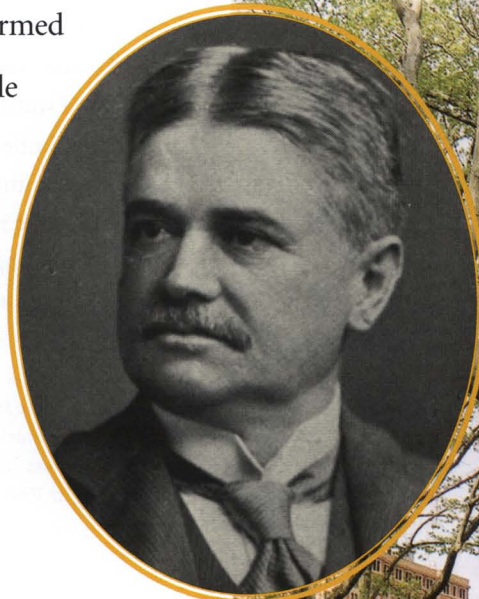


Pittsburgh's Benevolent Tyrant Christopher Lyman Magee

By Steven Bernstein

In 1893, Christopher Lyman Magee, the acknowledged “boss” of Pittsburgh, endeavored to show that measures he passed through the city councils, benefiting his traction companies, had not worsened the city’s financial condition. Stumping the city, armed with facts and figures, he faced a hostile crowd at the Soho School House.



Christopher Lyman Magee



Photo by Amanda Duryak Gillen



The power house and car barns of the Duquesne Traction Company in the Bellefield section of Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood. Built 1890, it served only six years before being converted to a multi-purpose theater and sports arena called Duquesne Garden. Perhaps best known for its ice rink, it was demolished for apartments in 1956. From *The 28th National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1894.*



Thomas Bigelow

Some in the crowd accused Magee of becoming wealthy by his control of the councils, using them to pass legislation benefiting his traction companies. Other denounced him for his domination of city politics. Magee answered yes, he had made a lot of money that way, but no more than anyone else in similar circumstances. He further stated that those who owned real estate along the streets that carried his traction lines, and "the city at large," had benefited from the expansion of those companies; the benefits were in the form of increased real estate valuation and the corresponding increase in real estate tax revenue. Further, his traction enterprises showed "his faith in the future greatness" of the city, and that he risked his money, "ten dollars to make one" and was therefore entitled to the rewards. Such was the attitude of Christopher Lyman Magee, who ruled Pittsburgh with a firm, but benevolent, grip a century ago.

Magee's business methods are illustrated by his dealings in the

transit industry. Magee had been president of the Transverse Traction Company. Though unprofitable, Transverse nevertheless diverted a lot of traffic away from the competing Citizens Railway Company, which ran to Lawrenceville. When Citizens bought out Transverse, Magee became a shareholder in Citizens.

Sometime thereafter, John Gordon, a contractor who held a majority share in the Pittsburgh, Oakland & East Liberty Passenger Railway, went to California where he observed cable-powered railways. Gordon thought he could transform his horse-drawn Pittsburgh, Oakland & East Liberty into a cable-powered line. He interested Magee in the idea, then sold his 5/8 interest in the company to Magee, P.A.B. Widener, W.L. Elkins, George Whitney, and Thomas Bigelow, a Magee cousin.

But Magee soon sold his interest in the Pittsburgh, Oakland & East Liberty and started a competing concern, the Duquesne Traction Company. Even with Magee's credentials as city treasurer, Pittsburgh banks would not lend to him, and Widener and Elkins were determined that the Duquesne line would not succeed. Magee, however, borrowed money from a New York bank, and Duquesne's competition soon forced the Pittsburgh, Oakland & East Liberty to reduce fares to 3¢. Despite a local law banning traction company mergers, the two concerns merged in 1875, forming Consolidated Traction Company. Thomas Bigelow opposed the merger as being illegal and threatened to sue; to avoid a lawsuit, Magee bought out Bigelow's interest for a large sum. And a law legalizing traction company mergers was soon passed.

Citizens of Pittsburgh contributed \$34,000 for a monument to Magee in front of Carnegie Library, Oakland. Designed by Augustus St. Gaudin, it took four years to complete and was unveiled in a special ceremony on July 4, 1908. Magee's character is remembered by the poem on the monument's granite shaft, from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

*The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven;
Upon the place beneath,
Tis' twice blessed: It blesseth him that gives,
and him that takes.*

The poem is mentioned in a contemporary newspaper article, but doesn't say why that passage was chosen above others, or whose idea it was to use it, though it's likely his family felt it was reflective of his life and philosophy.



