

Prisons and Nature in New York's Adirondack Mountains, 1845-1999

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I began my dissertation with a simple question: why are there so many prisons in the Adirondacks? I grew up in that area. My father worked in one of the prisons. Most of my childhood friends had at least one family member who worked in the prison system; many of them became correctional employees themselves; a few ended up behind bars. In the 1980s and 1990s, when I was in elementary, middle, and high school, it never occurred to me that there was anything “unnatural” about the number of prisons, or prisoners, in my midst. Prisons were such a normal, natural presence in the Adirondack region that questioning their presence or “naturalness” never occurred to me or anyone that I knew. However, through the course of my dissertation work, I have discovered that these questions *were asked*, time and time again. From the 1840s to the 1990s, the construction of prisons in the Adirondacks provoked intense debate about the region’s “nature.” The story of prisons in the Adirondacks, though, is a story about *three* distinct but deeply interconnected “natures”: physical (the non-human environment), social (the political, cultural, and social institutions created by and for human beings), and economic (the shape and dimensions of the prevailing capitalist order in the region). State-directed construction of what I call a *crimescape* (a landscape whose social, economic, environmental, and political dimensions have been shaped by criminal behavior in

distant places), characterized by institutions deemed antithetical to “nature,” posed significant challenges to the ways in which permanent residents and tourists understood the Adirondacks’ three natures. The question of how to make “unnatural” institutions such as prisons “fit” in an area seen as the epitome of “nature” consumed the time and energy of planners, residents, and tourists for much of the past 40 years. In the end, we will see that it was the convicts themselves who, through their labor and goodwill, helped bridge the numerous gaps between the prisons and the Adirondacks’ three “natures,” thus rendering the prisons a “natural” part of the Adirondack landscape.

I want to begin with some context. New York suffered from prison overcrowding from the late 18th century up until the early years of this century. The preferred solution to this problem, from George Clinton to George Pataki, was always the same: build more prisons. The flaws inherent in this idea became quickly apparent by the late 20th century. The more prisons that were built, the more quickly they filled up. Middle- and upper class New Yorkers yearning for “law and order” demanded and expected that criminals be sent away. Politicians eager to win favor with this voting bloc were more than happy to oblige (mention Rockefeller drug laws, harsh sentencing guidelines, etc.). The system, very quickly, fed upon itself. This disaster in state planning left New York with 69 prisons holding nearly 70,000 convicts and employing over 22,000 men and women by 1999. Much of this expansion occurred in and around the Adirondacks in the last quarter of the 20th century: by 1999, the region hosted 18 prisons which incarcerated nearly a quarter of the state’s convict population and employed thousands of local residents. Meanwhile, the overcrowding crisis that had compelled this expansion continued.

Overcrowding, therefore, cannot by itself explain why New York's prison-industrial complex exploded in the late 20th century. Another, and more significant explanation for this change, lay in the fact that by the 1980s, prisons had become a de facto economic development program for the chronically impoverished Adirondack region. Correctional planners, desperate for more cell space, promised potential host communities that prisons would function just like a business. In addition to offering "recession-proof" and stable employment to local residents, planners promised that the economic impact of penitentiaries would spread like wildfire, sparking a rebirth of long-stagnant and depressed local economies and spurring the development of new businesses, jobs, and livelihoods for people long accustomed to living permanently in hard times. This cynical exercise in state planning monetized the crimes and unfree bodies of New York's predominantly non-white, urban criminals as part of an attempt to "fix" the problems inherent in the Adirondacks' economic nature (marked by chronically high levels of unemployment and poverty). Seeking to use prisons as a tool to both relieve overcrowding and revive the Adirondacks' depressed economy ultimately solved neither problem, but instead cleared the ground for intense debate about the dimensions and futures of the region's three natures. I'll begin with a discussion of the Adirondacks' physical nature, which for both residents and visitors defines the region's character.

