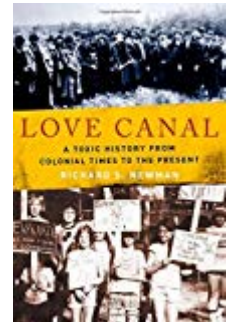


Richard S. Newman. *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xvii + 306 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-537483-4.



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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Richard S. Newman's recent book offers a new history of Love Canal, the neighborhood near Niagara Falls that became notoriously contaminated by buried chemical waste. As residents became aware of the leaching chemicals and associated health risks, they organized to investigate the problems and demand government action. Following widespread media coverage, the state and federal governments began evacuating residents of the subdivision, and the Environmental Protection Agency designated Love Canal as the first Superfund Site for remediation. Over the course of just a few months in the summer of 1978, Love Canal became an emblem of environmental degradation, unseen health risks from toxic landscapes, denial of responsibility by industry, and government negligence. In fact, this symbol remains Love Canal's most visible legacy. The author himself, having grown up in the area, had a hard time finding the former Love Canal, which now contains a new development called Black Creek Village. A fence surrounds the undeveloped

portion of the former dump site; the name Love Canal is not posted there.

Newman's book situates this story of chemical contamination and environmental activism in a much longer history of economic development and pollution in the Niagara region since the colonial period. These earlier developments illuminate continuities of environmental degradation through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the onset of industrialization, transport, and tourism. As in many areas of the United States, the growth of European American settlements correlated with the declining presence of Native Americans. The League of the Iroquois, composed of the nations of the Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Seneca, fished and hunted in the area around Niagara Falls and shaped the landscape through their agriculture and settlements. In the early nineteenth century, as the Iroquois were losing ground, the Seneca orator Red Jacket became an eloquent spokesperson for their claims to the land. Newman juxtaposes the struggles of Native Americans to retain their territory with the plans

by white settlers to transform the Niagara River into a major transportation route through massive engineering projects. In the end, the Niagara Ship Canal envisioned by William G. Williams was never built, but later in the nineteenth century William Love had similar plans for the region, including a Model City and waterway. This plan, another unrealized dream, left a gouged landscape: the partially excavated Love Canal.

In the twentieth century, the Niagara region became home to a burgeoning chemical industry. Most important to Newman's story was the company founded in 1905 by Elon Huntington Hooker. As production at Hooker Chemical Corporation's Niagara plant expanded through the mid-twentieth century, the abandoned canal site four miles away seemed an ideal site for waste disposal. Twenty-two thousand tons of chemical waste were deposited in 55-gallon drums between 1941 to 1953, the year the Love Canal dump was sealed. Company officials considered the site to be a secure clay vault, and planned to place a clay cap over the entire dump, though this apparently never happened. Love Canal was neither the only nor the largest chemical waste dump in the Niagara Falls region. Its subsequent notoriety stemmed from the purchase of the land by the Niagara Falls School Board in 1953 (for a mere one dollar) as the site for a new elementary school and subdivision. The company disclosed the dump and insisted the deed transfer liability with the land. The city agreed.

The remainder of the book focuses on the story that some readers will remember from news coverage forty years ago. Less than two decades after the construction of the subdivision and school, residents became alarmed at the number of miscarriages, health problems, and deaths in their small population, especially uncommon illnesses in children. As residents learned about the leaching of toxic wastes from the chemical dump, they organized locally, particularly through the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA), to

demand government response. Newman notes the largely white, suburban composition of the LCHA, particularly as compared with a similar organization of renters, largely African American, into the Concerned Love Canal Renters Association. Kevin Kruse has shown the crucial role that homeowners associations played in residential segregation in the 1960s and 1970s; in the Niagara region, even when the interests of white and black residents aligned, the organization of their communities reflected enduring social divides.[1] Here and elsewhere in the book, Newman might have expanded on how broader currents in politics and civil society shaped the activism in Love Canal.

Newman stays close to his sources, and this is both the strength and the weakness of his book. The narrative is compelling and well documented, but it engages little of the relevant scholarly literature, particularly that on environmental risk and regulation. He notes that the disposal of toxic wastes into Love Canal was perfectly legal at the time, but does not discuss how the understanding of the hazards of low-dose exposure changed from the 1950s to the 1970s.[2] Ulrich Beck is not mentioned in the book, yet this story of how a high-technology industry produced dangers it did not know how to control provides a perfect illustration of *Risk Society*. [3] That said, the story also opens up new ground for other scholars. I was fascinated by Newman's account of the remediation of Love Canal, which involved large engineering firms and the latest forms for containment. Historians have paid relatively little attention to the emergence of environmental remediation as a new field of technical knowledge and economic activity. We live in a world in which toxic waste is inescapable, and the question becomes whether it is manageable. Newman's *Love Canal* provides a timely reminder of how important citizen science and politics are in that process.

Notes

[1]. Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[2]. Soraya Boudia, “From Threshold to Risk: Exposure to Low Doses of Radiation and its Effects on Toxicants Regulation,” in *Toxicants, Health and Regulation since 1945*, ed. Soraya Boudia and Nathalie Jas (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 71–87.

[3]. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992).

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