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# A Small City's Big Scandal: Municipal Corruption, Progressive Reform, and the Grand Rapids, Michigan Water Scandal, 1900-1906

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A Small City's Big Scandal: Municipal Corruption, Progressive Reform, and the Grand  
Rapids, Michigan Water Scandal, 1900-1906

by

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Presented to the Faculty of  
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A Small City's Big Scandal: Municipal Corruption, Progressive Reform, and the Grand  
Rapids, Michigan Water Scandal, 1900-1906

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University of Nebraska, 2011

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At the turn of century the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan began debating plans for expanding its water supply. These debates quickly spawned corrupt dealings, which in turn produced the city's water scandal. The city's first genuine scandal, the water scandal marks a turning point in the city's history. The fact that the rather ordinary bribery scheme became a scandalous event reveals the city had adopted enough of the Progressive ethos to punish corruption. The water scandal stands as the tipping point of municipal politics in Grand Rapids between Gilded Age politics rooted in personal connections and Progressive politics centered around impartial administration.

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## Introduction

Drawing its name from the Grand River's rapids near which the city was founded, Grand Rapids' rise was somewhat fortuitous. Grand Rapids, Michigan, occupied a regional economic importance located between Detroit and Chicago. However, Grand Rapids did not benefit from its location. It was located directly between the two major cities, just inland from the Eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Early industry was positioned around natural resources, namely the river which bisected the city, and its flour and lumber mills and gypsum mines. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the city gained its reputation as the “furniture city” and many of the city's factories became internationally recognized as leaders in the field. At the turn of the century, the city was looking to grow and its leaders began taking the necessary steps to ensure Grand Rapids could become a regional power. One step was improving the city's water supply. Home to pollution and sewerage, the Grand River quickly became a less than ideal source of drinking water.<sup>1</sup>

In 1898, George Perry became mayor of Grand Rapids and began pushing for the city to find a new source of fresh water. Early in his second term, in 1900, the city's legislative body, the Common Council, began taking concrete steps towards securing a new supply of water. The city's leaders debated over several plans from filtration to ground water to drawing water from other nearby lakes and rivers. However, one plan in particular quickly gained popularity. A plan to build a pipeline from Lake Michigan to

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1. The most comprehensive history of Grand Rapids, as well as the best overview of the water scandal is Z. Z. Lydens, *The Story of Grand Rapids* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1966).

Grand Rapids (meaning roughly thirty to fifty miles of pipe) became the choice of many of the city's leadership, despite its huge construction costs, estimated in the millions of dollars.

In October, 1900, the city seemed ready to award a contract for the pipeline to one of a couple of bids the Common Council had received. However, at a city meeting, Mayor Perry revealed problems with the two leading bids. Each bid was required to submit a check of 100,000 dollars to demonstrate the ability to build the multimillion dollar water system and both bids had given the council forged checks. With the two bids disqualified, the council reopened the bidding process. However, before a contract could be awarded, more shadowy actions came to light. In February of 1901, city attorney Lant Salsbury was arrested in Chicago for stealing \$50,000 dollars from an Omaha capitalist, money allegedly intended to provide bribes to win Grand Rapids' water supply contract. A Kent County circuit court grand jury indicted five men in June, 1901 for a different bribery scheme. Lant Salsbury was again at the center of the plot. The grand jury also indicted Henry Taylor, a young east coast millionaire who provided the money, Stilson MacLeod, a local banker who helped move the cash, and Thomas McGarry, a local attorney who had put Salsbury in contact with the men running the scheme. The main organizers, con-men Frederick Garman and Robert Cameron, did not face any charges though.

As Salsbury and others remained tight lipped, the scandal stayed contained. Not until 1903, when Salsbury completed a sentence for a federal banking violation and faced additional prison time for bribery, did the scandal explode. Given his limited options,

Salsbury became the prosecution's star witness and named dozens of names. Salsbury revealed that McGarry put him into contact with Cameron, Garman's representative who came to Grand Rapids. Salsbury then took \$100,000 of Taylor's money, passed down through Garman and Cameron, and used it to bribe various aldermen, city officials, and even newspapermen. The resulting legal trials occupied the city's headlines for the next three years.

The bribery scheme and the resulting events that I, and the handful of other historians of Grand Rapids, call the "water scandal" was a fairly typical instance of municipal graft. Outsiders of questionable moral character used the money of a wealthy outsider to bribe city officials in order to win a massive construction project. When the scandal broke it rocked the city, as more than half the city's alderman, the city's mayor, the city attorney, and other prominent citizens faced legal action.

However, the water scandal's rather typical bribery plot stands out due to the scandal's timing. The water scandal occurred in the midst of the Grand Rapids' gradual recognition of and adoption of Progressive ethics for which big city reformers were advocating. The city's identification of the bribery scheme surrounding the water supply plans as a scandalous event marked a turning point in the city's adoption of progressive ethics in regards to corruption and municipal government. As a small city, Grand Rapids' adoption of the ethical system of Progressives does not necessarily align with the narrative arch of Chicago's Jane Addams, or New York's Tammany Hall. Rather, Grand Rapids tolerated scandalous behavior until the city reached a breaking point, the water scandal. As the breaking point, the water scandal became the city's first genuine

“scandal.” Although many scandalous events had occurred before this specific bribery scheme, the water scandal was the first major scandal to be interpreted through this new Progressive ethos that identified bribery and corruption as criminally and morally wrong offenses. In this work, I argue that the development of the water scandal was intimately tied to the city's process of adopting a Progressive era ethical system. As the water scandal unfolded, the city's transition from a Gilded Age ethos of personal politics to a Progressive ethos of professional governance becomes increasingly clear. This transition was not always easy or quick and it was not completed at the end of the water scandal. The water scandal was only the first part of Grand Rapids' ethical revolution in its civic government.

In the first chapter, I explore the urban world of the city's elite. The most powerful men in Grand Rapids connected themselves financially, socially, and even physically by largely residing in one neighborhood. Politically, the elite were fiercely competitive, though this party loyalty still fit neatly within a Gilded Age ethos of personal politics. While the closeness of the elite was good for a system reliant on personal connections, it slowed, but did not prevent, the first attempts at reform during the beginnings of the water scandal.

The second chapter examines the transition in the social ethos of the city through George Perry. Perry was mayor at the beginning of the water scandal and later faced bribery charges during the ongoing scandal. Perry recognized many ideas of Progressivism and utilized much of its rhetoric as mayor. However, he never quite replaced personal politics and tolerance of corruption with the impersonal Progressive

ethos to which he even alluded. His trial also serves as a reminder to the inexperience of Grand Rapids in punishing corruption. Contention over legal technicalities in many of the water scandal trials reveals that simply adopting an ethical system that does not accept corruption was not enough. Grand Rapids still had to figure out how to punish offenders.

The third chapter takes a step back, looking at how the scandal was and is viewed by the national press, local citizens, and historians. For a scandal in a small city, the water scandal received relatively impressive national coverage, suggesting the Progressive ethos Grand Rapids was adopting during the water scandal was also present at a national level. Local impressions of the water scandal focused on one figure, Lant Salisbury. The city, to its credit, did not scapegoat “outsiders,” and recognized corruption as an internal issue. However, by placing the blame on one man, the city did not seem to be fully ready to address the full ranging causes of corruption. I also examine the legacy of the water scandal in Grand Rapids, which I argue is the growth of reform organizations, like the Civic Club. The water scandal was the first step towards a more Progressive municipal government and the Civic Club and other reform organizations helped bring the city to a commissioner-manager form of government in 1917.

Before diving into the first chapter, though, I wish to provide some historiographical context. I contend that Grand Rapids' experience with Progressivism, specifically the trickling down of Progressive ethics from national leaders to local citizens, exposes a lacking in the scholarship on Progressivism when it comes to small cities, like Grand Rapids.

The historiography of Progressivism is incredibly large and diverse. Scholars have

been debating the history of the Progressive Era for as long as the era has been defined as “Progressive.” Even simply defining who Progressives were has proved a difficult task. Were Progressives liberals or conservatives? Populists or Mugwumps? Middle-Class Victorians? Corporate Liberals? Simply put, scholars have re-imagined the identity of Progressives many times throughout history. While a truly comprehensive review of the historiography of the Progressive Era would be quite lengthy, understanding the major works and shifts is important to understanding my re-imagining of who some Progressives were.<sup>2</sup>

Academics began writing about Progressives essentially right away. The first wave of scholarship on the period as early as the 1920s was understandably sympathetic as many Progressive leaders were still alive and the authors had just recently lived through the period. This first conceptualization of Progressives focused on Progressives who evolved from Populists and anti-business reformers. However, within a quarter century, historians had already revised the main identity of Progressives. Most notably, Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* does not trace his urban middle class Progressives to Populists, but rather to the Mugwumps of the Republican Party. Hofstadter attributed the era's reforms to increasing industrialization causing a “status revolution” among the middle and upper classes, prompting these Republicans to push for reform. Henry F. May also paints Progressives more conservatively, arguing they defended Victorian traditions. Though some, like C. Vann Woodward, who took a

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2. William G. Anderson, “Progressivism: An Historiographical Essay,” *The History Teacher* 6, no. 3 (May 1, 1973): 427-452; Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 1982): 113-132; Robert D. Johnston, “Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Political Historiography,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 68-92.

regional approach and focused on the South, continued to trace Progressive roots to Populists. In the late 1950s and 1960s, historians began to shift their focus from individuals to institutions like Samuel P. Hays and Robert H. Wiebe. A “New Left” interpretation, led by Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein, also emerged, branding Progressives “corporate liberals.”

With the dawn of the 1970s, Peter Filene drastically altered the historiography of the Progressive Era. While early historians debated over who Progressives were and what their main goals were, historians had generally portrayed a solidified Progressive movement free of much internal conflict. Peter Filene, though, sought to bury the conception of the Progressive movement as a single unified movement in his article, “An Obituary for 'The Progressive Movement.'” Filene identifies contradictions and inconsistencies between Progressives, undermining both the idea that Progressives were “Progressive” in every circumstance, as many were actually opposed to racial and gender equality, and a “Movement,” since the goals of Progressives were often different if not opposed. Filene's assertion that “Progressivism lacked unanimity of purpose either on a programmatic or on a philosophical level,” began a historiographical shift towards identifying and exploring the contradictions within the movement.

Scholars after Filene, followed his lead in undermining the solid “Progressive Movement,” though did not bury the term because of its useful identification of the era. Scholars like Michael McGerr and Richard McCormick reexamined the politics of the Progressive Era analyzing many of the anti-democratic measures Progressives embraced. Other scholars focused on exploring the anti-progressive stances of Progressives on racial

and gender issues, including Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization*, which analyzed the use of a discourse of civilization during the Progressive Era to frame reform that privileged maleness and whiteness, and Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent*, which casts Progressives as radical Victorians, though internally divided and racist, seeking to remake society. However, even as scholars re-framed Progressives in the context of race and gender, Progressives remained middle class men and women focused on reform. Robert D. Johnson's *The Radical Middle Class* and McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent* point to radical middle class reformers as the main actors of reform in the Progressive Era.

In my work, I intend to attempt to add another layer to this already lengthy discussion. However, I do not want to trace the roots of Progressivism to any political, social, or moral tradition. Nor do I seek to expose the racial or gender contradictions in the progressivism of Progressives. Instead of looking at progressives as heroic men and women sweeping in reform and removing corruption and waste, I examine men slowly moving, and perhaps occasionally stumbling, into political reform. I seek to obscure the line between the corruption of the Gilded Age and the reform of the Progressive Era by exploring the development and outbreak of political scandal in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The pervasive bribery of the city's political leadership from a plan to increase the city's supply of clean water unraveled slowly, forcing the city, and its questionable leadership, to grapple with the meanings of corruption and reform, punishment and fairness.

While historians after Filene's "Obituary" have exposed many of the inconsistencies, contradictions, and divisions within Progressive movements, for the most



part, scholars have not radically altered the conception of Progressives as primarily reformers. Historians have humanized Progressives, grounding reformers in their time and place, helping to explain the racial, gender, and anti-democratic stances many reformers supported. However, the conception of heroic reformers remains; historians have simply added a heroic flaw. Charles and Mary Beard found Progressives to be part of the “spirit of reform.”<sup>3</sup> Richard Hofstadter framed his entire narrative around the *The Age of Reform* setting the period's reforms apart from the rest of American history. Even after Peter Filene attempted to deconstruct the Progressive Movement, scholars did not abandon the heroic rhetoric. In fact, I would argue it has become more intense. Robert D. Johnson has a sympathetic view of “radical” middle class Progressives in Portland, Oregon, painting them as passionately democratic. Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent* argues radical middle class Victorians fought to remake society into a middle class utopia, a flawed but valiant goal that McGerr claims has affected modern politics. McGerr argues “the epic of reform” during the Progressive Era as made “the less-than-epic politics” of the nation one hundred years later. This focus on reformers as the vehicle for the Progressive Era reforms leads to a focus on great men and women of the period like Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Jane Addams, and Gifford Pinchot. Even Gabriel Kolko who argues reformers were not the main actors driving reform, frames the Progressive reformers somewhat heroically. Though the reformers were unsuccessful, Kolko laments “what might have been,” and still places the reform on a group of

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3. Charles Austin Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, *History of the United States* (The Macmillan company, 1921), 538.

conscious leaders, though they came from the business community.<sup>4</sup>

Many scholars of the Progressive Era touch on municipal politics, including Hofstadter, who attributed the success of urban machines to their introduction of immigrants into the American political culture.<sup>5</sup> Progressive crusades against corruption and for municipal reform has its own large historiography that has perhaps better dealt with the complexities of reform and corruption.<sup>6</sup> Though early work, like that of journalist Lincoln Steffens, depicted reform directly opposed to urban political corruption, later scholars have refined and blurred the morality of machine politics. Still near the height of machine politics in many cities, the 1930s saw an emergence of scholarship on urban bosses, but these works focused more on similarities rather than differences. John Thomas Salter's *Boss Rule: Portraits in City Politics* and George Reynolds' *Machine Politics in New Orleans, 1897-1926* argued the regional variances of urban machines were less than the commonalities. Likewise, Harold Zink's *City Bosses in the United States* explores the roots of various urban bosses, tracing their rise to power to the bosses' connections to immigrant communities.

While earlier academics examined the commonalities of urban politics, later urban historians, from the 1960s through the 1980s, more deeply explored the complexities of

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4. Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (Simon and Schuster, 1977), 1.

5. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 174-185.

6. A few good early overviews of the historiography of machine politics include: David P. Thelen, "Review: Urban Politics: Beyond Bosses and Reformers," *Reviews in American History* 7, no. 3 (1979): 406-412; David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta, "Bosses and Machines: Changing Interpretations in American History," *The History Teacher* 9, no. 3 (May 1, 1976): 445-463; Mark H. Rose, "Machine Politics: The Historiography of Technology and Public Policy," *The Public Historian* 10, no. 2 (April 1, 1988): 27-47; Michael Frisch, "American Urban History as an Example of Recent Historiography," *History and Theory* 18, no. 3 (October 1, 1979): 350-377.

local urban political systems and highlighted the benefits of machine politics. These scholars sought to move beyond the moral judgments of “bad” political machines and analyze the systems themselves. In *Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters*, examining case studies of bosses from New York's Boss Tweed to Chicago's Richard Daley, John Allswang looks to complicate and revise the depiction of exploitative bosses, hoping to “neutralize” the terms “boss” and “machine” and suggesting that “everyone 'sells' his or her vote” in the end. Jon Teaford also looks for a more “serious appreciation of the municipal structure” in his *The Unheralded Triumph*. Like Allswang, Zane Miller's *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* employs a case study to reenvision the urban political machine. Miller spatializes Cincinnati's urban politics, tracing the evolution of Boss Cox's political machine to neighborhood rather than ethnic politics. Similar to Miller, other historians utilize detailed case studies to examine urban politics, like Lyle Dorsett's study of Kansas City, *The Pendergast Machine*, and Allswang's study of Chicago, *A House for All Peoples*.<sup>7</sup>

In the last twenty years, the trend toward detailed case studies has continued and many scholars have begun to move past using a typical metropolis, focusing on the urban

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7. John Allswang, *Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters: An American Symbiosis* (Port Washington N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), 3-36; Jon Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 10-11; Zane Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Lyle Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Some other major works of this time period include: Lyle Dorsett, *The Challenge of the City, 1860-1910* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1968); John Allswang, *The New Deal and American Politics: A Study in Political Change* (New York: Wiley, 1978); John Allswang, *A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1971); Jon Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Jon Teaford, *The Municipal Revolution in America: Origins of Modern Urban Government, 1650-1825* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Lyle Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses* (Port Washington N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977); Kenneth Fox, *Better City Government: Innovation in American Urban Politics, 1850-1937* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977).

politics of smaller cities. Some historians still utilize urban bosses as the main vehicle of analysis. For example, James Bolin examines Lexington, Kentucky through the state's "best example" of a "true" political boss, William Klair. Very recently, James J. Connolly has also examined machine politics and Progressivism, though he takes a broader view than Bolin.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars have explored urban politics beyond the political boss in small cities. Many, like Richard Davies's analysis of the decline of Camden, Ohio in *Main Street Blues*,<sup>9</sup> deal with the de-industrialization of the Midwest, although others take broader views. For example, Alicia Barber studies the evolution of Reno, Nevada's less than upright reputation in *Reno's Big Gamble* and Sharon Wood's analysis of Davenport, Iowa's gender and labor relations in *The Freedom of the Streets*.<sup>10</sup>

I will continue the more recent trend for the study of urban politics to examine smaller cities. However, the story of the Grand Rapids does not replicate the urban political experience of big cities like New York, Chicago, New Orleans, or Kansas City, or even Lexington, Kentucky, where machine politics and bosses dominated. The city's water scandal is not the story of the exposed corruption of an urban boss, but rather extensive corruption despite the lack of a systematic political machine. The political landscape of Grand Rapids was rather bipartisan, or at least each party was strong enough to resist the development of a true political machine during this period. Although there were reform movements in the city, these movements were not strong enough to play a

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8. James Bolin, *Bossism and Reform in a Southern City: Lexington, Kentucky, 1880-1940* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); James Connolly, *An Elusive Unity: Urban Democracy and Machine Politics in Industrializing America* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010).

