

## Chapter VII

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THE CITY OF FALL RIVER  
POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL PHASES — 1902-1941  
THE UNI-CAMERAL CHARTER  
PLAN D CHARTER

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The population continued to increase with the building of new mills and as the city spread out, new streets opened and buildings erected, the government had difficulty in meeting the demands for civic betterments. The city had been working under its amended charter of 1854 which gave opportunity for, and promoted political bickering and trading, giving the voters little opportunity to place the blame for mismanagement on any particular individual or group.

A representative committee of thirty citizens of which Simeon B. Chase was chairman and John S. B. Clarke, secretary, drew up a new charter which, with a few amendments was approved by the "Legislature" and accepted by the voters of the city on November 4, 1902, by a vote of 6,835 to 3,689. (The blanks were not recorded.) It went into effect on the first Monday of January, 1903.

The charter was revised by Chapter 395 of the Acts of 1902. It continued the division of the city into nine wards and the municipal election in December, and provided for the election of a Mayor for two years and for the election of twenty-seven aldermen, three from each ward,—one of these to be elected as alderman at large from each ward for alternate years and one alderman from each ward each year for the term of two years; provided that the Mayor should have sole charge of the executive departments and that the aldermen should have charge of the legislative departments, the latter's acts, however, to be subject to the Mayor's veto.

The charter provided for twenty departments, sixteen of which were to be executive; the other four consisting of the city clerk's department, auditing department, the treasurer's department and the collecting department, the heads of each of which were to be elected for two years by the aldermen. The aldermen were also to elect a city messenger, a clerk of committees and

the superintendent of streets and surveyor of highways. All other officers (except those authorized by law to be otherwise appointed) were to be appointed by the Mayor, subject to the confirmation of the board.

There were to be three members of the Board of Health, two of whom must be physicians, to serve for three years, one of which was to be appointed each year. There were to be three fire commissioners, each to serve for three years (one appointed each year) to serve without pay.

The overseers of the poor were given charge of the city hospital with authority to appoint a staff of six physicians and six surgeons to serve without compensation.

The city was forbidden to make contracts involving over two hundred dollars unless they were in writing, accompanied by a bond and approved in writing by the Mayor. Each department was forbidden to incur obligations exceeding the appropriation made for the department.

The act was to be in effect when it was accepted by the voters and it was so accepted on November 4th, 1902, to take effect on the first Monday of January 1903.

Under the new charter the first members to be appointed on the "Board of Fire Commissioners" were Edward Lynch, George N. Durfee and Godefroy de Tonnancour. Under a State law, accepted by the voters of the city, Mayor Grime appointed the first "Board of Park Commissioners" consisting of Richard H. Cook, Charles R. Danielson, Edward A. Doherty, Matthew A. McClarence and Reuben C. Small.

At the beginning of the new century, Fall River had a population of 104,863, a valuation of \$73,511,614, a total tax of \$1,337,911.37, a tax rate of \$18.20 and a net debt of \$3,688,434.18 of which \$1,371,031.44 was water debt.

John T. Coughlin, a young attorney, won over George Grime, the election for the two year term provided by the new charter. Mr. Coughlin was a good example of one who took advantage of the opportunities this country offers an intelligent youth, with determination and no fear of hard work, to rise from a small beginning, to a position of eminence in a community. Many now living remember "John" as a "hill boy" when he had charge of the extra horse necessary to haul the Globe Street Railway cars up "French's Hill." Although there were forebodings when he first assumed his duties as mayor, he proved to be a very efficient and conscientious chief executive.

George Grime, when mayor, had recommended that a history of Fall River be prepared with funds provided by the city, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the city charter. It remained for Mayor

Coughlin to carry out the project under the direction of a committee of prominent citizens. Henry M. Fenner was appointed the editor and Mr. Fenner with the assistance of Benjamin Buffinton produced the volume in 1906, which today is a valuable reference book and has been frequently used in the preparation of this treatise. Mayor Coughlin served four terms. In 1906 his opponent for the office of mayor was Frederick W. Lawson; in 1908, Orlando Draper.

