

Kate Gleason, National Bank President

— BY KARL S. KABELAC —

“I WAS NO GREAT SHAKES AS A BANK PRESIDENT. The fact that the bank was more prosperous when I resigned than when I was made president was due mainly to circumstances.” So said Kate Gleason of her presidency—from 1918 to 1920—of the First National Bank of East Rochester, New York. She had always believed she was the first woman to be president of a National Bank, adding another first to her remarkable career, but we now know several women preceded her. But she may have been the first woman National Bank president without previous family ties to the bank.

Born in Rochester, New York, on November 24, 1865, Kate Gleason was the oldest of four children of William and Ellen (McDermot) Gleason. When she was 11, her older half brother, who had helped her father in his small tool-making shop, died, and Kate began helping out as a bookkeeper. In 1884 and again in 1888, she attended Cornell University, where she was the first woman to take engineering courses, but each time family needs forced her to leave before the school year was completed.

Back in Rochester, she began to take a more active part in her father's business, the Gleason Works, and from 1890 to 1913 served as secretary of the company, traveling frequently in both the United States and Europe as its sales representative. This role required a thorough knowledge of the industry and the technical aspects of the machinery she was selling. Years later, in her entry in *Who's Who in America*, she listed her occupation as mechanical engineer and credited her father as her primary teacher.

With the development of the automobile, the gear-cutting machinery her father had developed years earlier found new and growing markets. Henry Ford, a customer of the Gleason Works, is said to have incorrectly credited her with its invention, thereby extending her fame in a very male-dominated field. In 1914 she was the first woman elected to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and in 1916 she became the first woman member of the Rochester Engineering Society and an early woman member of the Rochester Chamber of Commerce.

Her two younger brothers also were active in the family business, and in 1913 management disagreements caused her to leave the company. Seeking other outlets for her talents, she became the receiver for a bankrupt machine-tool company in Rochester and was able to reverse its misfortunes and soon return it to profitability. She then became involved in several business ventures in the village of East Rochester, which was a mile or two from her suburban Rochester home. One of the businesses produced trailers

Kate Gleason, circa 1918.



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NEW YORK BANKS.

Bank Directors, p. 1387
Accessible Towns, p. 1402
Bank Attorneys, p. 1411

TOWN AND COUNTY	NAME OF BANK	ESTD.	OFFICERS	LIABILITIES	RESOURCES	CORRESPONDENTS		
	+State	Private						
East Rochester,	First National Bank	1921	Kate Gleason,	Capital,	25,000	Loans & Dis....	72,000	Hanover National Bank, N. Y.
Monroe,	50-55 Main St. Bk. Bldg.	1911	and Geo. H. Bower,	Surplus & Prof.	15,000	State & M. Bds.	32,000	Merchants Bank, Rochester
B. Pop. 4000 C4	Last State Bldg. And Div. 9	1911	and Francis J.	Circulation	7,000	Due from Rrs....	50,000	Traders Nat. Bk. Rochester
				Indiv. Dep....	229,150	Cash on hand....	20,000	
				State Dep....	8,000	Other Reserves..	15,000	

[illegible]

An entry in Polk's Bankers Encyclopedia, September 1919, lists Kate Gleason as bank president. At this time, there were 7,905 National Banks in the United States.

to be attached to cars for hauling or camping. Another was construction of a development of 100 low-cost, poured-concrete houses. This interest in concrete led her to become the first woman member of the American Concrete Institute. The housing tract exists in the village to this day.

East Rochester was founded in the 1890s, and by 1910 it had a population of nearly 2,500. As a growing community, it needed a bank. The First National Bank of East Rochester was chartered in late 1911 (charter number 10141) and opened early in 1912. In 1918 its first president left to assist in the war effort with the YMCA in France, and Miss Gleason, as an active local business person, was unanimously elected his successor by the board of directors. The war and immediate postwar period brought the bank prosperity, but as we have heard, Miss Gleason felt she could not take credit for it.

On January 23, 1920, she resigned the bank presidency to devote herself to her other interests. During the 1920s, she continued her interest in low-cost housing, as she planned communities in the Sea Island region of Beaufort, South Carolina, and the San Francisco, California, area. The former, to be developed as an artists' and writers' colony, was underway at the time of her death, while the latter was abandoned when the State of California took over some of the land for other purposes.

Toward the end of her life, Miss Gleason maintained three homes, one in suburban Rochester, one in Beaufort, and one at Septmonts near Soissons, France. She had come north to Rochester from Beaufort for the Christmas holidays in 1932 and, contracting pneumonia early in the new year, died in Rochester on January 9, 1933. The obituary in the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* noted she was a "philanthropist and pioneer woman engineer and industrialist" who was "dynamic, tireless and with an enthusiasm which ever renewed itself." Her will, probated later that Depression year, left \$1.4 million to a long list of charitable organizations and friends.

The First National Bank of East Rochester prospered during the 1920s under its third president, Andrew H. Bown, an East Rochester businessman and former bank vice president. It did not, however, survive the Depression, closing in 1934. Bown always considered it would have survived but for outside regulators who were too quick to close the village's bank.

Headquartered in Rochester, the Gleason Works continues to be a world



Miss Kate Gleason Chosen President Of National Bank

Miss Kate Gleason, mechanical engineer, manufacturer and developer of industries and homes in East Rochester, was unanimously

MISS GLEASON PRESIDENT OF EAST ROCHESTER BANK

Believed First Woman in Country to Be Named for Place of Its Kind.