9. Richard Davies, *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

10. Alicia Barber, *Reno's Big Gamble: Image and Reputation in the Biggest Little City* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Sharon Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

significant role in the exposing or reforming the corruption before the water scandal. In Grand Rapids, the line between Progressive and corrupt politician was even less clear than in an urban machine as political leaders could and did engage in “Progressive” reforms while maintaining questionable ties or even participating in outright corrupt practices. I explore this apparent contradiction by seeking to understand what corruption and reform meant in Grand Rapids through the outbreak of the city's water scandal.

Though perhaps on the larger side, Grand Rapids qualifies as a small city, occupying a secondary economic role between regional metropolises Detroit and Chicago. In carving out an economic niche, the city, like many small cities, chose intensive specialization, leading to the emergence of the city as a leader in furniture. Grand Rapids did not have one or two dominant families in place of an urban boss, like nearby Battle Creek, Michigan's Kellogg and Post families or Muncie, Indiana's Ball family. This absence of an utterly dominant family or political machine allowed for a more diverse political environment as leading citizens occupied both parties, often creating the appearance of a spirited political atmosphere. While there was more political competition than in many cities in the period, Grand Rapids was still dominated by a business and professional classes.<sup>11</sup>

As Timothy R. Mahoney has pointed out, the small city has been mostly lost in urban history as the metropolis has garnered a disproportionate amount of scholarship. Creating a dichotomy of narratives between large impersonal city and small community-oriented town, urban history would benefit from increased examination of small cities, of

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11. Timothy R. Mahoney, “The Small City in American History,” *Indiana Magazine of History* (2003): 211-230.

which Grand Rapids is certainly one.<sup>12</sup> A small, but growing sub-field of urban history, the study of small cities has produced many valuable works of scholarship. Perhaps the most famous early work on a small city was Robert and Helen Lynd's Middletown studies based on Muncie, Indiana. Though the Lynds sought to provide Muncie anonymity and increase their studies' applicability by referring to Muncie as Middletown, most academics examining small cities choose small cities for their defining characteristics, usually some form of intense economic specialization. The focus on economically important small cities is prevalent throughout the sub-field. Some of the first works, like Samuel Crowther's *John H. Patterson, Pioneer in Industrial Welfare* and Charlotte Conover's *The Story of Dayton*, focused on Dayton, Ohio. Similarly, during and after World War II historians continued examining economically important cities, notably some focused on the automobile manufacturing industry such as Hugh Allen's studies of Akron, Ohio, *The House of Goodyear, A Story of Rubber and Modern Business*, *The House of Goodyear, Fifty Years of Men and Industry*, and *Rubber's Home Town, The Real-Life Story of Akron* and Alfred Lief's *Harvey Firestone, Free Man of Enterprise*, but including others like Horace Powell's study of Battle Creek, Michigan's Kellogg company in *The Original Has This Signature: W. K. Kellogg*. The focus on economic centers has continued, with works like Wayne Broehl Jr.'s *John Deere's Company* and Thomas Dublin's *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*. Even though economically important cities tend to attract scholarly attention there are certainly works addressing other issues such as race, including Brian Butler's *And Undergrowth of Folly: Public Order, Race Anxiety, and the*

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12. Ibid.

*1903 Evansville, Indiana Race Riot and Thomas Cox's Black in Topeka, 1865-1915: A Social History.*

This small but vibrant sub-field of urban history shows small cities are a valuable tool for understanding the urban experience of millions of Americans. Using another small city, Grand Rapids, Michigan, I explore the transformation of a city's dominant ethos, from Gilded Age personal politics to more Progressive professionalism in the pages that follow.

## Chapter One

### The Urban World of The Grand Rapids Elite:

#### How the close-knit elite class, slowed initial reform efforts

At the end of the water scandal, dozens of men had been named by Lant Salsbury and others as participants in the scandal's bribery scheme. Even though many key local figures in the plan to profit from expanding the city's water supply were Democrats, City Attorney Lant K. Salsbury, Mayor George Perry, and Thomas McGarry, a prominent lawyer and political ally of the mayor, the scandal was surprisingly bi-partisan. Leading Republicans were also involved in the scandal including the publishers of the city's two Republican newspapers, prominent attorney Gerrit Albers, and state senator David Burns. Of the men identified as part of the bribery scheme, fourteen were aldermen. The aldermen best displayed the scandal's ability to cross party lines, with seven Democratic aldermen and seven Republican aldermen drawn into the scandal. Three aldermen were never tried, two Republicans and one Democrat, and another Republican was eventually acquitted. The court fined the other ten aldermen. The Democrats received harsher punishment on average than the Republicans. Four Democrats paid five hundred dollars and the other two paid two hundred, while two Republicans paid three hundred dollars and the other two only paid one hundred each. However, collectively these fines were rather light punishment. Salsbury paid two thousand dollars in fines in addition to prison time for a related federal banking charge. McGarry served two years for his involvement and the financier of the project, New York millionaire Henry Taylor, also paid two



thousand dollars.<sup>1</sup>

The ability of money to cross political allegiances may seem obvious, but historians have more frequently focused on political machines, not competitive political environments, as centers for pervasive corruption during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While historians have documented big city political machines extensively,<sup>2</sup> they have underexplored the political atmosphere of small cities, in which a large segment of the population experienced urban life. Extensive corruption within a small city like Grand Rapids, challenges the notion of political machines as the source of urban moral degradation and reform movements, which were largely absent from the unfolding of the water scandal, as the source of righteousness.

Grand Rapids and its water scandal present an alternative story of urban corruption. The largely dominant elite mixed at social clubs and intertwined their business interests. However, the political leaders still valued party line patronage. Just as the city elite simultaneously crossed and protected party lines, the elite facilitated corruption through personal politics, yet led reform efforts. Understanding the political and social context of the water scandal is vital to fully gauge the scandal's impact on the city and the city's conceptions of reform and corruption. The scandalous nature of the water scandal marks the city's transition from a Gilded Age ethos of personal politics to a Progressive ethos of professionalism. However, the intertwined, yet competitive, nature of the elite complicated this transition. In this chapter, I begin examining this complex

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1. *Grand Rapids Herald* April 2, 1901, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald* April 3, 1900; Lydens, 62-64; Dwight Goss, *History of Grand Rapids and its Industries* (C.F. Cooper, 1906), 1032-1033.

2. Some examples include: John Allswang, *Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters*; John Allswang, *A House for All Peoples*; James Connolly, *An Elusive Unity: Urban Democracy and Machine Politics in Industrializing America*; Jon Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph*; Jon Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City*; Jon Teaford, *The Municipal Revolution in America*.

Figure 1. Grand Rapids Aldermen in office during the 1900-1901 and 1901-1902 terms<sup>3</sup>



3. Several of my maps have been taken from my digital history project for History 970, *The Corrupt Network: Visualizing the Grand Rapids Water Scandal, 1900-1906*. Additional visualizations of the water scandal can be found at [http://segonku.unl.edu/student\\_projects/hist970/s11/bsarnacki/](http://segonku.unl.edu/student_projects/hist970/s11/bsarnacki/)

Figure 2. Grand Rapids Aldermen drawn into the water scandal



change in political culture, first exploring the urban world of the city's elite and then analyzing the first efforts of reform. I argue the interconnectedness of the elite made early reform efforts difficult, prolonging, but not preventing, serious action.

A few blocks from Grand Rapids' physical city center lay the city's center of power, the second and third wards. Residents could not walk around the block without passing the house of a business partner or political rival. In fact, finding the city's elite was as simple as walking a few blocks down Fulton Street, the boundary between the two wealthy wards. The year 1898, when George Perry first took the mayor's office, provides a good picture of the men of power who congregated on Fulton Street and its surrounding neighborhood.

Beginning at 229 Fulton, lived Joseph Houseman. Born in Barvaria, Houseman emigrated to the United States in the 1850s and joined his cousin Julius in Grand Rapids in order to open a clothing store. Though Joseph Houseman had many business ventures, he continued in the clothing business, adding new partners and building the successful Houseman & Jones company.<sup>4</sup> Walking east, away from downtown, was Ransom Luce's house, at 266 Fulton. Luce moved to Grand Rapids from upstate New York with his family as a teen. He began in business in a small grocery store and eventually became a towering figure in the financial world of Grand Rapids. He served concurrently as president of National City Bank, Luce Furniture Company and Hamilton-Kenwood Wheel Company. He also took an active interest in politics, serving nearly a dozen years as an alderman.<sup>5</sup>

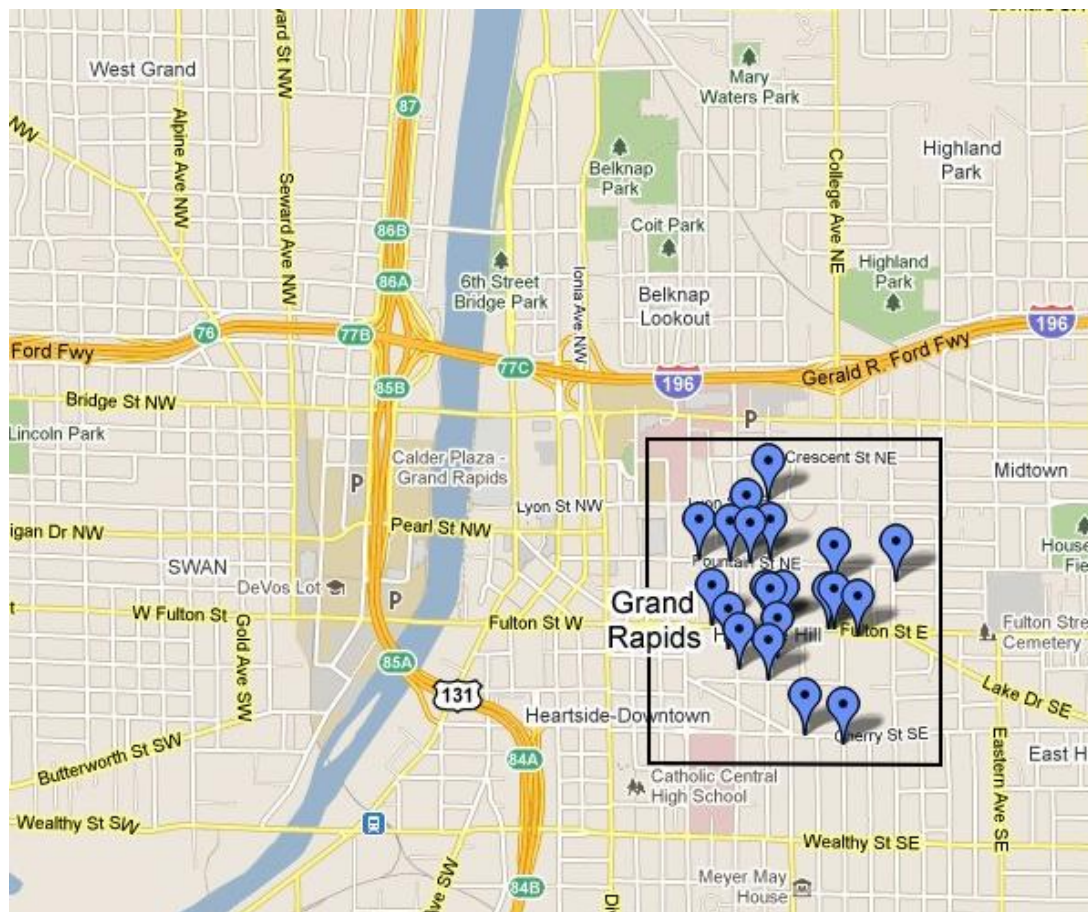
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4. Ernest B. Fisher, *Grand Rapids and Kent County, Michigan: Historical Account of their Progress from First Settlement to the Present Time* (Robert O. Law Company, 1918), 178-179; Albert Baxter, *History of the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan* (Munsell & Company, 1891), 484-485.

5. Baxter, 567; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory* (Grand Rapids,

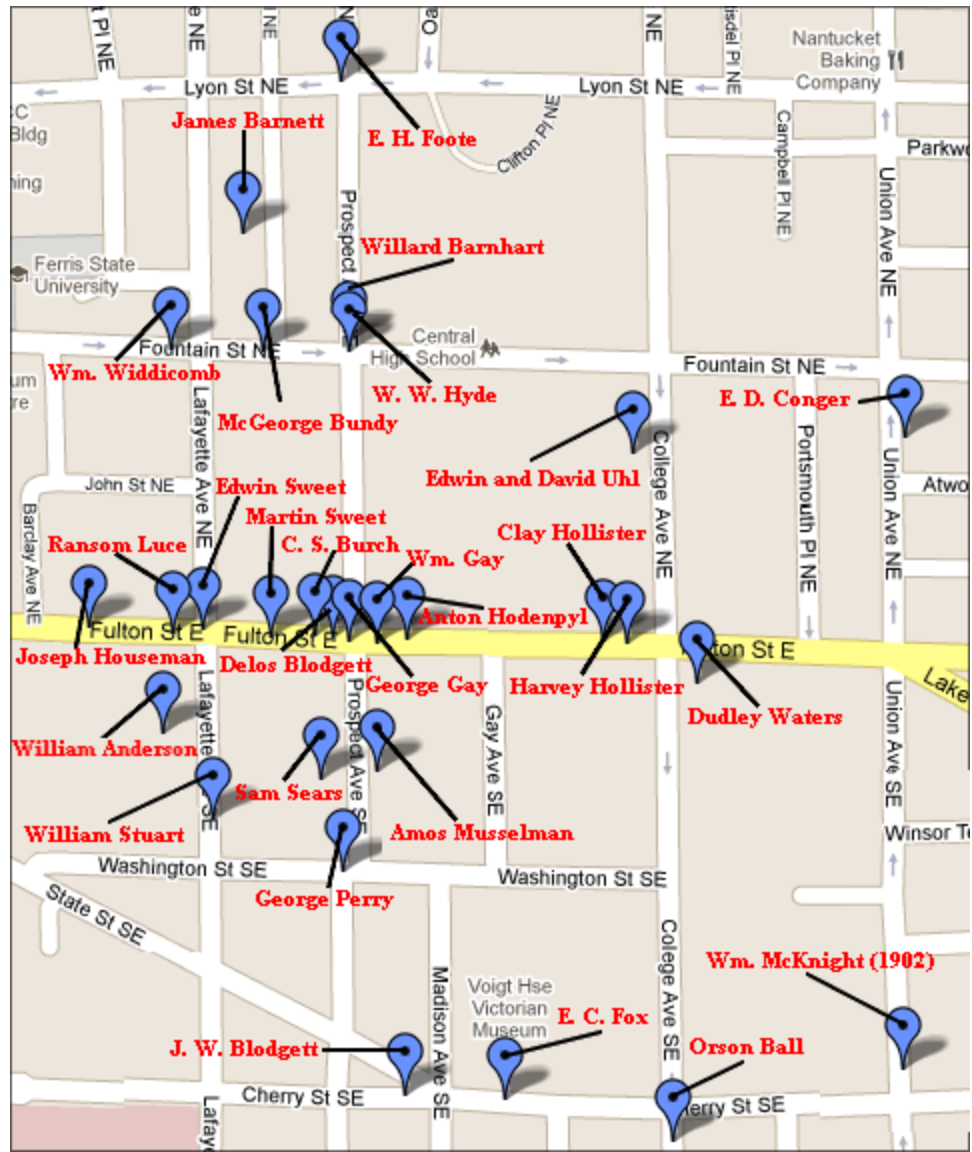
Edwin Sweet lived at the corner of Fulton and Lafayette. Though a lawyer by trade, like other leading citizens of the city, he engaged in several business ventures. Most notably, Edwin Sweet was involved with a plan to build a YMCA for the city, which failed. Instead of a YMCA he and other business partners built the Livingston Hotel on the land. It was one of the city's five main hotels at the time. In politics, he served on the board of education for several years and then became mayor in 1904.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 3. Sections of the Second and Third Wards



MI: Deans-Hicks Printing Co., 1898), 648.  
6. Lydens, 231.

