

Teaching Cleveland

Connect Collaborate Commit

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[10 Greatest Clevelanders](#)

[12 Most Significant Events](#)

[The Best of Teaching Cleveland](#)

[Cleveland Stories](#)

Cleveland: "The City on a Hill" 1901-1909

Chapter from "Progressivism in Ohio 1897-1917" by Hoyt Landon Warner Ohio State University Press (Google Books)

Cleveland: "The City on a Hill: 1901-1909"

In the fall of 1900, after an absence of six years, [Tom Loftin Johnson](#) had returned to Cleveland to devote himself to the cause of reform by taking part in municipal politics. He was already well-known as a former congressman and as an eccentric millionaire who had become a disciple of [Henry George](#). Johnson had recently sold the last of the street-railway lines and steel mills which had been the source of his wealth, in order to free himself from business cares. His opportunity to enter upon his new political career was, however, as fortuitously timed as had been that of [Samuel Jones](#) in Toledo.

Within weeks of his return he was unexpectedly importuned to run for mayor. There had been a popular outcry during the summer of 1900 against attempts to force through the city council a franchise renewal favorable to [Mark Hanna](#)'s street railway. A faction among the Democrats, sensing the political advantage of capitalizing on this protest, was looking for a candidate who would have the energy, knowledge, and money to lead the fight. The availability of Johnson seemed heaven-sent; they seized upon the retired millionaire who knew the street-railway business from top to bottom and who seemed eager to champion the people's cause in this contest.

Johnson, who had known Hanna for twenty years and did not underestimate him as an opponent, realized from the outset that it would be "a very hard fight." "But," he wrote to his friend Samuel Jones, "I have learned the lesson from you that fear of defeat must never retard one from going into a contest and I am going into this in earnest. I have no doubt that much of what is done here will bear fruit with you and help you in the good fight that you are undertaking in Toledo."

On February 6, 1901, Johnson allowed himself to be "surprised" at his home by the Committee of Fifty, bearing a petition of several thousand signatures drafting him as the Democratic nominee for mayor. Producing from his pocket a prepared statement, he read his acceptance speech, which announced the platform on which he would campaign: a business administration, home rule, a three-cent fare for street railways, municipal ownership of public utilities, the equalization of taxes, and the single tax. Radical as this platform was, every plank except the single tax was familiar campaign talk in Cleveland. William Akers, who was to be Johnson's Republican opponent, came out for three-cent fares and a municipal light plant.

Johnson's prospects were promising. He enjoyed a well-established reputation in both political and business circles. Twice he had been elected to Congress from one of the Cleveland districts and had endeared himself to the party professionals by his lavish expenditures. [Charles P. Salen](#), who had managed those campaigns, had launched the Johnson boom for mayor in the hope that the candidate's wealth would again fill the party coffers. His candidacy was further aided by strife among the Republicans, which weakened his opponent. On the other hand, Johnson helped to heal the factionalism which had plagued his own party. A Bryan supporter since 1896, Johnson commanded the support of the silver wing, which had threatened to bolt if the incumbent mayor, John Farley, a Gold Democrat, had been renominated. Even though Farley became a dissenter himself and tried to develop a Democratic movement for the Republican Akers, the old mayor was so discredited by his inefficient administration and favoritism to the railroad interests that his endorsement was a bane rather than a blessing. The influential Democratic paper, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, gave Johnson its backing.

Because of his former prominence in the transport industry of the city, the nominee could also count on the support of some of his old business friends who regarded him as a bargain mayor. Others, notably Mark Hanna, took seriously his commitment to Georgian doctrines and advised their friends to vote against this dangerous man. Another group at the opposite end of the political spectrum also accepted his beliefs as sincere. [Peter Witt](#) and Tom Fitzsimmons, old Populists and managers of Jones's successful Cuyahoga County campaign in 1899, threw themselves behind Johnson's election. They made a nonpartisan fight for him in the immigrant-labor wards as they had for Jones.

In the campaign Johnson was accused of being a tax dodger and of being a hypocrite in now advocating a three-cent fare, whereas, as an owner of street railways, he had charged a higher rate. Instead of responding in kind, with smear charges against his Republican opponent, Johnson answered the criticisms directly and briefly, then addressed himself to educational talks on the swollen values of public-utility franchises that went untaxed, the inequalities of taxation in general, and the need for public improvements. He disappointed the professionals by keeping his campaign expenditures within the limits prescribed by the Corrupt

Practices Act and by refusing to promise any jobs. At the election on April 1 he won by a plurality of six thousand votes. He carried the immigrant wards of the West Side by three thousand and made heavy inroads in the East End wards, bulwarks of Republicanism. With characteristic impetuosity, Johnson, instead of waiting the customary two weeks, took office two days later to prevent a threatened action he considered hostile to the city's interest.

What was the true character of this new mayor? Was he a dangerous radical, as Mark Hanna insisted, or a politician ambitious for personal honor and success as most of the newspapers believed? His past career had been so paradoxical that mixed interpretations of his character and motives were inevitable.

Tom Johnson had been born on July 18, 1854, the son of an Arkansas cotton planter and slaveowner. His earliest memories were of the Civil War, which began when he was seven. While the father served in the Confederate army, the family led a nomadic existence. When peace came, the Johnsons were in Staunton, Virginia, where they remained for the next four years, too poor to move from their temporary home. Tom experienced there the gnawing uncertainty of poverty and also received his first lesson in monopoly, as a newsboy. A railroad conductor, taking a fancy to him, agreed to give the boy exclusive rights to sell the newspapers which the train brought from other cities. Since these were the only papers available in Staunton, and the demand was brisk, Tom was able to collect a handsome premium. Although five weeks later a change in conductors abruptly ended the scheme, Tom, meanwhile, had earned eighty-eight dollars, enough to enable the family to move to Louisville, Kentucky, where the father hoped to make a fresh start among relatives and friends. In his autobiography Johnson says that he never forgot the lesson of this first business venture: to place his money and energy behind a business where there was little or no competition.

