

Fires, Floods, and Conspiracies: A Century of Ecological and Social Change on New York's Black River Canal

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I Introduction

FOR THE THIRD TIME in three years, water surged through a splintering tear in the Black River Canal, ripping trees from the ground and carving a fifty-foot-deep crater in the towpath.¹ The first two breaks, in 1897 and 1898, had been attributed to unusually heavy rainfall. But on September 18, 1899, citizens and state officials had reason to be suspicious: as the *Rome Daily Sentinel* reported, it was amid Northern New York's "driest [season] ever known in the records of the weather bureau" that the third break had occurred.² "A break of this sort is the last thing that would be expected at such a time as the present," the *Sentinel* continued, "and the cause of it is a mystery."³

Construction on the Black River Canal had finished in 1855, a nearly half-century earlier, at the tail-end of the American "canal era."⁴ Running through the western Adirondack foothills alongside the Black River, the Black River Canal comprised a world-record 109 locks. It connected Rome to Carthage and, in doing so, spanned three counties: Oneida, Lewis, and Jefferson. It was never profitable during its almost seventy years of operation, though its water supply was vital to preserving the function of the famed Erie Canal. Indeed, the Black River Canal was built primarily to serve as a feeder to the Erie and, prior to the "mystery" of the canal breaks, had been best known for its association with its parent canal.

With the third break, however, the Black River Canal was momentarily thrust into the regional spotlight, and newspapers across New York clambered to cover the story. Among state officials, "an effort was... made to ascertain whether the break was 'artificial,' or whether it occurred in the natural course of events," as the *Utica Observer* reported.⁵ Meanwhile, hundreds of repairmen descended upon the village of Forestport, the site of the break, to restore navigation on the canal. Having already patched the canal's feeder twice before, the crews spent only seventeen days fixing the 1899 break; however, the repairs still cost the state more than 17,000 (over 600,000 in 2023).⁶ By the time the Black River Canal was operational again, local papers reported that the state attorney general had arrived at "the opinion that the 'artificial' cause" of the breaks "was the more probable."⁷ New York subsequently enlisted the help of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, which sent detectives to masquerade as laborers in Forestport.⁸

It did not take long for the Pinkertons to unearth an astonishing conspiracy. "The case when

¹Michael Doyle, *The Forestport Breaks: A Nineteenth-Century Conspiracy along the Black River Canal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 101-102.

²"Broke Its Banks," *Rome Daily Sentinel*, September 18, 1899.

³*Ibid.*

⁴In *Canals for a Nation*, Ronald E. Shaw defines the American "canal era" as the period beginning in 1790 and concluding in 1860.

⁵"Break Caused by Design," *Utica Daily Observer*, December 11, 1899.

⁶Doyle, *The Forestport Breaks*, 103.

⁷"Break Caused by Design."

⁸Doyle, *The Forestport Breaks*, 109.

made public will create one of the greatest sensations that this county has known for some time,” claimed the *Jamestown Evening Journal* in January 1900.⁹ “The evidence shows,” the *Journal* continued, “that the breaks of 1897, 1898 and 1899 were caused at the instigation of persons in Forestport who would profit by the money which laborers employed upon the break would spend in the town.”¹⁰ By the following spring, the alleged conspirators were standing trial, and their testimonies revealed the identities of the Forestport residents who stood to benefit from the Black River Canal’s destruction: hotel- and saloon-keepers.¹¹ They had orchestrated the plot, reasoning that canal breaks would summon repairmen to the village, thereby driving up their businesses’ patronage.¹² As traffic on the Black River Canal diminished toward the end of the nineteenth century, nearby business owners devised an inventive—and illicit—method of continuing to profit from the waterway.

II Argument

These conspiracies raise a host of questions about the Black River Canal’s relationship to its environs. How did a rural, sparsely populated region become the site of seemingly rampant crime and conspiracy? Did changes to the natural landscape, prompted by the Black River Canal, result in changes to the social landscape? What do the conspiracies reveal about residents’ perceptions of the government and public works, and how did these perceptions develop?

In this paper, I argue that the Black River Canal was not solely a force of ecological change in the Black River Valley; the development of the region’s physical landscape went hand in hand with social change. Yet, even as the Black River Valley underwent extensive landscape transformation, citizens’ perceptions of the canal remained relatively stable. Before, during, and after the canal’s construction, residents saw the Black River Canal as a symbol of egalitarianism and New York’s duty to facilitate equal economic opportunity for all. However, the canal fostered social stratification, environmental degradation, and malfeasance throughout the nineteenth century, all while never making a profit for the state. Thus, the Black River Canal was both a public works project and a powerful heuristic; the canal continued to signify egalitarian prosperity, even as its true consequences unfolded.

III Existing Scholarship

Four seminal histories have already documented numerous aspects of the Black River Canal’s lifespan: *The Forestport Breaks: A Nineteenth-Century Conspiracy on the Black River Canal* by Michael Doyle (2004) and Thomas C. O’Donnell’s series of “informal histories” of the Black River Valley, including *Snubbing Posts* (1949), *Birth of a River* (1952), and *The River Rolls On* (1959).

The Forestport Breaks details the 1890s canal-break conspiracies; however, Doyle devotes most of his book to the aftermath of the breaks (i.e., the conspirators’ trials) and spends little time discussing the factors that catalyzed them. “Buried within [Doyle’s] sources are clues to how the era’s economic strains may have shaken up class, gender, and ethnic identities and interactions,” Carol Sheriff writes in her review of *The Forestport Breaks*.¹³ “Yet Doyle usually leaves his readers to figure out for themselves the theoretical implications of such evidence. His rendition of the

⁹“Break Conspiracies,” *Jamestown Evening Journal*, January 15, 1900.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹“A Wrecker Confesses,” *Lewis County Democrat*, April 18, 1900.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Carol Sheriff, review of *The Forestport Breaks: A Nineteenth-Century Conspiracy along the Black River Canal*, by Michael Doyle, *New York History* 86, no. 1 (2005): 107.

Forestport breaks is one in which the mystery, not the history, takes central stage.”¹⁴ While Doyle notes that the canal engendered crime in the Black River Valley, he does not explain *how* it did so. In this paper, I examine the century leading up to the canal breaks to demonstrate that they were not an isolated event; rather, they were the culmination of a century of ecological and social change.

Unlike Doyle, O'Donnell does examine changes to the Black River Valley over the course of the canal's lifespan, but, because his histories are “informal” and chiefly concerned with folklore, his analysis is often rudimentary. For example, O'Donnell claims that the canal's “habits, its ways of doing things, its customs, the tales which grew up around it—all of these came out of the nature of the region which manned its locks and boats.”¹⁵ While I ultimately agree with this claim, I complicate O'Donnell's representation of the canal's relationship to its surroundings; the above claim obscures the Black River Canal's role in transforming its environs, erroneously suggesting that it was the Black River Valley that influenced the character of the canal, and not vice versa. I often take the latter stance in this paper.

Additionally, two works of environmental and technological history have modeled how to investigate the tenuous relationship between landscape change and social change: *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* by Carol Sheriff (1996) and *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* by David E. Nye (2004). In many ways, this paper's arguments about the Black River Canal concur with Sheriff's observations about the Erie Canal; both canals' proponents used the idealistic rhetoric of progress and egalitarianism, even as the waterways themselves fostered socioeconomic inequality and unexpected landscape change. Sheriff's insights, too, into Erie-adjacent New Yorkers' unique beliefs about government—namely their sense that public works should benefit private interests—prove especially relevant to the story of the Black River Canal.¹⁶ However, while the Erie Canal was financially successful, centrally located, and operational at the height of the canal era, the Black River Canal was a resounding financial failure, it existed on New York's rural margins, and it began operations in the back half of the nineteenth century. This paper tells a unique tale of “progress,” one set alongside a canal that was never, by traditional measures, successful.