Before the mid-19th century, the Adirondacks were, by and large, a blank spot on the map. Prior to the 1830s, the region didn't even have a name, and much of the area's abundant natural resources (iron ore, timber, water, and wildlife, for example) remained untouched and undeveloped. The region was also sparsely populated: aside from a small number of Native Americans, French Canadian loggers and fur trappers, farmers from New England, and a few

free African Americans and former slaves, the area was primarily an uninhabited wilderness. A natural history survey in the 1830s and 1840s, though, captured the attention of New York's political and business class. Representatives from both groups sought ways to build the necessary infrastructure to exploit the region's natural resources and thereby integrate this formerly blank spot on the map into the burgeoning and bustling market economy of antebellum New York. Simultaneously, the Empire State's prisons began to burst at the seams (briefly mention Newgate, Sing Sing, and Auburn). A small group of enterprising Adirondack residents quickly petitioned state leaders to build their next prison on the northern frontier, and in 1844, officials in Albany said yes.

The village of Dannemora (named for the famous iron mining region in Sweden) did not exist when the state legislature authorized construction of a prison there in 1844. Aside from a few ramshackle hunting cabins, the area was completely undeveloped. Prison planners expected their new penitentiary to play a primary role in reshaping the area's physical nature in the name of convict rehabilitation, economic development, and the legitimization and rationalization of state power in this frontier region. To those ends, planners had a number of objectives. First, they expected the new prison, to be built by the convicts using materials gathered from the local environment, to relieve overcrowding in the state's existing prisons (Newgate, Auburn, Sing Sing). Second, planners hoped that the fresh and unspoiled physical nature of the Adirondacks would facilitate a speedy rehabilitation for the prison's inhabitants, enabling them to reenter free society as productive citizens and rendering unnecessary any future criminal behavior (and incarceration). Third, officials wanted prisoners in Dannemora to harness and develop the region's natural resources (in this case, iron ore) as a means of keeping

the institution self-sufficient. Convict labor on iron production, state leaders hoped, would also encourage entrepreneurs to move in and exploit the region's natural resources, thus spurring the rise of a capitalist economic order in the North Country. Integrating the Adirondacks into the state's antebellum market economy would help facilitate the state project of rationalizing and asserting control over the region in the coming decades.

So what were the state's results at Dannemora? First, the prison profoundly reshaped the area's physical nature. Convicts chopped down and burned acres of forestlands, excavated and leveled hillsides, cut vegetation, dammed and rerouted streams, built mines, dug large holes in the earth, cut roads through the woods, constructed barracks, stockades, and guard towers, and tended livestock and vegetable gardens, all in pursuit of the state's lofty goals. Though the iron mining operation in Dannemora was a flop, by the early 20th century, as the prison continued to expand to meet the state's chronic demands for space, the community grew with it. Two Dannemoras developed, separated eventually not by the wooden stockade fence of the 1840s, but by a massive, imposing limestone wall that stands to this day both as a physical barrier between free and unfree *and* as a constant reminder of the historical linkages between the built environments of the prison and the community. Second, it is hard to assess how successful the state was in using its new prison as a vehicle for regional economic development. Mining and logging operations sprouted across the region, as did tourism and health care institutions (in the form of tuberculosis sanitarium). Life, though, remained a struggle for most residents, and population growth remained low, with high unemployment and poverty levels forcing many young people to leave the region in search of jobs and opportunity elsewhere. By the 1960s and 70s, the mining, logging, and health care industries had gone into

decline, and many graying communities wondered what the future might hold. The Adirondacks' physical nature had been profoundly reshaped in a little more than a century to serve the needs of miners, loggers, and tourists, but permanent residents of the region needed something new to survive. By the 1970s, a prison-overcrowding crisis in New York coincided, again, with state and local efforts to breathe new life into the Adirondacks' chronically crippled economy. For many, Dannemora would serve as a source of inspiration, and for others, as a cautionary tale.

