

MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS IN ADIRONDACK HISTORY

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Introduction

The Adirondacks, a mountainous wilderness located in New York State, fundamentally changed in the late 19th century. Expanding rail lines, the publication of travel guides, and other economic and social factors ushered in a new era of tourism and development. As more travel routes opened towns up to settlement and growth, droves of new visitors followed suit. The era of great camps built by Gilded-Age industrialists further brought in wealthy seasonal residents and tourists alike. Recreational outdoor activities were the other part of this boom, with hiking being formally recognized as such around the turn of the 20th century. (1)

The popular image of the Adirondacks has been that of a predominately modern, white-settled area that boasts nothing more than seasonal tourism. This historical narrative has often ignored indigenous populations and people of color who have historically lived and worked within the Adirondack Park.

Native Americans

Adirondack histories generally suffer from the misconception that few or no Native American archeological sites exist, and that the harsh environment precluded any considerable settlement by indigenous peoples. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that various tribes of Native Americans have been in the Adirondacks for around 13,000 years. (2) The Iroquois have been settled in the Adirondacks since around 1000 CE, with surviving evidence of early occupancy including intact pottery vessels and other culinary items. Following contact with Europeans, many Native Americans fell victim to the ravages of disease brought from the *Old World*. European encroachment also served to drive many natives to the Adirondacks as a place of refuge, namely the Mohawk and Abenaki. (3) Survivors soon found lucrative work opportunities in the Lake George and Lake Champlain corridor, which became a highway in support of the fur trade. Indians worked variously as mercenaries, guides, hunters, lumberjacks, horse team drivers, tanners, builders, tool makers and other essential roles which clearly influenced the fortunes of various European powers and the new settlements they developed. (4) Although American Indians make up six percent of the current population of Franklin County, their story continues to be obscured in comparison to that of the absentee Great Camp owners and other seasonal residents of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

African Americans

In the late 18th century it is estimated the Adirondacks contained around 400 slaves, mainly in Fulton and Clinton Counties. (5) In 1799, New York approved an Act for the General Abolition of Slavery which still had loopholes to extend bondage and indentured servitude. Slavery was not officially abolished until 1827. In the 1830s, abolitionist residents began organizing local networks to help escaped slaves flee to Canada. Around 1850, Gerrit Smith an abolitionist and politician, donated 120,000 of acres of land to three thousand African Americans in hopes that land ownership would be an important step in securing their citizenship and right to vote. (6)



Ten American Indian men in field at St. Regis, 1883. Photo by Verplanck Colvin, Courtesy of Adirondack Experience.



Laborers, Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium, 1908. Courtesy of Saranac Free Library, Adirondack Collection.



The enduring image of the Adirondacks, wealthy white tourists enjoying the outdoors. Courtesy of Adirondack Research Library, Union College, George Davis Postcard Collection.

Despite the good intentions, the North Elba colony was a failure. During the second half of the 19th century, the influx of European immigrants displaced blacks from manual labor positions they had traditionally worked. With the coming of the summer resort industry, many African Americans found themselves serving a new niche in hospitality as support staff for the new hotels and resorts. African Americans from outside the region were brought in as musical and theatrical entertainment for guests, further relegating people of color to the status as outsider within Adirondack communities. In the 20th century, African-Americans continued to find themselves concentrated in specific geographic areas (Saranac Lake being one) and low on the economic ladder, often employed in menial and subservient jobs. The rail lines serving the Adirondacks employed the most African American workers, usually as porters. The 1940s saw a demographic shift away from the Adirondacks toward upstate cities to seek out better job opportunities in the flourishing war industry. Blacks still represent a minority of the population in the Adirondacks, though local colleges are becoming more diverse. Disturbingly, many African Americans continue to experience hostility and racism in a predominately white regional area. Recently, the first black President of the Sierra Club was the recipient of racial slurs during a trip on the Schroon River. (7)

African Americans remain relatively obscure in the popular historical record of the Adirondacks, with most histories only covering slavery and abolition. In *The Adirondack Reader*, which boasts four centuries of Adirondack writing, there are only 10 pages with a mention of African Americans in a nearly 500 page volume. (8)

Conclusion

Despite under-documentation and marginalization, these groups have traditionally enriched the regional story of the Adirondacks. The groups however are seldom discussed in popular histories of the Adirondacks, which usually have a focus on development, recreation, and tourism 1850-present as seen through the lens of European Americans. Part of the problem lies with the historical manuscripts tradition in America whereby only prominent, land-owning whites were given sufficient documentation and attention. In the modern era where records are abundant and people have more control in preserving their own narrative, it is incumbent on current historians to be more balanced and inclusive when telling the story of the Adirondacks to future generations.

Sources

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