



# Stopping the Plant

The St. Lawrence Cement Controversy and the Battle for Quality of Life in the Hudson Valley



**Miriam D. Silverman**



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SUNY series, An American Region:  
Studies in the Hudson Valley  
Thomas S. Wermuth, editor

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## Foreword

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**H**aving lived for more than thirty years in Rhinebeck, New York, served on the school board, run for election to county government, and helped write a history of the town, I still feel like a newcomer. Yet, when tragedy struck my family, our neighbors arrived at our door with meals and sympathy. People newer to town than I am now see me as part of the local establishment. So which am I: an old-timer or a newcomer? That question is at the heart of Miriam Silverman's impressive exploration of the controversy that rent the Hudson community twenty-five miles to the north of Rhinebeck. In the late 1990s St. Lawrence Cement Company proposed to build a massive new plant on the edge of the town. The ensuing battle forced people to ask: What kind of community did Hudson want to be, and, even more problematic, who would make the decision? What values would they embrace—cement and “progress,” or aesthetic values and small proprietary businesses?

In the battle over the cement plant, clashing values and contested identities generated intense acrimony. All the parties to this conflict saw the stakes as so high that to lose was to see their local world destroyed. The dispute was not limited to Hudson since the potential consequences—visual blight, air pollution, and heavy traffic—had serious implications for the entire area. “Stop the Plant” signs appeared throughout the mid-Hudson Valley region, including in my neighborhood in Rhinebeck. To those of us who saw our small towns as havens from the ills of urban and suburban America and the landscape as a reminder of the nation's colonial heritage, the villains seemed obvious. St. Lawrence Cement and its supporters proposed to

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Lytle, Mark H., Professor of History and American Studies, Bard College, author of *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (2005) and *Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (forthcoming, Oct. 2006).

despoil our region in the narrow pursuit of profit. Mammon would seduce Gaia.

To most of the Mid-Hudson region, whether for or against the plant, this was a battle about good versus bad, right versus wrong, old-timers versus newcomers, as well as about the nature of community and local control. Rhinebeck had already rehearsed its own version of the cement plant controversy. In the late 1990s the administrators of local Northern Dutchess Hospital proposed a merger with two hospitals in nearby Kingston, one of which, Benedictine, was governed by the Catholic Church. Under the new management, Northern Dutchess would have to follow the dictates of the church to restrict the delivery of women's reproductive services. Many of us who settled in Rhinebeck as veterans of the 1960s' uncivil wars saw this as an attack on hard-won women's rights. Others of our neighbors viewed the merger as a blow for moral values or, more simply, as a bow to economic necessity. Given the seriousness of the issues and the partisanship of the contestants, we could hardly imagine how the conflict would ever be reconciled. In the end, economic and political realities scuttled the merger and peace returned to Rhinebeck. Nonetheless, we had discovered the thinness of the veneer of civility that prompts a cordial "hello" even to strangers we pass on the streets.

Rhinebeck shares some of Hudson's view shed, and the open spaces of Columbia County to our north act as a buffer against the southward encroachment of Albany and the capital district. We could hardly be indifferent to a project that proposed to reverse the process of de-industrialization that has enhanced the magnificent vistas essential to our quality of life. All the same, the fight was not ours to fight. We might be partisans, but we would not be participants. The same could be said for my second local community, Bard College, where I have taught American and Environmental History for the past thirty years. Situated on the Hudson River, between Rhinebeck and Hudson, Bard shares all the aesthetic and historic qualities that define the region. But, unlike Hudson or Rhinebeck, Bard is something of an exotic species. It is more *in* the region than *of* the region. Our students, decked out in black with the occasional lavender Mohawk, are conspicuous when they shop in the local stores. They are largely transients who may appreciate the beauty of the college setting, but seldom become deeply involved with the area.

Thus, I was particularly interested in the challenge Silverman set for herself. She clearly had a predisposition to side with the opponents of the plant. Her travels had sensitized her to the way that outside agencies, multinational corporations in particular, could exploit the human and physical resources of small communities without much

regard for local needs and sensibilities. Nonetheless, she needed to keep an open mind. After all she was as much interested in the dynamics of the Hudson community as it squared off over the plant proposal as she was in the merits of the project itself.

You now have the results of that inquiry before you. Silverman has proven herself remarkably even-handed in peeling back the layers of meaning that expressed themselves in “Stop the Plant” and “Support the Plant” signs. She discovered, to her surprise and mine, that reasonable and civic-minded people could stand on either side of the issue. The facts of the proposed project were not so much the cause of the dispute but rather what conclusions the two sides might draw from those facts. The plant controversy was not simply about economics and politics. It was more significantly about the future and the past. There were those seeking to protect the landscapes that inspired Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, and those who hoped to revive Hudson as a bustling blue-collar town, its streets crammed with Saturday shoppers and new cars.