In Louisville Tom soon took a job with a street-railway company owned by two friends of his father, Biderman DuPont and Alfred V. DuPont, advancing from office boy to secretary, then to superintendent of the road. While in the service of the DuPonts he invented a fare box which netted him twenty to thirty thousand dollars. With this saving and a loan of thirty thousand dollars from Biderman DuPont, Johnson in 1876 purchased the majority of the stock of an Indianapolis street-railway company, thus embarking upon his own at the age of twenty-two. Three years later he entered the street-railway field in Cleveland.

The most aggressive of the several companies then existing in Cleveland was one in which Mark Hanna was interested. Hanna's company initiated the fight against this interloper and won the first round, but Johnson came back, winning rounds two and three. After his defeat in their third clash, Hanna proposed that the two form a partnership, for, as he pointed out, to join his own talent in finance and politics to Johnson's skill as a street-railway manager would make a profitable combination.

Johnson, however, declined, giving as his reason that they were too much alike, that they "would make good opponents, but not good partners." Opponents they remained, in business and politics. The battleground for their fight was the Cleveland City Council chamber, where they vied for franchises. Mark Hanna taught Johnson to play politics as the only means of remaining in the Cleveland transit field. Johnson never resorted to bribery, yet whenever he wanted favors from the council, he contributed to the campaign funds of both parties, a form of indirect corruption against which he later inveighed.

In the late 1880's Johnson invented a girder groove rail, "a steam railroad 'T' rail with a street-railroad wearing surface," and an associate, Arthur J. Moxham, invented a process to roll it. After contracting with a steel company to manufacture these rails for a year, the profits were so attractive that in 1889 the two men built their own mill outside Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Six years later Johnson expanded his steel operations, erecting a new mill at Lorain, Ohio, a village west of Cleveland on Lake Erie. In locating his plant here he revealed his business acumen and foresight, for only a few others in 1895 recognized the natural advantage of this site in insuring low transportation costs of raw materials.

While pursuing his steel enterprises he was no less vigorous in the management and promotion of his street-railway interests. Selling his Indianapolis system at a good profit, he bought a part interest in the Sixth Street Line in St. Louis. His Cleveland lines were electrified and merged into a corporation, popularly known as "The Big Consolidated," at a substantial advantage to Johnson. In 1894 he also accepted the management of the Detroit street-railway system, purchased by the R. T. Wilson Company of New York, in which Johnson had a large interest. A dilapidated, run-down road, operating with horses and mules, Johnson rebuilt it into a modern, efficient system, electrically equipped throughout. His last venture as a private street-railway manager was in Brooklyn from 1896 to 1898. In the latter year he began disposing of all his business interests and investing his fortune of two to three million dollars in government bonds.

Johnson abandoned active business because, as he later declared, "the requirements of my work didn't square with my principles ... so I gave it all up to find peace and freedom of mind." His inward conflict had been increasing for some time, although only a few business associates and intimate friends knew of the intense conviction with which he maintained his principles, even in the face of harm to his business interests. To the general public he was a familiar businessman hero in the Horatio Alger tradition, who could be expected to devote his declining days to good works of charity, endowing hospitals and colleges, collecting art treasures, dabbling in politics. It was scarcely suspected that he would war against those monopolies which had brought him fortune and become the champion of social democratic reform. His enemies always suspected his sincerity. Yet his political career is a testament to the genuineness of his new faith. The man responsible for his conversion was Henry George.

Johnson, in his autobiography, has told the story of his chance introduction to George's writings. In 1883 on one of his frequent business trips between Cleveland and Indianapolis, a news vender offered him a book called Social Problems by a new author, Henry George. Thinking that it was another jeremiad against the social evils of vice and crime, Johnson was about to turn it down when the conductor of the train persuaded him that the book would interest him since it dealt with street railways, taxation, and land. Johnson read it almost without stopping and bought all the other books, including Progress and Poverty, that George had written. To

Johnson, George's analysis and solution "sounded true—all of it." Nevertheless he was reluctant to believe it. Distrustful of his own judgment of a theoretical dissertation, he persuaded his lawyer and his business partner to read *Progress and Poverty*. Both assured him that George was logically consistent. Since Johnson had been certain from the outset that the basic facts were right, this now convinced him that the argument was sound.

Johnson offered little explanation why George's ideas attracted him so immediately and powerfully, yet there are certain clues. He had an alert, inquiring mind that had been devoted almost exclusively to engineering and business problems, but it was capable of responding to the challenge of broad social questions. Furthermore, because he lacked formal education and an interest in reading, he had not previously explored the realm of political and social theory. Purely by chance he happened upon George as his guide. George appealed to him because he struck a responsive chord of humanitarianism that the younger man scarcely knew he possessed and because his message, though buttressed with erudition, was simple and direct. It was easy for Johnson to grasp George's "proof" that monopoly was a social wrong, to contrast that with the opposite belief he had long held, and to discover that his old view was egocentric, antisocial, and destructive. It was no more difficult for him to grasp George's specific and practical remedy: the elimination of the land monopoly by the single tax and thus the restoration of equal opportunity to all.

The effect of these ideas on Johnson was soon reinforced by the power of George's personality. The two men met in 1885 and began a friendship which strengthened with the years until George's death in 1897. Their relationship was one of pupil and teacher; Johnson was thirty-one, George forty-six in the year they met. The older man drew Johnson into politics first as a financial backer, later as a speaker in his campaigns in New York. Under George's inspiration Johnson ran four times for Congress from the Twenty-First Congressional District of Ohio. Defeated in 1888, he ran successfully in the next two elections, then failed of a third term in the Republican landslide of 1894. During his four years in the House of Representatives he consistently voted for tariff reductions, including that on the steel rails he manufactured. He and five collaborators read into the Congressional Record George's treatise, *Protection or Free Trade*; and the six parts were assembled in a pamphlet of which Johnson distributed over a million copies, each selling for one cent. In 1897 Johnson was manager of Henry George's last campaign for mayor of New York, the strain of which cost George his life. Johnson had remained in business throughout this formative period of his political development on the theory that making money to promote the cause would be his most effective contribution. By 1898, however, he was confident that his political apprenticeship was complete, that he should follow the advice of his teacher and lead a political crusade of his own for the Georgian reforms, and that the place to begin was the city.