State planners' efforts to build more prisons in the Adirondacks beginning in the 1970s collided with two new natures that they had not encountered in the 1840s. First, the region had witnessed the development of a very rigid social nature defined by sharp socioeconomic and class divisions between the largely poor and underemployed permanent residents and the increasing numbers of exceedingly wealthy Americans who began to think of and use the Adirondacks as their collective second home. Second, correctional planners in the 1970s operated within a new political, social, and legal framework that reflected changing ideas about the Adirondacks' physical nature and environment. Increasing public appreciation for and concern about the environment had helped generate a slew of laws and regulations that would make prison building a much more complicated process. Whereas planners in the 1840s freely reshaped and exploited the Adirondacks' physical nature, by the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, correctional leaders had to both consider how to protect the region's physical nature *and* contend with two additional natures: the rigid social nature, and its stagnant economic nature. Planners promised, again, that their facilities would breathe new life into a dying economy. What they didn't anticipate, though, was that prisons, and prisoners, would pose significant

challenges to the region's social nature. Finding a way to make prisons fit in the three natures of the late 20th century Adirondacks was a riddle state leaders never solved.

I will quickly review the history here. Middle- and upper class urban tourists began arriving in the region in the 1850s to engage in hunting, fishing, camping, and other outdoor activities. With the onset of industrialization and the construction of rail lines into the region, the fabulously wealthy began to build massive seasonal homes (called great camps) on lands across the Adirondacks. There they re-created the opulence of their Gilded Age urban lives in a wilderness setting. They fenced in their properties and claimed ownership of the natural resources on their estates. These actions stood in stark contrast to the "moral ecology" heretofore adhered to by permanent residents (as Karl Jacoby has described it). Year-round residents had grown accustomed to using the region's physical nature for their survival by adhering to unwritten, local codes of conduct that governed everything from how many trees one could harvest to how many deer one could kill in a single season. Urban elites, by contrast, considered local residents' relationships with the natural world as wasteful and destructive. Prizing locals for their intimate knowledge of nature but deriding them for their supposedly irresponsible behavior, wealthy New Yorkers played an important role in the development of conservation laws that placed severe restrictions on the manner in which individuals living inside and visiting the Adirondacks could use the region's physical nature. The legislature created the Forest Preserve in 1885, the Adirondack Park (a mixture of public and private lands) in 1892, and added Article XIV to the State Constitution in 1894, declaring all Forest Preserve lands inside the Adirondack Park as "forever wild" and protected from development. Expanding middle class incomes and improved infrastructure in the region during the first half

of the 20th century encouraged more and more tourists to visit the Adirondacks. Concerned that the region's physical nature could not accommodate the surge of visitors (and with them, their litter, second homes, and expectations of middle class comfort), in 1971 the legislature created the Adirondack Park Agency (APA), charged with regulating development on private lands inside the Park. The chasm between year-round residents and "summer people" only grew wider and deeper with the development of the APA. So, when New York began looking to build more prisons in the Adirondacks in the 1970s and 80s, officials encountered a seemingly unspoiled and pristine physical nature that only thinly masked the smoldering social and economic natures lurking in the wilderness.

By the mid-1970s, correctional leaders couldn't simply expect convicts to reshape the Adirondacks' physical nature in the interest of crimescape expansion (as they had in the 1840s). Prison building in the region in the late 20th century, as I mentioned, occurred within a regulatory framework designed to protect the region's natural resources and recreation-oriented character for both residents and visitors. Accordingly, planners had three important tasks: 1) to protect, as much as possible, the existing physical nature; 2) to ensure that their facilities did as little as possible to upset the existing social nature; and 3) to construe penitentiaries, as they had in the 1840s, as vehicles for economic expansion and growth (a tool to revive the area's stagnant economic nature). Sadly, they were generally unsuccessful on all three fronts.

First, planners did not always exercise proper care in protecting the area's physical nature. The most spectacular failures occurred in the run-up to the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid. To qualify for federal construction funds, Olympic organizers had to guarantee an

