

What is a Waterway Anyway?

By Daniel Rinn

SLIDE ONE:

Before I begin, I would like to thank Marian and the Center for Sustainability and Environment. I would also like to thank the Museum Association of New York and its partners for helping to bring the Smithsonian Waterways exhibit to our state. And if you haven't done so already, I would highly recommend, to each of you in the audience, that you explore the exhibit while it is here in Aurora.. As some of you may already know, it highlights a number of interesting ways in which water shapes our lives. And once you begin to think more about it, you realize it is almost impossible to comprehend the degree to which water has defined the contours of our history. Slow moving 'rivers of ice,' otherwise known as glaciers, for example, formed Niagara Falls, the Finger Lakes, peaks in the Adirondacks and the Catskills. Water has powered human industry – whether through steam driven turbines or via hydroelectric or thermoelectric sources. You learn, too, that water plays a central symbolic role in most forms of religious belief – it cleanses, it purifies, it renews, it *gives life*. And as the exhibit illustrates, water is indeed *everywhere* – it covers 71% of the earth's surface. Earth holds an estimated 327 quintillion gallons of water. *Quintillion*... how many of you have used that number before? Honestly? What the exhibit makes clear is the plain truth that water is an unquestionably powerful agent of historical change. It operates across vast expanses in both space and time. And yet, as a historian, I can honestly say I have thought very *little* about this centrality. As a result, I have found myself wondering what a *watwayr-centric* history of New York State would look like.

So, here is what I propose: I would like to examine the history of our state through the lens of waterways. I'm curious what this exercise might reveal. I imagine it has the potential to offer some insight into the various ways in which we interact with water, of course, but it might also serve to complicate how we conceive of waterways and *the relationship between environment and culture* more generally. Waterways are too often conceived as nothing more than shipping conduits: they allow the movement of goods and people. But this is wrong, I suspect, and I'd like to challenge this inclination. In doing so, however, we will have to think quite broadly about our definitions – and as the title of the lecture indicates, I'm chiefly concerned with our understanding of “waterway.” “What *is* a waterway?” Keep this question in mind as we glide over four episodes or moments in the history of New York. My plan is to start with a rather straightforward example of a historic waterway – the Erie Canal. I might even tell some fairly straightforward, or familiar, stories about this waterway. As the lecture continues, however, it is my hope that my examples will become counter-intuitive, maybe even absurd. At minimum, I would like to try to convince you that waterways are important – not because they allow us to ship things or people, but because they generate, reconstruct, and disseminate *ideas*. Waterways shape culture. They shape who we are and how we think. But I won't get ahead of myself, let us turn to our first example.

SLIDE TWO

The Erie Canal and the “Empire” State

Upon the completion of the Erie Canal, New York organized a celebration along the canal's route. In October of 1825 the *Seneca Chief* left Buffalo carrying two kegs of Lake Erie

water – it was headed for New York harbor, for the Atlantic. Festivities of various kinds met the *Seneca Chief* while it was in route. On November fourth it arrived at the harbor, and the kegs of water were dumped into the ocean, a symbolic action signaling the ‘Wedding of the Waters.’ Depending on your historical perspective, the canal certainly was worthy of celebration; it was quite a feat of engineering and intense manual labor. Construction was onerous, taking around 8 years to complete. An artificial river of sorts, the canal enabled greater ease of shipping and provided New Yorkers throughout the state better access to national and international markets. Indeed, it was an economic boon.

The operation of the canal itself led to the development of a complex micro-economy. Tens of thousands of workers were required to keep the canal open and functional. Goods needed to be loaded and unloaded from thousands of vessels, locks needed to be operated, work horses required stables and food, which also meant stable-hands and farms for oats and hay. And imagine all the hotels, shops, and warehouses that sprung up in the port cities along the canal route. This is only a brief list of the economic stimulants we might imagine. *And* this was not New York’s only canal. The state developed a larger web of waterways that connected lakes Erie, Ontario, Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, and Champlain as well as the Hudson, Susquehanna, Allegheny, and Delaware rivers. As a result, New Yorkers now resided in a modern market economy. Not only did new towns and cities begin to emerge, existing towns experienced astounding growth.

