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# Quabbin Reservoir: The Elimination of Four Small New England Towns

James Naglack

The construction of Quabbin Reservoir involved the elimination of Enfield, Greenwich, Dana, and Prescott, all located in Massachusetts. This paper will analyze the social effects of the construction of the reservoir in the Swift River Valley. Since work on the reservoir did not officially begin until 1927, it was possible to interview residents from the various towns. The interviews allowed the author to evaluate the validity of previously published works.

Urbanization in the 1890's brought a recognition of the need for central water supply systems. As cities grew larger, it was necessary to supply water for hundreds of thousands of people. Villagers could draw water from wells; city dwellers could not.

Boston's need for an adequate water supply arose due to three major concerns during this period. First, fire was a major threat. During the early days buildings were made of wood and were built close together. On April 7, 1825, a large fire destroyed fifty-three houses and stores in Boston, resulting in a loss of a half million dollars. Secondly, the so-called "germ conscious generation" of moralists urged their fellow citizens to keep themselves clean. Third, there was the threat of water-borne disease, such as typhoid and cholera.<sup>1</sup>

After the 1825 fire, the crucial need for water became apparent. The immediate response of the city was to reorganize the fire department and to order new fire fighting equipment.<sup>2</sup> It was not until 1838 that public opinion became so intense that the city of Boston petitioned the Legislature for the right to secure a sufficient water supply.<sup>3</sup> After a series of delays, Boston was granted permission to use the water from Long Pond in 1848.<sup>4</sup> That solved the problem, temporarily.

Then like other large cities, Boston added to its water problems by annexing several of its suburbs. In 1895, "Frederick P. Stearns, the engineer of the state board of health, called for the creation of a Metropolitan Water District to serve Boston and vicinity".<sup>5</sup> The 1895 report suggested the Ware River Watershed as a source of supply. Stearns described the Swift River Valley where the Ware River Watershed is located, as follows:

The river is made up of three branches and the topography is remarkable as, notwithstanding the hilly and almost mountainous character of the watershed, it is possible by the construction of a main dam 2,470 feet long, to raise the water 144 feet above the present level of the river, and of a secondary dam 2,065 feet long and 114 feet high, to flood an area of 36.9 square miles forming a reservoir that will hold 406 million gallons of water and have an average depth of 53 feet.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of Stearns' study and investigation of the water supply, the Metropolitan District was formed and the Metropolitan Water Board was established. "This act required the board to construct, maintain and provide a sufficient water supply for the city of Boston."<sup>7</sup> The fact that the Swift River Valley was ideally situated led to its ultimate destruction.

No action was taken, however, until 1919 when the Legislature authorized the State Board of Health to investigate the possibilities of Stearns' report. In 1922, the Metropolitan Water District and the State Board of Health recommended that the proposed system be still further enlarged by taking water from the Ware and Swift Rivers.<sup>8</sup> In 1927, after a series of delays, the Legislature considered the report; finally the Swift River Act was passed, providing for the construction of an extension of the tunnel from the Ware to the Swift River, in accordance with the findings of the joint board report of 1922.<sup>9</sup>

Before any definite plans for Quabbin Reservoir had materialized, there was evidence of a great love on the part of area residents for the Swift River Valley. Francis H. Underwood was one such resident who took it upon himself to write a book entitled *Quabbin: The Story of A New England Town*. In this book, Underwood captured the quality of life in the valley and expressed his hope that "the glory of New England can be preserved, after the homes have been occupied by people of other races and ideas." Underwood gave his readers the natives' view of Quabbin. "To the Quabbin Boy the boldly marked sky-line on the hills that shut in the valley... was the boundary of the known world. Strangers must have looked upon this little village with compassion; but for the native it was cheerful."<sup>10</sup>

Underwood later expressed the promise of Quabbin: "It was a delight to take deep draughts of exhilarating air, to watch the spectral wreaths of smoke rising from distant chimneys, to count afar the many steeples, and to seek out the purple-gray mountains" where "the only sounds that broke the stillness were the occasional lowing of cattle, the murmur of brooks, and the light silvery strokes of the meeting clocks."<sup>11</sup>