Figure 4. Fulton Street in 1898



On the next block, lived Martin L. Sweet, who had no documented familial link to Edwin. In 1846, Martin Sweet moved from upstate New York to Grand Rapids and began milling grain. After becoming one of the area's foremost figures in grain, he switched interests opening Sweet's Hotel in 1868. However, Martin Sweet was never locked into one industry. He organized the First National Bank, the predecessor to Old National Bank, with which he was also closely involved. He also invested in lumber, buying up land and opening a sawmill north of Grand Rapids in Ludington, Michigan. One of the city's early leaders, he even served as mayor in 1860.<sup>7</sup>

Following Sweet were the houses of Charles Burch and Delos Blodgett. Burch was the general manager of the *Grand Rapids Press*, one of the city's two Republican affiliated newspapers. Delos Blodgett was an upstate New York transplant, like Martin Sweet. His son and heir to his Muskegon lumber business and many Grand Rapids real estate holdings also lived nearby, a few blocks south on Cherry Street.<sup>8</sup>

Next to the lumber baron was one of the city's furniture giants. George Gay bought into a furniture company founded by Julius and William Berkey, which was renamed Berkey & Gay. George Gay became treasurer of this company, which as one of the furniture city's most powerful companies furnished the Astor Hotel in 1903. Gay also joined many other business ventures including Oriel Cabinet Co, and Grand Rapids Plaster Co, both of which he was president and the Fourth National Bank, where he served as vice-president. George resided at 380 Fulton and his son, William Gay, lived just down the road at 404 Fulton. When George Gay died in 1899, William moved back down the block into his father's residence. William also took over as president of Oriel

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7. Baxter 394, 674-675.

8. Baxter, 686.

Cabinet Co. and moved from manager of Berkey & Gay's retail department to vice-president by 1902.<sup>9</sup> Anton G. Hodenpyl, who served on the Fourth National's board of directors with both George and William Gay, also lived nearby at 413 Fulton.<sup>10</sup>

Just down the block lived another father and son tandem, Harvey Hollister at 471 Fulton and his son Clay at 465 Fulton. Harvey was a native Michigander, who became intimately involved with the banking world of Grand Rapids. After some years clerking for retailers and other banks, he joined Martin Sweet at the First National Bank and later the Old National Bank as cashier. Clay began working at the Old National Bank in 1888 as a clerk two years after graduating from Amherst. From there, he began his steady rise through the ranks of the city's elite under his father's tutelage.<sup>11</sup> Clay, at the time the assistant cashier, became one of the Old National Bank's directors in 1901. Clay, like many of the city's elite, was active in other economic ventures. In addition to his position at the bank he served as the director for the Fred Macey Furniture Co. and treasurer of the Federal Audit Co.

At the corner of Fulton and College was Dudley Waters another second generation Grand Rapidian. One of the city's wealthiest citizens, the Waters' wealth came from Dudley's father Daniel Waters, who, along with Dudley's uncle, operated a meat packing plant and manufactured "bent-work wooden ware." Dudley also followed his father as a director of the Grand Rapids National Bank. Dudley expanded his father's fortune,

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9. Baxter, 465; Fischer, 92; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1898, 408; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Deans-Hicks Printing Co., 1902), 536-537; *Furniture World and Furniture Buyer and Decorator* (Towse Publishing co., 1903) v. 69-70, 12; Patrick E. Mears, "The Michigan Trust Company, et al. v. Simmons Company: Julius Amberg Shocks the Simmons Company for Its Looting of the Berkey & Gay Furniture Company," *Stereoscope: The Journal of the Historical Society of the United States District Court for the Western District of Michigan* 9, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 6.

10. R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1898, 505.

11. Baxter, 675-678; Fisher, 176; John William Leonard, *Who's Who in Finance and Banking* (Who's Who in Finance Inc., 1922), 334-335.



earning positions on the boards of the People's Savings Bank, Michigan Trust Co, and the Gunn Furniture.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to Fulton Street's impressive parade of homes, the surrounding area was full of the city's elite. Along with Charles Burch of the *Grand Rapids Press*, Eugene Conger the editor of the city's other Republican newspaper, the *Grand Rapids Herald*, lived no more than a block off of Fulton Street. McGeorge Bundy, a lawyer who represented Old National Bank and big player in the local brick industry lived within walking distance of his in-laws, the Hollisters. McGeorge Bundy's son, Harvey Hollister Bundy and grandson, also named McGeorge Bundy, both played prominent roles in national politics. Harvey Hollister Bundy was involved in the Marshall plan. The younger McGeorge Bundy made a name for himself in the Kennedy administration. William Widdicomb, president of the family owned, and very successful Widdicomb Furniture Co. also lived just north of Fulton. The candidates for the 1900 mayoral election, William J. Stuart, who previously served as mayor in 1892, and George Perry who was up for reelection, lived a block apart south of Fulton Street. One time law partners Edwin Uhl and Wesley Hyde were also neighbors in this area. Edwin Uhl was a leading figure in the city's Democratic party, serving as mayor in 1890 and later ambassador to Germany. Wesley Hyde was president and the driving force behind the city's Civic Club, which played a role in prosecuting the water scandal and investigating other instances of municipal corruption. Other prominent citizens included the president of Musselman Grocer Co., Amos Musselman, secretary and treasurer of the Grand Rapids Chair Co, Elijah Foote, and Martin Sweet's partner in both milling and banking, James Barnett.

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12. Baxter, 593-594; Fisher 391-392; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1898, 451, 1076; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1902, 1445.

Barnett also partnered with McGeorge Bundy and Harvey Hollister in the Fosburg Lumber Co.<sup>13</sup>

The city's power was so concentrated in this area that virtually every financial institution in the city had at least one board member within two blocks of Fulton Street around the turn of the century. Old National Bank's president, James Barnett, vice-president Willard Barnhart, and board members E. Crofton Fox and Clay and Harvey Hollister were neighbors. Grand Rapids National Bank had its president, Edwin Uhl, vice-president Joseph Houseman, and several members of the board of directors including Dudley Waters, Amos Musselman, William Widdicomb, and Samuel Sears living in this area. Ransom Luce was president of National City Bank. Orson Ball was a board member of Grand Rapids Savings Bank. Both Edwin Uhl and his son David were on the board of Fifth National Bank. William Anderson, the president of Fourth National was a neighbor to two vice-presidents, George Gay in 1898 and John Blodgett in 1900 and board members Anton Hodenpyl, and William Gay. Michigan Trust Co's board members Willard Barnhart, James Barnett, Harvey Hollister, Samuel Sears, and Dudley Waters all lived in this area as did the State Bank of Michigan board of directors members Elijah Foote and William Stuart. The People's Savings Banks boasted several residents on its board including, William Anderson, John Blodgett, Anton Hodenpyl, Dudley Waters and Eugene Conger.<sup>14</sup>

Since so many of the city's power brokers lived in this area, when the water

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13. R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1898; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1902. "Harvery Bundy, 75, Ex-Diplomat, Dies," *New York Times* October 8, 1963, 43; Bratt, James D. and Christopher Meehan, *Gathered at the River: Grand Rapids, Michigan and its people of faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Grand Rapids Area Council for the Humanities, 1993), 25; Lydens, 262.

14. *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 10, 1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 31, 1900, 7; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 9, 1901, 6.

scandal broke, reform often came at the cost of their neighbors. By 1902, when Perry lost reelection and the water scandal was beginning to take off this situation became quite literal. William McKnight, who represented Salsbury and was then tried for bribing a witness, moved to this small area at 164 S. Livingston. Most strikingly, Perry, under scrutiny for the water scandal, and Wesley Hyde, who was helping to apply the scrutiny, both moved onto Fulton street. As the investigation and prosecution of the scandal continued, these men lived across the street from one another, Perry at 348 Fulton and Hyde at 345 Fulton. Even if not everyone involved had such close living quarters, with much of the elite concentrated in such a small area of the city, when they finally began to adopt Progressive notions of reform and corruption, it was often their neighbors caught in the crossfire.<sup>15</sup>

Though many of the city's elite lived in this area just east of downtown, it was certainly possible for members of the city's elite to reside elsewhere and still hold influence. For example, Charles Garfield was the president of Grand Rapids Savings Bank and partnered with William Anderson and Joseph Houseman on two street construction companies despite living south of the city's elite neighborhood. One important tool of these men who chose not to live near the other members of the city's elite class was social organizations. Grand Rapids had many social clubs, though none was more exclusive or home to more powerful residents than the Peninsular Club.<sup>16</sup>

According to the Peninsular Club's constitution, the club's primary function was “to promote social intercourse amongst its members.” In order to accommodate the city's preeminent elite on both sides of the political aisle, the club refused to express any

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15. R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1902, 711, 888, 1055.

16. Baxter, 543; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1898, 786.

“opinion on any religious, political or social question.” On everyday but Sunday, members could frequent the club house from seven in the morning until midnight, though special occasions could keep the club open until four in the morning. The club was still open on Sundays, from nine in the morning until ten at night, but the club did not allow games or alcohol. During the other days, the club allowed card games, though only gentlemanly ones. The constitution outlawed “the games of Poker, Loo, and other games of hazard” or gambling. Every Saturday evening was “Club Night,” during which the club wanted its members “to make a special effort to be present.”<sup>17</sup>

The Peninsular Club was one of many social clubs in the city. However, unlike the Lakeside Club, which had hundreds of members, the Peninsular Club only kept dozens of members. The club maintained this exclusivity through strict admissions policies and fees. For a man to gain membership, he needed a current member to submit a written proposal, which then needed a another member to second the proposal. Afterward, the applicant's name, as well as the names of his two sponsors, would be posted at in the club house for ten days. Finally, the members would take a vote, and only two negative votes could deny an applicant membership. If the members did approve the applicant, he would then owe a fifty dollar initiation fee, after which he would be responsible for the annual dues of forty dollars.<sup>18</sup>

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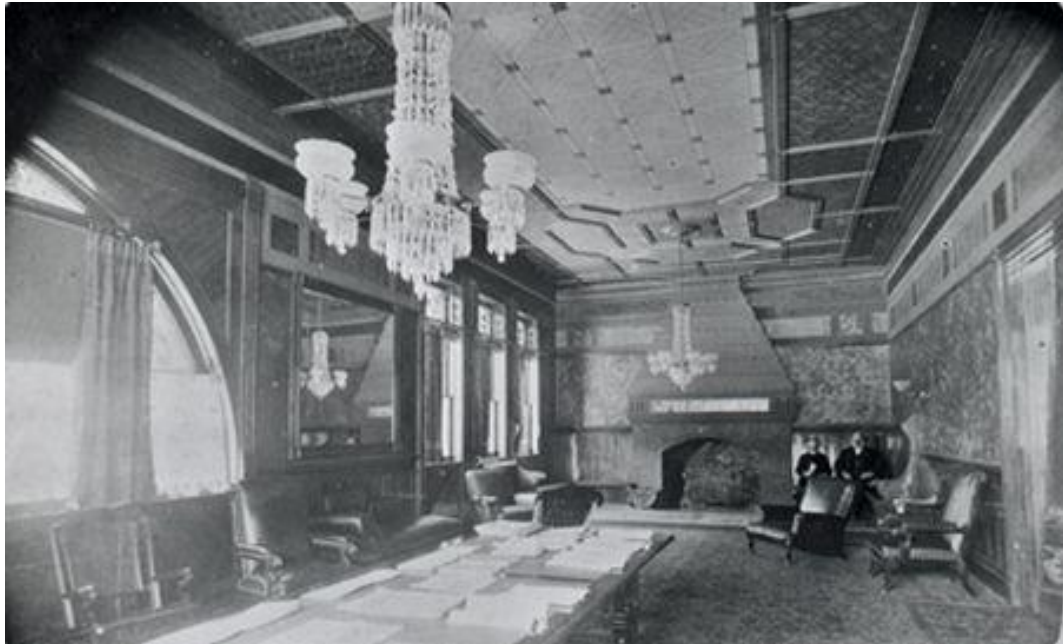
17. Peninsular Club, “Peninsular Club Yearbook, 1897,” Box 23, Collection 366, Peninsular Club Collection, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Peninsular Club, “Peninsular Club Yearbook, 1904,” Box 23, Collection 366, Peninsular Club Collection, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

18. Ibid.

Figure 5. Peninsular Club Dining Room, c. 1890s



Figure 6. Peninsular Club Meeting Room, c. 1890s



Figures 5 and 6 are from Grand Rapids Public Library Michigan Room Copy Photographs Collection No. 185, Box 2 Folder 162, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Figure 7. Peninsular Club Exterior, 1888



Figure 8. Lakeside Club, 1896



Figures 7 and 8 are from Grand Rapids Illustrated Collection No. 91, Box 1 Folder 3.18 and Folder 5.4, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Though exclusive, non-members could still access the social power of the Peninsular Club. Members could invite non-members to enjoy the social club, though only twice in one year. However, with the connected nature of the city's leading citizens men who knew several members, could turn two invitations into several rather quickly. For example, in addition to his own social relations with members like Thomas McGarry, George Perry appointed several Peninsular Club members to city government positions while mayor, including Dudley Waters, Charles Phelps, William Boyns, and David Uhl. Though George Perry was not a member during his time as mayor, he could easily socialize at the Peninsular Club if he wanted.<sup>19</sup>

Perry could also socialize with many of the same influential citizens at other social clubs, like the Lakeside Club, for which he served on the board of directors. The Lakeside Club was much less exclusive than the Peninsular Club, with its membership capped at one thousand members. On the shore of Reed's Lake in the resort suburb East Grand Rapids, any of its members could use the Lakeside Club's water access year round for boating in the summer or ice skating when the lake froze. However, its members were no less genteel than those lucky few of the Peninsular Club. With a grand stairway in front and an opening onto the lake behind, and three stories high 134 feet by 90 feet, the Lakeside Club's building was a rather impressive display of gentility.<sup>20</sup> The building contained, among other rooms, a swimming pool, a library, parlor, billiard room, the "Lakeside" room, banquet room, dining room, and palm garden. These rooms boasted mahogany furnishings, colonial style decorations, and a few Roman style columns, with many items donated by local companies. The John Widdicomb Company and Michigan

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19. Ibid.

20. My use of gentility is informed by scholarship such as Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

Chair Company each provided furnishings for specific rooms and the Grand Rapids Gas Light provided free gas for the entrance lights for two years. Several items stood out, particularly the “ebony ping-pong table,” a glass peacock, and the “decorative poster pictures designed by the famous English artists, Cecil Alden and John Hassell.”<sup>21</sup>

The city's elite men could socialize over masculine activities at these clubs like drinking, smoking, and games. However, both the Lakeside and Peninsular Clubs had spaces available to women and children. The Lakeside Club designated times for women and children to use the swimming pool. The Peninsular Club provided a separate space, the ladies dining room, as the appropriate space for members of the club to entertain women, as well as the only area permissible for children. While these masculine clubs made accommodations for women, the women of the elite families also constructed feminine spaces for association, of which the Ladies Literary Club (hereafter referred to as the LLC) was the preeminent space. Unlike the Peninsular Club's explicitly social purpose, the LLC's function was the “promotion of literary, scientific, and educational purposes,” but also “the bringing together of women that they might be helpful to one another and to society.” The LLC hosted nationally renowned speakers in its auditorium and held classes on Shakespeare, short stories, and the Bible. The LLC would even host events of other organizations. For example, the 1901 meeting of the state's bankers' association used the LLC's building. The president of the association, Clay Hollister, knew the LLC through his mother, Mrs. Harvey Hollister, who was a member. The wives of many of the other leading bankers in the city, such as Mrs. Dudley Waters and Mrs. Edwin Uhl were also members as were the wives of furniture magnates, such as the women of the Widdicomb and Gay families, politicians, like Mrs. William Stuart and

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21. “Glimpse Inside the Lakeside Club House,” *Grand Rapids Press*, October 10, 1903, 12.