Rochester, for example, had certainly been a flour producing region before the completion of the Erie Canal – it had exported 67,000 barrels of flour via Lake Ontario in 1829 – but six years after the canal was built, Rochesterians exported 240,000 barrels of flour. Canal

barges created access to new markets and thus encouraged an agricultural boom. Nor was this a one-way shipping channel – canal boats didn't just extract flour or other agricultural products, they also brought in consumer goods. The canal catalyzed an agricultural boom which then facilitated a robust consumer market. With the increased buying power of farmers, there developed new consumer trends. This was especially true in the mid 1840s, when farmers began upgrading farm equipment and buying any number of conveniences such as clocks, stoves, hats, books, etc.. Of course there are costs to this level of economic integration. Farmers were now tethered to a more expansive and unpredictable set of market relations, a fact that became too real in 1837 with the onset of a six-year depression.

But, still, I don't think I am deviating too far from the majority of historical accounts that celebrate the New York canal system, specifically the Erie Canal, as a marvel of modern infrastructure. The state, in a sense, became smaller, more integrated, less wild. Indeed, these waterways accomplished much – they essentially closed the frontier in the Empire State. Let us pause briefly and consider the story so far: as the example of canals indicates, waterways have been central in bringing New York into the modern age. The canal marks an important watershed moment in the history of our state. In the early to mid 19th century, New Yorkers became consumers and producers in a complex market economy accessible via manmade waterways. Of course New Yorkers were dependent on rivers, streams, and lakes – natural waterways -- for trade and transportation before canals were developed, but this dependence defined a foregone era of the pioneer who toiled in wilderness. In the popular imagination, the completion of the canal was an important event leading up to the closure of the frontier. It enabled development on more and more lands in Upstate and Western New York. The state seemed “settled.” Wilderness,

nature, now seemed one step closer to human control. The Erie canal, then, appears to symbolize independence from the vagaries of nature and the dangers of the frontier. At least, this is how one account might have it.

But I would like to push the implications of this story a bit further. Is the canal more than a modern marvel of infrastructure that helped close the frontier? What else might we glean about the relationship between waterways and culture from this example? Well, a quick pass over the history of the Erie Canal suggests this “artificial river” profoundly altered more than the economy and infrastructural landscape.

Canal-builders innovated new technologies such as oversized plows for digging, an endless screw that made it easier to fell trees, the stump-puller, and a limestone-based cement that hardened underwater. And, incidentally, there was no engineering school in the United States when construction of the canal began. These innovations were ad hoc in many cases. Workers typically learned on the job. Still, the need for technical training was not ignored. As a result, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was founded in 1824 in Troy. And I don’t think it is too much of a stretch to argue that the canal also had a larger impact on education via the advent of “scientific farming.” Easier access to land and markets went hand in hand with the increased use of new fertilizers, new draining techniques, and the appearance of an agricultural press devoted to showcasing the latest farming techniques and equipment. In 1841, the State Agricultural Society was formed – the organization immediately began formal lobbying for an agricultural college. The college, Cornell University, wouldn’t be built for another two decades, but its formation was very much rooted in the agricultural developments the canal made possible. And

although the canal helped revolutionize a number of ideas, we should note that it also *reinforced* some of the more troubling cultural assumptions of the time.

SLIDE THREE

Construction of canals was predicated on a longstanding belief—handed down from the early colonists in North America--that wilderness must be conquered. And, as the historian Roderick Nash has noted, white settlers very much perceived Native-Americans to be *a part of that wilderness*.^[1] If nature must be displaced and succumb to the expansion of civilization, then so too for the numerous peoples who lived in North America before colonization. The Erie Canal was built during a period of “Indian removal” in which Native-Americans were forced west of the Mississippi. The canal actually cut through territory traditionally held by the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois – a confederacy of tribes including the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora peoples. In 1811 DeWitt Clinton, the Mayor of New York City and a member of the canal commission, remarked “before the passing away of the present generation, not a single Iroquois will be seen in this state.”^[2] But Clinton, who would become the State’s Governor in 1825, was not correct in this prediction. Despite various removal efforts and continued encroachment on legally protected Native-American lands, the Haudenosaunee remained in New York -- though encroachment on their communities would continue well into the 20th century. Which brings me to my second example of a historic waterway, the Allegheny Reservoir.

