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By Dr. Mason Gaffney

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Cleveland's Explosive Growth Under Mayors Tom Johnson and Newton Baker

Mason Gaffney

Cleveland, 1900-20

Cleveland grew by 109% from 1900 to 1920. For most of this time it was under the administrations of single-taxers Tom L. Johnson, 1901-09, and Newton D. Baker, 1911-16. In 1906, Mayor Johnson inaugurated a low three-cent trolley fare, which entailed possible deficits he intended to meet by taxing real estate. In 1909, Johnson formally put in place reformed machinery for land assessment. W.A. Somers, who had supplied his "standard unit" system of mapping land values to Johnson in 1901, was made chief clerk. Johnson and Somers raised assessments from \$180 million to \$500 million, with a new emphasis on land values. For the first time there was a fair assessment in Cleveland (Russell, p.291; Bremner, Chap. 14, pp.153-64).

Johnson and Somers analyzed property assessments and found that assessors had been undervaluing holdings in rich neighborhoods and overvaluing those in poor. Johnson, a master showman, put up large maps illustrating this, inviting discussion and suggestions from the public. To aid understanding, he pushed "the Somers unit system"—a system later used by Purdy in NYC. A Standard Unit was one front foot, 100 feet deep, with formulas to adjust for corner influence, depth influence, etc.

To win support for up-valuing land and down-valuing buildings, Johnson set up a city-sponsored tax school in 1901. The biggest landowner in Cleveland sued to stop it, and won, but by the time the tax school closed it had operated for twenty months, and prepared the public mind for a large rise of land assessments (Johnson, pp.127, 129; Bremner, pp. 129, 136, 157-58). Johnson's parting view upon leaving office in 1909 was of his candidates taking control of the City Board of Equalization, which had the last word on assessed valuations (Bremner, pp.162-64). To this day a bronze statue of Johnson stands in downtown Cleveland, holding a book with the visible title *Progress and Poverty*.

Johnson's city solicitor and ally, Newton D. Baker, won back the mayoralty in 1911, so the anti-Johnson interlude was brief. Baker implemented Johnsonian policies until President Wilson appointed him secretary of war in 1916. This high-level appointment recognized the political power of the single-tax movement in that era, a power that later historians and economists have wrongly trivialized or ignored or dismissed ("the voters will never accept it," etc.). Baker left behind a large city debt, and the infrastructure it had financed, assuring that the city would still need heavy land-value taxes for some time to come. Peter Witt, a fiery single-taxer, ran to succeed Baker, and lost only narrowly, indicating that Johnsonian policies retained a large constituency, and would not suddenly vanish. After 1916, though, Cleveland slowly fell into old-line Tory hands (Cramer, p.7), and began its long slide into its present torpor and mediocrity. From 1900 to 1920, Cleveland's population had more than doubled, indicating the city's dynamism under Johnson and Baker, and the benefits that lingered a while after them. If Cleveland had continued growing at the Johnson-Baker rate, its population today would be 15 million or so, double that of NYC, and thirty times the half million it actually has now.