When Johnson assumed the duties of mayor of Cleveland, he was forty-seven and in the prime of life. He was of medium height, comfortably stout, his expanded girth a witness to his love of good food. His curly black hair, finely cut nose, mouth, and chin gave his features a Grecian cast in profile. His eyes were bright, always darting about. Genial and jovial, he generally wore a smile, an irresistible smile that disarmed enemies and heartened supporters. His manner was unaffected and easy unless aroused; then he could be gruff though never abusive. He treated opponents fairly.

Johnson's formal schooling lasted only a little more than a year, but with characteristic drive and energy he sought to remedy this by self-improvement after he entered politics. He considered his four years in Congress the equivalent of a college education, with Henry George, his frequent visitor in Washington, as tutor. While mayor, he hired a teacher and learned French at the breakfast table, and at night, before retiring, he did a stint in a volume on political science.

In this and other ways he resembled his Toledo counterpart, Samuel M. Jones, with whom he had formed a friendship in the Bryan campaign of 1900. The two men were attracted to each other by their common interests and background. Both had a natural curiosity, a habit of close observation, and an aptitude for mechanics. In addition, Johnson was an able mathematician and an expert in electricity. Both were self-made, successful businessmen who had turned reformers. But Johnson was pre-eminently the practical man, while Jones mixed with his innate practical sense a large measure of Celtic mysticism and lyricism. Johnson did not share Jones's love of music and poetry. Both were humanitarians, but Jones's love of humanity came from the heart, Johnson's more from the mind. Jones was pacific by nature and disliked opposition; Johnson was a fighter who thrived on competition. Although Jones's attributes for leadership were considerable, Johnson possessed them in fuller measure: buoyancy of spirit, personal magnetism, showmanship, a sense of humor, a sense of justice, a rugged constitution, tremendous capacity for work, a talent for organization, and executive ability. One day Johnson defined executive ability: "It's the simplest thing in the world; decide every question right half the time. And get somebody who can do the work. That's all there is to executive ability."

Johnson knew how to delegate power and select good men. He surrounded himself with a brilliant coterie, attracted, or "hypnotized," as his enemies claimed, by his magnetic personality. Many were young, recent graduates from college, whose social conscience had been aroused by the new spirit of protest that was challenging complacency on the campuses. The original group included: [Newton D. Baker](#), [Frederic C. Howe](#), and [Edward W. Bemis](#) from Johns Hopkins; [Charles William Stage](#) and John N. Stockwell from Western Reserve in Cleveland. Later, still younger men were added to the fold: Carl Friebolin, also from Western Reserve; Robert J. Bulkley and Alfred A. Benesch from Harvard; and Robert Crosser from Kenyon in Gambier, Ohio. Johnson was teacher as well as comrade to these young men; he taught them practical civics.

Others gathered to the circle of advisers and friends were students of social problems known for their high-mindedness and civic sense: Peter Witt, a voice for reform since the 1890's; the Reverend [Harris R. Cooley](#), minister of Johnson's church; William J. Springborn, a Republican convert and efficient manager of municipal enterprises; Daniel E. Leslie, guardian of the city park system; [Fred Kohler](#), the chief of police with a national reputation for his reforms; Carl Nau, watchdog of the city's finances; Antoine Biderman DuPont, the son of Johnson's first benefactor and his traction expert in the street-railway fight; and the Mayor's private secretary, [Walter Burr Gongwer](#), a young reporter of promise whom the Plain Dealer reluctantly released. These men from many walks of life were inspired by a common ideal: the success of the city experiment. They liked their work; they talked shop at their parties. "Theirs,"

wrote Lincoln Steffens, "is a sense of pride and preoccupation such as I have never felt."

Of this wide circle four stand out, pre-eminent in their devotion to Johnson and in their contribution to the cause: Baker, Cooley, Witt, and Howe. Johnson's chief lieutenant and heir was Newton D. Baker. He was born in 1871 in Martinsburg, West Virginia, a border community where feelings aroused by the Civil War and Reconstruction ran high. Baker's own family had been split by the war. His grandfather Elias Baker had remained loyal to the Union but his own father, after whom he was named, served in the First Virginia Cavalry. Although the father accepted the Northern victory, he continued to be a staunch Southern Democrat and inculcated in his son a strong sense of loyalty to that party.

In other ways Newton Baker, Sr., who was a doctor and a man of culture, influenced the son. He helped to mold the boy's taste for history and government, and he picked out the new Johns Hopkins University as the college the young man was to attend. There the son took courses with Professor Woodrow Wilson in political science and listened to the professor at the dinner table in the boarding house where they lived together. Young Baker graduated in 1892, took a year of postgraduate study in jurisprudence and Roman law, and, finally, another year at William and Mary in an accelerated course in American law.

Upon admission to the bar in 1894, the young lawyer opened an office in Martinsburg, where he practiced law for the next five years with one interruption in 1896-97 when he went to Washington, D.C., to become private secretary to Postmaster-General William L. Wilson in President Cleveland's cabinet. In 1899, at the age of twenty-seven, he decided to seek another community — one with brighter prospects than the declining Martinsburg could offer. At the urging of his fraternity brother, Fred Howe, and a prominent Democratic lawyer, [Martin A. Foran](#), the young attorney chose Cleveland.