SLIDE FOUR

Kinzua Dam

In 1908 members of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce organized a commission to examine the potential for flooding and flood control in their city. The commission recommended the construction of numerous reservoirs to not only combat floodwaters, but also to serve the interests of various industries that grew up along the Allegheny River. The recommendations and subsequent plans to build a dam in the area met stiff resistance from the Seneca Nation. The dam would have put their lands at the bottom of one of the deepest reservoirs in the eastern United States. The project was abandoned in 1928, but it would resurface decades later after a catastrophic flood inundated the city of Pittsburgh in 1936. Once again, local industrial leaders and politicians pushed for the construction of a dam on the upper Allegheny river. And once again, Seneca land was in jeopardy, and a protracted battle ensued.

The controversy intensified when President Eisenhower took office in 1953. Under his administration, the Departments of Justice and the Interior were supportive of the project. And with the additional support of the Army Corps of Engineers, which had been a proponent of the dam since the 20s, it appeared likely efforts would not stall this time. The Seneca offered resistance of course. The Seneca Council prohibited the Corps from surveying their lands – a prohibition that was ignored. They also enlisted the aid of Arthur Morgan, the former head of the Tennessee Valley Authority during Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency. Morgan proposed alternate building sites that would spare Seneca land. Continued pressure from the Seneca and their allies delayed the project through Eisenhower’s years in office. But the Corps and other proponents of the dam remained committed – they dismissed Morgan’s proposal for an alternate building site and moved forward with a plan that required the removal of 600 Seneca residents from the area.

A shred of hope remained, however, as Seneca leaders made inroads with John F. Kennedy during his campaign for the presidency. Yet, despite Kennedy's assurance that he would stop construction of the dam if elected President, he lacked the political will to do so once in office. Resistance continued and it illustrated that the Seneca people had a wide range of supporters. The National Congress of American Indians, the American Indian Chicago Conference, and the Councils of the Cherokee and Oneida Nations joined the cause. So too did the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends. Sixteen Quakers held a silent vigil at the dam site that lasted several weeks. They also initiated a letter-writing campaign to pressure public officials and news outlets. Musicians joined the fray too. Buffy Sainte-Marie, a Cree folksinger, referenced Kinzua in her songs "Now That the Buffalo's Gone" and "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying."^[3] Johnny Cash's "As Long As the Grass Shall Grow" stormed the airwaves in Western New York and Pennsylvania.

But construction on Kinzua Dam continued. When completed in 1965, it submerged upwards of 10,000 acres of Seneca land in New York State.^[4] Several Seneca communities were condemned as the federal government invoked the right of eminent domain in the creation of the reservoir. As a result, 600 residents were dislocated, existing cemeteries were removed and relocated, and whole communities were effectively drowned. Indeed, the Allegany Reservoir was a Lake of Betrayal.

SLIDE FIVE – PLAY CLIP

As the documentary suggests, flood control only played a minimal role in the underlying motivations for constructing the dam. Once again, the Haudenosaunee people would have to make way for economic and industrial progress. In the eyes of the federal government, Native-

Americans still seemed to exist as if a part of the landscape. Thus, the United States violated one of its oldest treaties as it continued to bring “nature” *under control*. It seemed Americans, at least white Americans, stood above the natural world as master. This logic, however, would be tested in the Love Canal crisis, which brings us to our third waterway.

SLIDE SIX

Love Canal

In 1972 Debra Gall was doing what you might expect most eleven year-old children do: she was contemplating a small act of vandalism while playing outdoors. She found a lump of chalk-like substance near a swing set. The mystery-chalk might be great for drawing on the sidewalk. Unfortunately it crumbled almost immediately. Shortly thereafter she rubbed her face, which caused a painful burning sensation in her eyes and on her skin. She had to be taken to the emergency room. Several other children would soon join her. After an investigation from the Niagara Falls Fire Department, it was revealed that Debra and other children had been exposed to an industrial chemical, benzene hexachloride. Over the next several years residents began noting the onset of other illnesses. Louis Gibbs, for example, was shocked when her son developed epilepsy. Other residents began talking about strange headaches and unusually high rates of miscarriage and even cancer. It turned out their neighborhood was built around an abandoned canal that had be used as a chemical landfill.