As for Nye's book, this paper affirms his characterization of American “foundation narratives,” which “explained and validated expansion” (i.e., ecological destruction) and depicted technology (like canals) as “democratic.”¹⁷ Yet, this history of the Black River Canal challenges Nye's argument that nineteenth-century Americans believed canals and railroads were “developing the latent potential of the landscape.”¹⁸ The Black River Canal required an excessive number of locks, traversed a harsh and isolated region, and was inoperable for much of the year due to extreme cold. In Northern New York, there was little “latent potential” to speak of.

IV Advocating for the Canal

As he stood before his colleagues in the New York State Assembly, Charles Dayan warned that the Black River Valley was on the brink of crisis: “A general panic has seized upon our people,”

¹⁴Ibid., 107.

¹⁵Thomas C. O'Donnell, *Snubbing Posts: An Informal History of the Black River Canal* (Boonville: Black River Books, 1949), 159.

¹⁶Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996), 90.

¹⁷David E. Nye, *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 5-6.

¹⁸Ibid., 151.

he harangued, “and when and where it will terminate Heaven only knows.”¹⁹ Given that Dayan was speaking a year before the infamous Panic of 1837, his warnings about a “general panic” that was worsening by the day might seem prophetic. However, Dayan was not predicting a national financial collapse; instead, he was bemoaning the supposedly imminent demise of settlement in Northern New York. He suggested that, in the years to come, droves of settlers would abandon the region and head westward: “Could you have seen the hundreds and thousands crowding the shores of the lakes for a passage to the ‘far west,’” Dayan told his fellow Assemblymen, “you could feel and realize the general gloom which hangs over that part of the State.”²⁰

Dayan, who represented Lewis County in the Assembly, insisted that the only way for legislators to quell the “panic” and eradicate the “gloom” saturating his community was to authorize construction on the Black River Canal. Indeed, he argued that the necessity of the canal had as much to do with economics as it did with morale, saying, “Could this committee have seen, as I have seen, the trials and struggles of [the Black River Valley’s] people to live unaided by the State, your liberality would reach their wants at once.”²¹ Keeping with his warnings about an impending “panic,” Dayan claimed that, if the state did not reward Northern New Yorkers’ “unaided” labor, the consequences would be dire: “The fate of this bill, sir, is comparatively a question of life or death, to that section of country which is my adopted home.”²²

Prior to the construction of the Black River Canal, settlement in the region was sparse, and life was arduous. In 1810, only 6,433 people were recorded as living in Lewis County.²³ However, in 1813, the *New York Gazetteer* estimated that “there [were] about 80,000 yards of cloth produced from family industry” per year in Lewis County, leading the author to comment, “Really in no country have I seen more of sober and industrious perseverance,” a necessity for survival in a harsh climate.²⁴ Lydia Pitcher, who lived in Lewis County in the 1810s, offered a similar portrait of “sober and industrious perseverance” in her recollections. Referring to her husband and brother-in-law, Pitcher wrote, “I doubt if one could find a more industrious set than he and Daniel were,” as they were tasked with chopping wood, hunting game, and crafting shoes during the winter.²⁵ Pitcher herself participated in the household industry described in the *Gazetteer*, an undertaking that posed its own set of challenges: she described having, as a teenager, whitened ten yards of hand-spun cloth, “but while the men came in to eat dinner, the fire from the burning brush was blown by the wind on my cloth, and burned half of it before it was discovered. Oh dear! Here was my first grief, and child-like and woman-like, I cried. Never shall I forget how bad I felt. I needed it so!”²⁶ Early life in the Black River Valley was perilous, and Pitcher’s distress exemplifies the pressure that all settlers faced as they struggled to survive in a hostile region.

In addition to expounding on the trials of household industry, Pitcher also emphasized that her surroundings were sometimes frighteningly “wild”:

It was almost dark and just before we got home a wild animal rushed across my path. It frightened me terribly... Almost every night we heard [the wolves] howl, and sometimes they came very near our house... We often saw a great black bear trudge across the

¹⁹Charles Dayan, *Speech of Mr. Dayan, in Favor of the Black River Canal* (New York, [1836?]), 6.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 7.

²¹*Ibid.*, 5.

²²*Ibid.*, 5.

²³Franklin B. Hough, *A History of Lewis County, in the State of New York, from the Beginning of Its Settlement to the Present Time*, 1860, pg. 293, Lewis County Historical Society, Lowville, New York.

²⁴Horatio Gates Spafford, *A Gazetteer of the State of New-York: Carefully Written from Original and Authentic Materials, Arranged on a New Plan, in Three Parts...* (Albany: H.C. Southwick, 1813), 83.

²⁵Lydia Pitcher, “A Pioneer’s Version of Life in Early Lewis County,” *North Country Life* (Winter 1950): 29. This source came to my attention through *John Brown’s Tract* by Brown and Walton.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 27.

paths. I was rather timid about going out alone much.²⁷

Her fears about the dangers of the wilderness were only compounded by the Black River Valley's isolation: "Our nearest neighbor," she wrote, "did not seem near at all."²⁸ Before the construction of the Black River Canal, life in the Black River Valley was uniformly perilous.

Twenty years later, Charles Dayan would stand before the New York State Assembly and describe these toils to make his case for the Black River Canal. A lawyer in Lowville, Dayan also had a successful political career: he served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1831 to 1833, and in the New York State Assembly from 1835 to 1836.²⁹ He was one of a handful of local "elites" who publicly campaigned for the Black River Canal and were largely responsible for its realization. The project was first championed by Caleb Lyon, a prominent resident of the region (for whom the canal terminus, Lyons Falls, was named) and close friend of New York Governor DeWitt Clinton.³⁰ It is likely that Lyon played a role in encouraging Governor Clinton to propose building a canal in the Black River Valley.

These "elites," though they invoked the economic benefits of the canal in their arguments, also frequently emphasized the moral implications of routing a man-made waterway along the Black River. This strategy aligns with Sheriff's assessment of contemporary political mores. "In the nineteenth century, rhetoric was an important tool," and "public meetings and orations [were] so central to antebellum political culture" across the United States.³¹ At the same time, New Yorkers' understanding of "republicanism" had transformed: the government was no longer expected to merely protect the "common good"; instead, it was now expected to operate with absolute "fairness."³²

Consequently, the Black River Canal's proponents emphasized the importance of spreading public works investment across New York, as opposed to concentrating it in select regions. To do so, they frequently described the Black River Valley as a "neglected" region. In 1836, for instance, the Black River Canal committee remarked "with great force... on the injustice of expending other millions on a particular route and suffering the secluded portions of the state to remain neglected" in a report to the New York State Senate.³³ Similarly, the editors of the *American Railroad Journal, and Advocate of Internal Improvements* described the residents of the Black River Valley as "the people of that neglected section of the State."³⁴ This remark preceded a report on the proceedings of a Black River Canal Convention, held on October 1, 1835.³⁵ During this convention, the delegates passed a resolution that, among other things, called upon New York's legislators to recognize that "right and equal justice demand a reciprocal sense of liberality and patriotic course of conduct from those who are now enjoying unexampled prosperity by accommodations constructed with our full share of expense."³⁶ This language of "neglect" implicitly characterized the Black River Canal as a symbol of egalitarianism; the canal was an opportunity for legislators to model the American ideals of "right and equal justice" and "liberality" by aiding forlorn regions of New York.³⁷

²⁷Ibid., 27-28.

²⁸Ibid., 28.

²⁹History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, "Dayan, Charles," accessed November 3, 2022, [https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/D/DAYAN,-Charles-\(D000162\)](https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/D/DAYAN,-Charles-(D000162)).

³⁰Clarence L. Fisher, *History of Lyons Falls* (Boonville: Willard Press, 1918), 7.

³¹Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 85.

³²Ibid., 100.

