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Harriet E. Brown Dow

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Rochester, the City of Beginnings

by
Harriet E.
Brown Dow

Genesee Valley Historical Reprint Series



State University of New York at Genesee

Genesee Valley Historical Reprint Series: Rochester, the City of Beginnings

In her 1919 address to the Rochester Historical Association, H.E.B. Dow juxtaposes the city's history of social tolerance and forward thinking with its religious conscience. This book is a must-read for those who wish to find out how anti-slavery, women's suffrage, the temperance movement, the modern cult of spiritualists, anti-masonry, and even the raid on Harper's Ferry had their beginnings in Rochester, NY.

Discover the names and influences of many prominent Rochesterians, most of whom now rest in the city's famous Mount Hope Cemetery, who had a hand in shaping the nation's nineteenth century politics and American industry -- from the issuance of paper money by the federal government to the founding of Western Union, the Pacific Railroad, the mail order industry, the Republican Party, voting machines, and much more.

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ROCHESTER, THE CITY OF BEGINNINGS (1)

One cannot do justice to Rochester, a City of Beginnings, without a word about the beginnings of Rochester. This fair city of ours was founded by remarkable men. There was an unusual blending of the New England Puritan, with the saving grace of the Southern Cavalier. God-fearing men, they laid the city's foundation upon the eternal principles of righteousness — a city where the widest tolerance and the utmost catholicity of opinion prevail, and yet a city marked by unswerving devotion to the faith of the fathers. The finest tribute ever given her was when Frederick Douglass said: "I chose Rochester for my home because I know of no city in the Union where I could've located with less resistance and a larger measure of sympathy and cooperation."

Rochester has been called — perhaps not inaptly — "a hot-bed of 'Isms.'" She has permitted them, it is true, but adopted them very cautiously, none unreservedly, seldom extensively. So responsive has she always been to every forward movement, it is hard, often, to differentiate between initiation and adoption. A prominent New York woman lecturing in Rochester during the late war, prefaced her address by saying: "I am very glad to visit your city, for very often when we are considering an advanced step in New York — something which seems very new to us — someone is pretty sure to say: 'Why don't you send to Rochester and find out how it works? It's been in operation quite a long time there.'"

The most far-reaching enterprise our country has known — the American Bible Society — originated in Rochester, started first in 1821, amplified in 1825 by methods which, in their development, placed the Bible within universal reach and stimulated the desire for its possession. Of this movement, it has been truly said: "The result of it can be only estimated in eternity and by

(1) Address delivered at the Rochester meeting of the New York State Historical Association, October 9, 1919.

the light which the Judgment Day shall shed upon the affairs of men."

Public opinion in Rochester forbade the Erie Canal boats to ring bells or blow whistles when passing through the town on Sunday. A strenuous effort was made to prevent all traffic on the Lord's Day, failing which, the leading citizens built a fine line of boats limited to week day travel. It was a costly but willing venture for conviction's sake. The effort was not a financial success, but the benefits were very evident in a strengthened observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest and spiritual development and as showing to the world the calibre of the Rochester conscience.

A tract society was almost coincident with the first settlement. The Woman's Missionary Organization is a mid-nineteenth century movement, but Rochester had a Female Missionary Society in 1818. This same year a Female Charitable Society and a non-denominational Sunday School were organized. This was some years before the churches awoke to the fact that Sunday School work belonged to them.

The first total abstinence address ever given in the world was made in Canandaigua, but almost immediately the work was taken to Rochester. General Riley, our old Temperance War Horse, always claimed Rochester as the mainspring and head center of the temperance movement. He, himself, delivered over 8000 temperance addresses and bestowed 6000 temperance medals in Europe and America. Jonathan Childs, the first Mayor of Rochester, resigned when he found he had to sign a liquor license. Rev. Penny, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, preached the first total abstinence sermon ever delivered in Ireland, some say in the British Isles. He also inaugurated a movement along these lines in Great Britain.

Largely through Rochester efforts and influence the Non-Imprisonment Act and the General Banking Law were passed by the Legislature, two of the most important measures, probably, in the history of the State. It was Judge E. Darwin Smith, as Justice of the Court of Appeals, who settled the power of the Federal Government to issue paper money as a war measure, a

decision of which Chief Justice Chase said that the effect on the credit of the government was equal to a victory on the battlefield.

