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“Social Activism, Environmentalism, and the Construction of an Adirondack
Prisonland, 1975-1999”

On the last weekend in August 1981, a caravan of overloaded sedans and station wagons pulled up to the front entrance of Paul Smith's College in Gabriels, New York. One by one, mothers and fathers said long goodbyes to their sons and daughters arriving to begin the new school year. Standing along the roadside greeting each passing car were representatives from the recently formed Citizens Against More Prisons in the Adirondacks, known as CAMPA. The protesters informed all who would listen of the college's plan to sell its local satellite campus to the state Department of Correctional Services for use as a minimum-security prison. CAMPA's picket served as a warning to parents and students of the penitentiary's potential harm to the region's ecological integrity, public health, and social character. At the same time, the protesters challenged the college community to reconcile its support for an institution destined to “destroy” Gabriels. The picketers' actions were but the latest chapter in a long struggle surrounding the environmental implications of prison building projects inside New York's largest state park.

My paper explores the history and memory of resistance to penitentiary construction in three Adirondack Park communities: Ray Brook, Gabriels, and Tupper Lake. The advent of a national anti-prison movement in the early 1970s coincided with the growth of organized environmentalism. However, what began as a progressive, moral crusade to short circuit the trend toward mass incarceration quickly became an organizationally incoherent collection of local anti-penitentiary groups. By the early 1980s, a national-local split had riven the anti-prison and environmental movements into hostile (though sometimes overlapping) camps. While national-level critics focused on the moral crisis of warehousing prisoners, local history, politics, and nature blurred the lines between anti-prison activism and environmentalism in northern New York. By the late 1980s, the anti-prison and environmental movements in the Adirondacks were often indistinguishable, though subject to the vagaries and contradictions of local actors. The disconnect between the two movements only deepened in the 1990s as more prisons opened and local, environmentally-oriented concerns supplanted the broader movement's moral agenda. Interestingly, by the 2000s, local memory of environmentalism's role in shaping this prisonland faded as the anti-prison movement's moral roots acquired newfound social currency.

I'll begin in the Essex County hamlet of Ray Brook, renowned for its sprawling state tuberculosis hospital opened in 1904. The closure of the 540-acre facility in 1975 coincided with an overcrowding crisis in New York's prisons *and* with preparations for

the 1980 Winter Olympics in nearby Lake Placid. Correctional planners coveted the site as a potential prison, while the Olympic Organizing Committee saw ready-made housing for 2000 athletes. In 1976, Governor Hugh Carey converted the facility to a state medium-security prison, the region's first new penitentiary since 1845. Carey's action inspired Olympic organizers to forge an alliance with the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), also seeking new cell space, to build a dual-purpose housing complex. Construction on the new facility, designed to lodge Olympic athletes first and imprison 500 federal medium security inmates later, began, without public comment, on a tract of state Forest Preserve land in Ray Brook in June 1977.

The scheme to house Olympic athletes in a future prison built atop constitutionally protected and undeveloped forestland sparked global outrage and spurred organized resistance at the national, state, and local levels. New York City progressives, with support from a wide array of religious, peace, and civil rights activists, formed Stop the Olympic Prison (STOP) in April 1978 as the public face of moral opposition to what they derided as the "Olympic Prison." The Ray Brook facility's symbolic value could not be understated, especially as Cold War tensions with the U.S.S.R. heated up and the U.S. prison population surpassed that of its longtime enemy. STOP embarked on a public relations campaign, holding protest marches, producing reams of literature, and enlisting the support of politicians, journalists, clergy, and celebrities across the country in hopes of scuttling the project.

STOP's critique of the racist roots of mass incarceration, however, found little reception among local residents who experienced firsthand the ecological transformations required to build the massive new complex. Residents awoke that June morning to the sound of chainsaws and wood chippers reshaping a 150-acre landscape long treasured for outdoor recreation. Heavy rains then unleashed a torrent of unsecured soil and wood chips into area waterways, contaminating water supplies, destroying aquatic habitats, and killing untold numbers of fish, waterfowl, and other organisms. As the connections between bodily and environmental health became grimly apparent, locals who tolerated the new state prison became violently opposed to its federal counterpart across the road. Unfortunately, STOP didn't exploit its considerable public platform to address the ecological and health concerns of area residents. For prison advocates (most notably, local Republican Congressman Robert McEwen and the local Catholic diocese), this split seemed to prove their claims that the project, along with its promise of economic uplift, enjoyed widespread support. Without a legal mechanism to halt or repurpose the facility, STOP supporters stood by helplessly as Congressman McEwen, the local Catholic bishop, and Lake Placid's Olympic organizers cut the ribbon on Ray Brook's federal prison in September 1980.

