



**Figure 15:** *William's parents, Thomas P. and Ellen McKee Hughes, shown here circa 1900. They are likely holding one of their first grandchildren, born to William's younger brother, Thomas, Jr. and his wife Louise Jennings Hughes. Courtesy of Kyle Hughes.*



### CHAPTER THREE: "POOR BILLY" GOES TO WASHINGTON

1902 – 1912

In many ways, Paterson was undergoing a period of great change around the turn-of-the-century. The city had not only reached its industrial peak, but also the zenith of its wealth. Much like Gilded Age society across America, prosperity was poorly distributed; the working class struggled to get ahead while the factory owners sought to flaunt their success with opulent estates and other financial endeavors. In 1892, businessman Catholina Lambert funded the construction of a mansion, modelled after Warwick Castle in his native England, to house the silk industrialist's large art collection. A grand reception of four hundred guests marked the completion of Belle Vista, which is known today as Lambert Castle and is home to the Passaic County Historical Society. Just across the Passaic River in East Paterson (now Elmwood Park), the Barbour family built an elaborate Second Empire mansion of their own. Though they mainly resided in New York City, this country estate enabled the Barbours to host many prominent guests when they were in Paterson to oversee their local business interests. Signs abounded that the city's wealth was reaching new heights, yet for the average worker this remained a period of discontent and unrest.<sup>1</sup>

A new wave of immigrants, mostly Italians and east-European Jews, was pouring into Paterson and its neighboring towns. Such demographic change certainly would have been unsettling to the long-established communities hailing from northern and western Europe. Like the Irish in Little Dublin, the new-wave immigrants came for jobs: while Paterson's silk industry employed 3,000 workers in 1870, three decades later that figure had grown to almost 19,000, some 60% of the city's workforce. As if signaling the arrival of this new immigrant population while at the same time acknowledging the city's class stratification, the Hamilton Club opened in 1897. The building which housed the gentlemen's club was modelled after

the Palazzo Medici in Florence, Italy, and Vice President Garret Hobart was a founding member along with others of elite social status.<sup>2</sup>

As the city grew, so too did its need for public services. In the 1890s the city established a paid, professional fire department, a forty-mile trolley system linking Paterson with neighboring communities was incorporated, and electricity was in the process of being installed to power the town's homes and businesses. The citizens of Paterson dedicated a new City Hall in 1896, opened new post office built in 1899, and construction of the county courthouse was ongoing from 1898 to 1903. Despite these symbols of urban progress, an official of the Silk Association of America affirmed that "the same spirit of unrest exists to-day in Paterson as it ever did." As evidenced by the Frank & Dugan saga of 1901, strikes remained a common occurrence. Though it overshadowed some of the social discontent, the city's urban progress—infrastructure built of stone and steel—was fragile. In biblical fashion, fire and water destroyed much of it within just a handful of years.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 16:** *This 1905 postcard juxtaposes old and new Paterson at the turn-of-the-century. The view is of Main Street, furnished with telephone and electrical wires and crowded with a mixture of pedestrians, horse-drawn carriages, trolleys, and automobiles. The commercial street scene makes the danger, pollution, and noise of Paterson's factories seem like a far-off concern, while they were in reality the lifeblood of the city's prosperity. Author's personal collection.*

It was in this tumult of continuity and change that William Hughes's first run for public office came in the fall of 1901, when Passaic County Democrats nominated him as a candidate for the New Jersey General Assembly. The campaign was less than one month long, as his nomination on October 14 pitted him against Raymond Bogert, who was a 36-year-old plumber and Paterson alderman. One fellow Democrat at the convention hailed Hughes as a "fearless friend of the working man," and *The Passaic Daily News* noted Hughes's recent work on behalf of the Frank & Dugan strikers in its coverage. His pro-labor reputation earned him the endorsement of Paterson's Progressive Political Club just before the general election, and local labor advocate John McKeon wrote Hughes a letter of support recalling the Frank & Dugan saga: "The most methodical strike of all strikes is at the ballot box, and . . . all wage workers and their friends should see to it, that the name of William Hughes is on their ticket as well."<sup>4</sup>

One problem for Hughes was that he was seeking elected office in a county with several thousand more Republican voters than Democrats. In the 1901 election, about 26,500 votes were cast in the county, with the Republican candidate for governor Franklin Murphy winning by about five percentage points. Hughes came up short at the polls in the race for the State Assembly, but ran ahead of the Democratic gubernatorial candidate by more than 500 votes and fell short of his opponent's total by just 409 votes, losing by fewer than two percentage points. As Bogert ran behind every other Republican Assembly candidate in Passaic County, the election returns offer evidence that a significant number of Republicans voted for Hughes over their own party's candidate. In politics, of course, a loss is a loss regardless of how narrow the vote tally. An editorial in *The Paterson Evening News*, presumably by the local Republicans, mockingly proclaimed that the county's labor element had "buried . . . Hughes beyond any hope of political resurrection" by granting him their support.<sup>5</sup>

Just a few months after Hughes lost at the polls, and a few weeks after his father's death, the worst fire in New Jersey history swept through Paterson. Shortly after midnight on February 9, an overheated stove in a



