

ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck

City Historian

Vol. LV

Summer 1993

No. 3

Remembering Front Street

by Henry W. Clune
Robert G. Koch
and Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck





M. Sharp Commission House in the early 1900s. (Rochester Public Library)

Cover: Hall Brothers Lunch Room at Main and Front Streets. (Rochester Public Library)

ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by the Rochester Public Library. Address correspondence to City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Avenue, Rochester, NY 14604.

Subscriptions to the quarterly Rochester History are \$6.00 per year by mail. \$4.00 per year to people over 55 years of age and to non-profit institutions and libraries outside of Monroe County. \$3.60 per year for orders of 50 or more copies. Foreign subscriptions \$10.00.

©ROCHESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY 1993 US ISSN 0035-7413



*The north end of Front Street at Central Avenue at the turn of the century.
(Rochester Public Library)*

The Genesee River Reclaimed Front Street

by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck

For decades after Rochester was laid out, the Genesee River and the people who settled along its banks struggled for control of the river's banks and water. The early history of Front Street demonstrates how the river often dictated our city's destiny.

In 1811, Nathaniel Rochester laid out Front Street, what he then called Mason Street, on dry flats between the first (low water) and second banks (high water) of the west side of the Genesee River. There were about three quarters of an acre of high, dry land between the river and the east line of Mason Street. Gideon Cobb arrived in Col. Rochester's One Hundred Acre Tract in 1814 and used part of the dry flats for a cattle and hay yard. Ira West ran an ashery on the next lot. Moses Dyer owned a chandlery south of the market in 1819.

Jacob Graves, Matthew Mead, Hervey Ely and Josiah Bissell built on the land and improved their lots on both sides of the new street. In another settlement on the east side of the river, Elisha Johnson blasted his raceway and dumped the stone debris into the east channel, diverting the current to the west. Johnson built a dam south of Mason Street to deepen water for the raceways it fed on both sides of the river.

But in 1817 and 1819, what had begun as promising wilderness settlements, were swept away by spring freshets. Johnson's newly completed dam gave way, overflowed into Allen's old raceway and flowed into Mason Street. The strong current overran the low bank of the river between the bridge abutment of the Main Street bridge and the pier, followed the wagon ruts on the carriageway and covered the flats on Mason Street. The current was so strong that it carried away the slaughterhouse and crashed another building into the pier of the bridge. The foundation of Matthew Mead's blacksmith shop was washed out. When the water receded, the river had reclaimed thirty-five feet of its banks. The current had carried away four to five feet of earth from the surface of the flats. The banks that Nathaniel Rochester had measured Mason Street from were gone. The east side of the flats was gone.

Ralph Lester who arrived in Rochester in 1816 recalled that Mason Street was not used much. The east bank sloped gently on alluvial sand into the river allowing easy watering of horses. Works & Graves made improvements in the road to get access to their tannery.

Deep cuts were made into the banks on both sides of the river to build the aqueduct in 1823 and in 1824, builder Elisha Johnson excavated twenty feet into the sandy west bank to anchor the Main Street bridge. The banks on both sides of the river were changed.

In 1825 Rochester, Fitzhugh and Carroll filed a quit claim with lawyer John Mastick for Mason Street. The street was not to be built over and a retaining wall was to be built to prevent the river from overrunning its banks again. The street was filled in from the wall to the level of Dyer & Barton's Soap and Candle Factory. The street was moved westward. A Union & Advertiser reporter identified Elisha Johnson as one property owner whose careless dumping of debris in the river resulted in redirecting of current and overflowing. His dam also endangered land owners north of the dam.



Market Cottage, built on the site of a pioneer boarding house. Early residents there remembered Mason Street (Front) Street when nearly an acre of dry, treed land stood between the street and the river. (Rochester Public Library)

In 1859 there were still litigations involving poorly defined land lines and liabilities for damages to properties. Despite the retaining walls, the river continued to flood Front Street and was devastating in 1865 and 1916.