Magee-Womens Health Foundation; photo by Brady Stewart

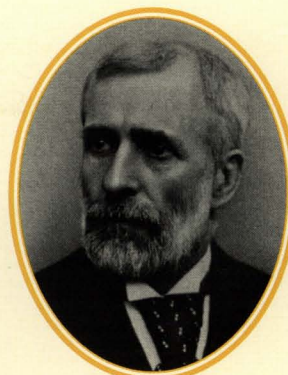
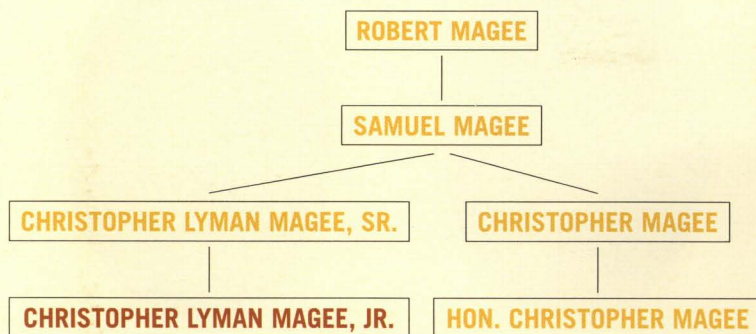
The Maples, Christopher L. Magee's home, in the late 1930s after its conversion to a nursing school. It was torn down in 1955.

Traction company magnate, banker, city treasurer, state senator, philanthropist — Christopher Magee wore many hats. He owned the *Pittsburgh Times* and *Pittsburgh Daily News*, several houses in the East End, and held stock in several dozen companies including Sharon Steel and Consolidated Gas. He enjoyed enormous influence in the state Republican party and over many Democrats. His chosen candidate for state treasurer, William Livesey, was elected in 1882, giving Magee much influence on the state legislature, and he later helped elect Democrat Robert Pattison as governor of Pennsylvania. Magee was also prominent in the national Republican Party, attending every convention from 1876 to 1900.

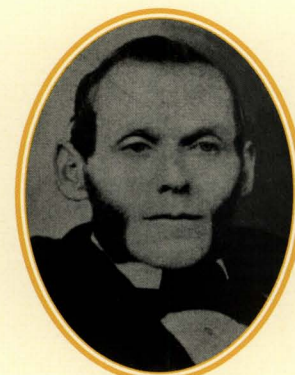
Powerful though he was, Magee had a generous disposition. Elderly people in his neighborhood never lacked for Christmas turkeys, sent anonymously. He donated \$15,000 for a pathology lab at Mercy Hospital; \$100,000 for a children's zoo in Highland Park; and in his will, specified that upon his wife's death, the bulk of his \$5 million estate should be used to build and endow a hospital. The Elizabeth Steele Magee Hospital for Women, named for Magee's mother, opened January 19, 1911, in his former home, "The Maples" (named for the clusters of stately maple trees). The large, 2-story greek-columned frame house was at the corner of Forbes and Halket streets in Oakland. It served as the Eleanor Gillespie Magee Nurses residence and as the Magee Hospital School of Nursing until 1942.

Christopher Lyman Magee was born on April 14, 1848 — Good Friday — in the family home, a gabled house of frame construction at 39 High Street, then an extension of Sixth Avenue. He was the second son of Christopher Lyman Magee, Sr., and Elizabeth Steele Magee.

His great-grandfather, Robert Magee, had emigrated from



Hon. Christopher Magee



Thomas Steele

All portraits from *Palmer's Pictorial Pittsburgh and Prominent Pittsburghers Past and Present, 1758-1905* (Pittsburgh: R.M. Palmer, 1905), HSWP Library & Archives, Library collection

Ireland to Western Pennsylvania in 1786. Samuel Magee, his grandfather, ran a business on Chancery Lane, and was elected Allegheny County commissioner in 1815. Samuel had two sons with near-identical names: Christopher Magee and Christopher Lyman Magee. Samuel died in 1836, leaving most of his estate to son Christopher, father of Judge Christopher Magee.

Samuel Magee's other son, Christopher Lyman Magee (later Sr.), was born in 1808. He became a partner in the firm of C. & C.L. Magee, hatters doing business at 42 Market Street. Through friendship with Simon Cameron, President Lincoln's first secretary of war, Christopher Lyman Sr. obtained an appointment as a sutler during the Civil War.

His son, Chris, (the subject of this article) attended the Third Ward public school, the Grant School, on Grant Street. He switched to a Catholic school run by Jesuits, but was ejected for a disciplinary infraction. He briefly returned to the public school before again switching, this time to the business classes of Professor John Barry, which were held in the basement of a Methodist church at Wylie Avenue and Tunnel Street.