Mrs. George Perry, and other prominent citizens like Mrs. McGeorge Bundy.<sup>22</sup>

Though the LLC had an educational foundation, it clearly had social inclinations. Using a 1926 inventory, the LLC clearly displays elements of genteel socialization. Some of the kitchen items included two lunch cloths, two silver tea urns, two small china plates, three tea towels, one sugar tong, four lemon forks, four glass lemon plates. The LLC also had other, more expensive items, such as a grand piano, thirty-six books by Shakespeare, a Wilton Rug, and a silk American flag, estimated at \$1,125, \$100, \$257, \$75 respectively.<sup>23</sup>

Although the elite of Grand Rapids were certainly capable of setting aside political allegiances for business and pleasure, the political arena was still fiercely competitive. Despite the fact that many of the big political players lived in such close quarters, neither political party refrained from slinging dirt. In particular, both parties were eager to paint the other as a political machine. Perry's penchant to appoint Republicans to city offices, though seemingly proof against his participation in machine style politics, provided a great amount of fodder for his opponents. Specifically, it was the complaints of other Democrats who had been promised positions in the city government for which Perry faced the most criticism.<sup>24</sup>

The Republican *Herald* enjoyed lambasting Perry's unfulfilled promises, suggesting that the resignation of Perry's private secretary would allow him to “solidify at

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22. Ibid.; Peninsular Club, “Peninsular Club Yearbook, 1897”; Peninsular Club, “Peninsular Club Yearbook, 1904”; Ladies Literary Club, “Brief History of Ladies Literary Club,” Box 23, Folder 11, Collection 275, Ladies Literary Club Records, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Ladies Literary Club, Inventory, Box 23, Folder 2, Collection 275, Ladies Literary Club Records, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan *Grand Rapids Press*, June 10, 1901, 5.

23. Ladies Literary Club, “Brief History of Ladies Literary Club”; Ladies Literary Club, Inventory.

24. *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 11, 1900; *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 6, 1900; *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 4, 1900. Allegations of promised seats, often a point of mockery for the *Herald* is frequent throughout Perry's campaigns.

least a dozen Democratic votes” with promises<sup>25</sup> and that one of the city's leading retailers should start keeping tabs on the “market value of Perry promises.”<sup>26</sup> The *Herald* also frequently dubbed Perry and his supporters the “Tammany Club,” or “cabinet” which, allegedly, forced a reluctant Perry to run for reelection in 1900.<sup>27</sup>

The Democratic organ, the *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, used similar machine-centric rhetoric when advocating for Perry, suggesting “He has been no dummy, no mere figurehead.”<sup>28</sup> During the 1902 election, the *Morning Democrat* suggested the only machine behind the Democratic party was “the all-powerful, irresistible engine of popular sentiment.”<sup>29</sup> Even during the 1898 election for mayor, his first successful attempt, Perry described himself with rhetoric invoking anti-machine politics, stating in his acceptance of the Democratic nomination that he stood “unpledged to any man or set of men either directly or indirectly.”<sup>30</sup>

The Democrats did not simply defend against these charges either, shooting the same accusations back at the Republicans. The *Morning Democrat* said “the opponents of Mayor Perry” only wanted “to knife somebody who, perhaps in the interest of the public good,” did not follow the machine's wishes. The newspaper maintained “Such a secret cabal cannot command any degree of respect in any community.” Perry and the *Morning Democrat* often brought up a Republican proposal to lengthen the term of men appointed to city boards, referring to it as the “blocks of five amendment.” The name referred to a corruption scandal in Indiana in 1880, though since the *Morning Democrat* used an entire

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25. *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 20, 1900.

26. *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 13, 1900.

27. *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 25, 1900, 4.

28. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, April 1, 1900, 8.

29. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 19, 1902.

30. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 29, 1898.

editorial to explain this term it was likely not as effective as using “Tammany” or “Tammany Club.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, while enthusiastic, the Democrats were much less focused in their attacks on Republicans. They frequently changed the name of the group allegedly controlling the city. They used a variety of combinations of leading Republicans such as “Conger-Stow-Stuart-Johnston blocks-of-five cabal,” “Blodgett-McMillan-Burrows-Stuart Cabal,” “Blodget-McMillan-Burrows ring,” “Conger-Stuart-Stow cabal”<sup>32</sup> among others in 1901 alone.

The fiercely competitive political atmosphere made for potential awkwardness and hurt feelings as the city's elite were still very close in business ventures, social affairs, and physical space. Normally quite active in the local Elks lodge, George Perry turned down a position organizing their annual meeting because of a political disagreement with the organization's secretary. Perry explains, “For political reasons the secretary of the lodge and myself are no longer friends—much less brothers.” After Perry did not appoint him to a political position, one which “he was not at all qualified to fill,” the secretary had called him “by all the vile names that are so readily at his command” in various public places.<sup>33</sup>

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The elite of Grand Rapids built a financially, socially, and spatially intertwined

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31. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 13, 1900, 2.

32. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 30, 1901, 4; *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 31 1901; *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 29 1901, 4; *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, May 7, 1901, 4.

33. George Perry to Joseph Kerwin, November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1899, Box 7, Letter Press Book 1898-1899, 835, George R. Perry Collection, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, MI.

small urban world. However, they were also politically divided and men were expected to adhere to party lines. Reliant on personal connection, this urban atmosphere supported a Gilded Age ethos and slowed early efforts of reform during the beginning of the water scandal.

The first sign of scandal came in October of 1900, just as the common council began receiving bids for companies to begin building the Lake Michigan pipeline. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the Pure Water Commission, a body of city officials appointed to evaluate the water question, recommended the bid of a plan backed by David Fitzgerald over another similar bid by J. M. Jackson. The council required each bid to submit a check for one hundred thousand dollars to demonstrate the financial ability to complete such an expensive project. One week after the Pure Water Commission made this recommendation, mayor Perry revealed that he had investigated the worth of these checks. Perry first attacked the Jackson party's check, calling it a "bare-faced fraud intended to deceive this Council and the citizens of our city." He also noted was signed by a "it looks like Garmon." This "Garmon" was actually Frederick Garman who would become a leading witness for the prosecution in the water scandal and with whom Perry had already corresponded. As for the Fitzgerald check, he discovered, the Edmond P. Schmidt of the Edmond P. Schmidt Co., who signed the check had defaulted on a \$170.00 check four months prior and likely violated New York state banking laws in the way he drew up the check. Perry also revealed Schmidt had only "an uncarpeted room with his name under that of another firm—The Pianograph Co." for an office and that his company was "not connected with the New York Stock Exchange."<sup>34</sup>

It seems logical that upon finding the two leading bids for supplying the city with

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34. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1900-1901*, 440.

pure Lake Michigan water were frauds, city leaders or outside activists would push for reform. However, little happened at that time. Instead of halting the bidding process in favor of an investigation into the forgeries, the city leaders decided to simply reopen the bidding process, as if phony bids were just another normal issue for which they had to account.<sup>35</sup>

The real outbreak of the water scandal would not come for another four months on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1901, when the city of Chicago issued an indictment of city attorney Lant Salsbury for stealing fifty thousand dollars from Omaha capitalist Guy Barton. Barton and Salsbury had placed the money, intended to convince the Grand Rapids leaders to award the water contract to Barton, in a bank safety deposit box. Once Salsbury had demonstrated he had enough ability to award the contract to Barton, Salsbury would use the money to bribe the common council. Initially faced with his indictment, Salsbury, “with slippers on,” denied any involvement. He wondering aloud, “if I stole the money I would like to know what I did with it.”<sup>36</sup> The city accepted the simple denial by the lifelong resident of Western Michigan. The politically aligned *Morning Democrat* supported Salsbury saying that Salsbury's name had been mistakenly brought up during the Chicago investigation “in some mysterious, incomprehensible way.”<sup>37</sup> Even the normally hostile *Herald*, editorialized about the “very strange proceedings,” refusing to suggest the Cook county grand jury may be accurate. The Republican paper stood up for the Democrat, saying that “the issuance of an indictment in a Chicago court” would not be enough “to convince his friends in Grand Rapids,” of Salsbury's involvement in larceny. The newspaper went further, speaking on behalf of the city stating “The

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35. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 25, 1901.

36. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 22, 1901, 1.

37. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, February 22, 1901, 1.

disposition in this town will be to accept his denial at par and he will not be lacking in friends to stand by him.”<sup>38</sup> The politically opposed *Herald's* initial defense of Salsbury shows the strength of the connections among the city’s powerful citizens. While the *Herald* accused Salsbury of compliance in the city's “Tammany Club,” when faced with the reality of corruption, the city's leadership stood together, trusting personal relationships over legal accusations.

Two days after the *Herald's* defense of Salsbury, the newspaper revealed Salsbury's new claim to have taken the money “by mistake,” and quickly changed its tone, then suggesting Salsbury had intended to use the money to bribe city officials.<sup>39</sup> The *Herald* was back to wisecracking about Salsbury, the “hustler” with the “defective” memory, in its next publication.

Even as the *Herald* poked fun at Salsbury's sudden change of mind in regards to his possession of fifty thousand dollars, the antagonistic newspaper assumed that, in all likelihood, “the recovery of the money will end the prosecution just begun.”<sup>40</sup> Despite the fact that a city official took a large sum of money and the paper speculated that the money may have been intended for a larger scheme, the politically opposed newspaper “deemed probable” a lack of prosecution without commentary.<sup>41</sup> The *Herald* assumed returning the money would quickly resolve the incident. However, Salsbury refused to return the money because the Chicago prosecutors decided that the return of the money would not affect the decision to move forward with the case. While the *Herald* continued its sarcastic remarks aimed at the city attorney, the newspaper did not view the Chicago

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38. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 22, 1901, 4.

39. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 24, 1901, 1.

40. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 24, 1901, 2.

41. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 24, 1901, 1-2.

attorneys as progressively pursuing corruption, but rather only serving as a “stumbling block to any plan of settling the indictment.” The newspaper viewed the whole incident as a matter between Salsbury and Barton who negotiated the release of the money separately<sup>42</sup>

Upon the resolution of the conflict between Barton and Salsbury, Barton released a statement, stating he did not wish to be involved with any further prosecution of Salsbury “as he has been severely punished by the exposure for any wrong he may have committed.”<sup>43</sup> Just as the *Herald* suggested, Barton thought the incident was not a matter of corruption, but an interpersonal conflict the money and damage to Salsbury's reputation was enough punishment. After Barton wanted to drop the case, and without seeming to care for what the money was intended, the *Press* agreed, saying the case had become “the result of a business misunderstanding.”<sup>44</sup>

Even in a harsh editorial calling for a grand jury, the *Herald*, suggested that Salsbury's disagreement with Barton, which may have come while plotting a bribery scheme of public officials, was a “private” issue. In lamenting the city's “disgraceful accumulation of dishonesty and corruption,” the *Herald* observed, “It is no longer looked upon as a crime to steal from the public and the laxity in public matters has even extended to private affairs.” The “private affair” between Barton and Salsbury was still being concluded, but at least one of the “public matters,” to which the *Herald* referred, the corruption trial of former city clerk Frank D. Warren, had finished a little over a year earlier.<sup>45</sup>

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42. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 25, 1901, 1.

43. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 26, 1901, 1.

44. *Grand Rapids Press*, February 25, 1901.

45. *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 26, 1901, 4.

On May 15, 1899, Mayor Perry again exposed corruption, revealing that while Frank Warren was the city's clerk, money had gone missing. By June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1899, Warren had repaid a \$3,468.28 shortfall.<sup>46</sup> Warren later repaid further shortfalls and was placed on trial, suggesting a “forgive and forget” attitude was not always applicable in the city's politics. However, Warren's defense, that it would be unfair to punish him since others had taken city funds without punishment and subsequent acquittal certainly shows an urban atmosphere disinterested in punishing corruption. Warren was retried after the Michigan supreme court overruled the trial judge, who had set aside the jury's acquittal due to the clear evidence of Warren's guilt. Even then, though, the second trial unfolded much like the first. Warren's defense consisted of asking for sympathy because “the city had lost nothing” through Warren's “speculations” and that they should acquit “on account of his wife and little girl.” Despite the prosecutors warning that the jury should not ignore the facts out of sympathy and the judge “instructed the jury that it had no moral right to disbelieve the” facts of the case, the jury came back split, leaning towards acquittal nine to three.<sup>47</sup>

A little over a month after the jury favored Warren for the second time, the trials came to an end as he switched his plea to guilty, taking responsibility for his actions. Even after two trials, Warren received no punishment. Like Barton's refusal to cooperate with Salsbury's prosecution after Barton received his money, upon Warren's admission of guilt, the judge decided to indefinitely postpone Warren's sentence. Similar to the *Herald's* contradictory stances on Salsbury's legal troubles, the newspaper denounced the city's climate of corruption, saying “a community of good moral health” would not have

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46. *Proceedings of the Common Council, 1899-1900*, 69, 151.

47. *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 4, 1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 25, 5; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 26, 1900, 1, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 29, 1900.



hesitated to convict Warren, while Warren maintained his innocence. Upon his admission of guilt, though, the newspaper's editor Eugene Conger called the lack of punishment “merciful,” and echoed Barton's take on Salsbury, suggesting the “worry and trouble” Warren endured during the trials was satisfactory punishment.<sup>48</sup>

The prosecution of Warren for taking city funds to use in personal affairs certainly hints at an emerging notion that the city should punish corruption and adopt Progressive ethical and criminal systems. However, the refusal of two juries to convict Warren in spite of pretty clear proof shows a slow acceptance of Progressive stances against corruption. Likewise, the judge's and the *Herald's* acceptance of an admission of guilt as satisfactory punishment reveals even those who stood against corruption still did not take it serious enough to hold a city leader criminally responsible. The assumption of Barton and the *Herald* that once Salsbury returned the money the incident could be “forgiven and forgotten” certainly suggests the political climate had not changed drastically.

Like Salsbury's Chicago affair and the Frank Warren trials, the city's politicians were reluctant to recognize the importance of Salsbury's corruption. Salsbury's Cook County indictment came less than two months before the city elections, presenting Republicans an ideal rallying cry for the election. Republican candidates were “worthy of the confidence and respect of the people.”<sup>49</sup> Republicans would create “safeguards against corruption in city affairs,” if they gained control of the council.<sup>50</sup> The council was comprised of two representatives from each of the twelve wards with one of the two spots open to election each year. The Democrats held a two seat majority, but had seven of their seats up for reelection. With the Republicans pushing Salsbury's corruption as a prime

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48. *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 23, 1900, 4-5.

49. *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 30 1901, 7.

50. *Grand Rapids Herald*, April 1, 1901, 4.

voting concern, the party gained two additional seats, a possible sign of public disapproval of Salsbury's actions. However, even the *Herald* admitted the Republican victory came during a “light vote,” which suggests corruption was not ample motivation for the city to turn out at the polls.<sup>51</sup> The *Morning Democrat* went as far as suggesting the election amounted to “No Material Change in Control of the Local Municipal Administration.” Instead the Democratic paper blamed a “light vote” on “overconfidence and lack of organization,” and the loss of Polish support because one priest's took “the warpath” against Democrats.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the Republicans had gained additional seats on the council in each of the last four elections, including three spots in 1899. Salsbury's indictment may have played a role in the Republican victory, but the 1901 election was far from a mandate against corruption.

Perhaps because of the lack of a public mandate on Salsbury's corruption, the Democrats on the council, as well as some Republicans, did not see Salsbury's all but admitted guilt in the Chicago affair as a politically toxic issue. In a secret ballot, at least one Republican joined the Democrats on the first ballot, which gave Salsbury twelve votes, and at least three joined on the next, which gave Salsbury fourteen votes, a majority of the council's twenty-four aldermen. Even after the council passed a resolution, which forced a public re-vote, Salsbury received two Republican votes and a twelve to eleven edge. Since thirteen aldermen of the 1901 council were implicated in the water scandal by its conclusion, Salsbury's reelection may not be surprising. The two Republicans who openly sided with Salsbury faced corruption charges later and the one Democrat who did not side with Salsbury was not drawn into the scandal. However, four

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51. *Grand Rapids Herald*, April 2, 1901, 1.

52. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat* April 2, 1901, 1, 4.

other Republicans later involved in the scandal openly voted against Salsbury. Also, five Democrats not touched by the scandal still sided with Salsbury, suggesting the issue of corruption still did not bother all of the “honest” aldermen. In a city with bipartisan corruption, dealing with corruption became, for the most part, a partisan issue. The election of Salsbury once again revealed that the Progressive ethos lacked the strength to produce a strong reaction against corruption in the beginnings of the water scandal.<sup>53</sup>

On June 14, 1901, after weeks of testimony by dozens of witnesses the Kent County circuit court grand jury indicted Salsbury and four others: Thomas McGarry, who Frederick Garman had hired as attorney for his scheme, Stilson MacLeod of the Old National Bank, Republican Gerrit Albers, and Henry A. Taylor, the New Yorker whose money financed the bribery plot. Grand Rapids Democrats were rather displeased. Through the process, they complained of the political nature of the grand jury proceedings. While Democrats counted the fact that the grand jury did not indict mayor Perry as “a splendid victory,” Garman and Cameron who masterminded the bribery scheme and several Republicans that they expected the grand jury to indict were not.<sup>54</sup> In particular, they had hoped the Hollister family, who was intimately tied to the Old National Bank, would suffer politically. McGeorge Bundy, lawyer for the Old National Bank and another attorney Garman had on retainer, Clay Hollister, assistant cashier at the Old National, also allegedly met with his college friend, Garman, and Bundy, and Harvey Hollister, cashier and overseer of MacLeod at Old National all went before the grand jury and escaped without indictment.

