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Braddock, PA: A Microcosm of the US

Braddock, PA is a town located just outside of Pittsburgh along the Monongahela River. With just over half a square mile of land occupied by just over 2,000 residents, on paper, this region may seem insignificant at first glance. Even in person, as I drove down Braddock Avenue for the first time, it felt like a ghost town in the shadow of the last operating steel mill in the area. There was little activity on the streets except some through traffic and a few locals popping in and out of the Family Dollar Store. However, through my research, I have come to understand that this unremarkable looking town is composed of much more than meets the eye. The current state of Braddock is a culmination of a long, layered history filled with periods of colonization, warfare, development, industrialization, prosperity, suburbanization, economic devastation, environmentalism, and most recently a crossroads of revitalization efforts.

I have also come to see Braddock in many ways as a microcosm of the United States. A microcosm is defined as “a community or other unity that is an epitome of a larger unity.” (Merriam Webster) This means that the events that take place in Braddock are exemplary of much larger themes in US history. Some of the major successes and struggles faced in this country have been magnified within the Braddock community. By studying the history of Braddock’s rise and fall, we can come to a deeper understanding of the way individual communities in the US are impacted by more global economic trends. Also, by watching or participating in the current movements to transform the economy and environment of Braddock, we can expect to gain insight into what is or might become a larger scale phenomenon. The major themes in Braddock’s history which mirror the broader US history are colonization, industrialization, economic devastation, environmentalism, and the current revitalization efforts.

If you could deconstruct the layers of the built environment of Braddock through the ages, you would reveal a great deal about its history, as the use of its land and physical resources have played a major role. In the oldest layer, you would find rich land that was occupied by Native American groups. The terrain began to change after John Frazier was granted permission by the local Native American ruler to build his cabin there and became the first European settler in the area in 1753. The prime location of Braddock along the Monongahela River attracted the opposing colonizing powers of Britain and France. Their competition came to a head at the Battle of the Monongahela in 1755. The battle proved to be a crushing defeat for British General Edward Braddock who lost his life that day and for whom the town has been named ever since. Both Benjamin Franklin and George Washington had tried to warn General Braddock about the unique and effective military tactics employed by the French and Native forces; however, his blind confidence in the British military fatefully led him to dismiss their advice. This battle was of great significance in the history of Braddock and the future United States as it taught important lessons on both sides. The British learned that their enemies and their unconventional tactics were not to be underestimated while the colonists learned that the powerful British army was not indomitable. (Grom, 2008)

Following this major battle, Braddock was relatively quiet, and the land was mostly converted into farms and orchards. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, the advent of the steel age and industrialization began to radically transform Braddock’s landscape. Railroad tracks and a barrel factory were introduced around 1850, and 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 steel industry in Braddock continued to grow into the twentieth century. In May of 1912, Carnegie Steel Company launched a multi-million-dollar renovation plan for the Edgar Thomson mill which included 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. Many other businesses found success in Braddock at this time. 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. (Grom, 2008)

The influx of industry also spurred development in many other aspects of 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 an opportunity for other types of businesses and community organizations. 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 called The Famous and Nugent’s and two grocery chains called the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company and Bishoff and Company. 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 many 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. Thanks to contributions from many business owners in the community, Braddock General Hospital was opened in 1906. During this time, Braddock also earned the nickname, “City of Churches,” since 44 churches were established between 1830 and 1917. (Grom, 2008)

About a decade after World War II, drastic economic devastation swept Braddock even more suddenly than industrialization had a century earlier, largely due to the decline of the steel industry and suburbanization. The decreased demand for US steel was accompanied by “a death spiral of layoffs, plant shutdowns, reductions in pay and benefits, strikes, and eventually a wholesale shedding of its workforce.” (Straub, 2008) This deindustrialization and the increasing popularity of surrounding suburban residential developments caused a dramatic decrease in Braddock’s population. Basically, anyone who could afford to do so moved out of Braddock. Either they had lost their jobs and went to seek employment elsewhere, or they decided to commute to their jobs in Braddock from the suburbs for a higher quality of life. This suburbanization was made possible by the development of new roads and increased automobile accessibility. Shopping malls in these suburban areas also contributed to significant economic decline among the variety of other businesses in Braddock. The fleeing population caused a great reduction in the tax base which allotted the local government insufficient funds to provide adequate relief to the struggling people stuck in Braddock. (Grom, 2008) All of these compounding factors left Braddock as a shell of the bustling industrial town it once was. These effects were felt most severely by minority populations in Braddock, particularly the large proportion of African Americans, who additionally faced workplace discrimination and did not have the resources required to move. (Straub, 2008)

