

Watershed Moments: An Environmental History of the New York City Water Supply

By David Soll

Lafayette College
256 Taylor Avenue
Easton, Pennsylvania 18042

dsoll66@gmail.com

© 2009 by David Soll

Editor's Note: This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Ken Rose and Erwin Levold. Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

“Watershed Moments” highlights changes in democratic governance and environmental policy in twentieth-century America by exploring the development and elaboration of New York City’s water supply network. Unlike most historical treatments of municipal water supply, this study emphasizes water management over system construction. Placing issues of management at the center of the narrative reveals the transformations in City water policy and the growing trend toward resource cooperation that marked the final decades of the twentieth century. Sociologists and political scientists have recognized the increasing tendency toward consensus on thorny environmental conflicts in the 1990s, but they have not probed the historical forces behind this transformation. This study fills this important gap in the literature through a careful analysis of the country’s most extensive water supply network.

Most scholars identify the emergence of environmental cooperation as a response to the inflexibility of 1970s top-down federal environmental regulations. Accurate in many respects, this analysis overlooks the establishment of earlier institutional mechanisms established to

encourage resource cooperation across political boundaries. In 1963, New York State joined with the federal government and the states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware to form the Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC) to coordinate the development and environmental protection of the river basin. The federal-interstate compact was a novel attempt to address persistent problems of water pollution and flow regulation across state boundaries.

The first major test for the DRBC came in 1965, when the worst drought in over a century gripped the Mid-Atlantic region. Dry conditions had prevailed since 1961, but the drought intensified in 1965, resulting in drought emergencies in New York and many other cities. The worsening drought increased tensions between New York and Philadelphia, which both drew substantial portions of their supply from the Delaware River.

The two cities faced different challenges with respect to the river. New York City's primary concern was quantity. A 1954 Supreme Court ruling required the City to release water from its reservoirs back into Delaware River tributaries to sustain stream flow in the lower stretches of the Delaware. New York City feared that complying with the release requirement during a severe drought would not leave enough water for diversion to millions of taps, hydrants, and showers. Philadelphia's concern was water quality. During the dry summer months, salt water from the Delaware estuary moved up the river. In non-drought years, the flow of fresh water flowing downstream prevented this so-called salt front from reaching the intake of Philadelphia's water system, guaranteeing the potability of the supply. However, in 1965, Philadelphia officials worried that a combination of drought and reduced releases from New York City's reservoirs would severely reduce the flow of freshwater in the Delaware, allowing the salt front to migrate far upstream, threatening the integrity of over half of Philadelphia's water supply.

As governor of New York during the summer of 1965, Nelson Rockefeller presided over state management of the drought. The drought affected the entire state, but the most contentious aspect of drought management involved New York City's water supply. The Nelson A. Rockefeller Gubernatorial Papers, (Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 15) contains a variety of documents that illuminate the response of New York City and New York State to the crisis. (See, in particular, series 10.3, Counsel's Office-Robert R. Douglas, Series 33, Speeches, and Series 34.06, Diane Van Wie Papers). In addition to various published government reports on the drought in the Delaware River basin, the subject files contain a number of letters to and from government officials that clarify the DRBC's role in resolving the dispute among the various basin states.

Of particular interest is a letter to Governor Rockefeller from Harold Wilm, who served as Commissioner of New York State's Department of Conservation, and as the governor's representative on the DRBC. While the basic outlines of the agreement that resolved the crisis are well known—they included reduced diversions and releases by New York City and compensating releases from an Army Corps of Engineer reservoir and from reservoirs operated by private power companies—the substantial reduction in water consumption in New York City has not been accorded the significance it deserved. New York City's willingness to accede to the compromise proposed by the DRBC hinged on its success in slashing water use. The resolution of the drought crisis of 1965 depended on the cooperation of millions of New York City residents, the federal and state governments, and the private sector. The DRBC's successful handling of the drought crisis was a harbinger of the environmental cooperation that would come to characterize many localized resource conflicts in the 1990s.

Record Group 15 of the Nelson A. Rockefeller Gubernatorial Papers also contains a trove of relevant documents for researchers interested in state environmental management more generally. Many series contain material relevant to environmental protection; see especially series 10.3, Counsel's Office-Robert Douglas and Series 25.3, Press Office-Agency and Commission Reports. Under Governor Rockefeller, New York State emerged as a national leader in environmental protection. Drafts of the governor's speeches and speeches by other administration members provide valuable insight into the rationale behind various environmental policy initiatives. These documents will be especially valuable to researchers who seek to depart from the conventional narrative of the environmental movement, which views the federal government as coaxing cooperation from recalcitrant state governments. A trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center will prove invaluable to researchers interested in exploring the origins of state-level resource protection and early examples of noteworthy multi-jurisdictional collaboration on environmental issues.