

How the Council-Manager Plan  
began in Sumter.

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## INTRODUCTION

On January 7, 1913 Malcolm McLean Worthington assumed the position of city manager for the small town of Sumter, South Carolina (population 8,109). On this date Worthington became not only Sumter's first appointed chief administrator, but also the first city manager in this world to serve under a popularly-instituted council manager form of government. Every step in the adoption process leading to Worthington's assumption of office and each official action once he became manager established important precedents later followed, to some extent, in over two thousand other American municipalities.<sup>1</sup> Sumter deserves full credit for first adopting this now popular form of municipal government.

The objectives of this paper are, first, to provide a detailed account of the adoption of the city manager system in Sumter and, secondly, to offer an analysis of why this small South Carolina town preceded all other American cities in the adoption of this new form of municipal government. In order to fulfill these objectives, the paper is divided into four major parts. First of all, a brief summary of the evolution of the city manager theory as a part of the larger municipal reform movement is presented as background material. Next, concentration is shifted from the national to the local level for a study of the events leading to adoption of the manager plan in

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<sup>1</sup>The Municipal Year Book 1972 reports a total of 1,427 council manager cities with a population over 5,000 and 634 managers in smaller jurisdictions for a total of 2,061 city manager governments in the United States.

Sumter. The third section of the report presents in detail an account of the early implementation of the plan in this particular city with special emphasis on the several precedents later incorporated into the national council-manager movement. The final section is an evaluation of the Sumter experience and an analysis of the significance of this brief, but important, episode in the American municipal reform movement.

## I. EVOLUTION

The adoption of city manager government in Sumter resulted from developments on both the local and national levels. On the local level a new spirit of progressivism and pride in the city created a desire to alter the form of municipal government. Events on the national scene, however, preceded the local movement and, to a large extent, determined the focus for local reform efforts.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century in large, medium, and even some small American cities the political boss dominated municipal government. This unique character filled a leadership vacuum in the city created by the diffusion of power resulting from the earlier popularity of Jacksonian Democracy principles. The extremes of bossism, however, eventually led to corrupt, inefficient, and unresponsive government in many cities. In response to bossism a countermovement of municipal reform gradually emerged as the most active and influential force in American municipal government in the early twentieth century. The predominantly middle-class reformers who first led the movement to oust the political boss sought to make city government more visible, more efficient, and more responsive to the will of all the people, not simply the party elite. The methods evolved to achieve these basic goals included: (1) city planning, (2) nonpartisanship and at-large election of councilmen, (3) the initiative, referendum, and recall, (4) municipal home rule, (5) the short ballot, (6) professional-

zation of the public service, and (7) strong executive leadership. An important means for implementing these reform methods on a large scale became structural re-ordering of local government. For example, the strong mayor form provided executive leadership, a shortened ballot, and usually some of the other benefits of municipal reform. The municipal reform movement, however, was still too young and vigorous to push this single structural reform and thus sought other approaches for making local government even more visible, efficient, and responsive. The city of Galveston, Texas produced the first major variation in municipal government structure. The Galveston commission plan shortened the ballot, concentrated power and responsibility in a few elected officials, and in general presented local government with an opportunity for more "business-like" operation. This new form of municipal organization soon received nationwide attention due to its success in Galveston under very adverse conditions created by a destructive hurricane and extensive flooding. Commission government, proclaimed the municipal reformers, cracked a long-accepted assumption that the mayor-and-council plan provided the only structure conceivable for municipal government. New forms could be invented and experimentation was, in fact, feasible.<sup>1</sup>

The commission plan did indeed spread rapidly during the first two decades of the current century, but the more astute reformers eventually began to uncover flaws in this new plan. First of all, friction among the several elected commissioners appeared inevitable due to certain structural arrangements. Each commissioner was primarily responsible

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<sup>1</sup>Richard S. Childs, Civic Victories: The Story of an Unfinished Revolution (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p. 140.

