLE 1

POPULATION OF ROCHESTER AND MONROE COUNTY  
1900-1930

Year	Rochester	Monroe County	Percentage of County Population in City	City Population Density, Persons/acre
1900	162,608	217,854	74.6	14.19
1905	181,666	239,434	75.9	15.63
1910	218,149	283,212	77	16.77
1915	248,465	319,310	77.8	15.99
1920	295,750	352,034	84	13.9
1925	316,786	392,174	80.8	14.36
1930	325,019	419,955	77.4	14.61

Sources: U.S. and N.Y. State Census.

TABLE 2

CITY VALUATION, TAX LEVY AND RATE,  
AND INDEBTEDNESS, 1900-30  
(NEAREST THOUSANDS)

Year	Assessors' Valuation	Tax Levy	Tax Rate <sup>1</sup>	Total Debt
1900	\$115,948,000	\$ 2,285,000	\$16.80 to 19.83 <sup>2</sup>	\$ 9,112,000
1905	126,940,000	2,397,000	17.02 to 18.93 <sup>2</sup>	9,980,000
1910	165,409,000	3,191,000	19.32	10,619,000
1915	226,200,000	4,458,000	19.73	19,530,000
1920	297,505,000	6,908,000	23.242	25,513,000
1925	471,479,000	13,490,000	28.62	45,815,000
1930	650,784,000	16,751,000	25.76	52,462,000

<sup>1</sup>Per \$1,000 assessed valuation. <sup>2</sup>Residents of newer wards paid lower rates.

Sources: *Annual Report of the Comptroller*, 1900-1930; U.S. and N.Y. State Census; City Directories.

TABLE 3

## NEW CONSTRUCTION, 1903-1926, CITY OF ROCHESTER

Year	New Buildings Authorized	Estimated Value (nearest thousand) \$	Condemnations
1903	550	1,695,000	27
1904	812	3,924,000	17
1905	NA	NA	NA
1906	1375	5,446,000	13
1907	1420	5,912,000	11
1908	1302	4,508,000	20
1909	2315	8,489,000	35
1910	2466	9,181,000	34
1911	2476	8,322,000	30
1912	2558	10,768,000	14
1913	2036	8,497,000	18
1914	1958	7,826,000	35
1915	2244	8,315,000	23
1916	2046	8,316,000	21
1917	1412	5,408,000	19
1918	705	1,339,000	23
1919	2193	8,030,000	17
1920	1993	8,179,000	6
1921	3618	14,452,000	18
1922	4469	15,239,000	5
1923	5651	20,107,000	22
1924	5193	26,326,000	28
1925	4835	28,103,000*	NA
1926	4207	18,388,000	NA

\*Includes value of remodeling—approximately \$3,000,000.

NOTE: Construction of private garages tended to inflate figures for number of new buildings in the 1920s.

Source: *Annual Report of the Bureau of Buildings* 1903-26; author is Fire Marshall 1910-20 and Superintendent of Buildings 1921-26.