

UP THE ADIRONDACK TO THE RIVER AND WOODS

BY CLARENCE JEFFERSON HALL JR.

The Adirondack wilderness can be treacherous and unforgiving—especially for a long line of prison escapees.

The Clinton Correctional Facility, located in the community of Dannemora, is situated in the dense and unforgiving wilderness of the Adirondack Mountains. The history of Clinton Correctional Facility over the past two centuries highlights the complex relationships forged among the region's penitentiaries, communities, and the surrounding natural environment since before the Civil War.

Up the River

Prison construction in the state's rural areas began in the early nineteenth century. One of the biggest problems

facing New York at that time was overcrowding in Greenwich Village's Newgate, the only state prison. According to David Lewis, historian of New York's prison system, the post-Revolutionary surge of migrants to upstate New York, spurred on by abundant land and construction of the Erie Canal, inspired state officials to build new prisons to relieve overcrowding and spark further development in more remote and underpopulated areas. From the outset, the correctional system operated to satisfy both carceral and commercial objectives. The first prisoners arrived at Auburn, the state's second prison, in 1818 as part of a

penal reform experiment designed to rehabilitate through hard work and strict discipline, including enforced silence. Opened along the Hudson River in 1826, inmates at Sing Sing spent their days working in nearby marble mines, providing stone for New York's notable structures. Despite the development of additional prison facilities, new prisons quickly filled, prompting state leaders to search for more cell space.

Clean Mountain Air

The New York Natural History Survey (conducted from 1836 to 1840) recommended using inmate labor on infrastructure and public works projects in the isolated Adirondacks.

Lyon Mountain was one of many towns in the North Country to host a prison.



Auburn, opened in 1818 and pictured here in the late nineteenth century, was the state's second prison.

Though iron ore mining was one of the North Country's largest and most profitable industries by the early 1840s, numerous deposits of the precious rock remained untapped. To relieve overcrowding at Auburn and Sing Sing, state leaders proposed construction of a new prison adjacent to recently discovered mines in western Clinton County. The goal of the mining was to keep the penitentiary financially solvent and spur increased business activity. In a sharp break with past practice, lawmakers dedicated Clinton State Prison to a program of rehabilitation through work and education, guided by humanitarian ideals. Prison Association of New York reformers hoped exposure to the Adirondacks' clean mountain air would aid in restoring inmates' physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Unfortunately, not every prisoner transported to Dannemora was enamored of the North Country's invigorating climate. Within two weeks of its June 1845 opening, Clinton experienced its first escape. The restorative environment described by the Prison Association proved

challenging the moment two inmates hurled themselves over Clinton's stockade fence. The pair ran toward Canada, trudging through dense forests to the top of a nearby mountain. Unsure of where to go, they traversed the woods until nightfall, when they spotted the prison only 800 feet away.

After spending the night in a swamp, the next morning the men moved east on the road to Plattsburgh. They stumbled upon the cabin of a widow who took them in, fixed lunch, and offered the fugitives a place to rest. After their nap, the escapees resumed their journey and encountered a search party of men carrying "guns and sticks." A searcher's rock quickly incapacitated one fugitive, while his counterpart fled into the forest. The remaining runaway surrendered the next morning. Perhaps realizing the suffering the men had endured in the swampy, bug-infested wilderness, the warden doled out a suspended sentence, only to be imposed in the event of future misbehavior.

The Adirondacks, though, were not always an intractable barrier to escape, nor was the

prison itself. Clinton's growing inmate population compelled the adoption of stricter security measures through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including construction of a dungeon, massive perimeter wall, razor wire fences, and gun towers. Still, prisoners sent to Dannemora made many attempts to flee. One prisoner dressed in civilian clothes simply walked out the front gate in 1860. He was found later living in Philadelphia.

Peter James, an inmate working in the prison cellar, spent four years digging a twenty-foot-long tunnel connected to Clinton's sewer system. In 1903, James and three counterparts escaped through the tunnel, only to be captured less than a week later near the Canadian border.

