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Bibliographic Essay, Quabbin “News” topic

Then and now: changing attitudes in news reports concerning the Quabbin Reservoir

The news that has been published about the development of the Quabbin Reservoir falls into three general categories. There are writings from the early part of the century discussing planning and development issues, recent articles looking back with nostalgia and sometimes resentment on the events that took place, and others about current water conservation or other issues that draw comparison with what happened in the Quabbin valley. The articles from different time periods show a change in the feelings and outspokenness of the displaced residents, moving from a somewhat resigned but accepting attitude in the past to one of fond, yet bitter, remembrance today.

News from the past

There was a fair amount of news published, mostly by newspapers local to the Quabbin region, during its planning and construction stages at the beginning of the century. Key issues discussed at the time were the water shortage of Boston, the engineering of the new reservoir, and the displacement of the people from the towns of Dana, Enfield, Prescott, and Greenwich.

The article “Reservoir to cover 3 bay state towns” from the New York Times in July, 1927, appeared a few months after the legislation to build the Quabbin Reservoir was passed. The article gives a bit of information about each of the towns to be covered over by the reservoir, and mentions several important and well-known people and ideas that had come

from them. It next moves into the issues of Boston's water shortage, and the work that went into choosing the Quabbin area as the best site for reservoir development. The article also mentions a series of investigations, hearings, and debates leading up to the decision to build the reservoir. The overall cost and general plans for the reservoir's construction are reported as well. The final part of this article offers a glimpse into how people felt about displacing the four towns. It reads, "The people of the valley of the Swift accept these facts with some resentment, but in the main with resignation and with dignity. And Greater Boston by no means is indifferent to the tragedy which the need of the city inflicts upon these innocent bystanders." The notion that the valley residents were performing an honored duty, and that the people of Boston were appreciative of their sacrifice, is not one that has carried on into recent history.

Another article, "Big reservoir dam begun in bay state," matter-of-factly describes the beginning of the construction of the reservoir in 1937. The four towns to be covered are mentioned, but the article focuses mainly on the construction techniques and engineering issues involved in the beginning of the project. It also talks about the use of watchtowers with searchlights, to enable work on the reservoir to continue at night. It is interesting that the article fails to note any protest from the townspeople. The feeling of the article is that the situation is simply a government order being carried out, and will continue on as planned.

Many other pertinent articles from this time period exist today in archival form. J. R. Greene's *The Day Four Quabbin Towns Died* lists several newspapers with useful information, including the Athol Daily News, Boston Globe, Boston Herald, Boston Post, Daily Hampshire Gazette, Orange Enterprise and Journal, Springfield Republican, Springfield Union, Ware River News, and Worcester Telegram and Evening Gazette. In

particular, Greene mentions the series “Letters from Quabbin,” written by Amy Spink and Mabel Jones, which appeared in the Springfield Union. The Boston Public Library holds microfilm from this time period for at least the Boston Globe and Springfield Union papers, which would likely prove useful in further research. A list of particular articles used by Greene in his study can be found in the back of his work, *The Creation of Quabbin Reservoir: the Death of the Swift River Valley*, in Part 1 of the appendix, but unfortunately by the time this was discovered I had no time to investigate.

News from recent times

Many newspaper and magazine articles have been written about the Quabbin Reservoir more recently. Most seem to offer a very calm and picturesque vision of the reservoir, and intertwine this with stories of the towns that were covered forever by its waters. The general theme of many recent articles, paying particular attention to the lost towns, can be summed up by William A. Davis in his 1998 Boston Globe article. He writes: “The subject of man books, stories, and legends, the towns over time acquired almost mythic status, transmuted from pleasant but ordinary country communities into symbolic rural Edens sacrificed to satisfy big-city needs for water.”

Some of the articles contain glimpses into the reactions and attitudes of the valley residents. Gregory Lamb, in “Quabbin: the valley where time went backward” (1982), says that the people in the four towns were “essentially good, decent, religious folks.” They were not prone to put up an organized resistance against what was being done to their homes, and Lamb describes that the state officials may have even played off the unselfish nature of the area residents, convincing them that it would be wrong to deny water to their fellow men.