for the functioning of one particular department, but also responsible for the operation of all city departments. In actual practice the individual commissioner either became a virtual czar over his one department, or constant friction resulted from other commissioners interfering in the affairs of a colleague's assigned department. When one commissioner began to investigate matters outside his own particular domain, all commissioners generally followed his lead in retaliation. The multi-headed commission government carried with it the possibilities of friction leading to inefficiency, which, in turn, led to waste and even corruption.<sup>2</sup> Also the commission plan violated the short ballot principle of elected representatives and appointed administrators. According to basic municipal reform doctrine, the choice of an administrator should be no more a natural popular function than the choice of an engineer or a landscape architect.<sup>3</sup> Based on the desire to secure professional administration by experts in city management the reformers concluded realistically that the best administrators are not necessarily the most proficient vote-getters. Closely related to popular election of administrators, a consequent lack of expert management represented a third defect in commission government. Since most commissioners continued to earn their living primarily from outside sources, in city affairs they still had to be considered amateur administrators. Finally, each commissioner faced a re-election campaign at some standard time

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<sup>2</sup>H. S. Gilbertson, "Some Serious Weaknesses of the Commission Plan," The American City, IX (September, 1913), 237.

<sup>3</sup>Richard S. Childs, "The Theory of the New Controlled Executive Plan," National Municipal Review, II (January, 1913), 81.

interval and thus could not generally make long-range administrative plans with any concrete assurance that he would be around for implementation.

Many municipal reformers recognized these several defects in commission government, but one reformer, Richard S. Childs, was particularly disturbed by the ill effects of commission government. Childs, a young New York advertising man active in municipal reform during the first decade of the twentieth century, demonstrated a special interest in rectifying the evils resulting from the long ballot in American elections. In 1909 Childs published an influential article later issued in book form as Short Ballot Principles. Less than a year later, Childs used a small endowment from his wealthy father to establish a National Short Ballot Organization in New York City. Childs next persuaded Woodrow Wilson to serve as president of the new organization thus assuring substantial publicity for the activities of the group. As a part of his campaign for the shortened ballot, furthermore, Childs soon began to publicize the commission form of government because this new plan obviously coincided with the short ballot principle. But, according to Childs, the commission plan was not enough to sustain the short ballot movement on the municipal level. Pending the appearance in America of some type of controlled single executive system, the short ballot movement appeared headed for a stone wall.<sup>4</sup> In order to achieve a short ballot, according to Childs, some elective offices had to be eliminated or made appointive.

While reviewing numerous articles on commission government in the Short Ballot office, Childs gradually began to build in his mind a plan

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 76.

of municipal government capable of eliminating the weaknesses of standard (Galveston) commission government. Proponents of commission government often claimed that their plan was clearly an efficient approach because it applied the proven business model of a board of directors to city administration. Childs agreed with this assertion; upon extending the analogy, however, he concluded that in fact commission government required a business manager added to the board of city directors in order for the business model to be complete. Childs soon read that the bicameral city council in Staunton, Virginia had appointed a general manager to handle the administrative affairs of the city. The leader in the Staunton manager movement declared: "There is nothing new in our system; we have simply adopted for the government of our city the business methods of the private corporation."<sup>5</sup> Childs realizing that such a general manager added to the commission would eliminate the major weaknesses of commission government--the imposition of administrative duties on elected representatives and the concomitant lack of expert administration--developed the idea of having the commission delegate its administrative duties and authority to a single appointive official. The city manager plan was thus born in the mind of Richard S. Childs. From theory to fact would follow later as attention shifted from New York to a small South Carolina community.

Before Sumter could assume its important role in the city manager movement, however, Childs and his Short Ballot colleagues had to fur-

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<sup>5</sup>John Crosby, "Municipal Government Administered by a General Manager--The Staunton Plan," in Commission Government in American Cities, ed. by Emory R. Johnson, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, XXXVIII (1911), 880. Crosby served on the Staunton city council when the first city manager was hired.