The Hon. Freeman Clarke was Vice-President and Acting President of the State Whig Convention in 1850. In 1852, he was delegate to the National Whig Convention and in 1854 was Vice-President of the first Republican Convention held in the State of New York. He was Comptroller of the Currency during Lincoln's troubled administration. Judge Henry Rogers Selden is believed to have suggested the principles of the homestead exemption law which, modified and fitted to the exigencies of the time, has long been in force in many states and territories. The Selden family has always been identified with the legal, judicial and business enterprises of the city for nearly one hundred years. They have not only given the country some eminent and distinguished jurists, but have contributed as well very largely to the development of telegraph and motor truck industries. Judge H. R. Selden was one of the founders of the Republican party — a supporter of Fremont and Dayton in 1856.

The first Republican candidates elected in the Nation were John A. King and Henry Rogers Selden, when they became Governor and Lieutenant Governor, respectively, of New York State, the election occurring in November, 1856. Mr. Selden (afterwards Judge of the Court of Appeals), presided over the Senate at a time when skilled parliamentarians, belonging to a party hostile to the Republicans were influential, yet no dissent was ever made from his rulings, even the opposition acknowledging his impartiality and fairness.

Rochester led in the Anti-Slavery movement. The founder of the city, Colonel Rochester, a Southerner by birth, early freed his inherited slaves. In 1827, Gerrit Smith delivered a characteristic address here on Colonization of the negroes in Africa. "He was then," Henry B. Stanton writes, "thirty years of age, in glowing health, with a voice pronounced superior to Henry Clay's, a noble specimen of manly dignity and beauty." The Monroe County Anti-Slavery Convention held in Rochester in 1839 is the first one on record.

In the old Brighton Cemetery is the grave of William Clough Bloss; the inscription on his monument reads "A thinker in

advance of his age, and an orator upon whose lips the people hung." Mr. Bloss was one of the pioneers of Rochester, a promoter of the free school law, and one of the originators of the Anti-Slavery movement. In 1834 he published here one of the first papers in its interest called "The Rights of Man." In 1838 he advocated the equal suffrage rights of women to the ballot. He was one of the few friends of John Brown, who didn't go into hiding after the failure of Harper's Ferry, although he was undoubtedly cognizant of the affair. Mr. Bloss' son, Mr. Joseph Bloss, an honored citizen of Rochester, upon the recent celebration of his eightieth birthday, gave many reminiscences of those early days. As a boy he had frequently taken runaway slaves from his father's house, which was one of the underground railway stations, to the home of Frederick Douglass. He recalled going to hear John Brown lecture in the Court House. His father was seated on the platform. There is in the possession of a Rochester family a remarkably fine letter written by John Brown shortly before his execution.

From 1837 till his death in 1847, Rochester was the home of the courteous humanitarian statesman, Myron Holley, an earnest but not intemperate abolitionist, publisher of "The Free Man" and founder of the grand old Liberty Party — that party with but one plank in its platform, the abolition of slavery. At his grave in Mt. Hope Cemetery stands a stately monument with a medallion portrait by Carew which was erected to his memory through penny contributions by members of the Liberty Party. Its impressive dedication witnessed by six thousand people, was a historic event in Rochester.

Rochester was the northern terminus of the "Underground Railway;" Douglass was its superintendent — from 150 to 200 slaves passing through here yearly. There was never a recapture nor a disturbance of any nature in consequence of the city's abolition action and sentiment. In 1858, William Seward delivered in Rochester the memorable address in which he characterized the trouble between free and slave labor as the "irrepressible conflict," which became the shibboleth in the heated ante-bellum controversies which followed.

It was a great thing for Rochester to have Frederick Douglass living here during that exciting time. Oh, to have been one of the vast throng which packed Corinthian Hall to hear him pour forth the vials of his indignation over the iniquitous Fugitive Slave Bill. Douglass was the first to suggest to the Government enlisting negro soldiers. He edited his paper, the "North Star," here, the first paper in the world edited by a negro and ex-slave. The New York Herald advised Rochester to throw the "Nigger Printing Press" into the Genesee and banish its editor to Canada.

When the news came to Rochester of Lincoln's assassination, the dazed people with one accord gathered in the City Hall. Some addresses were made. Douglass, seated in the rear of the hall, was called for. Probably nothing ever heard in Rochester, perhaps anywhere else in the world, equalled the gifted black-man's tribute that sorrowful day to the great Emancipator.

Wandering over our southern hills during those troubled times two men might often be seen in earnest consultation, one a noble, impressive looking man, bearing in his strong face unmistakable signs of African descent and the other, grey haired, angular, Puritan faced. Did not the latter trace his descent from the Separatists of Scrooby? Who doubts he was spiritually one of Cromwell's Ironsides? It was John Brown of Ossawatimie, who, while a guest of Frederick Douglass, planned on our southern hillsides his memorable raid on Harper's Ferry. This fool-hardy venture never met the approval of Douglass. Nevertheless, quixotic though it was, it accomplished that for which it was not meant; it fanned the slumbering embers and hastened on the fratricidal war which accomplished for every slave, what John Brown hoped to do for a handful in Virginia.