³³"Black River Canal," *Journal of the American Institute: A Monthly Publication, Devoted to the Interests of Agriculture, Commerce, Manufactures, and the Arts* 1, no. 6 (March 1, 1836): 308.

³⁴D. K. Minor, ed., "Black River Canal," *American Railroad Journal* 4, no. 42 (October 24, 1835): 345.

³⁵D. K. Minor, ed., "Black River Canal Convention — Great Meeting," *American Railroad Journal* 4, no. 42 (October 24, 1835): 345-46.

³⁶Ibid., 346.

³⁷Ibid.

Proponents' appeals to justice and egalitarianism were ultimately successful, and the New York State Assembly authorized construction on the Black River Canal during the same legislative session in which Dayan delivered his plea.³⁸ Near the conclusion of his speech, Dayan addressed the Assembly's chair: "We, sir, have been beggars in your halls for ten years, praying only for the crumbs of public aid, while the whole loaf has been given to our western brethren, and that very loaf purchased by taxing the salt in our porridge."³⁹ In 1836, with the authorization of canal construction, the people of the Black River Valley finally glimpsed the monumental development that a public works project seemed to promise.

V Building the Canal

The decade of deliberation over the Black River Canal and its authorization were not enough, however, to make its proponents' vision a reality. Constructing the canal required nearly twenty years of hard labor, which was performed by scores of Irish laborers who migrated to the Black River Valley in pursuit of work contracts.⁴⁰ While building the canal from 1837 to 1855, laborers lived in "shanties" or "appendages" on the outskirts of existing villages, where they supposedly "inspired the starting of newer drinking spots, and added some fancy touches to the art of Saturday night brawling."⁴¹ The existing residents of the Black River Valley, who had primarily migrated to the region from New England and Eastern New York, were united in their distance and difference from this new social class, since the Irish were foreign-born, performed "unskilled" work, and lived on the margins of an already marginal region.⁴² Few sources directly mention canal laborers or offer first-hand accounts of their lives, reinforcing the idea that these laborers were distant—both spatially and socially—from other residents of the Black River Valley while they built the canal.

In the few existing accounts of interactions between the Irish and pre-canal residents of the Black River Valley, hostility is omnipresent. Such hostility perhaps stemmed from contemporary perceptions of Irishmen and canal laborers, as both groups were associated with criminality and excessive alcohol consumption.⁴³ This association was not entirely unfounded: "As a prop to increased performance, as a narcotic to a spent body but still active head, as a frenetic release from a world consumed by toil, liquor primed the pump of the canal industry."⁴⁴ Hence, the few accounts of canal laborers often discussed crime or intemperance. For instance, in 1842, the editors of the *Northern Journal* in Lowville made sure to specify that it was "an Irishman" who had "entered our office through a back window, and stole therefrom a quantity of clothing amounting to 50, affirming the link between criminality and Irish nationality."⁴⁵

Animosity between pre-canal settlers and the Irish also manifested outside of print. Indeed, when canal laborers encountered other residents of the region, the outcome was not always sanguine. A circus visited Lewis County in 1849, which "brought together a large number of persons from [the] vicinity" and perhaps offered a rare opportunity for mingling between the Black River Valley's

³⁸New York Legislature, Assembly, *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New-York* (Albany: E. Croswell, 1836), 2158.

³⁹Dayan, *Speech of Mr. Dayan*, 7.

⁴⁰O'Donnell, *Snubbing Posts*, 30.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²Hazel C. Drew, *Tales from Little Lewis* (Lyons Falls, 1961), 19.

⁴³See Peter Way, "Evil Humors and Ardent Spirits: The Rough Culture of Canal Construction Laborers," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1397-1428. O'Donnell included an account in *Snubbing Posts* of a Black River Valley resident during canal construction: "Like the Irish the world over, the writer went on, 'there were few teetotalers among them'" (pg. 32).

⁴⁴Peter Way, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 182.

⁴⁵"[Untitled]," *Northern Journal*, May 5, 1842.

various—and physically disparate—social groups.⁴⁶ After the show, an “altercation” ensued, in which “the words ‘Yankee’ and ‘Irish’ were exchanged,” and “two or three” circus-goers left with visible “bruises and blood.”⁴⁷ In this episode, the tension between the “Irish” and “Yankees” of the Black River Valley was palpable. Hence, during the era of canal construction, the distance between Irish canal laborers and the rest of the Black River Valley was not merely physical; it also manifested in social relations.

When laborers completed construction on the Black River Canal in 1855, the Black River Valley at last had cause for celebration. It had, of course, required thirty years of effort to make the canal a reality. That same year, however, a different type of fanfare occurred along the canal in Lyons Falls: an Irish laborer was “brutally murdered by two of his countrymen.”⁴⁸ The murderers, who were “canal boatmen,” reportedly made “an onset upon Cooper’s [the victim’s] house or shanty.”⁴⁹ “This murderous affray,” the article’s author wrote, “has grown out of the sale of whiskey.”⁵⁰ More than it reveals the actual cause and sequence of these events, the article hints at a profound change. Fifty-five years prior, the communities along the Black River had been sparsely settled and barely developed; in 1800, only 1,362 people had lived in Lewis County.⁵¹ By 1855, not only did a 109-lock canal snake through the region, but the Black River Valley’s population had ballooned to 25,229, and it had also become a site of ethnic tension and burgeoning inequality.⁵² The completion of the Black River Canal thus marked a turning point in both the Black River Valley’s physical and social landscapes.

VI Early Landscape Transformations

In 1857, two years after the canal’s completion, a reader identified as a “Black River Boy” penned a letter to the editors of *Moore’s Rural New-Yorker*. He asked that the magazine publish more information about a “machine for shelling corn,” and he assured the editors that doing so “would please me, and many of your subscribers in this region... as we are tired of the neck-aching, back-breaking, hand-blistering operation of shelling corn by hand.”⁵³ In this brief letter, the “Black River Boy,” through both his rustic pseudonym and his description of farmers’ arduous labor in Northern New York, almost seems to present a similar characterization of the Black River Valley as did Lydia Pitcher forty years prior. Yet, his desire for information about machinery hints at the Black River Valley’s ongoing transformation from a “frontier” to a locus of commercial industry, spurred by the Black River Canal. Labor conditions on farms, as they had been fifty years prior, were grueling, so the desire for modernization was growing among local farmers. Now that goods could be transported to downstate markets on the canal, the Black River Valley was shifting away from household industry and toward an export economy, meaning that the need for modern farm implements was greater than ever before.

This transformation began well before 1855, a fact that distinguishes the Black River Canal from earlier projects like the Erie Canal. Nye, in *America as Second Creation*, argues that “contemporary stories about the Erie Canal... began with a remote area outside the stimulus of the market,” much

⁴⁶“Things in Lewis County – Annual Meeting of the L.C. Bible Society – Distribution – 8000 – Circus – Affray – Lightning – Plank Bonds,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 11, 1849.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸“A Rum Murder,” *Brother Jonathan* 16, no. 184 (May 26, 1855).

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Hough, *History of Lewis County* (1860), 293.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Black River Boy [pseud.], “Letter from a Black River Boy,” *Moore’s Rural New-Yorker* 8, no. 51 (December 19, 1857): 405.

like the Black River Valley.⁵⁴ Yet, he claims that, with the Erie's introduction, "towns arose along its banks and mushroomed into cities," meaning "the canal was cause and civilization an automatic effect."⁵⁵ In the case of the Black River Canal, however, its effects on the physical landscape were largely preemptive; it was often not the canal itself but the idea of a future canal that sparked rapid growth and landscape change.

