

In Honor and In Celebration



Francis J. McGrath
City Manager
1951 - 1985



1954 Mike Favulli Testimonial



1954 Dedication & Corner Stone Laying
New Trade High

Who Was this Francis J. McGrath?

After Worcester's voters approved a change to a new municipal charter, Plan E with council manager government, in 1947, the major task facing the council elected in the city elections of 1949 was to select a manager for the city. The council, chaired by Mayor Andrew B. Holmstrom, was aware of the importance of their choice, yet they were alert also to the need to act with some speed. Government had to be in place at the beginning of 1950. They turned to a local businessman, Everett F. Merrill, as the first city manager. Merrill, head of a local steel company, in turn, needed to organize an executive administration. As his chief assistant he picked Francis J. McGrath, who, when Merrill resigned early in 1951, would be elected to succeed him.

Who was this Francis J. McGrath?

He was, like many of his contemporaries, a veteran of World War II, in which he served in the Navy, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Commander in charge of naval radio stations in the Caribbean. He had returned from the war to his position as a school principal, moving from Union Hill School to Elizabeth Street School.

McGrath had been an educator since the early 1930's, teaching at Bartlett High School in Webster before joining the Worcester system in 1939. In that same year he had married Mary Wickham. Teaching was not a surprising career for Francis McGrath: his three sisters were all teachers and his father had been a custodian at North High School. Indeed, looking at Francis McGrath growing up on Blanche Street on Vernon Hill, one sees a man being shaped by values of family and faith and heritage. He grew up in an Irish-American family in which the idea and often the ideal of public service was a major stimulus.

In a family such as his, Francis McGrath followed the traditional road, first to Saint John's High School, then on Temple Street, not far from the foot of Vernon Hill and then on to Holy Cross from which he graduated in 1930. As Francis McGrath walked from home to high school and later to college, it is likely that he thought of the

world in fairly conventional terms: be faithful, work hard, respect public service, guard your integrity. With a Master's Degree from Boston College in hand, he started his career.

Clearly, though, something more was at work. There was ambition: the move from Webster to Worcester, the appointment to principalships and the rise in rank in the Navy show that.

In the thirties, Francis McGrath had done more than teach. He had been an announcer at the Mechanics Hall wrestling matches. After the war, he directed the city's Summer recreation program in 1946 and 1947, and, far more important, he was coordinator of the city's Centennial celebration in 1948. That was a golden year—the sadness of the world war behind people, the economy reviving and consumer goods in adequate supply, the darkness of the Cold War and the bloodshed of the Korean War still to be felt. Worcester could celebrate its hundred years as a city with enthusiasm and excitement. Francis McGrath later estimated that the centennial sponsored 126 events. Their success and the success of the Centennial celebration drew attention to this forty-year-old Worcesterite. Interestingly, among the vice chairmen of the centennial were Everett Merrill, the future City Manager and two men, Ralph Duffy and James D. O'Brien, who would be members of the first Plan E council. Emile Rousseau who would also serve on the first Plan E Council was the director of the Centennial's Industrial Exposition. Two more members of the future council were on other centennial committees.

The centennial's success and what must have been McGrath's organizational skills apparently recommended him to Merrill as Merrill assumed office in January 1950. On leave from the School Department, McGrath turned his energies to establishing the new administration.

