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The Presidential Election of 1840 in Rochester, New York

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The Presidential Election of 1840 in Rochester, New York

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Abstract

Rochester, New York was one of America's first boom towns, exploding from a population of 15 people in 1812 to nearly 20,000 just 25 years later. Its location on the crux of the Erie Canal and Genesee River made it an economic force, with flour milling as its staple industry. For my project, I have examined Rochester's growth through the 1830's and studied it through the lens of the heated presidential election of 1840.

The election of 1840 is often considered to be one of the first "modern" elections. The campaign between incumbent Democratic President Martin Van Buren and Whig candidate William Henry Harrison featured songs, slogans, rallies, and the erection of political headquarters in the form of log cabins throughout the country. Two issues have typically dominated historical interpretation of this election: the Panic of 1837 and social tension. The Panic of 1837 was a series of bank failures throughout the nation, which created a recession that dominated Van Buren's term as president. Social tension was manifested in Harrison's log cabin and hard cider campaign, which was an attempt by Whigs to appeal to average Americans and portray Democrats as elitists. The problem with this narrative is that it does not apply to Rochester.

Rochester was a new city with a relatively homogeneous population and a manufacturing sector that was not as developed as other cities'. This left it devoid of much of the ethnic and class tension that was prominent elsewhere. In addition, the election of 1840 was a rematch of 1836 in New York State, and despite the massive economic shifts that occurred during these four years, Rochesterians voted nearly identically in favor of Harrison in both of these years. Thus, neither societal nor economic factors appear to have played a very large role in how Rochesterians voted in 1840. This paper will analyze the important issues in Rochester and argue that it was a fundamental debate about the size of the federal government and the role of the president.

A key primary source that I have used is Henry O'Reilly's *Sketches of Rochester*, a history of Rochester that was published in 1838. Written just before the recession, it provides insight into Rochester's immense economic growth. To gain information on the political discourse surrounding the 1840 election, I have consulted local newspapers. The *Rochester Republican* and the *Rochester Daily Advertiser* were the two major Democratic newspapers, while the *Rochester Daily Democrat* served as the Whig organ.

Secondary sources that have given me a general understanding of the time period include Lee Benson's *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*, Charles Sellers' *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, and Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*. The Rochester-centric secondary sources I have used are the writings of Blake McKelvey, Rochester's historian for much of the 20th century, and two masters' theses written for the University of Rochester by Herbert Alvin Norton and George Myron Fennemore.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter I: The Growth of Rochester.....	8
Chapter II: The Panic of 1837.....	21
Chapter III: The Election of 1840.....	32
Chapter IV: Conclusion	69
Works Cited	74
Summary of Capstone Project	76

In the 19th century, Americans and America itself moved further and further west. As this process unfurled, several cities briefly became epicenters of commerce connecting east and west. One of the first of these metropolises was the not-so-western city of Rochester, New York, which for a short period in the 1820s and 1830s grew exponentially and became a focal point in the early American economy. The opening of the Erie Canal served as the impetus for Rochester's growth, combining with the region's inherent geographic advantages to create a formidable boom town. By 1837 the city had emerged as a prominent metropolis in a chain of intrastate, interstate, and international commerce, and had established an important relationship with its fertile hinterland of the Genesee Valley.

Rochester's economy, in conjunction with the rest of the nation's, was stifled by the Panic of 1837. The Panic was the culmination of a near decade-long Bank War between President Andrew Jackson and the second Bank of the United States. Jackson's veto of the bank's re-charter and subsequent placement of federal funds into "pet banks" combined with a speculative boom in western lands and the Specie Circular to create a massive overextension of credit nationwide. This, in addition to policy implemented by the Bank of England, caused banks around the U.S. to suspend specie payments in May 1837 and the national economy to fall into a recession just months into Martin Van Buren's presidency. Recovery was stagnant through Van Buren's term, and the economy, banking, and related issues played major roles in the 1840 presidential election.

The election of 1840 featured one of the most heated campaigns up to that point in American history. With the nation in a state of financial crisis, the interest of Americans in the policies of the federal government amplified, resulting in the flourishing of campaign rallies, songs, and slogans that has led many to consider it the first “modern” American election. Historically, this battle between Democratic incumbent Martin Van Buren and Whig nominee William Henry Harrison has been perceived as both a referendum on Jacksonian economic policy and a clash between the country’s emerging social classes. However, Rochester does not fit neatly into this characterization, as its newness and homogeneity left it devoid of much of the class struggle that was characterized by the log cabin and hard cider campaign. In addition, while Harrison did rout Van Buren in the Electoral College 234 to 60, the margin in the popular vote was much smaller, with Harrison receiving 52.9% of votes and Van Buren garnering 46.8%. In Monroe County Harrison received over 57% of the vote, but this value was almost unchanged from what Harrison had procured in 1836 prior to the recession.^{1,2} Thus the economy does not appear to have been a major factor in how Rochesterians voted. The election of 1840 was about something larger in Rochester, and it played out as a fundamental debate about the role of the federal government and the executive branch. A similar debate had been ongoing since the nation’s inception, and many Rochesterians had already made a decisive judgment that was not easily changed by economic conditions.

¹ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, November 20, 1840.

² *Niles’ Weekly Register*, December 3, 1836.

The initial secondary sources I examined were Carol Sheriff's *The Artificial River* and William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*. Sheriff discusses the economic, social, and political impact of the Erie Canal, and explains how it fundamentally changed life in the 19th century by compressing time and space, spreading the market economy westward. *Nature's Metropolis* is a history of Chicago's beginnings, but it has a much broader application. Cronon outlines the mid-19th century economy of America as a whole, exploring the complex relationships within cities, between cities, and between cities and their rural hinterlands. While Chicago became America's ultimate central metropolis, linking east and west, it was preceded by many cities, the first of which was Rochester. Thus Cronon's work is useful as an account of what this meant, and how the economy of a metropolis functioned.

A more Rochester-centric secondary source that I have consulted is the writing of Blake McKelvey, who was the city of Rochester's official historian for much of the 20th century. His works include *Rochester: A Brief History*, *Rochester on the Genesee: The Growth of a City*, and *Rochester: The Water Power City, 1812-1854*. In addition, McKelvey has contributed to *Rochester History*, a biannual scholarly journal founded in 1939 that is still in circulation today. Two final resources of note are masters' theses written for the University of Rochester by Herbert Alvin Norton and George Myron Fennemore, which detail Rochester's history from 1834 to 1843. Together, these works have provided a framework for my research.

An important primary source that I have used for the portion of the paper before 1838 is Henry O'Reilly's *Sketches of Rochester*, a history of Rochester that was published in 1838. Written just before Rochester was affected by the nation's economic slump, this source provides insight into the state and psyche of Rochester when things were going well and the city was a western economic power. The fact that such a book even exists is noteworthy, and it is an indicator of how few people living in Rochester were actually from the area and knew how its growth had occurred. There was a demand for someone like O'Reilly to in effect tell people what Rochester was and what it meant to be a Rochesterian. In addition to his own commentary, O'Reilly provides some very useful data, such as Erie Canal tolls collected, quantities of specific goods imported and exported through the Erie Canal, and wheat and flour price variations over time.³ Since the Erie Canal was Rochester's most important conduit for trade, and flour its most important product, this data is valuable in understanding Rochester's economy during the boom years. However, it is pertinent to note that O'Reilly was a leader in Rochester's Democratic Party and thus writes with the biases of a Rochesterian and of a Democrat.

For information on the Jacksonian economy and the Panic of 1837, I have drawn from Lee Benson's *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*, Charles Sellers' *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, as well as economic journals. To gain Rochester-centric information of the political

³ Henry O'Reilly, *Sketches of Rochester; with Incidental Notices of Western New York* (Rochester, New York: William Alling, 1838), 351.

discourse surrounding the 1840 election, I have studied local newspapers. The *Rochester Republican* and the *Rochester Daily Advertiser* were the two major Democratic newspapers, while the *Rochester Daily Democrat* served as the Whig organ. Although these sources did frequently republish articles from larger papers frequently, most of their political discussion is written by local editors and thus provides an understanding of how Rochesterians experienced the election. The papers also printed articles about local meetings and the resolutions citizens passed, supplying insight into the political activism of Rochesterians.

The secondary sources that I have consulted generally frame the election in the context of the economy and the convoluted class warfare between Whigs and Democrats. However, neither of these narratives truly applies to the city of Rochester in 1840. Analysis of the political debate between local Whigs and Democrats indicates that an elemental clash between disparate views of what the “United States of America” meant was taking place.

I. The Growth of Rochester

Rochester was one of America's first boom towns. Its population of just 15 people in 1812 exploded to over 20,000 by 1840, making it the 19th largest city in the U.S.⁴ Early settlers in the area discovered geographic advantages intrinsic to Rochester that positioned it to grow rapidly in the early 19th century. The most important feature was the 90-mile-long, 25-mile-wide Genesee Valley and the north-flowing Genesee River running through it. The southern portion of the river lies upstream in a fertile valley, serving as a natural hinterland to supply an industrial center with raw materials, while in the north the Genesee culminates with three separate waterfalls dropping 266 feet in total over a two-mile stretch, creating an ideal location for a water-powered city.⁵ After cascading over the last of these, known as the Lower Falls, the Genesee reaches Lake Ontario just five miles later. Rochester's population concentrated itself at the Upper Falls, on the crux of the intersection between the Genesee and the Erie Canal.

The mineral-rich Genesee, combined with soil enriched by glacial deposits and an underlying layer of limestone, made this basin extremely fertile.⁶ The land was optimal for grains such as wheat, oats, and barley, as well as fruits such as apples, pears, plums, cherries, apricots, nectarines, peaches, and grapes.⁷ This agricultural prolificacy is also a result of the temperate climate of the Genesee Valley. Cultivation of the valley was made even easier by the fact that, conveniently, portions of land along the Genesee were treeless upon their

⁴ Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places, U.S. Bureau of the Census, <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab07.txt>>

⁵ O'Reilly, *Sketches of Rochester*, 351.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

discovery. Thus, the advantages afforded to farmers in the valley were abundant. The land was fertile and partially cleared, the climate was temperate, and the river flowed northward to a growing industrial center with a series of falls that were perfect milling sites for the raw materials they were shipping. In addition, the trees that were present were valuable. Oak and pine forests were ideal for lumber, while maples could be cultivated for syrup.⁸ And, once again, this lumber could easily be shipped downstream to Rochester where the falls produced potent sawmills.

Lake Ontario offered additional opportunities to the latent metropolis of Rochester. The Great Lake enabled Rochester to be not just an intra and interstate commercial center, but an international one as well. Rochester merchants used Lake Ontario to trade with Quebec, Montreal, and Toronto, and also as an alternative route to Niagara Falls and other American ports.⁹

While Rochester may have had an abundance of natural advantages, it took several man-made improvements to the landscape to create a true boom town. Minor improvements to the city included bridges (as Rochester straddles the Genesee River), and a dam to control the Genesee.¹⁰ But the most important internal improvement for the city was the Erie Canal, which opened for trade east of Rochester to the Mohawk River in 1821 and was completed in its entirety in 1825. This also included the construction of an aqueduct, completed in September 1823, in order to allow canal traffic to pass over the Genesee River. In addition,

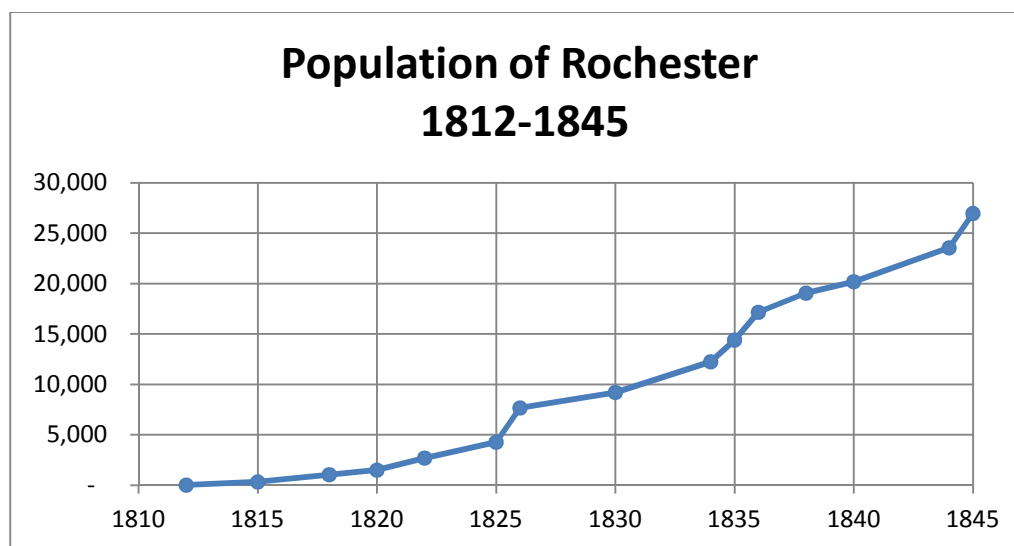
⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water Power City, 1812-1854* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1945), 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

small rail lines were constructed from the harbor of Rochester to the center of the city since the falls were impassable by boat, connecting lake, canal, and river trade.¹¹ By 1837, plans were also in place for railroads connecting Rochester to Auburn and Batavia, a Genesee Valley Canal to make southbound travel in the Genesee Valley easier, an expansion of the Erie Canal in order to facilitate its enormous amount of traffic, and federally-funded construction of a lighthouse and piers totaling 5,200 feet in the harbor of Rochester.¹²

The result of these completed and anticipated improvements was robust growth. Rochester's population exploded, multiplying fourfold between 1825 and 1840.