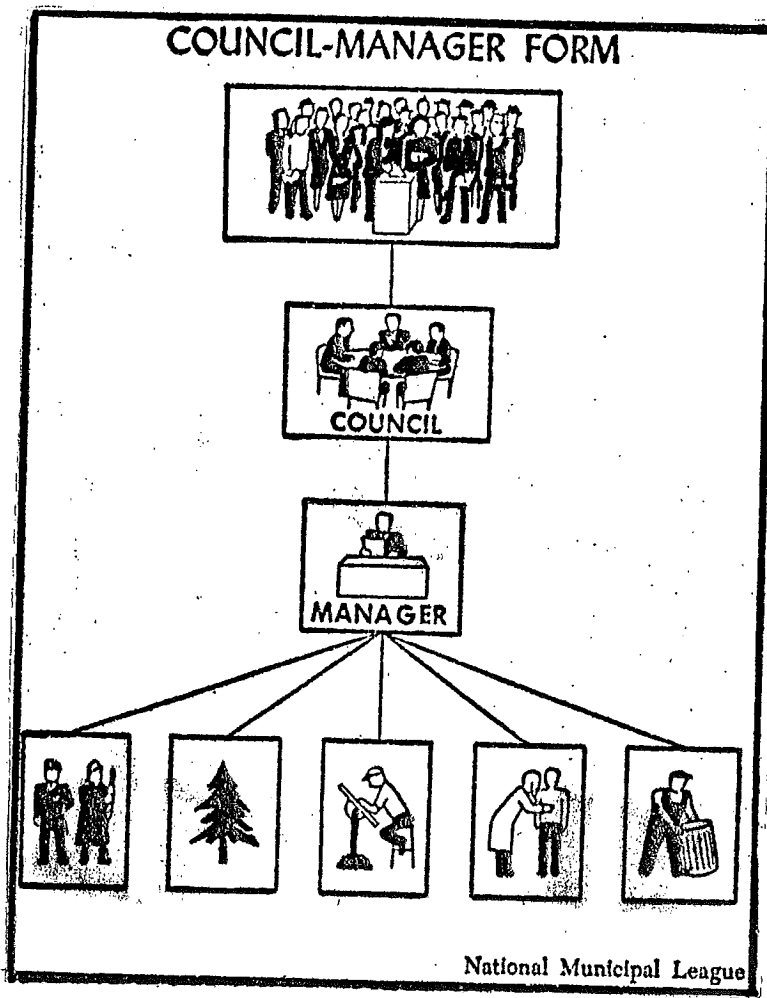
ther develop and then publicize their novel approach to municipal government. The publicity task probably proved no real burden for Childs as he had a solid foundation and several years experience in the advertising field. Calling upon this experience, Childs very early made a wise decision to link his general manager plan with the already popular commission form of municipal government. He thereby hoped to avert any split in the ranks of the reformers by getting his new proposal headed not in opposition to the commission plan, but in the same direction. Childs portrayed the new plan as a logical development in municipal reform and labelled his new idea "the commission-manager plan." The advocates of the commission plan had made use of the business corporation analogy, but Childs by adding a new position resembling the general business manager pre-empted the commission advocates' major argument without openly alienating this significant reform group. This major shift in emphasis eventually diverted the impetus of the commission movement into a movement for city manager government.<sup>6</sup>

Despite extensive use of the term "commission-manager plan," Childs' new theory in fact constituted something almost entirely different from the standard Galveston-type commission government. Only the short ballot fully characterized both plans. The other major points of the manager plan included the unification of all municipal powers in the council and the concentration of administrative authority in an official appointed by, and responsible to, the council. The unification of powers

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<sup>6</sup> Harold A. Stone, Don K. Price, and Kathryn H. Stone, City Manager Government in the United States: A Review After Twenty-Five Years (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1940), p. 11.

