

## **INTRODUCTION**



# **CITY OF MOMENTS**

The gods of the urban epoch grant an American city at least one golden moment, a time when it comes into the light and finally embodies its destiny. Think Boston in the pre-Revolutionary War period, Chicago at the dawn of the twentieth century, and Memphis at the mid-twentieth-century mark, when it lubricated the Mid-South economy and exported blues and rock and roll music to the world. A city in the moment has distilled its gifts—geographic location, natural resources, human intelligence, labor—and joined networks that connect to the nation and beyond, economically and culturally. Without question, “in the moment” is the place to be.

A few cities may have more than one moment. New York City exploded in economic and artistic influence in the twentieth century thanks in part to the mass of humanity from Europe that had arrived in its harbor, and it could do so again by addressing hyper-gentrification and global warming's rising waters. In North Carolina, the city of Charlotte lost its textile-fueled moment starting forty years ago, but today it's a national economic and transportation hub with pro sports and multiple colleges and universities, a city in a second moment—though not without flaws—that attracts new residents who can chase their dreams.

Syracuse, New York's moment lasted for more than half a century, 1900 to 1960, an era of incredible economic expansion and population growth that delivered the "Made in Syracuse" tag to almost every home and business in America. Buoyed mostly by an ever-blooming employment market, Pax Siracusa seemed endless. It even communicated a certain mystique, which some current residents might find humorous, accustomed as they are to rutted streets and the untamed brambles that now line the main arteries into town.

But, truthfully, the popular imagination used to see Syracuse in gunmetal glory—reliable, barrel-chested, and tempered by the harsh snows that sweep down from the Great Lakes every winter. Like Duluth, Akron, or Erie, it ranked in the second

tier of industrial cities, dwarfed by Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Chicago. But the city projected an everyman spirit, a place where good souls lived. It was home to the historic Erie Canal, a proud immigrant tradition, and blue-collar running backs Ernie Davis and Jim Brown of the 1950s and 1960s racing down the field in a streak of orange, the color of Syracuse University. In the movies, the best friends came from Syracuse, and if the plot hinged on a traveling vaudeville show, chances are the troupe had just finished a good run in that most American of middle-American cities.

Perhaps because the famed Shubert Brothers hailed from Syracuse—they controlled many theaters on Broadway and across the country in the twentieth century—the city often figured prominently in popular plays and musicals. Titles such as *So Was Napoleon* (1930), *The Farmer Takes a Wife* (1934), starring Henry Fonda, and *The 49th Cousin* (1960) were among them.

In Syracuse and beyond, old men in diners still argue about which were the “real cities,” meaning those that relied primarily on manufacturing and trade. That is to say any city that wasn’t Las Vegas, which sold self-indulgence, or Washington, DC, merely a government town. In their eyes, Syracuse in the mid-twentieth century might have been quintessentially authentic, full of companies exporting their goods to the world and employing

flinty people whose wages fueled local economic growth and improved community life.

Rooted in nineteenth-century commerce that burgeoned because of its enviable place at the midpoint of the legendary canal and later on the railroads, Syracuse's red-hot economy churned out a mind-boggling array of products throughout every minute of its shining hour: air conditioners, pharmaceuticals, china, ice cream scoops, auto parts, circuit boards, and furniture. Engines for the immortal Tucker automobiles rode the assembly line just outside the city in the late 1940s while, at the same time, General Electric perfected color television in a local plant. "For generations Syracusans believed that just because they lived in almost the precise center of the state, economic, educational, and cultural benefits would come to them automatically," noted the writer John A. Williams, who grew up in the city during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

The city nurtured churches, synagogues, fraternal organizations, and athletic clubs. Arts and entertainment flourished, while lush city parks inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted offered Sunday-afternoon respite. It was also home to stately

1. John A. Williams, "Portrait of a City: Syracuse, the Old Home Town," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1993), <http://syracusesthenandnow.org/UrbanRenewal/Williams/Williams15thWard.htm>.

neighborhoods and a nifty American Airlines office where customers purchased tickets at a drive-thru window, not to mention the Syracuse Nationals, one of the National Basketball Association's first powerhouse teams, and Gustav Stickley and Adelaide Robineau, major figures in the Arts and Crafts movement. People flocked to the city from across the nation and all over the world, a destination not unlike Detroit or Oakland, which teemed with newcomers in the post-World War II era.