" John Brown of Kansas,
He dared begin, but —
Losing, Won."

Little did it matter that the gallows awaited him, he gained that for which he did not seek — immortality.

Jesse Hawley, a whilom citizen of Rochester, writing from his debtors' prison in Canandaigua in 1807 a series of letters to the

"Genesee Messenger" under the signature "Hercules," brought to the attention of controlling minds a practical scheme for connecting Lake Erie with the Hudson River and Atlantic Ocean. He is generally conceded to be the Father of the Erie Canal, while to Myron Holley, next to Governor Clinton, is our country indebted for that great waterway which opened up the Middle West and made New York the Empire State. Without Holley's practical wisdom, energy and engineering skill, the construction of the Erie Canal would have been a failure. The initiative and consummation later for enlarging and improving it belongs to Henry O'Reilly, an Irish American and one of the most useful and far-sighted citizens Rochester has known.

It is, however, for his history of Rochester that he is best known. In 1826 Mr. Luther Tucker established the "Rochester Daily Advertiser," the first daily newspaper between the Hudson and the Pacific Ocean, and O'Reilly was its first editor. The "Times-Union" is the successor of the "Daily Advertiser." Through Mr. O'Reilly the plan which connected all telegraph lines in the United States, within a radius of 8000 miles, was projected, organized and effected. To his untiring effort, the success of modern telegraphy is largely due. The lines which he built one after another were, in their continuity, the longest range in the world. They were afterward consolidated and formed the basis of that great company "The Western Union," which is distinctly a Rochester enterprise, due to Rochester brains and capital. Mr. Isaac Elwood of this city was its first treasurer and secretary.

In Henry O'Reilly's employ was James Douglass Reid, a distinguished pioneer in the development of telegraphy. He had charge of developing the initial telegraph line, was the first superintendent of telegraphs, the employer of many boys who afterwards became famous, including Andrew Carnegie. He was the first employer of women in telegraph service, editor of the first electrical paper in the world and originator of the Signal "73." His home was for some time in Rochester, and at his grave in Mt. Hope the telegraphers have erected a fine monument, a shaft eleven feet high surmounted by Mr. Reid's bust in bronze.

Hiram Sibley of Rochester believed with Puck that he could girdle the earth in forty minutes. His plan was overland via Russia. To this end he spent large sums of money but ere his work was accomplished, Field had sunk his cable beneath the Atlantic, and Sibley's long line of poles in the frozen North was abandoned. No American ever received such signal honor and attention in Russia as did Mr. Sibley when he visited the land of the "White Czar."

On a handsome monument in Mt. Hope Cemetery, we read of Dr. Carner — another Rochesterian — that he was the Father of the Pacific Railroad, the plan of connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by railway originating with him.

In 1818, Mr. Everard Peck — to whom and his devoted wife much that is good in early Rochester is due — established the "Rochester Telegraph," a weekly Journal (the second in the city). Four years later a rather seedy young man entered his office and requested employment. Mr. Peck had no position to offer him but his kindly heart was touched when the applicant turned away almost in tears. So he impulsively made him a place — most fortunately for the needy applicant was Thurlow Weed, who, here in Rochester began a career, not only distinguished in journalism, but which, for sixty years, was one of the most potent factors in state and national politics. Probably no man ever wielded greater political influence than did this gifted editor — the President-maker, the Warwick of American politics for two generations. It was the "Rochester Telegraph" which first proposed John Quincy Adams for the Presidency and, before such a thing as a National Convention was known, a meeting of Rochester citizens was held, which placed his name in nomination.

Henry B. Stanton also began his distinguished editorial career on the "Rochester Telegraph" with Mr. Weed. It is his misfortune to be known as the husband of his wife, but he was a man of marked ability. Henry Ward Beecher said of him: "I think Stanton has all the elements of old John Adams, able, staunch, patriotic, full of principles, and always unpopular."

Into Weed's office one day a man came and told him about some mysterious tablets he had found, the inscription upon which

he wished published. He read extracts from something hidden in his hat. The sagacious editor declined the request and so Rochester escaped the notoriety of publishing the first Mormon Bible, for Mr. Weed's caller was Joseph Smith, the prophet himself. In 1830 Mr. O'Reilly editorially denounced Mr. Smith's pretensions as an absurdity. The pretender and his friend were delighted to see themselves in print and often reminded Mr. O'Reilly that the "Rochester Advertiser" introduced them to the world. It was the habit of Joseph Smith to come to Rochester every Monday morning and spend hours browsing over the books in the Alling Book Store. It would be interesting to know the kind of information or culture he was thus absorbing without money and without price.