in the council appears similar, of course, to the concentration of powers in the commission under the Galveston plan, but the unification under the manager plan really represents only the power to decide and not to implement. The distinguishing element of the new plan was obviously the official with the power to implement--the city manager. Childs contended that Americans in the past had always been more willing to extend powers to a group of men (a council or legislature) than to a single person. Under his new theory, however, great powers could be granted one individual because this official would be a controlled chief executive.<sup>7</sup> The controlled executive could act as freely as he



<sup>7</sup> Childs, "New-Controlled Executive," 79.

considered necessary to accomplish his specified duties always cognizant of the complete removal power over his job held by the council. The controlled executive plan went even beyond recall of the mayor, according to Childs, for the manager "can be bounced out of office in less time than it takes to print the blanks for a recall petition."<sup>8</sup> In short, the city manager plan achieved administrative unity, but avoided establishing one-man power.

A special committee of the National Municipal League including Childs offered the following basic description of the city manager plan:

A single elective board (commission) representative, supervisory, and legislative in function, the members giving only part time to municipal work and receiving nominal salaries or none. An appointive chief executive (city manager) hired by the board from anywhere in the country and holding office at the pleasure of the board. The manager appoints and controls the remaining city employees, subject to adequate civil service provisions.<sup>9</sup>

This same committee identified twelve major advantages of the Council manager government over other forms of municipal organization:

1. The city manager plan creates a single-headed administrative establishment instead of the five separate administrative establishments seen in the standard commission plan. This administrative unity makes for harmony between municipal departments since all are subject to a common head.
2. The city manager plan permits expertness in administration at the point where it is most valuable, namely, at the head.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>9</sup> National Municipal League, Committee on the Commission Form of Government, "The Coming of the City Manager Plan," National Municipal Review, III (January, 1914), 45. In addition to Childs this special committee included Charles A. Beard, professor of politics at Columbia University; William Bennett Munro, professor of government at Harvard University; Ernest S. Bradford, a former professor employed by the United States Department of Commerce and Labor; and, Clinton Rogers Woodruff, editor of the National Municipal Review.

3. It permits comparative permanence in the office of the chief executive, whereas in all plans involving elective executives, long tenures are rare.

4. The city manager plan permits the chief executives to migrate from city to city; thus one city can summon an experienced man from a similar post in another city.

5. The city manager plan, while giving a single-headed administration, abolishes the one-man power seen in the old mayor-council plan.

6. The city manager plan abandons all attempts to choose administrators by popular election.

7. The city manager plan leaves the lines of responsibility unmistakably clear, avoiding the confusion in the standard commission plan between the responsibility of the individual commissioners and that of the commission as a whole.

8. It provides for better discipline and harmony, inasmuch as the city manager cannot safely be at odds with the council.

9. Unlike the commission plan, the city manager plan permits enlarged councils, and so opens the way to the broader and more diversified representation which large cities need.

10. In very small cities, by providing the services of one well-paid manager instead of three or five paid commissioners, it makes possible economy in salaries and overhead expenses.

11. It permits ward elections or proportional representation which may be essential in a large city.

12. It creates council positions which should be attractive to first class citizens, since the service offers opportunities for high usefulness without interruption of their private careers.<sup>10</sup>

Before any city could actually attempt realization of these predicted benefits of council manager government, Childs' abstract theory needed a concrete form.

