Environmental History of Braddock, PA

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Due to its small population size and low economic status, Braddock, Pennsylvania may seem like a relatively insignificant town located just outside of Pittsburgh. However, Braddock has been a focal point of activity and change since before the creation of the United States of America. In many ways, the environmental history and development of Braddock can be viewed as a smaller scale model of the general trends happening throughout the country over many decades. Since the first European settler rested on this land up until the modern day, Braddock has experienced colonization, warfare, development, industrialization, prosperity, suburbanization, economic devastation, and most recently attempts to revitalize both the economy and the environment.

John Fraizer was the first known European to inhabit the region along the Monongahela now called Braddock. He travelled there after being kicked out of his previous settlement by the French. He became friendly with Aliquippa, the Native American ruler of the area, who permitted him to build a cabin on the land in 1753. Shortly after this modest initial settlement was established, King George II sent George Washington and Christopher Gist to explore the area and report the presence of any natural and/or strategic potential. Situated along the riverbank, this relatively untouched land presented many opportunities; however, the constant threat of encroachment by the French made the region much less favorable. Continued competition and struggle between the colonizing forces of the British and French came to a head in Braddock in 1755 with the Battle of the Monongahela.

The Battle of the Monongahela was a crucial event in both the history of Braddock and the future United States. In fact, ever since, the town of Braddock has adopted the name of General Edward Braddock who led the British troops and lost his life due to injuries from this battle. Braddock entered into battle with a careless sense of confidence, ignoring warnings from both Benjamin Franklin and George Washington about the very different and effective military tactics of the French and Native Americans. He is quoted by Franklin as stating, “these savages may indeed be a formidable enemy to your raw American Milita; but upon the King’s regular and disciplined troops, Sir, it is impossible they should make any impression.” His arrogance on the matter led to one of the first major defeats of the British within the American territory. Over 1,200 of the highly trained British soldiers lost their lives on Braddock’s field while the alliance of about 850 French, Canadian, and mostly Native American men was relatively unharmed. Importantly, this battle taught the British that their enemies and their unconventional tactics were not to be underestimated, and it proved to the colonists that the powerful British army was not indomitable. These lessons and many of the people present at the Battle on the Monongahela would become key players in the American Revolution.

Aside from this major battle, the early settlement at Braddock was relatively quiet, and the land was used for farmland, particularly orchards. However, the community and the environment radically changed at the dawn of American industrialization. The development began around 1850 with the opening of a barrel factory and the introduction of railroad tracks. In 1861, McVay-Walker, the first of many steel foundries in the area, opened. The main agent for change and large-scale industrialization in Braddock was Andrew Carnegie who immigrated from Scotland and opened his first business, Carnegie-McCandless and Company, in 1873. This name would soon be changed to Edgar Thomson Steel Works, after the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the initial company’s most significant client. The Edgar Thomson steel mill is the last functioning mill in the Monongahela Valley.

Industrialization caused a cascade of changes in Braddock. The growing abundance of job opportunities, upward mobility, and freedom attracted many European immigrants to the region. Residential communities started to pop up in the areas immediately surrounding the factories. By 1890, the population reached 8,500 people, and by 1920, Braddock was a vibrant community of over 21,000 residents from diverse backgrounds. This large population created a need and a successful environment for other types of small businesses and community organizations to open. The first of hundreds of Carnegie Libraries in America was built in Braddock by Andrew Carnegie in 1889. It served as a resource for the people of Braddock, most of whom were employed by Carnegie’s businesses, and became the central hub for all sorts of community organizations that were working to develop and improve the growing town. The high level of workplace accidents associated with the factories produced an evident need for a hospital. Braddock General Hospital was opened in 1906 thanks to contributions from many business owners in the community. During this time, Braddock also earned the label of the “City of Churches” with 44 churches established between 1830 and 1917.