Thomas F. Higgins won the election over Walter E. McLane in 1910. It was during Mayor Higgins' term of office that Fall River held the greatest celebration in its history, to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the building of the first cotton mill in Fall River, by Col. Joseph Durfee, in 1811. A week of festivities, inaugurated and conducted by the merchants and manufacturers began with the crowning of the Queen of the Carnival (Miss Marion P. Hills), at the City Hall by Mayor Higgins, followed by the coronation procession, on the afternoon of Monday, June nineteenth. In the evening of the same day there was a grand illumination of the "Centennial Arch" which had been erected over Main Street in front of City Hall; a temporary but imposing structure; a brilliant spectacle at night with its myriads of incandescent lights. Tuesday was "Automobile Day"; with a parade in the afternoon and a fireworks display on the South Park in the evening. Wednesday was "Fall River Day" featured by a trades parade, headed by the labor unions, which was nearly two hours in passing. Thursday was "Merchants' Day"; with a horse show at North Park and a carnival parade in the evening. Friday was "President's Day". President Taft arrived on the U. S. S. Mayflower, toured the city and visited the manufacturers' exposition in the "State Armory", the art exhibit in the "Public Library", the cotton manufacturing exhibition in the Bradford Durfee Textile School and the historical exhibit in Music Hall on Franklin Street. He was escorted to South Park by "regulars" and the "militia" where he made an address. In the evening there was a grand confetti carnival. On Saturday, "Aviation Day", there was a water carnival on the bay and a hydro-aeroplane exhibition by Glenn H. Curtis.

The populace supported the carnival enthusiastically and crowded all vantage points to view and applaud every event. The exhibits, particularly the one in the "Armory", which showed the products of the cotton mills and their use in the manufacture of merchantable products, amazed even those who were engaged in the production of the material.

The carnival was a great success. It increased the prestige and raised the morale of the city and went far towards uniting factions and erasing class distinctions.

After two years in office Thomas F. Higgins was defeated in the election of 1912, by James H. Kay. Mr. Kay held the office from 1913 to 1923; a longer period of time than any other mayor had served. In 1912 he defeated Mayor Higgins; in 1914, Henry B. Herrick; in 1916 E. P. Talbot, the Democratic candidate and William M. Dedrick, the Citizen's candidate; in 1918, E. P. Talbot and in 1920, William M. Sullivan.

Mayor Kay, working in harmony with the "City Council" and the various department heads, had many problems to face during the extended period of his administration, which were handled in a businesslike and efficient manner. With the support of the "Council" he was able to end the financial years with all bills paid and a surplus with which to begin the new year. World War I was fought during his incumbency and the city government did everything in its power to speed victory. Civic improvements demanding war materials were postponed. City laborers were employed to prepare public and private grounds for home gardens and land on the "Watuppa Reservation" was cultivated, where tons of vegetables were raised, which supplied food for city and charitable institutions.

Immediately following the armistice, the city enjoyed unprecedented industrial prosperity and many civic improvements were completed and inaugurated. By the end of Mayor Kay's administration the streets and sidewalks of the city were in prime condition.

Prosperous times were short lived however. The demands for cotton fabrics slackened and the mills were unable to hold their own against high taxes and southern competition and as time went on, corporations, one after another, were forced into bankruptcy. Mayor Kay, in his inaugural address in January 1920 had this to say.—"I wish particularly to address myself to a problem which is already disturbing and which is becoming constantly more acute. It is the question of relieving the distressing effects of protracted unemployment." (Under the law direct aid could not be given to those owning property.) "There is no answer to the unemployment problem but employment." The city could not employ all those who were idle and the kind of work that the city might offer was of such a nature that it would be unendurable for many. Conditions did not improve to any great extent, thus "hard times" in Fall River began some eight or ten years before the period of inflation through which the whole world passed.

In 1922, Edmond P. Talbot, the Democratic candidate was elected over Thomas J. Ashton, a Republican, and in 1924 he was again chosen, defeating James H. Kay.

