

ROCHESTER HISTORY

Greetings from Rochester

EXPLORING THE PAST THROUGH POSTCARDS

By Michelle Finn

*Based on an exhibition created by Michelle Finn and Emily Morry
for the Local History & Genealogy Division of the Rochester Public Library*



Vol. 77

Fall 2015

No. 2



A Publication of the Central Library
of Rochester and Monroe County



A selection of vintage souvenir postcards from Rochester, NY, dating from America's "golden era" of postcards (ca. 1905-1913).

Front Cover: A variety pack of souvenir postcards published by the Rochester News Company in 1937. The pack contains views of 18 local landmarks and includes a description of the city's notable accomplishments. The inside flap provides room for a brief note from the sender. All images in this issue are from the collection of the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

Is there anyone out there who hasn't sent or received a postcard? I so clearly remember, as a child, poring over the racks of colorful postcards depicting Niagara Falls while on a rare trip with my parents, agonizing over which shot of the Falls I should spend my pennies on, then carefully writing out the ubiquitous message, "Having a great time. Wish you were here." That card never made it into the mail, mainly because the trip was an over-nighter, but I carefully carried it back home to Rochester and proudly presented it to my Gram. In this issue of *Rochester History*, Deputy City Historian Michelle Finn examines the history of postcards, how they do and do not accurately depict history, and how they represent the evolution of social communication. Within these pages you will find lovely examples of Rochester postcards from the library's collection, along with insightful commentary from Finn. I expect you will also be taken with a desire to go buy your own Rochester postcard to send to a loved one.

Patricia Uttaro, Library Director

About *Rochester History*

Rochester History is a scholarly journal that provides informative and entertaining articles about the history and culture of Rochester, Monroe County, and the Genesee Valley. In January 1939, Assistant City Historian Blake McKelvey published the first quarterly edition of *Rochester History*. Subjects researched and written by him and other scholars were edited, published, and distributed by McKelvey with the goal of expanding the knowledge of local history. Studying local history as a microcosm of U.S. history has brought insight and understanding to scholars and researchers around the globe.

Today *Rochester History* is published biannually (spring and fall) by the Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County. The journal is funded in part by the Frances Kenyon Publication Fund, established in memory of Ms. Kenyon's sister, Florence Taber Kenyon, and her friend Thelma Jeffries.

Rochester History invites submissions of manuscripts of 6,000-7,000 words that further its mission of increasing knowledge of and interest in local history and culture and of placing local issues into a national or global context. To receive a copy of the journal's complete submission guidelines, send a request to HistoryJournal@libraryweb.org or call (585) 428-8095.

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Greetings from Rochester

EXPLORING THE PAST THROUGH POSTCARDS

By Michelle Finn

A picture is worth a thousand words, and perhaps no historical artifact reflects this adage better than the postcard. As revealing as the messages they accompany, the pictures on postcards offer their own stories about the people, places, and perspectives of the past. Humor, political views, social values, artistic sensibilities—postcards can tell us a lot about the people who used them and how they saw the place and time in which they lived. Originating as consumer goods that were designed to appeal rather than to document, postcards tend to depict the past as people wanted to see it and not necessarily as it truly existed. Nonetheless, postcards can be valuable historical resources, telling us as much in what they omit as they do in what they depict and how they depict it.

The Rochester Public Library's Local History & Genealogy Division (LHGD), located on the second floor of the Rundel Memorial Building in downtown Rochester, houses a collection of approximately 3,000 postcards dating back to the early 1900s. The library accumulated these cards over the years from a variety of predominantly unidentified donors and arranged them into an artificial collection for ease of management and use.¹ Only about 12 percent of the postcards in this collection contain personalized messages; the majority are unused cards that were apparently collected because of the views of Rochester and its surrounding area that they feature.

Although many of the postcards in this collection were digitized a decade ago and are available for public viewing online via the library's *Rochester Images* database, some staff felt the collection as a whole merited deeper exploration. In December 2015, two members of the LHGD Exhibits Team, Deputy City Historian/Historical Researcher Michelle Finn and Library

Assistant Emily Morry, created an exhibition around it. *Greetings from Rochester: Exploring the Past through Postcards* included more than 200 postcards from the library's collection, organized by theme into four large wall cases and two freestanding covered display tables installed in the hallway outside of the Local History division. Finn and Morry developed text emphasizing the historical value of the collection and situating it within a wider story about the history of postcards in the United States.

This essay, based on the exhibition, examines the library's postcard collection and what we can—and cannot—learn from it. The images considered here are but a sample of those contained in the collection, which captures urban and natural landscapes, social and cultural life, business ventures, industrial accomplishments, historical happenings, political campaigns, famous faces, and regular folks—both extraordinary and everyday scenes of a bygone era. Occasionally carrying messages, but more often offering only images, the library's postcards can enhance our understanding of the people, places, and events of Rochester's past.

A Brief History of Postcards

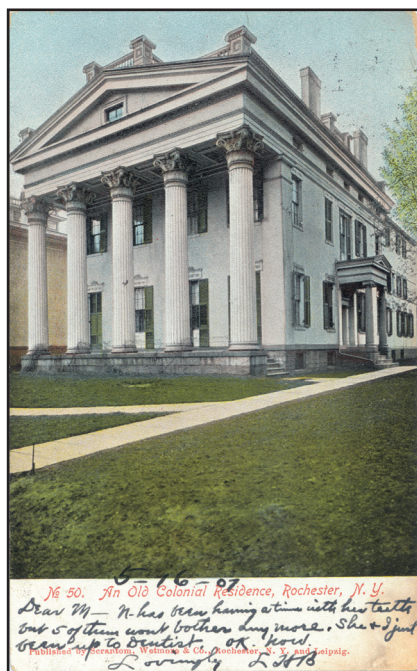
In 1869, Austria became the first country to accept the use of “postal cards,” special mailing cards with preprinted postage that were available exclusively through the government's postal service.² Other countries were quick to follow suit, and the United States Post Office issued its first official postal card in May 1873. Unlike privately printed postcards, which required purchase of a full-priced stamp in addition to the cost of the card itself, pre-stamped government-issued postal cards were mailed at a reduced rate, making them cheaper and therefore preferable to consumers. This changed in the U.S. in May 1898, when passage of the Private Mailing Card Act allowed both private and government cards to share the same reduced one-cent postage, resulting in the increased popularity of privately printed postcards.³

Aside from their stamp, or “inducium,” government postal cards were quite plain: monochromatic, lacking illustration, and often blank on the reverse side. People used them primarily to transact business; they functioned as receipts and advertisements and were efficient tools for setting appointments and confirming orders and deliveries. Businesses could order them in bulk with preprinted messages that further simplified communication.⁴ Privately printed postcards, on the other hand, were typically elaborate, adorned with illustrations that were often very colorful and attractive. These designs first appeared on the message side of the postcard, sometimes leaving little room for the written note itself, like in these examples from the library's collection



(Figures 1 & 2).⁵ It was not until 1907 that the now-familiar format of combining address and message on one side and image on the other was established.⁶

The prominence of images is a defining characteristic of postcards and suggests that a card's pictorial element is just as important as—if not more important than—its text. Most of the postcards in the library's collection lack messages; these cards appear to have been accumulated for the value of their images alone. When messages do appear, they are usually brief, sometimes only a sentence or two, and they do not necessarily refer to the images they accompany. Formatted for quick and informal notes like "Will send the silk tomorrow"⁷ and "N. has been having a time with her teeth,"⁸ postcards were the province of those who lacked time or interest in lengthy letter writing, similar to our use of electronic mail and text messages to share information today.



Figures 1 & 2. Examples showing the proportion of image to message space on postcards before the 1907 adoption of the divided-back format.



Figure 3. A souvenir view of Main Street during Rochester's 1909 Industrial Exposition.

The first souvenir postcards in the United States were sold at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. As postcard scholar Dorothy B. Ryan explains, exposition postcards quickly became popular collectors' items, and this is reflected in the handful of souvenir cards in the library's collection (see Figures 3 and 33).⁹ By 1905, American enthusiasm for postcards amounted to what journalist Julian Ralph dubbed a "postal-card craze."¹⁰ Early twentieth-century Americans sent postcards to family and friends when they travelled. They collected postcards as souvenirs of their experiences and decorated their homes with them. They used them for advertising their businesses and for announcing important life events like births and marriages. They formed postcard clubs and held contests to see how many words they could fit on a card. They even threw postcard showers to help their friends amass these coveted objects.¹¹ Several of the messages on the library's cards allude to this practice of postcard collecting (Figure 4).