But by the 1970s the popular imagination had forgotten Syracuse, as it had Duluth, Akron, and Erie. Industry that had nourished families and civic life was hemorrhaging tens of thousands of jobs while a charismatic mayor with two mistresses who were twin sisters larded his bank account with kickbacks from developers drunk on federal urban renewal money. Crumbling infrastructure, soaring poverty rates, and false promises defined the city for the next four decades. When national news media turned to Syracuse, they focused on corruption, racial strife, and plant closings. Things couldn't have been worse in 1986 when a national reporter writing about the city's malaise observed that "a lot of people have never heard of the place."<sup>2</sup>

2. Elizabeth Kolbert, "The Talk of Syracuse: New York's Old 'Salt City' Struggling to Overcome Setbacks," *New York Times*, June 16, 1986.

By the late 1990s, Syracuse had not fully confronted its rust-belt conundrum, unlike Cleveland and Pittsburgh, for example, which had all but lost their heavy manufacturing only to pivot gradually to education and healthcare. Smaller than both cities and therefore potentially nimbler, Syracuse seemed a candidate for rightsizing, consolidating steady strengths in order to find its footing. Could it not exploit the vast water resources in the area in service of a nation fast drying up, or capitalize on its place at the center of a gorgeous natural triangle connecting the Finger Lakes Region, Lake Ontario, and the Adirondack Mountains, or claim its proud progressive tradition dating back to the nineteenth century, when it sheltered fugitive slaves and prominently embraced the women's rights movement?<sup>3</sup> Evidently, the answer was no.

Instead, the city became home to one of the highest concentrations of African American and Hispanic poverty in the nation, the most tragic of rankings because people who live in dense poverty are far less likely to climb out of it. Not surprisingly, then, few from those populations had joined the middle class, as if affirmative action had never existed. Many companies could count on one hand

3. The city hosted no less than a dozen major abolitionist conventions between 1845 and 1850 and was home to Harriet May Mills, a leading suffragist.

their employees of color, and utility crews working for good pay on power lines and cable boxes were virtually all white. One prominent attorney said recently that Syracuse never cared much about finding a place for its people of color in the mainstream of social and economic life, pinpointing what may be the city's tragic flaw.

The list of head-scratching characteristics only seems to grow: *de facto* racial segregation reigns throughout the region; public transport is minimal; city code enforcement—particularly in housing—lacks teeth;<sup>4</sup> and ruptured pipes, corroded with age, spew up water through the city streets whenever cold weather prevails in this, one of the snowiest urban areas in the contiguous United States.

And city government often resembles a three-ring circus: corrupt police officers have been known to submit bogus timecards and wrangle sexual liaisons with citizens who call for help, while a recent mayor of Syracuse and her counterpart in the county executive's office of Onondaga County, home to the city, nursed an iron-clad grudge that hampered badly needed regional cooperation. One morning in 1999, citizens could have been forgiven if they thought they had woken up in a Robert

4. For example, a city law requires residents and business owners to clear their sidewalks after snowstorms but does not levy fines or any other penalty on scofflaws.

Penn Warren novel when the local paper reported that the Onondaga County district attorney, a Republican, had launched a crusade against gossip, pledging to uncover the source of rumors about the Republican mayor's treatment of his wife. Would busybodies chatting over their backyard fences be next? A few years later, that same DA launched an investigation into forged letters of support for the Democratic mayor, a patently trivial matter.

In the midst of all this, the city fell in love with a shopping center, the Carousel Mall. Its owner—developer Robert Congel—had admirably built it on an abandoned oil field in the late 1980s, erasing an eyesore that offended anybody approaching the city from the north. But in 2000, Congel unveiled plans for an expansion of Mall-of-America proportions, proposing indoor golf, a hotel, and a replica of the Erie Canal in exchange for thirty years of tax freedom.

Syracuse contracted a strong case of mall fever. Real estate agents promised rising home values, politicians touted job growth, and the developer prophesied the rejuvenation of the city's fading North Side, which abutted the mall. But the promise was a mirage. A new wing of the mall appeared, but no mega-structure. It would soon come to light that the tax agreement never required Congel to deliver on the totality of his vision. And, in 2020, he still holds his tax breaks. In a word, the city



was duped. But the city and the county—through their competing industrial development agencies—remain enamored of tax relief for building projects, mostly hotels that promise little more than low-wage jobs. Like an out-of-control gumball machine, they release enormous handfuls of economic treats when developers deposit a penny.

By Donald J. Trump's inauguration in 2017, you could have called Syracuse a broken city: law enforcement lacked the person-power to respond quickly to 911 calls; city government couldn't pay for repairs to damaged roads; litter covered many sidewalks and exit ramps; drug dealing thrived openly on well-traveled downtown corridors; and violence frequently erupted in the public schools. What's worse, city leaders couldn't point to a new day.



