

PERSPECTIVE:**HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MARGINALIZED
POPULATIONS IN THE ADIRONDACKS****MATTHEW GOLEBIEWSKI**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores gaps in popular Adirondack histories that systematically ignore American Indians and African Americans in favor of whites. This oversight by authors is due to a mix of historic record-keeping practices, reliance on out-of-date sources, and a persisting need to sell the idea of the Adirondacks to a predominately white, middle-class tourist base. This article outlines the respective groups' history in the context of the Adirondacks and discusses the relevant literature, or lack thereof.

Editor's Note: Author uses the terms American Indian and Native American interchangeably; similarly, the author interchanges black and African American.

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 up towns 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 (Forest History Society 2019). Due to these factors, the popular image of the Adirondacks has been that of a predominately modern, white-settled area that serves as a base for seasonal tourism. This historical narrative has often ignored indigenous peoples, people of color, and permanent residents who have historically lived and worked within the Adirondack Park. This rhetoric is supported by an abundance of literature, which often sells the idea of the Adirondacks as a place of adventure and escape for millions of visitors each year while failing to mention the stories of other peoples and their contributions, from which whites have traditionally benefited. To compound the situation, cultural appropriation and exploitation of these groups were typically promoted through the entertainment of wealthy tourists. This took the form of theatrical and minstrel shows, further distorting the historical record.

NATIVE AMERICANS

Adirondack histories generally suffer from the misconception that few or no Native American archeological sites exist within the Adirondacks and that the harsh environment precluded any considerable habitation by indigenous peoples. After a brief mention of the fur trade and early colonial struggles, these histories then typically jump towards the late 19th century when Indians were often employed as guides.

Archaeological evidence from recent excavations overwhelmingly shows that American Indians have been in the Adirondacks for around 13,000 years. The Iroquois have been settled in the Adirondacks since around 1000 CE, with surviving evidence of early occupancy including intact pottery vessels, projectile points, stone axes, and other items (Stager 2017).

Following contact with Europeans, many Native Americans fell victim to the ravages of disease brought from the “Old World” and experienced violence from new settlers. Due to the resulting decrease in the indigenous population, it would be easy for contemporary authors of the time to deem it an uninhabited wilderness, a myth further propagated by books like *A History of the Adirondacks*, a two volume set written by Alfred Donaldson in 1921, and even as recent as 2004 in *The Adirondack Atlas*. European encroachment served to drive many Indians to the Adirondacks as a place of refuge, namely the Mohawk and Abenaki. 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, toolmakers, and other essential roles that clearly influenced the fortunes of various European powers and the new settlements they developed (Schaefer 2000). 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.

In 2017, Adirondack Experience attempted to acknowledge and address this essential deficit by opening an exhibit titled, “A Peopled Wilderness: Native Americans in the Adirondacks” (Adirondack Experience 2019). Further, archeology continues to unfold, namely in the Adirondack uplands, which continues to inform academics’ and residents’ understanding of the peoples that occupied these lands prior to white settlement.

AFRICAN AMERICANS

In the late 18th century, it is estimated that there were about 400 slaves in the Adirondacks, mainly in Fulton and Clinton Counties (Svenson 2017, 12). In 1799, New York approved an Act for the General Abolition of Slavery. Despite this, the Act still had loopholes to extend bondage and indentured servitude. Slavery was not officially abolished in New York 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 acres of land to 3,000 African Americans in hopes that land ownership would be an important step in securing their citizenship and right to vote (Svenson 2017, 19). Despite the good intentions, the North Elba colony was a failure in this regard.

During the second half of the 19th century, the influx of European immigrants displaced blacks from many jobs they had secured. 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. Additional African Americans were brought in as musical and theatrical entertainment for guests, further relegating performers to the dehumanizing status of outsider and novelty act. In the 20th century, African Americans continued to find themselves concentrated in specific geographic areas (e.g., Saranac Lake) 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 of blacks from the Adirondacks to upstate cities in order to seek 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, relative to recent decades. Disturbingly, many African-Americans continue to experience hostility and racism. Recently, the first black President of the Sierra Club was the recipient of verbal abuse and racial slurs during a trip on the Schroon River (Svenson 2017, 245). With the exception of a few topics usually relating to early abolitionism, African Americans remain relatively obscure in the popular historical record of the Adirondacks.

To summarize the plight of blacks in the Adirondacks, Alice Paden Green said this:

“Although their numbers have always been small in the Adirondacks, society there is to this day shaped by the way blacks were treated over the past two centuries. This is of particular concern today as the region’s residents confront the lack of diversity and the continued practice of discrimination. To move forward on this front, we need to clearly understand the nature of that treatment and come to terms with the past” (Svenson 2017, 247).