Data from Rochester Population 1812-1990, University of Rochester,
<<http://www.history.rochester.edu/canal/rochpop.htm>>

This boom was the result of Rochester's immense economic potential. A comparison of Erie Canal Tolls collected in each city demonstrates that Rochester dominated trade within New York State west of Albany, as tolls collected in

¹¹ Blake McKelvey, *Rochester on the Genesee: The Growth of a City* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 44.

¹² O'Reilly, *Sketches of Rochester*, 336.

Rochester more than doubled those of other rival cities. However, Buffalo's economy was growing rapidly and starting to catch up.

Erie Canal Tolls Collected (\$)

	1834	1835	1836
Albany	252,746.42	357,613.84	389,327.28
Buffalo	91,203.44	106,213.35	158,085.05
Lockport	44,536.68	52,129.24	38,199.69
Palmyra	51,056.54	40,181.28	41,079.17
Rochester	164,247.28	176,170.33	190,036.59
Syracuse	83,550.68	74,756.29	56,767.22
Utica	52,266.44	50,584.30	57,974.40

Data from O'Reilly, *Sketches of Rochester*, 242.

Erie Canal navigation was vital to Rochester's well-being. Rochesterians owned a larger proportion of stock in Erie Canal transportation lines than the citizens of any other city in the state, a total that was equal to half the entire amount of stock available.¹³ An 1831 entry in the *Encyclopaedia Americana* states that the number of "boats built, equipped, and owned principally at Rochester make it the seat of the transportation business, and the various trades connected with it."¹⁴ Thus Rochester was engaged not only in business on the Erie Canal, but in the business of the Erie Canal itself, investing in and managing lines, and building the boats that travelled on it.

While the above chart demonstrates the overall economic activity within these New York cities, it fails to delineate if goods are being imported, exported, or simply passing through the ports. Fortunately, in *Sketches of Rochester*, O'Reilly provides a detailed analysis of the total amount of individual goods that

¹³ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

were “landed” and “shipped” in Rochester through the Erie Canal in 1836.¹⁵ This data demonstrates that Rochester’s net imports were timber, wheat, salt, cotton, tobacco, gypsum, merchandise, clay, mineral coal, pig iron, and iron ware. Net exports included sundries, domestic spirits, boards and scantling, flour, bran and ship stuffs, ashes, dried fruit, clover and grass seed, wool, woolens, cheese, butter and lard, hops, leather, and furniture. In addition, staves, pork, beef, flaxseed, peltry, and stone were “shipped” and “landed” about evenly, indicating that these goods were likely just passing through the city.

What O’Reilly’s data fails to account for is trade from Lake Ontario, railroads, and the Genesee River.¹⁶ However, railroads did not account for a large percentage of Rochester’s trade, and trade on the Genesee was largely in one direction due to difficulties navigating southward and the nature of Rochester’s relationship with its hinterland. Rochesterians harvested a vast amount of resources from the Genesee Valley, and these raw materials were either being exported directly, refined, or used as materials in Rochester manufactures that were then exported, such as flour, boards and scantling, wool, woolens, and furniture. Therefore Rochester was both a hinterland and a metropolis. It was the metropolis of its region, importing raw materials from the Genesee Valley and manufacturing many of them into finished goods. However, Rochester was also part of New York City’s vast hinterland, exporting many of its raw materials in exchange for manufactured goods that it simply was not capable of producing yet.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁶ O’Reilly does state that 200,000 bushels of wheat were imported from Canada, under heavy duties.

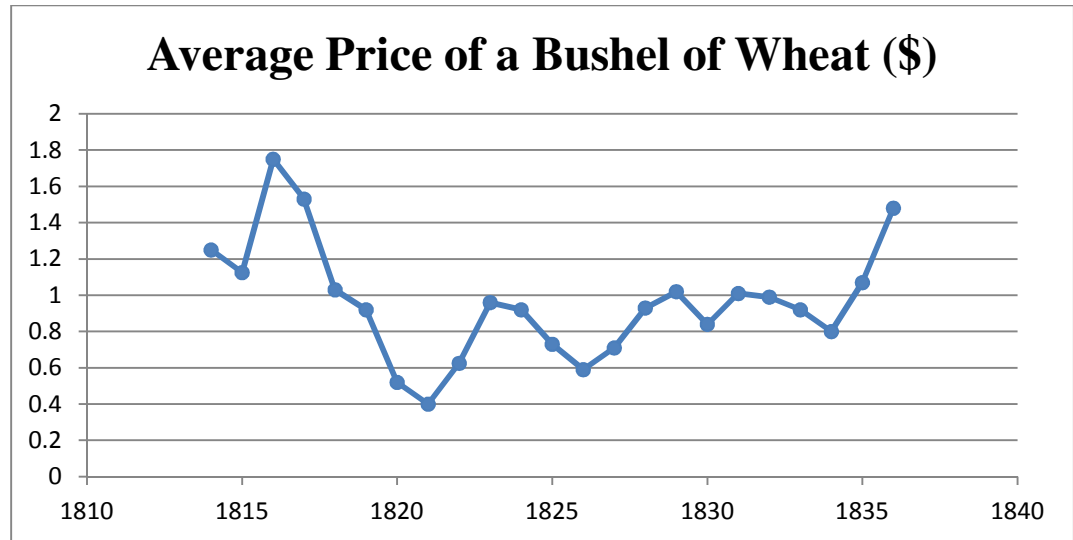
While Rochester's commercial economy was quite diversified, its staple product, and a source of national renown and local pride, was flour. Flour mills utilized the two mile long stretch of Genesee shoreline that runs through the center of Rochester, dropping a total of 266 feet, a total decline greater than that of Niagara Falls. By 1837, there were 20 mills in Rochester with 90 runs of stone, capable of grinding a total of 20,000 bushels of wheat a day into 5,000 barrels of flour.¹⁷ Rochester mills ground wheat from the Genesee Valley and places as far away as Ohio and Montreal, distributing their flour product throughout New York State, the United States, and Canada.¹⁸ By the 1830s this flour production process was finely tuned, with some flour mills extending from the Genesee River directly to the banks of the Erie Canal. This enabled boats to unload a cargo of wheat and reload with flour without moving an inch, in a process that took just three hours.¹⁹ Millers and farmers had an interdependent relationship, with millers providing a market for farmers' output and farmers satiating millers' seemingly infinite demand for wheat to grind.

Despite the fine-tuned flour production, the flour industry was subject to much turmoil due to price fluctuation. The prices of wheat and flour nearly doubled in the years leading up to the Panic of 1837.

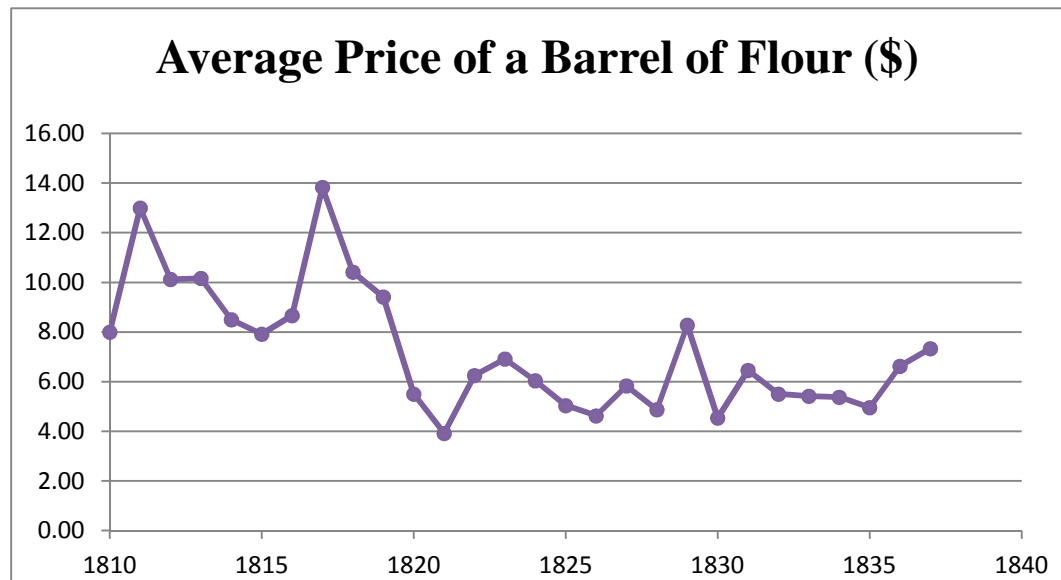
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 361.



Data from O'Reilly, *Sketches of Rochester*, 362.



Data from O'Reilly, *Sketches of Rochester*, 366.

This variation can be attributed to many factors, including demand both domestically and internationally (especially Britain), monetary policy, weather, and the opening of the Erie Canal. Price fluctuation often bred additional instability, as high prices one year led to overproduction in the next, causing prices to fall. In addition, despite the massive increase in western wheat

production during the 40 years preceding 1837, total U.S. yearly output did not increase drastically.²⁰ This was largely due to changes in the economies of the east coast and south that made them more market-oriented. The New England economy transitioned from agriculture to manufacturing and trade, while southern agriculture converted to the lucrative cotton crop. This exemplified the growing interconnectivity of America's economy, as New England and New York City became more reliant on raw materials from the south and west, while the south and west were reliant upon New England and New York City for a market. Rochester straddled this divide, acting as a commercial center with its own hinterland in the Genesee Valley while also functioning as a hinterland to New England and New York City.

In 1817, the year construction on the Erie Canal commenced, a barrel of flour was listed at \$13.50 per barrel. This number steadily declined to \$4.75 in 1825, and then continued to fluctuate. Thus the completion of the Erie Canal and growth of the city of Rochester appears to have had a sizeable impact on the price of flour, but it could not eliminate the inherent price fluctuation. In 1837, at the outbreak of the financial crisis, flour prices in Philadelphia skyrocketed to \$11.00 per barrel. This shock was felt in New York City as well, leading to a riot on February 13 in which mobs raided a Hart and Herrick warehouse and destroyed flour and wheat.²¹ While this was intended to harm speculative merchants, it actually hurt the millers themselves, as the product remained their property until it was sold.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 364.

²¹ McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water Power City*, 215.

By 1837, Rochester was a bustling commercial city, continually hosting travelers and merchants passing through as well as engaging in commerce itself. Despite its commercial advances, Rochester was far from a modern industrial city, and signs of its rapid growth and the short period of time separating it from when it was a western outpost were omnipresent. The city was dotted with tree stumps yet to be removed, and 236 people still made their living as farmers within the city limits.²² Even those engaged in pursuits outside of agriculture often kept truck gardens in their lawn. Rochester's robust growth also prevented proper city planning and infrastructure. It was without a sewage system or a water supply outside of open wells, leading to health problems and several cholera epidemics. The lack of an adequate infrastructure to distribute water also posed serious risks for the spread of fires.²³ However, Rochesterians had created a metropolis in a matter of decades, and there was a shared belief that nature could be perfected.²⁴

This mindset was influenced by the fact that the citizenry of Rochester was primarily made up of New England Protestants of English descent.²⁵ These migrants sought new opportunities in the west, primarily through the vast availability of land. Land ownership was vital to the republican ideals envisioned by their forefathers, as it left men beholden to no one for their well-being and free to pursue their own prosperity. This also meant that men had skin in the game, and as voting citizens they had an incentive to protect property rights and prevent

²² George Myron Fennemore, *The Growth of a City: The History of Rochester from 1839 to 1843* (Rochester, New York: The University of Rochester, 1938), 93.

²³ McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water Power City*, 177.

²⁴ Herbert Alvin Norton, *Prosperity and Adversity: The History of Rochester from 1834 to 1839*, (Rochester, New York: The University of Rochester, 1938), 191.

²⁵ McKelvey, *Rochester on the Genesee*, 36.

abuses of government power. Land in the Rochester area was not only abundant but fertile, and it became a very attractive area for settlement after the Erie Canal created easy access.

Religion played a dominating role in the lives of these Yankees. It instilled a disdain for idleness and was a driving force behind their industriousness and material successes. Presbyterians were the largest denomination, followed by Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians.²⁶ The prevalence of Presbyterians was due largely to the numerous revivals that had swept through upstate New York led primarily by Charles Finney. Revivals were so frequent and effective that the region became known as the “burnt over district” due to the fact that there was so little fuel, in the form of unconverted inhabitants, left for future revivals.

By 1837, there were 22 congregations within the city and over a dozen churches had been constructed.²⁷ The Protestant churches of Rochester were more allies than adversaries, often sharing space and cooperating with each other. However Catholics, Rochester’s fifth-largest religious group, were much less well-received in the community. In the early 1830s most of this population was made up of Irish immigrants, many of whom had come to build the Erie Canal and never left. Protestants were intolerant and bigoted to these people, fearful that their allegiance to the Pope in Rome posed a threat to American democracy.²⁸

Due to Rochester’s short existence and rapid growth, an overwhelming majority of its residents were naturalized Rochesterians who had been born elsewhere. Of the 2,000 voters in the 1836 election, just five of them had been

²⁶ Norton, *Prosperity and Adversity*, 108.

