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THE MAYOR and THE MACHINE

by Gary Alan Nathans

To assume the political atmosphere of Paterson at the turn of the twentieth century was humdrum and lifeless is to underestimate human capacities for ambition, greed, dedication, and vengeance. They are not strange bedfellows in national politics and it becomes uneasily apparent that affairs on the local level contain similar markings. It should not be deemed abnormal when these ingredients manifest themselves in deeds of political savagery; particularly within the pages of neighborhood history.



JOHN JOHNSON
Mayor.

Paterson newspapers, September 25, 1907, strained to supply their readers meaty material concerning their late mayor, John Johnson. Most papers favored the inspirational approach which provided for long paragraphs on the subject's move up the ladder of opportunity from mill worker, to alderman, to postmaster, to lawyer, to mayor. This lovely success story was then crowned by the injection that an already great city servant had reached the pinnacle by becoming Paterson's first mayor to die in office. However, before an editor concluded, he would most certainly charge persons unnamed with the Mayor's death or possibly even the Mayor with causing his own.

By 1905, the Board of Aldermen was losing power through the gradual switch to a commission system. This resulted in the replacement of aldermen with appointees in departmental positions thereby reducing the Board's administrative power over city affairs and leaving it in only a legislative capacity. Yet the transformation had not progressed to the point where a seat on the Board was not a political plum since its members still held controlling power in many city departments including the powerful finance committee.

Over a period of time the system of aldermanic rule had proven to be at the root of governmental inefficiency by permitting the birth and fertilization of political bosses and machines. These units found it an easy task to manipulate such vital functions as the expenditure of tax dollars and the issuance of corporate franchises for location in Paterson. Housing within its boundaries 24% of the silk mills of the nation and 80% of those in New Jersey, the city offered a huge tax base for perpetuating growth. But, for mysterious reasons, city services were poorly lacking especially in the fire departments and public schools. It became eventually clear that what rotten politics took off the top left a starvation level at the bottom. To this condition, John Johnson addressed himself. Though he remained inwardly bitter to the self-serving organization in which he worked, the instinct for political survival proved the dominant force and so as an alderman Jack Johnson became the guardian of the purse strings after the initial harvest.

It was inevitable that one who exhibited the inward guise of a political puppet but the outward look of a dedicated public servant should find his way to bigger and better things, and so the Democratic Party bestowed its nomination for mayor of Paterson on John Johnson in 1903. However, the sudden change in destiny allowed his ambition for good government to materialize prematurely and in a sudden burst of independence from his political strings, candidate Johnson used his influence to shut one Dr. Fitzmaurice out of the Democratic nomination for alderman from the ninth ward. Based on Johnson's integrity, it is easily assumed that the good doctor was not a good candidate. Certain key members of the party quickly concluded that having John Johnson in office was not necessarily contingent to having the Democratic Party in power. So those least concerned with the city's welfare saw to it that Mr. Johnson lost Democratic votes and unsurprisingly the election of 1903.

Having underestimated his party's will at the polls, the former candidate faced the political reality that unless he appeared to leave his integrity and independence at the door step of his last defeat, he could not return to the party fold and hence his future in city government would be over, posthaste.

Be it sufficient to note that John Johnson again, in 1905, received his party's nomination for mayor. The Paterson Daily Press of October 30, 1905, acknowledged this feat of political rebirth: ". . . the Democratic candidate for Mayor is a pastmaster in the arts of political chicanery, and is quite solidly supported by some of the most sinister influences in the city. . . ."

By a 1000 vote margin, the mayoral chair once more held a Democrat who, it was expected, would be an asset to his party. Yet the well oiled political machine, still downing victory champagne, choked when Mayor Johnson, in January of 1906, kicked a party loyalist named Dr. John Banta from his post on the Board of Health. "There is considerable indignation. . . ." the Paterson Evening News reported. "The worst of it is that Dr. Banta worked for and voted for and spent his time and money for Johnson at two elections, and was led to believe that he would be reappointed." Johnson's action was a deliberate blow at the local Democratic machine. The News sounded a sinister and foreboding note when it concluded of the affair, "The throw-down of Dr. Banta is one of Johnson's mistakes."

This episode kicked up a little verbal dust but not everyone in key party positions became upset. After all, a few disagreeable appointments could be tolerated. It was not as if the Mayor had interfered with the Board of Aldermen. However, the inevitability of that occurrence was not long in the offing. On the afternoon of January 3, 1906, the Mayor's secretary, J. J. O'Byrne, marched uninvited into the aldermen-run finance committee meeting armed with pen and paper and commenced to record, word for word, the proceedings. A public statement by Mayor Johnson left little room for speculation: "It is my intention during my regime to have records of all meetings, in order that I may look over the reports at my leisure and be posted on issues that seem to be important to the citizens. All conversations passed at such meetings will be on file in my office and at any time they may be seen for the asking. This I think is justice to the committeemen, myself, and the citizens at large."

If these acts did not prove sufficiently potent to end the Mayor's political future in Paterson, it was his support for state-wide reforms, intended to convert all large cities 100% to the commission form of administrative government, that did. By mid-1907, every important department of the city was being administered by commissions and with the eventual passage of the state bill, the power of appointment became the sole responsibility of the Mayor. No longer could the Board of Aldermen exercise the smallest of administrative powers in Paterson. Since appointments to commissions were to come from the citizenry at large, old style politicians suddenly found it nearly impossible to continue their traditional grip on city government from dark, cigar-smoked, bar rooms.

As the time for the mayoral election approached, the Democratic bosses saw their opportunity for revenge. While it had been customary to renominate an incumbent mayor without a primary, John Johnson found himself cheated of the nod. A brutal primary race suddenly stood in the path of reelection. But, the opposition had been busy and it soon was made apparent that too many party members had been persuaded not to become Johnson delegates.