Businesses and industries continued to be built near the river and Rochester became prosperous, swallowing up the little settlements along the riverbanks and becoming a city. The public market was built on Front Street and soon attracted crowds of shoppers from the city and countryside. Vendors and farmers sold the freshest meats, fish,



The devastation of the flood of 1865 which collapsed buildings, flooded basements and filled the streets with debris. The mayor requested the assistance of soldiers at the end of the Civil War, but the Army would not release them. (Rochester Public Library)

vegetables, fruits, hay and grains. Vendors on the street called out their wares. Men and women haggled over prices. At times different languages could be heard. Front Street developed into one of the finest commercial streets in the city with tailors, butchers, shoemakers, grocers and other small shops.

Toward the end of the 19th century, gambling houses operated openly. Prostitutes walked the streets soliciting business. Many "respectable" women could not shop on Front Street without being insulted, according to a Union & Advertiser reporter writing in 1894. He complained of the "bums and curbstoners" who stole for a living. One bum supposedly stole a suit from a mannequin outside of a second-hand store and sold it to the owner of the store. In another case a turkey was stolen and like other large amounts of meat, was probably sold to a saloonkeeper.

While Front Street was still known at the turn of the century as the best place to buy meats, tailored suits and fresh market products, it had been taken over by an undesirable population whose life was to steal, drink and sleep it off at the Rescue Mission on Front Street.

The recollections of Henry W. Clune and Robert Koch describe Front Street as it was in the 20th century—an interesting and intense mix of people and activities. In the 1960s the buildings on Front Street were torn down as part of the Urban Renewal Project.



Prices of groceries are advertised in the windows of the Genesee Provision Co. On the wagon at right the company advertises hotel delivery. (Rochester Public Library)



Shoes, clothing, meats and other items could be purchased at the shops on Front Street. (From the Stone collection, Rochester Museum & Science Center)

Remembering Front Street

by Henry W. Clune

Rochester's now obliterated Front Street, which once extended from Main Street East to Central Avenue, was not, of course, as well known as New York's Broadway or the London Strand or the Shanghai Bund, but it was nonetheless a street of a character that stimulates recollection.

Fifty odd years ago I was a guest at the Malibu Beach, California home of Gregory LaCava, a well known Hollywood director. (Miss Katherine Hepburn later told me, "He was the most sensitive director I ever worked with.") There were many guests at the party, and a prodigious amount of food. One of the guests, a slim agile old fellow, with a worldly air and an aspect of having been well-traveled, had been assigned to cut the ham, a procedure which he now and then interrupted to dance a jig or sing a catch of a popular song. When I was introduced to him, he asked sharply, "Where you from, boy?"

I was considerably beyond boyhood, but I told him, "Rochester, New York."

"How the hell is Front Street?" he wanted to know.

I was astonished. "How'd you know Front Street?" I inquired.

"I used to pick apples in Wayne County," he said. "When we'd get paid, we'd head for Rochester and the saloons on Front Street, and Rattlesnake Pete's museum on Mill Street, and if we ran out of money, we might put up overnight in the Rescue Mission on Front Street."

I first knew Front Street when I was in my mid-teens and often went there on Monday night with my closest friend and next door neighbor, Charlie Maloy. There was some fraternal organization somewhere on the street to which Charlie's father paid an insurance premium on the first Monday of every month, and Charlie carried the payments to the headquarters of the organization. It was interesting—even exciting—to go into the street after dark; it had various novelties.

The Salvation Army Band often blared forth at the Main Street corner; at the Mill Street corner we were frequently enchanted by the flamboyant sales talks of pitchmen, those eloquent street corner salesmen, who talked to a spell-bound crowd in one "pitch" about the merits of a patent can opener, a gyroscopic top, and a guaranteed cure for consumption, and usually made lively sales when the talk was over. There was usually a vociferous religious meeting in the Rescue Mission, and we could hear the chorused shouts of "Praise God, Hallelujah!" And there was tinny music from some of the several saloons on the street.