Baker's short, slender frame and agile movements gave him a boyish appearance, although there was nothing juvenile about his face. His dark hair, sensitive brown eyes, strong chin revealed spirituality and strength. A story that is told of his entrance into Cleveland politics was built upon his Puck-like figure. One day Judge Foran, unable to make a scheduled political address, asked Baker to pinch-hit for him. The chairman of the meeting, an old time Democrat, introduced Baker in this patronizing, curt way: "Mr. Foran is sick and cannot appear. He's sent his boy to speak for him. Come on, boy, and tell'em what you know." The crowd laughed as the wispy Baker came forward, but that speech made the reputation of Judge Foran's "boy." It was different, it was compelling. Baker's oratory was not of the old school; his delivery was clear-toned, graceful, simple, and convincing.

When Johnson returned to Cleveland and was elected mayor, Foran told him about Baker. The young lawyer had already begun to interest himself in the social and civic work of Cleveland. Fred Howe invited him to join a social service club at the YMCA, which conducted a vigorous program for the welfare of children and workingmen. Johnson, immediately attracted to Baker, brought him into the administration first as the legal adviser to one of the tax boards and then, when an opening occurred, as assistant law director.

In later years, when Baker had become a conservative on economic issues, there was speculation among his old friends on why he had ever joined the Johnson reform movement. His interests were bookish, and his temperament was cautious and judicious. His one previous experience had warned him, he confessed to a friend, that he was not a politician. In 1896 he had followed the conservative course, bolting the Bryan ticket and voting with the Gold Democrats. Yet his choice in 1901 was deliberate; he rejected an offer to join a law firm with one of the most lucrative practices in Cleveland to accept a poorly paid legal post in the city government. No doubt his decision was prompted as much by his heart as by his mind. He was moved by the suffering and wretchedness of the poor of Cleveland, which he experienced for the first time. But the most impelling influence was unquestionably Tom Johnson, whom Baker came to love with a devotion that few men inspire. Responding to Johnson's tutelage, the young lawyer became a convert to the principles of Henry George and to the Mayor's "Democratic selective socialism," as Baker once called it. Baker's political creed was simple: "I am a follower of Tom Johnson." He won the confidence of the Mayor as no other man did, and his loyalty never wavered.

In 1903 he was elected to head the city's law department, where he served for four consecutive terms, surviving Johnson's defeat in 1909. A tireless, efficient worker, Baker bore the burden of the law suits and injunctions with which the public utilities pelted the city during Johnson's administration, and he was in the thick of every campaign, preaching the Johnson causes. His diction was so beautiful that radical ideas from his lips lost their terror. He was a fighter whom opponents respected because he was fair and without personal malice. His was a great contribution to the Cleveland experiment as Johnson's principal aide and later his successor in the mayor's office.

The second man in the Johnson "cabinet" was [Harris R. Cooley](#), a graduate of Hiram College and Oberlin Theological Seminary and a former pastor of the Cedar Avenue Disciple Church of Cleveland. The friendship between the two began in the early 1880's when Johnson became one of Cooley's parishioners. Since his student days Cooley had developed a strong interest in social work. His father, the superintendent of Cleveland's Bethel Union, had introduced him to the problems of a charity organization, and several trips to England brought him firsthand knowledge of the social settlement movement and the Salvation Army. He shared Samuel Jones's belief that the teachings of Jesus could be made to work in industrial and social relations. He shared Tom Johnson's commitment to the teachings of Henry George.

In 1901 the Mayor appointed Cooley director of the department of charities and correction because "he is just the man to carry out my ideas of reform in the treatment of the unfortunate. . . ."

Many were scornful at first of this "preacher-in-politics," but his character and ability won the confidence of the people. He served until the end of 1909. With a minister's gift for imagery and parable, he could rend the hearts of his listeners with tales of misery and

misfortune and then inspire them with a vision of what the city could do for the fallen members of society. The council never refused an appeal from him for appropriations. His service to the humanitarian cause in Cleveland was exceptional, and his work won national notice.

The most fiery radical as well as the most colorful personality of the Johnson circle was [Peter Witt](#), whose inheritance and background prepared him for the role he was to play. He was born a rebel; his parents were exiled German Forty-eighters. One of eleven children, he was forced by his father's inability to feed so many mouths to leave school and go to work at thirteen; thus he knew early the sting of poverty. After trying various trades he learned that of an iron molder, only to have this means of livelihood cut off in his early twenties when he was blacklisted for organizing a strike. Embittered by such treatment, he became a determined foe of the industrial order that had outlawed him. He joined the Populist crusade against the hated monopolists and discovered that he had a talent for speaking and organizing that was serviceable in politics.

He and Johnson first met in 1894 at a tent rally that the then congressman was leading in his campaign for re-election. Witt and some friends appeared during a long harangue by a Democratic henchman and began to heckle the speaker. Instead of ordering them out of the tent, Johnson invited Witt to come to the platform and speak his mind. Such fair play inspired mutual respect and understanding which ripened into friendship. The two soon discovered another tie: their common allegiance to the theories of Henry George. Johnson praised Witt as a man of "sturdy honesty" and "unswerving fidelity to principle." In any job he tackled, Witt showed marked ability and ingenuity, first as head of the "Tax School" in Johnson's first administration and then as city clerk from 1903 to 1909. His specialty was publicizing the taxation issue. In campaign talks he introduced stereopticon slides to illustrate his tax lecture and lashed out at tax dodgers, excoriating them with his epithets.

Conservatives anathematized him as an anarchist. Within the Johnson circle he spoke his mind with the same vehemence, lecturing anyone, from the Mayor down, who he felt was at fault. Publicly he ripped apart Charles Salen, Johnson's chief lieutenant in the state Democratic hierarchy, for a breach of faith. Privately he voiced his suspicions of Newton Baker's sincerity. The Johnson group passed off his remarks as the barbed thrusts of the court jester, but his later political career suffered from the indiscretions into which his quick, sharp tongue betrayed him. To the Johnson movement he was important as a gadfly, as an orator who dramatized the reform issues, and as a dynamic lieutenant who commanded the loyalty of the immigrant workers.