For instance, "the arrival of the canal inspired no new hotels in the Boonville-Lyons Falls sector," writes O'Donnell.⁵⁶ "The fact of the matter is that Lyons Falls had jumped the gun as long before as 1850, six years before the opening of navigation there."⁵⁷ Notably, the first of these new hotels was named after William J. McAlpine, an incoming member of the State Canal Board.⁵⁸ Whether this nod to a canal official was meant to garner political favors or was a simple signal of the hotel's connection to the canal is unclear. In any event, the choice of names signifies that the development of the Black River Valley's built environment had been shaped by the Black River Canal well before the canal had even been completed. A similar principle governed the creation of settlements along the canal route: the founders of Port Leyden gave the village its name "in anticipation of the construction of the canal," which, in 1836, was "still many years in the future, but reasonably certain," according to Franklin B. Hough in his 1883 local history.⁵⁹ The village was not yet a canal port, but its settlers nonetheless constructed their community to preempt the construction of the canal.

Similarly, progress toward agricultural "improvement" in the valley was non-linear.⁶⁰ Between 1845 and 1855, the final decade of canal construction, the amount of improved land in Lewis County jumped by more than 80,000 acres, the county's largest ten-year increase in the nineteenth century.⁶¹ Within the first five years of the canal's completion, however, the amount of "improved" land actually decreased, from 184,540 acres in 1855 to 177,031 acres in 1860.⁶² Although sections of the canal had already opened for navigation before 1855, the improvement boom leading up to its completion further suggests that anticipation of the Black River Canal was an even more powerful catalyst of environmental change than the canal itself.

Thus, the very idea of the Black River Canal exerted immense influence on the Black River Valley's landscape. Well before the canal was finished, enthusiastic entrepreneurs dotted the proposed canal route with their businesses, village founders used maritime language to name their settlements, and farmers readied their land for increased production. The Black River Canal functioned as an economic safety net for these settlers, who believed that the government's investment in the region would buoy their own. The Black River Canal had become a heuristic for liberal state investment, and this perception was as transformative as the canal itself.

VII Exports and the Environment

This is not to say that, when the canal did open, its effects were inconsequential. Indeed, the proliferation of industry was accompanied by significant environmental consequences: producing the canal's principal exports—agricultural products and timber—at a commercial scale created a

⁵⁴Nye, *America as Second Creation*, 151.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 151-152.

⁵⁶O'Donnell, *Snubbing Posts*, 49.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Franklin B. Hough, *History of Lewis County, New York with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Syracuse: Mason, 1883), 267-68.

⁶⁰Agricultural "improvement" is the process by which land is modified to be made more suitable for farming.

⁶¹Hough, *History of Lewis County (1883)*, 75.

⁶²*Ibid.*

transitional landscape, in which the Black River Valley's historically "wild" character mingled with its newfound industrialism.

"Perceive us rolling on our way to 'The Woods,'" wrote an editor of the proto-environmentalist magazine *The Knickerbocker* in 1857, "three strong two-horse wagons, containing 'the part,' and one big wagon the edibles and potables which were to be our 'sustenance and support' in the howling wilderness."⁶³ The editor was detailing his recent "fishing excursion to John Brown's Tract" in the western Adirondacks, during which he visited several communities along the Black River Canal, two years after its completion.⁶⁴ As this writer depicts it, the Black River Valley was a landscape in transition: it was no longer included as part of "The Woods," nor "the howling wilderness," yet it was still a decidedly rural landscape, even if it was riddled with signs of burgeoning industry. He recounted speeding "over a good plank-road," from which he could observe the "rich but newly-cultivated fields of rye and oats" and "the black-charred 'stumps' which were profusely sprinkled over the fields."⁶⁵ Upon "descend[ing] a sandy hill into a deep gorge, where the shallow Black River tumbled over its rock bed," the editor noticed that "saw-mills and tanneries diversified the scene," along with a "little settlement-inn," where his party enjoyed "a bowl of delicious field-strawberries and milk" before "rattling on [their] way again."⁶⁶

Although the editor strove to depict a quaint countryside, his account reveals that, in the canal's early years, the Black River Valley was beginning to shed its "wild" character. The isolated "frontier" of Lydia Pitcher's youth was seemingly no more, as the Black River Canal had transformed the forested valley into a nascent industrial landscape. The widespread household industry that had characterized Pitcher's adolescence did decline precipitously after the canal was completed: the value of "home-made manufactures" in Lewis County decreased from 25,253 in 1840 to 10,606 in 1860, even though the county's population nearly doubled during that same period.⁶⁷ With the Black River Valley now possessing a direct channel to downstate markets, commercial industry proliferated as capitalists exploited and exported the natural resources of the "wilderness."

Agricultural data affirms that the Black River Canal's completion catalyzed widespread ecological change. "The cultivation of more than eighty years has quite changed the natural surface of the landscape," Hough wrote in 1883, "and a patch of reserved woodland here and there alone remains" on "the limestone terraces and slate hills" to the canal's west.⁶⁸ While Hough identified the "cultivation of more than eighty years" as the cause of this ecological change, his statistics suggest that the Black River Canal was the most powerful catalyst of agricultural "improvement" and, therefore, landscape change: Hough recorded that only 37,880 acres of land in Lewis County had been "improved" for agriculture in 1821, as compared to 241,091 acres in 1875, twenty years after the canal's completion.⁶⁹

The Black River Canal not only encouraged agriculture but also inspired extensive logging in the Black River Valley. Logging, of course, was not possible without deforestation, which accentuated the effects of agricultural "improvement." Within fifteen years of the Black River Canal's completion, Lewis County was home to 112 sawmills, which produced 130 million feet of lumber annually.⁷⁰ Large-scale logging resulted in the decimation of the Black River Valley's forests: from the canal's opening until the end of the nineteenth century, O'Donnell claims, "the vast timber

⁶³"Fishing Excursion to 'John Brown's Tract,'" *The Knickerbocker or New-York Monthly Magazine* 50, no. 4 (October 1, 1857): 416.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 414-417.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 416.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷Hough, *History of Lewis County* (1883), 79.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 75.

⁷⁰Ralph N. Van Arnam and Lewis S. Van Arnam, "The Era of Navigation of Black River, Part III: The Lumber Trade," *North Country Life* (Summer 1949): 51.

lands covering the entire region of the Black River head waters beyond Forestport, and lying east of the Black River all the way from Forestport to the Beaver River and beyond, disappeared.”⁷¹ The Black River Canal not only broke the valley’s “land-lock,” as O’Donnell terms it, by providing a transportation channel to the rest of New York, but, through the production of its chief exports, the canal encouraged the destruction of the “wildest” aspect of the region’s landscape.⁷²

Where early settlers had once seen an untamable “wilderness,” canal-era residents now saw a region ripe for commercial industry, as it was full of natural resources that could be processed and exported. When a forest fire scorched the eastern portion of the valley in 1871, the *Lewis County Democrat* reported that “hundreds of acres of valuable standing timber [had been] burned down,” along with “thousands of feet of bark and logs for the tanneries and mills which line[d] the streams” of the ravaged towns.⁷³ Not only does the article’s description of the “tanneries and mills which line the streams” convey the ubiquity of industry in the valley’s forests, but its use of the term “standing timber,” as opposed to “trees,” nods to residents’ newfound perception of forests as an economic resource.⁷⁴

As loggers felled the Black River Valley’s forests, and as the Black River Canal continued to supply water to the Erie, other ecological changes followed in step, including a decline in the populations of native flora and fauna. Hough identified numerous animals, once common in Lewis County, that had become rare by the mid-nineteenth century, such as moose, beavers, wolves, and panthers.⁷⁵ While some of these species likely disappeared as an indirect consequence of the canal (i.e., due to development and deforestation), others were deliberately eradicated. For example, in the case of panthers and wolves, the “state, county and towns” offered “bounties for their destruction,” presumably to make the land safer for humans and livestock.⁷⁶

The fate of the Black River Valley’s fish reveals the extent to which the canal impacted local ecology. “In Fish [C]reek,” Hough wrote, “salmon formerly abounded, and were taken in the early history of the county as large as twenty or twenty-five pounds in weight.”⁷⁷ By the time of Hough’s writing, however, the fish had become scarce, a change that he attributed to development: “As settlements began in that part of the county, at a comparatively recent date, no traditions remain as to their [salmon’s] former abundance.”⁷⁸ But it was not just settlement that affected fish populations; commercial industry was also to blame. In “A Fish Story,” ecologist Cheryl Lyn Dybas identifies logging as a prominent threat to Northern New York’s native wildlife in the mid-nineteenth century: “Hundreds of dams were built to hold water for spring log drives” on Adirondack rivers, and the “stirred-up mud blanketed many miles of streambeds, driving fish out of one set of waters and into another.”⁷⁹ Canals also directly affected fish populations: they provided “new fish-migration routes,” which changed species distributions, and they also made possible a higher volume of tourism.⁸⁰ More hunters and fishermen were now able to make the journey to Northern New York than ever before, which created new opportunities for overexploitation.