The period between 1905 and 1913 is generally considered to be the "golden era" of postcards in the United States, with consumption reaching close to one billion postcards a year at its peak.¹² The postcard industry was a very lucrative business for publishers, distributors, and retailers, not to mention the United States Post Office. Established in 1775,

the U.S. Post Office steadily expanded its services to include free delivery based on population size and usage. By the turn of the twentieth century, letter carriers were delivering mail multiple times a day in America's cities—up to nine times a day in New York City in 1905—and Rural Free Delivery (RFD) was nearly universal, bringing the mail directly to homes even in remote areas across the country.¹³ This system made it highly convenient to send and receive communication through the mail, and the simple and affordable nature of the postcard made it a popular medium. As the U.S. Postal Service Historian noted in a 2014 report, “The peak growth years of rural delivery—1901 to 1909—coincided with the postcard craze.”¹⁴ According to this report, women in particular contributed to the growth in postcard popularity, sending three times as many postcards as men in this period and receiving four times

as many. At a time when most of the country still lived in rural areas, postcards seem to have helped farm women overcome the isolation that often characterized their lives.

A number of factors led to a decline in the American postcard industry by the outbreak of World War I in 1914. For one, the telephone, though still absent from the majority of American homes at this time, was emerging as a viable alternative for quick—indeed instantaneous—long distance communication.¹⁵ The war itself contributed to the decline by disrupting the supply of imported cards, which had previously dominated the American postcard market.¹⁶ Yet certainly the most ironic factor in the decline of the postcard industry was a 1909 tariff intended to protect American postcard producers from competition from

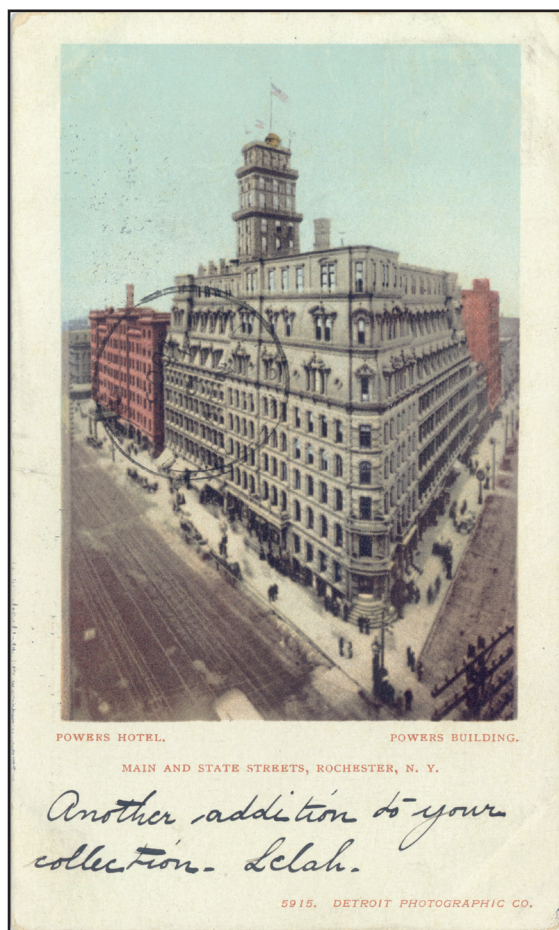


Figure 4. Mailed in 1902, this card of the Powers Building carries a message that speaks to the popular early twentieth-century hobby of deltiology, or postcard collecting.

European (primarily German) manufacturers. In anticipation of this tariff, American importers stockpiled German cards, thereby flooding the U.S. market. This increase in supply exceeded buyer demand, and prices fell accordingly. At the same time, folded greeting cards were becoming popular and retailers began replacing their postcard stock with this more profitable product. By 1913, many American postcard manufactures were either driven out of business or compelled to switch over to greeting-card production.¹⁷

Even though they never regained the popularity they had during their golden era, postcards have remained a familiar part of American culture. The 1970s witnessed a resurgence in postcard collecting, and this trend was reflected locally. The Western New York Post Card Club of Rochester, formed in 1976, boasted as many as 120 members by 1978.¹⁸ In 1984, two new sets of Rochester postcards were released, updating the local selection for the first time since the 1950s.¹⁹ Today, postcards continue to serve their purpose as souvenirs, collectors' items, and an inexpensive means of communication. As the library's collection reveals, these commonplace objects have historical significance as well. Through words and images, these postcards reveal values and perspectives of Rochesterians of the past.



Figure 5. This postcard of the Genesee River Gorge and Driving Park Avenue Bridge was most likely published by the Rochester Hardware Association and was sent from a local hardware convention in 1921.

Postcard Production

With the passage of the 1898 Private Mailing Card Act, a host of American companies and individuals began making and marketing their own postcards.²⁰ Deltiologist Alan Petrulis, whose website, *MetroPostcard.com*, offers a wealth of information on the history and production of postcards, provides a helpful overview of how early postcards were made.²¹ The process—which took anywhere from two weeks to four months to complete—began with a publisher, who contracted with the necessary parties to create the desired product. Postcard publishers included individuals, small shops and organizations, tourist-oriented businesses like hotels and railroads, and actual publishing houses. The majority of postcards made in this country were commissioned by druggists, stationers, grocers, restaurateurs, theater operators, innkeepers, novelty peddlers, and other neighborhood proprietors across America, like the Rochester Hardware Association (Figure 5) and Rochester’s own Fanny Farmer candy maker (Figure 6), who sold postcards both to supplement and advertise their businesses.

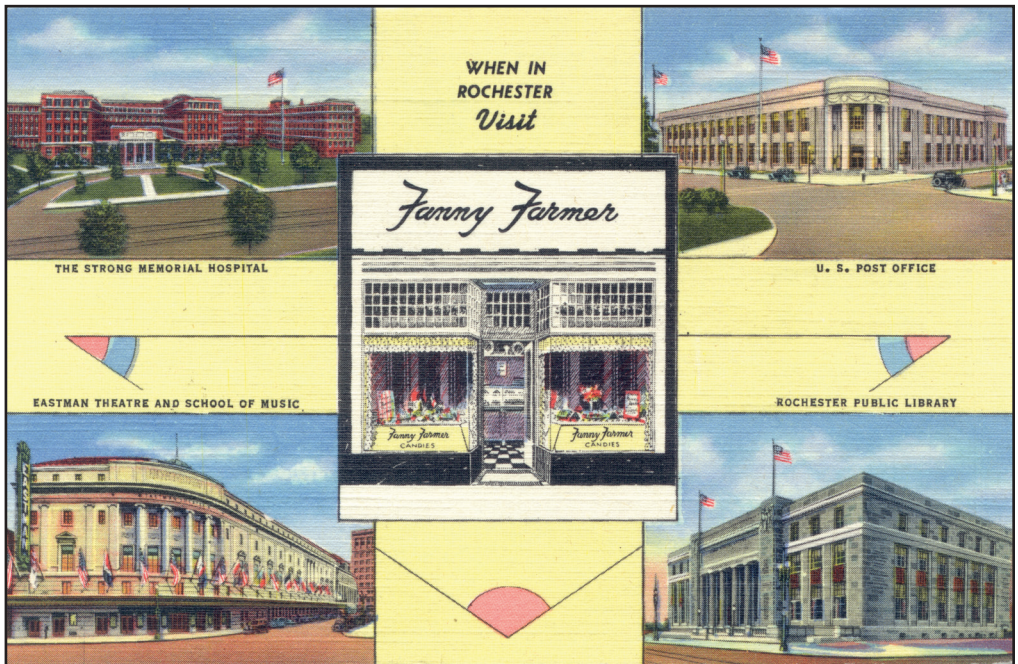


Figure 6. A postcard commissioned by the local confectioner, Fanny Farmer. Note how the card positions the candy shop among some of Rochester’s most prestigious institutions.



Figure 7. This postcard depicting rhododendrons in Highland Park was published by local bookseller Scrantom, Wetmore & Co. and was printed in Leipzig, Germany.