In her book Silverman reveals to us how this fascinating saga played itself out. She links the battle over “the plant” to romantic visions of the nineteenth-century Hudson River Landscape School and the earlier fight to save Storm King Mountain. She illuminates the technical data on which the State Department of Environmental Conservation decided the case, as well as the aesthetic and historic issues that informed the opponents. Anyone who thinks of home as a special place threatened by forces both distant and close at hand will find a profound connection to the people of Hudson as they struggled to define the soul of their community. We have Miriam Silverman to thank for that.

Mark H. Lytle  
Bard College

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## Acknowledgments

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**I**would first like to express my respect and appreciation to the thousands of individuals who committed their time, energy, and money, their hearts and souls, to fighting this battle over many years. Their passion and dedication to claiming their community as their own are inspirational. I would also particularly like to thank those who took time out to share their thoughts and experiences with me—Andy Bicking, Cyndy Hall, Linda Mussmann, Dan Odescalchi, and Sam Pratt, as well as others who have chosen to remain anonymous. Many thanks to those who contributed images to enrich this text—Concerned Women of Claverack, Terry DeWan, B. Docktor, Friends of Hudson, and Mark Teague. Thank you to Diana Brown and Yuka Suzuki for their help and support during the research phase of this project. I offer my deepest gratitude to Professor Mark H. Lytle for contributing the Foreword, and for his detailed comments and suggestions. And finally, a million thanks to my mother, for her patience, love and unending assistance. Without her neither this book, nor I, would be here.

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# Introduction

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**W**hat you have in your hands is an incredible story with above all one important message—yes, it is possible. It is possible to have a say in the nature of development in your community. It is possible to fight back against the forces, the companies, however large they may be, that threaten a community's quality of life for the sake of their own profit. In the Hudson Valley, confronted with a proposal by the world's second-largest cement producing company to build a massive coal-powered cement plant, what began as a handful of local concerned citizens did not sit back and accept that millions of tons of air pollution would be brought to their beautiful upstate New York community. They did not resign themselves to what many saw as the inevitable processes of development necessitated by ever-increasing demands for cement. They did not passively leave it to the government regulatory agencies to decide what was best. Instead, they took the future of their community into their own hands, and with extraordinary dedication and inspirational perseverance, they achieved what many had thought impossible—they won.

In a world where every day there is new environmental destruction—another river poisoned, another forest decimated, another factory smokestack erected—it is easy to feel powerless and overwhelmed. Just before I began the research that led to this book, I had been traveling in several countries around the world, studying environmental and social movements. I returned burdened with confusion and despair. I was angry at my own country for the destruction it has wrought on economies, environments and cultures around the world. I felt frustrated and unsure as to how to proceed with my own life, when American society is constructed in such a way as to make it extremely difficult to live without damaging the environment or contributing to someone's exploitation.

But I also had a glimmer of hope, the beginning of a formulation of a solution. In all the countries I visited, from India to New Zealand to



Mexico (and, it would turn out, upstate New York), the underlying struggle was the same: the desire for self-determination, or autonomy—the ability to have a say in one’s livelihood, health, community and destiny. In the global capitalist system, with wealth and power consolidating into fewer and fewer hands and the interests of government intertwined with the interests of big business, control has been ripped from the hands of the people. In response to globalization taking control away from the people, in part what is needed is the cultivation of its opposite: a process of localization. This could include a localization of food, money, and community—in essence what community planner Doug Aberley (1993) calls a “reinhabitation of place,” by reinstituting dependency on the local environment.

For me, what the concept of localization inspired was a desire to understand what was going on in my own backyard. I had spent so much time looking at other people’s problems and yet knew very little about the place I lived. When I moved back to my home in Red Hook, New York, eager to stay in one place and to process the overwhelming experiences I had had, I began to notice signs sprouting like dandelions on lawns throughout the area, emblazoned with the words “STOP THE PLANT.” I quickly learned that St. Lawrence Cement (SLC) was proposing to close its plant in Catskill, New York and open a much larger and more technologically-advanced plant across the river in Greenport, just outside of Hudson, New York. For some local residents, hoping the plant would stimulate the economy and the new technologies would improve the regional environment, the proposal was a welcome one. To others it was nothing less than a death threat to the environment, beauty, small-scale economy, and quality of life in the region.

