

**BATTLES OF THE NORTH COUNTRY: WILDERNESS POLITICS**  
and Recreational Development in the Adirondack State Park, 1920-1980

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On many maps of New York State, a clear “Blue Line” stands out that encompasses a vast expanse of the upstate portion of the state. Located within this “Blue Line” is the massive upland and mountainous region known as the Adirondacks. This ancient highland region has long been a source area for resources used by humans. First, it was a hunting and fishing territory for Native Americans. Later, Europeans obtained furs, lumber, and iron from these vast spaces. Although Native Americans didn’t live in the area, Europeans did settle here, building farms, clearing lands, founding villages, and making lives. By the turn of the 1800s and with the formation of a newly independent United States and New York State, the region developed into an urbanized, industrial, and technologically advanced collective. One of the changes arising from these modernizing processes was the increase of wealth and leisure time for more people. Outdoor recreational activities became more common by New York’s growing urban populations. Conservationists and many of the wealthy who wished to protect their properties and exclusive recreational activities advocated for protection of the region. As a result of these social and political forces, the state created what was called the Adirondack State Park in 1892. This territory, encircled by “the Blue Line,” was based on the idea of “forever wild.” Therein lies the source of the acrimonious and convoluted conflicts that would occur well into the twenty-first century.

The author begins his discussion of the conflicts over the uses of Adirondack lands in the 1920s. By then, the massive extractive industries that had exploited the region’s iron and lumber resources for nearly a century and a half had begun to fade. Farming was, and still is, an undertaking for some in the area, it could never replace iron and lumbering in importance for the regional economy. At the same time, a growing urban population in the state that had more leisure time and financial resources desired more outdoor recreational opportunities, such as camping, hiking, and hunting. With newly available means of transportation in the form of automobiles and better roads, people could now get to more isolated wilderness areas such as the Adirondacks. Ironically, many of the places they wanted to visit were already either owned by the wealthy or were being protected by conservationists. This set the stage for conflict and rancor.

Two major events would roil this already existing conflict over land use. New York State,

along with building a more extensive and usable road network in this region, undertook a major road-building effort up the side of one of the iconic peaks of the area, Whiteface Mountain. This sparked multiple battles within state government circles, and between public and private land owners and uses. The state was making the region “less forever wild.” These roads were augmented by campgrounds and recreational spots along the newly built roads. Many of these spots were quickly overrun by eager vacationers, producing problems of pollution, trash, and overuse of local resources. These problems continue to the present day, as do the disagreements about who is responsible maintaining the sites and how much development should take place. These conflicts were made worse by the 1932 Winter Olympics and all the construction associated with it.

The second major event was the 1980 Winter Olympic Games held in Lake Placid. New and more elaborate sporting facilities had to be built and maintained for the Games. Likewise, further road and other transport systems, housing, dining, and (some) entertainment establishments were added, mainly in and near the village of Lake Placid. The Games brought a sudden rush of people into the region. Those Games were a success, but they created a problem. What was to be done with all the facilities after the Games were finished? Generally, the decisions were to keep using them for further events and both public and private recreation, vacationing, and service functions. This is what is occurring now; with additional big events like an Ironman Triathlon event, more stores, motels, and restaurants. The conflicts between public and private land and business owners have continued.

Who would have thought that having fun and finding rest and regeneration in a beautiful natural setting would cause such turmoil? Yet, that turmoil has been a part of the human and natural landscapes of the Adirondacks for a century and a half. Parts of these problems derive from the fractious results of having both public and private landownership within the park, and the government regulatory agencies that have been at work in the region, especially since 1980. The author has captured the essential ingredients of these dilemmas for the peoples and areas of the Adirondacks.

This book is organized with an introduction, seven “content” chapters, and a conclusion. The chapters are presented in a chronological order that identify, elaborate, and discuss the evolution of land use problems, conflicts, and events in the region from the early 1920s to the end of the 1980s Olympic events. The book is written in direct, clear, and expressive prose, and has few writing problems. Although not a long book, it provides the basics of a complex and dynamic situation in a large portion of New York State. It is well researched, using a large collection of local newspaper articles, varied academic works, and government documents as references and sources. A few more maps showing the developing infrastructures and facilities, plus the connections with the outside world, would have enhanced the narrative, though. There is one additional thought that occurred after finishing this volume. What has happened since the end of the 1980 Olympics in the region in most recent days? This is a continuing story, and would seem to be a logical sequel to this first volume.