

Michelle Tiu
21H.421 – Introduction to Environmental History

March 16th, 2004
Professor Ritvo

Never Forgotten: The Towns of the Swift River Valley

When Boston is in need of more water, Massachusetts looks westward for a solution. In the early twentieth century, it was decided, once again, that Western Massachusetts' natural resources would hold the answer to Boston's water problems. During the 1920's, construction began on the Quabbin Reservoir, a project that would remedy the state's water problems, but would leave much turmoil in its wake. By constructing the Quabbin Reservoir, the Swift River Valley, as well as the four towns of Dana, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott, were overtaken and destroyed.

There is a great deal of information available on these four lost towns of Quabbin. J.R. Greene, a life-long resident of Athol, Massachusetts and a local expert on the Quabbin Reservoir, wrote the comprehensive book, The Day Four Quabbin Towns Died. The entire book is an excellent resource for information on the Quabbin towns, spanning from their past to their unfortunate destruction. Greene attempts to "recreate the Swift River Valley at the time its four towns officially passed out of existence" (6), by giving detailed descriptions of both local and national concerns of the time. In addition to providing basic facts and histories of the towns, Greene also documents the townspeople's reactions to their imminent end. Further, the appendices provide a list of Town Records and Disincorporation Laws, as well as a record of Town Officials, Residents and Voters.

Michael Tougias's Quabbin: A History and Explorer's Guide is another valuable resource on the towns of the Quabbin Reservoir. Tougias takes an all-encompassing look at the four towns, analyzing their past through a myriad of pictures, histories, and first-hand accounts. In

“The Past: Part 1, *Creating the Quabbin*” (2-21), Tougias tells how the Swift River Valley was cleared of its property and residents. Of note are the sections entitled “Cleaning the Valley,” “Cemeteries: Removing 7500 Dead,” and “Negotiating the Sale of Property” (which includes copies of the actual forms and notices used by the towns). He then takes a more personal approach in the next sections, “The Past: Part 2, *The Lost Towns*” (29-70) and “The Past: Part 3, *Forgotten History of the Region*” (80-85), by telling the stories of the Swift River Valley residents. Through interviews with former town residents, Tougias is able to recount the memories of those who once lived in the lost towns. Additionally, Tougias shares the towns’ histories through pictures, letters, anecdotes, and local folklore.

There are many other sources that also share the personal histories of the town’s residents. Chapter 2 of Thomas Conuel’s *Quabbin: The Accidental Wilderness* relays the history of North Dana as seen through the eyes of Warren “Bun” Doubleday, a descendant of the town’s original residents. Doubleday speaks of the drastic changes in Dana’s landscape, and supports his story with pictures of the demolition of the Swift River Valley. J.R. Greene’s *Strange Tales of Old Quabbin* relay “true stories of unusual lives and incidents in the towns of the old Swift River Valley.” It is a collection full of old legends and folklore from the surrounding area.

Further, *Historic Quabbin Hikes*, written by J.R. Greene, not only serves as a “basic guide to several historic sections of the reservation,” but also divulges information on local history. Chapter 1, entitled “About the Lost Towns,” provides town histories dating back to the 1700’s, and gives an overview of the towns from beginning to end. Pages 67-111 describe hiking trails that wind through the former town of Dana. Interspersed between Greene’s hiking advice and suggestions is an abundance of information on Dana. While describing the trails, he also tells of the remnants of former Dana, such as cellarholes and waterlines, and relays the

stories behind these artifacts. If one is willing to wade through the surrounding text, this source proves to be an extremely valuable resource.

Several other sources tell the stories of the Swift River Valley residents through pictures. Though the “WestfordComp” website is a personal home page, it has a wealth of information on the Quabbin Reservoir. Containing a multitude of pictures from both the past and present Quabbin Reservoir, the site also has individual pages devoted to each of the four lost Quabbin towns. Each page has a brief history of the town, as well as pictures of the towns, landscapes, and residents. Further, this page provides an excellent series of time-lapsed photos of the Quabbin Reservoir, dating from 1927, 1939, and 1989.

The Lost Towns of the Quabbin Valley, a photo documentary by Elizabeth Peirce, provides 128 pages of photographs from the Swift Valley Region. Through her photos, Peirce clearly expresses her compassion for the towns and families that suffered from the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir. She solicits sympathy from her reader by arranging photographs from every possible facet of life. Through distinct chapters devoted to each town, the book shows the buildings, lands, factories, and businesses of the Quabbin Valley. Pictures of shops, parks, schoolchildren, and families, among many other subjects, are included in this comprehensive photo documentary.

For information on the legislative decisions which led up to the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir, Fern L. Nesson’s Great Waters: A History of Boston’s Water Supply should be consulted. Chapter 3 of this book focuses on the Quabbin Reservoir, and pages 46-52 specifically discuss the Goodnough proceedings. These pages follow the House and Senate Water Supply Committee meetings, the public town hearings in Enfield and Ware, and also Massachusetts’ legislative decisions.

J.R. Greene's The Creation of the Quabbin Reservoir: The Death of the Swift River Valley also touches upon the legislative actions of the state. Pages 79-84 discuss the legislative proceedings which forced residents to leave their homes, and specifically focuses on *how* the residents were asked to move. This book is "intended as a study of the events that led to the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir," but also discusses the four towns in relation to the Quabbin. In "Part IV: Construction, Chapter 3: Exodus," Greene tells of the "erosions of the old way of life." He mentions how, in the towns' final stage, businesses declined, homes were sold, and cemeteries were uprooted. Continuing this in "Part IV: Construction, Chapter 5: Four Towns Cease to Exist," Greene mentions Enfield's last Ball, the slow demise of the towns, and the exodus from the Swift River Valley.

For further facts and figures on Dana, Enfield, Prescott, and Greenwich, one can consult a number of different books. Quabbin Facts and Figures, distributed by the Friends of the Quabbin, is a booklet of hard facts and figures on the Quabbin Reservoir. Specifically, the booklet gives the population of each of the four towns, the date of the towns' last town meetings and legislation passed by town government. Further, it includes a time-lapsed photo of Enfield, tracking the town from its beginning to its end.

Similarly, An Atlas of the Quabbin Valley: Past and Present, written by J.R. Greene, provides specific information on each town. Pages 6-17 provide the following data for Dana, Enfield, Prescott, and Greenwich: history, area of the land, post offices, local geography, churches, industry, war heroes, and population data. Further, two maps of each town are included, one dating from 1850 and the other from 1900. There are also two relevant maps, entitled "Boundary Changes of the Towns" and "What the Reservoir Covered." For those more technologically inclined, the "Friends of the Quabbin" website appears to contain the same

information. Further, the website provides an extensive chronology, ranging from 1901-1950, that contains pertinent information on the towns.

More information on the Quabbin Reservoir is available. An extremely comprehensive list of works can be found in J.R. Greene's [A Bibliography of Quabbin Valley History](#). This booklet is a general bibliography of all works related to the Quabbin Reservoir. Specifically the sections entitles "General Books and Pamphlets," "Relevant Histories of Adjacent Towns," "Annual Town Reports," and "Town Records and Genealogical Data" provide specific information on the four lost Quabbin towns.

Moreover, any additional information can be obtained from the Swift River Valley Historical Society, located in Salem, Massachusetts. The society strives to keep "the memories of the towns... alive" through their collection of historical items.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21H.421 Introduction to Environmental History
Spring 2011

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.