Bernard Welch fled over one of Clinton's twenty-foot-high security fences in 1974 and lived a comfortable double life in Virginia. Captured in 1980 after committing a murder, he then went on to escape from an Illinois prison a few years later.

Escapes were not confined to inmates at Clinton, as new state and federal prisons were opened beginning in the mid-1970s. The rationales for the quarter century of prison expansion that followed paralleled those given prior to construction of Auburn, Sing Sing, and Clinton. By 1973 New York's inmate population swelled beyond capacity, leading to a crisis state officials believed could be solved by

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Tracking escaped prisoners through the Adirondack wilderness proved to be a difficult task.



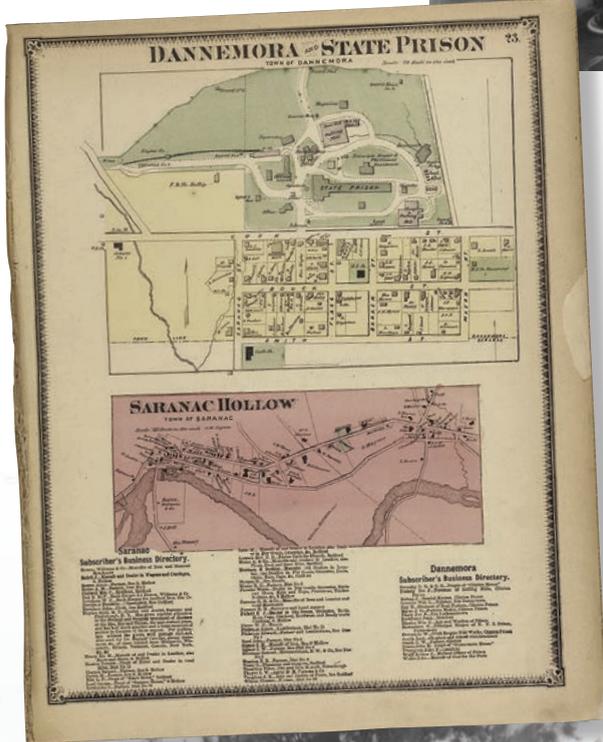
Below: To relieve overcrowding at Auburn and Sing Sing, state leaders proposed construction of a new prison adjacent to recently discovered mines in western Clinton County.

Bottom: A shuttered state tuberculosis hospital in Ray Brook, Essex County, was converted to a minimum-security prison in 1976.



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Order was carved out of the wilderness in the Clinton Prison mess hall, ca. 1910.