The canal was originally named after William T. Love around 1892. Love landed in Niagara Falls with hopes of building a model city, a green city. He imagined the development of a canal that would divert water from the Niagara River into a series of artificial waterfalls that

would provide power for a community of approximately 200,000 residents. His scheme attracted interest and even earned him the trust of a few investors. He began construction of Love Canal in 1894, but the project was terminated two years later. Love's company was bankrupt. As the city of Niagara Falls grew up around the site, it actually appeared that Love's vision was on its way to realization. The city was affordable and the residents in La Salle neighborhood enjoyed the benefits of living on the quiet, tree-lined streets of a suburban community. But Love's canal did not remain untouched over the years. It was purchased in the 1940s by Hooker Chemical Company. Hooker drained the canal and used the site as a dumping ground for various industrial byproducts. Eventually the landfill was sealed and buried. The land was then sold to the Niagara Falls Board of Education in 1953. The Board received the property -- 16 acres total -- for the low cost of \$1. And they knew why: Hooker stipulated in the contract that their company would not be held accountable for any problems that may be caused by the waste buried below. Soon enough two schools appeared on the property and a neighborhood developed around the perimeter.

So, when Lois Gibbs suspected something other than natural causes accounted for her son's epilepsy, it turned out her suspicion was warranted. Investigations revealed a litany of ailments could be tied to the canal -- headaches, respiratory problems, rashes, miscarriages, birth defects, and even chromosomal damage. Gibbs organized her neighbors and demanded an explanation as well as a means of escaping this horrifying reality.

In 1978 the New York State health commissioner closed the school and suggested pregnant women leave the neighborhood. Naturally, residents began to wonder why evacuation should focus exclusively on pregnant women and infants... wasn't everybody at risk? And if so,

where were they supposed to go? How were they supposed to pay their bills? Gibbs, now serving as the president of the newly formed Love Canal Homeowners Association, demanded these that these families be compensated and relocated. The state agreed to purchase some homes, but only those closest to the canal. Further pressure mounted and Gibbs, along with other members of the Home Owner's Association, held EPA officials hostage in a Love Canal home. The increased press coverage that resulted proved effective: President Jimmy Carter declared a state of emergency and agreed to relocate the whole neighborhood.

SLIDE SEVEN: PLAY VIDEO CLIP

As the historian David Stradling argues, the Love Canal Homeowner's Association turned out to be one of the most important environmental organizations in the country. The whole episode revealed that "average people, especially women [could] make a difference in environmental politics."^[5]I think this is right, but it makes me wonder about the Seneca's battle over the Allegheny Reservoir 10 years prior. Why were their claims denied? What made the Love Canal Home Owner's Association more successful? Well, Louis Gibbs was a middle class, white female concerned about the health of her family. When Gibbs and her fellow activists demanded action from government officials to protect *the home*, they were playing on a longer tradition of women reformers in the United States.

Around the turn of the 20th century, female reformers entered the political sphere in their efforts to protect the *family*. In doing so, they were challenging longstanding assumptions that relegated the role of women to the domestic sphere exclusively. Older beliefs held that women were not supposed to be engaged in public or political life. But they used this logic to their advantage: if my job is to protect my family and my home, then I therefore must work to effect

social change. Lois Gibbs and her contemporaries were clearly operating within this mold. And, as we shall see, ideas about gender and family were important in the history of another waterway: the city pool.