⁷¹O’Donnell, *Snubbing Posts*, 97.

⁷²Thomas C. O’Donnell, “The Black River Story,” 1952, pg. 7, Box 5, Thomas C. O’Donnell Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Syracuse, New York.

⁷³“The Fire in the Woods,” *Lewis County Democrat*, May 31, 1871.

⁷⁴This perception of trees was, apparently, not unique to the Black River Canal’s environs. As Sheriff comments in *The Artificial River*, “In a region where nothing seemed to carry the same meaning anymore, not even a tree was just a tree...farmers did not merely sell the fruits of nature; instead, they consciously invested in market production” (pgs. 96-97). Throughout New York, the advent of the canal system appears to have transformed residents’ understanding of the natural world.

⁷⁵Hough, *History of Lewis County (1883)*, 53.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Cheryl Lyn Dybas, “A Fish Story,” *Adirondack Life* 34, no. 2 (March/April 2003): 64.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 65.

The Black River Canal had created a conundrum: with the advent of commercial logging, native fish populations struggled to adapt to the new condition of the Black River Valley's rivers and streams, yet ever-more fishermen were able to travel to the region on sporting expeditions. In hopes of resolving this dilemma, the U.S. Fish Commission intervened. The Commission placed "various kinds of fish... in the waters of the county" in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, transporting them in pails from one body of water to another via boat or truck.⁸¹ The region's reputation for tourism among New York's sportsmen, such as the *Knickerbocker* editor who eagerly embarked on a "fishing excursion to John Brown's Tract" in 1857, could only persist with government intervention.

Before and after the completion of the Black River Canal, widespread development in the Black River Valley profoundly altered the region's ecological character. By the mid-nineteenth century, hunters and fishermen were no longer traipsing into a pristine "wilderness" when they visited Northern New York. Much like the crops and timber that the region was exporting in droves, the "wilderness" had, too, become a manufactured product.

VIII Man-Made Disasters

Unlike deforestation and fish stocking, much ecological change in the Black River Valley was not deliberate. "The primitive region of this county still comprises large areas of unsettled lands," Hough wrote, "and where not ravaged by fires, and by lumbermen, presents the same wild forest scenery of lakes, dark winding streams, tangled swamps and sombre pine and hemlock forests, as when first explored by surveyors and hunters."⁸² Here, the local historian provided a revealing caveat to his idyllic description of the Black River Valley's "primitive region."⁸³ In noting that both "lumbermen" and "fires" encroached on the "wild forest," Hough contradicted his assertion that, in 1883, the valley was the same "as when first explored by surveyors and hunters."⁸⁴ Instead, perhaps unintentionally, Hough painted a distinct portrait of Lewis County, wherein the "wilderness" and industrialism tenuously coexisted under the specter of environmental devastation. By inciting rapid development throughout the Black River Valley, the Black River Canal had also made possible catastrophic accidents, namely fires and floods, which reneged on the dramatic improvement envisioned by the canal's promoters.

Port Leyden experienced a series of industrial fires throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century—some accidents and some alleged arson—each of which threatened to destroy the village. "The mid-night alarm of fire, which has become so familiar to us because of its frequent occurrence," a *Lewis County Democrat* column began in 1878, "was again sounded in our streets at about one o'clock Tuesday morning," phrasing which clearly emphasized the regularity of disastrous blazes.⁸⁵ The problem persisted: "Last Monday morning about midnight," opened another article in the *Lowville Times* the following year, "the citizens of Port Leyden were aroused by the usual cry of fire."⁸⁶ Indeed, the pattern of frequent fires continued for more than a decade, culminating in an 1889 fire so destructive that it even attracted the attention of the *New York Times*: "The Douglass House, the Opera House, eight stores, the Post Office, and several dwellings were destroyed," reported the *Times*, and "fifteen families lost their homes and many of their possessions."⁸⁷ The following week, the village submitted a "formal appeal for practical aid" to New York City Mayor Hugh J. Grant

⁸¹Hough, *History of Lewis County (1883)*, 53; Dybas, "A Fish Story," 65.

⁸²Hough, *History of Lewis County (1883)*, 43.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵"Port Leyden Items," *Lewis County Democrat*, April 30, 1879.

⁸⁶"Fire at Port Leyden," *Lowville Times*, August 14, 1879.

⁸⁷"A Village Swept by Fire," *New York Times*, October 26, 1889.

due to the extent of the damages.⁸⁸ As the *Times*, in a follow-up article, described the calamity, “the heart of the village was swept away.”⁸⁹

Although Port Leyden experienced an unusually large number of fires, due in part to a “fire fiend” who supposedly committed numerous acts of arson in the late 1870s, the entire valley lived under constant threat of conflagration.⁹⁰ A two-and-a-half-story paper mill in Lyonsdale, for instance, burned down in 1887, and a sawmill in Dayanville went up in flames in 1871. Reporting on the latter, the *Lewis County Democrat* bemoaned that it was “the third mill that Mr. V [its owner] had lost by fire.”⁹¹ Due to the arrangement of the region’s new settlements, with homes and businesses clustered on the canal banks, a fire could prove ruinous for entire communities: during a later fire in Port Leyden, if the flames had been able to travel one house further, a local reporter claimed, they “would probably have destroyed nearly all the business part” of the village.⁹² Due to the frenzied development inspired by the canal, capitalists paid little mind to disaster prevention. “Our fathers were so preoccupied with building this country in a hurry,” Ralph and Lewis Van Arnam suggested in 1950, “that they had no time to bother with such folderol as adopting safety measures in their rickety mills and factories.”⁹³

The Black River Canal was indirectly responsible for industrial fires because it encouraged the growth of industry and the settlement of dense canal communities. Floods, however, were a direct fault of the canal—and its poor maintenance. Almost immediately after the canal opened, state officials called its condition into question. “To maintain navigation [on the Black River Canal]”, the New York State Engineer and Surveyor wrote in their 1863 annual report, “many important repairs are absolutely necessary.”⁹⁴ They criticized “the present system of letting the repairs [of the canal] by contract” and asserted that a “few more years spent in a similar manner will make the canal almost entirely useless.”⁹⁵ They were particularly concerned about the canal’s condition south of Boonville, the location of the North Lake reservoir.

Six years later, their fears about the Black River Canal’s maintenance were realized. “The immense body of water, covering 5,000 acres, rushed through the valley of the Black River, carrying dismay and leaving ruin,” read a column in the *New York Reformer*, describing the 1869 collapse of the North Lake reservoir.⁹⁶ Although there were no casualties, the “majestic mass of waters... hardly paused for the puny obstructions placed in its path by the hands of men,” traveling over fifteen miles, destroying mills and tanneries as far north as Port Leyden, and creating an amount of damage upon which it was “impossible to place any estimate.”⁹⁷ Descriptions of the flood were nothing short of biblical, and they foreshadowed the deliberate canal breaks that would occur thirty years later.

