

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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## **“Canaltown”**

**A Focus of Historical Traditions**

By Blake McKelvey

“Canaltown,” the southeast quadrant of the Genesee milltown of the 1820’s, later a busy segment of the thriving Flour City, recalls these and succeeding Rochester eras to strollers along the Medina block pavement of South Water Street today. Like the Four Corners area and many other parts of old Rochester, this district has witnessed the coming and going of successive generations of buildings as well as inhabitants. Its principal activities have shifted with the times, but for over 160 years they have been supportive functions closely related to the character and growth of the larger city centered on the One Hundred Acre Tract across the river. Increasingly linked to Rochester’s urban core by four successive Main Street bridges and by two successive aqueducts, the South Water Street district acquired a claim to the title “Canaltown” because it was the first to perform that function and because it is one of the few districts where remnants of that era persist today. The proposed restoration of “Canaltown” as an embodiment of Rochester’s historical traditions has a firm foundation in the structural remains as well as in the factual record of South Water Street.

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## Beginnings

Enos Stone, a migrant from Lenox, Massachusetts, who acquired the farm on the east bank at the upper falls of the Genesee in 1809, was no rival to Colonel Nathaniel Rochester, the promoter of the tract across the river. In fact, young Stone was delighted to assist his more substantial neighbor and agreed to serve as land agent to facilitate the sale of town lots on the west bank during the Colonel's absence. Stone accepted several tentative bids for lots in the fall and winter of 1811, and he was on hand to greet the Scrantom family, the first permanent settlers of the new hamlet, on May 1, 1812. Indeed he gave them temporary shelter in the log cabin he had built the year before on a bluff overlooking the river where workmen were laboriously constructing the first Main Street bridge. But if Stone, who had erected a small frame house near that cabin and a crude sawmill on the river bank below, lacked the resources or the drive to promote a rival development, he was readily persuaded a few years later to turn that task over to Elisha Johnson, an enterprising promoter from Canandaigua.

Johnson, a surveyor and engineer with the backing of several friends in the Ontario County seat, purchased the main portion of Stone's farm for \$10,000 in 1817. He promptly subdivided his 80-acre tract into house lots and mill sites and invited the pioneer settlers on both sides of the Genesee to a picnic on the bluff overlooking the river. There on July 4, 1817, after a bounteous feast, they celebrated the independence of the nation, and of the local subdivision as well, by blasting rock to open a raceway along the east bank of the river. Johnson had secured permission from Col. Rochester to build a dam above the rapids to assure a steady flow of water into the Colonel's raceway on the west side as well as into his new east-side raceway. Before the close of the year, William Atkinson had arrived and acquired a site near

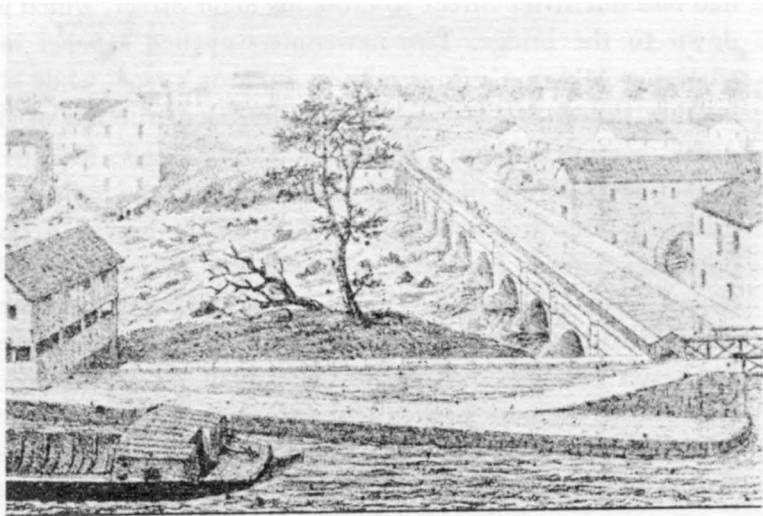
the bridge and was busily constructing the Yellow mill, the first on the Johnson race.

Two other events in 1817 overshadowed these developments. The incorporation of Rochesterville on the west bank of the Genesee that spring was welcomed by Johnson and his east-side associates as an asset, and they also supported the Colonel's leadership in a campaign for a separate county although they had to wait several years for its establishment. More important for all concerned was the state's decision that year to build a canal from Lake Erie to the Hudson and to cross the Genesee between the small upper falls or rapids and the Main Street Bridge, as Johnson's subdivision map already designated it.