The student of the Johnson experiment was [Frederic C. Howe](#). He was born in 1867 in Meadville, Pennsylvania, the only son of a respected middle-class merchant. In his autobiography he described the environment of his youth as "a comfortable little world, Republican in politics, careful in conduct, Methodist in religion." There he lived until he graduated from the local Allegheny College. Then at the age of twenty-two he left Meadville to begin the slow, painful process of unlearning the canons he had been taught. He enrolled at Johns Hopkins to work for a Ph.D. in history and politics, spent a summer at the University of Halle in Germany, and supported himself as a newspaper reporter. Although he had trained himself for a career in journalism, he could not find a job in that field in the hard times of 1892-93. Disillusioned by this failure, he turned to the study of law at the University of Maryland and New York law schools. In 1894 he settled in Cleveland, joining the firm of Harry and James Garfield, sons of the former President. His association with the Garfields was a happy and profitable one. But Howe was driven by his Methodist-Quaker inheritance to do more than make a success of the law; he threw himself into social settlement work and assumed the secretaryship of the Municipal Association of Cleveland, which had just been founded to promote good government.

In 1901, the year Johnson campaigned for mayor, Howe ran for council as a reform candidate on the Republican ticket. After hearing one of Johnson's talks he was so impressed by the directness and simplicity of the message that he called upon him at his office. In the course of that conversation Howe, who had admired the logic of Progress and Poverty but had remained unconvinced by its message, was converted to the Georgian faith. The young lawyer whose mind had been stripped of old shibboleths was poised and eager for conversion to a new set of values, but he needed Johnson as a catalyst. Howe became one of the Mayor's most grateful pupils; his affection for the older man was only exceeded by that of Baker. In the city council, to which he was elected, Howe became a spokesman for the Mayor and shifted his allegiance from the Republicans to the Democrats. Later he served the Johnson cause in the Ohio Senate, 1906—8. He also served as one of four assessors in a scientific reappraisal of Cleveland real estate in 1910, an account of which he entitled, "Single-taxing a City"—at best a half-truth. Taxation was one of his major interests, and to that subject he contributed several significant studies.

In his sincere, candid autobiography Howe has attempted to analyze his own complex nature and his reactions during the period when he was a member of the Johnson circle. Both a lawyer and a politician, he tells us that he liked neither the law nor politics. Perhaps his distaste for both arose from the duality of his career, which, in retrospect, seemed to him almost schizophrenic. As a lawyer he served railroads and public utilities; as an investor he bought their securities and built a comfortable estate upon their earnings; but as a Johnsonian Democrat he fought on the side of the people against the special privileges of those same corporations. Intellectually he was able to rationalize this duality by the same defense that Johnson has made familiar: the money he took from privilege would give him the greater freedom to fight privilege. Emotionally, however, this split existence took its toll. He could barely tolerate the snubs from old friends and the social ostracism which his political principles and activities brought upon him. For that reason he was glad in 1910 to abandon the law, politics, and the Cleveland scene itself for New York and to make a fresh start in journalism, which had remained his first love.

Long before he departed, however, he had already made his mark as one of the most persuasive publicists for municipal reform. In 1905 he published *The City the Hope of Democracy*, which marshaled in scholarly form all the arguments to support the thesis of the Cleveland group that the city was the dominant force in our twentieth-century civilization and there democracy would be reborn—"a democracy that will possess the instincts of the past along with a belief in co-operative effort to relieve the costs which city life entails." Howe instilled into this book his passionate love for the city and painted glowingly his vision of what the cities across the

land could become. The essay had a profound effect beyond the Johnson circle; it influenced the thinking of a generation of Americans. Moreover, it was the first of a series of studies that Howe made of cities in Britain and Europe.

Johnson's talent for inspiring followers was extraordinary. A leader of the Ohio single-tax movement, he aroused many men to champion George's ideas. Besides his four closest advisers he was instrumental in converting: Carl Nau, Antoine Biderman DuPont, Robert Crosser, mentioned above; [Elizabeth J. Hauser](#), a leading woman suffragist and an editorial assistant to Johnson in the preparation of his autobiography; and Lincoln Steffens, who had come to Cleveland to expose Johnson and remained to admire him. The Mayor drew into city and state politics other single taxers: William Radcliffe, an effective street-corner orator for the Johnson movement; James B. Vining, active in the low-fare fight for street railways and later an officer in Baker's administration; [Herbert Bigelow](#) and Daniel Kiefer of Cincinnati. [Brand Whitlock](#), the Toledo mayor and single taxer, leaned heavily upon Johnson and his circle for inspiration, advice, and campaign assistance. Johnson gave encouragement to Mark Fagan, a George disciple in New Jersey, in his campaign for reform. Following his defeat for re-election in 1909, Johnson was treasurer of the Joseph Fels Fund of America, established by the wealthy manufacturer of naphtha soap to promote the single tax. In two journalistic ventures Johnson financially supported Louis F. Post, friend and disciple of Henry George.

Johnson's loyalty to Georgian doctrine was unflagging; his last public address was delivered at a single-tax rally in Cleveland. Although he never made it a central issue in his campaigns, he sought to educate the people to this philosophy and lay the groundwork for its ultimate adoption by means of such preparatory legislation as direct primaries, the initiative and referendum, home rule for cities, and tax reform. In the words of an admirer, he did more through his political campaigns and his services as congressman and mayor to promote the political growth of George's ideas in the United States than any other person. This is too sweeping a dictum in the light of the services of other single taxers, but certainly George's influence on Ohio reform would never have been as pervasive without Johnson.

Doctrinaire single taxers criticized the Cleveland mayor's methods and activities as leading to fruitless compromise. They wanted none of his halfway measures; they disapproved of his association with the Democratic party. Johnson, however, would have nothing to do with organizing a single-tax party. With his intuitive political sense he adopted the most direct way to win victories for his ideas: to infiltrate and capture the organization of the Democratic party and make it a vehicle for his purpose. He selected that party not only because of his personal identification with it but also because in Ohio it had attracted a group of like-minded men eager for change.