After graduating high school, Magee briefly attended the Western University of Pennsylvania. His father died of a fever in 1863, leaving only a modest estate. Chris, only 15, left school and went to work as an office boy for Park, McCurdy & Co., steel manufacturers. The following year, through the influence of his uncle, "Squire" Thomas Steele, he obtained a job as a clerk in the city controller's office. Steele was prominent in city politics, having been an alderman and president of one part of the city councils. Steele strongly influenced Magee in the direction of a political career. Magee worked diligently in the controller's office, and in 1869, at age 21, was appointed to the important position of cashier in the city treasurer's office.

Magee then set his sights on attaining the office of city treasurer. Colleagues suggested that he grow a beard to enhance his youthful

appearance and improve his chances of winning the election. Ignoring this advice, Magee ran for office in 1871, and at age 23, won with a surprisingly large margin. He was re-elected in 1874.

Magee's performance as treasurer laid the groundwork for his later influence over Pittsburgh. A key factor was his performance during the Depression of 1873, which hit the city particularly hard. Demand for goods and services plummeted, prices fell, and unemployment rose. One bank, in which city funds were deposited, closed, and another became insolvent. Magee met several times with the directors, calming distraught board members, and successfully avoided permanent loss to the city. He later remembered that these were "among the most trying times of his life."

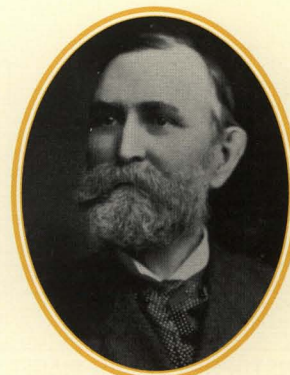
As treasurer, Magee reduced the city's deficit from \$15 million to \$8 million. However, prior to 1873, Pittsburgh had no property assessment procedures or laws, instead following those of Allegheny County. City property was often assessed at only a fraction of true value, sometimes less than 10 percent. Largely through Magee's influence, a Board of Equalization was created, which revised city valuations, increasing them from \$19 million to \$175 million. He also created an Office of Delinquent Tax Collection, by which the city immediately collected \$800,000 in delinquent taxes.



William Flinn



Matthew Quay



Henry Gourley

In the midst of his expanding career, Magee married Eleanor Gillespie, daughter of wealthy Pittsburgh art dealer J.J. Gillespie, on June 6, 1878. Eleanor's father owned a villa in Rome, and they vacationed in Italy a number of times. She would pass away there on May 10, 1909.

Magee played an important role in the passage of the Penn Avenue Compromise Acts. In 1879, according to existing laws, Penn Avenue was repaved at a cost of about \$6 million, assessed upon the property that benefited. However, the state supreme court nullified this arrangement, declaring it unconstitutional. Those property owners who had already paid had no way to recover, while those who had not paid could not be forced to. The court allowed city liens on non-paying property to stand, which clouded the title of those wanting to sell. Therefore, the Penn Avenue Compromise Act of 1879 was passed as was another in 1881. These authorized compromises between property owners and the city which resulted in revenue to the city estimated at \$1 million.

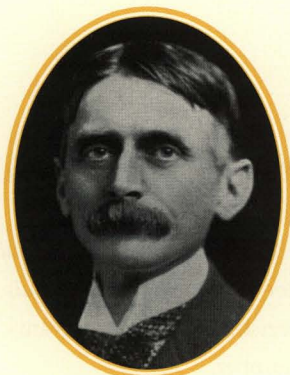
Magee's partnership with William Flinn solidified his control over Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. They were introduced by Thomas Bigelow at the Hotel Lochliel in Harrisburg in 1879 at the request of state "boss" Matthew Quay. Flinn was a dour, humorless man of large physique. Lincoln

Steffens described their association as "A happy, profitable combination, it lasted for life. Magee wanted power, Flinn wanted wealth.... Magee attracted followers, Flinn employed them. The men Magee won, Flinn compelled to obey, and those he lost, Magee won back." Their control over the city and county was cemented in 1882 when Flinn became head of the Executive Committee of the city's Republican Party.

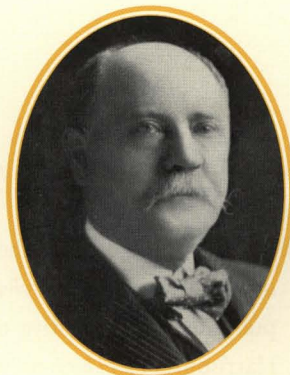
With Pittsburgh under control, Magee turned his efforts to state politics. He was first a protégé, then an associate of Robert W. Mackey, who was state treasurer, president of Allegheny National Bank, and a friend of "Squire" Steele. Mackey was also a part of the Cameron organization, which dominated state politics. However, Mackey died of tuberculosis in the summer of 1877, at age 33, shortly after the riots against the Pennsylvania Rail Road. Mackey was to have become the agent for the railroad in Allegheny County. Magee succeeded Mackey as head of the Allegheny County Republican Party, and later became the railroad's agent in Western Pennsylvania. Magee's taking control of county politics in this manner was thought by many to have been the source of his conflict with Matthew Quay.