These events promoted developments along the east as well as the west bank. Several newly arrived settlers erected small shacks adjoining Stone's house on the bluff, where Johnson had laid out River Street to cross his Main Street, which led down to the bridge. Two newcomers opened a paper mill adjoining Atkinson's flour mill on Johnson's race, while still another leased Stone's sawmill nearby. Construction of the canal eastward from Rochester commenced in 1819, attracting an influx of workmen, and spurred the building of modest houses in several parts of Johnson's subdivision, now popularly called East Rochester. When the state finally moved to create Monroe County in 1821, the commissioners designated to organize it chose the site offered by Col. Rochester for the court house instead of one proffered by Johnson in the park he had laid out adjoining Court Street. But as workmen pressed the construction of the court house on the west side, other workmen arrived on the east side to prepare the foundations for the piers of the first aqueduct.

The early twenties were crucial years for the area later to be called Canaltown. Hervey Ely, having suffered losses from flood damage to his mill on the west side, moved over and erected a frame mill adjoining Atkinson's Yellow mill on the

Johnson race in 1822. Together they packed several barrels of flour for the first shipment eastward on the canal, which opened to Little Falls that October. Local Methodists erected a brick chapel on River Street and provided it with a cupola which commanded a fine view of the booming town. An influx of stone masons and other workmen enabled the state to complete the construction of the aqueduct late in 1823. The easternmost of its eleven arches provided a passage for the Johnson raceway under the canal to supply power to the mills on its north side. With that assurance Elisha Johnson was ready to see his east-bank subdivision annexed by the village of Rochester. He not only accepted election to its board of trustees but became chairman in due course. The entire town gathered early in October to celebrate the completion of the aqueduct, which firmly linked the east and west sides into one community.



**The First Erie Canal Aqueduct Over the Genesee, From a  
Sketch Made in 1826**

Originally published in A. Duttonhofer, **Study Journey through the United States of North America . . .** (Stuttgart, 1835).

The construction of an improved Main Street bridge in 1824 brought the eastside settlement even more actively into the life of the bustling mill town. This was not an unmixed blessing however, for with increased activity came new hazards. Occasional fires had destroyed single buildings in earlier years, but in 1825 a fire that started in Elisha Johnson's shop spread to an adjoining sawmill on his raceway and threatened the nearby flour mills as well. One of these frame mills went up in smoke a year or two later as did several of the cottages on River Street, but such setbacks only cleared the way for more substantial structures. Horatio N. Curtis, who had purchased the lot at the southeast corner of the new bridge, built a frame mill out to rest on an extension of the eastern abutment of that bridge. This action, which infringed on the river bed, aroused protests from west-side property owners, but set a precedent for the village trustees who proceeded to construct a market out on a platform suspended on a northern extension of the western pier.

With two runs of stones in the Curtis mill, three in the Yellow mill, and four in Ely's east-side mill, the Johnson race offered a respectable competition to the mills on Col. Rochester's race across the river and those springing up on Brown's race at the main falls. The first village *Directory*, appearing in 1827, listed only seven mills in full operation and credited the Ely mill with the largest output that year. Three of the earlier mills had already been destroyed by fire, and Hervey Ely determined that year not only to build a new and larger mill of stone, but to locate it in an isolated spot free from the hazard of a fire spreading from adjoining structures. He found such a site at the southeastern corner of the aqueduct where the canal, turning sharply south, bordered him on two sides and afforded easy access to its freight boats, while the raceway and the river supplied protection on the other two sides. With an ideal site, Ely

engaged Robert M. Dalzell, the millwright who was completing the large aqueduct mill on the west side, to design and erect a similar one for him on the east side.

Hervey Ely was not the only east side promoter eager to take precautions against fire. Joseph Hall who in 1828 established a machine shop and furnace for the manufacture of agricultural implements near the aqueduct, erected a three-story stone building to house it. These and other developments prompted the village trustees to choose the name "Water Street" for the road bordering the Johnson race. Two years later the village ordered property owners along Water Street to provide and maintain a macadam surface. The millers laid planks as covers or bridges over the raceway to secure access to their mills. Sparks from a fire in one of the cottages on River Street (renamed St. Paul Street in honor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church erected on its northern extension in 1829) threatened the Curtis building at the bridge and destroyed Ely's frame mill nearby. Ely, who had leased that mill and thus escaped the major loss, now sold the property to Thomas Emerson who engaged Dalzell to erect the four-story Crescent mill, a stone structure equipped with the latest grinding and sifting machinery.