²⁷ O’Reilly, *Sketches of Rochester*, 289.

²⁸ Norton, *Prosperity and Adversity*, 119.

born in Rochester.²⁹ Thus, despite the abundance of tree trunks hastily left behind during its rapid development, most of the people living in the city were rootless. The relative homogeneity of migrants helped reduce social tension, but this still created difficulty in defining what exactly it meant to be a “Rochesterian.” In fact, there was great interest amongst its residents in learning about their city and how it had come to be. The demand for this information was so great that local newspaper editor Henry O’Reilly, an Irish immigrant himself, assumed the role of local historian and wrote a 400-page book, *Sketches of Rochester*, about the history of Rochester up to 1837. O’Reilly exhibits unyielding optimism about Rochester’s future, a byproduct of its sensational growth up to that point and a view that was likely shared by many of those who had experienced it.

O’Reilly, like many Rochesterians, was profoundly interested in politics, and became a local leader of the Democratic Party. Rochesterians’ political interests were inversely related to locality, with national politics dominating local papers and discussion, less attention paid to the state politics of Albany, and even less to local forms of government. A majority of Rochesterians identified with the newly-formed Whig Party, but it was far from dominant and a strong Democratic presence remained, with three Democrats elected to one-year terms as mayor between 1834 and 1840.³⁰

Between 1822 and 1838, New York State politics were dominated by the “Albany Regency,” a strong faction of Democratic-Republicans who later became

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁰ Dexter Perkins, “Rochester One Hundred Years Ago,” in *Rochester History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, July 1939, 5.

Jacksonian Democrats. The leading figure in this political machine was Senator Martin Van Buren, who later won New York's electoral votes in the presidential election of 1836. At the time, senators were elected by the state legislature, meaning there were strong ties and a system of patronage linking Van Buren with the politics of his home state. Among the leaders of the opposition to the Regency was Thurlow Weed, originally a member of the Anti-Masonic Party and later a converted Whig. Weed was an influential figure in Rochester, owning the Anti-Masonic *Rochester Telegraph* in the late 1820s, and continually travelling through upstate New York advocating his beliefs and supporting candidates such as DeWitt Clinton, John Quincy Adams, William Seward, and later William Henry Harrison.

To Rochesterians, the most important role of the state government was in funding internal improvements projects. Rochester benefitted enormously from the construction of the Erie Canal and corresponding aqueduct that enabled it to cross the Genesee River. Following the early successes of the canal, Rochesterians soon began lobbying for its expansion, as well as railroad lines and a canal to run through the Genesee Valley. An additional source of interest in state politics was the need to secure a state charter to open banks, an issue that will be discussed later.

The only form of local government in Rochester before 1834 was at the county level. In this year, Rochester became incorporated as a city and chartered its own government. The authority of the city government was originally quite restrained, with revenue limits and few enumerated powers. The limit for total

annual expenditure was \$8,000, to be split between light and watch, maintenance of the fire department, and general expense.³¹ A mayor with limited executive powers was elected annually by a ten-man, popularly elected Common Council, and the party affiliation of this office alternated between Whig and Democrat almost yearly.

Perhaps the most controversial issue of this early governing body was temperance. Rochester's first mayor Jonathan Child, like many local Whigs with strong Protestant convictions, was an opponent of alcohol consumption and believed it to be the cause of many of society's evils. However, towards the end of his term a Democratic Common Council was elected and authorized the granting of liquor licenses in Rochester. Morally opposed to the legislation but devoid of a veto power, Child resigned rather than sign it.

³¹ Norton, *Prosperity and Adversity*, 236.

II. The Panic of 1837

A major turning point in the ubiquitous optimism of Rochesterians was the Panic of 1837. Panic struck the United States on May 10, 1837, when every bank in New York City suspended payments of specie – or hard money – in exchange for paper money. The result was a nationwide five-year recession, and by the end of this period Rochester's clout in the American economy had diminished. To understand how this both impacted the nation and Rochester, it is necessary to explore the causes of this crisis and the state of banking in the U.S. at this time.

The most important player in banking nationwide was the Second Bank of the United States (B.U.S.), which was chartered in 1816. Headquartered in Philadelphia, it had 25 branches throughout the nation. Like its predecessor, the B.U.S. was attacked for overstretching federal powers, but the 1819 Supreme Court Ruling in *McCulloch v. Maryland* confirmed its constitutionality. As the holder of the government's deposits and the only national bank in the country, the B.U.S., under the leadership of Nicholas Biddle, was able to exert a great amount of influence over the U.S. economy. B.U.S. notes were driving state bank notes out of circulation and were well on their way to becoming the national currency.

Biddle's greatest power stemmed from his ability to tighten or relax his banks' demands on state banks for specie reserves. This allowed him to essentially regulate their ability to make loans, issue notes, and stimulate business, thus controlling the amount of money, credit, and business growth for the entire economy. While this stabilized banking nationally, enabling Biddle to ease or tighten credit to expand or contract the economy in a similar fashion to the

present-day Federal Reserve, this concentration of power outside of the government's control concerned then-President Andrew Jackson. Some of the nation's most important economic decisions were being made by a private, for-profit corporation that was answerable only to its shareholders and to no federal authority.³² Jackson declared the B.U.S. to be "in itself a Government" run by an "aristocracy [of] the wealthy and professional classes" that threatened "the mass of the people."³³ To Jackson, upholding the Constitution meant defending democracy, and he saw the B.U.S. as a direct threat to American democracy. Thus, in 1832 he vetoed a bill to renew the bank's charter, an action he saw as liberating the democratic U.S. government from the corrupting power of exclusive private business interests.³⁴ The veto served as part of a larger movement among a radical wing of the Democratic Party to convert to a hard-money system.

Jackson's veto did not end the Bank War, as the bank's initial charter ran through 1836. This gave Biddle four years to try to obtain another charter, and Jackson feared that he would use his resources to help elect politicians more sympathetic to the bank's cause through bribery and campaign contributions. Biddle could also ease lending standards and then squeeze credit right before the election of 1836, which would incite a panic and damage the Democrats' reelection prospects. To lessen the bank's influence, Jackson ordered the removal of all public funds from the B.U.S. by October 1, 1833. This decision was increasingly important, as Jackson had recently balanced the budget and was on

³² Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 322.

³³ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, New York: Norton, 2005), 394.

³⁴ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 438.

the verge of paying off the entire national debt, creating a surplus of federal funds. The government's deposits in the B.U.S. totaled nearly \$10 million, close to half of the bank's entire deposits.³⁵ This money was then deposited into state banks.

These "pet banks" provided easier credit than the B.U.S., which was one of many factors leading to inflation before the Panic of 1837. Another contributor was an increase in the supply of silver from Mexico. Instead of using this silver to increase lending without lowering reserve ratios, banks created an average of five new paper dollars for every one dollar in new silver that was deposited.³⁶ Thus reserve ratios fell, and the money supply grew enormously.

U.S. Banking & Currency Statistics, 1830-1837

	Jan. 1830	Dec. 1833	Jan. 1837
Number of Banks	330	506	788
Bank Loans	\$201m.	\$324m.	\$525m.
Bank Notes	\$61m.	\$95m.	\$149m.
Bank Deposits	\$55m.	\$76m.	\$127m.
Bank Specie	\$21m.	\$26m.	\$38m.
Reserve Ratio	18%	15.20%	13.70%
Total Specie in U.S.	\$39m.	\$41m.	\$73m.
Total Money Supply	\$134m.	\$186m.	\$311m.
Inflation	\$95	\$145	\$238
Population	12.8m.	14m.	15.7m.
Money Per Capita	\$10.46	\$13.21	\$19.80
Inflation Per Capita	\$7.42	\$10.35	\$15.15
Commodity Prices	72.2	75.3	90.4

Reproduced from Trask, "The Panic of 1837," 5-6.

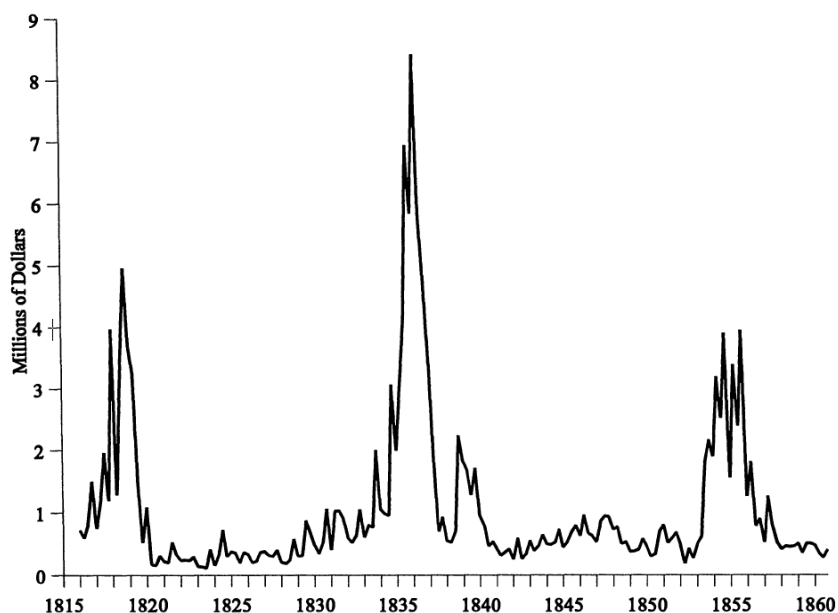
This easy money coincided with and contributed to a speculation boom in western land, causing a massive flow of paper to the west, which was then paid to

³⁵ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 395.

³⁶ H.A. Scott Trask, "The Panic of 1837 and the Contraction of 1839-43: A Reassessment of its Causes from an Austrian Perspective and a Critique of the Free Banking Interpretation," Mises Institute, March 2002. 3.

the federal government at a significantly diminished value. Sales of public lands increased almost ninefold in the middle of the decade.

Receipts from Sales of Public Lands, Quarterly 1816-1860



Reproduced from Rousseau, "Jacksonian Monetary Policy," 461.

An additional contributor to land speculation was the passage of the Deposit Act in June 1836, which redistributed proceeds from the sale of federal land to state banks and doubled the amount of pet banks that were the recipients of federal funds. This gave state banks additional funds while simultaneously making them more difficult to regulate given their quantity, leading to further increases in lending. This redistribution also hurt the larger banks on the east coast, and specie reserves in the financial capital of New York City were cut. The government became part of a "confidence scheme, whereby speculators borrowed large amounts of paper money, used it to buy federal land, then used the land as

collateral on further loans – all of which ensnared the federal government...in the ups and downs of the whole paper system.”³⁷

To combat this, Jackson issued an order known as the Specie Circular, which required all payments for federal land purchases to be made in specie. However, the Specie Circular failed to curtail land speculation fast enough. Instead of cutting land purchases, speculators simply borrowed specie in lieu of paper from the easy-lending banks of the time. The result was a drain in specie reserves, especially from east coast banks.³⁸ In September 1836, New York City banks held \$5.8 million, or 36% of all the federal money deposited in state banks. In addition, its banks held 16% of all the funds deposited in state-chartered banks, and 90% of the funds in New York State.³⁹ From September 1, 1836 to May 1, 1837, specie reserves in New York City banks fell from \$7.2 million to \$1.5 million, a decrease of nearly 80%.

International trade also contributed to the decline in the specie reserves of U.S. banks. Poor wheat crops in 1835 and 1836 caused inflation in commodity prices, defaults in farmers' loans, and an international trade imbalance, particularly with Great Britain.⁴⁰ To secure itself against fluctuations in the American economy and increase its specie reserves, the Bank of England instituted two policies. First, it raised interest rates. Next, the Bank began rejecting paper issued by companies associated with American trade. This decreased demand for American cotton as well as cotton-backed bills, deflating

³⁷Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 444.

³⁸Peter L. Rousseau, “Jacksonian Monetary Policy, Specie Flows, and the Panic of 1837” in *The Journal of Economic History*, 62, 467.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 462.

⁴⁰Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 456.

their prices.⁴¹ While the Bank soon realized the depressing effects of this policy and reversed it in the spring of 1837, it contributed to cotton price fluctuation and unease in the American economy.

Thus, a confluence of factors led to the Panic of 1837. Jackson's veto of the second B.U.S. charter and subsequent removal of federal funds from the B.U.S. placed a massive amount of funds in state-chartered banks. This eliminated the stabilizing powers of B.U.S. President Nicholas Biddle, and state banks abused their new funds by issuing a massive amount of loans, lowering their reserve ratios despite an influx of specie. Much of this new credit was used to finance a speculative boom in western lands. This was followed by the June 1836 Deposit Act, which doubled the amount of banks holding federal deposits, making regulation more difficult. In addition, this bill redistributed deposits away from the critical banks on the east coast. Concerned about the rampant speculation in federal land sales, Jackson subsequently issued the Specie Circular in July 1836, requiring purchases of federal land to be made in specie. However, this failed to stop speculation fast enough, and banks were drained of their specie reserves. An additional factor in declining specie reserves was a policy instated by the Bank of England that increased interest rates and devalued bills with ties to the American economy.