It was in Rochester that William Morgan, a Virginian by birth and an officer veteran of the war of 1812, wrote his famous book, the so-called "Exposition of the Third Degree of Masonry." It was in 1826 that this one of "our numerous Dragon's teeth" was sown, and the dire effects of that tragic book are matters of history. Rochester's part in the fate of the unhappy author is not to her credit. Two or more of his captors were Rochester men. The mysterious carriage in which he was forced away was owned in Rochester and a Rochester man was in the boat with him that awful night when he was rowed out into the Niagara River and seen no more. Such at least is Thurlow Weed's version of the fate of that unfortunate man.

Rochester was the center of the "infected district," as it was called, and here the storm which shook the country from center to circumference, raged most fiercely. "I have seen many political and social contests in my day," writes Henry B. Stanton, "but in some respects I think the anti-Masonic feuds excelled them all." Thurlow Weed was a leader, the most radical (I may say, rabid) of the anti-Masons, and he founded an anti-Masonic paper in Rochester.

There was a more beneficent beginning a little later here. About the year 1825, Mr. Tousey, a Virginian who spent his summers in Rochester, brought some love apple seeds which he planted as a vegetable and, when they ripened, he gave a dinner

to eight gentlemen, at Christopher's, a leading hostelry, at which the fruit was served and needless to say not greatly enjoyed. So it was in Rochester that tomatoes were first grown and eaten as a vegetable. In 1830, Mr. Weed, one of Mr. Tousey's guests, introduced them in Albany.

Rochester has brightened all America with flowers. The systematic raising of flower seeds had its beginning here. There were scarcely a dozen varieties, and those only the commonest kind, to be purchased when James A. Vick began, in 1859, his transcendent labor of love and beauty — the flower seed industry, to which his name and our city are wedded. No man ever made himself so beloved by patrons he never saw the country over, as our genial seedsman, editor, scholar, gentleman, whose name is a household word wherever there are flower lovers. Drop a letter in the uttermost parts of the earth, directed simply to Vick Park, America, and it will come, as many have, direct to Rochester. Our city sent California her first fruit trees. Mr. Vick was the first dealer in the world to sell fruit and vegetable seeds by mail. In this respect, at least, he originated the mail order business.

Into a little house in Hydesville, a Rochester man, Mr. John B. Fox, moved his family one historic day in 1847, and soon they heard the mysterious rappings to which many are listening still. The house had the reputation of being haunted and noises heard were interpreted to mean a murder had been committed there and the body buried in the cellar. Several attempts to find it, however, failed. Strange to say, within a few years the cellar wall caved in and a human skeleton was disclosed, supposed to be that of the unfortunate peddler who was the first to break the eternal silence. So much attention was attracted to the place that Mr. Fox returned with his family to Rochester, but, alas, the rappings came also, being heard even in the car in which they journeyed. They moved into a house on Troup Street and here these weird sisters, the "Fox Girls," as they were known, established the modern cult of Spiritualism, or Spiritism, as our English friends prefer to call it. Spiritualists, the world over, commemorate March 31st, 1848, as the birthday of their cult, that

being the day that uncanny child of twelve years, Kate Fox, asked questions which the rappings answered. These were accepted as proof that communication with the unseen world where the dead are gone is possible. Rochester is thus the Bethlehem of the New Dispensation. "Laugh, ye who never had your dead come back, but do not take from me the comfort of my foolish dream," sang Alice Cary. Interpret the far-famed Rochester Rappings as we may, let us not forget the solace given many aching hearts, longing unutterably for "the sound of a voice that is still."

When the Hermit Nation was rousing herself from her age-long sleep and wished to take her place among the peoples of the earth, she appealed to America for guidance, and a Rochester man, the Hon. E. Pershine Smith, from his wide knowledge of international law, was sent to her. He was given a position akin to that of our Secretary of State. He made her treaties, established her foreign relations and rendered her signal service in breaking up the nefarious coolie traffic. He received distinguished and grateful homage from the Japanese government. This connects Rochester closely with the beginning of the great Japanese Empire as a world power. We are further indebted to Mr. Smith for coining the convenient word "telegram." Mr. Smith's granddaughter, Carrie Ballestier, Rochester born and bred, became the wife of Rudyard Kipling.