In 1927, after a period of delays, the Quabbin Reservoir materialized. The Metropolitan Water District supply commission decided in October of 1932 on

the official name—"Quabbin Reservoir."<sup>12</sup> Quabbin was the name of an Indian chief of the Nipmuck tribe which earlier had inhabited the Swift River Valley. Sixty-five million dollars was appropriated by the state for the construction of the reservoir. "The project involved the flooding of thousands of acres, eviction of all families in the area, and the razing of each and every structure in the valley."<sup>13</sup>

The construction of the reservoir eliminated four towns—Enfield, Greenwich, Dana, and Prescott. In his book, *Quabbin: The Lost Valley*, Donald Howe reported that many lived in belief that such an occurrence would not take place. When nothing happened, tensions eased, and the matter was mostly forgotten.<sup>14</sup>

The passage of the Swift River Act in 1927 allowed Boston to construct its needed reservoir. The people of the valley responded by saying:

We folks feel that it is only a matter of time before we are forced out, and for a decade, since 1916, we have lived from day to day in anticipation of that time. If the Legislature is to act at all, let it be now, so that we can plan the rest of our days elsewhere taking with us as much as we can salvage of our life's work. We have the right to ask that our rights be carefully considered by the Legislature, that we may be made as whole as is equitable, but above all let it be swift and decisive action.<sup>15</sup>

People in the individual towns protested by writing letters, speeches, and poems. The protests demonstrate that the Swift River Valley towns stood together against the State of Massachusetts.

Enfield ended its existence as a town on April 8, 1938.<sup>16</sup> Prior to this date, Enfielders protested the elimination of their town in two ways. Some citizens wrote poems of protest. For example, A.A. Chickering, a former resident, wrote a poem entitled "The Tragedy of the Swift River Valley." The poem protested the destruction of the valley, the disturbing of the dead, and the loss Enfield residents would feel when they no longer had homes. Chickering described the universal feeling in the valley when he wrote:

I am deeply moved, and in much despair,  
When I think of the tragedy happening there.  
Do you suppose that the dead protest,  
At this sacrilege of their sacred rest?  
Could your hearts be gay,  
Were your old home village destroyed some day?<sup>17</sup>

Enfield refused to be treated as a legally defunct town, right up to its final town meeting in 1938. Donald Howe pointed out that "not a single citizen of the

State-owned town owned a dollar's worth of property" and that the "regularly-elected town officers conducted their assigned functions, voted appropriations, and after attending financial arrangements, closed "the town forever, adjourned, their tasks being considered legal and binding." This town meeting is believed to be unparalleled in the municipal history of the United States.<sup>18</sup>



"Overlooking the former site of the town of Enfield"

Greenwich was the second of the four towns to be eliminated. Greenwich, too, protested with speeches and writings. The earliest record of protest on the Park of Greenwich citizens came at the 1922 fourth of July celebration in that town. Representative Roland D. Sawyer delivered a speech entitled "The Connecticut Valley—There She Stands." Representative Sawyer boldly defended the rights of the valley residents, and he opposed the coming of the reservoir. He pledged to fight against it. The second speaker at the celebration was Representative George P. Webster, who also declared that the taking of Quabbin land was "needless and unjust." Like Sawyer he pledged to defend the towns in the Legislature.<sup>19</sup>

As time passed, dissent became more passive; Greenwich citizens accepted the inevitable with sadness. Mabel L. Jones wrote a poem entitled "A Quabbin Neighbor." In this poem she stressed the unity the valley people shared during the construction of the reservoir.

We miss our peaceful neighbor,  
We miss his cheery smile,  
We miss the lighted window,  
And his visits, once in a while.