Freshly butchered meats being unloaded for sale in a Front Street shop in the mid-1920s. (From the Stone collection, Rochester Museum & Science Center)

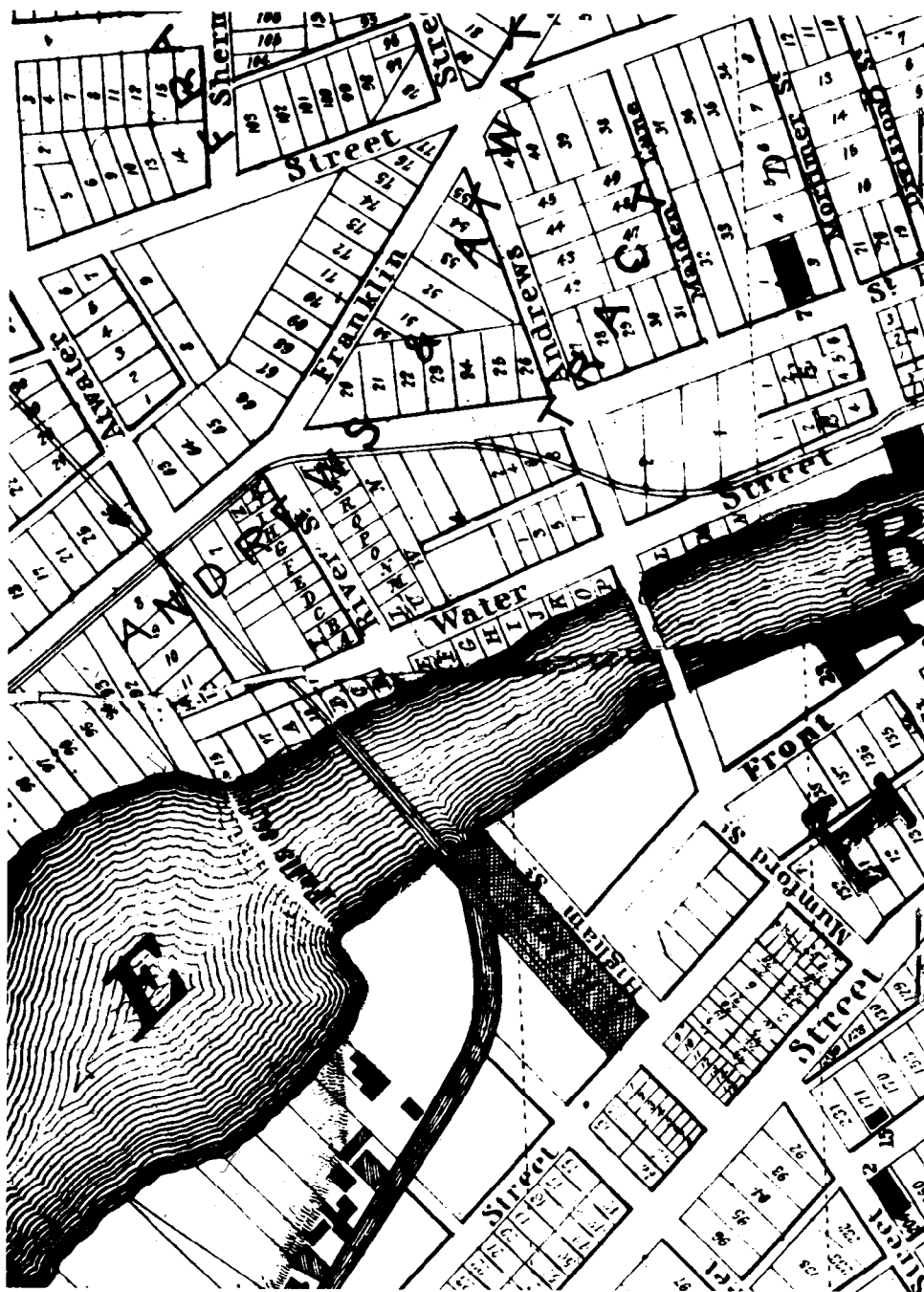
In grown-up life I was very familiar with Front Street. I was for some time a police reporter for the Democrat & Chronicle, and the newspaper building, on the south side of Main Street, faced Front Street, and from the front windows of the newsroom we could look full-length north on Front Street and see the trains of the New York Central Railway crossing the river trestle just north of Central Avenue.