Local companies involved in postcard production ran the gamut from large retailers like the Sibley, Lindsay & Curr Co. department store and Scrantom, Wetmore & Co. booksellers, to newspaper and magazine distributors like the Rochester News Company and Manson News Agency, to specialty stores like Walker's Post Card Shop and the Pictorial Post Card Co., to printing companies like Ser Lithography and Stecher Lithographic. While some of these firms, like Ser and Stecher, printed their postcards locally, most postcard publishers outsourced printing to Germany, where the vast majority of golden-era postcards were manufactured (Figures 7 and 8).²²

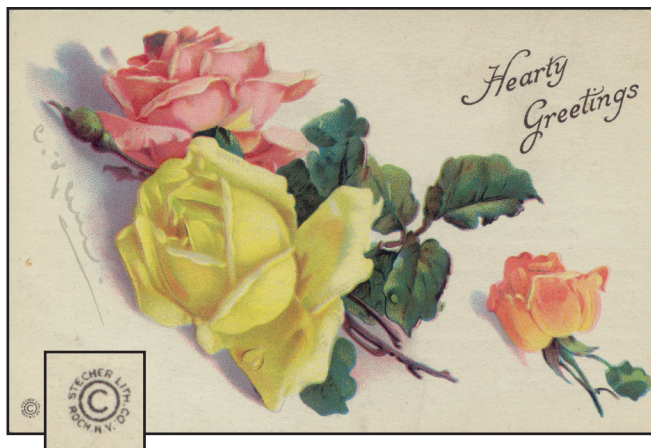
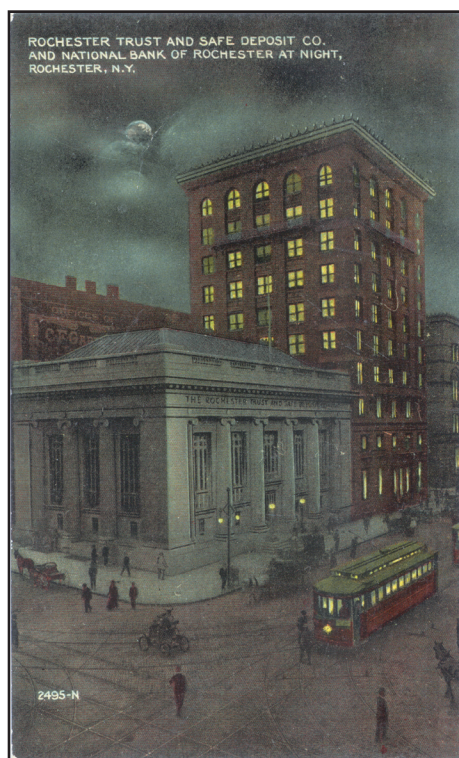


Figure 8. Note the seal in the bottom left corner of this postcard identifying Rochester's Stecher Lithographic Company as its publisher. The back side of the card indicates that it was "Made in U.S.A.," suggesting that Stecher might have handled the printing, as well. This postcard was used by the Hart & Vick seed company to promote its 1920 catalog.

No matter their size or form, postcard publishers relied on photographers or artists to supply the images for their cards.²³ Most postcards were based on black and white photos, which, Petruilis explains, the publisher either selected from a photographer's existing stock or commissioned specifically for the card being produced. Once the publisher selected an image, he sent it to a printer to manufacture the card. First, a production manager, who worked for the printer, decided if and how the image should be altered (it usually was). He selected a color scheme, often without having seen the actual colors of the place depicted, and identified elements like people, trees, and vehicles to be added to or subtracted from the composition. A retoucher then carried out the production manager's instructions. (See Figures 9 & 10 and 11 & 12.)

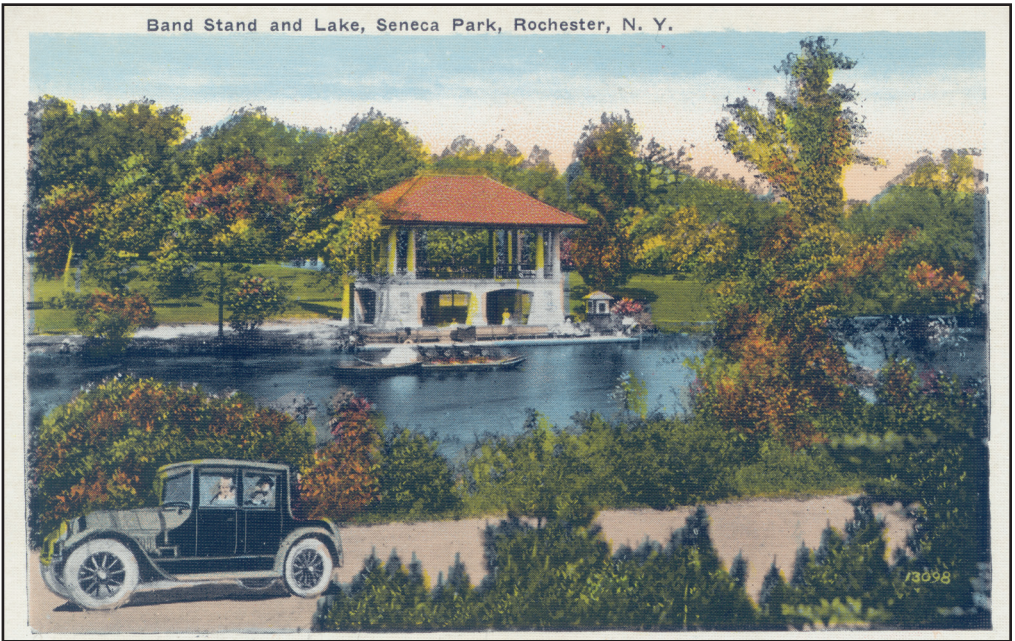
After the production manager and retoucher were finished with their jobs, the printer took the doctored negative and copied it onto photo sensitive tissue, which was then adhered to a plate or lithostone so the image could be chemically transferred. Each color was



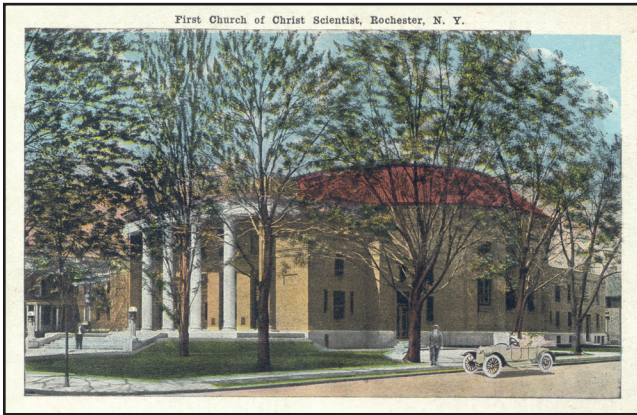
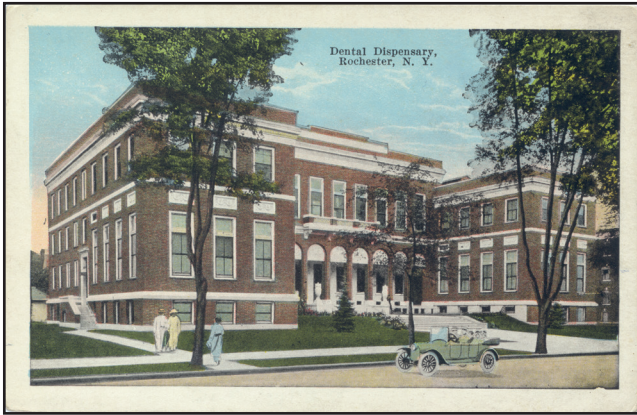
Figures 9 & 10. Sometimes postcard producers used simple alterations, like the addition of a border, to create different scenes from a single image. Other changes were quite drastic, like the recoloring that turned day into night in this scene of the Rochester Trust and Safe Deposit Co. & National Bank of Rochester, published by New York's Souvenir Post Card Co.



Figures 11 & 12. These postcards depicting Corn Hill's Plymouth Park (now Lunsford Circle) were created from the same photograph and published by the Rochester News Company. The scene was made to look different by altering details like coloring, tree fullness, and the presence of cars.



Figures 13 & 14. These postcards, published by the Manson News Agency and Scrantom's Inc., respectively, are based on the same photograph of the bandstand and lake in Seneca Park. Note the color variance and the superimposed vehicle that differentiate the two publishers' versions of the scene.