But if not in the moment, Syracuse is still a city of moments, a diverse and magnetic place.

Those who climb to the top of Woodland Reservoir on the southwest side survey a magical scene. In the distance, the university and hospital district gently slopes toward the downtown and then the landscape undulates wherever the eye can see. It's like the Seven Hills of Rome. Beyond the reservoir and around the city, the summits of many ancient drumlins promise astounding views; dozens of

neighborhood streets showcase old homes restored to their former grandeur; downtown at sunset reveals quaint alleyways and building façades alive like fire, reflecting the fading light.

Also in the downtown, small, independent businesses have sprung up as if to answer the big mall, that temple of chain stores. Eclectic music halls, farmers markets, bakeries, tiny art galleries, bars selling craft beer, and restaurants pledged to locally sourced food let you know that contemporary movements have come to Syracuse, largely without the mammoth tax breaks that beefy developers enjoy. Repeating a national trend, downtown has also seen a swell of young residents, who have made it the only zip code in the city to see net population growth.

Many families send their children to public schools where fiercely dedicated teachers negotiate dully lit hallways, shortages of textbooks, and sporadic knife fights, but still deliver solid preparation for admission to good universities and career readiness programs. City kids may salivate over the suburban schools' glistening music rooms and national athletic rankings, but the Syracuse schools do their job.

Like anywhere else, schools are the center of wider community life, and community life in Syracuse is rich. Neighbors across the old town gather for block parties and flock to parks for foot races,

summer concerts, and annual cleanups. People who live down the street and around the corner become like family members, recommending doctors, watching your children, bringing hot dishes in trying times, meeting up for drinks at a downtown bar. Many are politically active and socially aware, intentional about living in the city, clinging to an urban dream.

Inspiring people who work across social and emergency services populate Syracuse: teachers, volunteer coordinators, directors of non-profits, police officers, counselors, and nurses. They shoulder many of the burdens of this city that time and the national conversation may have forgotten, teaching the illiterate, counseling rape victims, confronting violence on the streets, hunting down shelter for the homeless, treating the drug-addicted, nurturing refugees from war-afflicted nations. They must be resolute in thinking that life can be better in Syracuse, or why would they do what they do with such heart?

Which points to the overriding question of this book. In a city hemorrhaging people and jobs, is there reason to stay? Cities blossom when people in them find purpose, and they wither when they have nothing left to offer. If the city is to discover another moment, then its people must remain to nurture and lead or else it may follow the once great African city of Timbuktu, now slowly melting back into the

desert, or the former auto capital of Detroit, popular today among so-called ruin-porn gawkers. For now, many people still make life work in Syracuse. But will the city continue to give them reason to stay?

Five people whose lives are intertwined with the city's help answer that question in this book: Jessi Lyons, an urban farmer attempting to grow community and a local food movement; Neil Murphy Jr., a city elder hellbent for better water management and smarter government; Elise Baker, an activist and downtown florist whose one and only real concern is the dispossessed; Justo Triana, a hard-working refugee from Cuba who gives as much as he receives by teaching English to fellow refugees; and Stefon Greene, a young man, and the primary figure in this narrative, who almost sank into the city's cruel streets only to bob up again as youth, diversity, and hope personified. Their experiences and perspectives—as they relate them in their own words—plainly and valuably reveal what it's like to live and work in a city on the edge, providing insight into how people discern hope as they decide if a city can remain a sheltering place.

This book strives to give readers a sense of Syracuse as it lives around the five subjects, contextualizing their extended commentary and storytelling with appealing secondary characters and various episodes, such as a tragic Father's Day riot and the trial that followed, sidewalk fistfights, Elise Baker's

community-raising convocations, and public debates over a regional consolidation proposal. The narrative also pays particular attention to Stefon Greene's family, who arrived in Syracuse in the late 1940s astride a huge influx of African American people. Representing a seventy-year-long thread, the family's story tracks many of the city's crucial issues: racism, urban renewal, drug abuse, the hope of upward mobility and, most importantly, the question over whether to leave the city or stay, which Stefon must grapple with in 2020.

As Syracusans go, the five commentators in this book are not necessarily unique, but they are thoughtful and quietly energetic, and, like many of their fellow citizens, they help keep the city moving from one day to the next. Framed by a hometown rife with violence, still hobbled by industrial collapse and often narrow in its thinking, they sketch out the city's tragic past and tumultuous present. But in embodying tenacity, innovation, reform and redemption they also propose a vision for Syracuse and for struggling cities everywhere, a rolling path away from oblivion and back into the national sunlight.