Although the *Reformer*’s article invoked the supernatural, the cause of the flood was anything but. In fact, the following year, the extent to which humans were responsible for the flood became the subject of a contentious legal case, tried in front of the New York State Board of Canal Appraisers.⁹⁸ Unwilling to accept that floods were an expected byproduct of a waterway, residents directed their ire toward the state. Indeed, during the proceedings, local victims of property de-

⁸⁸“Port Leyden Wants Help,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1889.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰“Port Leyden Items,” *Lewis County Democrat*, December 4, 1878.

⁹¹“Van Patten’s Mill Burned,” *Lewis County Democrat*, February 8, 1871.

⁹²“Another Fire,” *Lowville Journal and Republican*, January 23, 1890.

⁹³Ralph N. Van Arnam and Lewis S. Van Arnam, “Dannatburg—Lewis County Ghost Town,” *North Country Life* (Spring 1950): 10.

⁹⁴New York State Engineer and Surveyor, *Annual Report of the State Engineer and Surveyor on the Canals of New York for the Year 1863* (Albany: Comstock & Cassidy, 1864), 32.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

⁹⁶“Breaking Away of the State Reservoir at North Lake,” *New York Reformer*, April 24, 1869.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸“Black River Flood Case,” *Scientific American* 22, no. 6 (February 5, 1870): 96.

struction charged that the flood was hardly a “natural” disaster and was instead a product of state negligence.⁹⁹

Although the 1869 reservoir collapse had been triggered by a “natural” freshet, residents ultimately identified the state of New York, and not nature, as the source of their devastation. “‘What did utterly destroy us is this,’” Charles A. Sherman and Francis Kernan argued before the New York Board of Canal Appraisers in 1871, “‘that when the whole lower valley of the Black river was trembling under the rush of this powerful flood... the State, by its negligence, let loose upon us... a river of water.’”¹⁰⁰ In their coverage of the case, the *Engineering and Mining Journal* even went so far as to say, “It is a pity that the innocent citizens of that region should suffer, and that the innocent citizens of the State should have to pay, for the stupid and corrupt negligence of the Legislature.”¹⁰¹ It was the state’s neglectful stewardship of the canal—and not the Black River Canal itself—that had supposedly caused such extensive property damage. While the Black River Canal sparked rapid development, it was also an agent of destruction; the canal both built up and tore down the valley, with disasters typifying the canal’s role in causing unwanted changes to the region’s physical landscape.

IX Social Stratification

According to the New York State Engineer and Surveyor, the Black River Canal had lost 5,285,117.01 by 1886, *assumequivalent to nearly* 170 million in 2023.¹⁰² Although none of New York’s canals—save for the Erie—were profitable by the close of the century, the Black River Canal was making an exceptionally poor return on New York’s investment: the canal’s all-time revenues had amounted to only 5.5% of the overall cost to construct, maintain, and operate it.¹⁰³ In short, the state had lost nearly 95% of its investment. Only the Crooked Lake and Baldwinsville Canals had earned back a lower proportion of their construction, maintenance, and operation costs. Crucially, however, the state had invested 7x more money in the Black River Canal than in the Crooked Lake Canal, and 141x more money in the Black River Canal than in the Baldwinsville Canal.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the Black River Canal was the New York canal system’s most resounding financial failure.

This prognosis was hardly new; the New York State Legislature had long been concerned about all of the lateral canals’ profitability. During a Constitutional Convention in 1873, legislators proposed amending the state constitution to remove legal protections for many of the lateral canals, including the Black River. Under the new amendment, no longer would the constitution guarantee that the “‘Legislature [would] not sell, lease, or otherwise dispose of any of the canals of the State... forever.’”¹⁰⁵ Instead, it would thereafter extend those protections only to the Erie, Cayuga and Seneca, Champlain, and Oswego Canals, paving the way for the abandonment of New York’s other canals.¹⁰⁶ The following year, this amendment was given a referendum, and an overwhelming majority of New York voters cast a ballot in its favor. Of the five counties that voted *against* the amendment, however, the three with the strongest majorities were Oneida, Lewis, and Jefferson Counties—the three that bordered portions of the Black River Canal.¹⁰⁷ In Lewis County, which

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰“An Important Case,” *Engineering and Mining Journal* 12, no. 21 (November 21, 1871): 330.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²New York State Engineer and Surveyor, *Annual Report of the State Engineer and Surveyor on the Canals of the State of New York for the Fiscal Year Ending September 30, 1885* (Albany: The Argus Company, 1886), 11.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Noble Earl Whitford, *History of the Canal System of the State of New York Together with Brief Histories of the Canals of the United States and Canada*, vol. 1 (Albany: Brandow Printing Company, 1905), 766.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 766-767.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 767-768.

contained the largest portion of the canal, only 38 residents voted in favor of the amendment, compared to the 5,118 who voted against it.¹⁰⁸ Among eligible voters in the Black River Valley, then, public opinion of the Black River Canal remained exceedingly favorable in the final quarter of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, following the amendment's ratification, the New York State Assembly organized a Lateral Canal Commission in 1876 to investigate the now-unprotected canals' usefulness to their surrounding communities and New York State. This investigation, of course, included the Black River Canal, and twelve beneficiaries from the Black River Valley were asked to testify before the commission. "Would there be any difference in the value of these [timber] lands if the canal was abandoned?" Commission Chairman A. B. Waldo asked Witt C. West, a Lowville resident and the president of the Utica and Black River Railroad, during his testimony.¹⁰⁹ "I sold 3,000 acres of those timber lands two years ago for five dollars an acre," West answered, "those lands would not be worth twenty-five cents an acre if the Black River canal was abandoned; those lands would not be worth any thing; that is the way to tell it."¹¹⁰ A local committee had, the year prior, corroborated West's claims by estimating that the one-million acres of timberland bordering the Black River Canal would depreciate by \$10,274,500 if it was abandoned.¹¹¹ While this figure may have been inflated to encourage the legislature to retain the canal, it nonetheless reveals that landowners felt particularly threatened by the canal's impending abandonment.

Following the 1874 referendum, some proponents of the Black River Canal had even asserted that "the idea of selling or abandoning the lateral canals originated" not with the canals' unprofitability for New York at large, but instead "with the gigantic railroad monopolies of the State," who supposedly sought to capture "a monopoly of the transportation business."¹¹² Yet, even West, "a railroad man," was committed to protecting the Black River Canal, not only because it increased his property values, but also because the timber industry was a vital component of the local economy.¹¹³ "You know how it is with lumbermen—they buy about for every dollar that they get in value for their lumber," West said, "one reason why... I want to see this canal sustained is that notwithstanding [the railroad does] not get much of the lumber, we get every thing in the way of merchandise and provisions and machinery, and every thing that they [the lumbermen] want immediately, that they buy."¹¹⁴ In the Black River Valley, the canal and railroad played complementary, albeit different, roles in the local economy, though they both hinged on timber exports.

While West made fiscal appeals in favor of retaining the Black River Canal, other proponents resorted to a rhetoric of egalitarianism, like that which had characterized the initial campaign for its construction. "The State exercised imperial power in taking the lands of her people to build these canals, but she did it for the full development of all their vast resources, and it was done to promote the prosperity of her people," a pro-canal committee from the Black River Valley wrote to New York's Canal Commissioner.¹¹⁵ So, they continued, "the State, as a matter of good faith, if for no other reason, is bound to maintain [the Black River Canal] until we say the canal has

¹⁰⁸"The Lateral Canals," *Utica Daily Observer*, February 27, 1875.

¹⁰⁹New York Legislature, Assembly, *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York*, vol. 3 (Albany: Jerome B. Parmenter, 1877), 124.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.* West's comments mirror arguments made by Erie Canal merchants years earlier: in *The Artificial River*, Sheriff claims that "[b]usinessmen frequently cried 'ruin' when they wanted to persuade the government to maintain the public works to protect their private investments." While residents of the Black River Valley frequently lamented the unequal prosperity experienced by settlers along the Erie, they were nonetheless quick to borrow from Erie merchants' rhetorical playbook.

