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The Social Effects of the Construction of the Wachusett Reservoir on Boylston and West Boylston

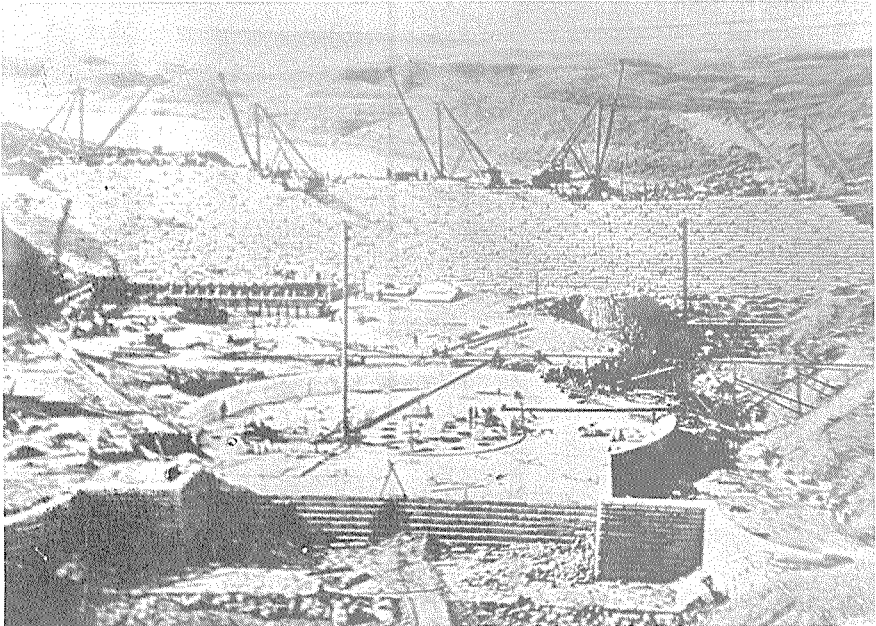
Glenn F. Anderson

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the effect of the construction of the Wachusett Reservoir on economic and industrial growth of Boylston and West Boylston, Massachusetts.

In 1889, Boylston was described primarily as a high ranking agricultural town in Worcester County. The assessor's returns of that year indicates that the town was valued at \$523,573 with a rate of taxation set at \$15/\$1,000. There were 160 dwelling houses, 224 horses, 820 meat-cattle, and 147 swine. Its dairy products were extensive, and it had some of the best orchards in the county. According to the Massachusetts State Census of 1875, there were produced in the town during the year ending May 1, 1875, 20,930 barrels of apples valued at \$8,100; 4,639 bushels of corn, valued at \$4,709; 18,689 bushels of potatoes, valued at \$11,847; 2,240 tons of hay, valued at \$37,053; 148,415 gallons of milk, valued at \$22,212; 43,500 pounds of pork valued at \$4,521; 49,425 pounds of beef, valued at \$3,876. The total value of all agricultural products for that year was \$147,537. The only manufacturing in the town was situated at Sawyer's Mills where there was a cotton mill owned and operated by the Lancaster Mills Company of Clinton. The resident superintendents of the mills were Deacon Moses Brigham, Levi Holbrook, James A. Weeks, Edmund C. Forbes, and Thomas C. Sheldon.¹

A short distance from Boylston center is the town of West Boylston. In 1896, West Boylston had an assessed value of \$951,610 and was becoming a progressive community thriving on the industries at Sawyer's Mills and elsewhere in town.² The community of West Boylston was to suffer the greatest loss of the two towns since its developing industries sat on the banks of the Nashua River which was later to be used as a source of water for the proposed man-made reservoir. In the near future West Boylston was to lose 157 or 33 per cent of its dwellings which meant that 1,305 people or 43 per cent of its residents would be driven from their homes. The town would lose three churches and four schoolhouses, four cotton mills, one gristmill, and one sawmill. As for natural resources, West Boylston was about to lose a total of 870 acres. In comparison, Boylston lost fewer dwellings and only one church and two schoolhouses; however, it lost 2,761 acres of land. The assessed devaluations of the two towns reflects the hardships that were forthcoming with the construction of the new reservoir. Boylston would contribute \$165,200 of her assessed value or 39 per cent, while West Boylston was about to lose \$557,730 or 60 per cent of its total value.³

