

The Village of Delta: public policy and community history

As a child one of my favorite recreation areas was Delta Lake. I was always confused to overhear my parents referring to the village of Delta and “the Delta stuff.” We never visited the village of Delta and I never saw the Delta stuff. Several weekends ago, this childhood mystery was solved when I was home and discovered a collection of boxes labeled “Village of Delta” in our attic. Inside the boxes were village documents, including pictures, postcards, letters, and journals. Some of the documents were dated the very last years of the village and many were at least partially damaged. When I asked my parents about the boxes, I learned that they had received the boxes after my grandmother’s death, some fifteen years earlier. Apparently the boxes had been in the possession of my grandmother’s cousin, Dan Bork, who had resided in the village of Delta until the village was no more.

The Village of Delta was a small agricultural village settled along the Mohawk River shortly after the American Revolution. The building associated with the Black River Canal, completed in 1854, and the trade that subsequently followed brought prosperity to the region as a whole and to the village of Delta in particular. Easy access to the canal system for shipping and trading lured many immigrants, who easily found employment opportunities either with the Erie Canal project or its related business. The turn of the 20th century, however, brought an abrupt end to the prosperity and good life enjoyed in the Delta village. In 1906, residents noticed a group of unknown surveyors exploring their village. A couple years later, the state government in Albany notified residents of a plan to construct a reservoir for the new barge canal. This construction would mean that Delta village would eventually be flooded. According to the eminent domain clause of the Constitution, state governments have the right to take private land for public use as long as the owners of that land are justly compensated. Between 1908 and 1911, residents of the Village of Delta were forced to accept compensation for their land and leave their homes. The construction of the dam of the Mohawk River was finished in 1912. The reservoir was filled and Delta lake created in 1916. With the creation of the lake, the Village of Delta ceased to exist.

This project will form the basis of research for my senior project in history next year. It will bring together public policy with a range of interdisciplinary questions, including those of environmental studies, economics and community history. For example, I am interested in the way that the residents of Delta understood and viewed the state’s right to their lands and village. Although as a matter of policy, the decision was supported by law, I will investigate the range of local responses to the decision. For example, what were residents paid for their property? How was this determined and how did residents feel about the sums as compensation? Another interesting aspect of this decision was its timing in terms of the economics. The Barge Canal was constructed well after the widespread use of trains and on the eve of the era of the automobile. I wonder how the decision to invest public monies in this kind of

project was viewed at this time. Next, I am interested in the environmental impact of the construction on the region. Did state officials or village residents consider the decision from this standpoint? Finally, I am interested in the reactions of village residents as a community. Of particular interest to me will be looking into their village meetings and how the village “moved on”. For example, I am aware of at least one entire church that was picked up and moved to a site in another town. What happened to the buildings and houses of this once thriving village? Where did the residents go and how did they manage to rebuild their lives? Did residents in any way celebrate their community or memorialize it? By approaching the history of Delta village through a variety of vantage points, I hope to make my own addition to the “village stuff” I found in my attic and consider public investment in historical perspective.

In preparation for the summer I have begin to look into boxes in the attic, sifting through the documents that are in my family’s possession, and compiled a partial bibliography of relevant readings. I will be drawing upon my background in women’s history and American history, as well as my background as a person from the area to deepen my research opportunities this summer. I will use personal contacts with community groups (e.g. the Senior Center in Rome) and churches (e.g. the First Presbyterian Church moved from Delta village) in the area to identify people who may have connections to Delta.

I will use a Levitt Grant this summer to catalogue the documents found in the attic, study the economic and environmental issues surrounding the building of the Canal, and collect information about the way people of Delta Village reacted to changes before them. In order to do this, I propose to do research at state and local archives, particularly the Rome Historical Society and Rome Public Jervis Library, and the New York State Archives in Albany. I may also need to make use of newspapers of the period available either at Cornell or the New York Public Library. In the fall term, I plan to take an environmental studies course and a U.S. history course in order to give me a deeper understanding of the issues as I complete my senior project. I would plan to present my research in the spring of 2007 to a campus audience.

Bibliography- Summer Research

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Budget for Proposed Summer Research Project (Summer of 2006)

6 weeks

Copying costs at libraries and here	\$175
Gas and Tolls- \$30/ week	\$180
Erie Canal Village entry fee (for entire summer)	\$ 25
Books	\$120
Total	\$500