By May 1837, New York City banks were in a dire state. On May 4, 1837, the sudden death of the bank's president led to a run on the Mechanic's Bank, and while all specie requests were met, it represented declining public confidence in the city's banks. This triggered additional runs several days later, with \$600,000

⁴¹ Rousseau, "Jacksonian Monetary Policy," 462.

in specie withdrawn on May 8 and an additional \$700,000 withdrawn on May 9. This was unsustainable, as the city's pet banks held only \$1.5 million in specie on May 1. As a result, most of the city's banks were forced to suspend specie payments by the evening of May 9, with every remaining bank suspending them the next day. News of the run on the Mechanic's Bank reached New Orleans on May 12, and on May 13 banks suspended specie payments there as well.⁴² This led to a nationwide recession characterized by a tightening of credit and deflation.

U.S. Banking & Currency Statistics, 1837-1843

	Jan. 1837	Jan. 1838	Jan. 1839	Jan. 1843
Number of Banks	788	829	840	691
Bank Loans	\$525m.	\$486m.	\$492m.	\$255m.
Bank Notes	\$149m.	\$116m.	\$135m.	\$59m.
Bank Deposits	\$127m.	\$85m.	\$90m.	\$56m.
Bank Specie	\$38m.	\$35m.	\$45m.	\$34m.
Reserve Ratio	13.70%	17.40%	20%	29%
Total Specie in U.S.	\$73m.	\$88m.	\$87m.	\$90m.
Total Money Supply	\$311m.	\$254m.	\$267m.	\$171m.
Inflation	\$238	\$166	\$180	\$81
Population	15.7m.	16.1m.	16.6m.	18.7m.
Money Per Capita	\$19.80	\$15.7	\$16.08	\$9.14
Inflation Per Capita	\$15.15	\$10.31	\$10.84	\$4.33
Commodity Prices	90.4	91.3	87.2	65

Reproduced from Trask, "The Panic of 1837," 6-7.

From 1837 to 1843, the assets of the nation's banks declined by 45%, and 194 of the 729 banks in the nation closed. Prices plummeted, per capita investment declined by 1% per year, and per capita output fell 1.4% per year. In addition, per capita imports were cut in half, and incorporations of nonfinancial

⁴² *Ibid.*, 482.

businesses declined by 80%.⁴³ The economy recovered slightly in 1838, as the Treasury promised to accept payment in paper from banks that resumed specie payments. Federal and state governments also made payments in specie as much as possible. This, combined with the Bank of England's shipping of \$1 million pounds in gold to New York in the spring of 1838, increased the supply of specie in American markets and led to the resumption of specie payments by many American banks in July. However, banks quickly overextended themselves again, and on October 9, 1839 the B.U.S., which continued to exist as a state bank after losing its federal charter, suspended specie payments. This triggered suspensions nationwide, and the nation fell back into recession.⁴⁴

As leader of the Albany Regency, Van Buren had attempted to create a banking system in the state of New York that could withstand such turmoil. Under state law, banks were privately-run but required a state charter due to the restraining laws of 1804 and 1818. These acts abolished free banking and banned unchartered institutions from issuing notes or loaning money. As a result, banks essentially became legal monopolies. Although they were private, for-profit institutions, they were "assumed to have a public character" and "were regarded as instruments to implement public policy and to advance the Commonwealth's interests."⁴⁵ Charters were granted with the caveat that public interests be served and that the state would have regulatory power. In addition, charters were infrequently granted and thus highly prized, leading to intermingling with state

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 457-458.

⁴⁴ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 463-465.

⁴⁵ Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 89-90.

politics and corruption. The state tried to limit this by instituting a law in 1821 requiring a two-thirds vote in the legislature to charter a new bank, but this only amplified the ties between banking and politics.⁴⁶

A major reform to this structure occurred with the 1829 Safety Fund Act and the establishment of the Safety Fund Banking System. This required banks to contribute to a common reserve fund administered by the state, which would be used to redeem the notes issued by any institution that failed. The goal of this legislation was to make banks liable for each other's operations. State control over the banks was greatly expanded as well, with the creation of the New York Bank Commission to eliminate the previous "fallacy of control by self-enforcing charter."⁴⁷ This consisted of three commissioners, one chosen by the governor and two selected by the banks. The commissioners were required to visit each bank four times annually, and they were given broad investigative powers as well as the authority to close insolvent banks.⁴⁸ While Van Buren and the Regency advocated laissez-faire economics, they perceived banks to be unique institutions because they were "not a mere aggregate of free agents."⁴⁹ Thus the reckless actions of one bank could impact other banks and threaten the entire financial system of the state. The Regency's remedy to this systemic risk was the Safety Fund, as it would punish banks for making poor decisions while also insuring citizens' deposits to prevent contagion and a run on the banks. However, the Safety Fund

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

proved far inadequate to deal with the volume of bank failures resulting from the Panic of 1837.⁵⁰

Due to the difficulty of obtaining a state charter, credit was limited in Rochester. In contrast to the rest of the nation, Rochesterians faced a deficiency of credit throughout the 1830s. Just two banks, the Bank of Rochester and the Bank of Monroe, existed before 1830, and despite its rapid growth, the city added only two banks, Rochester City Bank and Rochester Savings Bank, before the Panic.⁵¹ This lack of credit decreased the effects of the Panic, as Rochester banks were overcapitalized and had sufficient specie to continue making payments. However, to prevent a run on the banks in the wake of New York's suspension, Rochester banks too were forced to suspend specie payments.

Rochester was also less affected than other cities at the outset of the crisis due to high flour prices and four ongoing internal improvement projects: a railroad to Batavia and Auburn, the Genesee Valley Canal, expansion of the Erie Canal, and improvements to the Lake Ontario harbor. However, high flour prices led to the overproduction of wheat in 1838 and 1839 and a subsequent crash in prices, reducing profits for Rochester millers and the thousands of farmers who sent their wheat to the Flour City to be ground.⁵² In addition, funding for internal improvements dried up, and much of this construction halted until the economy improved. The collapse of credit also hurt trade on the Erie Canal, as goods were often paid for with paper money or through an established credit relationship with a capitalist downstate. The further west a town was, the less trustworthy its banks

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 93

⁵¹ McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water Power City*, 212.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 217.

were deemed, and the notes it issued were discounted accordingly. When the Panic struck and contagion spread, paper money was less trustworthy and thus valued less, decreasing the demand for Rochester's goods and lessening the ability of Rochesterians to purchase goods from elsewhere.⁵³ However, trade on the canal did not completely collapse and remained relatively strong when viewed in context of the recession, an indication of its importance in New York's economy.⁵⁴

Rochester's municipal government was forced to open the area's first soup kitchen in the winter of 1837-38, and subsequently had to offer additional relief to the struggling poor. In the spring of 1840, 1,389 Rochesterians – or 6% of the population – received public assistance. Just \$7,191 was given in 1840, amounting to five dollars per person.⁵⁵ This was because the city government had few sources of revenue and was short on cash during this period. In addition, many Rochesterians were uncomfortable with the idea of government handouts in this manner, and preferred that relief be administered through private organizations (mostly religious institutions) as it had been previously.

⁵³ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 322.

⁵⁴ McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water Power City*, 222.

⁵⁵ Perkins, "Rochester One Hundred Years Ago," 12-13.

III. The Election of 1840

The emerging Whig Party was disorganized at the time of the 1836 presidential election. Its national strategy against Martin Van Buren, the sitting Vice President and anointed successor of Andrew Jackson, was to run four regional candidates to prevent Van Buren from gaining a majority of electoral votes and throw the election into the House of Representatives. In the state of New York, the Whigs ran General William Henry Harrison. Although he gained a majority of votes in Monroe County, Harrison was unable to win Van Buren's home state. The Whig strategy failed, and Van Buren secured four more years of Jacksonian Democracy in the White House.

Van Buren was an advocate of big parties and small government. He helped build the Albany Regency, which dominated New York State politics for over a dozen years as a political machine for the Bucktails and later the Jacksonian Democrats. A believer in majority rule, Van Buren wanted his party to be the majority and his majority to be powerful. While the Whigs accused him of having been devoid of personal convictions early on in his career and of simply trying to "set out in life with the strongest party," he eventually built his own dominant party.⁵⁶ However, he generally used his big party to reduce the power of government by lowering the gubernatorial term from three to two years, opposing internal improvements projects (particularly at the federal level), lessening tariffs, and fighting for states' rights.⁵⁷ This ideology made him a poor match, at least politically, to be president during the late 1830s. The Panic of 1837 struck just

⁵⁶ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, August 9, 1839.

⁵⁷ Jerome Mushkat, "Martin Van Buren" in *The Encyclopedia of New York State* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 1632.

months into Van Buren's term, and although he personally had little to do with causing it, he was heavily criticized. Van Buren held firmly to Jacksonian policies, refusing to re-charter the national bank or invest in internal improvements projects to stimulate the economy. The state of the economy posed an enormous threat to his reelection prospects, with Whigs dubbing him "Martin Van Ruin."

The Whig Party improved its infrastructure during Van Buren's presidency, and planned to hold its first-ever national convention in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in December 1839. After the eclectic campaign of 1836, the goal of this convention was "the union of the Whigs—for the sake of the Union."⁵⁸ The three major candidates for the nomination were Senator Henry Clay, General Winfield Scott, and Harrison.

While Clay's esteemed political career had earned him respect in Rochester and Harrison's military successes had garnered him enough popularity to win the city's vote in the presidential election of 1836, Rochester's Whigs nominated Scott as their candidate of choice. This was largely due to electability, with the pro-Whig *Rochester Daily Democrat* stating that "there is no pleasure in running a man for the mere pleasure of having him beaten," and in selecting a nominee for the newly-consolidated Whig Party, "the only question should be, 'who will secure the largest number of votes?'"⁵⁹ Due to his military victories, Scott, much like Harrison, was well-known nationwide and quite popular, while his detachment from politics meant he would not alienate too many voters. In

⁵⁸ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, August 9, 1839.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1839.

addition, the *Democrat* was wary of a rivalry between Clay and Harrison supporters, fearing that if Clay was nominated Harrison backers would be unwilling to rally behind him, and vice versa.⁶⁰ Nominating Scott was a way of triangulating these factions and offering a candidate everyone could support. Given the previous disunity amongst Whigs and the fact that they ran four presidential candidates in 1836, their emphasis on electability was practical. It is also likely that Clay's southern sympathies diminished his support in Rochester, as in the year preceding the convention he had made staunch anti-abolitionist statements.⁶¹ However the *Democrat* did not overtly say this, and leading into the convention it avoided writing anything negative about the three candidates, leaving the opportunity available for Whigs to unite around whichever one was nominated. The candidates were all popular amongst Whigs in Rochester, and although individuals each had their own preferences, the *Democrat* believed that "there are but few who are friends to either, who are not warm friends to all."⁶²

Senator Clay visited Rochester in July 1839 as part of a tour from Buffalo to New England to galvanize support for his candidacy in the north. Clay was well-received in the city, and his entrance was met with a procession of 50 men on horseback followed by a "cavalcade" of 71 carriages with "loud bursts of cheering" throughout.⁶³ Rochesterians appreciated Clay's devotion to "popular rights and civil freedom," but more importantly they were aware of how profoundly Clay's American System ideology of internal improvements had

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, December 12, 1839.

⁶¹ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 495.

⁶² *Rochester Daily Democrat*, July 11, 1839.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, July 22, 1839.

impacted their city.⁶⁴ A speech welcoming Clay noted that Rochester was “in its growth and prosperity, one of the most remarkable monuments which our country and age presents, of the results of that beneficent policy – adopted and advocated with signal fidelity by you.”⁶⁵ Clay returned the gratitude, thanking western New York for its support throughout the years. While the *Democrat* demonstrated great reverence for Clay and his long political career, it made no reference to his presidential aspirations. This was a reaction typical of other stops on Clay’s tour. He was often met with massive crowds, but attendees were more appreciative of his presence than inspired to endorse his campaign.⁶⁶

The Whig National Convention took place from December 4-8, 1839.

Clay was the leading candidate heading into the convention, and gained a plurality of votes in the first ballot. However, his recent anti-abolitionism strategy was undercut by the failure of four slaveholding states to send a delegation. Meanwhile, Harrison’s stronghold was in the middle and western states, while Scott’s popularity was foremost in the north.⁶⁷ Multiple ballots followed, with prominent Whigs seeking to convince delegates to change support for their candidate of choice. Perhaps the most important man in this process was upstate New Yorker Thurlow Weed, an extremely influential figure in New York politics, particularly in the western portion of the state. Weed supported the nomination of Scott, but to a greater extent he opposed the nomination of Clay, whom he deemed unelectable due to his unpopularity with Jacksonians, abolitionists, Anti-

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 495.

⁶⁷ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, December 13, 1839.

Masons, and Irish immigrants.⁶⁸ In backroom dealings, Weed managed to convince several northern delegates to switch their support from Clay to Scott. With Scott gaining momentum and Clay fading, a private letter was leaked that seemed to indicate that Scott was in favor of abolition. This ruined Scott's chances in the south and caused Virginians to flee from Scott to Harrison. Weed quickly maneuvered, throwing his weight and most of Scott's supporters behind Harrison and earning the 66-year-old a majority of delegates on the next ballot.