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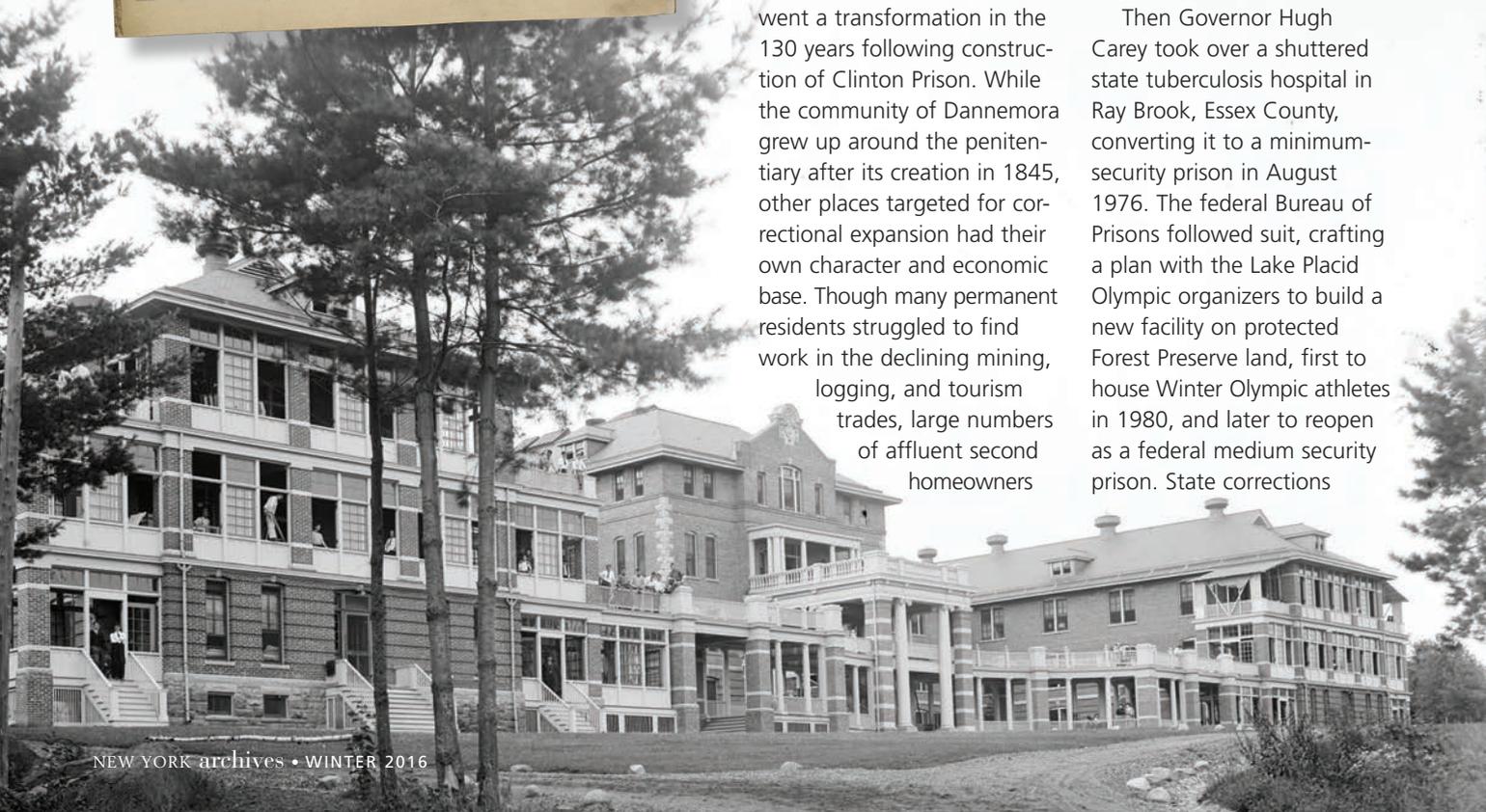
adding new cells. Once proposals to build penitentiaries in the New York City area encountered resistance from suburbanites, corrections officials looked north to Adirondack communities. State planners hoped the promise of secure jobs in a region notorious for high unemployment, poverty, and a diminishing population would blunt the impact of any potential opposition. They were wrong.

A New Adirondack Era

Life in the Adirondacks underwent a transformation in the 130 years following construction of Clinton Prison. While the community of Dannemora grew up around the penitentiary after its creation in 1845, other places targeted for correctional expansion had their own character and economic base. Though many permanent residents struggled to find work in the declining mining, logging, and tourism trades, large numbers of affluent second homeowners

and seasonal visitors claimed the Adirondacks as a rustic retreat. Added to this were land use regulations dating to the late nineteenth century, including the Forest Preserve Act of 1885; Adirondack Park Act of 1892; Article XIV of the State Constitution, protecting lands within the Forest Preserve as "Forever Wild;" and the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency in 1973. Unlike 1845, it seemed prisons would not easily be placed inside New York's largest state park.