But the fight wasn't over. The failure of mass incarceration to stem the prison-overcrowding crisis prompted insatiable (and illogical) demand for new cells. In the decade after 1980, the BOP twice attempted to build a second federal prison in Ray

Brook. Its first effort in 1983 spurred the creation of Concerned Citizens of Ray Brook (CCRB), a local anti-prison group whose grievances focused on ecological health and public safety (after numerous escapes in prior decade). Protesters immediately embarked on a petition and letter-writing campaign that contributed to the plan's quick demise. The Bureau revived the proposal in 1989, shocking Concerned Citizens back into action. This time, however, prison foes had both the law and history on their side. Back in 1977, the nearby Village of Saranac Lake had agreed to connect the federal prison to its sewage treatment system on the condition that future penal expansions first receive village consent. Months of public pressure, meetings, and reams of correspondence yielded Concerned Citizens a considerable victory. In early 1990, local Republican Congressman David O'Brien Martin, a heretofore-reliable supporter of the prison industry, killed the project before it reached the House floor.

Homeowners in the nearby Franklin County hamlet of Gabriels had watched in horror as Ray Brook became a reluctant host to two prisons in the space of four years. Like Ray Brook, Gabriels acquired fame for its tuberculosis sanitarium, originally operated by Catholic nuns from the 1890s through the early 1960s. In 1966, Paul Smith's College purchased the 227-acre property for use as a satellite campus, which by 1980 was deserted. However, unlike Ray Brook, Gabriels had a larger and more affluent population of seasonal homeowners, many of whom vacationed on family

estates dating to the Gilded Age. If STOP's message of social justice had met a tepid response in Ray Brook, it had little hope in the highly stratified enclave of Gabriels.

The formation of CAMPA in July 1981 was not a response to any real or perceived health threat; after all, the 150-inmate minimum-security prison proposed for Gabriels was to occupy an existing facility. Instead, CAMPA's environmental concerns centered on preserving the Park's social character in the face of rampant prison expansion. Homeowners viewed Gabriels as the embodiment of the Park's late-nineteenth-century planners' original intent; namely, as an isolated wilderness enclave designed to alleviate the pressures of living, working, and governing in the nation's industrial cities. Thus, the forced migration of largely nonwhite, urban prisoners posed threatened the Park's survival. CAMPA's goal, therefore, was to short-circuit the indirect racial and social integration of their community via mass incarceration.

Armed with vast financial and social capital, CAMPA grew into a homegrown, anti-prison juggernaut aided by attorneys, scientists, environmentalists, and former STOP members. The group even enlisted the support of the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) and its stridently anti-prison chairman, Theodore Ruzow. The APA, established in 1971, regulated developments on public and private lands inside the Park. Its binding jurisdiction, however, was limited to private projects, thus giving the Corrections Department and College a relatively free hand in building the prison. However, unlike the penitentiaries in Ray Brook, which received no public oversight,

CAMPA and its APA allies used their limited powers to complicate the conversion by forcing public involvement.

For over a year, prison critics bombarded Corrections with endless requests for information, letters of protest, lawsuits, and two months of public hearings in the winter of 1981-82. The protracted struggle unmasked the social and racial anxieties that underpinned CAMPA's environmental critique. However, the project's widespread unpopularity also compelled a round of face-saving by state officials via three major concessions: 1) a promise to add 140 acres of the prison site to the protected state Forest Preserve; 2) a pledge to shield the facility from public view; and 3) community use of free inmate labor on public works projects. Legally powerless to stop the project, CAMPA disbanded following the prison's August 1982 opening. However, in a strange twist of fate, the inmates critics feared most spent the next quarter century undertaking construction and repair work that maintained the rustic wilderness whose disappearance CAMPA had feared. In so doing, the prisoners inadvertently preserved the hamlet's existing social character. Thus, critics and supporters alike regretted the prison's closure in July 2009.