Elisha Johnson gave a new boost to his South Water Street tract with the construction in 1832 of the horse railroad to Carthage. With its southern terminus at the eastern end of the aqueduct and its single track paralleling the race on Water Street, it provided direct connection with the steamboat landing on the lower Genesee at Carthage. Unfortunately, although the service continued for several years, the volume of traffic failed to expand, and the American Hotel, opened on Main Street at the railroad crossing in 1832, soon leased its quarters to John O'Donoghue who opened an auction store there two years later.

In 1834, the year that saw the adoption of Rochester's first city charter, Enos Stone erected his first mercantile

building at the corner of Main and South St. Paul Streets. It was at this time that Charles J. Hill acquired and remodeled the Yellow mill, renaming and repainting it as the White mill. Joseph Hall built a second stone building of three stories adjoining the Crescent mill and installed three run of stones in what became known as the Model mill. The fire hazard was so threatening in this district and throughout the city that Elisha Johnson had submitted a plan for a water works company to the legislature, and the city had received authority for its creation in its first charter. Other needs had intervened, however, and although Johnson renewed the agitation during his term as mayor in 1838, no further action was taken.

More pressing concerns faced the city and the Canaltown district in the late thirties and forties. The threatened collapse of the first aqueduct, as deterioration under the combined attack of water, air, and ice weakened its brownstone arches and trough, placed the fortunes at least of the west side in jeopardy. The east side would perhaps have reaped a relative advantage, but its millers, headed by Hervey Ely, had been the first to import wheat from the midwest to supplement grain from the upper Genesee Valley, and they joined their west side colleagues in appeals to Albany for a replacement of the aqueduct and an enlargement of the entire canal. The state's favorable response to these petitions resulted in an expenditure of huge sums, \$445,000 in Rochester on the new aqueduct alone, which proved a great boon to its citizens in these depression years.

Built of limestone from Cayuga and rushed to completion in 1842, a few months before the final collapse of its predecessor, the second aqueduct had more ample proportions and a more enduring structure. Constructed to cross the river on a southeasterly slant, it eliminated the right angle turn at the eastern end, which had from the start been a cause for pitched battles between crews heading east and

west. This improvement, coupled with its two-way passage across the river, greatly speeded shipments. The canal's new course routed it past the southern rather than the northern side of the Ely mill and brought that structure more definitely within the Canaltown district. The state maintained the abandoned turn of the old canal as a loading spur for a time, to the great advantage of Ely and his South Water Street associates.

Justly proud of his stone mill, generally the most productive in the entire state, Hervey Ely took delight in conducting visitors through its successive floors. One such party in July 1835 included the noted Frenchman, Maurice Chevalier, and a Spanish botanist, Don Ramon de la Sagra, who described it with great precision in his journal. Portions of his journal, as translated years later for the Rochester Historical Society, help to recreate the glamour of Canaltown's first era:

I visited in the company of M. Chevalier the great flour mills [of Hervey Ely]. The grain comes to them by river and canal boat, from which it is brought up to the top floor of the building by a simple mechanism, moved by the principal water wheel, and with admirable speed, in the quantity of 500 to 600 bushels per hour. The grain is cleaned of its outer film or husks between perforated metal plates of conic form and falls to the stones where it is ground . . . .

The flour just ground falls to the coolers where crossed bars spread it out, and forming spirals in its turn, it enters a central opening from which it passes to the fans and sieves which separate the brans. The transference of the flour from the stones to the coolers, and from these to the sieves, etc., is done by very large spirals, in the fashion of screws of Archimedes, now horizontal that pass from one room to another, now vertical, which descend from the upper floors. Finally, the flour reaches the room where it is put into barrels, with the aid of an hydraulic press. And I believe it is unnecessary to say that all of these operations are executed by the action of a great water wheel, modified in its rapidity and force by the ingenious and well calculated mechanisms . . . . A very small number of workmen assist in the operations that require them, that is to say, in the regulating of the stones and the heading of the barrels . . . into which the purified flour is packed.

[“A Spanish Traveler Visits Rochester,” translated by Watt Stewart, RHS Publication Fund Series, Volume XVIII (1940), p. 107.]



### Canaltown's Heyday

The completion of the second aqueduct ushered in a new era of more substantial developments in the Canaltown district. A reconstruction of Main Street bridge after a fire in 1838 had raised its eastern level in order to reduce the grade on the Main Street hill. These alterations, combined with recurrent fires, had prompted Curtis to replace his fire-damaged frame mill with a three-story brick and stone commercial structure in the early 1840's. Again he built out to the line of the eastern abutment, which extended his property a dozen feet beyond the shore line. His neighbors, however, were more concerned with the fire hazard than with the flood danger, and the brick building was hailed as an asset. John O'Donoughue, now a furniture dealer, acquired the site where he had previously operated an auction room and erected a brick building of four stories on Main Street east of South Water, thus raising a new standard for the district.

