

SABBATICAL LEAVE PROPOSAL

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Project Title

The Genesee Valley: Confronting the Pristine Myth on the Developer's Frontier.

Project Description

The frontier of western New York was opened for settlement by private developers in the late-eighteenth century. Some developers were syndicates like the Holland Land Company, the focus of William Wyckoff's *The Developer's Frontier*. Wyckoff shows how Holland Land Company investment shaped the New York landscape from the Genesee River west to the Great Lakes.¹ To the east of the Holland company lands, however, lay other development tracts, that, to date, have received relatively little scholarly attention. Purchased by wealthy individuals, some of these tracts evolved into leasehold land systems, and two centuries on, these lands also reflect the developer's influence. Nowhere is this more evident than in the middle Genesee Valley, where a regionally-, if not nationally-renowned landscape surrounds the village of Geneseo. A parkland of sylvan groves and meadows, this part of the Genesee, particularly its landmark trees, has come to be widely celebrated in art and literature.

These statuesque oaks stand as regional icons, and through the eyes of early travelers and contemporary commentators, this landscape has been likened to picturesque parts of rural England. So, too, authorship of this New World Arcadia has been assigned to brothers James and William Wadsworth, private developers and founding fathers of Geneseo, who came to the valley in 1790. The Wadsworth family retains ownership of thousands of acres of property in the valley, and as Peter Hugill has noted, some of these lands continue to be leased, making it the only area in the US where the remnants of a nineteenth-century tenant system still operates.²

Most of the region's veteran oaks, and its most scenic parklands, are located on ancestral Wadsworth lands, and, without question, the family has played a key role in shaping the valley. In this research, however, I suggest that the Wadsworths have served as this landscape's stewards, not its architects, for the area's pastoral atmosphere is rooted in a much earlier history of native land use. This research confronts the "Pristine Myth"³ underlying historical accounts of the Genesee: namely, that the developer's hands were solely responsible for humanizing these lands. I consider not only the developer's influence in shaping this unique environment, but also the role of earlier indigenous populations and their maintenance of a rare ecological community—an eastern Oak Savannah—the majestic traces of which still spread their limbs over Wadsworth properties.

Contextually, the project is grounded in geographic and historical scholarship in landscape change on the American frontier. Most notably, the project extends a critical literature on the “pristine myth,” the misperception that the New World was a sparsely populated wilderness of barely perceptible human disturbance prior to European colonization. Methodologically, the project combines archival and ethnographic research with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis. GIS are sophisticated computer tools for mapping and analyzing spatial data. In this case, patterns of historic and contemporary land occupation and spatial arrangements of oak savannah will be mapped and analyzed.

Project Objectives

In scholarly terms, this research will add to our understanding of local geography and history, and American environmental history. In more specific terms, this project will: (1) provide a landscape-focused local history of the middle-Genesee; (2) provide new insight into the evolution of a unique American landscape; (3) contribute to a rich theoretical literature on environmental change and the American frontier; and (4) contribute to a nascent area of scholarship in Historical GIS—the application of GIS in historical inquiry.

Expected Outcomes

The primary outcome or end-product of this project is an article-length manuscript to be submitted to the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. The *Annals* is widely considered the flagship, peer-reviewed journal in Geography. Secondary outcomes include at least one professional paper to be presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers*; and lastly, the applicant will become proficient in the use of GIS by obtaining professional technology training.

Project Timeframe

Archival research, conducted mostly in Wadsworth Family collections in Geneseo, is underway. This archival work involves tracing land ownership patterns in the Valley and unearthing clues to the origins and maintenance of the area’s landmark oaks. Archival research will be completed prior to the commencement of the proposed sabbatical leave (Spring, 2008). Ethnographic research (interviewing), involving members of the Wadsworth family and other longtime residents of the valley, will be conducted during sabbatical leave. So, too, will professional paper presentation, GIS training and data analysis, and manuscript preparation and submission. GIS training will be acquired in one of two ways. The applicant will either enroll in GIS training web courses, or participate in GIS workshops. Both options are offered by ESRI, the world’s leading GIS software developer.⁴ All tasks described above will be completed before the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year.

Justification of Leave

Upon completion of my doctoral degree in December 2001, I decided to use my dissertation as the foundation for a book dealing with place and identity in the American mining town. Book writing was a difficult and time consuming task, but also rewarding. The book was published in August 2006.⁵ As a result, I have spent the better part of my academic career studying mining landscapes and I now feel the necessity to move on into new research domains in cultural and historical geography. I view sabbatical leave as an opportunity to set off in new research directions, namely the realms of landscape history and historical GIS. The project described herein represents that research departure.

This will be a major undertaking, one that I would be unable to bring to fruition without a one-semester waiver of teaching and service responsibilities. Although the research area is local, the training required to become proficient in new areas of scholarship, and the intensive nature of data collection and analysis, require an extended leave. Intersession and summers alone would be insufficient.

Project Value

The project outlined above will result in material that I can use in a number of my courses. The topic is applicable to discussion in ENVR 124: Environmental Issues, GEOG 274: Conservation and Resource Management, and GEOG 388: Cultural Geography Seminar. Moreover, by becoming proficient in the use of GIS, I would not only gain the option of using the technology in the classroom, and but would also be able to supervise independent research using GIS tools. At present, most Geography graduates are more proficient in GIS than I am, a situation I am eager to remedy.

From a service standpoint, this project is of marked value to the broader Geneseo community. Many in Geneseo are now aware of my interest in the Genesee landscape and my hypothesis that the area's landmark oaks are of native origin. Given the attachment many feel towards these trees and their significance as regional icons, the topic is of great interest. In fact, a senior colleague in the social sciences told me that this project represents one of the most significant pieces of local research conducted at the college during his tenure.

Completion of this project during sabbatical leave would contribute to my teaching and be of benefit to the community. It would also broaden my research agenda, keep my scholarship intellectually fresh, and increase my professional stature. Although I have a strong publication record, it has been several years since I have published an article-length manuscript in a peer-reviewed journal. I would like to return to that format and I am intentionally aiming high in terms of the publication source: the *Annals* is the flagship journal in Geography. I was recently granted continuing appointment and promoted to associate professor, and at this point in my career I am eager to broaden my contribution to the college, community, and discipline. This project would serve as an important milestone in my professional development.

References

¹ William Wyckoff, *The Developer's Frontier: The Making of the Western New York Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

² Peter J. Hugill, *Upstate Arcadia: Landscape, Aesthetics, and the Triumph of Social Differentiation in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1995), 17-18.

³ William M. Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82:3:1992, p. 369.

⁴ For additional information on ESRI training programs see <http://training.esri.com/gateway/index.cfm>

⁵ David Robertson, *Hard as the Rock Itself: Place and Identity in the American Mining Town* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006).