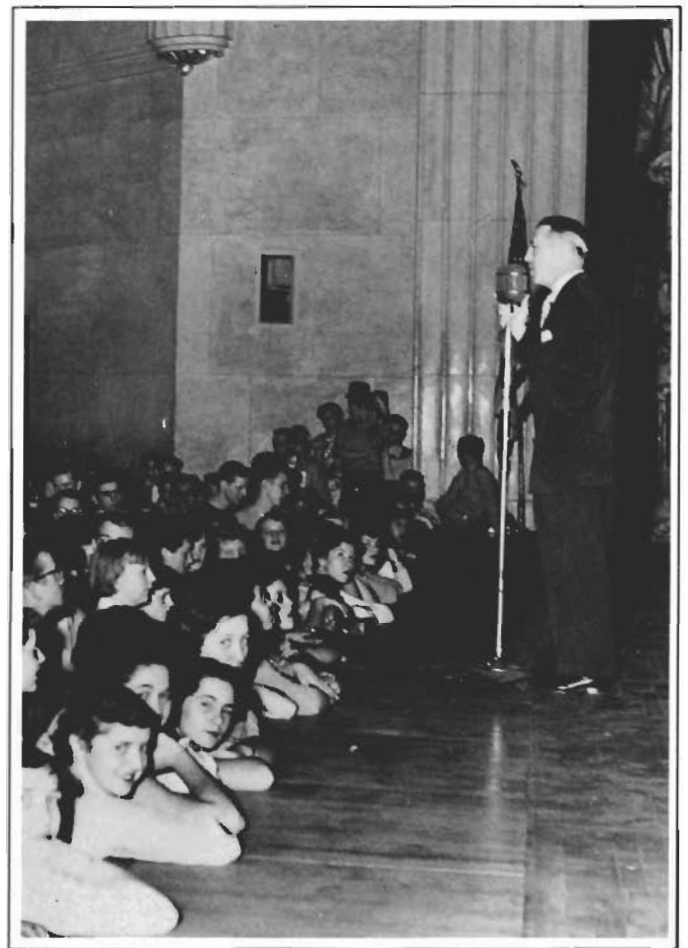
As he had promised when selected, Merrill stayed on as manager for a little more than a year; on March 20, 1951 he submitted his resignation to be effective on April 15, 1951. In his letter of resignation, Merrill wrote, "Especially do I com-



1954 With George F. Booth at Jimmy O'Brien's Testimonial



**1955 Safe Driving Day
Interviewed by Andy Fuller of WTAG**



**1954 Halloween Party
Worcester Auditorium**

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mend the seemingly untiring work of my executive assistant, Mr. Francis J. McGrath, who has had a large part in whatever success has attended my administration." He went on to express his "gratitude" for McGrath's "loyalty and friendship."

McGrath must have been pleased at Merrill's commendation as he prepared his candidacy to succeed him. McGrath, of course, was not alone in seeking the manager's job. Applicants from across the country submitted letters, were subject to private investigator inquiries, and were interviewed by the council. With Merrill's support, McGrath had an inside track and soon the newspapers were reporting that despite the calls of the League of Women Voters and the Citizens Plan E Association to move slowly, that Councillors Burrows, Duffy, O'Brien, Rousseau and Mayor Holmstrom were leaning toward his selection.

In his interview with the Council, McGrath offered as references a number of prominent local businessmen, naval officers and Merrill. The Council seemed unimpressed with the non-Worcester applicants, and despite some final pressures to consider others, the Council voted to elect McGrath manager in a decision which one councillor said answered the question "why let it drag on?"

Following an executive session, the council voted unanimously in public session to name Francis McGrath as Worcester's second city manager. He was sworn in on April 24, 1951, beginning one of the longest tenures of any chief executive of an American city; by the time he left office on February 1, 1985, Francis McGrath had served nearly thirty-four years.

The Worcester McGrath came to manage in 1951 was bustling. Its population reached an all time high in the 1950 federal census (203,000), its industries were strong, sharing in the post war boom, its role as a retail center was unchallenged. Yet Worcester, like its region and the nation, was on the edge of significant change. Population would shift to the suburbs, old industries would

die and the car would transform the shopping habits of all Americans. When McGrath retired, Worcester had changed: it had fewer people, its economic base was in services and its retail role had diminished.

But, before the changes, there were extraordinary demands to be met. The depression and war had left a legacy of needs: schools for a growing population, services better tailored to the community's needs, facilities for municipal services. Later, as change was apparent, there came the need to rebuild and revitalize the city, the goal of reversing decline.

The 1950's saw major work on the city's school plant which would ultimately lead to the construction of 24 new schools and additions to nine others. Beyond that, the record of public facility construction was extraordinary: seven new fire stations, including a new headquarters, a new police headquarters, a new main library, 3,000 units of elderly and public housing, parking garages and parking lots, three major redevelopment projects, and the Centrum. There was little that this builder's hand did not touch.