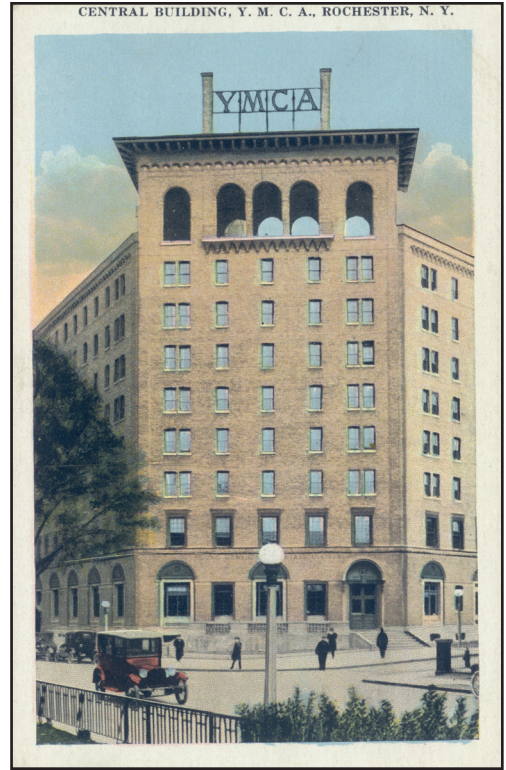
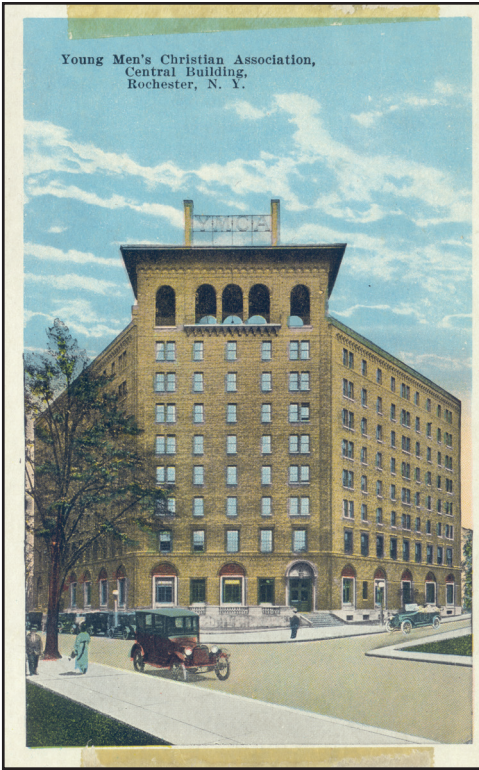


Figures 15 & 16. These postcards of the Dental Dispensary (published by the Rochester News Company) and the First Church of Christ Scientist (publisher unknown) both contain the same image, albeit differently colored, of an open-topped car full of people.

added in its own layer. The more colors the printer used, the more complicated the process and the more expensive the job. The final step in the postcard production process was to disseminate the cards to the drug stores, novelty shops, newsstands, and other retail outlets that sold them. Salesmen, distributors, and jobbers (small-scale wholesalers) all worked to get printed cards into the hands of retailers and, ultimately, the customers who so enthusiastically purchased them.²⁴

As Ryan and Petrulisi both note, and as the images shown here illustrate, there was a fair amount of artistic license taken in producing postcards.²⁵

Publishers used photographs freely, seldom with attribution and seemingly without much concern for any copyright protection that might have existed.²⁶ Often different publishers would use the same photo, altering the image slightly to market it as something new (Figures 13 & 14). Because printers frequently used stock decals, it was not unusual for the same graphic element to appear in different postcard scenes, like the group of people riding in an open car that appears in postcards of both the Eastman Dental Dispensary and the First Church of Christ Scientist (Figures 15 & 16). Note, too, how the same decal of a red car is superimposed on the two views of the YMCA in Figures 17 & 18. In a blatant disregard for scale, the car maintains its size despite the variation in its proportion to the building behind it, resulting in what Ryan describes as a “near-grotesque” (comically distorted) effect.²⁷



Figures 17 & 18. These two postcards of the YMCA, both published by the Rochester News Company, illustrate a disregard for scale as the same decal of a red car is superimposed without consideration for its proportion to the building behind it.

Such editing illustrates why we cannot necessarily rely on postcards as accurate representations of history. Even photographic postcards, which seem to provide straightforward views of the way people and places looked, ultimately present constructed images that inherently manipulate our perception, and thus our understanding, of the subject that is depicted.²⁸ A photographer's decisions about what to include in the frame and what to leave out, lighting, angle, distance, exposure—all shape the meaning and messages conveyed by a photograph. As critical essayist and cultural analyst Susan Sontag points out in her work *On Photography*, “Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality...photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are.”²⁹ Physically doctoring photographs, as happens in postcard production, further detracts from their authenticity, like when magazine editors Photoshop models' bodies to unrealistic proportions or when Joseph Stalin had Leon Trotsky and other perceived adversaries removed from pictures and thus, to an extent, history.

Most cases of photo manipulation are not quite so extreme, particularly when it comes to postcard production. It is generally safe to assume that most postcard images, though altered, are not completely distorted and that what we see in these pictures more or less resembles what actually existed. Thus, despite their limitations, postcards can still be useful historical resources. Not only can postcards give us a sense of the aesthetic values of the period in which they appeared, the fact that they are artificial leads us to ask useful questions about the social and cultural values of the people who created and consumed them. What people and places proved worthy of depiction on postcards? Who or what was typically ignored as postcard subjects? How were different people and places portrayed? What ideals and stereotypes do the images convey? In helping us to uncover this sort of information, postcards can lead us to a deeper understanding of the past.

Vintage Views of the Flower City

In her study of photographic postcards in the early twentieth century, Rosamond Vaule identified the view card as the most common type of postcard, and this certainly rings true for the library's collection, more than 70 percent of which falls into the "view card" category.³⁰ Depicting scenes of busy streets, skylines, buildings, parks, landmarks, and other locations both spectacular and mundane, view cards appeal to tourists and locals alike, who buy them as souvenirs and as a way of showing family and friends what the places they visit look like. (See Figures 19 & 20 and 21.) For those unable to travel, Valerie Monahan



Figures 19 & 20. An exterior view of George Eastman's grand estate on East Avenue, sent from a visitor in 1926 to her son in Pennsylvania.

notes, postcard views provide an opportunity to see new and distant locales that they could not otherwise experience, often offering “off the beaten track” scenes (Figure 22) not typically found in guide books or brochures.³¹ High vantage points (Figure 23) similarly capture interesting perspectives that the average viewer seldom sees.³² Among the handful of view cards in the library’s collection that actually contain messages, notes such as “Thot [sic] perhaps you would want this picture where Aunt L. died”³³ and “The cross x indicates where I go to have teeth filled”³⁴ suggest how view cards enabled correspondents to share in each other’s lives despite physical separation.

The charm of view cards lies in their novelty, their beauty, and their ability to capture a sense of place in time. However modified by the production process, scenes of unpaved streets, outmoded forms of transportation, outdated fashions, and unfamiliar skylines can give us an idea of what things used to look like and how people experienced everyday life. (See Figures 24 and 25.)



Figure 21. A picturesque scene selected by a visitor in 1908 to show a correspondent in Buffalo that “R.[ochester] is quite a town.”



Figure 22. An “off-the-beaten-track” scene in Rochester’s Durand-Eastman Park, published by Scrantom, Wetmore & Co. after 1907.



Figure 23. A “birds-eye view” of Main Street, looking east from the Powers Building, circa 1912.



Figure 24. This busy street scene provides a sense of what Downtown Rochester was like circa 1915.

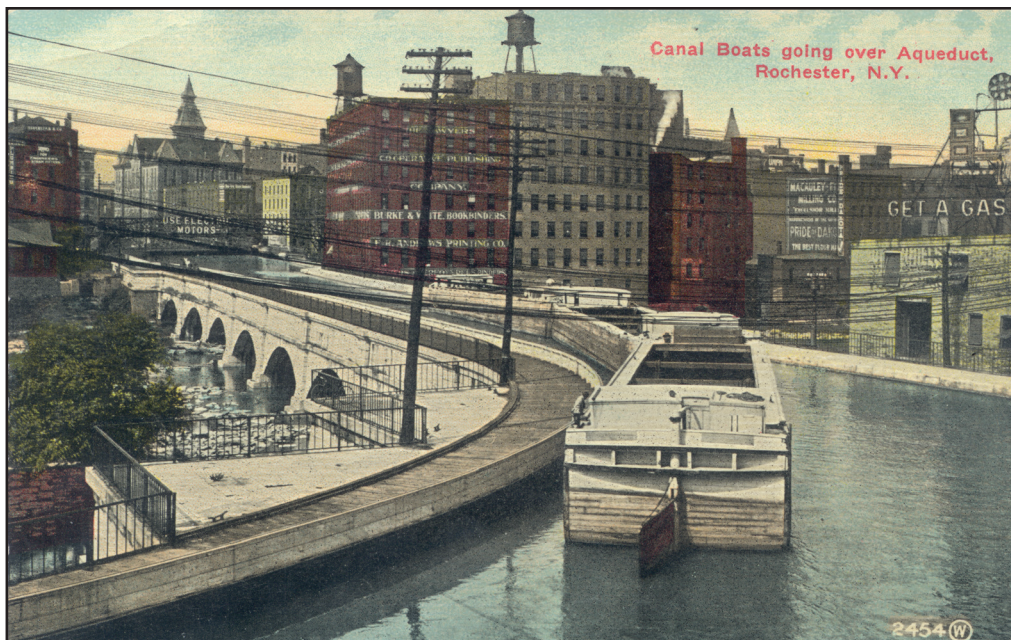


Figure 25. An aqueduct once carried the Erie Canal over the Genesee River, as depicted in this postcard scene from 1911.