These trends of growth and development continued throughout the early 20th century into the 1950s. The steel industry in Braddock was doing so well that in May of 1912, Carnegie Steel Company launched a multi-million-dollar renovation plan for the Edgar Thomson mill which would include the addition of 14 open-hearth furnaces, railway improvements, and 3,000 new employees. This expansion helped the steel industry to meet increased demand for steel products during the World Wars. Increased production meant increased demands on the labor force in Braddock which resulted in some labor riots and strikes, especially during World War 1. During World War II, as most of the men went abroad to fight, the women took on more jobs and more responsibilities within the various industries. Edgar Thomson was not the only excelling industry in Braddock. For example, McClintic and Marshall Construction Company which began in 1901 quickly became one of the largest steel fabricating companies in the country, taking on huge projects such as the construction of the Panama Canal lock gates, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the University of Pittsburgh’s Cathedral of Learning. The business sector greatly benefitted from the success of these large industries which attracted an active residential community. Between the mid-1920s and 1960, the number of businesses and the total sales volume in Braddock more than tripled in value. Some significant businesses included two large department stores, The Famous and Nugent’s, and grocery chains, the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company and Bishoff and Company.

This picture of Braddock as a vibrant, successful, ever-expanding community is strikingly different from the Braddock that exists today. In fact, after visiting the contemporary town, I found it difficult to even imagine what Braddock must have been like in its prime. In one article, Jim Straub wrote, “After losing 90 percent of its peak population, today it looks more like the nightmare at the end of the American Dream.” Many factors contributed to the decline of Braddock, including the development of new roads, increased automobile accessibility, suburbanization, and deindustrialization. New roads provided easy access to adjacent neighborhoods in the Pittsburgh area. Suburban housing developments in these neighborhoods attracted people within the community who were fortunate enough to purchase their own car and afford a new home. Shopping malls in these suburban areas also contributed to significant economic decline among the variety of other businesses in Braddock. Simultaneously, economic decline led to “a death spiral of layoffs, plant shutdowns, reductions in pay and benefits, strikes, and eventually a wholesale shedding of its workforce.” Those who possessed the skills or education required for other types of work left in search of new jobs. The fleeing population caused a decrease in the tax base which left the local government with insufficient funds to provide adequate relief to the struggling people stuck in Braddock. All of these compounding factors left Braddock as a shell of the bustling industrial town it once was. These effects were felt even more severely by minority populations in Braddock, particularly the large proportion of African Americans, who additionally faced workplace discrimination.

John Fetterman, the fascinating and passionate mayor of Braddock, has been working tirelessly since his election in 2005 to find new ways to address the many issues facing his community. One major problem in Braddock is the impact of the environment on the population’s health. Fetterman has been quoted as saying, “The mills' principal contribution to the town at this point is, well, pollution… Braddock has the highest rate of child asthma in the region." The air quality in Braddock is very poor. Statistics from the Toxic Release Inventory in 2008 revealed that Edgar Thomson Steel Works “reported stack air releases of 33,489 lbs., primarily comprised of hydrochloric acid, ethylene, and manganese compounds, and on-site fugitive air releases were 64,849 lb…primarily comprised of methanol, ammonia, and zinc.” Fetterman’s approach to improvement thus far has been to basically turn the entire town into a recycling project. By inviting outside artists and builders in, Braddock is very gradually being transformed. When other economically depressed communities have to turned to outsiders for revival, it has typically led to gentrification, or a displacement of the original inhabitants who can no longer afford to live in their newly renovated town. However, Fetterman and other locals who are invested in the success of Braddock do not foresee this being a major issue since the town is 90% vacant to begin with.

Looking at the history of Braddock and understanding how it digressed into its current state reveals very complex intersections between industrial prosperity, environmental costs, and the impacts these factors can have on vulnerable communities. The town was largely built by and for industry so when the industry stopped, the town quickly went into a state of severe decline. Those that could escape did so, but the 3,000 remaining residents have been left to live with the lasting environmental impacts of the heavy industrialization and to attempt to revive their home. The future of Braddock rests in the hands of an increasing number of people who are committed to once again transforming this small area of land into something of real significance.

While researching for this paper, I came across many types of resources from a wide variety of perspectives. The book from which most of the historical facts came from was written by Robert M. Grom who is the president of the Braddock-based Heritage Health Foundation and has a clear passion for the history and community of Braddock which he wanted to share with the world. The article which I used for most of my information about the current state of Braddock was published in *An Independent Socialist Magazine* which provided an interesting perspective. Another source I referenced was a scientific research study of air quality in Braddock which was published in the journal *Environmental Health*. This plethora of sources available about Braddock shows that it is a unique community which has attracted the interest of many types of people who are invested in its future.

References

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