

Religion and Society:

A SHOPKEEPER'S MILLENNIUM

"Despotism may govern without faith," Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1831, "but liberty cannot." The French observer arrived in the United States during the Second Great Awakening, an evangelical revival that shook the new republic from Tennessee to Vermont. Its legacy was manifold: political cleavages that lasted throughout the 19th century; revised notions of "individualism"; the first stirrings of adaptation to a new and more impersonal urban society. With millennial optimism, Americans of all classes now felt that human initiative, not just divine will, could establish God's Kingdom in this life. It was a new vision of what the nation might become. A new breed of historians has begun to probe this and other aspects of early U.S. social history. Using church records, tax lists, census schedules, diaries, and letters, they meticulously try to reconstruct life in small communities as a means of illuminating a much larger landscape. Paul Johnson's *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, a portrait of society and religion in 19th-century Rochester, is the most recent example and one of the best. We present selections from it here, adapted and abridged by the editors.

by Paul E. Johnson

In November 1830, the evangelist Charles Grandison Finney faced an audience of merchants, master craftsmen, and their families at Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York. The people at Third Church were inheritors of New England Calvinism, and they knew that the world was beyond their control. In 1815, the town's Presbyterians had declared themselves impotent before a God who "foreordained whatsoever comes to

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pass." Revivals had been eroding this idea since the 1790s, but most Rochester Protestants still inhabited a world where events, in historian H. Richard Neibuhr's phrase, were a glove on the hand of God.

Finney had been fighting that idea since the middle 1820s. Now he turned to the audience at Third Church, stared down from the pulpit, and said flatly that if Christians united and dedicated their lives to the task, they could convert the world and bring on the millennium in three months—not the physical reign of Christ but the reign of Christianity. His audience stirred. Then scores of people rose from their seats, many of them weeping, and pledged their lives to Jesus.

Wilderness Boom

Similar scenes took place in towns and cities throughout the northern United States in the winter of 1830–31. The Second Great Awakening made new hearts in hundreds of thousands of middle-class men and women and set them off on a massive and remarkably successful crusade to remake society in God's name.* In Rochester alone, church membership doubled in six months.

The revival moved west into Ohio and Michigan, east into Utica, Albany, and the market towns of inland New England. In 1831, membership in Vermont's Congregational churches grew by 29 percent, Connecticut's by more than one-third. Even New York City and Philadelphia felt the revival's power. Never before had so many Americans experienced religion in so short a time. Evangelist Lyman Beecher, who watched with excitement from Boston, declared that the awakening of 1831 was "the greatest revival of religion that the world has ever seen."

It took a century for Beecher's words to fall on scholars' ears. It was Gilbert Barnes, a historian of the antislavery movement writing in the 1930s, who first "discovered" the revival of 1831. In his view, the evangelical, you-can-change-the-world spirit soon affected the antislavery movement, leading abolitionists to reject their earlier, "gradualist" techniques. Other scholars noted that the evangelists quickly brought a new power and dynamism to the burgeoning temperance, moral reform, and missionary societies in Jacksonian America.

Political scientists, meanwhile, have discovered a confused and fragmented opposition to Jacksonian Democrats coalescing

*The First Great Awakening occurred during the 1730s and '40s. Revivalistic fervor broke out in preacher Jonathan Edwards' parish in Northampton, Massachusetts—"a surprising work of God" he called it. It quickly spread throughout British North America.

in the 1830s, with support centered in the areas hit hardest by the revival and with issues and organizational methods taken directly from the evangelists. When elections had pitted Federalists against Jeffersonian Republicans, members of different denominations had lined up on opposing sides. Now political contests found evangelical Protestants on one side and nearly everyone else on the other. That division can be traced into the 20th century.

If so much came out of the revival of 1830–31, precisely what went into it? Were revivals a response to insecurities engendered by a dog-eat-dog economy? Did they result from spiritual emptiness among men and women who moved too often to establish new social ties or maintain old ones? Rochester, New York, is an ideal place to look for some answers. The sequence of rapid urbanization, religious revival, and political and social reorganization struck that community with uncommon force.

Rochester was the first of the inland boom towns created after 1815 by the commercialization of agriculture. In 1812, the site of Rochester was unbroken wilderness. By 1830, the forest had given way to a city of 10,000, the marketing and manufacturing center (it furnished guns and nails, shoes, wagons, furniture, farm tools) for a broad and prosperous agricultural hinterland.