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53. *Grand Rapids Herald*, May 7, 1901, 1, 3-4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 16, 1901, 1; *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 18, 1901, 1; *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 19, 1901, 3; *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 25, 1901, 1; Lydens, *The Story of Grand Rapids*.; Goss, *History of Grand Rapids and its Industries*.

54. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, June 14, 1901, 1; *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, June 15, 1901, 1.

Figure 9. Grand Rapids Aldermen who voted to reelect Lant Salsbury as City Attorney





During the proceedings, there was significant partisan bickering over Garman testifying in front of the grand jury. Mayor Perry arrested Garman and Cameron for the forged checks they gave to the board of public works. However, the assistant prosecutor Charles Ward, who was conducting the grand jury, maintained they had immunity as witnesses. Ward, as well as Republicans, saw the arrests as an attempt “to close their mouths regarding important matters.”<sup>55</sup> The partisanship of the grand jury proceedings reveals the slow acceptance of reform in Grand Rapids. The first calls for a grand jury stressed impartiality and broad powers, not simply focused on the water scandal. The *Morning Democrat* in particular was adamant about the grand jury investigating the Republicans' gubernatorial campaign in 1900, though they were not alone.<sup>56</sup> The *Press* voiced displeasure over the political atmosphere of the city, calling the water scandal “the culmination of a long series, similar in nature, which have shown that such things as rigid honesty and conscientious performance of duty are all too rare in official life in this community.”<sup>57</sup> The grand jury, though it had the power to investigate other scandals, only indicted men involved in the water scandal. The failure of the grand jury to live up to its goals of true impartiality and sweeping reform highlights the importance of the water scandal. The water scandal was the tipping point in Grand Rapids. While the Progressive ethos of reform did not trickle down enough for this small city to avoid partisanship, Progressive notions of corruption had infiltrated the political atmosphere enough to produce a true scandal. More than a mistake that could be forgiven and forgotten, the bribery scheme resulted in a full fledged scandal, marking the first genuine attempt at reform and the first definitive indicator of the adoption of Progressive ethos in Grand

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55. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, May 17, 1901, 1; *Grand Rapids Press*, June 5, 1901, 1.

56. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, February 26 1901, 2.

57. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, February 25 1901, 2.

Rapids.

The city's close-knit power structure, reliance on personal relationships, and acceptance of a Gilded Age style of government slowed initial reform efforts. No one investigated the forged checks. Salsbury received the benefit of the doubt from his rivals. Like Frank Warren before him, Salsbury also was able to restore the missing funds and, at least temporarily, avoid punishment. Even the circuit court grand jury, a legitimate attempt to put Progressive reforms into action, devolved into partisanship. However, the bribery scheme stayed a scandal and more men were put on trial for their actions. Despite complaints of partisanship, the grand jury indicted five men for charges relating to corruption. Progressive reform was making headway in Grand Rapids.

The *Morning Democrat* accused the circuit court grand jury of partisanship, often taking issue with assistant prosecutor Charles Ward, who as conducting the proceedings.



Figure 11. “The Anti-Perry Band Will Now Give a Few Favorite Selections.”  
Grand Rapids Morning Democrat, June 8, 1901, 1.

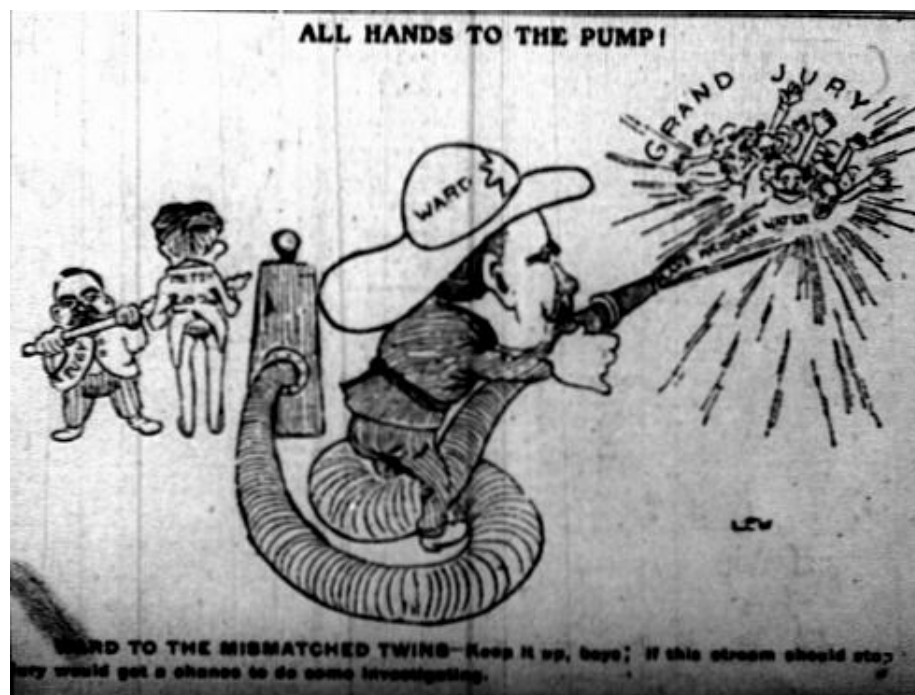


Figure 12. “All Hands To The Pump”  
Grand Rapids Morning Democrat, June 7, 1901, 1.



These advertisements from the *Grand Rapids Press* display some of the novelty of the Circuit Court grand jury proceedings. As the first major scandal of Grand Rapids, the water scandal represents a transition to a Progressive ethos.

There'll Be A  
Big Boom  
Soon

Just After the Grand Jury  
Convenes—

there will be a real estate boom. Everything will be on the rise. You begin to advertise your business in The Evening Press want columns.

Figure 13. “There'll Be A Big Boom Soon”  
*Grand Rapids Press*, May 24, 1901, 9.

**SALSBURY**  
**NOT GUILTY**  
**BUT GABLE**  
**THE TAILOR, IS THE**  
**GUILTY PARTY.**

The jury of 12 well selected up-to-date gentlemen, found Gable, the tailor, guilty in the first degree of being the best up-to-date tailor in this city, and also find him guilty of carrying the largest new line of spring woolens. His bond has been fixed at \$10,000, the amount of goods he carries. Call in and see for yourself; the tables are loaded with all novelties of the season. He is also guilty of making up garments in metropolitan style and at popular prices. 114 Monroe street is his place of business.

Figure 14. “Salsbury Not Guilty But Gable The Tailor, Is The Guilty Party.”  
*Grand Rapids Press*, February 27, 1901, 7.

## Chapter Two:

### The Corrupt Progressive:

#### George Perry and his trial as representations of the transition from the Gilded Age to Progressive Era

The *American Biography* entry for George Russell Perry comes closest to referring to the water scandal when it mentions Perry as “one of the first to advocate a pure, substantial water supply as a necessity to the public health and welfare.”<sup>1</sup> Mayor Perry was intent on overhauling the city's water supply to find “a suitable supply of water for all the needs of the city, not only for the present but for all time to come.”<sup>2</sup> Perry saw the water system as a necessary improvement if the city was to continue grow in size and attract businesses.<sup>3</sup> However, Perry's time as mayor was not defined by simple construction plans. Rather, the bribery scandal that accompanied the city's plans to obtain a new supply of pure water dominated his last years in office and much of his legacy as mayor.

As a figure, George Perry best represents the political culture in which water scandal took place. Perry indulged in Progressive rhetoric and some progressive-style governance. However, his rhetoric and even his seemingly Progressive actions only show a recognition and not an adoption of Progressive ethics. He accepted and used its rhetoric of business-like governance and infrastructure improvements, but tolerated, if not

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1. American Historical Company, *American Biography; A New Cyclopaedia*, vol. 43 (New York: American Historical Society, 1934), 171-173.

2. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1900-1901*, 5-6.

3. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1900-1901*, 3.

outright embraced, the Gilded Age ethos of governing through personal politics. Though a jury found Perry not guilty for bribery, Perry's trial exposed his acceptance of corruption in politics and even his own involvement in corrupt practices. George Perry's place between using Progressive rhetoric and a Progressive ethical system of government best demonstrates the water scandal as a turning point. Perry's incomplete acceptance of Progressive ideals represented the piecemeal trickle down of Progressive ethics from national figures to small city leaders. The prosecution of Perry, and the details of other water scandal trials, represent the next step of the spread of Progressivism in Grand Rapids. Enough of the city's leaders recognized the new ethical system of Progressivism, but then they had to figure out how to apply it.

Born in Connecticut in 1849, George Perry grew up in Detroit and became a druggist before moving to Grand Rapids in 1868. After a short stint in a Chicago drug store, Perry permanently returned to Grand Rapids where he worked as the bookkeeper for a wholesale grocery company and later as a merchandise broker. Perry was very active politically. He was elected city treasurer in 1886 and reelected to the same position twice afterward. He ran unsuccessfully for the 5<sup>th</sup> district's congressional seat in the house of representative in 1898, the fall after first being elected mayor. Perry was reelected in 1900 and defeated during his third campaign in 1902. Even after the water scandal, Perry remained active in politics attempting a few unsuccessful campaigns for mayor and serving on the board of assessors for four years beginning in 1908.<sup>4</sup>

As a candidate, Perry stressed his success and business-like administration. At his 1898 nomination, Thomas McGarry introduced Perry, describing his success in the business world, "His business transactions aggregate but a little short of \$1,000,000 per

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4. American Historical Company, *American Biography*, 171-173.

annum,” at social clubs, “The fraternal orders to which he belongs will all attest the truth of this,” and in the Democratic party, “This has been evidenced by his previous successes at the polls.”<sup>5</sup> In his acceptance speech of his 1900 nomination he talked about how the city wanted leaders to “give to the management of the city affairs their closest and undivided attention.” Perry detailed how the “executive head” of the city needed to act as a hands on manager, closely keeping an eye on his appointed boards.<sup>6</sup>

He advocated for increased “personal liberty,” by which he meant citizens would have “some freedom of choice as to their own acts.” Perry believed the law should not dictate people's actions. If people wanted “to attend a public place of amusement on Sunday it should be their right and privilege to do so, provided, everything is conducted in an orderly and proper manner.” This included lowering taxes and relaxing prosecution of liquor-related offenses. Perry saw the amount of city resources used to monitor saloons wasteful.<sup>7</sup> Perry was also a fierce advocate for the state legislature getting out of municipal government and granting the city home rule.<sup>8</sup>

As mayor, much of Perry's energies focused on improving the city's infrastructure, within which providing a better water supply fit nicely.<sup>9</sup> After winning hard-fought reelection in 1900, Perry spent much of his inaugural on internal improvements, while still being able to “live within our means” as a city, of course. The most important item

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5. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 29, 1898, 1.

6. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 23, 1900, 1.

7. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 29, 1898, 1; *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, May 3, 1898, 4-5.

8. *Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, March 29, 1902, 1.

9. Previous scholars have examined municipal improvement campaigns as Progressive movements. In particular, they have focused on the efforts of women's organizations to ensure “municipal housekeeping.” Two good sources are Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For a case study more narrowly focused on water supply see Kate Foss-Mollan, *Hard Water: Politics and Water Supply in Milwaukee, 1870-1995* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2001).

on his agenda was continuing to find an adequate supply of pure water, but he also emphasized issues such as building bridges, showing “exceeding care in ordering the improvements of streets,” moving forward “getting the wires into conduits,” and growing the reach of the city's lighting.<sup>10</sup> The next May, following the elections that came in the wake of Lant Salsbury's district court indictment in Chicago, Perry, again advocated a conservative Progressivism in which the city would “live within our income,” but would still emphasize infrastructure improvements, such as making sure the alleys found within the city's “business district” were paved and lighted, making “[a] complete and systematic inspection of all the sidewalks,” and of course, finding a cheap supply of “pure water” for the city's consumption.<sup>11</sup>

Progressive rhetoric of efficiency and expertise often littered Perry's speeches about deciding between proposed water plans. When advocating for a project to use ground water, referred to as the Bailey springs plan after Sluman Bailey, the owner of the land, Perry drew on the expertise of the City Engineer, a local professor, and outside experts Allen Hazen and Samuel Gray. Perry was well understood to be a supporter of the Bailey Springs plan, but he rationalized his support, saying, “I simply am following along the lines recommended by the engineers and they certainly would be without prejudice.”<sup>12</sup> Later praising Samuel Gray, Perry said he was “at the head of his profession, not only in this country, but also in Europe,” before saying “it would seem to be that it would be well that we should now follow the advice of this man, lay out a plan.”<sup>13</sup> This sort of lobbying was Perry's main source of influence over choosing the

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10. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1900-1901*, 5-6.

11. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1901-1902*, 2-3.

12. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1900-1901*, 306.

13. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1901-1902*, 643.

city's new water supply. As mayor, Perry had little direct control of the choice of plan for the city's water supply. He could veto a decision by the common council if he did not agree with it. He also appointed the Pure Water Commission, which investigated different proposals, including filtration of the Grand River, various others rivers and lakes, the Bailey Springs plan, and the Lake Michigan plans.

Perry presented other Progressive plans in his annual addresses, such as his 1900 assertion “that every employe [sic] of the city is entitled to a certain vacation, say 10 days, with pay, and that all should be treated alike. The man who works in the office and he who toils on the street all should be used alike in this respect.”<sup>14</sup> In 1899, Perry raised the issues of water meters, citing the efforts of “Our neighboring city, Milwaukee,” to impose water meters. In 1901 he wanted the city's Common Council to investigate the “twin nuisances” of smoke and dust, which should be reduced, while still acknowledging that manufacturers needed “cheap fuel and cheap fuel makes dense smoke”<sup>15</sup> Perry also advocated for improvement such as building a new firehouse, constructing a new public playground, and planting trees, which would give “materially to the beauty of our city”<sup>16</sup> Rather ironically, in 1899, Perry began his message to the Common Council stressing the openness of the city's government. He claimed “There are no dark spots to hide; the inquiring gaze of the public can look where it pleases and there is no blemish to conceal.”<sup>17</sup>

Even more than his rhetoric in the city, Perry established himself as a Progressive by joining and participating in organizations such as the League of American

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14. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1900-1901*, 2.

15. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1901-1902*, 2; *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1899-1900*, 8.

16. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1901-1902*, 1-2.

17. *Proceedings of the Common Council City of Grand Rapids, 1899-1900*, 2.

Municipalities. In 1898, shortly after his election as mayor, Samuel Black, mayor of Columbus, Ohio and new President of the League of American Municipalities, appointed Perry the Honorary Vice-President for Michigan.<sup>18</sup> Perry was also invited by the Good Roads and Public Improvements Association of Missouri to its convention, which it claimed would “be the largest Convention ever held in the United States in this interest.” The group claimed that “Good Roads, and other Internal Improvements” would occupy a central issue on the party platforms for the 1900 election and stated “Progressive Legislators realized that work must be found for the idle classes.”<sup>19</sup> The *Grand Rapids Press* agreed with the importance of good roads, calling them “evidence of high civilization.”<sup>20</sup> Whether or not Perry explicitly agreed or even attended the convention, his prioritization of public improvements during his governing suggest he did not disagree.

The next year, 1899, Perry presented a paper, “Is it Better for a City to do Its Own Work by Cont. or by Day's Work.” at the League of American Municipalities' annual convention held in Syracuse, New York, which was subsequently published along with the other presentations in the journal *Public Improvements*, “a journal for the engineer, contractor and public official.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps because of Perry's involvement, the League of American Municipalities chose Grand Rapids as the site for its convention in 1902, though by that time Perry was no longer the mayor and the municipal government was sorting through corruption.<sup>22</sup> Perry was also active on the state level, serving as President

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18. E. F. Gilkson to Perry November 3, 1898, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

19. W. H. Moore to Perry November 12, 1898, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

20. *Grand Rapids Press*, March 22, 1901, 2.

21. V. D. Hygte to Perry September 25, 1899; Gilkson to Perry August 3, 1899, Box 1, Folder 4, George R. Perry Collection.