Before beginning my investigation into the SLC controversy I knew a bit about environmental issues in the area, and the country more generally, but I had never delved into the deeper aspect of the stories of the people fighting around those issues. Most of the environmental movements I examined internationally were made up of lower economic classes and were often tied to basic survival needs. I wondered, what would an environmental movement look like in a postindustrial country, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world? Would it be based in elitist desires for a beautiful landscape? Would it rely on the idea that economic needs are secondary to environmental ones?

What these questions may make clear is that I began this project with biases on both sides of the argument. I am an environmentalist. I believe our society needs a dramatic restructuring of its priorities and way of life, taking into account that every aspect of our natural environment is in grave danger from human greed and ignorance. I am also cognizant, however, that the belief that environmental concerns should have precedence over all other concerns can have extremely detrimental

consequences when imposed on those whose beliefs, or needs, are different. I think that change needs to happen from within a community—that outside economic interests should not overrule local environmental ones nor outside environmental interests overrule local economic ones. What I learned in the course of my research on the SLC dispute, however, is that none of these categories is easily definable. Sometimes both sides have both economic and environmental concerns, and sometimes it is hard to identify just who is really the outsider.

It is not my goal in this book to determine or persuade the reader as to who was right and who wrong. Instead I have chosen to engage in discourse analysis, focusing on the people involved in the dispute and on how the process of public discourse both constructed and represented previous constructions of the worldviews of the individuals involved. Cultural geographers Trevor Barnes and James Duncan, articulating a common element of postmodern thought, state that the discourse about our world “reveals as much about ourselves as it does about the worlds represented,” and thus “when we ‘tell it like it is’ we are also ‘telling it like we are’” (1992: 3). From this perspective, the discourse on the SLC plant can only be said to represent the participants in the debate, not the facts of the plant itself. In addition, as anthropologist Stephen Tyler describes, discourse is both the object and means of postmodern anthropology (1987: 171). Thus, to continue with the postmodern framework and turn the lens on myself, it must be acknowledged that in presenting discourse I am also engaging in discourse, and therefore am also representing my own subjectivities—“telling it like *I* am.” But while my depiction of the controversy is undoubtedly influenced by my own values and perspective, my goal was to avoid, as much as possible, placing judgment on the “facts” provided by each side. Instead, my desire is for the discourse of the controversy to speak for itself, for the reader to experience the full force of the polarized dialogue in all its confusions and contradictions.

But my even greater desire is that you will use this story as inspiration. That you will develop compassion for those with whose beliefs you do not agree, and understand them as based in their experiences of the world, just as yours are based in your experiences. And that you will be motivated, encouraged to fight for change within your own community, to fight for a community that reflects your values, your definition of quality of life. Because although this battle has ended, the war continues. As long as there is a demand for cement, there will be a supply. Maybe the plant will be built in another country where there are fewer environmental regulations, fewer labor laws. Or maybe it will be in your backyard. But whatever the challenge is that you face in your community, my hope is that you use the message of this story to know that no challenge is insuperable. Change is possible, is necessary, and is up to us.



**Figure 1.** *Hudson Valley in Winter, from Olana*, 1871. Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900). Oil on paper, mounted to canvas. OL.1981.14. Courtesy of Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

## CHAPTER 1

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# **The Place, the Plant, the People, and the Permits**

When I first moved to the Hudson Valley people said, “You’re going to see all the problems with the environment that you would find in the country, but you’re also going to find all the solutions.”

—Andy Bicking, volunteer coordinator and  
outreach manager for Scenic Hudson

**T**he Hudson Valley, the land surrounding the Hudson River from Albany to Manhattan, is one of the most beautiful regions in the United States. From the time Henry Hudson “discovered” the area in the seventeenth century, it has inspired exploration—into its mountains and waterfalls, and into the self, through art, literature, philosophy, and all passions of the human soul. For many, the Hudson River is a respite, a playground, a shelter for birds, fish, and wildlife, and a magnet drawing city-weary homebuyers to a life of serenity and rejuvenation. They believe that the river has the potential to revitalize the Valley and relieve the poverty and high unemployment rates that have plagued its communities for the past several decades.

When others watch the river as it flows from high in the Adirondack Mountains down to New York City and the Long Island Sound, they see first and foremost a transportation route—a beautiful one, but primarily a means to carry goods from the industries along its banks to the population and shipping centers to the south. Particularly following the building of the Erie Canal and the population boom in New York City, the river was critical to the economies of towns in the Valley. Then, in the 1960s, industries in the Valley, as in the rest of the country,