The political events of the years to follow are too recent to be properly discussed here in detail. They should be left for some future commentator. Suffice it to say, that some of the governing bodies during these years seemed to act on the supposition that the city could spend its way to prosperity. The voters of the city must bear their share of the blame for the results. Possibly no government, under an elective system, could fully cope with the serious conditions which confronted the community.

There were four candidates for mayor in 1926 — W. Harry Monks, E. P. Talbot, John T. Coughlin and John Manion. W. Harry Monks was elected and when he assumed office, he was confronted with an increased indebtedness of four million dollars and many unpaid bills.

In 1928 Edmond P. Talbot was again elected. Edward Lajoie was the opposing candidate.

#### *Mayor, City Council and City Manager Charter "Plan D"*

The voters adopted November 6, 1928, by a small margin (For, 16,009; against, 14,345; blanks, 8,633), a new charter under which the government of the city and the general management and control of all its affairs were vested in a mayor and a city council of four members elected at large, the mayor acting as chairman of the council. The mayor had no veto power but had the same powers as the other members to vote on measures coming before it. The council was given the power to elect a city manager, who might or might not be a local resident. Under the charter, "The city council shall appoint a city manager who shall be the administrative head of the city government and shall be responsible for the administration of all departments." The city manager had the power to appoint or remove all city officers and employees which the City Council considered necessary for the administration of city affairs. The charter also provided for primaries for municipal elections. Edward F. Harrington served as City Manager under the Talbot administration of 1929 and 1930.

Daniel F. Sullivan, a non-partisan candidate, defeated E. P. Talbot for mayor in the election of 1930. Upon the organization of the new "Council" in 1931, Edward F. Harrington was replaced by the election of J. Walter Ackerman, who had been the city manager of Watertown, New York. The new government assumed its duties at the most critical

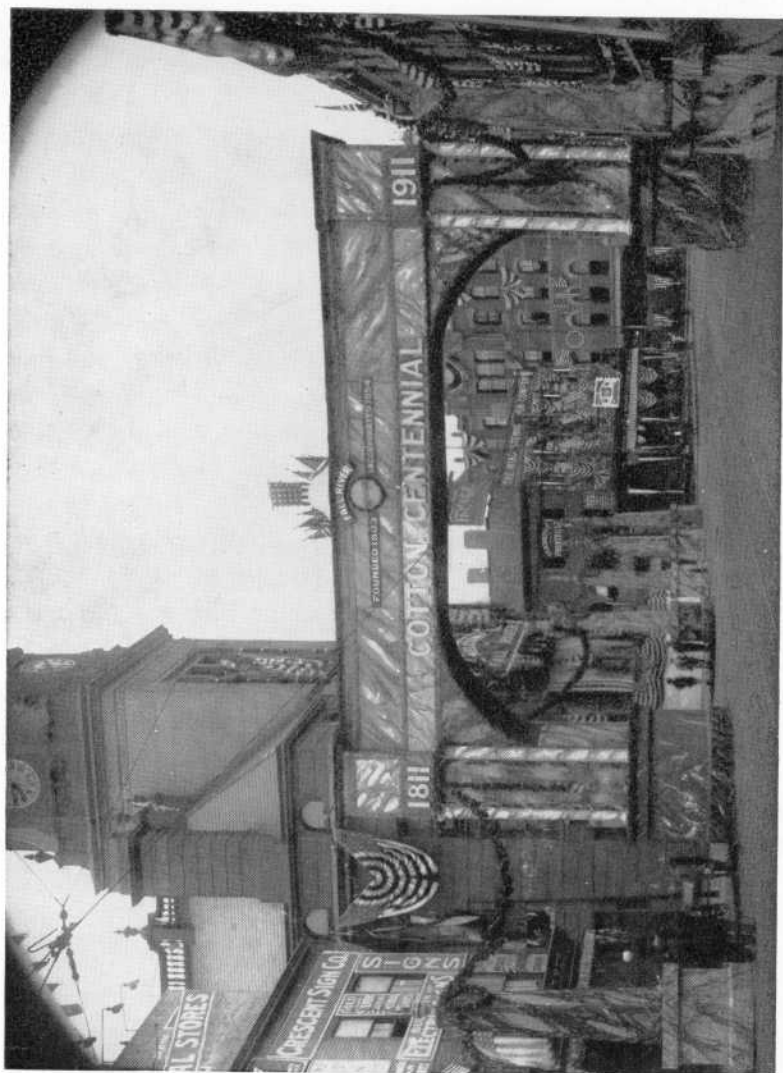
time in the city's history. The mayor in his inaugural address said, "Our fiscal plans must be considered solely in the light of our collectible revenue" and he made recommendations toward a more economical administration, which were later adopted. The Recreation Department was abolished. The engineer, street, public buildings, wire and plumbing divisions were placed under a Commissioner of Public Works. The offices of City Collector and City Treasurer were united. Later, the "Council" by ordinance abolished the Maternal and Child Welfare Department as a separate department combining it with the Board of Health.