22. *Washington Post*, August 5, 1902, 10.

and presiding over the third meeting Michigan Municipal League in 1901. Perry headed the Grand Rapids delegation. The league attracted representatives from several other Michigan cities such as Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, Jackson, and Adrian.<sup>23</sup>

Perry, seemingly, put progressive rhetoric to work in his appointments to city positions. Historians have often interpreted the bureaucratization of the government, from civil service reform to the Gospel of Efficiency, as a Progressive goal. Perry's appointments seem to fit the anti-machine, business-like patronage style that reformers sought.<sup>24</sup> In defense of his selection of a Republican for a private secretary, Perry invoked this very notion, saying, "If you can show me a Democrat with as much brains as Mr. Hunter has I will point him my private secretary" [sic].<sup>25</sup> The Republican *Herald* even complimented Perry on choosing "to do what would be to the city's best interest." The *Herald* drove the point home that Perry's appointments of Republicans was "for the public good and to insure efficient public service" and "for the welfare of the city" all out of "patriotic course," and a "high sense of duty to the municipality."<sup>26</sup>

However, Perry's appointments were perhaps not as self-sacrificing as they may seem. Perry's choice for a police commissioner, Republican and fellow Elks brother, William Boyns, assumed the first vice presidency of the Lakeside Club during Perry's reelection campaign. Although the club had a thousand members, Perry served on the board of directors for the club as did Dudley Waters, the Democrat Perry appointed to the board of public works during the same period and Perry's friend, Thomas McGarry.

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23. *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 20, 1901, 2.

24. Much of the literature of the Progressive Era covers this topic. A good starting place is Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency the Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

25. *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 31, 1900.

26. *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 4, 1900.



While these personal relationships do not preclude Perry's appointments from being Progressive actions, they certainly resembled the personal politics that the new Progressive ethos sought to eradicate.<sup>27</sup>

Perry's appointments do not represent the replacement of personal politics with progressive detachment, but rather the use of progressive rhetoric and personal connections to facilitate personal political gains. Perry governed during a political shift within Grand Rapids politics and his appointments seemed to recognize this shift. From 1882 to 1892 only one Republican served a single year as mayor. The next ten years saw both parties hold the office for five years. Over the following fifteen years Republicans would hold the mayoral office for thirteen of the years. Similarly, the United States congressional representative of the Grand Rapids area was relatively even until 1895, which marked the first of six terms for Republican William Alden Smith. After six terms, the people of Michigan elected him senator and another Republican representative took over his seat in the house for another two terms. Even the ward races were politically shifting. During the 1898-1899 term there were eighteen Democrats and six Republicans. The next year Republicans picked up one seat and three more the next year and another the year after, leaving the Democratic majority at a slim two. After Salsbury's Chicago indictment in 1901, the Republicans finally took control of the common council, with a thirteen to eleven majority, culminating the trend towards a Republican majority. This political one-sidedness was new to Grand Rapids as the early political atmosphere was quite even. From 1850 until 1900, no mayor served more than two years in office and from 1850 to 1880 there were twenty two mayors and the incumbent party failed to win

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27. *Grand Rapids Herald*, April 20, 1900.

reelection sixteen times.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the extreme political competitiveness of early Grand Rapids, George Perry held the mayor's office in the middle of the emergence of a Republican-dominated political atmosphere. To win in 1898 and 1900, he had to attract significant numbers of Republican voters and making Republican friends through patronage was certainly not a bad decision. Perhaps most indicative of Perry's overtures to the Republican establishment was his appointment of Orson Ball to the board of public works. Ball was the vice president of Grand Rapids Savings Bank, which included a number of prominent Republican businessmen like Roger Butterfield and Frank Leonard. Ball also managed the wholesaler Ball, Barnhardt, Putnam Company, of which Willard Barnhardt, a member of the Old National Bank directors was president. Ball also rubbed elbows, quite literally, with prominent Republicans at Fountain Street Baptist. At church services, Ball could find his associate Roger Butterfield and the Republican State Senator and deacon Robert Loomis. By giving coveted appointments to Republicans, Perry likely gained some of the support among Republicans that allowed him to win two mayoral races, something no one on the Democratic ticket would accomplish for over fifteen years.<sup>29</sup>

Perry engaged in other backroom dealings that benefited himself and his political allies. In the wake of Perry's testimony before the Kent County circuit court grand jury in June 1901, the Common Council's committee on buildings, comprised of three Democratic aldermen each of whom the court fined later for bribery during the water scandal, awarded half of the city's contract for coal, to the Century Fuel Company. The

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28. Lydens, 656-657.

29. *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 9, 1901; Lydens, *The Story of Grand Rapids.*; *Grand Rapids Illustrated*; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1898; R. L. Polk & Co., *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Grand Rapids City Directory*, 1902; Baxter, *History of the City of Grand Rapids, Michigan*.

Century Fuel Company's stockholders, who stood to gain from the city contract, included George Perry, Dudley Waters, David E. Uhl, a holder of a garbage contract with the city and son of one of the city's most prominent Democrats, William Hayden, a close Perry ally, and Charles A. Phelps, the President of the company and another Perry appointee who served as a police commissioner.<sup>30</sup>

Personal politics also seems to have played a significant role in Perry's progressive plan to upgrade the city's water supply. Perry strongly advocated for the city to buy the land of Sluman Bailey, a farmer just outside of the city, which allegedly possessed springs that could produce millions of gallons of water. While he came to adopt the use of water from the Grand River as a part of this plan, purchasing the Bailey Springs, was a constant. Before the investigation into a new water supply began at full scale, Bailey demonstrated himself as a willing political ally, writing to Perry that he was lobbying the Governor and Secretary of State for a charter amendment that Perry was pushing.<sup>31</sup>

During his bribery trial, Perry even confessed to several instances of clear participation in and tolerance of Gilded Age politics. The most telling confession was his taking of \$16,000 as city treasurer and giving it to a Democratic candidate for congress.<sup>32</sup> When testifying, Perry rationalized his actions pointing out the deep pockets of the Republican Party. The incumbent Democrat faced leading citizen and former mayor Charles E. Belknap as candidate and successful businessman Delos Blodgett as chairman of Belknap's committee. Perry also insisted that he had every intention of repaying the funds advanced from the treasury, stating “it was represented to me that there were many

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30. *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 25, 1901, 4.

31. Sluman Bailey to Perry December 18, 1899, Box 1, Folder 4, George R. Perry Collection.

32. *Grand Rapids Herald*, November 29, 1904, 1; *Grand Rapids Herald*, November 30, 1904, 1.

wealthy men in the Democratic Party who would reimburse me if I went a little farther and put up more money.”<sup>33</sup> On cross examination, Perry reiterated his innocence of any wrong doing, claiming “I never stole \$16,000 or 16 cents from the city treasury” and “I was never arrested, sir, and never did anything with criminal intent.” Like the “forgive and forget” attitude displayed in the corruption case of Frank Warren who misused city funds and Lant Salsbury's legal issues in Chicago, as long as Perry repaid the funds he could claim that “I did not steal a cent from anybody.” Perry's insistence of innocence of any real crime shows he shared the indifference to the system of corrupt politics that depended on “wealthy friends”<sup>34</sup> and allowed for the misuse of public funds for political reasons.

Perry's participation in Gilded Age-style politics, however, was not always antithetical to Progressive reform. Furthermore, Perry even displayed the ability to spin Gilded Age politics into a need for Progressive reform. Specifically, in 1901 Republican state senator David Burns, who was later charged and acquitted for bribery in the water scandal, proposed a bill that would prevent city officials who had misused city funds from holding political office in the future. Perry and his political allies did not embrace this seemingly Progressive reform. Instead, they contended that it was an unfair attack on Mayor Perry himself. When support for a statewide bill fell through the bill was amended to be limited to Grand Rapids. Perry then helped turn the issue around to the home rule of cities instead of municipal corruption. Home rule, which provided city governments with increased power over their internal affairs, was a Progressive restructuring of the power of the municipal government. In the 1900 Democrat State Platform the Democrats

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33. *Grand Rapids Herald*, November 23, 1904, 8.

34. *Grand Rapids Herald*, November 27, 1904, 4.

“demand[ed] the right of home rule for all municipalities, and the election of United States senators by the people,” placing this request alongside the direct election of senators as a call for increased democracy in government.<sup>35</sup>

Even when Perry meant to show that he was not a participant in corrupt politics, his testimony still revealed that he tolerated a corrupt system of municipal government. Perry testified that before Lant Salsbury was city attorney, Salsbury had approached him on behalf of a street railway company in order to win his approval for the company. Perry rejected participation in this corrupt scheme, claiming that he “said that now that I had been elected mayor, I intended that the people should know me as I was. I said that I intended to give a good, fair, square, honest administration and that there should be no spot to which any one could turn a suspicious finger.”<sup>36</sup> Though it is hard to call Perry corrupt for refusing a bribe, his willingness to work within the corrupt-system is evident. Perry did not attempt to explicitly reform the system that is bringing his office corrupt deals, nor did he even attempt to disqualify or remove Salsbury as city attorney, a man he clearly knew was willing to participate in corrupt backroom deals.

Perry's involvement in the water scandal, at best, is another instance of the tolerance of the corrupt system of municipal government and at worst an instance of Perry's participation. Though Perry exposed the two leading bids on the water contract for forging checks, he did little to halt the bidding process. In fact, Perry knew the bidding process was filled with fraud well before the promoters submitted the bad checks. The prosecution in Perry's trial pointed out this very discrepancy in Perry's writings, showing “Perry's letters to strangers outside the city brand Garman and Cameron as the blackest

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35. *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 7, 1901, 8.

36. *Grand Rapids Herald*, November 23, 1904, 8.

criminals outside of prison walls. Yet he never whispered a word to his best friends in the council, never a word to his friends on the board of public works.”<sup>37</sup> Less than a month after receiving an initial letter from Frederick Garman, the lead promoter and key witness in the water scandal, Perry investigated Garman's background, writing to an acquaintance in New York, who worked in the same Building as Garman. Perry's contact failed to “find any one who knows him.”<sup>38</sup> After a little more success in finding people who had contacted Garman, the best Perry's contact could do is find that the “Traders Security Company” sign had been removed from the office door and that the only person to have heard of Garman was the elevator operator, and even then only because “a number of people” had come in and asked about him. This New Yorker told Perry that no one had ever seen Garman in the building in which he supposedly worked. The only comments Perry's contact could garner about Garman's company were “unfavorable,” and yet Perry did little to alert the council or prevent Garman, who clearly was less than legitimate, from sending in bids for the city's water supply. With such advanced knowledge of Garman's unsavory character, Perry at best knew that his city was dealing with a potential scam and saw nothing out of the ordinary, tolerating the type of political dealings that Progressive reformers fought to eradicate from municipal politics. At worst, Perry saw an opportunity to personally profit and joined the scheme himself. Either way, Garman informed Perry he was willing to send a representative, R. A. Cameron, to visit the city and work out a deal less than two weeks after Perry investigated Garman's business. Perry told Garman to send his representative.<sup>39</sup>

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37. *Grand Rapids Herald*, December 7, 1904, 7.

38. A. Reed to George Perry May 16, 1900 and May 17, 1900, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

39. Telegram Garman to Perry May 25, 1900; Perry to Garman May 25, 1900, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

Even before Perry agreed to have Garman send a representative to the city, Perry received further warnings about plans to expand the city's water supply from a New York engineer, Albert Smith. Smith wrote Perry telling Perry that he had met with some representatives of the Grand Rapids Hydraulic Company, a private water company in the city, who insisted that they “could get any sort of reasonable contract – and perhaps one not so reasonable for your City” (emphasis original).<sup>40</sup> Again Perry had warning that some parties were plotting to corruptly profit from the city's water plans, yet he did nothing to even slow down the process. Perry did not bother to expose this potential fraud, despite his public opposition to the taking of water from Lake Michigan as the corrupt plan advocated.

Two weeks later, Perry received another warning from Smith, who wrote to Perry in June 1900, informing Perry that men had come into his office and claimed they had secured a contract to build a new water system for Grand Rapids. Upon hearing that there were men claiming to have a signed contract to supply the city with water, Perry did nothing publicly to halt the process or investigate the claims. Again, Perry at best simply saw this sort of dishonesty in the bidding process as normal and tolerated the schemes of promoters.<sup>41</sup> Even when Smith mentions Garman's representative in another letter of warning a week later, in which Smith also expresses that he believed “these people are in a way hurting your City by these representations of this influence and ability to do so and so,” Perry allows Garman's scheme to proceed.<sup>42</sup> Even having these early warnings as to the nature of the type of men with which Perry's city was dealing, he did little to expose

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40. Smith to Perry, April 27, 1900; Albert Smith to Perry May 21, 1900, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

41. Albert Smith to Perry June 9, 1900; Telegram Smith to Perry June 6, 1900, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

42. Smith to Perry June 15, 1900, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

any fraud until months later in October, and even less in terms of criminal investigation, waiting until Cameron and Garman were willing to testify, potentially against Perry himself, in June, 1901. Perry's response to Smith, that the citizens of Grand Rapids had to first approve a contract so Cameron and others would likely not get any contract, is at best indicative of Perry's acceptance of corrupt methods of business in awarding municipal contracts.<sup>43</sup>

### **Learning Reform**

Perry's record as mayor depicts a Progressive leader building a better city, while his trial reveals Perry as a politician operating in the Gilded Age, taking city funds and receiving bids from conmen, and possibly participating in their schemes. Just as Perry embodied the transition of Gilded Age politics to Progressive Reform, the effort to punish Perry depicts the growing pains in administering reform. In particular, the city stumbled into reforming its jury system during Perry's trial, following the objections of Perry's attorney, A. A. Ellis.

Following the successful challenge of technicalities of other water scandal defendants, Ellis began the jury selection process for Perry's trial by objecting to the entire list of potential jurors. The prosecuting attorney, Charles Ward, had access to the list allowing him to "look up" potential jurors.<sup>44</sup> However, when Ellis requested the same list, the district court clerk claimed that the list was "a secret matter." Ellis also objected to the fact that some of the men selected had already served on juries of other trials,

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43. Perry to Smith June 11, 1900, Box 1, George R. Perry Collection.

44. *Grand Rapids Herald*, Oct 7, 1904, 1; *Grand Rapids Herald*, October 8, 1904, 1.



clearly tainting their objectivity. The jury commission did not disagree, saying “that no attempt was made to protect the list of names drawn from public inspection” and that “Anyone can see [the list of names] at any time.”<sup>45</sup>

After the judge denied the defense's initial claims of unfairness, Ellis again challenged the Kent County method of jury selection. This time, Ellis claimed that the jury selection method was illegal because the court organized the potential jurors by ward before selecting them. The judge was more amenable to this request, calling it “a particularly serious” issue of which he himself had questioned the legality.<sup>46</sup> The city, as well as the county, had previously relied on jury commissioners to divide the city into districts and select men who “would make suitable jurors.” After this selection, the commissioners would form the jury pool by randomly selecting an equal number of names from each ward in his district.<sup>47</sup> The judge ruled that the jurors should have been selected without regard to wards and the prosecution agreed for the court to select a new pool of jurors, postponing the trial for two weeks.<sup>48</sup>

Several of the water scandal trials faced technical issues with juries and jury selection. Lant Salsbury appealed his case all the way to the state supreme court on a variety of issues ranging from “the validity of the indictment” to “errors alleged upon the charge,” though none of which won him a new trial. In one instance, Salsbury's lawyers argued the judge improperly replaced two jurors during the circuit court grand jury. After removing the disqualified jurors, the judge instructed the sheriff to fill the spots with bystanders. Simply adding bystanders was legal, but Salsbury's lawyers argued,

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45. Ibid.

46. *Grand Rapids Herald*, October 8, 1904, 1, 5.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

unsuccessfully, that the court did not question the new jurors to see if they were qualified.<sup>49</sup> Thomas McGarry unsuccessfully appealed his conviction on a technical issue of jurisdiction.<sup>50</sup> Alderman James Mol successfully argued in front of the state supreme court that his rights were infringed when jurors from a different water scandal case were allowed to sit on the jury for Mol's case.<sup>51</sup> Gerrit Albers, one of the first men the circuit court grand jury indicted, also won his appeal to the state supreme court. After a jury found Albers not guilty of "corruptly offering money to an alderman," he was convicted of perjury for his testimony on the same events. The state supreme court found that once the court ruled on the series of events in Albers' case, through his acquittal, another jury could not convict Albers assuming an alternate series of events.<sup>52</sup>

The mixed results of these early water scandal trials, as with the disputes over jury selection in Perry's trial, reinforces the novelty of the water scandal. Grand Rapids did not have the experience or judicial infrastructure to handle a scandal because before the water scandal the city handled issues like corruption in a different way.