Concern for the fire hazard was a major aspect of the period. Charles J. Hill, whose White mill was the only frame mill left standing on the east bank, had accepted the post of fire warden in order to improve the services of the volunteer fire companies. But the city's increasing density had frustrated these efforts, and Hill had run successfully for mayor in 1842 with the hope of promoting a solution. Mayor Hill increased the number of fire companies, but it remained for his successors to persuade the Common Council in June 1844 to enact the city's first building code. Under its restraints, as amended in August, no new construction of wood or remodeling with wood was permitted within the fire district, which included the entire Canaltown area, and all chimneys, old and new, had to be lined with brick or plaster, and all roofs constructed of tile, slate, or metal.



### Canaltown in 1868

Section from the William Henry Robinson Lithograph of Rochester, N.Y. Courtesy of Mrs. John L. Wehle.

These regulations foreshadowed extensive new developments throughout the Canaltown area. When fire damaged Enos Stone's commercial building at the corner of Main and South St. Paul Streets in 1845, he hastened to replace it with a four-story brick block, said to match in size and style the brick block completed that spring by Nehemiah Osburn on the northeastern corner at that intersection. A brisk demand for space in the upper floors of his block prompted Stone to acquire the properties adjoining him on the south. In the late forties he erected a three-story brick building extending to the property line of the brick chapel, which the Methodists had now sold to the newly formed St. Mary's Catholic Society.

The detailed Smith and Callan map of Rochester, published in 1851, shows a solid frontage of brick buildings on Main and St. Paul from Water Street around the corner to the brick chapel. Two small frame shops occupied part of the open space in the rear on the bluff sloping down to Water Street where the last traces of the old horse railroad had long since disappeared. The raceway was still there, of course, and its western edge boasted, in addition to Hill's White mill, the last remaining frame structure, a row of three substantial stone mills as well as Joseph Hall's three-story foundry and a third three-story stone structure he had erected in the late forties to serve as a factory for the manufacture of his newly invented threshing machine. A sixth stone structure, a two-story malt house dating from 1832 adjoined Hall's factory and bordered the canal spur which still bounded the northern wall of the Ely mill.

Few districts in the Flour City, as Rochester was then proudly acclaimed, were as substantially built up as Canaltown, and few boasted a wider assortment of functions. Flour milling still held first place, and no one was surprised in 1846 to hear that Gideon W. Burbank, a newcomer from Orleans County, had paid \$20,000 to acquire the Crescent

mill. No one was surprised when a few years later Burbank as well as his neighbor, former Mayor Charles J. Hill, shipped carefully packed barrels of flour to London as Rochester's exhibit in the first World's Fair in 1851. Many were delighted a decade later to learn that the Crescent mill had won recognition abroad. At the request of Count Romanhoff who had visited Rochester to study the workings of its Western Union telegraph company and who had been taken on a tour of its flour mills, two millwrights were preparing detailed drawings of the workings of the Crescent mill, which the Count planned to duplicate on his estate in Russia.

But the mills were not the only prize feature of the small South Water Street district. Indeed the four mills together did not employ as many workmen as the "Agricultural Works," as Joseph Hall described his threshing machine factory and foundry. The demand for farm tools produced in his original blacksmith shop and furnace had encouraged him after two decades to construct a second three-story stone building and to excavate for a basement floor in both structures in order to provide space for a collection of screw cutting machines, saws, lathes, and planing machines, all of the latest design and operated by water power. To tend this machinery, valued in the mid-forties at from \$80,000 to \$100,000, he employed some 60 workmen and turned out 20 of his patented threshing machines a week in the rush season. Hall was also licensed to produce Pitts milk separators and shipped them throughout western New York.

Adjoining Hall on the south side was the massive two story stone brewery of William Burtis and Samuel N. Outhout. The oldest malt house in Rochester, it had direct access to the canal both for supplies of grain and for shipments of ale. As his output increased, Samuel Outhout, who rebuilt the brewery after a fire in 1859, collaborated in the early sixties with Charles S. Hall, who had inherited his father's agricultural works next door, in constructing adjoining three-

and four-story brick warehouses on the east side of South Water Street to store their respective products and supplies during winter months when the canal was closed.