Harrison was the second choice of Rochesterians, and upon hearing news of his nomination the *Democrat* stated that "we heartily acquiesce in the unexpected but not unwelcome decision." The Whigs had hoped to emerge from the convention as a united party, and prior to the bitter politicking of the convention the *Democrat* had believed that "harmony will as certainly follow the deliberations and decision of the convention, as light succeeds darkness!"⁶⁹ However many Clay and Scott supporters were upset with the outcome of the nomination, with Clay stating that "my friends are not worth the powder and shot it would take to kill them," and blaming "a band of men about Rochester" for destroying his nomination, an allusion to Weed's scheming.^{70,71} Nonetheless, the *Democrat* feigned unity after the convention, stating that Whigs had reacted nationwide with "the liveliest enthusiasm" and that Harrison's nomination by convention made him "the people's candidate."⁷² The *Democrat* also noted one of Harrison's best attributes – that his military career and frontiersman persona made

⁶⁸ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 496.

⁶⁹ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, July 11, 1839.

⁷⁰ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 497.

⁷¹ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, December 17, 1839.

⁷² *Ibid.*, December 18, 1839.

him somewhat of a Jacksonian figure who could appeal to the common man. Harrison was depicted as a humble man, whose life of service had left him poor and weathered, making him “the People’s Candidate – the choice of the yeomanry, the farmer, the laboring man and the mechanic.”⁷³ They hoped he could not only unite Whigs nationwide, but attract former Jackson supporters as well.

Democrats were quick to challenge these assertions. Their view of the convention was that “by the chicanery and intrigue of a few corrupt demagogues, have the whig party been deprived of a competent candidate; and forced to adopt a weak, incompetent, and superannuated old man.”⁷⁴ One of the city’s Democratic papers, the *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, reprinted stories from around the country that demonstrated the lack of harmony within the Whig Party about the nomination of an “old granny” that the Whig *Democrat* had selectively omitted, emphasizing Clay’s bitter response to defeat. The paper also rejected the notion that Harrison could intrude upon Jackson’s political territory, arguing that it took more than a military uniform to be a viable candidate for president. While Harrison may have had a resemblance to Andrew Jackson, Democrats argued that “all of the leading principles and measures of General Jackson’s administration [were] adopted, carried out, and sustained by Mr. Van Buren.”⁷⁵ They believed Whig campaign strategies were facetious and ignored actual policy.

Following news of Harrison’s nomination, Rochester’s Whigs responded in a way typical of the time – by holding a town meeting. The gathering passed

⁷³ *Ibid.*, December 12, 1839.

⁷⁴ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, December 17, 1839.

⁷⁵ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, December 18, 1839.

resolutions approving of Harrison's nomination and commending his wisdom, patriotism, and service to the country. This was followed by a lengthy showing of gratitude towards Scott and his supporters, a sign of their attempts to consolidate Whig strength and heal the self-inflicted wounds of the nomination process. Clay was also acknowledged, but in a much more concise fashion that was telling of the disparity between his and Scott's popularity within the city.

The meeting then moved its focus to the incipient national race between Harrison and Van Buren, outlining some of the issues most important to Rochester. This predominantly consisted of negative criticism of the Van Buren administration rather than positive advocacy of Whig policies that would be brought to fruition by Harrison, something Democrats complained about for much of the campaign. The Rochester Whigs denounced the overall "maladministration" of Van Buren, with the national deficit being the first example of this. They proclaimed the Treasury to be "literally bankrupt," and deemed it embarrassing that "even the pitiful pension to the widows of the Revolutionary soldiers, are put off like creditors of an insolvent debtor."⁷⁶ Erasing the national debt had been a focus of Jackson's presidency, so emphasizing Van Buren's failure to adhere to this doctrine was likely an attempt to lure former Jacksonians to Harrison's cause. It is also telling that they cite Revolutionary War pensions as an example of bills the Van Buren administration would be unable to pay. This shapes the debate into one of patriotism, with the former generals Jackson and Harrison honoring and continuing the legacy of the Revolution, while Van Buren was bankrupting the nation's government, war heroes, and principles.

⁷⁶ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, December 21, 1839.

The Whig town hall meeting then moved to the state of the American economy, which despite “facilities of intercourse unknown in any other country of equal extent,” was in a state of depression.⁷⁷ These Rochesterians believed the chief cause of their economic struggles to be the “utter destruction of the medium of exchange,”⁷⁸ leaving merchants and millers short of cash. This meant that “the farmer is unable to sell the fruits of his hard labor,” even though “there is a demand for them, at good prices, in the great markets of the country.”⁷⁹ The result was moral bedlam, with “broken contracts, increased litigations, debtors resorting to all contrivances, legal and illegal,” and “faith and confidence between man and man utterly destroyed.”⁸⁰ This was a simplistic explanation of the depression that did not place blame on any social class and instead expressed sympathy for the toll it had taken on each of them. It also framed the argument as one of morality, with the economic decay resulting from Van Burenism threatening the ethical fibers that held America together. Blame is also placed squarely on Van Buren’s 5’6” frame, even though he had only been president for a few months before the Panic of 1837 and much of its causes were rooted in battles that had been fought during General Jackson’s presidency. This was because, as previously stated, Whigs hoped to market General Harrison as a Jacksonian figure, and by isolating their criticism on Van Buren they hoped to procure the support of former Jackson voters.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Rochester's Democrats held their own "Democratic Republican Convention" in March 1840. Henry O'Reilly, writing the opinion of the convention, stated that Rochester Democrats "have admired the fearless patriotism with which those Statesmen [Jackson and Van Buren] struggled to restrain the Federal Authority within the spear of duty prescribed by the constitution" and preserving states' rights.⁸¹ Restraining the federal government was a key issue in the ideology of Rochester Democrats, and they were pleased with the previous decade of Democratic rule. The resolution then states that "this was best exemplified in the [Jackson] veto of the Maysville Road Bill, which overthrew the Logrolling system" and restored the control of internal improvements to the states, "except in cases where the improvements are clearly of that general character which places them within the rightful reach of the national government."⁸² Both parties accused the other of overstretching constitutional limitations. Whigs criticized Democrats for the spoils system (a frequent complaint of the party not in power), the pet banks, Jackson's use of the veto, and Van Buren's kingly lifestyle, while Democrats criticized Whigs for the national bank, internal improvements, and other government infringements on the free market, such as tariffs.

In keeping with their attempt to portray Harrison as the true defender of the constitution, the Whig *Democrat* reprinted a nationally syndicated list of "plain reasons for plain men" to vote for Harrison, nearly all of which addressed

⁸¹ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

⁸² *Ibid.*

his character and respect for constitutional restraints on executive power.⁸³ It stated that Harrison was a “tried republican of the Old School” who fulfills “Jeffersonian requisites for office,” meaning he is “honest, capable, and faithful to the constitution.”⁸⁴ Both Democrats and Whigs sought to inherit the Jeffersonian legacy, and this statement argues that Harrison, the son of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was a candidate who respected the way things used to be. He wanted to continue the heritage of the Revolution, while Van Buren was taking the country in some foreign direction. The column then states that as Governor of Indiana, “millions of dollars passed through [Harrison’s] hands, and every cent has been accounted for,” and he had been “invested with power” throughout his life, with the “supremacy of the law” being maintained at all times.⁸⁵ This is a reaction to Jackson and Van Buren’s spoils system as well as the pet banks, which Whigs perceived to be innately corrupt and a way of siphoning federal money to political allies. Van Buren was also portrayed to live like a king, with the White House as his “executive mansion” that employed “gardeners, keepers of the grounds,” and interior designers.⁸⁶

Harrison was also characterized as a morally upright man who could be trusted with the people’s money and would end the present system of abuses. This was manifested in his “plain...dress and manners.” Unlike Van Buren, Harrison was “a man of substance, not of show,” who did not think of himself as being better than anyone else. He worked “with his own hands,” and Whigs essentially

⁸³ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, December 20, 1839.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, July 1, 1840.

presented him as an American Cincinnatus, a farmer at heart who treated “every honest man as his equal” and would govern solely for the best interests of the people.⁸⁷ He had also been out of public life for twelve years, which prevented him from getting “mingled in the party strife of the day,” meaning “he would therefore be the President of the whole people.”⁸⁸ The Whig Party was new and had never won a presidential election, so it had to appeal to a broader base and could not simply tout the Whig Party over everything else. This statement about Harrison being a president for Americans, not just Whigs, was necessary to attract non-Whigs, who made up a majority of the electorate.

Whigs also claimed Harrison’s modesty would make him a diminutive executive who “would respect the will of Congress... and would only use the veto power when the act submitted for his approval came in conflict with the constitution.”⁸⁹ In addition, he would respect the Senate’s judgment of his appointments and would not be offended if a nominee was rejected. This is an allusion to Jackson and Van Buren’s monarchical rule, and Whigs must have believed that a majority of people nationwide favored the previous balance of powers with a legislative branch that did not cower to the executive.

An appeal was also made to voters in western states. The *Democrat* declared Harrison to be “the Father of the present admirable system of disposing of the public lands,” for as a member of Congress he introduced the Harrison Land Act, which divided public land in the west into small tracts that could be

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, December 20, 1839.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

sold at low prices.⁹⁰ This meant “that a poor man who can make up \$100, may become an independent freeholder,” expanding the republican ideal of land ownership and economic independence to a great number of people.⁹¹ Harrison was very popular in the west, due not only to his land advocacy but to his military campaigns. His most famous victory was the defeat of Tecumseh at the Battle of Tippecanoe in Indiana, which earned him the nickname of Tippecanoe, or “Tip” for short. Whigs felt nearly assured of success in the west, with a western newspaper claiming that “the history of the West is his history. For forty years he has been identified with its interests, its perils and its hopes.”⁹² The challenge for Whigs then was to win the states of New York and Pennsylvania, which accounted for 72 of the 294 electoral votes at stake. These states had the large metropolises of New York City and Philadelphia located in their southeast corners, but growing populations in their western regions could reverse this downstate dominance and turn their electoral votes in Harrison’s favor.

The Whig Party was in many ways a descendant of the Federalist Party, and prior to the election of 1840 it had failed to fully embrace the populist aspects necessary to win national elections like Jackson’s “Democracy” had. It was portrayed as an elitist, pro-business party, and Democrats continually referred to Whigs as Federalists, with the *Advertiser* stating that “the principles of modern whiggery are identical with those of ancient federalism.”⁹³ In an attempt to degrade Harrison, the Democrat-leaning *Baltimore Republican* printed a derision

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, February 3, 1840.

⁹³ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, December 17, 1839.

reportedly uttered by a Clay supporter days after the convention: “Give him a barrel of hard cider, and settle a pension of two thousand a year on him, and my word for it, he will sit the remainder of his days in his log cabin.”⁹⁴ Whigs embraced the insult, leveraging log cabins and hard cider into symbols of Harrison’s populist campaign. In fact, Whigs were able to completely change the previous narrative and depict Van Buren and his Democratic Party as elitists. Democrats never took these actions seriously, with the *Advertiser* stating that “the contest will be so light and easy, that democracy will march on to conquest, without encountering scarcely a show of resistance.”⁹⁵ They believed the log cabin and hard cider campaign to be a “farce... practicing upon an old federal doctrine, that the mass of the people are ignorant and easily deceived.”⁹⁶ It was seen as ironic that “the men who live in fine houses, and drink imported wines, are endeavoring to make the people believe that they are friendly to those who live in Log Cabins and drink Hard Cider.”

Rochester Democrats criticized Whigs for being condescending and founding their campaign on the assumption that Americans were “devoid of all claims to discriminating rationality,” and the best way to get their vote was “by means correspondingly degraded and vulgar.”⁹⁷ Democrats believed they were the true party for the average American, and Whig attempts to intrude on their base were viewed as artificial. The pro-Van Buren *Rochester Republican* asked, “who are the real friends of the poor? Those whose doctrines tend to perfect equality so

⁹⁴ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 498.

⁹⁵ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, December 17, 1839.

⁹⁶ *Rochester Republican*, April 28, 1840.

⁹⁷ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, December 17, 1839.

far as laws and legislation are concerned? Or those who contend for measures that would “make the rich richer and the poor poorer?”⁹⁸ Democrats believed a small government free from the influence of business to be in the best interests of the poor, not proactive government policy that “moisten[ed] the rich man’s field with the sweat of the poor man’s brow.”⁹⁹ They were confident that Americans would be smart enough to see through this deception, and that the Whig thesis “that the mass are ignorant, and easily gulled” would prove to be incorrect.¹⁰⁰

In March 1840, a Whig Young Men’s County Convention determined that Rochester should join other upstate New York cities like Syracuse, Penn Yan, and Seneca Falls, and erect a log cabin “as the Head Quarters of the friends of Gen. Harrison in the county of Monroe.”¹⁰¹ Rochester’s cabin was completed less than a month later, and a formal dedication ceremony was held on April 27. The *Democrat* described an electric environment, with hundreds of Rochesterians arriving hours before the start of the ceremonies. The editor had “never attended a political meeting in the city where there was more enthusiasm, and high patriotic feeling” and it convinced him that “Harrison *will* be our next President.”¹⁰² When the ceremony finally started, it was led by Dr. Matthew Brown, a symbolic decision for as one of Rochester’s earliest settlers, he himself had once lived in a log cabin. The ceremony lasted over three hours and was filled with political songs, cannon shots, toasts of hard cider, and cheering. It was more of a

⁹⁸ *Rochester Republican*, April 28, 1840.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰¹ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, March 31, 1840.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, April 27, 1840.

celebration than a policy discussion, but the prominent issue that was discussed was the independent treasury.