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE HISTORIC RECORD

Popular Adirondack histories seem to gravitate towards natural history, development, recreation, and tourism from 1850 to present. They forgo more extensive discussions of marginalized populations, partly due to a lack of primary sources. The problem lies with the manuscript tradition in America whereby only prominent, land-owning whites were given sufficient documentation and attention. Those who were literate in the dominant language of historians also tend to leave behind records that are used to craft narratives for *official histories*. Compounding the situation is a reliance on increasingly aging secondary sources.

A National Parks Service webpage on Native Americans in the Adirondacks only has one source from work produced in the last 10 years. The rest of the footnotes cite publications from the years 1868 to 1969 (National Parks Service 2019). Similarly, no comprehensive study on African Americans in the Adirondacks was completed until 2 years ago with Sally E. Svenson's *Blacks in the Adirondacks: A History* as the best resource to explore the topic. Current work on these topics tend to be published by academic presses and journals, further eluding mainstream audiences.

CONCLUSION

Despite under-documentation and marginalization, American Indians and African Americans have enriched the regional story of the Adirondacks. 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. Historians should incorporate emerging archaeological evidence, as well as other new sources. Likewise, the tourism industry needs to broaden its marketing strategies to offer the benefits of the outdoors to diverse communities in an effort of goodwill and inclusivity. Although there have been some successes with recent regional exhibits, studies, and books, much work is still needed.

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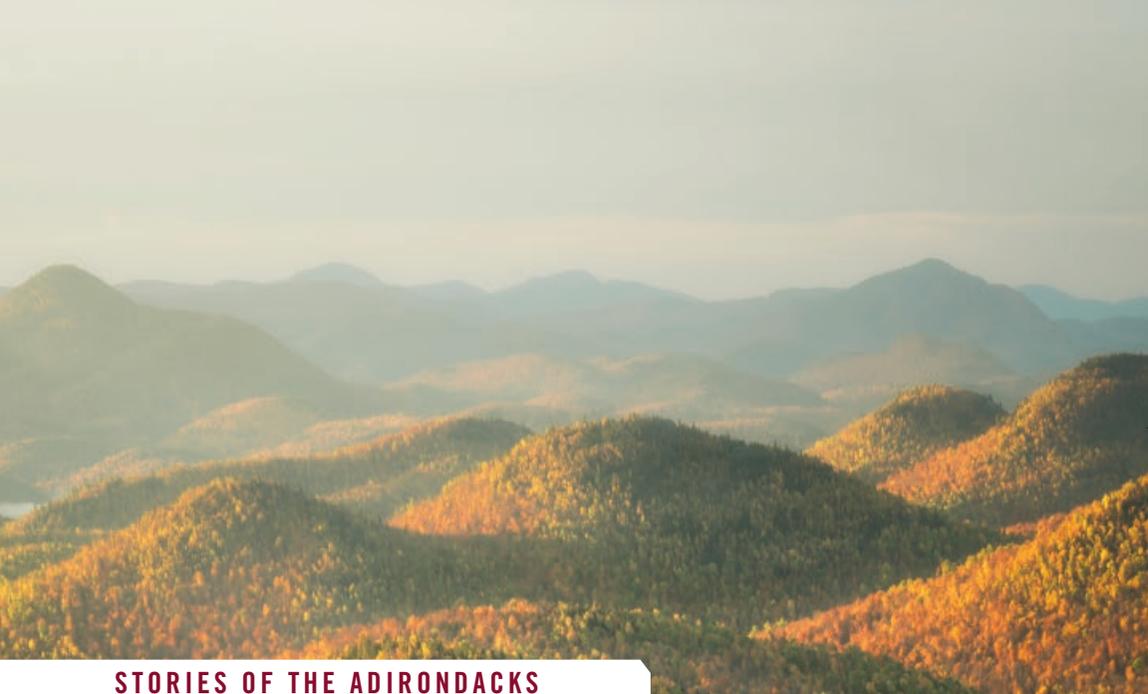
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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STORIES OF THE ADIRONDACKS

In our effort to showcase the many personal stories of the Adirondacks and to highlight the various ways in which they are told, we present the final section: Stories of the Adirondacks.

Though more informal storytelling than typical academic articles, these concluding essays are rooted in history and demonstrate our commitment to welcoming a broad spectrum of perspectives from our contributors. The materials and sources used to write these essays can be found at the end



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