Water Street's increased activity at its southern end had required additional improvements to its roadway. The original macadam surface had become so overlaid with mud, washed down the bank from behind the South St. Paul Street buildings, that all abutting property owners joined to scrape off the excess dirt in March 1853. Three years later the Common Council passed an ordinance calling for the replacement of the deteriorating planks that covered the raceway and assessed the cost for new 2-inch planks, each 28½ feet long, on the adjoining properties. In 1867 the Council again ordered repairs to this planking, or bridge as it was called, and two years later ordered the digging of a sanitary sewer to reduce the numerous discharges into the river.

These improvements and another rebuilding of Main Street bridge in the late fifties stimulated other developments in the Canaltown district. The construction of the fourth Main Street bridge, a substantial stone-arch structure, dragged on for three frustrating years but provided an enduring improvement on its completion. Horatio Curtis, who had lost three successive buildings to fires and floods at the south east corner, died shortly after launching reconstruction, which his son George E. Curtis completed a year later. That three-story brick office building was the first of a row of three and four story brick structures that crept out along the south edge of the bridge in the mid seventies to match the similar row of brick buildings that had previously replaced the frame structures on its north side.

If the river and the raceway were thus being blotted from view, these improvements facilitated increased activity and an intermingling of functions throughout the business district. Seth Terry opened a saloon on the ground floor of a

four-story frame house erected by George F. Danforth on the east side of South Water back of O'Donoughue's block to serve workmen in the nearby warehouses and mills. A merchant tailor and two more drygoods merchants crowded into the long ground floor stores opening on Main Street in the building previously occupied solely by O'Donoughue who now stored most of his home furnishing supplies on the second and third floors. Other merchants and tradesmen — a jeweler, two shoemakers, a paper hanger, a sign painter, two barbers, two printers — and the patrons of a billiard hall climbed the stairs here, or around the corner in one of the Enos Stone's blocks on South St. Paul to take advantage of the cheaper rentals on the upper floors. A second saloon, a wagon shop, and a grocery store shared the ground floor entrances on that side with a theater, which increasingly commanded precedence on South St. Paul.

When Enos Stone opened a theater in his three-story brick block on South St. Paul in 1848 it was the first permanent theater in Rochester. If its announced capacity of 1000 was probably an exaggeration, its hall, decorated by Colby Kimball and illuminated with 75 of the newly introduced gas lights, proved adequate to accommodate the limited audiences attracted by a theatrical company shared in alternate weeks with Buffalo's pioneer theater. The arrival of occasional theatrical troupes and stars from the east (among them Charlotte Cushman who played for ten nights in various Shakespearean roles in February, 1852) brought additional excitement and prompted a decision in 1853 to remodel the hall and rename it the Metropolitan Theater. The new managers opened with a performance of "The Honeymoon, or How to Rule a Wife," and managed to maintain a schedule of performances that lasted without a break for eight months.

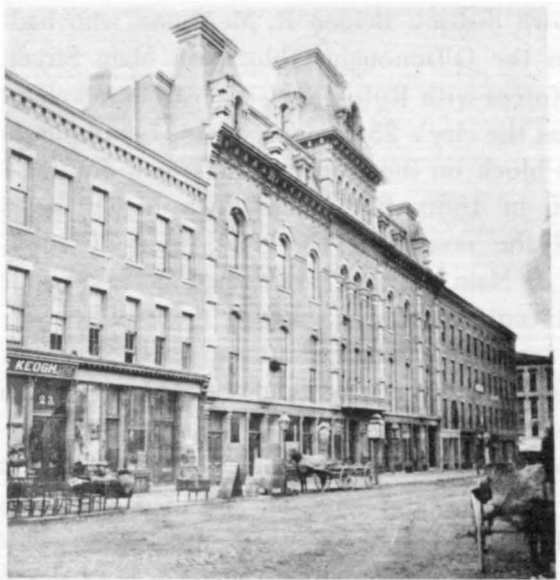
The Metropolitan Theater maintained an intermittent schedule during the mid-fifties. It won new friends by

presenting "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Women's Rights in 1853" among other plays on contemporary subjects. The newly opened Corinthian Hall on the west side provided some competition but both John Drew and Edwin Booth, who arrived for their first visits to Rochester in the late fifties, made their appearance at the Metropolitan. Wellington Meech assumed control of the theater in 1859 and maintained an active schedule supplying diversionary entertainment throughout the long and trying years of the Civil War.