Actually bringing together into one basic proposal all the various manager principles and commission variations probably stands as Childs'

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 46.

major contribution to the municipal reform movement. Childs does not, in fact, consider his role to have been as father of city manager government, but instead explains: "I was the minister who performed the marriage ceremony between the city-manager as first thought of in Staunton and the commission plan in Des Moines [an advanced form of the Galveston plan]." <sup>11</sup> As pointed out above, the city of Staunton, Virginia had hired a general manager in order to bring business practices into municipal government. A movement for standard commission government had developed in Staunton during 1907, but was thwarted by a state constitutional requirement that all cities of a certain size maintain a mayor and bicameral council. Local reform leaders sought other ways to achieve administrative unity eventually settling on the idea of a general manager. An ordinance creating such an office was passed by the city councils on January 13, 1908. Staunton soon after became the first city to hire a manager, but the basic structure of government remained the old mayor-and-council form. Childs, reading of the success of the Staunton experiment in his New York office, very quickly decided this structure did not represent the proper plan to publicize as an improved alternative to commission government. Because Staunton retained the basic mayor-and-(bicameral) council structure, Childs felt that city's plan lacked two major reform features: the short ballot and the unification of powers in a single elective body. The general manager in Staunton, therefore, had to satisfy not simply one council, but two legislative bodies and a mayor with veto power; and at the same time

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in John Porter East, Council-Manager Government: The Political Thought of Its Founder, Richard S. Childs (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 75.

keep all three branches in line with his projects. According to Childs this "was no form of government for any other city to copy!"<sup>12</sup> Demonstrating again a keen understanding of advertising principles, Childs chose to completely ignore Staunton in his Short Ballot publicity. He concluded that had the imperfect Staunton Plan been pushed, much confusion would have resulted and "we would have had to explain away Staunton for decades."<sup>13</sup> Childs still needed a city to implement his theory of "true" council manager government.

The first opportunity to present the manager theory in written form arose in early 1910. Childs in preparing his program of work for presentation to the New York State Short Ballot Organization considered as a top priority the drafting of an optional commission-plan law for New York state municipalities. To conduct the actual drafting Childs hired, on recommendation of Charles Beard, a Columbia University graduate student, H. S. Gilbertson. Childs instructed Gilbertson to make provision that the standard commission select a manager to conduct the city's administrative affairs. Initially Gilbertson appeared "a little startled" at this suggestion, but soon produced an extensive draft incorporating the new city manager concept.<sup>14</sup> The Short Ballot Organization chose, however, to concentrate its 1910 efforts on state level reform and never reviewed the Gilbertson draft. Childs, therefore, began a search for another sponsor soon finding a receptive group in the Lockport, New York Board of Trade. The Board of Trade was in the process during late 1910 of proposing a new city charter of the standard commission type

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Childs, Civic Victories, p. 144.

for Lockport. Childs contacted the group offering to furnish them with the "latest thing in a commission charter"--Gilbertson's city manager draft.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Childs promised Lockport nationwide publicity if the Board of Trade would endorse the proposal. The Board soon chose to accept Childs' offer and the Lockport representative introduced the council manager plan into the New York state legislature of 1911. Although the legislature rejected the Lockport Proposal, the council manager plan now had taken definite legal form and Childs had a document to publicize. Childs fulfilled his promise to the Board of Trade by spreading news of the Lockport Proposal all across the country. Throughout 1911 the Short Ballot Organization issued press releases on the new plan to over one thousand newspapers across the country. Childs also wrote long articles concerning the plan sometimes signing his own name and on other occasions borrowing the name of some other noted reformer. The Short Ballot Organization distributed these articles to the National Municipal Review, The American City, The Outlook, and other national journals. The council manager plan quickly became a national movement recognized by the press even before any city adopted it.<sup>16</sup>

Municipal reformers in large cities and in small towns alike began to accept the council manager plan as a second alternative to mayor-and-council government. Movements were initiated to adopt the new form in several jurisdictions. In La Grande, Oregon, for example, a petition was circulated in 1911 asking for a charter referendum to decide on city

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<sup>15</sup>Stone, Price, and Stone, Twenty-Five Years, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

manager government. The special election to be conducted on December 3, 1911 was never held, however, as the required number of petition signatures could not be obtained.<sup>17</sup> Voters in another Oregon city, Eugene, did get a chance to vote on a proposed charter "identical with the one introduced by the Board of Trade of Lockport."<sup>18</sup> The city manager plan was submitted in late 1911 as an alternative with a regular commission plan, but Eugene voters rejected both choosing not to earn for their community the title as first council manager city--this distinction remained for Sumter.