Nobody left their homes happily, and there were a few instances of stubborn resistance, but never were they violent. For instance, one man awoke in the morning and heard workers taking apart the roof of his barn, so he walked outside and took away their ladder.

Other newspaper descriptions of the time mention the unfairness of the decision to build the Quabbin. Allen's 1994 Boston Globe article says that residents of the tiny towns didn't have a very strong voice, and in addition, all of the decision-making was done in Boston, where the townsfolk could not easily travel. Residents did not openly welcome the Boston workers in their towns, calling them "woodpeckers," as they were just destroying and pecking away at the wood and didn't really know what they were doing.

Many of the recent articles contain mention of what former residents of the valley have been doing since being displaced from their homes. Several members of this group still meet regularly to reflect on their earlier years in the valley. Allen's article talks about a ceremony in 1994 which gave about a dozen former Quabbin residents a certificate from Secretary of State Michael Connolly commemorating their loss. In addition, the papers mention a ball being held in Amherst exactly 50 years after the last one was held in Enfield, on the last night of the four towns' legal existence.

The newspapers are also a good source for determining current feelings about the Quabbin Reservoir project. Several mention that one of the last indignities imposed on these residents was the removal of 7613 dead from the valley's 34 cemeteries. It is further brought up that the residents were poorly compensated for their homes and property when forced to move. Many are upset that after all that was sacrificed, most Bostonians have no idea where their water comes from. Judith Gaines' 1992 Boston Globe article describes the worst feeling had by many former valley dwellers, simply that "they can never really go home."

In contrast to these widespread negative feelings about the experience, some residents found a few good things that came of it. Lamb describes that at the time of the depression, the building of the reservoir would provide a lot of jobs. He explains that this may have contributed to Boston officials' eagerness to get the project passed. Former valley residents also feel that had the reservoir not been built, people may have started moving west for water, and rural populations would rather not have that kind of development.

Several newspapers also discussed the idea that what happened to the residents of the Quabbin valley would not even be considered today. Lamb writes that the "growing squabble over the likely effects of acid rain at Quabbin contrasts sharply with the quiet eviction of the valley people half a century ago," showing the change from the little notice taken of the Quabbin people then, to large concern for the people using the water now.

Related topics

Another subset of articles mentions the Quabbin Reservoir but does not dig deeply into its history. The 1986 New York Times article talks about Boston's concern that by 2020, the Quabbin would not be able to provide enough water to suit its needs. The city began looking west again, investigating ways to divert water from other sources. Environmentalists, as well as former Quabbin residents, opposed this idea, and argued that the current resources could be conserved better. The city agreed, and set to work on fixing 6400 miles of leaky pipes. It was mentioned that because of these ongoing efforts to take care of the reservoir and to conserve water, many people from the displaced towns feel less bitterness at their loss.

Turner's 1988 article, "State problems, rural solutions," from the Boston Globe, draws a comparison between a Boston plan to build a state prison in a rural community and

the development of the Quabbin Reservoir. It addresses Boston's arrogance, in that the city ruins rural peoples' way of life to solve their own problems, producing results that the affected people never benefit from. Another article mentions the Big Dig, and how similar to what has happened in the past, Boston will get an entire new system while the rest of the state remains in need.

The overall message sent by newspapers has changed drastically over the years. In the early part of the century the Quabbin Reservoir was deemed a necessary solution to Boston's water problem, and it was designed to affect a minimal number of people. News reports at that time spoke more of the development issues of the project and focused less on the sacrifices made by the residents displaced from their homes. Recent articles tend to describe more the tragic destruction of the four Massachusetts towns, and emphasize the Quabbin story as an example of metropolitan areas' disregard for people living in rural areas. Despite having different feelings about the reservoir's development, most news accounts tend to agree that the Quabbin Reservoir is a beautiful and valuable resource, with a history that makes it that much more special.