SLIDE EIGHT

Pools

The first municipal pool in New York City opened in 1906 at West 60th Street. It was situated between an Irish and an African-American neighborhood. The pool did not see much use, however. One might reason that perhaps white ethnics would be unwilling to swim with African-Americans. In truth, early 20th century pools were not really segregated by race – at least not in most northern cities. So that doesn't get us too far in explaining why the 1906 pool was unpopular. Unlike most cities at the time, New York built pools in the basement of bathhouses. They were quite small – 30 by 60 feet – and clearly not provided for recreational amusement. New York's first municipal pools were essentially created as a means of ensuring that lower class residents took *baths*. They were a means of controlling hygiene. Poor people were dirty and avoided bathing. They needed to be manipulated or tricked into maintaining cleanliness -- At least this is what middle and upper class officials thought. But, as you might imagine, dingy basement pools were not attractive to *anybody* and thus saw little use. The president of the board of alderman, John Roy Mitchel, sought to change this.

Mitchel proposed the construction of a large, outdoor pool in Central Park. This location would be accessible for a larger number of working-class New Yorkers. And because of its size, it would prove more attractive, more fun. Besides, Mitchel reasoned, Central Park already

provided numerous forms of recreation for the city's wealthy elite – it was the place to go for horseback riding, as well as carriage and automobile driving – but it offered nothing for people with limited economic means. He understood that Manhattan's lower-class residents had different recreation interests. His mission, as he stated it, was “to popularize the uses of Central Park.”^[6] This must have been quite the radical idea because it immediately met firm resistance. Lawyers, university presidents, bankers, industrialists... basically all the wealthy people in the city... did not want the masses raining down on the park. Critics not only dismissed the idea of an outdoor pool in Central Park – many of them also loathed the idea of a pool *anywhere* in the city. Such a pool would only encourage the rowdy, *undisciplined* play of children. It would also be a breeding ground for disease. And to build something like this in *Central Park*– this was *ludicrous*. One critical reformer stated the pool would bring poor children “into a part of the city where they are not wanted.” Another said it “would attract all sorts of undesirable people.” Poor blacks and whites were just too dirty, loud, and rowdy for inclusion in the genteel landscape of Central Park. The pool would not be built.

Eventually, however, this class divide began to evaporate in the 20s and 30s. Outdoor pools became more widely popular, especially during the Great Depression. Roosevelt's New Deal dedicated federal monies to the construction of recreational facilities (such as pools) all over the country. New York benefited greatly from this program. In 1936, 11 pools were constructed in the city. And these weren't the small, basement-style dingy holes of the progressive era – the newer pools were much larger and extravagant. They typically included a swimming area of 120 by 300 feet, a diving area of 60 by 100 feet, and a wading area of 50 by 100 feet. And there was another important change in this period.

While Progressive-Era pools might have been divided by class rather than race, they *were* segregated by gender: men and women swam at separate times. During the 1920s this changed as swimming was increasingly understood as an activity that promoted community and *family* values. Lower, middle, and upper-class white men and women were now swimming together. Of crucial importance, this new openness was coupled with a fear of the black male. White *women* could not be swimming alongside African-American men. Black males were too predatory and white women too alluring and frail. In short, greater class and gender integration was predicated on the black-white racial divide. Pools in New York entered a stage of de-facto segregation.

SLIDE NINE

The fear of interracial swimming only grew more entrenched as swim suits evolved (or devolved, depending on your perspective). Swimsuits became tighter, skimpier, and generally more revealing of the human body throughout these years. Men stopped wearing tops and their trunks became shorter and tighter. But the important change, really, was in female swimwear. The older suits effectively covered the entire body, except for the forearms. They included skirts, leggings, and a gown-like top. It was a baggy garment, and it could weigh as much as 15 pounds when wet. Newer suits shed much of this fabric. The skirt fell away, replaced by tighter and shorter trunks. The tops too became tighter, more form fitting. Some were even open-backed! Even crazier, some women wore two-piece suits that exposed their midsection! Evidently the new swimwear was meant to reveal, rather than conceal the body.

SLIDE TEN

The change was rooted in the culture of the 1920s, which saw the rise of the “New Woman” – The New Woman was more independent and open to her sexuality. The Olympic swimmer Annette Kellermann also helped popularize the skimpier suits. She preferred tighter fitting, lighter, and thus more revealing swimwear. And for obvious reasons – such a suit allowed for easier movement in water. Pools thus became eroticized in the minds of early to mid-century Americans. The new pools were large and undisciplined places where men and women bumped into each other underwater – there was a lot of potential for unsupervised bodily contact in this environment. All of this reinforced fears of the African-American male. Desegregation of pools would not occur until decades later – and by that time, public pools became unpopular. Many of them were no longer maintained. They grew dilapidated. Most middle and upper-class Americans in the latter half of the 20th century opted to swim in private pools.