The project that created the most controversy in the history of the two towns was approved in 1893 by the Massachusetts Legislature. The site was chosen because of land forms in Worcester County which owe their origin to the receding melting glacier which covered the New England area millions of years before. Formed during the recession were the shorelines of a glacial lake which was impounded by ice acting as a dam. When the ice melted the lake disappeared, leaving the Nashua River valley which is the site of the present reservoir and considered to cover the exact same area as the glacial lake Nashua.⁴



CONSTRUCTION OF THE WACHUSETT RESERVOIR

Construction of the reservoir began in 1895 with the process of soil removal and the building of dikes. The plans called for a basin eight miles in length and covering an area of six and one half square miles of the towns of Clinton, Boylston, and West Boylston. When completed it was estimated that the reservoir would store around sixty-five billion gallons of water with a watershed of 105 square miles.⁵ The reservoir was being built to supply the city of Boston with an ample supply of water which was to be carried there via aqueduct. The “Water Supply Act of 1893” called for an investigation into the feasibility “... of a water supply for the city of Boston and its suburbs within the radius of ten miles from the state house, and for such other cities and towns as in it should be included in connection therewith.”⁶

The labor force employed to work on the reservoir project consisted of mostly Italian and Hungarian immigrants who roamed from town to town looking for employment. In the peak year of development, 1901, the labor was divided as followed:⁷

Contractors force:	Men	Horses
Reservoir Department	1,296	163
Dam and Aqueduct Department	312	16
Weston Aqueduct Department	819	113
Distribution Department	241	30
Day-labor force, construction	40	2
Engineering force, including engineer inspectors and those engaged upon maintenance	188	—
Inspectors not engineers	10	—
Maintenance force, not including civil engineers ..	203	—
	3,109	324

The progress of construction was marred by disputes between the Italian laborers and the management along with friction between the residents of West Boylston over the introduction of immigrant workers. On September 1, 1899, a strike broke out in Boylston centering around a conflict concerning the Italians employed on the construction of the new road from West Boylston to Boylston. It appeared that the contractor wished to push the work a little faster and not being able to secure enough men from Louis Romano, the shanty boss who previously supplied Italian laborers, a number of men were hired from the contractor Corangeo. Corangeo's men had just finished building a road between West Boylston and Clinton through Sterling, along with 40 Hungarians who had been employed on the same job. Because of the presence of the new workers, Romano and Fred Dell, another shanty boss, informed the Italians that their pay was to be reduced from \$1.35 to \$1.25 per day.

Tempers continued to rise when the workers began to complain that exorbitant prices were being charged for supplies which they had to purchase from Romano and Dell. The frustrations resulted in violence. The workers started from West Boylston and destroyed everything along the construction site which ran the distance of the road.

The next morning the men started out again heading for trouble. At the west end of the road they met Corangeo's men and the Hungarians at work in two gangs. The strikers came upon them with stones, clubs, and anything else they could pick up on the way and began using them against Corangeo's men. At this point, C. V. Busch along with officers C. S. Knight and Louis Robich of Boylston and W. J. Burns of West Boylston stepped in to restore order. The men were appeased when the contractor, Busch Brothers,

declared that there would be no cut in wages and the supply stores would charge prices similar to those of other stores. Romano and Dell were fired and the conflict ended.⁸

The shanty which housed the Italians was rented to them for \$1.00 a month per person. The fee included a cot or a mattress in a building with no windows or ventilation, which made it uncomfortable considering the fact that 120 men were housed there during the summer months.⁹ The immigrants also lived in mud hut colonies in the areas where land was being excavated for the reservoir. In 1968 one of these colonies was found in the area of the Newton Reservoir in Athol. The Newton Reservoir was also built with the labor of Italian immigrants between 1902 and 1904. The 18 huts were found under a camouflage of pine trees and described as U-shaped mounds of earth with a two-foot opening for a doorway. The interiors measured from 8x10 to 9x12 feet offering enough living space for one or two men. The mounds had a tent-like roof made of sticks and mud. Inside the mounds were found small sheets of metal shaped into stove pipes, along with eating utensils and various other materials.¹⁰ When the Italians entered West Boylston with their wives and families, they rented houses that were slated for destruction and reportedly "...took little interest in the appearance."¹¹