Rochester can hardly claim the beginning of the Woman's Rights Movement, but the association is very close. Our city was its Mecca, because it was the home of its ablest leader and advocate, Susan B. Anthony — one of the greatest women of her day. Rochester loved and honored her. At her death, she was given a public funeral, the City Hall bell tolling as she was borne to her last resting place — an honor never before accorded a woman.

Rochester women were the first to vote in a state and national election when, in 1872, Miss Anthony and some of her followers exercised that function. Their subsequent arrest and Miss Anthony's trial therefore, is a *cause celebre* in the history of that movement. The inspectors of election were the only ones jailed for that infraction of the law, but the women made their incarce-

ration a sort of perpetual banquet, showering every possible attention upon them. In 1868 an equal suffrage paper "The Revolutionist" was started in Rochester under Miss Anthony's management.

The mechanical part of shoemaking was so developed by Mr. Jesse Hatch as practically to revolutionize that industry, placing Rochester in the forefront of its modern beginning. In 1851 and 1852, Jesse Hatch & Son established in Rochester the first real shoe factory in the world. Prior to that, shoes were made in the rears of stores, in homes, or in places akin to the modern sweatshops. Mr. Hatch was the first to employ women here in shoemaking, the first in the world to employ them in a factory. During those early days, Miss Anthony said to Mr. Hatch: "Why don't you interest yourself in female labor?" "Madam," he replied, "if you will accompany me to my shop in the rear of the store, I will show you fifty women preparing uppers. Do you see that young woman over there? She is a clerk employed to wait on lady patrons, but she's going to leave Saturday because I requested her to reduce the size of her hoops so I could get behind the counter."

Rochester is the birthplace of the voting machine (Myers); the individual communion cup originated here (Forbes), and a Rochester church (The Central) was the first to adopt the innovation. The community chorus and the opening of school houses as civic centers originated in Rochester.

Powers Building in Rochester had the first elevator in the world outside of New York City, and when the building was erected it was one of the first two or three fire-proof buildings in the world. In fact, it is said that no city of its size in the world has so many useful inventions to its credit as Rochester. Among the latest is a machine which pops corn, butters it, puts it in a bag, hands it to the customer; and still another, a bed which makes itself. Our city has filled the museums of the world with casts of every known creature, historic or prehistoric, belonging to earth, sky or sea, through the inventive genius of that eminent scholar, renowned traveler and collector, Professor Henry A. Ward.

It was in Rochester that Roscoe Conkling made his historic speech denouncing George William Curtis in such scathing terms and that was the beginning of the great feud in the Republican party which fired Guiteau's pistol, defeated the Plumed Knight of Maine for the Presidency, bringing the Democratic party back to power with all its far-reaching consequences.

In Rochester lived the genial angler who stopped the wanton destruction of fish and by his discovery and development of their artificial propagation so greatly increased the supply of fish for food as to render him a world benefactor. It is hardly to America's credit that our great fisherman, Seth Green, received his highest homage from France. Dr. Graham, a Rochester physician, promulgated here his theories of the dietetic value of unbolted flour to which his name is wedded. It was another Rochester physician who discovered that a dislocated shoulder or hip could be replaced by manipulation instead of the clumsy and terribly painful method of rope and tackle—the only means in use before. A Rochester scholar wrote a magazine article suggesting from his own reasoning the focal accommodation of the eye, by changing the lens, twenty years before this fact was discovered by German Scientists.

It was a resident of Rochester, Mr. Lewis H. Morgan, who gave to the world the first adequate account of an Indian tribe, or group of tribes. In this history of aboriginal archaeology his "League of the Iroquois" is epoch-making. It is a fascinatingly interesting compendium of the habits, customs, religion, social and political organization of the Five Nations, which modern scholarship and expert research have only slightly modified. To quote Dr. R. B. Dixon of the Peabody Institute, Harvard College: "Its greatest merit lay in the fact that it led people to realize for the first time the importance and significance of the truly extraordinary experiment in government by the Iroquois—an experiment which was in a sense the forerunner of our own league or federation of the Union, and which in the importance which it accords to woman, in a way foreshadowed, one may say, the present progress of woman suffrage."

Rabbi Max Landsberg, of Rochester, a distinguished scholar, more than thirty years ago translated and introduced into his

temple worship an English translation of the Jewish prayers — the first time in Israel's age-long history that her supplications had been rendered save in the Ancient Hebrew tongue. That same learned Rabbi translated the Book of Genesis for the recently prepared Jewish Bible, which is authoritatively regarded as the latest word in Scripture research and scholarship.

How far thy little candle shines,
Oh, City Fair, of Mine,
By prayer begun, by fate decreed
A benediction unto Man.

HARRIET E. BROWN DOW.

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