Truly, some of the most enticing postcard views are of natural landscapes. Scenes of parks, waterways, vegetation, and wildlife can often convey the beauty of an area better than a visitor could describe it in words. Not surprisingly, a number of the postcards in the Rochester Public Library’s collection feature the Genesee River and its waterfalls (Figure 26). In addition to being visually striking, the river is a historically important natural resource. Offering a constant supply of fast-moving water that could be used to power mills, the Genesee attracted speculators to this area beginning in the late 1780s. By the mid-nineteenth century, an abundance of gristmills led to the nickname “Flour City,” with flour production reaching over half-a-million barrels a year by the 1850s. This development was fostered by the arrival of the Erie Canal in 1823, which intersected the river and enabled goods and people to



Figure 26. This postcard, published in 1904, offers a serene view of the Genesee River’s Middle Falls and the natural beauty that surrounds them.



Figure 27. James Vick's seed company helped Rochester become the country's leading seed producer in the late nineteenth century. After Vick died in the 1880s, his sons took over the business. This postcard, published around 1910, includes a list of tips for spring planting and advertises seeds, bulbs, plants, and manure, noting that the company was an exclusive agent of "Genuine Peruvian Guano."



Figure 28. The City created Highland Park out of land donated to it by local nurserymen George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry. Designed by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the park features a world-class plant and flower collection, as seen in this postcard view of Rhododendron Valley in bloom, circa 1910.

be shipped to and from what is now downtown Rochester, supporting the economic and physical growth that fueled America's first boomtown. Fittingly, the canal is also a prevalent subject in the library's postcard collection.³⁵

Even as Rochester was in its prime as America's leading flour producer, another industry was emerging that would transform the "Flour City" into the "Flower City." In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, nurserymen like George Ellwanger, Patrick Barry, Charles Crosman, and James Vick established acres of blossoming fields and blooming hot houses that boosted the city's economic success, and its aesthetic appeal. When Ellwanger and Barry donated land to the city to be used as a public park in the 1880s, city leaders hired the renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to design it, and a world-class urban park system was born. Anchored by Genesee

Valley, Highland, Maplewood, and Seneca parks, and enhanced by several neighborhood parks and squares throughout the city, Rochester's park system is one of only four in the country planned by the talented landscape designer. The beauty of this system and the historical importance of Rochester's nineteenth-century flower and seed industry make local flower, park, and garden views essential components of Rochester's postcard collection (Figures 27 and 28).³⁶

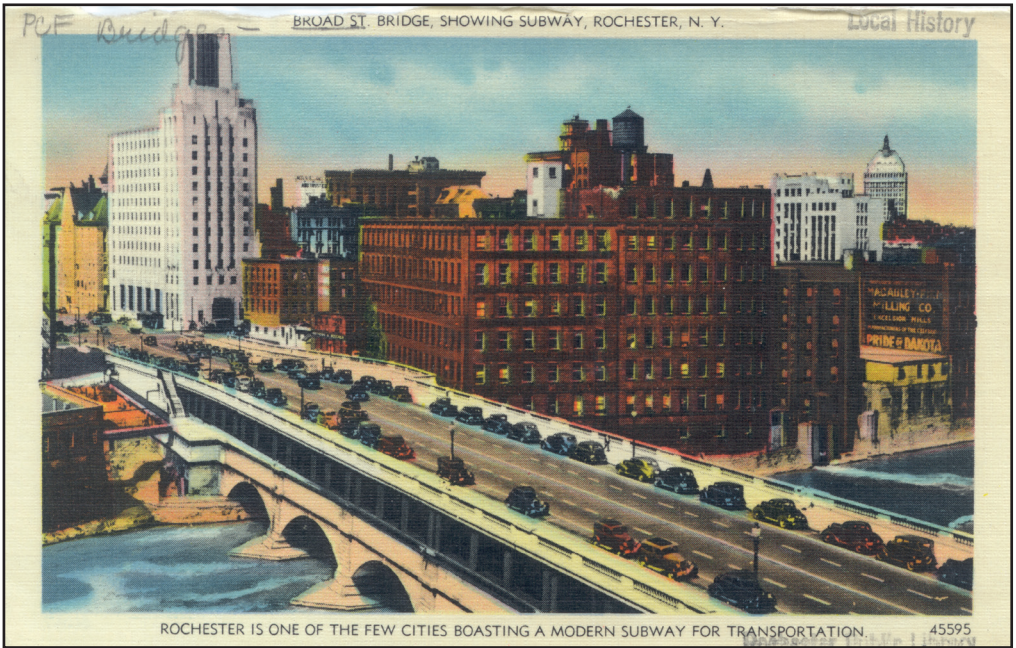


Figure 29. “Rochester is one of the few cities boasting a modern subway for transportation,” announces this postcard of the Broad St. Bridge, circa 1930s.



Figure 30. This postcard featuring the Powers Building was published by Scrantom, Wetmore & Co. as a souvenir for Rochester's Industrial Exposition, October 1908.

The home-grown pride and boosterism that view cards express applies to both natural and urban settings, alike. As one mid-twentieth-century postcard of the Broad Street Bridge points out, “Rochester is one of the few cities boasting a modern subway for transportation” (Figure 29).³⁷ A card published by the bookseller Scrantom, Wetmore & Co. proudly notes the attractiveness and innovative construction of the Powers Building in which it was housed (Figure 30). Not all view cards convey civic pride so explicitly, but as Vaule argues, the sheer act of depicting a place on a postcard automatically enhances its status. Scenes of buildings, bridges, and other monuments celebrate not only the structures themselves, but the accomplishments of the people who built, lived, and worked in them.³⁸

Culture and Community

As windows on the past, postcards not only provide an idea of what a place once looked like, they also show us what people once did. The social and cultural life that is depicted on postcards gives us a sense of what people valued, how they spent their free time, and how they wanted to be perceived.

Though “leisure time” was not a concept familiar to many Americans prior to the Civil War, by the late nineteenth century, a substantial number of citizens were laboring fewer



Figure 31. The Virginia Reel, a popular amusement park ride depicted in this 1912 postcard, was one of many attractions that awaited visitors to Ontario Beach Park in the early twentieth century.

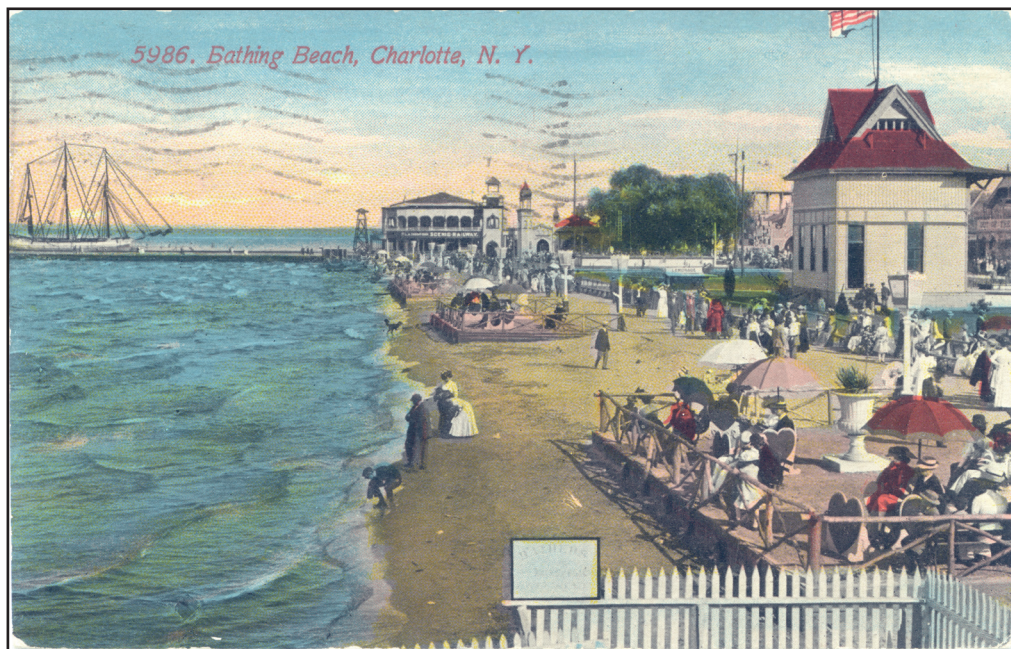


Figure 32. This view of Ontario Beach Park circa 1912 encompasses the variety of activities that the beachfront destination offered leisure goers in the early twentieth century.

hours and accruing more disposable income. Leisure industries featuring amusement parks, resorts, dance halls, theaters, and movie houses arose in cities such as Rochester to cater to this growing market. The rise and golden age of postcards coincided with the rise of the leisure industry in America, and postcards both portrayed and promoted these new sites of socialization.³⁹

Grand hotels and lakeside resorts accessible by newly developed trolley lines were among the most popular leisure destinations for Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these businesses published and distributed promotional postcards depicting the range of views and activities that awaited their guests.⁴⁰ Lake Ontario proved the preferred recreational spot for many Rochesterians and, as such, images of its camping sites, amusement park rides, bathing facilities, and hotels figure prominently in the library's postcard collection (see Figures 31, 32, and 45).⁴¹

The turn of the century also marked a golden era in the theater, and postcards necessarily played a role in this world as well. Actors and performers often had postcards made from studio portraits and distributed them to fans. Theater promoters circulated postcards to drum up business when play attendance was lacking.⁴² Today, postcards representing bygone venues such as the Bijou Dream (Figure 33) and Rattlesnake Pete's Saloon and Museum



Figure 33. The Bijou Dream Theater occupies the foreground of this souvenir postcard showing East Main Street at night, decked with lights and flags for the Shriners Convention held in Rochester in July 1911.



