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"Prisons as Economic Savior in New York's Adirondack Park, ca. 1841-1999"

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Upstate Correctional Facility in Malone, New York (Franklin County), built in 1999, was the twelfth and final prison opened in the Adirondacks after Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora opened in 1845. Each of these prisons was conceived in similar conditions: a crisis in overcrowding in New York's prison system that coincided with a period of decline and readjustment in the state's economic structure. In the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, residents of the sparsely populated Adirondacks wrote to Governor William Seward, imploring him to build prisons in the region to boost the local economy. For 131 years, Clinton Correctional Facility stood as the state's only prison in the Adirondacks, a stone fortress in the wilderness, the Empire State's own Siberia, an institution that provided jobs and locked up thousands of criminals. In that time, though, the idea of using prisons for more than just incarceration and punishment did not disappear. As both prison overcrowding and recession plagued New York beginning in the 1970s, the idea resurfaced and gained momentum. This time, though, the idea of using prisons to create jobs and boost the economy attracted a significant number of supporters *and* critics from both inside *and* outside the region. The late 20th century debate over prison expansion in the Adirondacks occurred within an economic and sociopolitical framework that had not existed in 1845; namely, a postindustrial economy

dominated by tourism and a region managed and governed by state environmental, conservation, and land use planning regulations (elaborate briefly). Prisons became a regional industry in the Adirondacks in the late 20th century, and nature became an active player in this discussion and helped inform ideas, conceptions and arguments about the prisons' "economic impact."

I want to begin by briefly discussing how ideas about economic impact influenced the state's decision to build its first prison in the Adirondacks, and how the state's manipulation and reshaping of nature in the interest of providing economic stimulus *and* relieving overcrowding garnered only positive attention. I want to argue that the Adirondacks' frontier condition in the mid-19th century (largely uninhabited, inaccessible, and unknown to most Americans) combined with its potential usefulness in the state's growing industrial economy (mining, logging) served to keep the debate about the state's newest prison largely positive. A century and more later, as the base of the Adirondack economy came to rest on tourism, mining and logging declined, and the region came under the purview of state environmental and land use regulations, the shaping, reshaping, and manipulation of nature to make way for prisons would attract both more attention and more criticism.

The Panic of 1837 and the resulting depression contributed to greatly increasing crime rates across New York, but especially in the state's urban centers. By the early 1840s, the state's existing prisons at Newgate, Auburn, and Sing Sing were severely overcrowded. Inspired by the reports of a natural history survey of the Adirondacks undertaken by a group of scientists in the 1830s (led by geologist Ebenezer Emmons, and indicating large deposits of iron ore and vast forests ready to be logged), and buoyed by the support of local residents asking the state

specifically to build prisons and use convict labor to mine iron ore as a means of economic stimulus, in 1842 the Legislature authorized a study of the idea of building a prison in the region. Public officials were also under pressure from skilled workers and labor leaders eager to end the contract system in state prisons, where goods manufactured by convicts were sold in competition with those produced in private industry. Skilled labor recognized the need for a new prison, and the state needed its new prison to be financially self-sufficient. In 1843, the state's investigator reported that the region's ore was "of the magnetic variety, and is very valuable"; the mines were "the best located of any I have visited, in regard to an abundant supply of fuel (timber and water). The soil of the adjacent country is good, furnishing an abundant supply of provisions at a cheap rate. For the manufacture of wrought iron, this is the best locality for such an establishment."

The state proposed to employ convicts in its new prison in mining and producing iron on state land inside the prison. To avoid competition with skilled workers, the iron would be sold overseas, the profits being turned directly back into the prison's operating fund. The *economic* benefits of an institution designed specifically for incarceration, therefore, would be spread far and wide. Urban mechanics would be offered relief from competition with convict labor; Adirondack residents would be offered jobs in the new prison; and the state would have a new, financially self-sufficient prison to house its growing criminal population. Nature would play a passive role in this change, bending to the state's will by offering up its bounty of trees, stone, water, and iron ore as humans reshaped the Adirondack environment in the name of "progress."

In May 1844, the prison bill passed the Legislature and was signed by the Governor. The bill's passage prompted the firing of a 26-gun salute in Albany's main park and a 100-gun salute in New York City, "an example followed by most of the villages in the State." In Albany and New York City, large parades of skilled workers and politicians praised the prison bill's passage. While men and women in the state's urban centers celebrated, news of the new prison was slow reaching the Adirondacks, an area largely cut off from modern transportation and communication networks in the mid-19th century. There were no parades. There were no gun salutes. There was no celebration. Within a year, the new prison would be open, and for over a century New York's largest maximum security penal institution would continue to be the only such institution in the Adirondacks welcoming the state's convicts for incarceration, and in some cases, execution. Many of the same forces that had driven the construction and opening of the prison at Dannemora would propel the state's prison-building binge of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Nature, though, would assume a more active role in the prison debates of the late 20th century, a condition that would make the process much more complicated and complex.