¹¹¹"Black River Canal," *Utica Daily Observer*, August 10, 1875.

¹¹²"The Lateral Canals."

¹¹³New York State Assembly, *Documents of the Assembly (1877)*, 124.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 124-125.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 186.

passed its usefulness.”¹¹⁶ The canal’s “usefulness,” as characterized by these proponents, could not be measured solely in net profits. Indeed, they claimed that the Black River Canal’s future could not be determined by the government; it could only be charted by the people of the Black River Valley.

“Do you not see that with her imperial power [the State] has forced a contract upon us—that we have paid the cash for the prospective benefits?” the committee asked.¹¹⁷ “That now, with this contract unfulfilled on her part, and we demanding with the voice of justice for that which is due to us, she [the State] is made [to] turn from our people and listen to those who are favorites now, but whose counsel is folly and whose flattery is death.”¹¹⁸ Absent from these appeals is, of course, the fact that the Black River Canal was completed at the emphatic urging of the region’s residents; it was hardly a “contract” exacted by an “imperial power.” The abandonment of the Black River Canal, they insisted, would be a gross injustice and a dereliction of the government’s duty.

Ultimately, these appeals were successful. In its report to the legislature, the Lateral Canal Commission unanimously recommended that New York retain the Black River Canal. “Besides its necessity as a feeder to the Erie,” they wrote, “it is believed by your commission... that its business will be largely increased rather than diminished in the future.”¹¹⁹ By advising against abandoning the Black River Canal, the commission protected the region’s timber industry, even though it was the Black River Canal that had spurred the industry’s growth in the first place, a fact that was not lost on the legislature. “A very large amount of property has been invested in Oneida, Lewis and Jefferson counties, in mills, tanneries and other manufactories,” the Assembly noted in 1877, “because of the canal.”¹²⁰ Closing the canal, the commission warned, would “greatly cripple if not effectually destroy this branch of industry.”¹²¹

While some residents of the Black River Valley had profited from the timber industry (so much so that they were willing to form independent committees and testify before the state legislature to defend the Black River Canal), others reaped substantially fewer benefits. The “lumberjacks” who chopped down the region’s timber constantly faced the prospect of grave bodily harm, and their families lived in abysmal conditions. In *Birth of a River*, O’Donnell writes, “Fingers were always being lopped off, often two or three at a time... while bolting saws were forever taking their toll on arms.”¹²² Near Forestport, the site of the canal breaks in the late 1890s, these lumberjacks lived in “mill shanties,” and “as timber was cut away... squatter families moved in along the creeks.”¹²³ For loggers, mill workers, and their families, the Black River Canal’s timber boom had grave consequences. The mismatch between the lives of timber investors and timber workers, then, illustrates the Black River Valley’s new social stratification.

Social stratification was also apparent in the region’s leisure spaces. Hotels had appeared throughout the Black River Valley during the construction of the Black River Canal, although plenty predated the canal due to the region’s reputation as a “wilderness” tourism destination. Quoting a correspondent from the *Utica Herald*, E. R. Wallace wrote of the Hulbert House in his 1882 *Descriptive Guide to the Adirondacks* that, “for the last thirty or forty years, [it] has been the rallying point of pilgrims to the Wilderness... The flavor of trout and venison is as natural to the place as fragrance [is] to a rose.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 187.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 19.

¹²⁰Ibid., 188.

¹²¹Ibid., 19.

¹²²Thomas C. O’Donnell, *Birth of A River: An Informal History of the Headwaters of the Black River* (Boonville: Black River Books, 1952), 77.

¹²³Ibid., 69.

¹²⁴E. R. Wallace, *Descriptive Guide to the Adirondacks, and Handbook of Travel to Saratoga Springs; Schroon*

While hotels continued to serve tourists throughout the Black River Canal's existence, their role diversified as the canal prompted local development and population growth. During the era of the Black River Canal, hotels' character began to more closely resemble that of saloons, which had also proliferated due to the canal's construction. "Ed Farr kept what under law passed as a hotel, providing sleeping accommodations of a sort for wayfarers should any ever be hold enough to ask for them," O'Donnell recounts, "To the immediate locale, however, the place was accepted as just a saloon."¹²⁵ Indeed, contemporary advertisements for hotels in the Black River Valley frequently touted that a "bar stocked with rich, choice Liquors... can always be found," as was the case with the Central House in Boonville.¹²⁶ Hence, the region's hotels did not cater exclusively—or even primarily—to transients. Hotels hosted local meetings and were sites of regional political events, such as the 1899 Democratic Assembly Convention for the third district of Oneida County, which was held at Charles Dorrity's Hotel in the hamlet of North Western, a small community located directly on the Black River Canal.¹²⁷

Hotels became particularly important to the local social world—and particularly similar to saloons—following New York City's passage of the Raines law in 1896. Soon thereafter, towns and villages across the Black River Valley held similar referenda on saloon licensing, including in Theresa, where, the *Lowville Journal and Republican* reported, the "town voted no saloons by a majority of 180" in February 1887.¹²⁸ By May, however, the *Journal* claimed that "an attempt was made to convert one of them [the closed saloons] into a 'Raines hotel,' thereby defeating the wishes of the people and evading the spirit of the law," not to mention paving the way for "a 'cesspool' of iniquity [to be] re-established in the heart of [the] village."¹²⁹ As was also the case in New York City, evasions of anti-saloon laws were common in the Black River Valley, and the existing prominence of hotels in the region only made them more feasible. In his research notes, O'Donnell recorded the story of a proprietor who "had a saloon which was half in Remsen, where the bar was, and half in Forestport." The source continued, "When Remsen went local option Owen [the proprietor] merely moved the bar into the Forestport part," effectively avoiding licensing laws.¹³⁰ By the end of the century, hotels in the Black River Valley frequently connoted immorality and unlawfulness.

Yet, hotels played such a central and varied role in the Black River Valley that, in some cases, they doubled as both a locus of crime and as makeshift police stations. "There is no more dreary public highway in Oneida County than that which leads from Rome to Boonville, following for the most part the Black River Canal," read a special dispatch to the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, "but even for all the loneliness and desolation no one would have an idea for a moment that a traveler would be molested in this lonely country by women."¹³¹ Around 2 a.m. on a September night in 1886, two "female Dick Turpins," as the *Globe-Democrat* termed them, blocked the path of two travelers near North Western, where they then threatened them with a revolver and demanded that they hand over any money or valuables in their possession. Although the travelers recognized their assailants, they did not report the crime to the police for more than a month; the women had told them "to pass on and make no revelations whatever of what had occurred under penalty of causing [them] trouble."¹³² When law enforcement finally arrested Susan Scoville and Mary Jane Dunn,

Lake, Lakes Luzerne, George and Champlain; the Ausable Chasm; the Thousand Islands; Massena Springs, and Trenton Falls (Syracuse: W. Gill, 1882), 12.

¹²⁵O'Donnell, *Birth of a River*, 75.

¹²⁶"Hotels," *Lewis County Democrat*, August 16, 1893.

¹²⁷"Third Democratic Assembly Convention," *Rome Daily Sentinel*, October 2, 1899.

¹²⁸"Trying to Evade the Raines Law at Theresa," *Lowville Journal and Republican*, June 3, 1897.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*

¹³⁰Thomas C. O'Donnell, "Birth of a River Research Notes," n.d., Box 4, Folder 2, Thomas C. O'Donnell Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Syracuse, New York.

¹³¹"Female Dick Turpins," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, November 1, 1886.