## II. ADOPTION

In 1912 Sumter was a small city of just over 8,000 inhabitants situated in a largely agricultural region about forty-five miles from the state capital. The city served as a minor trade center for the surrounding farms and also as county seat for Sumter County. Sumter had been incorporated in 1845 with the original charter being amended in 1887 to make the town a city. As a city, Sumter was governed by a popularly-elected mayor and four aldermen. In 1894, legislation increased the number of aldermen to eight with all elected at-large. City business was conducted primarily by several standing committees each composed of a different combination of aldermen. According to most

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<sup>17</sup>Richard S. Childs, "Who Thought of it First? Not Me!" (Unpublished typewritten article, a copy is located in Sumter City Hall, Sumter, South Carolina; January, 1969), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup>Charles A. Beard, "Events and Personalia," National Municipal Review, I (January, 1912), 128.



observers, this plan of government served the city fairly well, but from an administrative standpoint proved inefficient and haphazard.<sup>19</sup> The city operated adequate water and sewer systems, but had extended a franchise to a Philadelphia corporation to operate an inadequate and rundown electric system. The city contained only a few paved blocks on Main Street and a few hard-surfaced sidewalks.<sup>20</sup> Major city expenditures were also required to maintain police, fire, and health departments. Overall the municipal government appeared in a relatively sound financial condition and not marked by any notable graft or corruption. The large size of the council and the cumbersome committee system, however, prevented swift and efficient action.

A new spirit of progress emergent in Sumter during the early months of 1911 eventually generated enough interest to shake traditional confidence in the old form of city government. In the spring of 1911 the Chamber of Commerce was reorganized, adopted a new constitution, substantially increased its membership, and decided to pursue an active course in all city affairs. The Chamber created the new position of executive secretary hiring as the first incumbent A. V. Snell of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Snell, although still a young man, was a lawyer with considerable experience having worked with the Justice Department in Washington as well as having been in private practice in Oklahoma City and Duluth, Wisconsin. Snell had also been active in chamber of commerce work in both these latter two cities and brought

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<sup>19</sup> Anne King Gregorie, History of Sumter County (Sumter: Library Board of Sumter County, 1954), p. 402. Newspaper accounts during the period correspond with Gregorie's later observations.

<sup>20</sup> This description of Sumter in 1912 is drawn primarily from Gregorie, Sumter County, pp. 408-409.

to Sumter great enthusiasm for his job. Under Snell's direction the Sumter Chamber promoted the expansion of downtown business activity, encouraged the establishment of several local banks, and sponsored the town merchants' first major shopping promotion--an Annual Bargain Day. In order to keep pace with this expanded activity in the private sector, Snell soon turned his attention to improving the structure of local government. While living in Washington and Oklahoma City, Snell had become interested in municipal reform reading all obtainable material on the topic with particular emphasis on the commission plan.<sup>21</sup> Snell undoubtedly followed with interest the development of Childs' new form of commission government and waited for an opportunity to apply municipal reform principles to Sumter city government.

In 1910 the South Carolina legislature had enacted legislation allowing Columbia, the capital city, to adopt the state's first commission government. The voters of Columbia approved the commission proposal and soon began spreading across the state news of the benefits of this new system of municipal government. Other South Carolina cities observing the Columbia experience also desired to join the nationwide commission-government movement. In response to local requests, the state assembly in 1911 passed a measure allowing Charleston, Greenwood, and certain other cities to vote on adopting the commission form of government. Governor Coleman Blease, however, found sections of the bill objectionable and exercised his veto power preventing final passage of the law. Supporters of the legislation proclaimed that the issue would be raised again in the 1912 legislative session. Reflecting the new spirit of local pride and progressivism, the Sumter Herald

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., .p. 403.