By the 1970s, the economy of the Adirondacks was in bad shape. The mining industry was in freefall. Indeed, two former mining communities, Lyon Mountain and Mineville, would eventually become prison towns. Logging remained but on a much more limited and restricted basis. Tourism was the bedrock on which the region's economy rested, but the glittering lakes, snow-capped peaks and glamour of the 1980 Winter Olympics obscured the daily realities of life for many Adirondackers: a grinding poverty and profound sense of uncertainty about the future. Unemployment rates in the region were among the highest in the state, and tourism

jobs provided neither economic security nor health benefits. Many in the region felt stuck and saw no way forward.

Local politicians and boosters looked south, first to New York City, and then north up the Hudson to Albany. By 1976, New York City was also in bad shape. The city had nearly gone bankrupt, public services were on the decline, and both violent and nonviolent crime rates were skyrocketing. In Albany in 1973, the legislature had enacted the Rockefeller drug laws, which together with the various urban crises being played out in the New York City area combined to overcrowd the state's prisons. In an act of desperation, in 1976 Governor Carey unilaterally closed a state drug rehabilitation center near Lake Placid and converted it to a minimum-security prison. Many in the region welcomed this move and saw in the new prison a reason to be hopeful about the Adirondacks' economic future. The problems of the state's urban centers, some argued, could reap enormous benefits for its northern hinterlands.

The men and women who supported prison building in the Adirondacks, from the 1840s to today, framed their support largely in terms of the purported positive economic impact to be derived from warehousing the state's criminal population. The prisons could not help but provide jobs, they argued, and residents of the Adirondacks needed secure, stable employment. Those jobs, boosters argued, would create a ripple effect in the regional economy, spurring the development of new service-oriented businesses such as bars, restaurants, lodging, laundromats, barber shops, hair salons, and the like. To those who worried that the prisons might discourage tourism, supporters noted that most of the prisons would be hidden from view and located in areas off the beaten path (a subject of intense discussion—elaborate here). Prison boosters were keenly aware, though, that this new

industry depended on a continuation of the economic, social, and political problems that continued to churn out a steady stream of criminals from the state's urban centers. To this point, many argued that in addition to providing badly needed jobs for area residents, the criminals transported to do time in the Adirondacks would benefit from being incarcerated in a region whose landscape and nature would promote their rehabilitation and ultimate re-entry into free society. Indeed, many prison promoters argued that prisons were a natural fit for the Adirondacks, a region that had a history of welcoming the sick, disadvantaged, and infirm. Prisons fit nicely in a region whose historical trajectory included the development of tuberculosis sanatoria, institutions for the mentally challenged, and drug and addiction rehabilitation centers. Making prisons an industry in the Adirondacks, many argued, would be a win-win situation for the entire state.

The evidence I have uncovered indicates that support for the prisons based on a promise of positive economic impact came largely from permanent residents of communities either vying for a prison or in the process of getting one; local politicians (mostly Republican in a region dominated by Republicans); and the Department of Correctional Services, which in many ways behaved like an economic development agency when deciding to build prisons in the Adirondacks. The occasional convict also voiced support for prisons as a vehicle for economic recovery in the Adirondacks (in scattered letters and interviews in local newspapers). Corrections, though, could not simply choose a site, build a prison, and populate it with convicts. In the Adirondacks, a region governed by strict environmental and land use planning regulations, the state's correctional agency had to prove that its institutions would harm neither the environment nor the character of the Park. As in other communities across the

state, Corrections also had to gain the acceptance of surrounding communities and residents, and one of their most prominent selling points in the Adirondacks was a promise of jobs and economic revitalization (a task they were not legally charged to do).

*Opponents: racialized environmentalism; will not bring jobs—seniority; economic impact will be minimal; will hurt the region's character; will drive tourists away; convict work gangs are obscene and rude to local residents they encounter; obscene gestures toward women; will increase cost of living—convicts families will move there, girlfriends, wives, children; they will go on welfare and drive up taxes; convicts upon release may stay there, go on welfare, drive up taxes; they are not suited to a rural, wilderness environment like the Adirondacks—most are from the city—that is where they should stay; the skills they learn in the jobs they perform in the prisons in the Adirondacks will do them no good when they return to NYC; WILL CAUSE DAMAGE TO THE ENVIRONMENT (WHICH MANY OF THEM DID)—reshape nature in the interest of incarceration—hurt water, soil, wildlife populations

*Convicts: commodified in the name of economic uplift for the Adirondacks

*Return to Dannemora 2011: the largest maximum security prison in New York; close to 3000 inmates; a main street devoid of businesses (except bars, a liquor store, and a gas station); economic impact hard to gauge, though thousands are employed there, town built up around it

*Perhaps the Dannemora section is too long?

*Results: uneven—talk about infrastructure improvements in Malone, but that some communities saw on revitalization from prisons; irregular employment—not recession-proof (statistics); closings that began 2 years ago and will continue; it's not an economic savior;

Gabriels closed in 2009; Lyon Mountain closed in January 2011; Governor Cuomo said in State of the State address this year: "An incarceration program is not an employment program. If people need jobs, let's get people jobs. Don't put other people in prison to give some people jobs."

*Emphasize points about nature and economy