Figure 34. Peter Gruber, better known as Rattlesnake Pete, came to Rochester in 1893 and established a saloon and curiosities museum on Mill Street. This undated postcard depicts Pete in a snakeskin suit with his dogs, Bruno and Nero.

(Figure 34) serve both as unique souvenirs and historical documents chronicling Rochester's once popular leisure spots that have since disappeared from the local landscape.

While recreation-themed cards give the modern viewer a sense of the most cherished pastimes of times

past, Loriene Roy notes that postcards depicting intellectual and cultural spaces offer insight into a community's values and sense of self.⁴³ Educational institutions, courthouses, hospitals, and libraries projected an image of modernity and achievement and helped communities illustrate the way they wished to be viewed by the world.⁴⁴ Locally, postcards of the Eastman Theatre (Figure 35), the University of Rochester (Figure 36), the Memorial Art Gallery, and other lofty establishments lent Rochester an air of sophistication while suggesting the city merited consideration

as one of America's major urban centers. Such artifacts capture vivid social and cultural scenes that help bring Rochester's past, and the activities and values of those who lived it, to life.

Just as telling as what we see in these postcards of Rochester's social and cultural life is what we do not see in

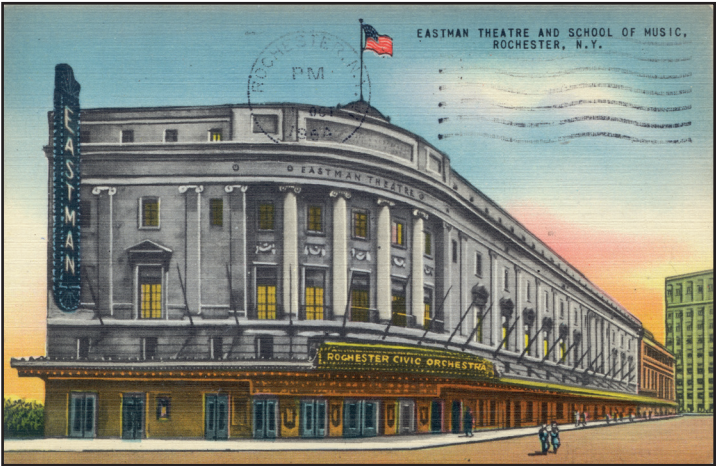


Figure 35. The Eastman Theatre and School of Music has stood on the corner of East Main and Gibbs streets since 1922. Depicted in this postcard from the 1960s, the world-class institution is a local point of pride.



Figure 36. This postcard depicting scenes of buildings affiliated with the prestigious University of Rochester predates 1955, when the Prince Street Campus closed its doors and the school's female students joined their male counterparts on the River Campus.

them. Despite the fact that Rochester's rapidly growing population became increasingly diverse between 1890 and 1915, the library's collection of postcards from this period overwhelmingly depicts a seemingly homogeneous white middle class.⁴⁵ There is little in these images to suggest the influx of new immigrant groups from eastern and southern Europe and only a handful of pictures representing the city's vibrant and long-standing German community. Images of the working class are confined to labor activities, masking their participation in and contribution to Rochester's growing leisure culture. Conspicuously absent from the collection are images of African Americans, an important, if small,



Figure 37. Kodak Tower, built in 1914, is an iconic Rochester landmark located in the historic High Falls District. It looms in the nighttime sky in this 1940s postcard.

demographic in early twentieth-century Rochester.⁴⁶ The only non-European group depicted in the library's collection is the Seneca Indians; a few postcards created from dioramas and artwork at the Rochester Museum & Science Center contain relatively respectful depictions of Pre-Columbian village life.⁴⁷

The lack of diversity reflected in the library's postcard collection suggests that a romanticized, sterilized view of Rochester resonated within the local postcard market. This view is deceptive. To look at these images, one would think Rochester was a bastion of unity and affluence at the turn of the twentieth century, without an inkling of the social inequalities that motivated Progressive-era reformers towards causes like education reform, housing and public health, temperance, and woman suffrage.

Business and Industry

Because of their compact size, colorful nature, and cost effectiveness, postcards proved an invaluable tool to businesses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Not only did countless Rochester companies utilize postcards to

endorse their wares and make their mark, one of the city's most renowned industries actually had a hand in the medium's development and democratization, as Vaule explains in her study of postcards and American photography.⁴⁸

Having recognized the potential of photography early on, George Eastman helped popularize this art form by simplifying camera use and making it more affordable, and the Rochester innovator saw similar possibilities when the postcard craze struck in the early 1900s. In 1902, Kodak introduced a special photo stock that allowed ordinary Americans to make their own postcards. From 1903 to 1941, the company produced several models of its "3A" camera, which used postcard-size film. For a time, Kodak also offered postcard processing and printing services at 10 cents a card.⁴⁹

Beyond facilitating the production and processing of amateur postcards, Kodak also made its own professional cards advertising these services. Most early examples featured the "Kodak Girl" with a 3A camera and a preprinted promotional message on the back.⁵⁰ Later cards vaunted Kodak's grandeur with images of the company's impressive State Street tower (Figure 37) and its expansive Kodak Park campus featuring record-high smokestacks (Figure 38).

Kodak was certainly not the only business to recognize the promotional uses of postcards. As Chris Connor explains, nineteenth-century advertisers had already established the practice of circulating trade cards, and postcards proved the logical next step.⁵¹ Ryan notes the various uses of promotional postcards: some announced to shop owners the impending visit of a sales representative; others functioned as an order, or as a receipt for

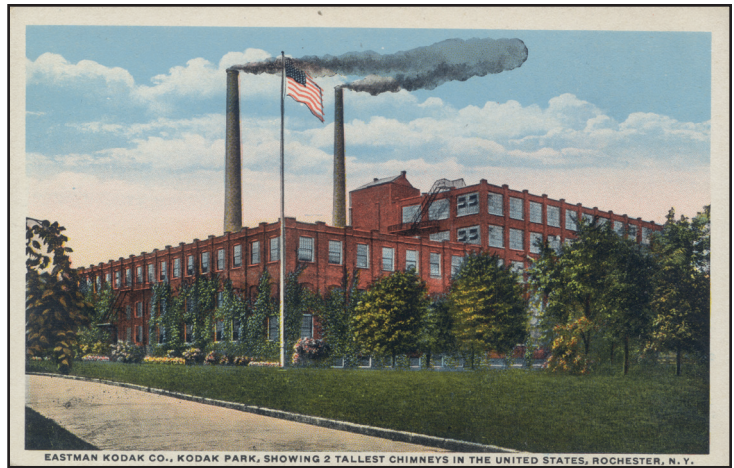


Figure 38. While Kodak Tower stood as Rochester's tallest building until the late 1960s, Kodak Park's smokestacks were, according to this 1915 postcard, the "two tallest chimneys in the United States."



Figure 39. This advertising postcard for the Kelso Laundry Co. depicts one of its horse-drawn delivery wagons, a familiar sight around Rochester circa 1910.