George Perry was a transitional figure in the sense that he partially adopted Progressivism, specifically in his rhetoric. However, Perry did not fully accept the Progressive ethical system. Perry's continued use of a Gilded Age ethos despite adopting some Progressive ideas represents one step in the movement of the Progressive ethos from the national to the local level. The technical issues raised in Perry's trial and several other water scandal trials, show the next step. After the water scandal produced an atmosphere that more fully accepted the Progressive ethical system, the city had to come

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49. *People v. Salsbury*, 134 Mich. 537, 96 N. W. 936 (1903).

50. *People v. McGarry*, 136 Mich. 316, 99 N. W. 147 (1904).

51. *People v. Mol*, 137 Mich. 692, 100 N. W. 913 (1904).

52. *People v. Albers*, 137 Mich. 678, 100 N. W. 908 (1904).

to grips with what reform meant and how to carry it out.

## Chapter Three

### A City's Dark Spot Remembered: Responses to the Grand Rapids Water Scandal

When the idea for a building a pipeline to bring water from Lake Michigan to the city resurfaced during the Great Depression, an alderman retorted that the plan “isn't worth the paper it is written on.”<sup>122</sup> However, the bribery scheme of the water scandal was far from the city's only scandal at the time. The city's “textbook scandal” ran contemporary to the water scandal and involved citizens of the same social circles, including mayor Perry. The city's president of the board of education, John Rowson, who was soon to retire, rejected an overwhelmingly approved book contract for math textbooks on September 9, 1899. The board formed an investigatory committee shortly after allegations of corruption were circulated by many including the *Grand Rapids Herald*. This committee decided that the American Book Company, the publisher of the new textbooks, had attempted to improperly influence the contract when it paid a few hundred dollars to a local attorney to bribe Rowson. However, the board of education ultimately chose not to pursue the corruption, instead, adopting a minority report, which found no bribery had taken place and that the attorney had been legitimately hired by the company.<sup>123</sup>

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122. Lydens, 64.

123. Lydens, 488-489; *Grand Rapids Herald* January 9, 1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald* March 30,

Though comparatively small, the textbook scandal nevertheless became an issue in local politics. The *Grand Rapids Herald* raised the issue before the 1900 mayoral election, repeatedly charging Perry with helping to “whitewash” the American Book Company's bribery of Rowson.<sup>124</sup> Like the water scandal, the textbook scandal also involved several of the city's important citizens. Aside from mayor Perry, Edwin Sweet, who helped shape the investigative committee's majority report, was the most influential citizen involved. Sweet, a member of the exclusive Peninsular Club, practiced law for eight years with William Stuart, the former mayor who ran against Perry in 1900. Though a Democrat, Sweet ran for mayor under a nonpartisan ticket in 1906, after serving the previous two years as mayor after the scandal.<sup>125</sup> The textbook scandal also garnered the attention of the Civic Club, which decided the election and running of the school board needed much greater oversight.<sup>126</sup>

The textbook scandal and other lesser scandalous events lay the groundwork for the impact of the water scandal as a social tipping point. After the water scandal, the city would hold corrupt behavior to the new ethical system advocated by national reformers. In this chapter, I examine how the way in which the water scandal has been remembered to explore the city's adoption of this new national ethos. The national response to the Grand Rapids water scandal reinforces the importance of the water scandal as a scandal. It also suggests the rest of the nation was also beginning to recognize the same ethical

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1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald* April 1, 1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald* April 2, 1900, 4.

124. *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 30, 1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, April 1, 1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, April 2, 1900, 4.

125. Fisher, 177.

126. *Grand Rapids Herald*, August 11, 1901, 3; *Grand Rapids Herald*, August 21, 1901, 7; *Grand Rapids Herald*, August 22, 1901, 4.

system. The local response, and its placing blame on Lant Salsbury shows the city had begun to view corruption as an internal issue. However, scapegoating Salsbury seems to suggest the city was not quite ready for a completely reformed city at the time. Finally, I argue the legacy of the water scandal lay in the city's Civic Club. The fledgeling reform organization benefited from the water scandal, which turned the public favor towards reform.

### **National Response**

The defining feature of the memory of the water scandal was its national resonance. Though never front page national news, newspapers like *The New York Times*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, ran stories about the Grand Rapids water scandal. The *Los Angeles Times*, which only mentioned the Grand Rapids scandal a handful of times and the *Washington Post*, which ran nearly thirty articles related to the scandal, had no local ties to the story, yet still showed interest in the events of the small Michigan city. Several residents of the New York were involved in the scandal, most notably, Henry Taylor whose money financed the scheme and Frederick Garman who made the initial contact with Grand Rapids locals about the scheme. This local interest was emphasized in the coverage in the *New York Times*, as six of the fifteen articles (40%) printed explicitly mentioned the New York ties in the story.

Chicago had the most local interest, since city authorities had arrested Salsbury for stealing Guy Barton's money in connection with a competing bribery scheme for the

Grand Rapids water deal. However, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* showed comparatively little interest in the events happening within the city limits, only running three of its forty articles (7.5%) on Salsbury's arrest in February 1901. Instead, the majority of the *Tribune's* articles addressed the Grand Rapids circuit court grand jury during May (eleven articles) and June (five articles) of 1901 and Lant Salsbury's full confession and the arrests which followed in late November and early December 1903 (eleven articles).

The Chicago newspaper was not surprised at the corruption, evident by its general disinterest in Salsbury's local embezzlement charges. Instead, the pervasiveness of corruption in a small city fascinated the newspaper, an interest reflected in its coverage of Grand Rapids' initial circuit court grand jury proceedings and Salsbury's full confession in 1903, which spurred the majority of arrests in the water scandal. Though most of the articles were merely statements of events, when the *Tribune* explicitly stated its views on the Grand Rapids scandal its words supported its publication patterns. Reacting to Salsbury's confession in 1903, which exposed a surprising number of Grand Rapids politicians and city elite, the *Tribune* found the corruption "raw and unblushing." The newspaper expected indirect corruption and found it shocking the scandal, "was not disguised in the form of stock tips or advance information as to what street a new line would run on." Moreover, Grand Rapids scandal's "striking feature" to the *Tribune* was "that it concerns a comparatively small town." Before,

It had been generally supposed that Virtue had been driven from the big cities and had taken refuge in the smaller ones, whence the boodler could not drive her out. But here is a typical middle western city of moderate size, progressive, busy, and prosperous, in which political corruption, if Salsbury is to be believed, is as widespread and thorough as it ever was in Chicago during its palmiest days of evil. City officials, the mayor included, and many leading citizens not in office,

have been boldly dishonest.<sup>127</sup>

Even before the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* view of small cities was supposedly destroyed by this scandal, the newspaper liked to compare Grand Rapids' bribery scheme to a reversal of the “good old 'gold brick game.” The “gold brick game” consisted of a big city resident taking a gold brick out into the country and selling it to multiple farmers. Instead, Grand Rapids, who were apparently comparable to rural farmers in the eyes of the Chicago newspaper, reversed the scheme and sold a “gold brick,” the water contract, to a “supposedly sharp resident of New York City,” while making arrangements to sell it to Guy Barton of Omaha. All of this trickery was done without actually giving away their “brick,” which they could have continued selling.<sup>128</sup> While municipal corruption in small cities may have not been extraordinary, to some in larger cities it certainly seemed out of character. However, just as the reformers in Chicago and other big cities recognized corruption and the need for reform in their cities, by taking note of the water scandal, the national audience saw the same need for reform in Grand Rapids.

Like the *Tribune's* response to the scandal, a major reason for the water scandal's place in the history of Grand Rapids, is not the fact that it was an instance of corruption. Rather, the water scandal's importance lies in the fact that the bribery scheme became the water *scandal*. The water scandal was the city's tipping point for its tolerance of Gilded Age politics. The textbook scandal was one of the “less boodle schemes” the *Grand Rapids Press* mentioned in its calls for the investigation into the water scandal, just as the *Press* and *Morning Democrat* called for investigations into the 1900 Republican

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127. *The Chicago Daily Tribune* December 2, 1903, 14.

128. *The Chicago Daily Tribune* May 17, 1901, 4; *The Chicago Daily Tribune* June 15, 1901, 2.



gubernatorial campaign.<sup>129</sup> However, these scandals were not enough individually or even collectively for the city to sustain a push for reform. The shock of the water scandal created enough of a public outcry to sustain an investigation into the bribery scheme to create a full-fledged scandal.

### **The Importance of Lant Salisbury**

While the Chicago newspaper lay the blame on Grand Rapids for the bribery scheme, in many cases of municipal corruption, the city leaders laid the blame on “outsiders.” Though Grand Rapids had several outsiders on which to lay the blame, the true outsiders involved escaped with little punishment. New Yorker millionaire Henry Taylor, whose money financed the plot, paid a \$2,000 fine, but the conmen who drove the bribery scheme, Frederick Garman and Robert Cameron, never received punishment from Grand Rapids courts. Instead, Salisbury, who lay outside the city's elite, bore the brunt of the legal blame for the scandal, serving two years in jail for a federal banking violation and fined \$2,000 for bribery in circuit court.<sup>130</sup> In writing about the water scandal city historians have pointed the finger at Salisbury as the main actor, but have also tried to understand and perhaps even rationalize his reasons for participating in the bribery scheme. Portrayals of Salisbury have painted him as intelligent, charming, and possessing too much ambition and not enough morals. This cocktail of characteristics, in the narrative of the water scandal, led Salisbury to speculating in wheat markets and financial

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129. *Grand Rapids Press* February 25, 1901, 2.

130. Goss, 1032.

troubles. When presented with the bribery scheme, Salsbury was too far in debt to turn away the chance for cash, making Salsbury not necessarily an evil mastermind, but a flawed person of the times.

Writing shortly after the water scandal in 1906, Dwight Goss described Salsbury as “a young successful attorney with a penchant for politics.” Though Salsbury was “ambitious for wealth and position, he was not, to those who knew him well, considered overscrupulous in means and methods for achieving success.” He was also “personally popular and easily made friends,” and “thoroughly understood men, their motives, their dispositions, their characters and their weaknesses.”<sup>131</sup> Writing sixty years later, city historian Z.Z. Lydens called Salsbury the scandal's “arch villain.” He describes Salsbury as “a country boy,” who “was the embodiment of the epigram, 'Too clever is dumb.'” As “the typical city slicker of the melodrama, a diviner of human nature with a knack for exploiting it,” Salsbury “was personally popular and persuasive, though not generally deemed pure in heart.”<sup>132</sup>

Like the city's historians, others in the city saw Salsbury as the slick talker, who perhaps got in over his head. Horace Thomas Barnaby Jr. published a fictionalized account of the water scandal, first under the title *The Decade: A Story of Political and Municipal Corruption*, and later under *The Water Scandal: A Story of Political and Municipal Graft and Corruption*, in which Salsbury once again plays the role of villain. Oscar Sanderson, a thinly veiled version of Salsbury. Barnaby described him as such,

Sanderson was a good mixer among the boys, was an excellent joker, enjoyed to an extreme his Havana smoker, never cared much about hanging around home in

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131. Goss, 1021-1022.

132. Lydens, 58.

the evening, belonged to five or six secret orders for the purpose of getting help rather than to help any one else, could spin his jolly yarns for house at a stretch without intermission, was an easy and pleasing off-hand speaker, and found pleasure in an occasional indulgence in the social glass, all of which combined to make of him an excellent politician.<sup>133</sup>

Barnaby was not much kinder to others, for instance, mayor Perry's alter ego was referred to as a man “so depraved as to admire the pluck of men who do not even deny their criminal operations—men who ingeniously contrive either by bribery, fraud, or otherwise to avoid the legitimate consequences of their evil doings.”<sup>134</sup>

In the securing the election of the mayor, and likewise himself, “Sanderson exhibited the same dogged determination that had characterized his life, and having fallen into the companionship of the ring, he countenanced and approved all that was done upon the theory that ‘the end justifies the means.’” Barnaby suggested Salsbury bribed his way onto the council, as Sanderson spent “nearly a thousand dollars” for the mayoral election and “another thousand dollars to conduct the campaign to whip the council” for his own appointment. Bribery was not Sanderson's worst trait, however. In order to secure the cooperation of MacLeod's fictionalized self, Joseph Hastings, in stealing from bank coffers for speculating on wheat, Sanderson blackmails him.<sup>135</sup>

In reviewing the novel, *The Grand Rapids Press*, suggests the hero, Harvey Morgan, is a fictionalized version of Barnaby himself. At the time, Barnaby, like Morgan, was a lawyer and state representative for the Grand Rapids area. Though “Harvey

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133. Horace Thomas Barnaby, Jr., *The Decade: A Story of Political and Municipal Corruption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wolverine Book Publishing Co, 1908), 127; Horace Thomas Barnaby, Jr., *The Water Scandal: A Story of Political and Municipal Graft and Corruption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Shaw Publishing Co, 1910), 127.

134. Barnaby, *The Decade*, 128; Barnaby, *The Water Scandal*, 128.

135. Barnaby, *The Decade*, 119, 129-130, 132-141; Barnaby, *The Water Scandal*, 119, 129-130, 132-141.

Morgan was not the handsomest man in the commonwealth,” he made up for his appearance with “the marked gentility and exactness in his manner.” Barnaby never faced a legal action, though his alter ego Morgan faced a trial for his alleged involvement in the water scandal, perhaps reflecting a feeling to ensure that his own name was clear.<sup>136</sup>

Overall, the novel failed to impress the *Press*, who said the book “lacks directness of style and at times wanders about to such an extent that it is difficult to keep track of the main trend of the story.” Barnaby’s retitling of his work, from *The Decade* to *The Water Scandal*, also suggests the novel was not a wild success.<sup>137</sup> However, even if not a grand success, the novel, like the city histories, reveals the importance of Salsbury in the memory of the water scandal. Despite Morgan’s status as hero, the novel spends a great deal of time focusing on the Sanderson, particularly his speculation on wheat that bankrupts him and drives him towards the bribery scheme. Although not “forgive and forget,” the extended examination of Sanderson’s reasons for his involvement in the bribery scheme serve to humanize him. Barnaby, though not kind in his portrait of Salsbury, does understand and even sympathize with his corruption. After all, “Five thousand dollars is a pretty big temptation to hold under a poor man’s nose when there’s so little danger of detection.”<sup>138</sup>

Barnaby’s thinly veiled account of turn of the century urban corruption fits into an entire genre of fictionalized life that filled bookshelves of the late nineteenth century and has continued into today. This genre of “urban noir” highlights, if not glamorizes, the

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136. “His Book is Out,” *Grand Rapids Press*, September 19, 1908, 12; “Latest in Books” *Grand Rapids Press*, November 7, 1910, 10; Barnaby, *The Decade*, 13; Barnaby, *The Water Scandal*, 13.

137. “His Book is Out,” *Grand Rapids Press*, September 19, 1908, 12; “Latest in Books” *Grand Rapids Press*, November 7, 1910, 10.

138. Barnaby, *The Decade*, 257; Barnaby, *The Water Scandal*, 257.

corrupt urban underworld of bribers and swindlers. Perhaps the most famous example, the academy award winning *The Sting*, follows two 1930s professional con-men as they try to swindle a mob leader. However, the best example of this genre is Ben Hecht's *The Front Page*. The play, which has been made into several films, revolves around Hildy Johnson, a newsreporter attempting to retire and Walter Burns, the editor trying to keep Hildy on the job on the eve of the politically important hanging of Earl Williams. *The Front Page* shows Chicago politics at its best. When a man comes from the governor's office to deliver a reprieve for Williams, which would damage the mayor's political prospects in the next election, the mayor promptly attempts to bribe the man. The mayor offers a nearly nine hundred percent raise, including relocation costs for a position in the city sealer's office, where he would put seals on documents "to see that the people of Chicago are not muled by unscrupulous butchers and grocers."<sup>139</sup> Another earlier look into the corrupt urban world behind the city's politics was Hamlin Garland's *A Member of the Third House*. The "third house" to which Garland refereed was "a body of corrupt men who stand between the people and the legislation."<sup>140</sup> While Grand Rapids did not seem to have such an organized "third house" organization, the sentiment of one Hamlin character, "Give me a hundred thousand dollars, and I'll capture *anny* legislathur in this great and glorrhious," [sic] aligns nicely with the bribery scheme of the water scandal.<sup>141</sup>

In addition to the fictionalizations of urban life, many contemporary journalistic accounts fall into the urban noir genre. Lincoln Steffens painted a picture of St. Louis

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139. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page* (New York: Covici Friede, 1928), 94-100.

