

Historiography of Marginalized Populations in the Adirondacks

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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) 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 and people of color who have historically lived and worked within the Adirondack Park. This rhetoric is backed up 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 which whites have traditionally benefited from. To compound the situation, exploitation of these groups was typically promoted through the entertainment of wealthy tourists. This took the form of theatrical and minstrel shows, further distorting the historical record. (2)

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 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.

The pre-colonial era is usually written off as a non-entity as the typical patterns of European settlement and environmental degradation are absent. In a piece written by John Jerome and included in the third edition of *In The Adirondack Reader*, this rhetoric is clearly visible: “Although Adirondack history doesn’t really get rolling until after the Revolutionary War, two [European] pre-revolutionary entrepreneurs did try to settle there, and inadvertently set the tone of the place.” (3)

Archaeological evidence from recent excavations 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. (4)

Following contact with Europeans, many Native Americans fell victim to the ravages of disease brought from the *Old World*. Due to this decrease in 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.

Native Americans 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. (5) 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, this essential deficit was corrected by an excellent exhibit at the Adirondack Museum entitled “A Peopled Wilderness: Native Americans in the Adirondacks.” (6) Further archeology continues to unfold, namely in the Adirondack uplands.

African Americans

African Americans have been part of the fabric of the Adirondacks going back to the colonial era. Despite this, their representation in historic literature seems to mostly focus on the Underground Railroad, abolition, and farming.

In the late 18th century, it is estimated the Adirondacks contained around 400 slaves, mainly in Fulton and Clinton Counties. (7) 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 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. (8) 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 jobs they had traditionally worked. With the coming of the summer resort industry, many African Americans from outside the area found themselves serving a new niche in hospitality as support staff in hotels and resorts. Others were brought into the area as musical and theatrical entertainment for guests. While this has the potential to enrich the predominately hegemonic white culture, this entertainment 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 and low on the economic latter, 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.

African Americans remain relatively obscure in the popular historical record of the Adirondacks and never seem to have been fully incorporated into the predominant culture. 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. (9)

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. 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. (10)

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.” (11)

Difficulties with the historic record

Popular Adirondack histories seem to gravitate towards natural history, development, recreation, and tourism from 1850-present. They forgo more extensive discussions of marginalized peoples, partly due to a lack of primary sources. The problem lies with the historical manuscript tradition in the United States whereby prominent, land-owning whites were given the majority of 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. (12) Similarly, no comprehensive study on African Americans in the Adirondacks was completed until two 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 be published by academic presses and journals, further eluding mainstream audiences.

Conclusion

Despite under-documentation and marginalization, these groups have traditionally 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 new and diverse communities in an effort of good will and inclusivity. Although there have been some successes with recent exhibits, studies, and books, much work is still needed.

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