The independent treasury, Van Buren's rebuttal to a national bank, was perhaps the most important issue of the election in Rochester due to its relation to the economy as well as its timing. Van Buren advocated an independent treasury from the outset of his presidency and began taking actions to move the country in that direction, withdrawing federal money from the state banks. This decreased investors' confidence and was a factor in causing the Panic of 1837. O'Reilly writes that this "Constitutional course" of limited federal government "was further manifested by uncompromising hostility to national Banks."¹⁰³ He believed a national bank was unconstitutional since Congress was not given the authority to charter corporations. The Democrats' solution to the banking crisis was to "render the government and the Banks mutually independent of each other" in order to protect business and politics from "those contaminating influences which have too frequently been engendered by the connections between politics and banking affairs – between legislation and the stock-market."¹⁰⁴ This was known as the independent treasury system, and O'Reilly claims that "the Democracy of Rochester and Monroe County...were among the foremost to proclaim formally their attachment to such measures." An independent treasury would be a safer depository for government funds than the pet banks, and it would also eliminate the patronage that this system had created. Democrats believed it would also give Congress greater oversight of these funds and the public's money would no longer

¹⁰³ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

be “at the mercy of banks,” as it had been during the Panic of 1837.¹⁰⁵ This essentially summarizes the Democratic narrative of the Bank War of the previous decade. The B.U.S. tied the finances of the federal government with the private finances of the country. This led to corruption and speculation, and it jeopardized the sovereignty of the federal government. O’Reilly states that resolving this is “the chief issue now before the country,” and defines the debate to essentially be between establishing “a National Treasury independent of a National Bank,” or “a National Bank dependent on the Treasury.”¹⁰⁶ To Democrats, the existence of a national bank posed an existential threat to Jacksonian Democracy.

The Independent Treasury Act passed Congress in late June 1840, but Van Buren waited until the Fourth of July to sign it, declaring it the “Second Declaration of Independence.”¹⁰⁷ However its passage only intensified the debate and it dominated political discussion in the months leading up to the election.

A meeting of Whigs in Rochester following its passage was very well attended, as people gathered to oppose it and the “perfidious and tyrannical manner in which it was carried through Congress.” They called the act “an express refusal by the federal government to exercise one of its most necessary and useful duties, namely, the providing for a currency of sound and uniform value.”¹⁰⁸ The bill moved the government further away from a national banking system, and the termination of depositing federal funds into state banks would decrease available credit and increase the heterogeneity of currency. The

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 465.

¹⁰⁸ *Rochester Republican*, August 5, 1840.

legislation was also represented a “frightening” expansion of executive influence and Whigs feared that the appointment of “an unlimited number of executive agents for undefined purposes” to manage the treasury would lead to “espionage, bribery and corruption.”¹⁰⁹ Van Buren would use this “interested army of 100,000 Sub Treasurers” to increase party patronage through the spoils system, and those appointed to these positions would then “enrich themselves by the use of the public money.”¹¹⁰

Opposing the independent treasury allowed Whigs to claim to be the true advocates of states' rights and limited government instead of Democrats.¹¹¹ They attempted to blame Van Buren’s banking policy for the Panic of 1837 and use this argument in a way that would attract the working classes. A piece in the *Democrat* directly sought their attention, with a bold heading of “Laborers, look here!” and stating that while work used to be abundant, it is now “scarce, and when you get it, you have to work comparatively cheap.”¹¹² The argument was essentially one between supply- and demand-side economics. Van Buren’s system of a primarily specie currency and an independent treasury would reduce the overall supply of money and thus make everything less expensive. However, Whigs argued that this mirrored the state of affairs in Europe, where “Sub Treasury currency and policy... enable the wealthy manufacturers... to obtain materials and labor at prices which allow them to undersell American and English

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Wilentz *The Rise of American Democracy*, 498.

¹¹² *Rochester Daily Democrat*, March 3, 1840.

manufacturers.”¹¹³ They feared that while such a system would “no doubt... be a glorious thing for wealthy manufacturers in this country,” it would prevent “any ability in the people to purchase their fabrics.”¹¹⁴ “American free men” would be turned into “Van Buren serfs” and a European-style aristocracy would rise in America.¹¹⁵ This also fit well with the Whig narrative of Van Buren as a president-king. However Democrats were upset with the hypocrisy of the argument, as in their view the Whig Party and its predecessors had historically represented aristocratic principles.

Rochester’s Whigs also believed the independent treasury would have dire effects on the economy, lowering the value of property, goods, and wages, and destroying confidence and credit. This was because Whigs believed its inherent distrust of paper money would “uproot that system of mutual confidence and credit” which was the basis of a well-functioning economy. While Democrats often framed Whigs as advocates of banks and big money, Whigs argued that the availability of credit actually benefitted the “honest and industrious” poor. When “supplied with the essential aids of capital,” they were more productive and were able to enhance their independence.”¹¹⁶ Prior to Jackson’s Bank War, this had produced “a degree of prosperity, and civilization unparalleled in the history of nations.”¹¹⁷ In an attempt to attract former Jacksonians, Whigs also argued that an independent treasury went against Jackson’s ideology, quoting a statement he had made in 1834 that “the proposition is disorganizing and revolutionary, subversive

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, July 31, 1840.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1840.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, August 5, 1840.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

of the fundamental principles of our government.”¹¹⁸ This is another example of Whigs attempting to distinguish criticism of Van Buren from criticism of Jackson.

An additional wrinkle for the Whigs was that due to Van Buren’s dominance of New York State politics and the charter banking system discussed earlier, they could claim that Van Buren and his friends had essentially chartered every bank in the state of New York (except for the new ones). Whigs in Rochester held him accountable for nearly everything that banks did, for the chartering system created an enormous amount of political influence in the banks and made them “subservient to [Van Buren’s] political interests.”¹¹⁹ Van Buren’s views on banking later liberalized and became more in line with the hard-money ideology of the Loco Foco faction of his Democratic Party, but his role in the monopolistic and overextended Safety Fund Banking System that had preceded the Panic was inescapable. Whigs condemned bankers with ties to the Regency for seeking easy money as opposed to laboring Americans who earned their worth. The major difference between bankers and average Americans was that “when people want money, they go and *dig* for it. When bankers want money, they go and *print* it.”¹²⁰ Thus Whigs were able to reverse some of their previous aristocratic branding and present Van Buren as the candidate of the wealthy bankers.

In response to the Panic, Whigs passed the New York Free Banking Act in 1838, creating a banking system they believed would be more effective. The legislation allowed banks to open and print money without a charter as long as

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, August 8, 1840.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, October 22, 1840.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

their initial capital totaled at least \$100,000, meaning banks were now “divested of all monopoly features, for all men who chose may incorporate themselves.”¹²¹ Whigs argued that these banks would have no “exclusive privileges,” and would not be allowed “to issue one dollar more than the stockholders have paid in” due to increased regulation by state authorities, and a 12.5% specie reserve ratio requirement.¹²² While at first glance this may appear to have followed Loco Foco ideology, liberals criticized the \$100,000 capital requirement, the exoneration of bank stockholders from personal liability from bank losses, and the expanded regulatory bureaucracy created by the increased rules and regulations.¹²³

Van Buren’s long political career in the state of New York meant that Rochesterians knew him well, and Whigs could easily point out the contradictions, such as the Safety Fund Banking System, that had occurred over the previous thirty years. The *Democrat* attributed his inconsistency to a “ruling passion [of] selfishness,” which led him to place “over-weaning pulsations for office and power” ahead of “patriotism, honor, gratitude, [and] principle.”¹²⁴ Originally a supporter of James Madison, Van Buren backed his adversary, DeWitt Clinton, in the presidential election of 1812. Then, in the early 1820s, he became a leader of the Bucktail wing of the Democratic-Republican Party in New York State that opposed Clinton and his construction of the Erie Canal. While Clinton was a Democratic-Republican, many of his principles, notably the

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 98.

¹²⁴ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, August 8, 1840.

advocacy of internal improvements, later became important parts of Whig ideology.

Internal improvements were naturally of great interest in Rochester and a major source of much of its wealth. While Whigs were the party of the American System, Democrats in Rochester were not opposed to all internal improvements, but simply more cautious with expenditure. An important distinction was in the level of government that funded the projects. Democrats believed there was little role for the federal government in appropriating money for improvements and that this duty fell upon the states, for they had succeeded “in effecting for themselves far more than could have been achieved for them by the general government.”¹²⁵ Thus Rochester’s Democrats, like nearly all Rochesterians, advocated “the speedy and complete enlargement of the Erie Canal as a work of policy, economy and a source of great and permanent revenue.”¹²⁶ However, similar to their stance on banking, they were wary of an overextension of credit. They opposed how Whig Governor William Henry Seward had funded canal enlargement through the issue of \$40 million of debt all at once, instead preferring gradual funding through canal toll profits.¹²⁷

While Erie Canal enlargement was deemed a worthy state investment, Democrats viewed many other Whig projects to be prodigal. Railroads were becoming more prominent in the late 1830s, and many new lines were being built across New York State. Whigs proposed state funding for one such line, the New York Erie Railroad, because private investors had “lost all confidence in the

¹²⁵ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

¹²⁶ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, May 7, 1839.

¹²⁷ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, August 9, 1840.

ability of any company to construct the road.”¹²⁸ This infuriated Democrats, who argued that if it was not a profitable venture for a private company, then it would be a poor investment for the state and a waste of public money even though some residents would benefit from its construction. The *Advertiser* accused Whigs of essentially buying votes through projects such as this, stating that “the Whigs wish to connect their names with every local measure, to enlist local feeling in their behalf, to entice speculators into their ranks.”¹²⁹ Internal improvements were a boon to the area in which they were constructed, and such projects were an easy way to gain local popularity, extend political favors, and make a lot of money for landowners and speculators in the region.

Another point of contention in this ubiquitous debate was financing through a direct tax. In an effort to limit extravagant improvements projects, some Democrats advocated funding such projects through direct taxation of the New York’s residents. The *Advertiser* stated that it would be a “happy day for the States” if this happened, because then “few if any [projects] will be executed whose utility is not unquestioned.”¹³⁰ However the Whig *Democrat* refuted accusations that projects were excessive, stating that they have always been “opposed... to any system of improvements as will not, by its revenue, directly or indirectly, pay all of its expenses for repairs, attendance and interest.”¹³¹ They also believed financing through direct taxation was “unjust and oppressive” because “all tax payers may not equally enjoy the benefits and privileges created

¹²⁸ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, May 7, 1839.

¹²⁹ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

¹³⁰ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, February 11, 1840.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

by the tax.”¹³² The present system of collecting tolls after the project opened, although it created debt initially, was fairer because it taxed users of the canal or railroad directly as opposed to taxing all citizens.

Whigs in Rochester viewed Democratic opposition to internal improvements as “abandon[ing] and denounc[ing]...the system which has enriched the state, and made her, in commercial greatness, the pride and boast of the union, and the admiration of the world.”¹³³ They praised the “wisdom” of Clinton in building the Erie Canal and believed that “internal improvements are destined to be zealously prosecuted” but that they would “ultimately triumph over all their enemies.”¹³⁴ Van Buren himself was an example of this, as he once opposed construction of the Erie Canal but would never take an anti-canal position in 1840.

Another aspect to this was the fact that Whigs had historically been the party of the elites, and the re-charter of the B.U.S. as well as internal improvements would likely benefit wealthy capitalists the most. The reinstatement of a relatively stable system of credit would lubricate trade and help the economy recover while also allowing the wealthy to return to speculative investments. Likewise, internal improvements would increase trade and enable increasing returns to scale, which would potentially create a true upper crust of Rochester society that was substantially wealthier than the rest. Thus, depending on one’s economic beliefs, Whig policies could either be seen as favoring the upper class

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, May 18, 1839.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

or as policies that would increase income inequality but still improve the general welfare of all citizens.

A very similar debate was fought over national tariff policy. Democrats wanted a low tariff that was relatively equalized across industries, as tariffs on manufactured goods under the American System created an unequal playing field. They believed that “no efforts should be made to bolster any one branch of business or class of people at the expense of another” and wanted “manufactures, like agriculture and commerce, [to] be safely left to the intelligent enterprises of the people.”¹³⁵ The main purpose of tariffs should be to provide “moderate revenue” for the federal government, and any protection that was rendered from tariffs should be “incidental.”¹³⁶ O’Reilly rejoiced over Jackson’s reduction of the tariff by nearly a half, and stated that the manufacturing industry had been successful in the years since this reduction. This policy was popular in the south, where there was little manufacturing and plantation owners benefitted from being able to buy cheap manufactured goods from Europe while also avoiding retaliatory tariffs on their exports of raw materials.

Contrarily Whigs, who had been stereotyped as wealthy factory owners, were in favor of protectionist trade policies. As part of the American System, they favored high tariffs to shield America’s nascent manufacturing sector, and they favored increased regulation as well. In fact, the Democratic *Rochester Republican* argued that “the difference between the contending parties in this country, is in nothing more strikingly evinced than on the subject of trade,” for

¹³⁵ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

“whigs are never satisfied unless trade or commerce is *hampered by legislation*. They must have a *regulator*, or they are panic stricken at once.”¹³⁷ Democrats feared extensive regulation because “a monopoly direct or indirect is awarded to the regulating few at the expense of the many,” and this was a “sure stepping stone to an American privileged order.”¹³⁸ As for a high tariff, it was “one of the many schemes devised to fleece labor for the benefit of a would be aristocracy” and part of a general Whig policy of creating “more restraints for the especial benefit of the few.”¹³⁹ This argument was somewhat hypocritical, for the state chartered banks under Van Buren’s Regency were very similar to the legalized monopolies the Democrats accused Whigs of trying to create.