I knew Paddy Paddock, who was called "Mayor of Front Street," and Chicken Murray, one of the street's best known characters, and the avuncular Capt. Vaughn, the policeman assigned to the street, who was forever calling the "paddy wagon," the police vehicle, to lug off some drunk Cap had found lying in the gutter.

Chicken Murray was a harmless old inhabitant of Front Street, who, with the first winter snow, would commit some petty theft along the street, plead guilty, and be sentenced to the penitentiary. His "crime" was by design. He knew he would have a warm bed during the winter months in the penitentiary, where he was always given charge of the chickens, thus his sobriquet.

There were two or three pawn shops in Front Street, three or four saloons, Andrews Market, known all over town for the excellence of its meats, another place that sold only chickens, a store that sold clothing at discount prices, Taylor's hat store, where in my youth I bought caps and gloves, and, at the northeast corner of Front and Main Streets, Hall Brothers Lunch Room. The brothers who operated the lunch room boasted that they threw the key away on opening day, and from then on the place was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was self-serving; you brought your food from a counter and ate it off the spatulate arm of your chair. It was cheap but good. Among other favored dishes was chicken pie for 20 cents. It was a meal in itself. Concealed in a thick viscous gravy were carrots, onions, and liberal slices of chicken, the concoction topped by a crust somewhat the texture of battleship plating, but tasty if one had solid teeth.

At midnight and in the early hours of the morning, Hall's was a catch-all. Policemen, motormen and conductors from the trolley cars, wassailers sobering up, compositors, pressmen, and reporters from two morning newspapers, bartenders, gamblers, stage hands, newsboys waiting for the early editions, taximen and hack drivers, bums



Plat map showing Front Street. (Tim O'Connell, Maps & Surveys)



who had panhandled the price of a cup of coffee, and numerous other night persons, gave Hall's a sort of cosmopolitan atmosphere. Its powerful lights and its white walls lent it the glitter of a nova. It was a snug haven on a clustery winter night; it was cooled by whirling fans on nights of summer dog days.

I never knew because I never thought to ask if Paddy Paddock, the Front Street Mayor, lived in one of the flats above the stores and saloons, or resided outside his semi-official domain. I do know that whenever you looked for him he was in Front Street. He was a genial gregarious person whom everyone seemed to like. He one time took me to Buffalo for a convention of the League of American Hoboes, of which he was a member, and with One-Eyed Connolly, the famous gate-crasher, who initiated me into the order. Later, I was asked to be a delegate to the national convention of the League in Miami, Florida, but I eschewed the honor. Paddy had a sense of elegance. I once introduced him to my wife. The next day he sent a bottle of Chanel # 5.

In a basement next door to Hall's Lunch Room, Mikey Troy had a horse room, and his telephone service extended to bookmakers as far away as California. Mikey was a popular little man, who had been horribly burned when an automobile blew up and burned before he could escape from the fiery equipage. The operation of the horse room was quite open, and of course Cap Vaughn knew what was going on. I can recall no time when an arrest was made. Cap Vaughn had a paternal tolerance. His son, Ward Vaughn, during the era of Prohibition, had one of the best—if not the best—speakeasies in the city in Stone Street, where he served what was pronounced "safe" whiskey and gin and where other bootleggers sold synthetic liquors, some of which were poisonous.

After Prohibition was repealed, a friend of mine, Butch Martin, who had closed Terrace Garden, in Ridgeway Avenue, once the liveliest night club in the city, opened a saloon on the east side of Front Street, near to Central Avenue, which became almost as popular as his Ridgeway Avenue resort. He did very well despite the fact that his night barman was heartily disliked, and was spoken of as "Charlie Sonofa bitch."



Live poultry could be purchased and dressed to order at butcher shops on Front Street. Rochester photographer Len Rosenberg recalls seeing feathers blowing down the river as chickens were plucked at the back, river-side of the shops. (From the Stone collection, Rochester Museum & Science Center)

Rattlesnake Pete's celebrated saloon (and museum) was often said to be on Front Street. It was on Mill Street, half a minute's walk from Front Street. Pete's surname was Gruber, and he was surely one of Rochester's best known citizens. He had in his museum/saloon a couple of glass cages inhabited by rattlesnakes, and he had a trick of handling the snakes with his bare hands. He also had a number black snakes, which were not poisonous, but killed small prey by constriction.