Little Commonwealths

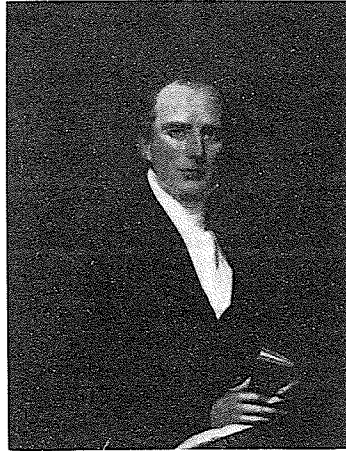
The perfect mill site at the falls (the Genesee River drops 200 feet within what is now downtown Rochester) had attracted attention from the beginning. When workmen digging the Erie Canal reached Rochester in 1821, they found a busy village of 1,500 merchants, artisans, and small manufacturers, all living symbiotically with the thriving countryside around them. In 1818, the town exported 26,000 barrels of flour; by 1828, 200,000 barrels.

There were fortunes to be made here, and they were promptly secured by families like the Rochesters, the Stones, the Whittleseys, the Bissells. Upward mobility was not absent; Abelard Reynolds, for example, went from boyhood poverty to a

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*Charles Grandison Finney
at age 40, in a portrait
painted two years after his
revival effort in Rochester.*

*With other evangelists
such as Lyman Beecher
and Jedediah Burchard,
Finney helped spread the
Second Great Awakening
among hundreds of thou-
sands of middle-class
families.*



Greek Revival mansion on Rochester's stately Fitzhugh Street. This rags-to-riches story was acted out with considerable frequency, but all such men were soon connected by marriage or partnership with the town's ruling elite.

Indeed, this churchgoing, wealthy to middle-class group of shopkeepers, merchants, millers, and manufacturers—the core of Finney's revival—was remarkably stable and close-knit. In 1827, 42 percent of Rochester proprietors were in business with relatives; 56 percent had partnerships with other members of the business elite. Of the "top tenth" families in 1827, 71 percent were among the top tenth 10 years later. They controlled the commerce and the churches and tried hard to shape local political life.

Of course, all of them had come from someplace else (most from deeply Calvinist New England), but ties between families and between generations of the same family were uncommonly strong. Because capital was hard to come by, the leading families were anxious to intermarry. Finney's converts were the most firmly rooted people in town.

The city's humbler folk were more transient. In 1827, only 21 percent of adult males in Rochester were independent proprietors; the others worked for them. Most Rochestarians were laborers and journeyman craftsmen. Few of them went to church. These young drifters, most of them single with no family responsibilities, moved about constantly. One-fourth of the work force possessed no particular skill and looked for casual work along the Erie Canal, around the mills and loading docks, and in the streets. In its lowest reaches, Rochester was a funda-

mentally unstable, blue-collar society. Fewer than one in six of its poorer residents would stay as long as six years.

The existence of these two extreme societies, one rich and Calvinist, the other poor and unchurched, is testimony to a process that had been evolving since the Revolutionary War. The small, family-centered shop (what Jonathan Edwards had called the "little commonwealth"), where laborers generally lived with the employer and were under his continual supervision, moral and otherwise, was in decline. By 1834, for example, only 1 in 20 journeyman shoemakers lived with his employer. Master and wage earner were now different and opposed kind of men. In 1829, a Rochester newspaper editor had occasion to print the word "boss" and followed it with an asterisk. "A foreman or master workman," he explained. "Of modern coinage, we believe."

Take the case of Everard Peck, publisher of a small weekly newspaper. After his marriage in 1820, his household consisted of seven persons, some undoubtedly his employees. By 1827, we know that four journeyman printers and bookbinders were living under his roof. He was aware of his responsibilities as head of an extended family, of his "duty," as he wrote to his father-in-law, toward the employees in his care.

The End of Patriarchy

But even as merchants and shopkeepers talked of patriarchy, the intimacy on which it depended fell apart, a victim of economic growth. By 1830, Peck operated printing offices and a daily newspaper, a bookstore, a paper mill and warehouse, and speculated extensively in Rochester real estate. While he continued to board employees, he could hardly board them all, and his attention, in any event, was engaged in operations that went far beyond relations with young printers and bookbinders. This same estrangement was occurring in stores and workshops all over Rochester.

