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ROCHESTER,
THE FLOWER CITY

1855-1890

BY

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FOREWORD

THE ROCHESTER OF 1855 was a young city, still in its early forties. The rapid growth of its villagehood, spurred by the Erie Canal, had transformed the frontier hamlet of 1812 into one of America's first boom towns, which then emerged, by 1834, as the world's outstanding Flour City. Sobered by the depression of the late 1830's, Rochester had acquired a measure of stability through a diversification of its commercial and industrial activities. Mature urban status on the mid-century pattern had been attained by 1854, enabling old residents to pride themselves on the remarkable developments they had witnessed.¹

Ranking seventeenth in size among American cities in 1855, Rochester had already developed most of the natural advantages of its site, though few citizens yet realized that fact. The community's water-power era was drawing to a close. More than in the case of many favorably located rivals, more than during its own earlier years, the city's future would depend upon the inspiration and skill of its inhabitants. Time was required to bring these new forces into play and the Flower City, as it was now called, slipped back to twenty-second in rank during the sixties when several younger cities forged ahead. However, renewed vitality in the seventies and eighties enabled Rochester to maintain that position throughout this period, thus retaining its character as a dynamic medium-sized city, fairly typical of the new urban communities which were becoming increasingly influential in American life.

But the city of the mid-fifties did not simply grow older and stouter with the passing years. Rather it was, in a sense, born again during the period of this study, for a cosmopolitan era was dawning in Rochester as in a dozen other American cities. The influx of new immigrants had already planted sturdy colonies in several urban centers where their cultural contributions as well as their labor skills soon commanded recognition. The contributions were not, of course, welcomed by all, nor accepted without modification. In fact, the long, slow process of assimilation, by which the older Yankee stock and the immigrant folk were transformed into the new Americans of the late eighties, provides a central theme for this volume, and a major theme for American history generally during the period.

Rochester's cosmopolitan decades witnessed the birth of new indus-

¹ Blake McKelvey, *Rochester the Water-Power City: 1812-1854* (Cambridge, 1945).

tries and, even more important, the development of new economic relationships. It was *the* age of enterprise, and the city's growth and well-being waited upon the emergence of individual and institutional leadership. Thus a sense of waiting, of hesitancy, characterized the late fifties, when a number of economic and civic dilemmas plagued the Flower City, and the Civil War prolonged the period of uncertainty. Reconstruction days, fraught with political and economic corruption, brought many trying experiences, but already the seeds were being sown, the skills learned, the inventions patented and the institutions founded, out of which the more dynamic city of the eighties would arise.

✓ The city's renewed vitality, with a population growth of 200 per cent in these thirty-five years, increased the urgency and complexity of its civic problems. Rochester's experiences (with its water system, for example) were characteristic of urban communities generally, as were the richer opportunities in social and cultural fields and the greater scope for debauchery. But the accomplishments—and likewise the failures—were in each case the work of individual citizens, whether a few or many, and generally marked a trend in the community's development. Final solutions were seldom reached, for each decision or program raised fresh problems.

A number of outstanding personalities emerged, including representatives, as the years advanced, of the new ethnic groups. Many provided real leadership in one or more fields, and although I have endeavored to limit the number of names introduced, several score inevitably appeared so frequently that they could not be omitted. Nevertheless, amidst the turbulent play of forces active in Rochester during these years, no single figure gained the commanding position held by a few individuals in earlier and later periods of the city's history. It was in fact an era of institutional ascendance. Corporations, unions, societies, teams, parties, churches, and less formal groups not only supplied the intimate everyday associations which the smaller neighborhood had once afforded, but likewise provided a more impersonal, if not as yet a more stable, leadership in community affairs.

Democratic processes were maintained on the whole, although in many fields representation was becoming most indirect. Citizens discovered, sometimes painfully, the need for constant vigilance against corruption and demagoguery; they made some progress toward an understanding of the technical aspects of government and industry, and learned to regard one another more tolerantly. Despite the wide dissimilarities of various groups and the deepening rift between capital and labor, a wholesome social life emerged, adding much to the well-being of most citizens. Several trends were to carry on into a later era, but 1890 found Rochester with many social, economic, and civic di-

lemmas of the previous three decades resolved and ready to face the new problems with fresh spirit.