**Figure 17:** *William Hughes's stenography office was located across from City Hall in the Romaine Building, built in 1894. Courtesy of the Paterson Museum Collection, Paterson, N.J.*

trolley shed caught fire. Fanned by 60-miles-per-hour winds, the blaze tore through downtown Paterson in what was described as a “whirlwind of flames,” and then spread eastward into the Sandy Hill residential neighborhood. While there were only two deaths connected with the fire, it destroyed 459 buildings, more than a quarter of the city's structures, and twenty-six city blocks. Homes, stores, churches and banks were burned to the ground. By the time the fire was extinguished, the library, the City Hall and the ornate Hamilton Club were in ruins. Hughes was not spared from the fire: the Romaine Building where his office was located also burned, and as supreme court commissioner at the time, he was in possession of a large collection of legal records which were lost forever. As with most other businesses damaged by the fire, carrying on was essential. By February 12, Hughes temporarily relocated his office to 17 Smith Street.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 18:** *An apocalyptic scene looking down Market Street after the Great Fire of February 9, 1902 in the vicinity of the Romaine Building. Courtesy of the Paterson Museum Collection, Paterson, N.J.*

In September, 1902, the Democrats of New Jersey's newly-drawn 6th Congressional District, consisting of Passaic, Bergen, and Sussex counties, gathered in Paterson for what proved to be a messy nominating convention. Coverage by *The New York Tribune* spoke of a chaotic affair, in what appears to be a case of no one being inclined to run as a “sacrificial lamb” in a Republican-majority district. Several nominations were made with no success: William B. Gourley of Paterson, chairman of the state Democratic party, tried to force the nomination on Michael Dunn, counsel for the City of Paterson, who quietly fled the convention. Bergen County Democrats proposed one of their own who also withdrew. Gourley was vehemently opposed to the nomination of Hughes, as he was seen to be closely aligned with Paterson's mayor John Hinchliffe, with whom Gourley did not get along. The chairman fought for several hours to stop the

nomination, which Hughes initially declined, but after several votes, recesses, and county caucus meetings, the convention again circled around to the “friend of labor . . . a young man in every way worthy to lead the party to victory.” Hughes finally accepted the nomination, and three cheers were heartily offered by the convention delegates.<sup>7</sup>

When Colonel William L. Barbour was nominated as the Republican candidate by the 6th District Republicans in July, 1902, many local newspapers treated him as if he were a congressman-in-waiting. Barbour was trying his hand at elected politics

for the first time after achieving great success in business. The nearly fifty-five-year-old titan of industry, President of the Linen Thread Company, Inc., had inherited and expanded his own business empire with factories on both sides of the Atlantic. Barbour carefully fostered his political relationships for many years prior to his run for office: he was a delegate at every Republican National Convention since 1884; former President Ulysses S. Grant dined in the Barbour family home just across the Passaic River in Bergen County when Grant visited on a tour of Paterson in 1880; the young Barbour also hosted his personal friend President William McKinley in the Silk City on the occasion of Vice President Garret A. Hobart’s funeral in 1899, and was executor of the decedent’s will. He was a well-connected, widely-



**Figure 19: Colonel William Barbour (1847 – 1917), who obtained his title as a member of N.J. Governor John W. Griggs’s staff, was the owner or officer of at least ten corporations, including the Barbour Flax Spinning Company. In 1910 he was elected president of the American Protective Tariff League and in 1911 was Treasurer of the Republican National Committee.**

known figure possessing near unlimited financial resources and strong media support.<sup>8</sup>

Although Barbour acquired his party’s nomination under questionable circumstances—by using his wealth and connections to challenge incumbent Representative James F. Stewart—he possessed the benefit of running to represent a seat in which Republican voters significantly outnumbered Democrats. It was not without reason that the Republican-aligned newspaper *The Morning Call*, in reporting upon Barbour’s candidacy, speculated he would easily win on Election Day by earning the largest vote majority of any local Republican candidate in recent history. Even Barbour, in a campaign address at the end of October, referred to himself as Paterson’s next congressman. That prediction never came to pass.<sup>9</sup>

It was not William Barbour, but a former bobbin boy at one of his factories, who was headed to Washington to represent Paterson in the 58th Congress. Hughes won the district by a margin of about 3,850 votes, only narrowly losing Bergen County, where Barbour resided. How did a thirty-year-old silk worker turned lawyer manage to beat the local linen tycoon? A number of factors should be considered, including the role of the media and both candidates’ appeal to the voters. While the Republicans had *The Morning Call* and *Passaic Daily News* in their corner, the publishers of *The Paterson Guardian* and *The Passaic Daily Herald* openly supported Hughes. Secondly, in looking at the results it becomes clear that many Republicans must have backed Hughes over their own party’s candidate. This may be attributed to the fact that Barbour essentially purchased the Republican nomination over incumbent Representative James Fleming Stewart, allegedly carpet-bagging into the district by purchasing a home in Bergen County. As the owner of several factories in Paterson, Barbour would have likely been unpopular with the working class of the surrounding area who may have found greater appeal in Hughes because of his background, ongoing work as a labor lawyer, and progressive platform. Hughes also had the good fortune to be running during a midterm election political environment that proved favorable to Democratic congressional candidates nationwide. Although they didn’t take control the House of