### *Board of Finance*

At the beginning of the year 1931, the finances and credit of the City of Fall River had become appreciably impaired. Due to serious and prolonged depression in the cotton industry, many mills shut down and the market value of all had been materially lessened, on account of which the city had been obliged to decrease the valuation of its assessable property 30.4% in five years, but the municipal expenses had been decreased only 6.3% during the same period. There had been much tax litigation and the courts had ordered very large refunds of collected taxes. There had been municipal deficits for several years and they had not been provided for. The "general debt" of the city on January 1st, 1931 was \$7,778,320 which did not include other outstanding liabilities of \$5,470,000, making a total debt of \$13,248,320.

The legislature by Chapter 44 of the Acts of 1931 established a Board of Finance for the city and this act became effective in February of that year. The Board of Finance was given full charge of finances of the city and no debts could be paid or any appropriations made without their approval. They had power to appoint or remove, at their pleasure, the city auditor, city treasurer, city collector and the board of assessors; power to order abatement of taxes, and to control the finances of the school and police departments; they were authorized to issue and did issue city obligations in the amount of \$3,500,000 to balance the budget.

These exceedingly broad powers, dictatorial in scope, became necessary, for a city government, no matter how fearless and unpolitical could be assured of re-election, and a city which had defaulted on a bond issue could not expect to reach normalcy in two years. A Governor could choose his appointees from the State at large without a time limit and could appoint members to the "Board" who had no affiliations in local affairs. Only one member of the "Board" had to be a local citizen.



COTTON CENTENNIAL ARCH





Governor Ely appointed Frank J. Donahue, now a judge of the Superior Court, James Jackson, a Boston banker and a former State Treasurer and James A. Burke, Jr., a prominent local mill executive. Mr. Burke was unable to serve for very long and was replaced by Joseph A. Wallace, a local High School teacher. The personnel of the "Board" changed from year to year. Mr. Donahue resigned and Henry B. Sawyer was appointed as chairman. In 1935, when James Jackson was chairman the "Board" hired an expert adviser in the person of Frank W. Osborne. Rupert S. Carven, Francis E. Kelly and H. William Radovsky served terms as members of the "Board". Edmond Cote was chairman when the work was completed in 1941.

In 1932, Joseph L. Hurley, who had been the Corporation Counsel under Mayor Talbot, running as a Democrat defeated the non-partisan candidate then in office. Mr. Hurley was later elected the Lieutenant Governor of the Commonwealth and is now a Judge of the Superior Court receiving his appointment from Ex-Governor James M. Curley.

The new City Council, early in January, the Mayor not voting, elected Alexander C. Murray, City Manager by a vote of three to one. Mr. Murray had received his early training with Edward M. Corbett and Edward I. Marvell, local architects. For seven years, he was employed by the Southern Railroad, first as an assistant rod man and was advanced to the classification of civil engineer. He was appointed City Engineer by Mayor Monks in 1927 and continued in that office until it was combined, with several other city departments as previously outlined, when he became Commissioner of Public Works.