Magee enjoyed great influence in the state legislature after William Livesey became state treasurer. However, in 1885, Quay himself was elected state treasurer. Quay then became dominant in state politics, and Magee temporarily retired, taking a sabbatical to Italy. But when Democrat Robert Pattison became governor in 1890, much of Magee's influence in Harrisburg returned. A truce was called, but their conflict was revived in 1895 when Quay became state Republican chairman.

Meanwhile, Magee retained control of the city councils by making sure that the city charter of 1887 vested legislative power in the councils, and executive power in the city department heads. In Magee's charter, the mayor was a figurehead. However, by an oversight which Magee came to regret, the mayor was given a general



Edward M. Bigelow



William B. Rodgers



William J. Diehl



William Addison Magee

supervisory power over city department heads. This provision caused trouble for Magee and Flinn when Henry Gourley became mayor in 1890, and again when Gourley ran for city controller in 1893. Gourley distanced himself from the Magee-Flinn “ring” and vetoed many of Magee’s street improvement measures that were designed to assist his traction companies. Gourley’s crusade created a lot of public excitement and weakened the ring stranglehold on city politics.

Magee was elected state senator in 1896, representing the 43rd Senatorial district. On March 28, 1899, he offered four bills for the Senate’s consideration, among them the Waterworks bill, which would give a municipality the right to use eminent domain to take over a water works if it was determined that private ownership was not running the concern correctly.

The Magee-Flinn ring continued to weaken; the biggest blow came in 1899 after Flinn removed Edward M. Bigelow as head of Pittsburgh’s Department of Public Works. Flinn’s construction company, Booth & Flinn, had enjoyed a lock on nearly all city paving contracts since 1887, but Bigelow had opened the city contracting process to competitive bidding. Thomas Bigelow, angered by his brother’s removal, spared no effort to destroy the ring. Although they were cousins of Magee, the Bigelows also still seethed over the earlier turmoil regarding the Pittsburgh, Oakland & East Liberty Passenger Railway.

Thomas Bigelow’s approach to politics was also quite different from Magee’s. He supported the Citizens Party, dedicated to the goal of honest city government. He supported City Solicitor William B. Rodgers in drafting the “Ripper Bill,” which removed Magee’s chosen mayor, William J. Diehl, and replaced him with a Recorder. The “Ripper Bill” passed through the state legislature on February 28, 1901, Magee’s last session in attendance.

Magee was already withdrawing from public life. He had developed a mysterious illness in 1899, provoked by the difficulties of

dealing with his many commitments. It was evident, according to later news reports, in the loss of his “quick, light step” and the development of a “leaden pallor” to his face. The official cause of his death was listed as “paralysis of the bowels and nervous collapse” but some physicians were certain that he suffered from liver or kidney failure.

In Fall 1900, he was re-elected to a second Senate term. He reportedly made his last legislative appearance on February 28, 1901. Later that day – probably at the house he was renting at 111 West Street, Harrisburg – he heard of the passage of the “Ripper Bill” and collapsed, reportedly “losing all interest in life.” He died there peacefully at 5:22 p.m., on Friday, March 8, with family and friends in attendance. Four days later, after his remains were returned to Pittsburgh on a special train, Magee was laid to rest in Allegheny Cemetery. On April 16, at a special election, William Addison Magee – his nephew – succeeded him as state senator.

Steven Bernstein holds an M.A. degree in history, and has written numerous articles over the past seven years.

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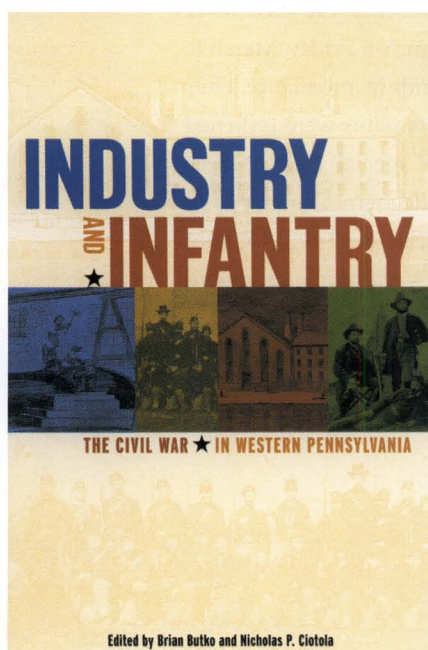
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