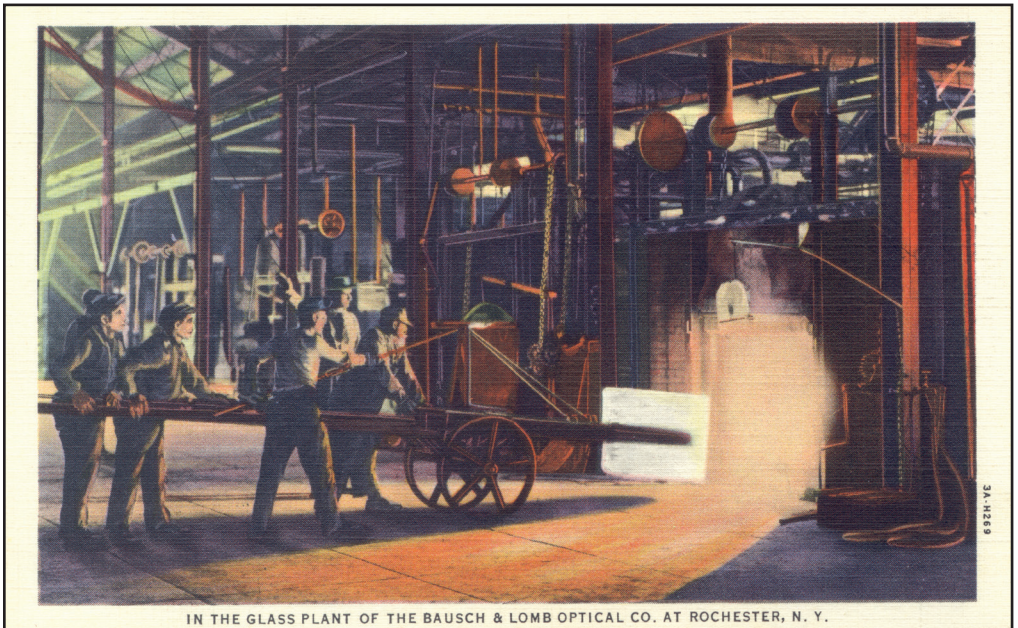


Figure 40. This undated postcard scene depicts workers at the Bausch & Lomb Optical Co. removing molten glass from an oven. As the back of the card boasts, "The Bausch & Lomb Optical Co. is the only optical manufacturer in America making its own optical glass for eyeglass lenses, microscopes, telescopes, photographic lenses, etc."

an order, between a retailer and a distributor.⁵² Advertisement postcards also reached consumers, either through private mail delivery or via magazine and newspaper inserts. Many household products and services advertised in this way (Figure 39). Banks and insurance companies also utilized the direct mail tactic, sending out postcards to promote their calendars for the coming year. Exterior views of factories and stores were among the most common types of advertisement

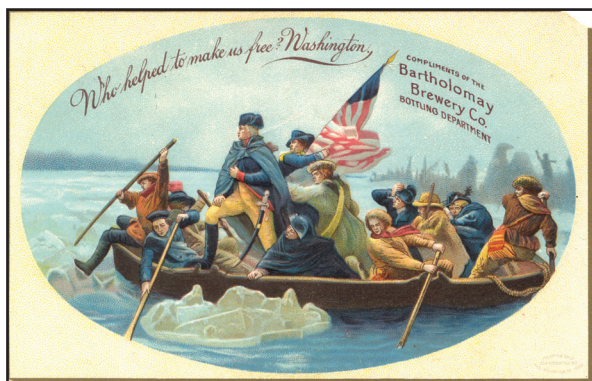


Figure 41. This advertising postcard, issued circa 1909, appropriates the classic scene of George Washington crossing the Delaware River and associates the Bartholomay Brewery with Washington's integrity and leadership. At one time Rochester's largest beer producer, Bartholomay switched to dairy production in 1919 as the 18th Amendment ushered in the Prohibition Era.

postcards, while a smaller number of cards depicted an industry's laborers at work (Figure 40).⁵³ Royalty and patriotic imagery were also prevalent advertising themes, explains Connor, as they linked a given business or industry with honesty and reliability (Figure 41).⁵⁴ Postcard ads were frequently designed to appeal to children in the hope that they would be saved and shown off to relatives. As such, images of children, puppies, kittens, and nursery rhyme characters are often found on advertisements from the classic postcard era.⁵⁵

Early twentieth-century companies knew that the public's penchant for collecting and displaying postcards meant that their postcard ads were likely to reach a wide audience. The library's collection offers a number of examples of the different ways local businesses took advantage of this effective promotional tool.

Historical Postcards

Though postcards are primarily viewed as souvenirs today, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they served important roles in the unfolding of historical events. An inexpensive and efficient means of communication, postcards were frequently used to disseminate news, correspond from afar, and promote political campaigns.

At the turn of the twentieth century, local photographers captured newsworthy events on film, then produced and sold postcards of the photos, often on the same day. As such, the postcard represented an important news medium. The most popular and best-selling news-based



Rochester, N. Y. Fire February 26, 1904

No. 1650 National Art View Co. N. Y. City.

Figure 42. A “newsy” postcard depicting the 1904 fire that destroyed three blocks of Rochester’s downtown shopping district, including the original building of the Sibley, Lindsay & Curr Co.

postcards depicted disasters such as shipwrecks, floods, and fires, providing viewers (and voyeurs) with a level of detail and intimacy unattainable by the printed word alone (Figure 42).⁵⁶

Postcards took on new roles in times of war. Ryan notes that during World War I, the British government issued cards with preprinted sentiments that soldiers could send from the front. Personal messages were outlawed due to fear that pertinent information might reach the enemy. The YMCA distributed similar cards to American troops after the United States entered the war. Traditional postcards without prewritten messages were later circulated as well.⁵⁷

Elena Danielson explains that postcards had distinct advantages over letters as a form of wartime correspondence. Because they lacked envelopes, postcards passed through military censors’ screenings

more rapidly than letters. As an added bonus, the postcard’s limited space allowed soldiers to reassure relatives of their safety without creating the pressure of composing an elaborate message.⁵⁸ War-themed postcards usually promoted patriotism and the justness of the conflict while disparaging the enemy. Others presented sanitized depictions of the war, or images of troops on the home front. Some fortunate family members received real-photo postcards featuring a portrait of their loved one, often taken by provincial photographers overseas (Figure 43).⁵⁹

Postcards also figured prominently in political campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ryan points out how thoughtfully framed photographic portraits could reinforce a candidate’s image as honest and trustworthy, while derogatory cartoons were often used to belittle opponents.⁶⁰ In 1908, more than 50 different postcard companies threw their hats in the ring for the famous three-way presidential race between William Howard Taft, Theodore

Roosevelt, and William Jennings Bryan.⁶¹ Though their place in presidential campaigns has diminished since that contest, postcards continued to serve as valuable tools for local politicians in the twentieth century. In Rochester, candidates vying for positions ranging from family court judge to congressional representative mailed out postcards emblazoned with their portrait to both inform constituents of their policies and to remind them of an impending election date (Figure 44). Depicting what were once current events, historical postcards are now a valuable record of our past, enshrining some of our community's notable figures and affairs.

Conclusion

As historical artifacts, postcards can offer a valuable first-hand perspective on the past. As with any primary source, however, one must approach postcards critically, keeping in mind that they are prescriptive rather than descriptive. The images on postcards tend to embody ideals as opposed to reality, depicting how people wanted things to be seen and not necessarily how things actually appeared. As such, they can reveal a lot about people's values, often proving more informative in what they neglect than in what they expose.

The collection of postcards at the Rochester Public Library captures a range of subjects from Rochester's past, chronicling the perspectives and activities of our predecessors. The collection is available for public use in the Local History & Genealogy Division, with any number of stories just waiting for the next inquisitive researcher to uncover. The library's exhibition, *Greetings from Rochester*, is on display through September 2016 with plans for a digital version in the future.



Figure 43. A portrait-cum-postcard of an unidentified World War I soldier.

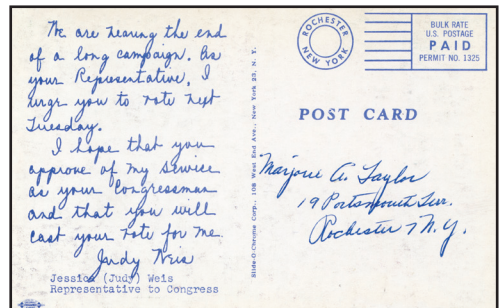


Figure 44. Jessica (Judy) Weis was Rochester's first Congresswoman. Judging by its preprinted message, this postcard was used by Weis during the reelection campaign for either her second (1960) or third (1962) term.