The factor of immigrants entering the two towns must be considered when discussing the social affect of the construction of the Wachusett Reservoir. Prior to the beginning of construction seventy percent of the inhabitants of West Boylston were native-born citizens while the other thirty percent was composed of French-Canadians and Irish, the majority of whom were citizens by birth.¹² The residents of West Boylston were shocked by the activities of the "Italianos." At the turn of the century it was illegal to make and to sell intoxicating liquors in West Boylston, but the Italians managed to obtain them. This led to a few raids on the Italians who were often caught in the act of drinking and gambling. The Italians were also held responsible for several stabbing incidents and one murder in the previously quiet town.¹³

The terms of the Metropolitan Water Act provided additional police protection to the towns if needed during the construction of the reservoir.¹⁴ Such protection was necessary because of unlawful acts committed, sometimes unknowingly, by the men who came into the area looking for work.

In 1904 the Boylston Construction Company arranged, in an attempt to keep its employees contented, a celebration of the Feast of Assumption. The *Worcester Daily Telegram* wrote that, "On Sunday afternoon, August 14, the Marine Band of Rodi, Italy, arrived at the railroad station and marched through the town of French Hill where a huge white tent containing an altar and a shrine to the Virgin Mary had been erected. There they gave a band concert which was followed in the evening by a religious service, fireworks,

and dancing.” On the next day the festival was continued with a greased pole contest and a greased pig chase. Nothing like this had ever been seen in West Boylston.¹⁵

The new reservoir must have been seen by many Boylston residents as a threat to the natural beauty of the town. Much concern in West Boylston was directed at the possibility of losing many of the municipal and private buildings in town. In 1896, the town librarian expressed her concern in a segment of the “Librarian Report:” “During the past year the attention of our townspeople has been largely to the expected destruction of a large portion of the town to afford a basin for Boston’s water supply. The interests of the library are naturally considered in this connection, and whatever the future may be or whether the town of West Boylston shall become great or dwindle to insignificance is certainly basis for concern for a useful Library.”¹⁶ In the same year the school committee expressed similar concern and called for courage from the townspeople. In their report they stated that: “We are aware of a sentiment in town of discouragement in view of the terrible fate that has been decreed and is now hanging over us. The powers intrusted with our destruction do not deign to tell us how soon we shall abandon our homes and all our rights and our duties here. Yet it doesn’t seem best to lie down in despair, but to keep on with courage and a heart for any fate.”¹⁷

The most devastating affect of the construction of the reservoir was the virtual, total loss of industry. Although the industries were located almost entirely in West Boylston and the village of Sawyer’s Mills, Boylston was sure to have a rise in unemployment due to the destruction of the mills. As early as 1897, agents from towns seeking industries appeared in West Boylston.¹⁸ Most of the companies remained in the New England area.

On April 7, 1898, Frank Rice, then president of the Central Mill, announced that the mill would close on July first. The mill, the houses connected with it, and the water rights had been sold to the Metropolitan Water Board for \$100,000. On the first of July, then, West Boylston was faced with its first problem as the Central Mill employed sixty men.¹⁹ Then on July 1, 1898, George Howe of the firm of Howe, Morton, and Lovell announced that he had sold his interests to the state. For the real estate he received \$46,000. The boot shop, which had been very prosperous, stopped its operations in November of 1898.²⁰

On May 8, 1899, the board announced that the West Boylston Manufacturing Company might be able to continue operations until April 1, 1902.²¹ On June 12, 1899, the owners announced that they had sold to the state for \$525,000 and would move to Easthampton in 1902.²² The 300 employees were given the opportunity to move with the mill, and many did.

On June 5, 1899, The Clarendon Mills announced their decision to move to Peterboro, New Hampshire, and to take with them as many of their 500 employees who wished to make the change. The amount received from the state was \$240,000.²³ On February 17, 1900, the Clarendon Mills closed their doors and by April 7, 1905, the ruins were covered with water up to the level of the second story.²⁴