MISS KATE GLEASON.

EAST ROCHESTER HAS FIRST OF WOMEN BANK PRESIDENTS

Directors of Institution Unanimous in Choice of Miss Kate Gleason To Succeed Harry C. Eyer, Who Goes to France To Engage in Y. M. C. A. War Work; Built Up Prosperous Suburb from Mere Hamlet.

With the leaving of Harry C. Eyer, business acumen of the gentler sex, after this week for that has come to the front so fast in the past few years.

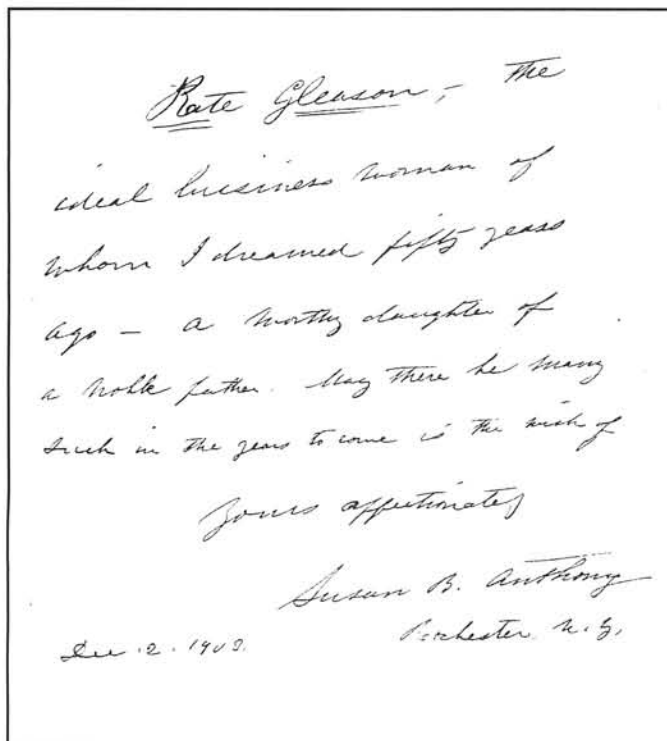
A money of trust for the business mechanical developer of homes. Board of Bank of requested by the C. Eyer. Gleason be period believed American bank the out-built for us and it that she with the town's possibilities. She is now devoting all of her time to one of her East Rochester interests, the Hi-Speed Trailers, which she considers as great an improvement on the wagon as the automobile is

chemical engineering department of Cornell University. In 1914 the American Society of Mechanical Engineers elected

WOMAN BANK HEAD IN EAST ROCHESTER

Miss Kate Gleason Elected President of National Bank—Retiring Chief to Go to France for Y. M. C. A. With her recent election to the

Kate Gleason gave the first \$20 National Bank note she signed to her friend, suffragist leader, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, who kept it in the little leather "Votes for Women" case and called it her "Good Luck Pocket Piece." Newspaper clippings tell the story of Kate Gleason's selection as president of the First National Bank of East Rochester, New York.



Famed suffragist and fellow Rochester resident Susan B. Anthony was a long-time friend of the Gleason family. Anthony's inscription to Kate Gleason in the first volume of *History of Women Suffrage*, which she presented her in 1903:

Kate Gleason, - the
ideal business woman of
whom I dreamed fifty years
ago - a worthy daughter of
a noble father. May there be many
such in the years to come is the wish of
Yours affectionately
Susan B. Anthony
Dec. 2. 1903. Rochester, N. Y.

leader in the production of gear-making machinery, with other factories in England, Germany and India. The company is listed on the New York Stock Exchange, and the current chief executive officer, James Gleason, is Kate's grandnephew.

Kate Gleason's presence continues in the Rochester area. The Rochester Public Library was one of the beneficiaries of her estate, and today its auditorium is named in her honor. For nearly a century, Kate and other members of the Gleason family have been active in the governance of the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). In 1947 a women's dormitory was named in her honor, and in 1998 the Gleason Foundation, founded by family members and today Rochester's largest philanthropic foundation, gave RIT \$10 million in Kate Gleason's name to upgrade engineering facilities and expand engineering educational opportunities, especially for women students. In recognition of this gift, the engineering division recently was named the Kate Gleason College of Engineering.

Sources and Acknowledgments

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF KATE GLEASON are found in *Who Was Who in America* (1943), *Dictionary of American Biography*, First Supplement (1944) and *Notable American Women* (1971). Other useful sources include an article by Helen C. Bennett in the October 1928 issue of *The American Magazine* (from which the opening quote of this article comes); accounts of her election to the bank presidency in each of the four Rochester daily English-language newspapers, August 18 or 19, 1918, and her obituary from the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* of January 10, 1893. Bown's typescript analysis of the financial situation of the bank at its closing is found in the Fellows Papers, Box 1, Folder 12 in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester. The photograph of the National Bank note and its leather holder is courtesy of the Lavery Library, St. John Fisher College, Rochester. The photograph of Kate Gleason and the inscription by Susan B. Anthony are courtesy of Jan Gleason of Rochester, whose help with this article is gratefully acknowledged. ❖

Karl S. Kabelac recently retired after 30 years as a librarian with the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester (New York).