Younger men were assuming leadership throughout the Canaltown district. Belden R. McAlpine, who had opened a store in the O'Donoughue block on Main Street in 1851, joined forces with Rufus Keeler, a leather merchant who had served as the city's 23rd mayor in 1857, and purchased Enos Stone's block on the corner of Main and South St. Paul for \$55,000 in 1860. Because of their higher elevation they escaped the ravages of the great flood of 1865, and the corners at Main and St. Paul attained increased importance as a retail center with the opening there of several drygoods stores, among them that of Alexander B. Hone at Main and Water Streets. Michael McMahon opened a wagon shop in the old brick chapel on South St. Paul, and a harness shop and stable occupied the last two frame structures in the area.

But if Keeler and McAlpine escaped the ravages of the great flood, they suffered severe fire losses, particularly in 1869 when the Metropolitan Theater was totally destroyed. That fire not only gutted the theater and the several stores on the ground floor but toppled the front wall into the street and the south wall onto McMahon's wagon shop, which was likewise severely gutted. So severe were the losses of Keeler and his associates that they welcomed an offer by Judge Charles Finke, a theatrical promoter in Brooklyn, to rebuild on the old site. After acquiring title to the theater block, Judge Finke undertook its reconstruction on a grand scale.

He engaged John R. Thomas as architect and Leon H. Lempert as artist to decorate the interior. Together they designed a theater that had both a wider and deeper hall, 110 by 70 feet, a more spacious stage, and more comfortable balconies. Its facade on South St. Paul Street, with two rows of extra high windows separated in clusters by pilasters leading up to the overhanging cornice, gave the theater a grand appearance. In order further to demonstrate its importance, the architects and promoters added a mansard roof, featuring a square tower and four balancing turrets, to attract the attention of interested travelers.



**The Grand Opera House**

The theater in the seventies even without its attic and towers had the height of a four story block. Adjoining it on the south was a three-story brick block which housed the elegant Severance and Carr saloon for a time and a number of auction rooms above. Samuel Outhout, who had acquired this property in the seventies, remodeled it in 1885 as the



Windsor Hotel in what proved to be a vain effort to supply a residential facility for visiting thespians. The Grand Opera House opened with a performance of *Il Trovatore* on May 12, 1871, and Thomas Carr as manager enjoyed an enthusiastic patronage in the early seventies.

It was in the early seventies that the last of the principal lots in the Canaltown district were built up. John Wagner erected his block over the now abandoned spur of the original canal around 1875. Fronting on South St. Paul, its facade today shows a slight bend where the foundation, based on the eastern wall of the canal, perpetuates the angle of that ancient artery's curve. William O'Neil built or occupied the brick building bounding the south side of Ely Street. Ely Street itself was long plagued by washouts because of the steep descent from St. Paul to Water Street below. By 1875 John R. Smith and James Wilson had reconstructed the stone portion of the Ely mill, gutted by a fire that completely destroyed its frame wing, and William S. McMillan had acquired the Crescent mill, still a leading producer of flour although the shipments by canal were declining and dropped to the vanishing point before the close of the decade.

One major improvement in the eighties added new dignity as well as historic permanence to the Canaltown district. The rapid decline in flour shipments by canal was a result of the speedier service available over railroads whose heavy shipments from the west made it imperative that Rochester millers switch to those more costly but also more competitive carriers. To reach the rail lines, millers on South Water Street had to engage heavy carts to haul their flour to the freight station, and deep ruts in the old macadam surface on Water Street as well as broken planks in the old "bridge" over the raceway frequently obstructed deliveries. Finally in 1889 after long debate the Common Council adopted an ordinance directing the improvement of South Water from East Main to

the north side of the old aqueduct and assessed the cost, estimated at \$28,273, on abutting properties. The improvement was so well designed and effectively executed that it has endured with limited repairs for almost nine decades. Such a project merits historic attention as well as preservation:

The proposed improvement [Ordinance No. 3746] shall consist in constructing flag stone walks on each side of the said street between the limits mentioned, except where good flagstone walks of suitable thickness and width, and laid at the proper grade now exist. The flagstone walk on the east side of said street to be approximately ten (10) feet in width between the curb and street lines, and laid generally on a sand foundation. The flag walk on the west side of said street to be of such a varying width as now exists between the west line of the street and the center of the west race wall, and to be supported over areas by properly constructed iron work. Between the lines of said flagstone walks, and on that portion of said street forming the roadway thereof, shall be constructed a Medina stone pavement. That portion of said pavement to be constructed over the raceway now existing under said Water Street, to be supported by brick arches formed between iron girders to be located transversely across said raceway, the ends thereof resting on the race walls and the center of each, supported by a longitudinal iron girder resting on iron columns standing on the rock bottom of the raceway. Also, a line of curb stones shall be set on the east side of the roadway against which a gutter shall be formed in the usual manner. On the west side of the roadway the surfaces of the Medina stone pavement and flagstone walk shall coincide with each other, the gutter to be flattened and formed not only to provide for proper drainage, but to admit of driving through and across the same.