¹³²*Ibid.*

they were “conducted into the sitting room” of the Half-way House, a hotel in North Western, to be questioned by the deputy sheriff.¹³³ During a *Globe-Democrat* correspondent’s interview with Scoville, she claimed that she and Dunn “had no idea of robbing any one,” and had instead been traveling “to make merry with a hotel-keeper.”¹³⁴

The highway robbery incident not only illuminates the complex role of hotels in the Black River Valley but also proves instructive about contemporary gender dynamics in the region. Scoville was reportedly a 30-year-old widow who tended a canal lock near the scene of the attempted robbery; she lived “comparatively alone in a small house beside the lock.”¹³⁵ After a warrant was issued for her arrest, she allegedly hid in a canal boat in front of her home and resisted officers’ attempts to remove her from the waterway.¹³⁶ Although her crime may have been exceptional, Scoville’s situation was otherwise ordinary. Plenty of working-class women in the Black River Valley found employment on the canal or in its ancillary institutions.

While some women, like Scoville, worked as lock-tenders, others worked on the canal boats themselves, often as cooks, as is evident in photographs of canal boat crews.¹³⁷ Women also frequently worked in—and even sometimes owned—saloons and hotel restaurants. For example, as detailed in contemporary business directories, a woman named D. Shnider operated a saloon in Boonville, and two women, Lizzie Burlison and L. L. Burlison, operated a pair of adjacent saloons in Rome.¹³⁸ While it was less common for women to act as proprietors of hotels and saloons, they were ubiquitous in their kitchens: contemporary census manuscripts and business directories indicate that cooks, waitresses, and “domestics” in these institutions were typically women.¹³⁹

Meanwhile, other women in the Black River Valley vehemently opposed the allegedly rampant depravity of hotels and saloons.¹⁴⁰ To challenge the effects of these institutions, some reform-minded women proposed creating alternative social spaces in the Black River Valley: “Realizing the need of influences to counteract the many temptations in our community, and believing that counter attractions against the saloon and billiard rooms must be established as a means,” the *Lowville Times* reported in 1885, “a few ladies conceived the idea of opening ice-cream parlors, where the young and old of both sexes might find refreshments surrounded by pleasing and healthful influences.”¹⁴¹ Ultimately, however, local temperance advocates formed the “Temperance Tabernacle,” located off of Lowville’s main street and thus close to the town’s largest concentration of hotels and saloons.¹⁴²

The Temperance Tabernacle hosted a litany of family-friendly events, most of which catered toward (and were only accessible to) the Black River Valley’s upper echelons. For instance, the Tabernacle frequently hosted “Pink Teas” at its in-house roller-skating rink. Typically, the teas’ “proceeds [were] to be devoted to the relief of the needy and destitute of our village,” as reported in

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Ibid. In O’Donnell’s rendition of the story in *Snubbing Posts*, he says the robbers were nicknamed “Jane and Susie” and “had proceeded to terrorize the North Western-Dunn Brook sector” after “arriving from the shooting West” (pg. 94).

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶“Stand and Deliver!,” *Utica Daily Observer*, October 29, 1886.

¹³⁷Edward P. Fynmore and Harney J. Corwin, *Black River Canal* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2005), 77.

¹³⁸*Gazetteer and Business Directory of Oneida County, NY, for 1869* (Syracuse: Hamilton Child, 1869); *Kimball’s Rome City Directory for 1898* (Watertown: J. C. Kimball, 1898).

¹³⁹Ancestry.com, *U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995* (Lehi: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011). Reviewed directories include those for Boonville, Lowville, Rome, and Carthage, from 1867 to 1904.

¹⁴⁰This focus on local, permanent institutions contrasts reformers’ efforts along the Erie Canal years earlier. Along the larger canal, reform efforts were often directed toward the behavior of *transient* canal workers, as Sheriff discusses in *The Artificial River*.

¹⁴¹“Semi-Annual Report of Lewis Co., Home Mission,” *Lowville Times*, May 21, 1885.

¹⁴²Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Lowville, Lewis County, New York, 1890*, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn06048_002.

the *Lowville Journal and Republican*, signaling the existence of social stratification.¹⁴³ Other events ventured a direct anti-alcohol message, such as a children's concert titled "An Hour with Mother Goose and Her Temperance Family," as was advertised in a *Lowville Times* blurb that encouraged families to "go and see the exceedingly pleasing, unique and instructive manner in which Mother Goose treats temperance."¹⁴⁴ With their goal of raising funds for the "needy and destitute," these events signaled that they were intended for those who were more privileged than members of the "under class."

As in nearby Utica, where, as Mary P. Ryan details in *Cradle of the Middle Class*, women's participation in welfare organizations "was voluntary and unpaid but nonetheless expensive and neatly integrated into the class system," only the wealthiest residents of the Black River Valley could partake in charity events, much less hold leadership positions in charitable organizations.¹⁴⁵ While the *Journal and Republican* boasted that the Ladies' Home Mission Society was "made up of a number of charitably inclined ladies who devote nearly all of their spare time... in arranging for entertainments, the proceeds from which are used... for such persons as are deserving of help and sympathy," only a certain segment of women were able to make such a commitment.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, with their stated aim of helping "the needy and destitute," the Tabernacle's events excluded working-class women by making them the supposed beneficiaries of their efforts, effectively othering them. Hence, the division in women's work and leisure in the late-nineteenth-century Black River Valley illustrates the region's emergent social divisions.

X The Canal Breaks

Despite efforts to shutter saloons and promote temperance in the Black River Valley, the conspiracies of the late 1890s nonetheless originated in the region's hotels and saloons. However, contrary to the beliefs of Temperance Tabernacle members, the crimes were not an isolated product of these establishments' alleged immorality; instead, they were the culmination of the tempestuous century of change in the Black River Valley.

The timber boom had waned by 1900, making the Black River Canal increasingly unprofitable, both for those directly involved in logging and for those whose livelihoods depended on canal traffic. So, business owners were willing to garner state investment in the Black River Canal at any cost, even if it meant destroying the canal itself. In a 1900 article titled "A Wrecker Confesses," the *Lewis County Democrat* summarized the conspirators' rationale for damaging the canal: "James Rudolph, who formerly kept a pool and card room at Forestport... said that Murray, Fradett, Root, and himself made the [canal] break of 1898 at the instigation of saloon and hotel-keepers of Forestport, who agreed to raise a pool and pay them."¹⁴⁷ The "saloon and hotel-keepers [were] in the business of selling liquor," Rudolph elaborated, so they "would be financially benefitted by the increase of population in the village, by reason of the making of the repairs."¹⁴⁸ The government, in their view, owed its citizens economic investment, no matter how illogical or impractical the avenue; the Black River Canal was a fulcrum for Northern New Yorkers' beliefs about the role and responsibilities of the state.

As Doyle details in *The Forestport Breaks*, all the accused hotel and saloon proprietors were either imprisoned or fined for their roles in the conspiracies. By 1901, however, they had all been

¹⁴³"Local Intelligence," *Lowville Journal and Republican*, March 19, 1885.

¹⁴⁴"Local Matters," *Lowville Times*, February 18, 1886.

¹⁴⁵Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 215.

¹⁴⁶"Local Intelligence."

¹⁴⁷"A Wrecker Confesses."

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*

released from prison, and there were no accusations of conspiracy along the Black River Canal thereafter.¹⁴⁹

XI Conclusion

The Black River Canal was much more than a public works project. For the residents of the Black River Valley, it was a powerful heuristic, representing their beliefs about the government—particularly its responsibility for providing “egalitarian” investment. The canal, too, was a driver of both ecological and social change. Those changes went hand in hand, as the region’s transformation from “wilderness” to a site of commercial industry inspired new socioeconomic divisions. By the end of the century, the Black River Canal had, in a way, begun to self-destruct: the very ideals that had driven its authorization prompted hotel and saloon owners to encourage the canal’s destruction, as they believed that state-funded repairs would be a boon to their businesses. Thus, the Forestport breaks of 1897, 1898, and 1899 were an embodiment of the century of discomfiting changes wrought by the Black River Canal, despite its advocates’ “egalitarian” vision.

¹⁴⁹Doyle, *The Forestport Breaks*, 208-209; 214.

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