Construction was only one side of Francis McGrath's work for Worcester. In his second winter in office, he introduced the winter parking ban to aid in snow plowing. In 1953, the city's police department was reorganized, adapting it to the needs of a highly mobile society. Later, other city departments would be reorganized as well.

Change and action of the magnitude under way in Worcester during the McGrath years could not occur without a base of public support, and Francis McGrath knew this. His relations with the council were secure until the mid 1970's, and he had a deft hand in dealing with the public at large. As astute a politician as any of his contemporaries, McGrath understood the need for public support of his actions. In the 1950's he participated in a series of little town meetings to deal with neighborhood issues and for almost his entire term as manager he broadcast a radio program, Meet Your City Manager, which gave him an opportunity to



1955 Presentation of American Veterans Award to Raymond Harold



1957 National Safety Award Presentation for National Pedestrian Protection Contest.



1955 With Mayor James D. O'Brien at the opening of Ralph's Market

Who Was this Francis J. McGrath?

talk directly to the public. He accepted invitations to all kinds of events, he answered thousands of letters, never relying on form answers, and his door was open to one and all. Until the revaluation controversy led to harassing phone calls, his home phone number was listed in the Worcester directory.

Court ordered revaluation in the early 1970's posed one of McGrath's most difficult challenges. For years Worcester, and other Massachusetts cities, had allowed valuations to depart from the market value of property, generally very much to the benefit of home owners. Owners of businesses and newer homes found themselves at a disadvantage and following a law suit which concluded that Worcester's assessments violated the state constitution, the city was ordered to revalue property; the process was long and slow. The city manager found himself bearing the brunt of council and citizen complaints, asserting that there was an effort to "make the manager the scapegoat for revaluation." For the first time he was subject to a motion of confidence, winning it 8 to 1, although not without some suggestion that the road was not so easy as it had been before. Turmoil showed in the council as well, as turnover was substantial in the elections of 1973 and 1975, working to the advantage of the manager.

The building of the Centrum made life difficult for the manager in the late 1970's. Like the revaluation issue, McGrath saw himself taking blame unfairly, but also, like revaluation, the completion of the project eased tensions for the manager. By 1984 he was willing to contemplate retirement, announcing in June of that year that he would retire by year's end. In fact, of course, that date was extended a month to the end of January 1985.

Although there was talk from time to time of Francis McGrath going to another city as its manager, the only serious possibility of his leaving the position seems to have been in the mid 1960's when he considered the position of Superintendent

of Schools. In the end he stayed with the job he loved so much. One of his few excursions outside of city affairs came when he served as head of Governor John Volpe's effort to secure a sales tax, but here he probably saw himself serving his city as much as his state. Worcester could not have had a more loyal son.

When news of Francis McGrath's retirement became known, there was an outpouring of praise of his tenure: "exceptional," "far sighted," and "outstanding" were the typical adjectives used by civic leaders to describe him. A survey commissioned by the Charter Commission, which had been elected in 1983, concluded "few municipal officials would be disappointed by the impressive favorability ratings garnered by McGrath at the conclusion of such a long term of service." Sixty-four percent of the survey respondents had characterized McGrath's work as good or excellent.

As the retirement day neared, McGrath announced, lest there be any doubt, that he would remain, "a strong executive until the day I walk out the door." No doubt that was one of the reasons for his success: a firm hand eager to remain at the helm. But there were other reasons.

Francis McGrath remained true to himself; he had been elected to do a job and he had done it. The virtues he learned as a child and a young man remained with him: hard work, loyalty, devotion, faith in God. He had begun his career as manager asking for God's help and he ended it saying "God's been good to me." He advised his successor that he would need "a lot of prayers, a lot of tolerance, a lot of understanding and a good sense of humor." These were the things which had kept Francis McGrath going and successful. There was a commonplace quality to concepts like integrity and cooperation, but as Worcester learned they were not commonplace in Francis McGrath; this mixture of values and personality produced an extraordinary figure, a man whose mark on the city has no equal.

John B. Anderson

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With Mayor Joseph Tinsley at the signing in of new
City Manager Jeff Mulford