Such separation could never be complete. Even with 10,000 inhabitants in 1830, Rochester was still a small city. Nearly every family lived within 750 yards of the Four Corners, the central business district; residents of the most exclusive streets could look across their back fences and see the new working-class neighborhoods. And every night the sounds of quarrels, shouting, and laughter from the poorer quarters invaded their newly secluded domestic worlds.

To upright Rochestarians, the world seemed to be slipping

from their grasp. They were on top of a city they owned but could not control. Drunkenness especially was widespread, along with its attendant ills. Where a friendly dram with the employer had once been customary after a hard day's work, now laborers returning to their neighborhoods stopped at the tavern or local grocery. A rowdy theater had opened up on State Street, a circus on Exchange. Workers seemed to have no compunction about violating the Sabbath. Tocqueville described the streets of Boston on a Sunday in 1831 as virtually deserted. A Sunday in Rochester, with its processions of barges on the Erie Canal and a business-as-usual atmosphere at the warehouses, was a different story.

Impasse

Rochester proprietors (like almost everyone else in the city) had migrated from villages in which the public peace was secure. Troublesome outsiders and dissidents were expelled; the others were governed by household heads, the disciplinary machinery of the church, and a web of community interrelationships. But in Rochester in the middle 1820s, troublemakers numbered into the hundreds, and they lived outside the families, churches, and social networks that the proprietors controlled. There remained one institution with the power to stop them: the village government. Although that body was authorized in 1826 to arrest drunkards and gamblers and close down the theater, circus, and dramshops, the power was never used.

One reason was that the property requirement for voting eligibility had been dropped by the New York State legislature in 1823. Workers wouldn't vote for men who attacked their amusements.

Merchants and masters were also fragmented. A mysterious murder in 1827 had split the middle-class elite into Masons and anti-Masons. While all agreed on the general principle of temperance, they split again into those who favored coercion and those who favored persuasion. For the same reason, the citizens divided into Sabbatarians and anti-Sabbatarians on the question of Sunday work. Politically, the ruling middle class was split into Bucktails and Clintonians, religiously into Episcopalians and Presbyterians.* In short, from 1827 until 1830, rich Christians did little else save fight in public.

*The Bucktails and Clintonians were rival factions of the Republican Party in New York State. The former was headed originally by Martin Van Buren, the latter by Governor De Witt Clinton.

This was the situation in 1829 when a worried Josiah Bissell, elder of the Presbyterian Church, wrote to Charles Grandison Finney. Bissell described a few of the "specimens of the large budget of evils rolling through our land and among us," dwelling on the moral dangers of canal-side life. And, he confessed, the good people of Rochester, squabbling among themselves, felt powerless to do anything about it.

Finney came to Rochester in September 1830. For six months, he preached in Presbyterian churches nearly every night and three times on Sunday, and his audience included members of every Protestant sect. During the day he prayed with individuals and led an almost continuous series of prayer meetings. Soon there were simultaneous meetings in churches and homes throughout the village. Pious women went door to door praying for troubled souls. Businessmen closed their doors early and prayed with their families. "You could not go upon the streets," recalled one convert, "and hear any conversation, except upon religion."

'A Trembling Hope'

Revival enthusiasm began with the rededication of church members and spread to the people closest to them. Inevitably much of it flowed through family channels. Finney claimed one Samuel D. Porter, for instance, as a personal conquest. But clearly he had help. Porter was an infidel, but his sister in Connecticut and his brother-in-law, Everard Peck, were committed evangelicals. Porter came under a barrage of family exhortation, and in January Peck wrote home that "Samuel is indulging a trembling hope." Hope turned into assurance eight months later; Samuel promptly joined his sister and brother-in-law in praying for the soul of their free-thinking father. The revival made an evangelist of every convert.

Who were these converts? Most of them came initially from the proprietor class: master craftsmen and manufacturers, lawyers, doctors, forwarding agents, master builders, shoemakers, coopers—in short, the entrepreneurs whose quest for wealth and privacy was directly responsible for disordered relations between the middle and working classes.