Both sides of the debate could be framed as beneficial to the common man. Democratic policy was appealing because it treated everyone equally. It could also influence average Americans in a very direct way, as a low tariff would increase the availability and decrease the price of higher-quality European manufactured goods. However, Whigs argued that while the tariff would benefit capitalists, it would also create manufacturing jobs. Additionally, a high tariff could be depicted as a policy that would strengthen America’s economy as a whole by enabling it to catch up with Europe.

Intrinsically linked with these issues of economic development through spending (internal improvements) and taxes (the tariff) was the issue of the national debt. Whigs expressed a vague desire to “reduce the extravagant expenditures of the Federal Government,” a statement that may have meant

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, October 14, 1840.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

precisely what it said, which was to cut “*extravagant expenditures,*” not expenditures as a whole.¹⁴⁰ Whigs scoffed at the notion that Van Buren was the “retrenchment and reform” candidate, accusing him of destroying the surplus which Jackson had left in the treasury and accumulating \$26 million of debt during his administration.¹⁴¹ This related to his overall expansion of the size of government, with his average yearly deficits of \$9 million a year equating to three quarters of John Quincy Adams’ entire yearly budget. The irony of Rochester’s Whigs was that they criticized Van Buren’s deficits, which were largely the result of declining revenue due to the recession’s impact on tariff revenue, while at the same time advocated internal improvement projects under Governor Seward which had put the state of New York into \$40 million of debt.¹⁴² Van Buren and the Democrats were more fiscally conservative than the Whigs, but the present state of economic affairs put the country in a situation where Whigs could actually campaign on balanced budgets.

Democrats instead blamed the present debt largely on Whigs for being so “enamorous” for the distribution of Jackson’s surpluses amongst the states in order to “build and fortify sea ports, to increase our army and navy, to put our country in a position of defense”.^{143,144} They accused Whigs of “entertain[ing] the strong doctrine that all the general government possesses is in trust for the states, to be handed over just as fast as their extravagant expenditures demand.”¹⁴⁵ This

¹⁴⁰ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, December 20, 1839.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, June 5, 1840.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, August 9, 1840.

¹⁴³ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, April 28, 1840.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

tied in with the Democrats' states' rights ideology, as they believed that the federal government should be kept small and its money used for federal purposes, instead of a large Whig federal government that would take money from states and redistribute it back to them unevenly.

Several other issues played smaller roles in the ongoing political debate in Rochester, the first of which was immigration. In the wake of the recession, many of Rochester's original settlers who had migrated to the area from New England moved further west and were replaced with primarily Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany. However, immigrant populations in Rochester remained less than they were in larger U.S. cities, and ethnic and religious tension was relatively low. Catholics statewide had historically found a home in the Democratic Party, with the Tammany Hall political machine of New York City integrating them into the party. In addition, one of Rochester's most prominent Democrats, Henry O'Reilly, was an Irish immigrant. As part of their increasing efforts to embrace democracy in order to be more successful in elections, Whigs statewide attempted to reach out to the Irish community, with Governor Seward making a benevolent speech to them on St. Patrick's Day. Democrats viewed these efforts as futile, with the *Republican* writing that "the Irish voted as usual...upon the Democratic side...with those who took sides with their countrymen, when persecution drove them to our shores, in the time of the rebellion, and have proved to themselves their real friends."¹⁴⁶ Whig attempts to reach out to this community were seen as ingenuous, and Democrats hoped that

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1840.

“Whigs will soon go back to considering the Irish to be the offscourings of the earth...just as soon as they are satisfied that they cannot get their votes.”¹⁴⁷

There were also a number of local meetings held in Rochester by Irish and German citizens during this time, and in an effort to show support for these communities both Democratic and Whig papers covered them. The Whig *Democrat* devoted a large amount of space to a meeting that was led by Henry O’Reilly and held on St. Patrick’s Day of 1840. This was an indication of the growing Irish influence in Rochester, with the paper claiming that “the festival... was got up in style and manner heretofore unequalled in this city.”¹⁴⁸ It is also noteworthy that a large number of the attendees were not Irish, but “men of various nations and different creeds,” including Englishmen and Scots, which O’Reilly cited as an indication of a “degree of liberality which should ever distinguish an enlightened community.”¹⁴⁹ The recognition of St. Patrick’s Day led to comparisons between Ireland’s dire economic and political situations and the relative freedoms of America, and the meeting had a celebratory tone of what was great about America. O’Reilly praised America’s “free institutions” that treated everyone equally and created “bonds of friendship among men who spurn the paltry jealousies too frequently engendered by national divisions and sectarian feuds.”¹⁵⁰ In extending this liberty to “exiles,” O’Reilly believed that Americans had “proved their own worthiness” of such freedoms.¹⁵¹ While harmony may have been exaggerated due to the festivity of the day and the coming election in which

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, March 25, 1840.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Whigs were pursuing Irish support, O'Reilly's comments cast a positive outlook on immigrant relations in Rochester.

The German presence was growing as well, and in September 1840 F.W. Lasak of New York City came to Rochester to speak to his fellow German-Americans about the coming election. His speech was delivered entirely in German, and Democrats expected it to be educational rather than partisan. However, he went on for nearly two hours denouncing Van Buren and telling his brethren to vote for Harrison. The Whig *Democrat* claimed this message was well-received, but the Democratic *Advertiser* asserted that many were discontented, with one man delivering a lengthy speech of his own as a rebuttal to Lasak's message.^{152,153} While this does not definitively say which candidate Germans tended to support, it is evidence of the importance both parties placed on attracting their vote. A close election could hinge on the decision of these new citizens, and with many native-born Americans likely already beholden to a party, immigrants were a demographic whose vote was likely the most malleable.

Whigs seemed to acknowledge that naturalized Americans were not their strength, advocating a voter registry law in 1839 for the purpose of limiting voter fraud, a problem that was "notorious" in New York.¹⁵⁴ Democrats saw this as an attempt to prevent immigrants from voting and characterized it as a common tactic, as historically each "election should bring with it attempts to keep up a distinction between native and naturalized voters by appeals to the latter as a

¹⁵² *Rochester Daily Democrat*, September 9, 1840.

¹⁵³ *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, September 9, 1840.

¹⁵⁴ *Rochester Republican*, May 7, 1840.

distinct class of citizens.”¹⁵⁵ Whigs viewed this as ironic, for Democrats had claimed that “the Whigs have been foremost in the fraudulent voting and other illegal practices,” and even offered allowing Democrats to write the legislation themselves.¹⁵⁶ Voter fraud was something that each party believed the other was guilty of partaking in, but only Whigs were willing to actually pass legislation to do something about it. This was because immigrants voted primarily for Democrats, and they wanted to protect their constituency. Until 1840, Democrats also had a far superior political machine, meaning they had the capability of producing more fraudulent votes than the Whigs.

An issue less overtly discussed was abolition. The Rochester area would eventually play an integral role in this movement, but due to the economic pressures of 1840 slavery was not a prominent issue in the election. O’Reilly wrote that Rochester Democrats supported the policy of “refusing to waste time in Congress in irritating discussions respecting the domestic institutions...which the limited powers of the federal government preclude that government from rudely interfering.” As with other issues, they turned to the expressly written word of the Constitution. However, they did claim to be in favor of abolition in the long-term, “as soon as the people of those states may deem compatible with the primary law of self preservation.”¹⁵⁷

Whigs were critical of the Democrats’ complacency with the issue of slavery and attempts in Congress to issue a Gag Law on the subject. They called Van Buren and his party “doughfaces” who were desperate for support and trying

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1840.

¹⁵⁶ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, February 3, 1840.

¹⁵⁷ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

to win over voters in the south. The *Democrat* stated that “Van Buren’s last hope rests in the South, and the most degrading subserviency is to be evinced to secure the concurrence of that portion of the Union.”¹⁵⁸ In a similar fashion to how Democrats reacted to Whig hard cider and log cabin tactics, Whigs hoped that Americans would “see its object, and spurn an alliance which is so basely sought by ignominious and time serving demagogues.”¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Whigs did not openly advocate abolition either, and “‘abolitionist’ was a word of much the same sinister connotation that ‘communist’ is for many people today.”¹⁶⁰ Slavery was an incredibly contentious issue, and Rochesterians were both preoccupied with problems more relevant to them and wary of alienating voters. However, a small abolitionist movement did exist in Rochester with an active Underground Railroad in the homes of William Bloss and Samuel Porter. Porter was also active in the anti-slavery Liberty Party and ran regularly for mayor of the city despite the fact that he rarely garnered more than thirty votes.¹⁶¹

The rousing log cabin and hard cider campaign incited much more excitement amongst Whigs than Democrats and the tiny Liberty Party were able to create for their respective candidates. On September 8, 1840 a “Great Meeting of the Whigs of Monroe” was held in Rochester, attracting a crowd of 7-8,000 “Freemen” from the city and surrounding area. The gathering opened with a two mile parade through Rochester in which the “City Band” as well as the “Germann Band” played music while the crowd sang political songs. The fanfare lasted all

¹⁵⁸ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, December 18, 1838.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Perkins, “Rochester One Hundred Years Ago,” 18.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

day, including speeches, resolutions, and the obligatory consumption of hard cider.¹⁶²

While Whigs may have been having a good time, Rochester's Democrats took pride in the fact that they made prompt and clear statements of their positions on issues, believing that it "form[ed] a striking contrast to the non-committal policy" of the Whigs.¹⁶³ Democrats accused Whigs of having no policy during Van Buren's Presidency other than "opposing every thing recommended by the Administration respecting the great financial question which has for some time convulsed the Republic."¹⁶⁴ The *Republican* criticized the Whigs' campaign for being "pitched in the panic key" and simply instilling fear rather than advocating any actually policy.¹⁶⁵ There was "not a manly trait about it," and Democrats cited it as "evidence that the policy of the whig party is to make no declaration of principles for the public eye, while in its present position."¹⁶⁶ Essentially, Whigs did not have to advocate any specific policy, for their "present position" was as the minority party, and Whigs did not have the power to enact legislation. Due to the state of the country's economy, criticizing Van Buren was also easy and attracted attention, while outwardly advocating specific policies would only alienate the broad electoral base that Whigs hoped to coalesce in order to win their first presidential election.

Democrats believed that in reality Van Buren's policies made sense universally, and that if "the leading and intelligent portion of the opposition...to

¹⁶² *Rochester Daily Democrat*, September 9, 1840.

¹⁶³ *Rochester Republican*, March 3, 1840.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, September 7, 1840.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

throw off all disguise...and candidly speak the sentiments of their minds upon the leading policy and measures of Mr. Van Buren's administration, it would be the language of candid approval."¹⁶⁷ They accused the Whigs of paralyzing Congress and rooting against economic recovery for their own political advancement, with the *Republican* stating that "any thing that betokens adversity to the government is sure to call from the whigs demonstrations of joy and satisfaction."¹⁶⁸

In an appeal to the working class, the Democratic *Republican* asserted that many of their bosses, the owners of "manufacturing establishments," were Whigs.¹⁶⁹ They accused them of trying to coerce their employees to vote for Harrison, which posed a major threat to the republican individualism upon which the nation was founded. Their message to laborers was that "to your views on politics and government; on science and religion they have no right to claim to give direction," and pleaded with them to "scorn the bribe as you are a man... an *American citizen*."¹⁷⁰ The rise of wage earners, who were beholden to their employers for their well-being, as America began industrializing posed a threat to the voting independence of citizens, and Democrats attempted to frame themselves as the true advocates for these people.

This issue was particularly important in Rochester, as its early settlers were small farmers and artisans who had migrated west largely due to the availability of land and the personal, economic, and political freedom associated with being a landowner. However, construction of the Erie Canal introduced wage

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1840.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, September 7, 1840.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

earners, mostly Irish immigrants, into the city, which made many uncomfortable. As the city's economy developed, the number of factories and wage-earning citizens increased, threatening the independence many had sought when migrating to Rochester. Worries of employer influence were indicative of larger concerns from both parties about the sanctity of voting. Each party accused the other of attempting to cheat the election by voting multiple times, paying people to vote, or registering ineligible voters. Days before the election, the *Democrat* even urged its readers to "challenge every person whom they do not personally know to be legal voters" and ensure that the opposition was competing fairly.¹⁷¹

As many expected, Harrison was victorious both in the city of Rochester, the state of New York, and nationwide. The election was a rout electorally, with Harrison winning 234 votes to Van Buren's 60. However the outcome was much closer than this data would indicate, as Harrison received 52.9% of the popular vote to Van Buren's very respectable 46.8%.

At the local level, both parties' newspapers were in agreement that Harrison received about 6,468, or 57.2% of votes in Monroe County, while Van Buren received 4,834 votes for 42.7%.¹⁷² Geographic location played an enormous role in voting tendencies, with Harrison garnering 64.7% of the vote to the west in Buffalo's Erie County but just 49.9% to the east in Syracuse's Onondaga County. Van Buren did much better in downstate New York, and statewide the margin between Harrison and Van Buren was just 51.6% for Harrison and 48.4% for Van Buren.

¹⁷¹ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, October 28, 1840.

¹⁷² *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, November 20, 1840.