During his first term in the mayor's office Johnson gained control of the Democratic city and county committees and built an organization loyal to him, which he and his successor, Newton Baker, dominated for fifteen years. Johnson succeeded in spreading his authority to the state Democratic organization for two years, 1902-3, long enough to bridle the power of John R. McLean in party councils. Many of Johnson's methods were scarcely distinguishable from those of his opponents. He bossed party conventions, wrote the platforms, prepared the slate of candidates, and expected the convention to rubber-stamp his work. The professional Democratic politicians, interested in office and patronage and indifferent to his program, accepted this dictation so long as Johnson mustered the votes for victory at the polls. They measured men and ideas by their popularity.

Nevertheless, in other respects Johnson's methods differed radically from those of the conventional boss. Primary elections were conducted honestly. Compulsory political assessments from public employees were forbidden; the heaviest burden of campaign expenses Johnson carried himself until his financial reverses in 1908 made that no longer possible. The breath of bribery or scandal never touched any convention Johnson dominated. To Johnson, loyalty to the party meant loyalty to the principles of the party platform. Those who were unfaithful he exposed and drove from political life. Faithful party henchmen were rewarded by being given priority in patronage and job appointments, but the men chosen had to be capable. Johnson never hesitated to select an able Republican for an important post, nor would he permit a conscientious city employee to be removed because of his party label. As his movement progressed in Cleveland, he gave less and less consideration to place hunters in the party and became increasingly nonpartisan in all except name. Johnson transformed the local Democracy of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County into a party in his own image, dedicated to social reform.

Johnson was successful in public life not only because of his remarkable talent as an organizer and leader of men but also because of the simplicity and directness of his goal. He did not suffer from any multiplicity or confusion of ideas; he was steadfastly faithful to the beliefs of his mentor, Henry George. There was one social wrong, the inequality of opportunity; one social remedy, to restore equality of opportunity and secure for each worker the product of his labor by eliminating monopoly and special privilege. The term "Privilege" (*To give emphasis to the importance Johnson assigned to the term "Privilege," his practice of capitalizing it has been followed.) meant the same to him as it did to Jones and Gladden; it applied to all businesses which profited from the labor of others because of legal protection from competition. The benefits the law conferred, Johnson grouped into five categories in order of their importance: the under-taxation of land—particularly, idle land—which was the foundation of "land monopolies"; other forms of tax favoritism, such as tariff protection, which created "tax monopolies"; special grants to railroads, which were the bases for "transportation monopolies"; franchise grants to urban utilities, which led to "municipal monopolies"; and patent restrictions, which undergirded "patent monopolies."

To Johnson the greatest movement of the times was the struggle of the people against Privilege. So far, Privilege had had the best of the contest because it was alert and quick to act and had been backed by the press, legislature, and courts. He conceived it to be his mission to assume leadership of the people's cause, to awaken them to this threat to their liberty, and to channel their latent power in support of a change that would bring them relief. How was the battle to be won? Not by political changes—replacing the present owners of monopolies by more virtuous men or exchanging a Democratic for a Republican political boss—but only by an economic change would the people be able to rout their adversary. The economic reform that would benefit the people of Cleveland

most directly was public ownership of the street railway, electric, gas, and telephone utilities, then in private hands. Such a change would eliminate franchise grants, which were at the root of the trouble. The people would benefit economically in reduced rates and improved service, and they would also profit politically by removing the most corrupting influence in municipal government.

Johnson, like the other two leaders in Ohio, was a "gas and water socialist," but in no sense a Marxist. He wanted to destroy Privilege in order to restore the fullest opportunity for competition among what he called "honest" forms of capital. He did not object to capital accumulation by individual effort, even to the combination of small units for greater efficiency and service. In making such an allowance he was at variance with the extreme antitrust advocates, who would abolish by law every combination that restrained competition in any way. To Johnson such legislation was too sweeping and non-discriminatory. He preferred to concentrate his attack against those trusts that existed because of law-made favors or restrictions.

Because of his single-minded dedication to one remedy, he had much less to say on labor questions than did Jones and Gladden. Moreover, while he was not unsympathetic, he lacked their deep concern for the workingman. As an employer Johnson had always paid good wages and encouraged his men to join unions. Although he did not think that trade unionism would ever solve the basic problem of labor, he did believe in unions as a means of achieving the solidarity and uplift of the workers. The true solution for labor, as for all groups, was the elimination of monopolies.

To open the war against Privilege, Johnson chose the street railways of Cleveland as his first target because of his intimate knowledge of their operation and structure. He might have been deterred from this choice by the impossibility of imposing his favored solution of municipal ownership on the traction lines, which the Ohio statutes did not then permit. But he had already conceived a scheme by which he might accomplish many of the same benefits through another approach that he had developed in Detroit with the assistance of that city's reform mayor, [Hazen S. Pingree](#).

It will be recalled that Johnson in the mid-nineties completely modernized the Detroit street railways for a private concern. Mayor Pingree became convinced that the new, efficient system could operate profitably at reduced fares, and to his surprise the traction manager agreed, for Johnson had by then come to look upon street railways with their exclusive franchise grants as "municipal monopolies." Both men believed that the fare might be cut from the prevailing rate of four or five cents to three, thereby restoring to the public the socially created franchise value without impairing a fair return to the owners on actual investment. It was Pingree who persuaded another private company to introduce the first three-cent fare on a cross-town line in that city. The success of this operation convinced Johnson of the feasibility of such a rate. It was also in collaboration with the Detroit mayor that Johnson devised another innovation that would be a step closer to municipal ownership: the formation of a holding company to operate the entire street-railway system for the public at cost. In 1899 the two co-operated in trying to sell the Detroit transit network to such a holding company, but the sale was defeated after the opposition claimed that the purchase price was too high. Nevertheless, Johnson's faith in this solution remained undimmed.