Rochester's cosmopolitan decades were crowded with complex developments in which innumerable economic, civic, and cultural forces played a part. Perhaps it would have been simpler for the historian and his reader had the facts relating to the railroads, the schools, and similar subjects been sorted out and presented as separate strands of the city's history, but the resulting picture would have been false, for all of these developments were interrelated throughout the period. To isolate them would be to untie the knots and utterly to destroy the pattern. Yet of course it was the development or displacement of the old railroads, the old schools, the old ideas, that comprised the facts and the events of history, and their movement can only be seen in time and against the background of other aspects of the contemporary city. I have therefore tried to tell Rochester's story in a series of natural stages: the late fifties, a period of hesitancy and indecision; the Civil War and its travail; the new hopes and failures of Reconstruction days; and finally the larger achievements of the late seventies and eighties.

The over-all pattern of economic, civic, social, and cultural activities became progressively more complex as both the city and the civilization of which it was an integral part matured. At one point the character of the population seemed most directly related to the economic development; at a later date its influence on civic and political affairs seemed paramount, while in the eighties the final significance of the cosmopolitan trends appeared in the social life of the entire city.

Throughout the progress of the research for this study, I endeavored to make a strictly critical analysis of the records and to weigh the community's activities according to the standards of the day; however, I have been more interested in interpreting than in criticizing its history. It has been necessary of course to select and arrange material, but I have endeavored to preserve the contemporary setting of events and to recount them as they seemed to command attention by the rise and fall of emphasis in the daily papers—those invaluable community diaries of which Rochester had four or five throughout the period. Other sources have perhaps aided me to see beneath the surface, while the perspective of a later period has brought some further understanding, but I have not sought to pass a twentieth century judgment on a nineteenth century community.

Rochester, N. Y.
April 1, 1948.

BLAKE MCKELVEY

CONTENTS

I. NEW VISTAS: DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC: 1855-1860	1
Population Trends. Economic Transition. Obstacles to Industrial Expansion.	
II. NEW ASPIRATIONS: CIVIC AND CULTURAL: 1855-1860	26
Civic Dilemmas. New Institutional Responsibilities. Social and Political Trends.	
III. THE IMPACT OF CIVIL WAR	61
Mobilization for War. Home-Front Adjustments. Getting On with the War.	
IV. POSTWAR ECONOMY: 1865-1875	98
A New Industrial Pattern. Commerce, Finance, and Labor. Panic and Depression.	
V. CIVIC AND POLITICAL RECONSTRUCTION: 1865-1875	127
A Changing Populace. Civic Denouements. <u>Educational Institutions.</u> The Press and Factional Politics.	
VI. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRENDS: 1865-1875	161
The Domestic and Social Scene. Postwar Pastimes. <u>Religion and Learning.</u>	
VII. ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND INTEGRATION: 1875-1890	200
The Road to Recovery. Labor and Management Organization. Industrial Revival.	
VIII. NEW INDUSTRIAL GROWTH	236
Tobacco, Beer, and Patent Medicine. Technical and Scientific Industries. Public Utilities.	
IX. DEMOCRACY IN THE CIVIC SCENE: 1875-1890	257
Civic Achievements. Public and Private Charity.	
X. DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION AND POLITICS: 1875-1890	284
<u>Educational Trends.</u> Politics and the Press.	
XI. AN INTELLECTUAL AWAKENING: 1875-1890	303
Religion in an Urban Setting. New Intellectual Vistas.	
XII. THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: 1875-1890	331
A Renaissance in the Arts. Sports and Amusements.	
XIII. TOWARD SOCIAL FULFILLMENT: 1875-1890	356
Enterprise or Status. Woman's Day. The Making of New Americans.	
INDEX	391