140. Hamlin Garland, *A Member of the Third House: A Dramatic Story* (Chicago: F. J. Schulte & Company, 1892), 12.

141. Garland, 40.

politics in *The Shame of The Cities* that replicated the experience of Barnaby's Sanderson. Like Sanderson whose financial troubles helped push him towards bribery, Steffens reported that in St. Louis “Men ran into debt to the extent of thousands of dollars for the sake of election.”<sup>142</sup> The best example of urban noir in George Leighton's *Five Cities: The Story of Their Youth and Old Age*, is the chapter “There's a Sucker Born Every Minute,” which examines the career of Michael McDonald. Leighton quotes Chicago writer Richard Henry Little as saying that even though McDonald never held political office “he ruled the city with an iron hand.” In McDonald's Chicago nearly all the aldermen were up for sale, with prices ranging from a couple of hundred to five thousand. When reformer William Stead exposed some of these corrupt practices, he and a number of prominent citizens formed the Civic Federation of Chicago. Similarly, in Grand Rapids, the exposure of the corrupt backroom practices during the water scandal helped grow the Civic Club, a new reform-oriented organization.

Another home to urban noir was *The National Police Gazette*. With articles such as “Catching Suckers Nowadays is a Real Cinch,”<sup>143</sup> *The National Police Gazette* published articles detailing various schemes and swindles. Some of the plots explained were the Gold Brick scheme, which the *Chicago Daily Tribune* referenced in its coverage of the water scandal, the Fake Ring Game,<sup>144</sup> a similar scheme that involved fake diamond rings and pawnbrokers, “the blackmailing scheme of a beautiful young

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142. Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Phillips, and Co., 1904), 35.

143. "Catching Suckers Nowadays is Real Cinch: The Modern Art of Turning the Trick in these Days of Easy Picking is a High Class One," *The National Police Gazette*, December 22, 1906, 6.

144. "Pawnbrokers Trimmed All Over the Country with Fake Ring Game: How Two Enterprising Sharpers Made a Good Thing Out of Sealing Wax Cameos," *The National Police Gazette*, June 20, 1903, 3.

widow,"<sup>145</sup> and a scheme of counterfeiting railroad bonds.<sup>146</sup> *The National Police Gazette* even purported to have identified the inventor of the Gold Brick scheme. Reed Waddell, the inventor, "was by instinct and education a gentleman, if ever a swindler could be called such." Waddell would gild a lead brick and imprint official markings, giving the fake brick just enough credibility to pass inspection before being sold to an unsuspecting victim.<sup>147</sup>

With both journalists and fiction writers detailing urban life and corruption, works such as *Barnaby's*, which straddled the line between reality and fiction, were quite normal. The prevalence of these works helps to explain the *Press's* lack of surprise at the reality of *Barnaby's* story, and their greater concern with his poor writing style.

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Salsbury's portrayal as the central actor in the narrative of the water scandal reveals the city recognized municipal corruption was an internal issue. Though the city had outside men on which to lay the blame, both legally and in the writing of the history, they did not take this route. However, Salsbury was also not a true member of the elite. Though he had some social connections, he came from the countryside outside of Grand Rapids, did not belong to the elite social club, the Peninsular club, and lacked the explicit connections to the city's highest social spheres that someone like George Perry possessed.

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145. "Fair But Dangerous: A Beautiful Young Widow of Chicago Who Terrorizes the Wretched Millionaires," *The National Police Gazette*, July 15, 1882, 10.

146. "Nipped in the Bud: An Extensive Scheme of Counterfeiting and Forgery Frustrated Arrest of the Celebrated Criminals Brockway, Martin and Foster, by the New York Police." *The National Police Gazette*, December 1, 1883, 7.

147. "The King of Bunco Men: The Inventor of the "Gold Brick" Swindle," *The National Police Gazette*, May 4, 1865, 6.

In many ways, Salsbury became an internal scapegoat, used instead of blaming the outsiders.

After his disbarment and political disgrace, Salsbury moved from Grand Rapids to Tennessee, while the politicians he testified against continued to enjoy the city's political and social circles. George Perry remained an important political figure, even showing his popularity by polling well in attempts to regain the mayor's office, though his campaigns were ultimately unsuccessful. In fact, by the time George Perry was eulogized in *American Biography*, he was remembered as only one of the “most successful civic leaders” in the city. Others were also able to avoid the stain of the water scandal despite Salsbury giving their names in connection to the bribery scheme. George Ellis, who helped bail Salsbury out of jail, became mayor in 1906, and even appointed George Perry to the city's Board of Assessors in 1908.<sup>148</sup>

The city resisted solely blaming the influence of “outsiders” from New York for the city's corruption. The leaders of Grand Rapids recognized the importance of taking some responsibility for its municipal graft. However, much of that responsibility fell on Lant Salsbury. This partial acceptance of responsibility by the city is representative of the city's partial acceptance of the ethos of Progressivism. While the water scandal did not clean up city politics once and for all, the legacy of the water scandal is its place as the first genuine scandal and first movement towards the progressive ethical system trickling down from national reform movements. The water scandal produced reform-oriented and nonpartisan organizations in the city which culminated first in the creation of a

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148. American Historical Company, *American Biography*, 170-172.



commissioner-manager system in 1917.<sup>149</sup>

The most important and powerful reform group in Grand Rapids was the Civic Club. Founded in 1901, the Civic Club aligned itself with other “non-partisan civic clubs similar in purpose” around the nation. The club sought to to replace politics with “business ability and sterling integrity” in municipal governance. The group wanted “honesty and business ability” in city government, not political parties, “which distinguish and divide the people into parties” despite the fact that the city government has “nothing to do with national and state issues.”<sup>150</sup> Though they advocated non-partisanship, the club was viewed, particularly by Democrats, as not wholly divorced from political proceedings. The *Morning Democrat* enjoyed lumping the new club into the Republican camp. Sparking the most controversy was the fact that Wesley Hyde, president of the Civic Club, was helping the prosecution during the Circuit Court grand jury initially charged with investigating the water scandal. During mayor Perry's arrest of Frederick Garman after Garman testified before the grand jury, an action that became politically charged, it was widely spread that a member of the Civic Club had hosted Garman before his testimony.<sup>151</sup> By shepherding the controversial witness around Perry's reach, it seemed as though the Civic Club had taken sides. However, the Civic Club did seem to be more interested in rooting out corruption than partisan politics. The club pushed for an investigation into the 1900 Republican gubernatorial election, board of education and textbook scandal, coroner's office, and other many other areas of municipal government in the name of reform.

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149. Lydens, 54.

150. *Grand Rapids Press*, March 17, 1902, 5.

151. *Grand Rapids Press*, June 3, 1901, 1.

The greatest difficulty facing the Civic Club, however, was the social standing of its own members. Several of its members lived, worked, and socialized with the very men they were advocating against and helping prosecute. In 1902 Hyde lived across from George Perry. Edwin Sweet lived less than a block down the street. If partisanship made the elite's social and business ties potentially unpleasant, prosecution of other elite citizens must have stung much more. However, the Civic Club's entrenchment inside the city's power structure seems to have been rather normal. Writing on the movement to reform the Chicago court system, Michael Willrich noted that the main actors were “a case of businessmen, lawyers, and elite civic reformers, as well as social activists.”<sup>152</sup> While Grand Rapids did not seem to have reform driven by many social activists, Hyde and Arthur Denison were lawyers, Cornelius Harvey ran a paint business, James Wylie went from cashier to president of the National City Bank from 1898 to 1902, and Edwin Sweet seems to fit all of the descriptions as an attorney, active businessman, and elite reformer. While the commissioner-manager system is the ultimate legacy of the Civic Club, its first large success was the election of Edwin Sweet as mayor in 1904 and a non-partisan campaign in 1906. The Civic Club used the public outcry created by the water scandal to drastically alter the political rhetoric of Grand Rapids. Though George Perry and others stressed their business-like government platforms and experience, the Civic Club removed the nuance and used the water scandal to fully popularize progressive rhetoric and ethics.

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152. Michael Willrich, *City of Courts: Socializing Justice in Progressive Era Chicago* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 206.

The water scandal was not Grand Rapids' last scandal. However, as the first genuine scandal, the investigation into the bribery schemes of Salsbury and others proved to be fertile ground for new reform-oriented men to take center stage. The water scandal was the first big step to the adoption of the progressive ethos pushed by reformers in Chicago, New York, and other big cities. Likewise, the centrality of Lant Salsbury in the memory of the water scandal, and the refusal of the city to shift the blame to outsiders showed an evolving notion of corruption as a local issue. The scapegoating of Salsbury serves as a reminder that this adoption of progressive ethics was not immediate, just as the non-partisan Civic Club could still land in the middle of partisan debates. The national resonance of the water scandal also suggests the continued emergence of a national awareness of corruption and its antithesis to the evolving progressive ethos. The water scandal was not a unique occurrence nationally or even locally, but the fact that the bribery scheme became a scandal reveals the trickle down of a progressive ethical system that has shaped much of the modern political sensibilities.

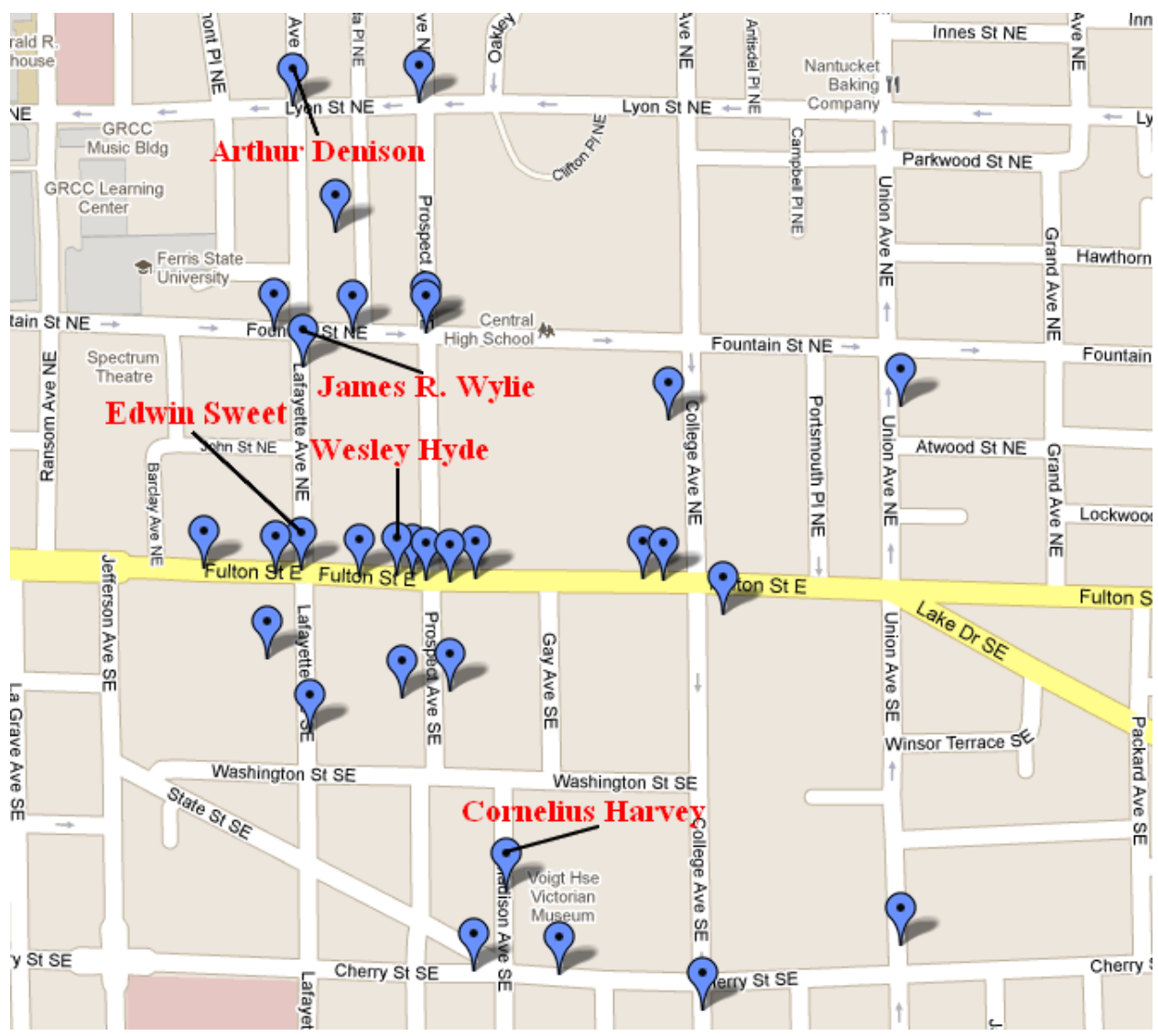
Though the Civic Club advocated non-partisanship, the *Morning Democrat* felt it aligned with the city's Republican *Press* and *Herald*



Figure 15. “Shakespeare's 'MacBeth' Up to Date”  
*Grand Rapids Morning Democrat*, April 3, 1902, 1.

Figure 16. Members of the Civic Club living near Fulton Street in 1902

(See page 25 for additional map of Fulton Street)



## Conclusion

The water scandal came to a rather quiet end. In February 1906, the prosecuting attorneys dropped the charges against former mayor George Perry nearly two years after jury could not agree on a verdict, as well as the remaining open cases. Five years after the water scandal first broke, the prosecution did not believe they could convict anyone else. The city's residents had become, as Grand Rapids historian Z. Z. Lydens phrased it, “weary if not yet quite bored.” Despite the ending, for five years the city had made efforts to deal with the scandal and punish corruption. Before, the city only nominally took care of other scandals, if not completely overlooking them. The water scandal, though, occupied the courtroom for five years and the city's memory for quite a bit longer.

The fact that the water scandal was a scandal, and such a large one at that, sets the bribery scheme hatched by Lant Salsbury and company apart. The “culmination of a long series”<sup>153</sup> of corrupt events, the water scandal marked the city's first efforts to confront corruption as unacceptable under new Progressive notions of good government. Though these efforts were not always smooth or successful, over the course of the water scandal, the Progressive system becomes increasingly important.

Initially, personal politics guided actions, as the city largely ignored the forged checks exposed by mayor Perry and defended Salsbury when his name came up in a Chicago criminal investigation. Partisanship stunted the first efforts of reform. The

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153. *Grand Rapids Press*, February 25, 1901, 2.

Common Council, on almost a party line vote, did not oust Salsbury as city attorney, even though he was under the indictment of the Cook County grand jury. When a Kent County grand jury began to investigate the rumors of bribery, party lines continued to play an important role in the direction of the investigation.

Even with a slow start, the grand jury successfully moved the scandal forward. The prosecution of many of the water scandal cases was not always interesting. George Perry's trial focused on determining what he knew about the bribery scheme and when, focusing mostly on his correspondence and personal character. However simple the questions of the trial were, though, these trials represent a victory for the Progressive ethical system. Perry could not rely on the simple defense strategies of former city clerk Frank Warren. Only a few years earlier, Warren based his case for acquittal of embezzling city funds around pity for his wife and kids and arguing other people also misused public funds and were not punished so the court should not punish him either.<sup>154</sup>

While the city could have easily pinned the blame for the bribery plot on the outsiders who organized the scheme and brought in the money, Grand Rapids was more interested in its own corrupt politicians. This focus on reform and cleaning up the government, not just the mess that it created, aided the Civic Club and the city's fledgling reform movement. The water scandal strengthened the city's focus on Progressive reform. The legacy of the water scandal lay in the outcomes of that reform movement, the rise of non-partisan politics and the commissioner-manager system of city governance.

The Grand Rapids water scandal reveals the manner in which many cities moved

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154. *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 4, 1900, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 25, 5; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 26, 1900, 1, 4; *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 29, 1900.

from municipal governments centered on personal relations and connections, to one based on more Progressive, professional managers and their administrations. No political machine was dismantled. No dominant family displaced. Grand Rapids made the transition through its adoption of Progressive ideas, specifically an ethical system that informed the role of good government and the meaning of corruption. The water scandal was the vital first step in this transition.

Grand Rapids was small enough for Chicago newspapers to roast the city over its corruption, suggesting that, in this case, the farmer had swindled the huckster. However, Grand Rapids was still big enough to shock its own hinterland. A juror from rural Kent County found the whole scandal “as fascinating as a dime novel,” noting that farmers had “to come into the city to learn how a great boodling scheme is planned and executed.”<sup>155</sup> The importance of Grand Rapids and its water scandal lies in its position as a small city. Historians have largely overlooked the path of small cities like Grand Rapids to Progressivism. The national narrative of Progressivism concentrates on grassroots reformers and strong ideological leaders. On the other hand, small city Progressivism, as demonstrated by Grand Rapids, was a product of city leaders gradually adopting and applying Progressive ideas in a piecemeal fashion.

To understand Progressivism, we must recognize these alternate, less heroic, paths to reform. Perhaps national leaders can be described, as creating an “epic of reform,” as Michael McGerr does.<sup>156</sup> However, in small cities like Grand Rapids, Progressivism came through the gradual adoption of Progressive ideas. Though created on the national

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155. *Grand Rapids Press*, May 18, 1901, 8.

156. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xiv.



stage, city leaders, often slowly and unevenly, applied the Progressive ethos to their municipality.

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