Finney's revival enlarged every Protestant church, broke down sectarian boundaries, and mobilized a religious community that had at its disposal enormous economic power. To each convert the question came: "Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" The answer was obvious: Unite with other Christians and change the world. The world, however, was filled with bad



From *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*.

In 1827, Rochester was a city with few upper-class enclaves and many mixed neighborhoods. By 1834, however, pockets of affluence were embedded in, but distinct from, working-class wards. In the 1838 map above, the central business district is outlined in red; broken lines mark the boundaries of prosperous blocks. The surrounding working-class neighborhoods were rarely more than a street away.

habits, bad people, and bad institutions that inhibited revivals and whose removal must precede the millennium. Among church members who had lived in Rochester in the late 1820s, the right course of action seemed clear. With one hand they evangelized among their own unchurched poor. With the other they waged an absolutist and savage war on strong drink. The theater on State Street was closed down and turned into a livery stable; the circus became a soap factory. Converted grocers emptied casks of whiskey into the streets. Mission workers flooded working-class wards with tracts and alms. Increasingly the wicked had no place to go. By the early 1830s, hundreds of working men had joined the revival.

Why did so many wage earners take the road pointed out by their masters? Many were sons and younger brothers of Finney's middle-class converts, and no doubt many others were trusty employees who followed their masters into church. Still others may have been drawn to evangelists who proclaimed a spiritual rather than a worldly aristocracy among men.*

No Earthly Solution

But with all of this said, the most powerful source of the workingman's revival was the simple fact that Rochester's laborers worked for men who insisted on seeing them in church. Working men who did not join churches had trouble finding jobs. In 1836, a free-thought editor announced that clerks were being forced to attend revival meetings. He quoted one of them: "I don't give a d--n. I get five dollars more a month than before I got religion." By 1834, Rochester's new Whig Party—an evangelical party led by the recently feuding "rich Christians" and other converts—carried every ward in the city's elections.

Thus, the Rochester revival served the needs of entrepreneurs who employed wage labor. Rochester was not unique; in the few towns that have been studied over time, revivals followed the same chronology and served the same functions. Everywhere enthusiasm struck first among masters and manufacturers, then spread through them into the ranks of labor. The workingman's revival of the 1830s was effected through missionary churches, temperance and moral reform societies, and Sunday schools that were dominated by rich evangelicals. The

*Not everyone backed the revivals. Some middle-class husbands saw them as subversive of their authority over their wives. One man wrote of Finney's visit to his home: "He *stuffed* my wife with tracts and alarmed her fears, and nothing short of meetings, night and day, could atone for the many fold sins my poor, simple spouse had committed, and at the same time, she made the miraculous discovery that she had been 'unevenly yoked.'"

religion that it preached was order inducing, repressive, and quintessentially bourgeois.

What of the master himself? If we are to render his turn to religion intelligible, we must understand that he experienced disobedience and disorder as religious problems, problems that had to do not only with safe streets and the efficient production of flour and shoes but also with the "rightness" of new relations of production.

It was a dilemma that had no earthly solution. Rochester masters assumed the responsibility to govern wage earners. At the same time, they had severed the relationships through which they had always dominated those men. Resistance in the workshops, the failure of the temperance crusade, and the results of elections in the 1820s dramatized what had become an everyday fact of life: Workmen no longer listened when proprietors spoke.

The revival of 1831 healed divisions within the middle class and turned businessmen and masters—in Rochester and throughout the Northeast—into an active and united missionary army. Governing their actions in the 1830s was the new and reassuring knowledge that authoritarian controls were not necessary. The new pious enclaves within the working class provided employers with dutiful workers and Whig votes. Workmen who continued to drink and carouse and stay away from church were no longer considered errant children; they were free moral agents who had chosen to oppose the Coming Kingdom. They could be hired when they were needed and fired without a qualm when they were not. By the middle 1830s, there were two working classes in Rochester: a large, church-going minority tied closely to the sources of steady work; and a floating majority that faced insecure employment and stifled opportunities.

Thus a nascent industrial capitalism became attached to visions of a perfect moral order based on individual freedom and self-government; old relations of dependence, servility, and mutuality were defined as sinful and left behind.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Interested readers may also wish to consult the following books: Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, by Paul Boyer (1978); Rochdale, by Anthony F. Wallace (1978); and The Burned-Over District, by Whitney R. Cross (1950).*