It was usual for intraparty conflicts to remain buried from public view and for party misfits to fade away. However, the extreme indignation of the machine towards Mayor Johnson bubbled to the surface and stood starkly naked. The seemingly polite joking of the Evening News surely came as a bitter reward to the hard working Mayor:

July 12, 1907: "Well Aldermen," said one prominent Democrat to another yesterday, "who will be the nominee for Mayor?" "Can't tell you," said the Alderman, "but I can tell you who won't be nominated." "Oh, that's easy," said the first speaker, "you mean Jacky Johnson." "Yes," said the Alderman, "I don't think he could get the delegates from his own ward."

July 17, 1907: Mayor Johnson is so busy hunting delegates for a renomination that he can't get, that he has no time to look into the necessity for a Shade Tree Commission that he ought to appoint before his term expires and he joins that well known political organization, "The Has Beens," otherwise known as the "Down and Outs."

July 20, 1907: Even Morristown has a Shade Tree Commission. Jacky Johnson does not seem to be able to appoint one. The members of the Hamilton Club who regulate what Mr. Johnson does as Mayor must be out-of-town on their summer vacations.

July 23, 1907: Two Patersonians were recently entertaining an out-of-town friend who asked the question, "Who's Mayor of your town?" "Jacky Johnson," said the first citizen. "No he is not," said the second man, "Charley Sterett has been Mayor for the past two years."

Finally, on July 26, 1907: Mayor Johnson is not in the running for renomination. His political fate was settled before he had been in office a month. He threw overboard the men and principles that elected him. . . . If Mr. Johnson had been true to the friends of a life time and the real principles of Democracy he would not be the lonely figure that he is today, when it is almost impossible to find any Democrat of prominence willing to run as a delegate in favor of his renomination.

By August of 1907, the political future of John Johnson had been formally brought to a close and for reasons whether organic or emotional, the balance of the individual succumbed the following month. Of course, it would be difficult for a citizen in the habit of passing the editorial page by to conclude that John Johnson had run afoul of his party. If you were well versed in the goings-on around Paterson, you would know that opposition to the Mayor and his policies was surprisingly sparse although occupying the most dangerous of quarters. Whether conjecture or fact, a segment of the Guardian's headline announcing the death of Mayor Johnson seems to amply communicate the severity of political revenge: "During the last hours of his illness, Mayor Johnson had hallucinations that everyone was trying to do him injury."

(Mr. Nathans is a graduate of Ohio State University where he majored in History. He wishes to gratefully acknowledge the invaluable help of Mr. Edward M. Graf.)

A large drove of fine sheep. — John S. Longwell, the butcher on the corner of Main and Fair Streets, whom market women call "Honest John" last week purchased and drove into town five hundred and fifty six sheep in one flock, said to be the fattest, finest and largest flock of sheep ever driven by any butcher into the market. "Honest John Longwell" will have plenty of good mutton and lamb for several weeks to come.

Reprinted from the Paterson Guardian, June 21, 1867

PATERSON'S MAYORS

John J. Brown, Whig	1854
Brant Van Blarcom, Democrat	1855
Samuel Smith, Democrat	1856
Peregrine Sanford, Democrat	1857-1858
Silas D. Canfield, Democrat	1859
Edwin S. Prall, Republican	1860-1861
Henry A. Williams, Republican	1862-1865
William G. Watson, Democrat	1866
Henry A. Williams, Republican	1867
Nathaniel Townsend, Democrat	1868
John Ryle, Democrat	1869-1870
Socrates Tuttle, Republican	1871-1872
Nathaniel Townsend, Democrat	1873-1874
Benjamin Buckley, Republican	1875-1878
Joseph R. Graham, Democrat	1879-1880
David S. Gilmore, Republican	1881-1882
Nathan Barnert, Democrat	1883-1886
Charles D. Beckwith, Republican	1887-1888
Nathan Barnert, Democrat	1889-1890
Thomas Beveridge, Republican	1891-1892
Christian Braun, Democrat	1893-1896
John Hinchliffe, Democrat	1897-1903
William Belcher, Republican	1904-1905
John Johnson, Democrat	1906-1907
Andrew F. McBride, Democrat	1908-1913
Robert H. Fordyce, Republican	1914-1915
Amos H. Radcliffe, Republican	1916-1919
Frank J. Van Noort, Democrat	1920-1923
Colin McLean, Republican	1924-1927
Raymond J. Newman, Democrat	1928
John V. Hinchliffe, Democrat	1929-1937
Bernard L. Stafford, Democrat	1938-1939
William P. Furrey, Republican	1940-1947
Michael U. DeVita, Democrat	1948-1951
Lester F. Titus, Republican	1952-1955
Edward J. O'Byrne, Democrat	1956-1959
Frank X. Graves, Jr., Democrat	1961-1966
Lawrence F. Kramer, Republican	1967-

In 1905, David Young, president of the Board of Aldermen, served as acting Mayor when William H. Belcher resigned from office.

In 1907 William Berdan, president of the Board of Finance, became acting Mayor, filling the vacancy caused by the death of Mayor Johnson.

Clifford L. Newman, president of the Board of Finance, became acting Mayor in 1919 when Mayor Amos Radcliffe resigned to serve in Congress.

Mayor Raymond J. Newman died June 13, 1923, five months and two weeks after he took office. Wilmer Cadmus, president of the Board of Finance, filled the vacancy until the general election in November, when Mayor John Hinchliffe was elected for the unexpired term.

Following the death of Mayor O'Byrne in December 1959, William H. Dillistin, president of the Board of Finance, served as Mayor for the unexpired term ending December 31, 1960