Then Governor Hugh Carey took over a shuttered state tuberculosis hospital in Ray Brook, Essex County, converting it to a minimum-security prison in August 1976. The federal Bureau of Prisons followed suit, crafting a plan with the Lake Placid Olympic organizers to build a new facility on protected Forest Preserve land, first to house Winter Olympic athletes in 1980, and later to reopen as a federal medium security prison. State corrections





Materials confiscated after an escape attempt at Clinton Prison in 1950.

officials in 1981 again sought new cell space by attempting to purchase a 227-acre satellite campus of Paul Smith's College in Gabriels, Franklin County, for a minimum-security prison. Citing emergency overcrowding conditions, New York's Corrections Department purchased and began moving inmates into an abandoned school in the Clinton County hamlet of Lyon Mountain in 1983, with environmental impact reviews happening after the prison had opened.

In each of these cases, correctional planners encountered resistance from residents, second homeowners and tourists. Opposition in Ray Brook prevented construction of a sewage facility at the federal prison, along with a planned second federal penitentiary. In Gabriels, locals forced prison officials to place most of the Paul Smith's property in the state Forest Preserve, which shielded the facility from public view.

Though circumstances differed in each of the Adirondacks' prison towns, the issue of escapes figured prominently in the planning and debates surrounding proposed penitentiaries. Despite

Clinton's history with escapes, prison planners seem to have generally downplayed potential breakouts, citing New York's low number of escapes and quick recapture times. In fact, Corrections Department reports and correspondence with the Adirondack Park Agency don't indicate that the long history of escapes from Dannemora was a matter discussed very much by the two agencies, a fact raised repeatedly by critics in hearing rooms, letters, and interviews.

Getting Away

Residents and tourists, though, were quite fearful. Much like Clinton in 1845, escapes from the area's newest prisons soon became a frequent occurrence. The first fugitive from the state prison in Ray Brook ran off six weeks after the facility opened in September 1976, hiding in a nearby hunting camp. Three months following the opening of the prison at Gabriels in 1982, a pair of inmates tried to buy beer from a local grocery. The night of a public hearing on the Gabriels prison project in July 1981, attendees had to pass through police checkpoints and roadblocks set up during the search for Dennis Klaphthor, a

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employed a wide range of primary source materials, including: the STOP the Olympic Prison collection, 1980 Winter Olympics Oral History, and Representative Robert McEwen's papers at the Special Collections Department and Archives of St. Lawrence University in Canton; Representative David O'Brien Martin's papers at the Special Collections Department of SUNY Potsdam; state records and correspondence related to prison construction projects at Ray Brook, Gabriels, Lyon Mountain, and Tupper Lake at the Adirondack Park Agency Records Office in Ray Brook; documents related to prison labor on outdoor conservation projects at the Department of Environmental Conservation in Ray Brook; microfilm of Dannemora town board minutes at the New York State Archives in Albany; local newspapers and periodicals stored on the website of the Northern New York Library Network; and the Prison Association of New York's annual reports and records at the New York Public Library.

Ray Brook inmate. His wife had driven from Long Island, picked him up off a work detail on Dewey Mountain, and dropped him at a motel in Delaware.

Many fugitives followed the example of Clinton's first runaways and tried to blend in with a forbidding environment. One disoriented Gabriels runaway hid under leaves and brush, on the prison grounds, until hunger forced him back inside. A duo from Ray Brook's state prison used stolen camping equipment to blend in as backpackers, only to be caught by teenagers who suspected something when the fugitives, posing as conservationists, sought to purchase cigarettes and liquor from the young people. Three more inmates from the Ray Brook federal prison learned getaway drivers were not always reliable after an argument with their

driver left them stranded at an Indian Lake cemetery just after their 1980s escape. Barrington Stephens, a convicted murderer at Ray Brook's federal prison, escaped in September 1982, at the beginning of hunting season in the North Country. Sporting hunting gear stolen from a resident's car, he was spotted by a local couple driving near Lake Placid one October morning. State police quickly apprehended Stephens, the first fugitive from the region's federal penitentiary. In 2009, an off-duty corrections officer spotted an escapee from the Lyon Mountain prison hiding in a local forest and apprehended him.

The Adirondacks, once viewed by reformers and corrections officials as a vital partner for rehabilitation, became, to many inmates, an unforgiving enemy. ■