The black snakes had enlarged Pete's reputation, and endowed him with an unlicensed degree in medicine. Persons suffering from goiter came to him from fairly distant places to be treated for goiter. Pete would wrap a black snake around the sufferer's throat and the snake, constricting its length, would massage the goiter and bring some relief, but not a cure, to the patient. He performed other medical "marvels," and once saved the life of an attendant at an animal show in Coney Island who had been bitten by a rattlesnake. Pete was rushed to Coney Island, where he fed the victim great quantities of milk, which the patient then regurgitated, poison included.

Pete often went on "snake hunts" and he often invited me to accompany him on these excursions. Some farmer in the nearby countryside would see a snake in his field and report to Pete that it was a rattler. It never was.

But Pete would put on a vest made of rattlesnake skins, and we would set out in his red Rambler automobile, which was ornamented in front with two large brass snakes. Occasionally, he captured a large harmless snake, but more often found no reptile of any kind. The occasion, however, made good news copy, and Pete delighted in the expansion of his reputation, and gained more goiter "patients" as the result of it. He was a friendly and likeable old fellow, and as his red Rambler with its brass symbols toured the country roads, he received welcoming shouts from all the country folk who saw him.

His Mill Street saloon displayed a collection of not very impressive curios: the remnant of a cigar supposed to have been smoked by the last man to be executed in the electric chair in Auburn prison; the glove of the famous baseball pitcher, Grover Cleveland Alexander; a shovel supposedly used to break the ground on which the White House was built. There were also devices into which one paid a dime for a peek at a naked woman and got a splash of water in the face for the peek; and others that gave one a small blow with a padded fist for a look. All in all, it was a shabby collection of museum specimens, but it attracted a large patronage to the saloon, and men who came in from the rural areas thought it the city's number one attraction.

Someone said, "Nothing is as immutable as change." Rattlesnake Pete died and the doors of his museum/saloon were closed. The Corinthian Theater, in Corinthian Street, a few steps from Pete's place in Mill Street, which had been erected as the city of Rochester's first notable auditorium and playhouse, ended its career as a burlesque theater; and Front Street ceased to exist as a city street. In its years of bustling life, it was different from any other street in the city. Those of us who knew it in its prime, as does the ancient writer of these paragraphs, cherish the remembrance of its unique character.

Henry W. Clune was a reporter and columnist for the Democrat & Chronicle. He has written thirteen books including The Genesee. He was born in Rochester and now lives in Scottsville.



The rear view of the Water Street businesses as seen from Front Street on the east side of the river in the 1960s. (courtesy of W.C. Roemer)

A Front Street Jazz Note

by Robert Koch

As a young professional musician before and just after World War I, my father knew downtown Rochester well and sometimes recalled the Front Street that Henry Clune recreates here. My Front Street was in the decade following World War II.

It had jazz, butchershop meat, produce and cheese, shops blithely secure in their declining specialties, and a trickle of derelict men seeping in and out a rescue mission. But mainly I remember it for exuberant jazz caught there with my college friends, Ralph Gray and Jim Feely. Otmens was a jazz bar that had been a meat market and looked it. It was alleged to be the original home of the “white hot,” the pork sausage that is part of local lore.

A narrow rectangular room thrust into a storefront building, Otmens still had much-scuffed white tile flooring. A small raised bandstand was on the left; the bar ran along the right wall. Tiny tables, indigenous to jazz joints, provided just enough room for our beers, and served as rattling drumheads for our improvised accompaniment. Front Street was convenient to city buses and if we arrived by automobile, we parked, safely, on the street itself or just around the corner. Otmens pulsated with swing era small combo sounds that attracted by word of mouth a wide range of people from across greater Rochester.