The central point in the poem came when Jones said:  
Of native stock, of native birth,  
This his home by right; but progress said—  
It's time to more: there is no use to fight."<sup>20</sup>

Dana was the third town to yield to the Reservoir. Reaction may be seen in a poem entitled "Reservoir of Memory" by Gertrude Hanson Black, a former resident. In the poem Black described the feeling that existed in the valley:

Anxiety, caused by growing fear,  
Hung over our heads for many a year,  
For it was rumored that covetous eyes  
Were turned toward our valley for its water supply.

"Reservoir of Memory" spoke, too of the recognition that came when:

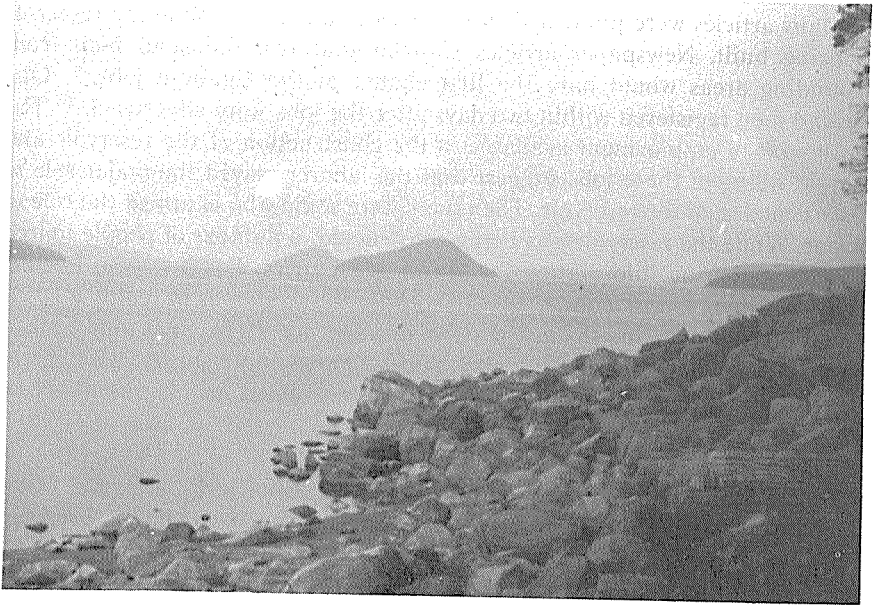
We realized at last our beautiful Swift River  
Valley was doomed,  
That we must give up the land of our birth,  
To quench Metropolitan Boston's thirst."<sup>21</sup>

The poem demonstrated the feeling shared by the valley people during the construction of the reservoir.

The reaction of Prescott, the last town, to the construction of the reservoir can best be seen in a book entitled *Past Events of Prescott Massachusetts*, written by a former resident, Lillie Pierce Coolidge. The book opens with a poem: "Prescott," which described the love for the town.

Prescott, we'll always cherish thee,  
While our short life shall last,  
We never will forget thee,  
In all your glowing past.

The book included the reactions of other area residents to the construction of the reservoir. For example, a local resident, Charles Abbott, wrote to a local newspaper condemning the reservoir on the grounds that economic motives were involved in the project. Abbott claimed: "There is large money behind it for the investors. It is even now talked that they may build an electrical plant below the dam, and manufacture power to sell to customers all over Massachusetts and Connecticut, and thereby add to their already bulging pockets."<sup>22</sup>



"Mount Pomeroy and Mount Lizzie; now islands in the reservoir"

The response of the individual to the construction of the Quabbin Reservoir is somewhat different from that of the response of the community. According to Eleanor Schmidt, a former resident of Prescott, responses of individuals could be divided into two groups: those of the young and the old. The younger people in the valley viewed the construction of Quabbin Reservoir as a "very exciting time." Construction began during the depression and promised younger people a chance to make money and to meet new people who were seeking jobs on the Quabbin project.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, those residents over forty wanted to be left alone. They had grown up in the valley and it was their home, they did not want to leave it.<sup>24</sup>

Mrs. Schmidt's observations on the reaction of older people to the building of the reservoir are largely substantiated by Evelina Gustafson, author of the book, *Ghost Towns 'Neath Quabbin Reservoir*. Gustafson reported that "To the elderly class, in the sunset of life...their happiness lies in their home; in the familiar surroundings of their community and in the dreams of the past."<sup>25</sup>

The attitude of the individual depended on the role that each person assumed. Some took advantage of the job openings; others reported the reactions of the society; some became protesters.