after-use for each new Olympic facility. After three years, organizers and federal officials agreed to build a \$22 million facility to house Olympic athletes, coaches, and officials that would be converted to a federal medium-security prison after the Games. The land chosen for the facility, though, was inside the protected state Forest Preserve. Why did planners miss this important detail? The official state map of the Adirondack Park had mislabeled the parcel as private property. Oops. Oh well. In no time, the federal government condemned the land, paid New York one dollar for it, and without notifying local residents, began chopping down nearly 100 acres of old growth forest and excavating and flattening hundreds of tons of earth that were also home to wildlife and provided recreational space for residents. Though powerless to stop federal construction workers from reshaping the area's physical nature, the APA did offer advice on how to mitigate potential damage. Olympic organizers, pressed for time, ignored them, and twice (in 1977 and again in 1978), construction workers cutting corners and not following rules caused an environmental catastrophe at the prison construction site. Rainstorms washed away tons of unsecured dirt and wood chips into nearby ponds, lakes and waterways, killing thousands of microorganisms, fish, birds, and furbearing animals. Sedimentation of area watercourses also polluted local drinking water supplies. In 1981 and 1982, state planners building a prison in the hamlet of Gabriels (northwest of Lake Placid, in an abandoned tuberculosis sanitarium) removed several historic structures on the site along with a significant number of trees and other natural growth. Prison construction at Gabriels also threatened the local loon population, a longtime winged symbol of the Adirondacks. And as late as 1997, prison planners, again pressed for time, proceeded with the preliminary phases of construction of a maximum-security penitentiary in Tupper Lake (southwest of Lake Placid),

only to discover that the chosen site sat atop a sensitive aquifer. State officials quickly moved the prison to Malone (north of Tupper Lake), only to discover that their original map of Tupper Lake had been wrong (there was no aquifer). After consulting maps of the chosen site in Malone, officials discovered that that site sat atop an aquifer. When pressed to move the site back to Tupper Lake in order to protect the aquifer in Malone, the state said no, and, after removing nearly 5000 trees, the prison opened in 1999.

In spite of their many failures, prison planners did make efforts to mitigate as much as possible the impact of their facilities on the region's physical nature, both to ensure adherence to the law and as a means of reassuring skeptics and opponents. Their efforts to make their prisons "fit" in the physical nature of the late 20th century Adirondacks included testing for visual impact, designing facilities that "blended in," as much as possible, with the existing environment, and ensuring that new penitentiaries wouldn't pose risks to local wildlife, water supplies, public services, property values, residents, and tourists. Indeed, planners often engaged with the public to discuss their proposals, a tacit recognition that the Adirondacks' physical nature by the late 20th century was deeply linked to its social and economic natures.

The expansion of the crimescape in the Adirondacks highlighted the longstanding class and socioeconomic divisions that defined the region's social nature. By and large, local residents welcomed the jobs and promised economic benefits the prisons might bring. Many could point to the well-paying jobs held by generations of men and women in the Dannemora area as an example of the positive benefits of crimescape expansion. Seasonal residents and second homeowners, on the other hand, disagreed. They saw prisons as an affront to the recreation and tourism oriented character of the Adirondacks; they could not see how an

institution that seemed to be the antithesis of nature could exist in an area that many considered the epitome of nature. The physical nature of the region, they argued, was intended for health, recreation, and tourism. However, summer people didn't focus their attention only on the prisons as physical institutions violating the historical character of the Adirondacks. The prisons' inhabitants, opponents worried, would also upset the region's social nature in profound and unsettling ways.

By the late 20th century, the vast majority of the men and women incarcerated in New York's prisons were either African American or Hispanic, and most of them hailed from the state's urban centers, especially New York City. For over a century, black and Hispanic men had been moved along the state's highways to Dannemora, largely without complaint from the public. Why? Because Dannemora was always a prison town—tourists never went there. In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, though, New York began expanding its crimescape into areas of the Adirondacks where many wealthy Americans had built second homes and were regular visitors. Many of these men and women owned properties that had been passed down in their families since the Gilded Age. The Adirondacks, to them, remained a bastion of white, elite privilege. The mass incarceration and importation of large numbers of criminal, African American and Hispanic men to *their* homes posed a serious threat to the existing, rigid social nature of the region. It seemed that many local residents who were supportive of the prisons were quite willing to accept this rupture in the region's prevailing racial order in the name of jobs and economic uplift. Indeed, to locals, economic impact and revitalization mattered more, even if it meant adopting a crude form of slavery as an economic development program. Summer people, on the other hand, needed neither the jobs nor the economic uplift, and so the