Finally, I will talk about the Franklin County Village of Tupper Lake, where for two decades residents quarreled over whether to join the Adirondacks' burgeoning prisonland. A community task force lobbied the state throughout the 1980s and 1990s to *attract* a prison to Tupper Lake. For nearly two centuries, the village had thrived as a

logging center and vacation resort in the so-called “Heart of the Adirondacks.” By the 1970s, however, decreased logging and tourism had battered its infrastructure and economy, leaving village leaders to seek corrections as an economic development alternative. This focus became an obsession, especially after the opening of prisons in Ray Brook and Gabriels.

From 1980 to 1997, the task force presented four different bids to state correctional planners. The first, in 1980-81, entailed a naïve attempt to revive the logging trade by building a wood-chip-burning electrical station to power a new public school and prison; the state said no, thanks. In 1986, the task force proposed to purchase a parcel of commercial forestland owned by International Paper (IP) for a future penitentiary. Unfortunately, IP wasn’t interested in selling, and residents organized as Tupper Lake Concerned Citizens (TLCC) formed to stop the project. While TLCC shared similar public health and ecological concerns as their neighbors in Ray Brook and Gabriels, by the mid-1980s, the AIDS virus was rampant in prisons across New York. TLCC successfully exploited public fear of the disease, leading the state to reject Tupper Lake’s bid in 1987. The task force had a problem on its hands.

Tupper Lake submitted its third proposal, including an agreement to purchase the IP land, to Corrections in 1989. TLCC swung back into action, this time forging an alliance with the APA and its anti-prison executive director Robert Glennon. Glennon warned the Corrections Department that any task force attempt to purchase private

land for prison construction would trigger legally binding APA review, entailing months of Gabriels-style hearings and paperwork. Fearing costly delays, Corrections rejected Tupper Lake again in the summer of 1989.

For the next seven years, a bitter cold war enveloped Tupper Lake as each side plotted their next moves. Their moment came when Republican Governor George Pataki announced a new round of prison expansion in 1996. The task force spent the next year pressuring state leaders to finally build in Tupper Lake. In a brazen act of political corruption, Republican State Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno freely admitted in August 1997 that he had decided on his own to build the 1500-inmate maximum-security prison in Tupper Lake. The prison, Bruno said, was a gift to the North Country's longtime Republican State Senator Ronald Stafford for over thirty years of loyalty and friendship in Albany.

The opposition was breathless. TLCC could count on support neither from the APA, stacked with conservative Republican appointees, nor from local environmentalists, many of whom feared potential ostracism from a governor widely lauded for his conservationist principles. In the fall of 1997, the Park Agency "fast-tracked" its customary review process to ensure groundbreaking before winter. An overeager Corrections Department promptly (and illegally) began reshaping IP's as yet unsold land, prompting TLCC to call in support from the Sierra Club's Albany branch. The Club's lawyer, Robert Glennon, called on the APA to immediately suspend its

review of the project. Fearing a lawsuit, the Park Agency and Corrections quickly backed down, local environmentalists joined the opposition, and in December 1997, Governor Pataki moved the prison to the Franklin County village of Malone, outside the Adirondack Park. While the governor's rationale was to protect a sensitive aquifer at Tupper Lake, U.S. Geological Survey maps showed no aquifer at Tupper Lake, but a significant one in Malone. Thus, Pataki's decision was more political than ecological, as he sacrificed one sensitive environment to preserve another. Without APA protection, Malone couldn't be saved. New York's 69th (and last) state prison opened atop the aquifer in June 1999. Tupper Lake got a museum.

Despite recent facility closures and reductions in the prison population, Corrections remains the North Country's largest single employer. However, the history of this nearly two-century-old industry in northern New York remains a mystery for many area residents. The significant role played by environmentalists in shaping this prisonland is even less known. What is interesting in 2015, though, is that increasing public attention toward issues of police brutality, racism in the criminal justice system, and the prison-industrial complex have helped restore to a position of prominence the moral and ethical questions first publicized by STOP in the 1970s. Our task is to firmly position questions of social justice and mass incarceration within their historically appropriate environmentalist framework, and I hope my project helps us begin that work. Thank you.