Endnotes

1. Library staff has digitized the majority of the postcards in the library's collection and has made them available for public use on the *Rochester Images* website (<http://www3.libraryweb.org/lh.aspx?id=927>). Interested patrons can view the original postcards in the library's Local History & Genealogy Division, 2nd floor, Rundel Memorial Building, 115 South Avenue, Rochester, NY.
2. Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard & Its Origins* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1966), 46; Historian, United States Postal Service, "Stamped Cards and Postcards," *About USPS.com*, 1, accessed June 14, 2016, <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/stamped-cards-and-postcards.pdf>.
3. According to a USPS Historian, customers continued to mail more postal cards than postcards until the mid-1960s, at which point postal card use declined while postcard use rose. Interestingly, this trend corresponds to the first appearance of a postal card with illustrations, perhaps bringing the previously simple, unadorned postal card into too direct a competition with the traditionally decorative postcard. Historian, USPS, "Stamped Cards and Postcards," 2, 4.
4. Chris Connor, *Miller's Postcards: A Collector's Guide* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2000), 6. Historian, USPS, "Stamped Cards and Postcards," 2.
5. Connor, 6–8.
6. Smithsonian Institution, "Greetings from the Smithsonian: Postcard History," *Smithsonian Institution Archives*, accessed January 8, 2016, <http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/postcard/postcard-history>.
7. Postcard, "Entrance to Mount Hope Cemetery," rpc0455a, Local History Postcard Collection, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, NY.
8. Postcard, "Jonathan Child House with message," rpc0034d, Local History Postcard Collection, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, NY.
9. Dorothy B. Ryan, *Picture Postcards in the United States, 1893–1918* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1982), 34.
10. Ryan, 15.
11. Ryan, 20–24.
12. Ryan, 22.
13. Historian, USPS, "Delivery: Monday through Saturday since 1863," *About USPS.com*, 1, accessed June 14, 2016, <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/delivery-monday->

- through-saturday.pdf; Historian, USPS, “Rural Free Delivery,” *About.USPS.com*, accessed June 14, 2016, <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/rural-free-delivery.pdf>;
- Historian, USPS, “Stamped Cards and Postcards,” 3–5.
14. Historian, USPS, “Stamped Cards and Postcards,” 4.
15. For more on the relationship between the rise of the telephone and the decline of the postcard, see Daniel Gifford, *American Holiday Postcards, 1905–1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2013), 82–85.
16. Historian, USPS, “Stamped Cards and Postcards,” 5.
17. Ryan, *Picture Postcards*, 26–32.
18. John Ritter, “Having a Wonderful Time,” *Times-Union*, March 14, 1978.
19. Mitch Broder, “Picture-perfect Rochester,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, March 16, 1984.
20. Staff, *The Picture Postcard*, 62.
21. Alan Petrusis, “Postcard Publishers, Printers, and Distributors of Note,” *MetroPostcard.com*, accessed January 8, 2016, <http://www.metropostcard.com/metropcpublishers.html>.
22. Ryan, *Picture Postcards*, 26–32.
23. Petrusis, “Postcard Publishers.”
24. Petrusis, “Postcard Publishers.”
25. Ryan, *Picture Postcards*, 146–149; Petrusis, “Postcard Publishers.”
26. For a discussion of the legal extension of copyright protection to photographs in the mid-nineteenth century, see Christine Haight Farley, “The Lingering Effects of Copyright’s Response to the Invention of Photography,” *University of Pittsburgh Law Review* 65 (2004): 385–456. Accessed via the *Social Science Research Network* website on June 16, 2016, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=923411.
27. Ryan, *Picture Postcards*, 149.
28. Social and cultural critics from Susan Sontag to the American Medical Association have weighed in on the effects of photography on our perception of reality. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973); Lindsay Goldwert, “AMA Takes Stand on Photoshop,” *NewYorkDailyNews.com*, June 24, 2011, accessed June 16, 2016, <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/fashion/ama-takes-stand-photoshop-medical-association-altering-contributes-unrealistic-expectations-article-1.126921#ixzz1QUW2THCf>.
29. Sontag, *On Photography*, 6–7.
30. Rosamond B. Vaule, *As We Were: American Photographic Postcards, 1905–1930* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2004), 67–74.

31. Valerie Monahan, *An American Postcard Collector's Guide* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1981), 17.
32. Vaule, *As We Were*, 74.
33. Postcard, "Hahnemann Hospital, Rochester, N.Y.," rpc1015a, Local History Postcard Collection, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, NY.
34. Postcard, "Triangle Building, Rochester, N.Y.," rpc0389a, Local History Postcard Collection, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, NY.
35. For more on the role of waterways in Rochester's settlement and early development see Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water-Power City, 1812–1854* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945).
36. For more on the creation and development of Rochester's public parks, see Katie Eggers Comeau, "125 Years of Rochester's Parks," *Rochester History* 75, no. 2 (Fall 2013).
37. Postcard, "Broad St. Bridge, showing subway, Rochester, N.Y.," rpc0174a, Local History Postcard Collection, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, NY. Rochester's subway operated from 1927 until 1956. It crossed the Genesee River under the Broad Street Bridge in the former bed of the Erie Canal aqueduct.
38. Vaule, *As We Were*, 123.
39. For more on the rise of Rochester's leisure industry, see Emily Morry, "Summerville Garden in Bloom," *Democrat & Chronicle*, June 17, 2013.
40. Vaule, *As We Were*, 157.
41. For more about Lake Ontario as a popular recreational spot for Rochesterians, see Kyle Somerville, "'This is where I love to go': The (Re)creation of Place at Ontario Beach Park," *Rochester History* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2013).
42. Connor, *Miller's Postcards*, 22.
43. Lorie Roy, "A View of Main Street: The Use of Postcards in Historic Preservation," in *Postcards in the Library: Invaluable Visual Resources*, ed. Norman D. Stevens (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1995), 142.
44. Roy, 142.
45. For more about Rochester's population growth and diversification at the turn of the twentieth century, see Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: The Quest for Quality, 1890–1925* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 145–167.
46. According to one source, there were around 1,000 African Americans living in Rochester in 1915, constituting less than 1 percent of the city's population. McKelvey, *Quest for Quality*,

157–158.

47. Although there are no dates on these cards from the museum, their shiny finish indicates that they were made after World War II. For a breakdown of how collectors have defined different postcard eras see Historian, USPS, “Stamped Cards and Postcards,” 5.

48. Vaule, *As We Were*, 41.

49. Vaule, 53.

50. Vaule, 57.

51. Connor, *Miller’s Postcards*, 38.

52. Ryan, *Picture Postcards*, 71.

53. Ryan, 80–86.

54. Connor, *Miller’s Postcards*, 38.

55. Connor, *Miller’s Postcards*, 38.

56. Connor, *Miller’s Postcards*, 38.

57. Ryan, *Picture Postcards*, 107.

58. Elena S. Danielson, “‘Patriotic and Profitable’: The World War I Postcards in the Hoover Institution Archives,” in *Postcards in the Library: Invaluable Visual Resources*, ed. Norman D. Stevens (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1995), 95.

59. Connor, *Miller’s Postcards*, 42–45.

60. Ryan, *Picture Postcards*, 94–96.

61. Ryan, 91.

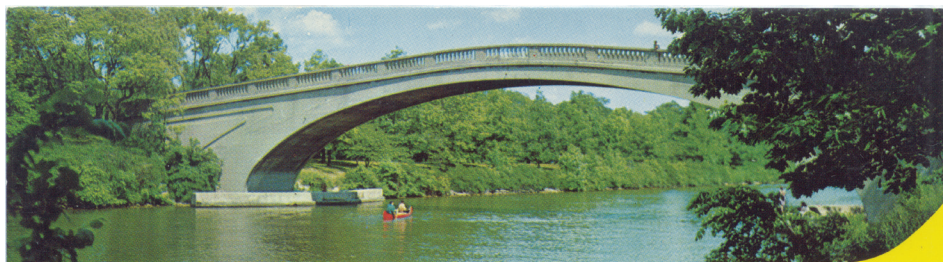


Figure 45. Grand hotels like the Hotel Ontario at Charlotte's Ontario Beach Park, depicted in this postcard circa 1910, were popular destinations for early twentieth-century vacationers.

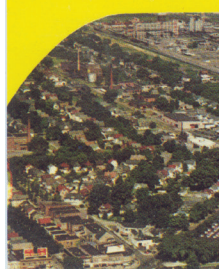
About the Author



Michelle Finn works as a Historical Researcher at the Rochester Public Library and has served as Deputy Historian for the City of Rochester since 2012. She holds a PhD in American History and a Graduate Certificate in Gender and Women's Studies from the University of Rochester, and she currently teaches a course in U.S. women's history at Monroe Community College. Finn heads the library's Local History Exhibits Team and sits on the Editorial Board of the *Rochester History* journal. She would like to thank her fellow board members and the journal's staff for their support in writing this article, with a special thanks to her colleague and friend, Emily Morry, for her help creating the exhibit on which it is based.



Greetings from: **ROCHESTER** *New York*



HELLO FROM
ROCHESTER, N.Y.
THE FLOWER CITY



A selection of souvenir postcards from Rochester, NY, dating from the second half of the twentieth century.



The address side of a variety pack of souvenir postcards published by the Rochester News Company in 1937. This set of 18 views could be mailed in its entirety for 1½ cents.



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