Many articles were published in newspapers during the time the reservoir was being built. Newspaper articles claimed that two thousand men from surrounding areas would have the first chance at the Quabbin jobs.<sup>26</sup> One thousand men registered within two days after the jobs were advertised.<sup>27</sup> The vast amount of employment available in the construction of the reservoir and the rapid filling of these jobs suggest that the laborer played the major role in the construction of the reservoir. Then there were some who assumed the role of reporter. While the reservoir was being constructed, a number of people toured the valley gathering information for books and papers. For instance, Evelina Gustafson's book *Ghost Towns 'Neath Quabbin Reservoir* was in reality a guide through the valley during the last years of its existence. "The final tour I made through the valley, in 1939," she said, "Filled my heart with great sadness...how different was the landscape that confronted me...it resembled an open prairie."

Finally, some became protesters. For example, Etta Berry, a former valley resident, went to the United States Supreme Court with a shovel hat on her head protesting the rights of the Swift River Valley citizens.<sup>28</sup> Other protesters reportedly left the valley only when the water had begun to rise. Some had to be carried away in boats.<sup>29</sup>

An important question was how the State of Massachusetts responded to the individual. According to Eleanor Schmidt, the state showed little or no consideration for the area resident.<sup>30</sup> Area residents played no role in the decision to destroy the four towns. Boston's thirst for water was all that seemed to matter. The way in which Legislators ordered investigations and enacted laws seemed to substantiate the feeling that the state was going to do as it pleased.

The way in which the state acquired the necessary property demonstrated the disregard for area citizens. Schmidt maintains that those who held out longer in selling their property received more money than those who had less patience. She estimated that a home that would have sold for two thousand dollars early in the project would have brought eight thousand towards the end.<sup>31</sup>

There was cause for criticism of the way in which the state tried to bring laborers to the project. Greedy politicians promised jobs in return for money. "Grafters" in Boston were taking advantage of the unemployed men by promising them non-existing jobs on the project.<sup>32</sup> When these men came to the Quabbin area and found no jobs available, a terrible burden was placed upon area residents to house and feed them.<sup>33</sup> What was to have been a project bringing only good to the area during the depression brought a number of headaches to the valley and its surrounding towns. The only respect shown the people of the Swift River valley by the State of Massachusetts was the



establishment of the Quabbin Park Cemetery. As Walter Clark pointed out in his book, *Quabbin Reservoir*, the cemetery was constructed in accordance with chapter 321 of the Acts and Resolves of 1927, calling for "care for all bodies to be removed from 26 cemeteries lying within the limits of the land purchased by the commission for the purpose of constructing a new reservoir."<sup>34</sup> Yet, the removal of bodies from all graves in the area was important to ensure that the water would not become polluted.

With the passage of time and the completion of the project, orders were issued for all residents of the area to leave by April 1, 1938. On September 29, 1939, it was announced that the reservoir was beginning to fill. The commission began developing Mt. Quabbin for sightseeing purposes in the fall of 1940. The H. P. Cuming Construction Company was selected to build a public observation tower.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1970's Quabbin Reservoir is complete, and like Francis Underwood, the native can still find the promise of Quabbin as he "Climbs the hills and sees the faint plumes of smoke over distant dwellings, thinking of the patient labor he had witnessed on those farms, and of the love and content sheltered for generations, by the gray roofs." And as the night is passed into the day "There is a new day, and the world begins its toil. And so it will be when he does not rise at that call, and the grass is beginning to grow over him."<sup>36</sup>

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