The soul of that sound was Herbie Brock, house pianist in the late Forties. In the 1930s while at the Batavia School for the Blind, he had heard Art Tatum on one of those clear channel radio stations that wafted Chicago or Detroit jazz to night owls. Tatum was the foundation on which Herbie built his own technique. A rhythm man and a hard driving, former circus trombonist known as “Jamaica Jive” (Albert Alfred Adams) were his regulars, but others from the local jazz scene dropped by, and occasionally a sideman from some band blowing through town. These jam sessions were often the best jazz we’d heard—and that’s got to include clubs in L.A., Chicago and New York. Occasionally, when the piano was otherwise sufficiently manned Herbie would take up his tenor sax, which he blew memorably well.

Brock took to the road as half of a two-piano team with his brother-in-law, known professionally as "Buddy Satan," a bold pianist who pioneered plucking strings of the open piano. Herbie later moved to Coral Gables, Florida, where he became an appreciated musical fixture. Jazz great Teddy Wilson was not alone in testifying to his quality.

Other places that "swung" during that post-war period included Jack Foran's on Spring Street, the Pythodd on Clarissa, the Diamond Bar near the old Seneca Hotel on Clinton Avenue South, the Bartlett Club on Bartlett Street, the Town and Country on Gibbs. Usually several of these, and others, were up and running, but the top action tended to ebb and flow from place to place. Sometimes they were packed to the doors, sometimes not. (A buddy and I heard Errol Garner at the Keyboard Lounge one night after a hockey game, probably in the 1950s, in the company of perhaps a half dozen others.) And not long before her death in 1959, I spent much of an evening chatting with Billie Holiday on a slow weekday night at a club on Ridge Road. Another setting was the Temple Theater where Ralph Gray and I recorded interviews with Nat King Cole, Lionel Hampton, Benny Carter, and other Jazzmen.

From 1950-54 I lived as a newlywed and tyro instructor at the Rochester Institute of Technology on South Fitzhugh Street, at about where the Public Safety Building sits. Front Street was part of our shopping routine, especially on Saturdays, and often with an infant's stroller. Later, in 1957, the ambience of its shops drew nostalgic recognition from two Hungarian refugees, Janos and Andras, who lived for several months with our young family in the South Wedge. As seedy as it was getting, Front Street still vibrated with intimately scaled life. Then it was gone.

Robert G. Koch is a Rochester native with a special interest in local history. He taught English at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the University of Rochester. He now produces "The Best Is Yet" broadcast by WXXI-FM.



Otmens on the right near Jacobsons Market offered jazz to a Front Street night crowd. (Courtesy W.C. Roemer)



Front Street looking south toward Main Street not long before urban renewal removed the street in the 1960s. (Courtesy W.C. Roemer)



Front Street was a busy shopping center in the 1920s. (From the Stone Collection, Rochester Museum & Science Center)



Front Street businesses sold out their inventories in preparation for urban renewal. (courtesy of W. C. Roemer)

Back Cover: Nearby, Rattlesnake Pete's Museum on Mill Street was part of the character of the Front Street neighborhood. (Rochester Public Library)

Greatest Curiosity in the City

PETER GRUBER, Proprietor

RESTAURANT AND MUSEUM

**FOREIGN and DOMESTIC
WINES AND LIQUORS**

**Imported and Domestic
Cigars and Tobaccos**

**SEE THE INDIAN DYING
FROM RATTLESNAKE BITE**

The Museum contains Rattlesnakes, Black Snakes, Copperheads, Spotted Adders, Four Legged Chicken, Eight Legged Lamb, Allegators and Gila Monster.

**SEE THE NEW ELECTRIC
PIANO**

Pete will cure Felons, Car-buncles, Boils and Blood Poison quicker than any man on earth.



**SEE DEATH OF CLEOPATRA
FROM BITE OF AN ASP**

An Oil Farm in operation, a fac simile of Coal Oil Johnny's. A Gold Mine in Operation. The Museum contains all kinds of Indian, Battlefield and Naval Relics.

**SEE WIND MILL SIGN IN
WINDOW**

Can furnish Snake Skins, Skunk, Coon, Ground Hog, Dog and Rattlesnake Oil.

RATTLESNAKE PETE

When in Town Step in and Shake Hands with Pete and Try Your Strength
8-10 MILL STREET
Rear of Arcade
(over)

ROCHESTER, N. Y.