prospect of summering near black and Hispanic convicts aroused the latent racial anxieties (and hatred) of many of these same wealthy landowners. The social nature of the cities was something they had sought refuge from in the Adirondacks. Having that urban social nature recreated in the mountains caused many elites to castigate the convicts as “scum,” “dark skinned people,” “refuse,” and “the dregs of New York,” among other epithets. Opponents to the prison proposed at Gabriels in 1982 complained bitterly about the state’s intention to include a mosque in its design proposal for the new prison, and critics of the state’s plan to build a prison at Tupper Lake in 1987 and again in 1997 worried about AIDS patients and pedophiles living in their community. The social nature of the region, they argued, could never accommodate non-white, non-Christian, unfree, urban criminals. The Adirondacks, they asserted, had been reserved for *them*.

Tourists and seasonal homeowners, despite their pleadings, would be forced to share the Adirondacks’ physical nature with the same non-white, urban, criminal men whose presence caused them so much angst. Many prison opponents feared the possibility of escapes, and on numerous occasions, those fears were realized. From 1845 to the early years of this century, escapes from Adirondack prisons became one of the more insidious features of an expanded crimescape. Owing in part to prison planners’ efforts to make their facilities “blend in” with the area’s physical nature (no high walls or intense security features to confine the prisoners), the fears and anxieties of tourists and summer people about threats to the existing social nature often came true. On occasion, some prisoners simply walked away from their lightly guarded prisons, hiding in the woods or in nearby hunting cabins, and on a few occasions, stealing residents’ cars, breaking into their homes, and rarely, physically attacking

nearby homeowners. Once, a couple of convicts from Gabriels simply left the prison and walked into town to buy some beer (assuming they would not be caught). Numerous times, convict laborers working outside the prison walls took advantage of their temporary freedom and escaped, hoping to make that temporary freedom permanent. Convicts, therefore, took advantage of the Adirondacks' physical nature as a means by which to transgress the real and imagined boundaries of the region's social nature. Their escapes, though, posed no threat to planners efforts to use prisoners as a tool to rebuild the area's economic nature. Escapees were almost always caught and found themselves punished with a trip to Dannemora.

However, the vast majority of Adirondack convicts did not escape from prison. As I mentioned earlier, prisoners' behavior both challenged and reinforced the existing social nature of the Adirondacks. Every escape confirmed their opponents' worst fears and anxieties. But their labor in Adirondack communities helped, over time, to break down that rigid social nature, making it more dynamic, and revealing its flexibility. Convict labor, performed as part of a joint program developed in the 1950s between the Corrections Department and the Department of Environmental Conservation, helped improve the economic nature of the Adirondacks, saving local governments millions of dollars in labor and materials expenses on countless vital projects, many designed specifically to maintain tourist and recreational infrastructure. Indeed, convicts in the Adirondacks have for over 50 years worked at building and rebuilding the physical nature of the region to make it more hospitable and useful for residents and tourists alike (examples: Saranac Lake ice palace, fire fighting, flood control, trail maintenance, working for the 1980 Winter Olympics, work in public schools, raising food for the poor, etc.). Planners hoped that convicts' labor in the region would give them skills and

education necessary to make them productive citizens after release. While it is difficult to assess the degree to which convict labor improved the lives of inmates after release, the evidence shows that by and large, the Adirondack public (permanent residents and summer people alike) grew to admire and appreciate the hard work performed by convicts in their communities. The hostility and anger expressed by opponents during the planning phases gave way (for the most part) to a tone of respect and goodwill. It would be easy to forget at this point, as I paint this somewhat idyllic picture, that these men, wrongly or rightly, had been convicted of crimes and *were in* prison. But at the same time, it is important to highlight the plaques, certificates, celebratory dinners, and notes of public thanks and appreciation extended by local residents to the convicts over the years, on numerous occasions, for the hard work they performed in the region. The planners never anticipated that the convicts themselves would ultimately do the work of making prisons fit in the Adirondacks' three natures, but in the end, that is exactly what happened.