### **The Nineties and After**

The 1890s ushered in a new generation of promoters throughout the Canaltown district and spurred construction of several new buildings. Following the death of Rufus Keeler in 1875 the Enos Stone block at the corner of Main and South St. Paul had passed to his three children, one of them the first wife of William S. Kimball, the tobacco

manufacturer who would bring new leadership to its development. Bracket H. Clark, who had acquired the Curtis block at the eastern end of the bridge in the eighties, sold it in 1892 to the promoters of the *Post Express* whose rotary presses apparently introduced a new use for the water power of the old raceway. Of the earlier millers only William S. McMillan, and one of Joseph Hall's sons, and one of the Wilson brothers were still in business in the early nineties. Hall's agricultural works had moved to Canada, selling the old stone foundry and machine shop to Edward Harris who leased it to a manufacturer of iron fences and window frames. Even Judge Finke sold title to the Grand Opera House to Frederick Cook in 1890. In fact all the old names except that of McMillan would disappear from the district by the end of the decade and with them several of its traditional functions.

The Grand Opera House was the first to go, but not its function or grandeur, for the new Cook's Opera House which replaced it was an even more imposing structure. The raging fire that destroyed the Opera House on February 19, 1891 also gutted the Windsor Hotel on its south side, as well as the two saloons that straddled its entrance on South St. Paul Street. To reconstruct the theater, Frederick Cook engaged one of the city's leading architects, J. Foster Warner, and together they devised a plan which extended the opera hall back into the court yard that had separated the old Enos Stone buildings from the warehouses on South Water Street. The new opera house in fact extended back to the brick wall built by Hall and Burbank to safeguard their stores of grain and flour during long winter months when the canal was dry. Warner converted the narrow lane leading from South Water to the rear court into a stage entrance, which afforded an additional exit in case of fire and facilitated the loading and unloading of stage props. This arrangement freed the front of the four-story Cook's Opera House building for appropriate

commercial functions. The adaptation promised a lively business activity during daylight hours when the great theater was empty.

Before the opening of Cook's Opera House, with a performance of *Pinafore* by the Rochester Opera Club on January 14, 1892, several merchants had leased quarters overlooking the street. A restaurant and two saloons occupied the ground floor, while a barber, a sign painter, a printer and a billiard hall proprietor drew customers to the second and third level. South of the theater the E.P. Reed shoe manufacturing firm opened a branch factory in the reconstructed three story block from which the Windsor Hotel had finally withdrawn. A wagon repair shop, another shoemaker, a harness shop, a chair maker and the Rochester Cycle Manufacturing Company occupied quarters in the other buildings fronting on South St. Paul in the early nineties. As the decade advanced two tailor shops, a magazine and news stand, and a real estate office found lodgment on the street, as did George R. Fuller, a specialist in artificial limbs, and a sales representative of the National Cash Register Company.

More dramatic developments were occurring on Canaltown's Main Street frontage. Most spectacular of all was the new skyscraper boldly projected by William S. Kimball and completed for the Keeler-Kimball estate in 1894. Designed by Leon Stern and constructed on a steel skeleton, one of the first in Rochester to adhere strictly to that new technique, the building's windows and separating panels rose in unbroken lines, simulating the flutings of a Greek column, to the twelfth floor where they appeared to support an overhanging cornice that resembled a Corinthian capital. Kimball, the second president in 1889 of the newly formed Chamber of Commerce, had persuaded that organization to lease the top two floors of his new skyscraper. That body accordingly opened its headquarters in sumptuous rooms

there in 1894, despite the onset of the depression, which brought foreclosure action against the Keeler-Kimball estate and a renaming of the structure as the Chamber of Commerce Building.

If an atmosphere of gloom filled the elevators carrying businessmen up to the top floors of the Chamber of Commerce building in the mid-nineties, more lively sessions were occurring in the editorial and news rooms of the *Post Express* which took over the reconstructed Curtis block at the west corner of Main and South Water. That elegant four-story structure provided a fit headquarters for the city's most independent journal. Edited by Joseph O'Connor, a talented writer and poet, it had assembled a competent staff of local columnists, including William H. Samson the local antiquarian, Mrs. J. Harry Stedman the arbiter of social propriety, and Charles M. Robinson the champion of city beautification. When the foreclosure of the Kimball estate dealt a severe blow to the *Post Express*, of which Kimball had been a leading backer, the paper surrendered its site on the corner to the newly organized Security Trust Company and moved into the seven-story structure it had been using for its presses on the adjoining Water Street property. The building afforded ample space for its editorial, news, and art staffs on the top floors, and for the circulation and business departments near the street level, with the printing presses in the basement convenient to the source of water power.