As with the Allegheny Reservoir and the Love Canal, swimming pools illustrate the ways in which a waterway can reinforce or repurpose old ideas *as well as* formulate new cultural assumptions. Pools helped remake the Victorian *bathing* suit into something different -- the modern *swim* suit. Swimming was active in ways that bathing certainly wasn't... in fact, cleanliness and hygiene have far less relevance to later pool culture. Women (and men) now displayed, even showcased their bodies in public. Cleanliness, humility, and restraint were replaced by an openness to the body, and human sexuality. And this might have been liberating - - but it also implied elements of social control. The new pool culture necessitated racial segregation and reinforced ideas about the undisciplined and violent nature of the African-American male.

And the eroticization of the body also implied a new conception of beauty. No longer was tanned skin associated negatively with outdoor labor. The tan, fit body, especially the female body, appeared in advertisements and movies -- and just think how common this is today... how many advertisements have you seen that display women in swim wear? And how many of these products actually have anything to do with swimming? I digress. In any case, my point is that swim suits set a new standard for what *body-types* were acceptable for public display. The muscular male in swim trunks and the thin, athletic female in a two-piece suit set the mark -- and without the pounds of fabric attached to the Victorian suit, it would be hard to hide your nonconformity to this ideal. So, it turns out that waterways exercise a surprising degree of control over our *aesthetic* assumptions. And this brings us to our final example.

SLIDE ELEVEN

The Hudson River, Storm King Mountain

In the early 1960s, Consolidated Edison (Con Ed) began planning the construction of a hydro-electric power plant at the base of Storm King Mountain on the Hudson River. The plant would both produce and store electricity, thus increasing the overall efficiency of Con Ed's grid system. Yet, the company would eventually face stiff opposition from grassroots activists who raised concerns about the environmental impact of the proposed project. Storm King Mountain and the Hudson River were *beautiful* features of the natural world -- as such, they should be protected from development. This argument appeared weak, however, as it didn't gain much traction with other environmental organizations, let alone Con Ed. The Hudson River Conservation Society (HRCS) and the Palisades Interstate Park Commission (PIPC),

organizations otherwise invested in preserving the Hudson, endorsed the Storm King project. The company was a job provider, and its new project would strengthen the local economy. Aesthetic considerations seemed far less important than the metrics of the economist.

SLIDE TWELVE

Still, a strong environmental backlash began to mount. Activists formed the Scenic Hudson Trail Conference, an organization devoted to preventing the construction of the plant. Their early efforts at halting Con Ed's project focused on making a case for the *aesthetic* value of the Hudson River. The presence of new power lines and a defaced mountainside, however, seemed inconsequential to the Federal Power Commission (FPC), which voted to grant Con Ed the necessary permits to begin construction. Activists would not experience much success until they leaned on the authority of *ecological science* — studies concerning water quality and fish populations held more sway than arguments about the region's natural beauty.

Indicative of national trends among environmental organizations, Scenic Hudson came to rely on professional litigation and lawsuits. Armed with growing evidence about the destruction of striped bass in the Hudson River, activists found themselves able to present a formidable legal challenge to Con Ed. The plant posed numerous risks to fish populations — the reversible turbines so central to power storage, for example, could destroy fish larvae and eggs. Scenic Hudson could also point to the nearby nuclear power plant at Indian Point, which had been shown to present numerous environmental hazards. Most important, fish populations and water quality could be studied, and *quantified* by scientists. According to the historian Robert Lifset, it was the more quantifiable and scientific (rather than aesthetic) claims of Scenic Hudson that led

to success in the courtroom. Fish and scenery produced revenue via the tourist industry. This was actually the language of control – Storm King needed to be managed to protect valuable resources. This reasoning translated well evidently. By 1980 environmentalists won the battle for Storm King.