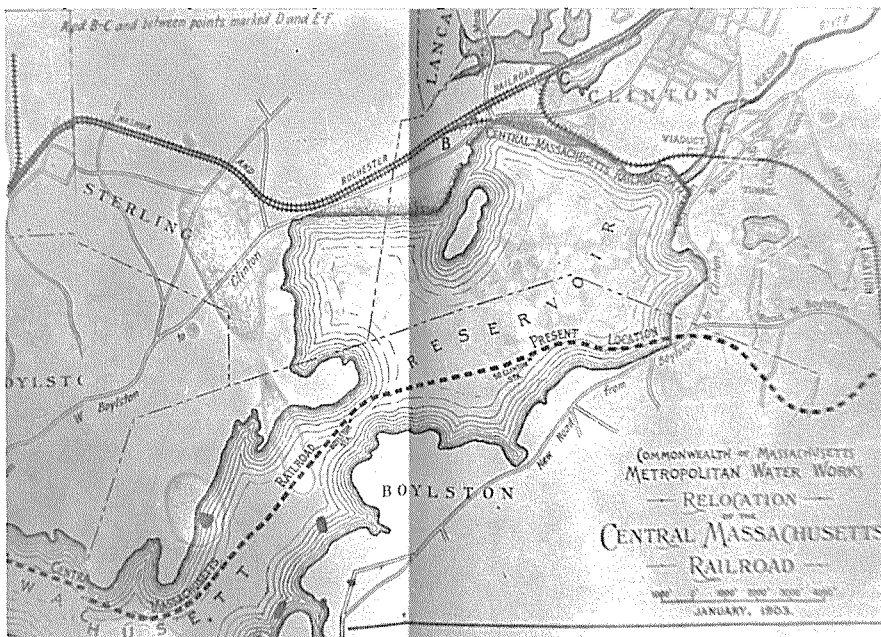
On October 11, 1899, the L. M. Harris and Company was sold to the state for \$194,000, and the firm was allowed to dispose of the buildings and machinery as they saw fit.²⁵ In April of 1902, Cowee's Grist Mill also shut down.²⁶ By the end of that year all of the major industries of West Boylston were no longer in existence.

The opportunity to move with the industries of West Boylston certainly must not have appealed to those employees who did not wish to leave the town. Many workers moved to Worcester for employment as a solution to their problem while a greater number had to leave the area for employment. The population of West Boylston dropped from 2968 in 1895 to 1500 in 1908.²⁷

Compensation to the employees of West Boylston who lost employment was provided by an act of legislature passed in 1896. Under the terms of this act, an employee could receive compensation no greater than the sum of his wages for the six months prior to his loss of work. In all 477 claims were filed and \$84,959.65 paid to claimants.²⁸ The financial compensation was indeed generous however it failed to compensate for the heartbreaks involved in looking for new jobs and finding new homes.

The financial setbacks of the town of West Boylston were multiplied by a decrease in the valuation of real estate and a decrease in the amount of taxes collected because of the removal of industry. To compensate for this, The Metropolitan Water Act of 1895 made provision for an annual payment to West Boylston of \$12,000 for as long as the town continues its corporate existence.

All that remains of the sunken areas of the towns is the Old Stone Church which was built in 1890 and saved by a plea of the townspeople. A recent allocation made by the state is to be used to restore the structure.



MAP OF THE WACHUSETT RESERVOIR

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Land Taking for Reservoir and Railroad," *Public Documents of Massachusetts being the Annual Reports of various Public Officers and Institutions for the year 1902*. XII (1903), p. 887.
- 2 Helen Maxwell Hamilton. *The History of West Boylston*. (West Boylston, 1956), p. 109.
- 3 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. February 9, 1895. (Most clippings that I found were in scrapbooks in the West Boylston Library and the Boylston Library and page numbers were not available).
- 4 John Donald Black and George William Wescott, *Rural Planning of One County, Worcester County Massachusetts* (Cambridge, 1954), p. 97.
- 5 John Nelson, *Worcester County A Narrative History* (New York, 1934), p. 8.
- 6 "Water Supply Act, 1893," cited in Hamilton, p. 234.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 69.
- 8 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. September 1, 1899, p. 8, col. 6.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. November 7, 1968, p. 10, col. 4.
- 11 Hamilton, *The History of West Boylston*, p. 140.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 13 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. April 23, 1905, p. 7, col. 1.

14 Appendix, Sect. 12.

15 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. August 15, 1904.

16 "Librarian Report 1896," cited in Hamilton, p. 36.

17 "School Committee Report, 1896," cited in Hamilton, p. 52.

18 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. June 30, 1897, p. 6. col. 2.

19 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. April 7, 1898.

20 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. July 1, 1898.

21 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. May 8, 1899.

22 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. June 12, 1899.

23 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. June 5, 1899.

24 Hamilton, *The History of West Boylston*. p. 124.

25 *Worcester Daily Telegram*. October 11, 1899.

26 Hamilton, *The History of West Boylston*. p. 125.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 140.