While the district's architectural gem — the Security Trust Building — was under construction at the corner of Main and South Water, new activities were appearing to the south. William Young had acquired the old Hall machine shop and foundry and was manufacturing wrought iron stairs to supply the demand for fire escapes created by the adoption of a new building ordinance in 1896. McMillan was holding his ground in the Crescent mill, but two new commercial printers, a book binder, and a dealer in typewriting supplies acquired

addresses on South Water Street. LaFayette Heidell's Saloon on the east side near the stage entrance became a popular resort for business as well as professional men who now rubbed shoulders with tradesmen, some of whom parked their bicycles at a stand in front of the warehouse at the end of the street where Reuben Van deCar stored his spices.

These developments were of course overshadowed by the construction of the new Security Trust Building on the corner in 1897. Eager to achieve a new elegance the bank had brought John DuFais from New York to design its building in a classical style. The tall Ionic columns that supported the porch over the front entrance gave the building a quiet dignity, which scarcely prepared visitors for the rich display of classical columns and other details on the interior. As preserved today it reflects the detailed ornamentation supplied by Claude Bragdon in 1903 when he expanded the bank's Main Street frontage and enlarged the interior hall, giving it more effective proportions.

The turn of the century brought the progressive development of the Canaltown district to a conclusion and saw the beginning of its slow decline. The success of the recently formed Rochester Gas and Electric company in acquiring the water rights of the properties on Johnson's race enabled it to replace the oft reconstructed Ely mill with its Water Street power station in 1902. Its turbines supplied power to operate the machinery in McMillan's Crescent mill as well as in Young's iron works and the *Post Express* pressroom for another decade or so. The Archer Manufacturing Company acquired and expanded the iron works as an annex to its own factory on North Water which was unable to meet the demand for barber chairs. By transforming water power into electricity the utility supplied a more efficient type of power but freed industrialists from earlier ties to the raceway and encouraged many to seek more adequate sites elsewhere.

Other changes occurred among the owners and lessees of properties in the district, among them the arrival in 1918 of H.H. Sullivan as the new owner of the Wagner building on South St. Paul, now renamed South Avenue. Among the newcomers to the district was C.B. Keith's Family Theater, which took over the aging Cooks Opera House in 1912; two years later its booking agent John Fenyvessy became manager and operated it as a motion picture house for many years. But the principal change was the replacement of the Erie Canal by the Barge Canal in 1918 and the construction of the Rochester Subway in the old canal ditch. Broad Street bridge was built as a deck over the aqueduct in 1924.

These developments so transformed the district that its Canaltown traditions were almost obliterated. But Water Street's historic Medina block pavement endures and recalls the early milling days of the Flour City. The heavy mill carts, the brewery wagons and threshing machines that once lumbered over this pavement have followed the canal freighters that proceeded them into oblivion. Other functions, too, have come and gone — theatrical, commercial, banking, and publishing. But the area's very diversity of activities poses a challenge to find a new function to restore its vitality. Accepting that challenge, historical preservationist and developer Douglas A. Fisher organized Canaltown Associates in 1971 in time to save the Security Trust Building from demolition. The Associates further propose to restore the Canaltown district as an historical embodiment of early Rochester and to make it a relaxing and entertaining feature of the contemporary city. Enos Stone could never have imagined it, but neither Elisha Johnson nor Charles J. Hill would have been surprised; either Joseph Hall or William S. Kimball might have bankrolled it, and John Fenyvessy would have stood up and cheered.

### Note on Sources

This account is based in large part on my more comprehensive and carefully documented histories of **Rochester: The Water Power City: 1812-1854** and **Rochester: The Flower City: 1854-1890**. Three reports of the **Board of Fire Underwriters** (1864, 1872, and 1890) and the Rochester atlases or platbooks (1875, 1888, 1900, 1910, 1918 and 1926) provided specific details on the ownership and character of buildings at these dates. John Fenyvessy's "History of the Rochester Opera House," a typescript in the Rochester Public Library, is a valuable source on that subject. Several issues of **Rochester History** supply additional information on the Erie Canal, Main Street bridge, and Rochester journalism. Finally the Rochester Directories have supplied much specific information.

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