At no time after its adoption, because of local conditions did the Plan D form of government have the opportunity of a fair trial. In 1934, by a vote of 13,864 to 10,160 (There were 10,339 blanks), the Plan A Charter procured from the State was adopted. The Plan A Charter provided a government by a Mayor and City Council elected at large and is the document under which the city is now operating.

Alexander C. Murray, who had had six years experience in City Hall and had proved to be serious minded, honest and efficient, defeated E. P. Talbot in the election of 1934 and became the first and up to the present time (1941), the only mayor to serve under the present charter.<sup>1</sup> He again defeated Mr. Talbot in 1936 and defeated Dr. Owen L. Eagan in 1938 and Dr. Eagan and Mr. Talbot in 1940.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Murray won over Mr. Talbot in the election of 1942. He retired from office voluntarily in 1945.

From February 1931 to December 31, 1941, the reins of the city government were in the hands of the State Board of Finance. The elective officials had little power of initiative. The accomplishments of the "Board of Finance" were well summed up in an editorial of the "Boston Herald", warning the City of Boston that it might expect a similar "surgical operation". — "It was hard mean work, but the budget was trimmed a good 20 per cent., bloated assessments were reduced from \$228,000,000 to \$110,000,000 and the city that had defaulted on a bond issue in 1930 was on its feet when home rule was established, January 1, 1942."

In 1924, the population of Fall River was 130,885. By 1931, after the closing of many mills, the population was only 112,757. The assessed valuations, at the highest in 1928 equaled \$161,682,250. In 1940, they were placed at \$92,900,550. The municipal debt at its highest in 1926 was \$10,268,143.42; in 1941, \$4,531,683.05.<sup>2</sup>

The manufacture of textiles continues to be the chief industry but during the last few years, diversified industries have been attracted to the city, where they find skilled help and good industrial property at a low rental or purchase price. S. H. Holbrook, in an article in the "Saturday Evening Post" wrote, — "It is worth noting that the city did not have a payless pay day during the wringing out process [and] that no bank failed."

Before the debacle, Fall River industry which was confined largely to the spinning and weaving of cotton fabrics, today manufactures a great variety of commodities evidenced by data issued by the Fall River Chamber of Commerce.

With honest and competent men in public office, the city can look forward to a renewal of prosperity and civic improvement. Fall River has been particularly fortunate in that, throughout its history, it has had in its governmental agencies so many men of character and efficacy; a number of whom served the public for many years.

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<sup>2</sup> Figures from the City Auditor's Report for 1941.

*Mayors of Fall River*

James Buffington, 1854-55.	John W. Cummings, 1885, 1887-88.
Edward P. Buffinton, 1856, 1860-66.	James F. Jackson, 1889-90.
Nathaniel B. Borden, 1857.	John W. Coughlin, 1891-94.
Josiah C. Blaisdell, 1858-59.	Amos M. Jackson, 1898-99.
George O. Fairbanks, 1867-68.	John H. Abbott, 1900-01.
Samuel M. Brown, 1869-72.	George Grime, 1902-04.
Robert T. Davis, 1873.	John T. Coughlin, 1905-10.
James F. Davenport, 1874-77.	Thomas F. Higgins, 1911-12.
Crawford E. Lindsey, 1878-79.	James H. Kay, 1913-1922.
William S. Greene, 1880-81, 1886, 1895-97.	Edmond P. Talbot, 1923-26, 1929-30.
Robert Henry, 1881.	W. Harry Monks, 1927-28.
Henry K. Braley, 1882-83.	Daniel F. Sullivan, 1931-32.
Milton Reed, 1884.	Joseph L. Hurley, 1933-34.
	Alexander C. Murray, 1935-

*City Managers*

Edward F. Harrington, 1929-30.  
 J. Walter Ackerman, 1931-32.  
 Alexander C. Murray, 1933-34.