Conclusion: The Watershed

I would like to close by summarizing a few points in order to draw out some of the insights each of these waterways might provide. As with the Erie Canal, the Kinzua Dam, the Love Canal, and city pools, the proposed Storm King facility indicates that Americans have a history of attempting to control, to subdue nature via its waterways. The canal initiated a transportation and market revolution by diverting water flow into an artificial river, the Kinzua Dam provided cheap power for industry by impeding the flow of the Allegheny, likewise the Storm King plan would have remade the Hudson landscape in order to provide power for New York City. Also interesting, these episodes indicate that waterways are sites of *social* control. Pools reinforced conceptions of gender, race, and class; the Kinzua Dam is suggestive of the continued inclination to write Native-American culture out of our history; and the Storm King episode speaks to attempts to establish a standard for how we value the environment. But I'd like to push this conclusion further and say that waterways are not just *sites* of social control, they are also *agents* of social and cultural change. They can affect us individually: the site of your ancestral home being flooded for a reservoir, the imposing beauty of the Hudson, the terror of poisoned children near the Love Canal, and the experience of being othered in a pool can be deeply embedded in your sense of self, community, and environment.

With this point in mind, I would like to close with a brief consideration of the Adirondack poet Jeanne Robert Foster. As a child, she and her family lived in incredible poverty as they attempted to eke out an existence in our northern wilderness. And perhaps she couldn't wait to leave for this reason. When she turned 18, she married an older man and promptly left her home. Foster pursued a varied career as a model, editor, and poet. She swam in circles that included many of the greats from the American cultural elite. She lived in New York City, Boston, and spent time in Europe. Yet, during her later years in life, she returned home and committed herself to social work. Something drew her back to the foothills of the Adirondacks. As her poetry suggests, she was connected to this place. She wrote:

*I heard the wild loon and the catbird cry
Over Sagamore Lake, and knew that I
Heard the ancient call of race
Bidding me to my own place.*

*I am the root of the yellow willow,
The stem of the lily leaf,
There cannot come to my marsh-grass pillow
The cry of a human grief*

In truth, she never really left home. Those mountains shaped her *very being*, they were with her everyday of her life. Despite the difficulties of living there, despite all of her wonderful experiences in the city and abroad, she could not surrender the beauty she saw nor the love she felt in that dramatic, mountainous landscape. The Adirondacks helped shape her personality. And she and her family helped shape the Adirondack environment. In a sense, Foster was herself a waterway.

If you insist on taking this literally, I could point out that humans are 60 percent water – we are sacks of water. Maybe our skin can be likened to the reinforced walls that contain the waters of a canal, dam, pool, or river. And the various biological functions our bodies engage everyday suggest the traits of an ecosystem. I might add that all kinds of information and goods are transferred back and forth inside and between these sacks of water. Like the Erie Canal, the human body is a highway for stuff and ideas. But, despite how amusing this thought is, I mean something different, something less absurd but perhaps more radical.

Foster is an extension of a larger, *preexisting* waterway – the Adirondack *Watershed*. This waterway is not an autonomous or independent system. It is tied to other waterways, watersheds, and bioregions – and these too are connected to others. Foster realized that living in a waterway required responsible participation in a larger community. This meant caring for other humans *and* remembering the intrinsic value of nature – of the larger system of connections that define our existence. I imagine the members of the Love Canal Homeowner’s Association, the Allegheny Seneca, and the Scenic Hudson Trail Conference realized this. So I’ll close by saying that perhaps its best if we follow these examples: let us learn to think like a waterway. Thank you.

SLIDE FOURTEEN

^[1]Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 28.

^[2]Qtd in Lorraine Boissoneault, “Thank the Erie Canal for Spreading People, Ideas and Germs Across America” <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/grab-your-mule-named-sal-and-explore-erie-canal-180963892/>

^[3]Bilharz, Joy Ann. 1998. *The Allegany Senecas and Kinzua Dam: Forced Relocation through Two Generations*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Chapter Three.

^[4]“9 Reasons Not to Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Kinzua Dam”

^[5]David Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, 215.

^[6]Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters* 69, 71, 72.