For nine years the fight raged in Cleveland between the Mayor and the private owners of the traction lines. Its details, which have been recorded many times by both participants and observers, lie outside the concern of this book. It is sufficient to say that it aroused the citizens of Cleveland in a way that few other issues have before or since. It was a central question in all five of Johnson's campaigns for mayor; it was fought in the newspapers, the council chamber, and the courts. The city streets became the scenes of near-pitched battles. It required all of the Mayor's daring, energy, and knowledge to win a temporary victory in 1907 for his solution: the operation of the consolidated street railways of the city by a holding company on a three-cent-fare, or cost, basis. But mismanagement, misjudgment, a costly strike, and inattention to public relations produced a popular revulsion against the Mayor's remedy. The people, in a referendum election, voted down the franchise grant to the holding company. Nevertheless, Johnson had only lost a battle, not the war. The final settlement which came in 1910, after he was out of office, incorporated his principles. The new franchise set a fair return of 6 per cent on actual investment and substituted a sliding scale for a fixed rate to assure such a return. For a three-year period from 1911 to 1914 the actual fare was three cents, with free transfers, thus proving the reasonableness of Johnson's prediction.

The street-railway contest has been criticized for the intensely hostile feelings it aroused and for the legacy of enmities it left. The Mayor has been accused of insincerity, duplicity, demagoguery, even nepotism and speculation—charges which the record does not sustain. The most he was guilty of was poor judgment, lack of tact, obstinacy, and a certain business impropriety. He himself shrugged off the false accusations, confident that his purpose was worthy and high-minded. To him and his group the fight was a great educational campaign, exposing, on the one hand, the nature and power of Privilege, and, on the other, awakening a popular interest in the importance of municipal ownership.

He was able to give an even more direct stimulus to the acceptance of this principle by demonstrating the practical benefits of municipal ownership in the operation of those services that the Ohio statutes then permitted cities to own and manage. A start was made in providing light and power by the annexation to Cleveland of two villages that already possessed municipal light plants. However, the further expansion of the city's system of electric power, which the Mayor fervently desired and the private electric utility as fervently opposed, had to be subordinated to the prolonged street-railway fight. But there were other activities where the resistance was less and the public demand greater. The city, for example, bought out a private garbage company and made refuse collection a municipal service; it took over street-cleaning and the lighting of street gas lamps, instead of jobbing the work to private contractors.

Indirectly Johnson endeavored to inspire confidence in municipal ownership by making Cleveland one of the best-governed cities in the country. He determined to eliminate politics from the municipal water works, which had become a nest of party hacks. [Edward W. Bemis](#), an economist trained in public-utility statistics and devoted to municipal ownership, was placed in charge. People scoffed at

this "professor-in-politics." There was near rebellion in the ranks of the Democratic organization when Bemis proceeded to substitute the merit for the spoils system, turning loose a Kansas cyclone in the water-works office. Johnson backed him to the hilt, overruling the persistent demands for place and patronage from his own partisans, to whom Bemis was anathema. The water-works department was placed on a scientific, business basis; a water-intake tunnel running out in the lake, the construction of which had been stalled by graft and incompetence, was completed, and water rates were reduced.

What Bemis accomplished for the water department, William J. Springborn achieved for the department of public works. He, too, shared Johnson's belief in the wisdom of municipal ownership and wished to demonstrate how efficiently municipal enterprises could be run. This former Republican administered with great practical skill the municipal garbage plant and light works; he pushed the program of clean, well-paved and lighted streets, protected by adequate drains. The same honesty and efficiency was introduced into the department of health by the appointment of the German-born Dr. Martin Friedrich. Building inspection was completely reorganized under a new code which strengthened the city's hand in eradicating tenement rookeries. A purchasing department was established to introduce business methods and gain the economies from large-scale buying.

As these reforms suggest, the Mayor looked upon Cleveland as a great corporation with himself as chairman of the board, the other city officers as directors, and the people as stockholders. In the spirit of a business executive with the best interest of his stockholders at heart, he supported actions that seemed to run counter to his principles. It was the cause of some wonderment that this advocate of municipal ownership should endorse a franchise grant to the East Ohio Gas Company to supply natural gas to the city's residents and the city itself. Not only did this mean admitting a new private utility, but also it meant admitting one that was affiliated with the unpopular Standard Oil Trust. But Johnson explained that his purpose was to promote the public welfare by introducing a cleaner, cheaper form of fuel and light, and that there was no other source available. To achieve this immediate goal he was willing to subordinate his long-range objective. Again for similar reasons he favored an extension of the Belt Line Railroad in Cleveland because an extension of rail facilities would stimulate the industrial expansion of the city and invigorate its economic life.

Honesty and efficiency in the management of municipal government and the promotion of the community's economic well-being were important, but the realization of Johnson's vision of "a City on a Hill" demanded something more. The city should bring beauty and pleasure into the lives of its citizens and a spirit of humanity toward the underprivileged. Johnson made a reality of the [Cleveland Group Plan](#), to which many contributed. The plan embraced the symmetrical grouping of the principal public buildings about a mall lined with formal shade trees, extending from the lake to the public square. It was unique in this country when originated, though other cities soon adopted similar improvements.⁵⁸ Johnson made the parks recreation centers for the people, removing the "Keep off the Grass" signs and greatly expanding their facilities. Under the direction of Superintendent of Parks Daniel E. Leslie, playgrounds, sport fields, tennis courts, bathhouses, and gymnasiums were built, and municipal band concerts inaugurated. The city contributed as never before to the joy and health of the community.