While unhappy with the election's outcome, Democrats were "right joyous...that the campaign of 1840 is closed," with the *Advertiser* stating that "its character and incidents will furnish matter for mortifying reflection for years to come."¹⁷³ They disliked the "political buffoonery" and "noisy, senseless mummerly" of the campaign, and expressed an "unavailing regret that a people so young, so reputedly enlightened, should have evidenced so much of the viciousness and corruption of older and less favored nations."¹⁷⁴ Democrats hoped that "1840 will ever stand solitary and alone, on the page of history, a damning stain on the brow of federalism and without a parallel in all coming time," but unfortunately campaigns such as this would become more of a norm than an anomaly.¹⁷⁵ Democrats considered the Whig cause to be made up of "the fragments of parties, broken off by the collisions and disappointments of half a century, branded together, in connexion with the money power, for the prostration of the democracy of the nation."¹⁷⁶ 1840 was simply a "spontaneous uprising, throughout the Union, of a long repressed party, whose hatred of democracy had increased with each year's exclusion from power."¹⁷⁷ As a whole, the Democratic tone was quite bitter, insulted that the very democratic forces Jackson had harnessed were now being used against them by a party they believed at heart to be aristocratic. The Whig Party was an "insult to the American people," and Democrats feared that in electing Harrison Americans had "become the authors of

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, November 7, 1840.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, November 13, 1840.

their own slavery.”^{178,179} In addition, they accused Whigs of being backed by \$400 million in banking capital and asserted that “in loving communion with all these influences, was abolition or the abolition party, whose hatred of slavery was so intense that they would not vote for Van Buren, because he would not favor the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, against the will of the people thereof and of the adjoining states.”¹⁸⁰ Their conception of what exactly Harrison would do as president was unclear due to the Whigs’ aversion to stating firm political policies, but Democrats were fearful that Harrison would repeal the Independent Treasury Act and re-charter the B.U.S., erasing twelve years of Democratic political will.¹⁸¹

While Democrats viewed Harrison’s election as an end to “the great experiment” of freedom and equal rights, Whigs believed future generations would look back on the election as a turning point equal in magnitude to the Revolution.^{182,183} Whigs thought they had made a statement that leaders must “study the interests of the great body of the people, of every class, and not those of the few at the expense of the many” in the new democratic America.¹⁸⁴ However, right up to Harrison’s inauguration, Whigs were unaware, or at least avoided sharing, what exactly Harrison would do as president beyond the “restoration of our country to that high state of prosperity that it once enjoyed.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, November 12, 1840.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, November 7, 1840.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, November 13, 1840.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, November 19, 1840.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, November 12, 1840.

¹⁸³ *Rochester Daily Democrat*, March 4, 1841.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, March 8, 1841.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Unfortunately, due to Harrison's death just 32 days into his term, no one would ever find out exactly what that meant.

IV. Conclusion

Historically, the election of 1840 has been characterized as a referendum on the economy and a campaign dominated by societal tension. While this narrative may generally encompass the larger cities of the United States, it does not apply to the city of Rochester particularly well. The state of the economy was horrendous during nearly the entirety of Van Buren's presidency, and one would expect that if this were the premier issue, Van Buren would not have stood a chance in the election. While Harrison did win by a landslide electorally, his victory in the popular vote was by a relatively small 6.1 percentage points.

The spread was larger in Monroe County, but the Rochester area was predominantly Whig. A more effective way to gauge the impact of the recession on the election in Rochester is by comparing the results of 1840 to 1836. These elections featured the same candidates, but were conducted under vastly different economies. The chart below demonstrates that Harrison's share of the vote increased by just 1.81 points from 1836 to 1840, and indicates that economic turmoil did not drastically change how Rochesterians voted.

Comparison of the 1836 and 1840 Presidential Elections in Monroe County

	Harrison	Van Buren	Total Votes	Population	Turnout
1836	55.41%	44.59%	8,819	17,160	51%
1840	57.23%	42.77%	11,302	20,191	56%
Change	+1.81	-1.81	+2,483	+3,031	+5
% Change	+3.17%	-4.24%	+21.97%	+15.01%	+8.19%

Data from Rochester Population 1812-1990; *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, November 20, 1840; *Niles' Weekly Register*, December 3, 1836.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ The data available only includes vote totals for Harrison and Van Buren, excluding Liberty Party candidate James G. Birney and write-ins. Thus percentages are from total votes cast for either Harrison or Van Buren and do not include the small amount of votes that were cast for other candidates.

Class tension, exemplified in Harrison's log cabin and hard cider campaign, has also dominated the interpretation of this election. Whigs attempted to run a populist campaign, reversing their previously perceived status as the party of the elite. Whig papers portrayed Van Buren as an aristocrat and emphasized that Harrison was the candidate of the "common man." The Industrial Revolution was bringing increasing returns to scale in American capitalists, enabling a select few to get wealthy at the expense of a growing wage-earning working class. This was a cardinal threat to the republic envisioned by Jefferson as well as the democracy envisioned by Jackson. A citizen beholden to his employer for wages was beholden to his employer for his entire existence, and it was feared that this would diminish one's independence in life as well as at the ballot box. While many Americans had been wealthy prior to industrialization, income inequality (at least in the free north) was much less than it would become. This was becoming a major source of contention in cities like Philadelphia and New York City. However, Rochester had only existed for roughly twenty years by 1840, and it lagged behind these older cities economically, meaning that it did not experience nearly as much class or ethnic tension.

There were certainly people struggling economically due to the recession, but the upper classes were not doing well either. In addition, the city's newness and lack of infrastructure prevented the returns to scale that would allow anyone to get extravagantly rich and an aristocratic class to arise. For example, tumultuous wheat and flour markets prevented Rochester's millers from getting very wealthy, as many would make massive profits one year and follow it up with

substantial losses the next.¹⁸⁷ Hence, even in Rochester's best industry, no one was exorbitantly wealthy and there was frequent turnover in mill ownership. In addition, most Rochesterians were not wage earners, and even those who were could still reasonably dream that one day they would own their own business. Rochester's economic homogeneity was accompanied by a relative lack of racial and religious tension compared to other U.S. cities, so the class rhetoric of the national campaign did not resonate very well. The class warfare which did exist was more from the traditional sport of politics than from an actual issue, for New York State political parties had historically attacked an elusive "aristocracy" that composed the opposition.¹⁸⁸ One of the Whig Party's predecessors, the Anti-Masonic Party, was focused primarily on this principle.

The two most prominent narratives of the election of 1840, that it was a referendum on Jacksonian economic policy and that it was the result of rising social and ethnic tension, do not accurately relate to Rochester. These factors may have incited interest in the election, as voter turnout increased from 51% to 56% between 1836 and 1840, but the state of the economy and frenzy created by the log cabin and hard cider campaign did not drastically change how citizens voted. Instead, what truly appears to have shaped the way Rochesterians cast their ballots is a fundamental disparity in their interpretation of the role of the federal government. Democrats believed in the supremacy of state governments, and did not believe it was the role of the federal government to develop the nation's economy. Contrarily, Whigs wanted a stronger central government that pooled the

¹⁸⁷ McKelvey, *Rochester on the Genesee*, 47.

¹⁸⁸ Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 54.

states' resources to strengthen the country's infrastructure and lubricate its system of commerce. Much of this debate can be traced back to the inception of the United States and the rivalry between Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. However, it is important to not oversimplify this characterization and interpret it as being concurrent to the Democratic-Republican and Federalist struggle. For one, the nation had already drifted far from Jeffersonian ideals, with yeoman farmers still ever-present but slowly being replaced by a working class, and the federal government growing substantially. Whigs and Democrats also had fundamentally different views on the role of the president than their respective predecessors, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. Democrats sought to constrain federal powers, yet they used a large political machine and powerful executives to accomplish these ends. Meanwhile Whigs wanted a stronger federal government, but they criticized Jackson and Van Buren for their monarchical tendencies and touted Harrison's aversive aspirations for power, pledge to serve just one term, and respect for the supremacy of the legislative branch.

Rochesterians were as divided on these issues as anyone. The city's geographic location left it bereft of a firm categorization as either eastern or western, while New York State had been a prominent Democratic stronghold for years and also played an integral part in the emergence of the Whig Party. But what truly distinguished the city of Rochester was its newness and homogeneity, both economically and ethnically. Devoid of a firmly established hierarchy, Rochester was in many ways an embodiment of the folklore that has surrounded Americans' interpretation of the Revolution. Its citizens had migrated to the area

in search of opportunity, where they conquered nature and attempted to build their own promised land. The city had experienced rapid growth, and prior to the Panic of 1837 it was inundated with an infectious optimism of what the future held for it. However, as had happened after the Revolution, differing opinions arose regarding what should be done with this freedom and what role the government should play in their lives. Rochesterians personified the ideal of republican free men, yet this political freedom did not automatically lend itself to political harmony, and a fundamental debate was underway regarding the proper role of the federal government. While much has changed in the last 170 years, Americans still disagree on many of these elemental questions.

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Summary

For my project, I have examined Rochester, NY's remarkable growth through the 1830's and studied the heated presidential election of 1840 through the lens of this city. This election is often considered to be one of the first "modern" American elections. The campaign between incumbent Democratic President Martin Van Buren and Whig candidate William Henry Harrison featured songs, slogans, rallies, and the erection of political headquarters in the form of log cabins throughout the country. Two issues have typically dominated historical interpretation of this election: the Panic of 1837 and social tension, which was manifested through Harrison's "log cabin and hard cider" campaign. I have analyzed to what extent this narrative is characteristic of Rochester.

Methods

A key primary source that I have used is Henry O'Reilly's *Sketches of Rochester*, a history of Rochester that was published in 1838. Written just before the recession, it provides insight into Rochester's immense economic growth. To gain information on the political discourse surrounding the 1840 election, I have consulted local newspapers. The *Rochester Republican* and the *Rochester Daily Advertiser* were the two major Democratic newspapers, while the *Rochester Daily Democrat* served as the Whig organ.

Secondary sources that have given me a general understanding of the time period include Lee Benson's *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*, Charles Sellers' *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America*,

1815-1846, and Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*. The Rochester-centric secondary sources I have used are the writings of Blake McKelvey, Rochester's historian for much of the 20th century, and two masters' theses written for the University of Rochester by Herbert Alvin Norton and George Myron Fennemore.

Findings

In the 19th century, Americans and America itself moved further and further west. As this process unfurled, several cities briefly became epicenters of commerce connecting east and west. One of the first of these metropolises was the not-so-western city of Rochester, New York, which for a short period in the 1820s and 1830s grew exponentially and became a focal point in the early American economy. The opening of the Erie Canal served as the impetus for Rochester's growth, combining with the region's inherent geographic advantages to create a formidable boom town. By 1837 the city had emerged as a prominent metropolis in a chain of intrastate, interstate, and international commerce, and had established an important relationship with its fertile hinterland of the Genesee Valley.

Rochester's economy, in conjunction with the rest of the nation, was stifled by the Panic of 1837. The Panic was the culmination of a near decade-long "Bank War" between President Andrew Jackson and the second Bank of the United States. Jackson's veto of the Bank's re-charter and subsequent placement of federal funds into state banks combined with a speculative boom in western

lands to create a massive overextension of credit nationwide. This, in addition to policy implemented by the Bank of England, caused banks around the U.S. to suspend specie payments (the exchange of gold and silver for paper money) in May 1837 and the national economy to fall into a recession just months into Martin Van Buren's presidency. Recovery was stagnant through Van Buren's term, and the economy, banking, and related issues played major roles in the 1840 presidential election.

Historically, this battle between Democratic incumbent Martin Van Buren and Whig nominee William Henry Harrison has been perceived as both a referendum on Jacksonian economic policy and a clash between the country's emerging social classes. While this narrative may generally encompass the larger cities of the United States, it does not apply to the city of Rochester particularly well. The state of the economy was horrendous during nearly the entirety of Van Buren's presidency, and one would expect that if this were the premier issue, Van Buren would not have stood a chance in the election. While Harrison did win by a landslide electorally, his victory in the popular vote was by a relatively small 6.1 percentage points.

The spread was larger in Monroe County, but the Rochester area was predominantly Whig. A more effective way to gauge the impact of the recession on the election in Rochester is by comparing the results of 1840 to 1836. These elections featured the same candidates, but were conducted under vastly different economies. Harrison's share of the vote increased by just 1.81 points from 1836

to 1840, indicating that economic turmoil did not drastically change how Rochesterians voted.

Class tension, exemplified in Harrison's log cabin and hard cider campaign, has also dominated the narrative of this election. Whigs attempted to run a populist campaign, reversing their previously perceived status as the party of the elite. Whig papers portrayed Van Buren as an aristocrat and emphasized that Harrison was the candidate of the "common man." The Industrial Revolution was bringing increasing returns to scale in American capitalists, enabling a select few to get wealthy at the expense of a growing wage-earning working class. This was a cardinal threat to the republic envisioned by Jefferson as well as the democracy envisioned by Jackson. A citizen beholden to his employer for wages was beholden to his employer for his entire existence, and it was feared that this would diminish one's independence in life as well as at the ballot box. While many Americans had been wealthy prior to industrialization, income inequality (at least in the free north) was much less than it would become. This was becoming a major source of contention in cities like Philadelphia and New York City. However, Rochester had only existed for roughly twenty years by 1840, and it lagged behind these older cities economically, meaning that it did not experience nearly as much class or ethnic tension.

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