In the development of its parks and playgrounds Cleveland followed other cities in the land, but in its handling of underprivileged groups it stood in the forefront. What Jones did for Toledo, Johnson and Cooley did for Cleveland in introducing a number of daring humanitarian reforms. In their fulfillment Johnson supplied the political backing, Cooley the planning and administration. The two approached the problem from the same premise as did Jones: the source of poverty and crime was the unjust social conditions that denied men the opportunity to earn a comfortable living; since society was to blame, delinquents were not to be treated as objects of charity but were to be given hope and fresh opportunities which the world had previously denied them. The spirit of Christian brotherhood with all men should replace the notion of self-righteous almsgiving to the poor and retribution to the evildoers. Johnson and Cooley sought to realize their ideals by a varied program.

Pardons and paroles were liberally granted to free men imprisoned for lack of money to pay court fines—a system that seemed to the two reformers tantamount to imprisonment for debt. When Johnson sat as magistrate of the police court, he was as generous as Jones in granting reprieves and in paying fines from his own pocket. After 1903 a "sunrise court" was introduced, which enabled persons arrested for intoxication the first time to plead guilty, sign waivers of their right to appear when tried, and be released by the police. This system of waivers was further extended in 1908 under the "Golden Rule" policy of Chief of Police [Fred Kohler](#). The substance of his policy was this: patrolmen were to be given large discretion in making arrests; only as a last resort were they to take offenders into custody; juveniles apprehended were to be sent home to their parents; intoxicated persons were escorted home, or retained, if necessary for their safety, and given a waiver of trial; those charged with a misdemeanor were to be released after signing the "Golden Rule" book unless evidence indicated the crime was committed with malice aforethought or with the intent to injure property or persons. Although this practice coincided with Cooley's humanitarian program, Kohler found other reasons to support his system. Quite simply he defended it as one of common sense that brought results. The "Golden Rule" policy was watched all over the United States and adopted in modified form in some cities. In Cleveland it raised a tempestuous controversy which stormed about the character of Kohler as much as about the policy itself.

Johnson had made him chief of police in 1903, partly in restitution for an injustice, partly in recognition of his ability, vigor, and self-reliance. A martinet, he was hated by the police force for his insistence on strict military discipline and for his capriciousness. Also something of a sycophant, he knew how to impress people in authority. He won Johnson's respect and confidence because he carried out to the letter the Mayor's policy toward saloons, gambling, and vice. Johnson knew that he could no more eliminate drinking and private gambling than he could abolish prostitution, but he determined to eliminate their most offensive and vicious side. He ordered gambling places and assignation-houses to separate from saloons; if the owners were recalcitrant, he stationed a uniformed policeman before the doors to take down the names of all who entered. This technique was so effective that gambling places closed and houses of prostitution no longer operated in conjunction with saloons. Slot-machine operators were forced out of business. The practice of blackmailing bawdyhouses by periodic police raids to collect large fines was stamped out. So long as Kohler was chief, he would not countenance the slightest suspicion of graft among the men of the department. He won from

Theodore Roosevelt the encomium of "the best chief of police in America." In Newton Baker's administration Kohler's career as chief of police came to a sad end; he was removed from his post because of a scandal involving his personal life.

Another and equally important part of the Johnson-Cooley program was the establishment of a farm colony outside of Cleveland to care for the aged, the sick, and the delinquent. Cooley, who had recommended the plan and for whom the farm colony was named, had two motives for this back-to-the-land movement: to furnish land that would afford the inmates the greatest opportunity to use whatever talents they possessed, and to cure the mentally and physically ill. On a two-thousand-acre plot at Warrensville three clusters of buildings were located, separated by fields and forest. Designed in the Spanish-mission style, with plastered walls and roofs of red tile, they were simple and dignified. One group provided a home for the aged poor, the second was a tuberculosis sanatorium, and the third the workhouse and reformatory.

Cooley rhapsodized on the wonders of these model communities. Hardened criminals were to be reformed by placing them in "sundungeons/' glass-enclosed rooms in the towers of the reformatory, where the therapy of light and air would effect a cure. If this was sentimental, wishful thinking, not all of Cooley's ideas of penal reform were so naive. His aim was the reformation and rehabilitation of character—to make men. He freed the Correction Farm of the trappings of a prison: no striped clothing, no chains, no weapons for the guards. The work in the fields built up the bodies of the inmates; a night school, organized in the House of Correction, taught the illiterate to read and write; a Brotherhood Home in the city furnished lodging for released prisoners and served as an employment agency. On the same principle Cooley operated a Boys Farm at Hudson for minors sent from the juvenile court. He substituted humaneness and dignity for callousness and petty cruelty in the treatment of all the wards of the city. The Cooley plan, which followed, but in certain respects excelled, European farm colonies, attained a fame which crossed the ocean; visitors came to inspect it from many lands. It placed Cleveland in the vanguard of penal and welfare reform.

This sums up Johnson's achievements in his adopted city. Like all visionaries, he failed to realize the dream that inspired him. Privilege he failed to abolish; inequality and poverty remained. His work was that of "seed-plowing, planning, and pioneering."⁶⁵ His battle for municipal control of street railways and municipal ownership of light and other services illustrated how the fight against Privilege might ultimately be won. The management of Cleveland during his nine years set a new standard for municipal service in cities. The Cooley-Johnson reforms brightened the prospects for a more humane treatment of society's wards everywhere. Johnson and his "City on a Hill" were a beacon light to reformers in other cities: Joseph W. Folk in St. Louis, Samuel M. Jones and Brand Whitlock in Toledo, George W. Guthrie in Pittsburgh, Edward F. Dunne in Chicago, and William B. Thompson in Detroit. "Cleveland shared Tom Johnson with all its sister municipalities," the Kansas City Star declared. "Not another city entered a franchise fight, or planned an extension of activity for the general well being, or sought a square deal in any form, that it did not receive help and inspiration from Cleveland's public servant." Yet the force of his personality and ideas was not confined to the urban sphere. His contributions to the regeneration of Ohio, though less brilliant, were of a magnitude to place him in the front rank of the state's reformers.

* artwork by Viktor Schreckengost, courtesy of Gene Schreckengost.

All journal articles are free on line. To order a print version of the journal please [click here](#).