Braddock has still not been able to fully recover from this unexpected economic devastation. One article stated that, “After losing 90 percent of its peak population, today it looks more like the nightmare at the end of the American Dream.” (Straub, 2008) Now, the population is around 2,140 people, about 70% of the residents are African American, and about 30% live below the poverty line. Many of the buildings are vacant and in disrepair, and the abandoned properties hold little monetary value. (“Braddock, Pennsylvania”) These conditions have created many struggles for the Braddock community, but it has also presented a unique opportunity to essentially rebuild Braddock from scratch. Many people and organizations have become very invested in the future of Braddock, and they have initiated many creative approaches and programs to reimagine and redevelop Braddock.

One influential person involved in many of Braddock’s new projects and initiatives has been their mayor, John Fetterman. His striking appearance, impressive education, and passionate work has earned him, and therefore Braddock, a lot of attention from the press. He is a large 6 foot 8 inch white man with several tattoos, including the zip code of Braddock and the dates of every homicide which has occurred in the town during his time as mayor permanently stained on his forearms. Recognition of his own privileged upbringing sent him on a mission to use his Harvard master’s degree in Public Policy to benefit underserved communities. He saw enormous potential in the Braddock community and dedicated himself fully to bringing this old steel town into the future. Since his start as mayor, Fetterman has done a lot of good in the community. While he is interested in bringing more businesses and traditional jobs into Braddock, he also emphasizes the power of the arts and the environment in transforming a place. Two of his most successful and well-known projects are his non-profit, Braddock Redux, and the Braddock Youth Program. (McKelvey, 2018)

The goal of Braddock Redux is “to mobilize teens, young adults, and like-minded people of all ages from both within and outside the community for the purpose of the overall betterment of the Braddock area through training opportunities, art initiatives, green initiatives, employment opportunities, the creative re-use of existing structures, and through the flexibility to respond to other opportunities that arise.” (“Braddock Redux”) The arts initiatives in Braddock are two-fold: they want to offer space to outside artists, while also cultivating arts education and engagement for the current residents. The UnSmoke Systems Art Space was created in a vacant building which used to be a Catholic school. The classrooms are used as gallery space and many events are hosted in collaboration with other cultural organizations. Braddock Redux helps to get the local community engaged in art by hosting art shows for nearby school children in their community center and by involving them in development projects, such as the new mosaic welcome sign and mosaic park. They also are working on housing projects to host artists and attract their business. (“Braddock Redux”) Just this past June, accomplished cellist Yo-Yo Ma visited Braddock and said, “There is a deep, long tradition here, but it’s wonderful to see this new artistic energy.” (Reynolds, 2018)

In their striving towards a stronger community, Braddock Redux also works closely with the Braddock Youth Project, which is another initiative started by Fetterman. The Braddock Youth Project has been very successful in helping the community through youth-run programs and in providing quality job experience and training to the participants. A large part of the program includes the development and cultivation of an urban farm, Braddock Farms, which opened in 2007 in partnership with Grow Pittsburgh and has expanded since. The farm provides organic produce for a local farmer’s market and is part of the Penn’s Corner Farm Alliance. (“Braddock Farms”) The youth also run several other programs including a community newsletter and a peer education program about healthy lifestyles. Granting the youth with the responsibility and power to make real changes in their community has proven very successful. As the project coordinator Andrea Arrington once said, “They’re not adults, but they can take on adult responsibilities. They’re not children, but they still have the sky-is-the-limit optimism of children.” (Tubbs, 2011)

Although Mayor Fetterman has certainly been a catalyst in many of the redevelopment projects in Braddock, he could not accomplish any of it alone, and some feel as though he receives too much credit and recognition for his contributions. I had a chance to talk with the current President of the Braddock Borough Council, Tina Doose, and she explained to me that Braddock is actually a “weak-mayor system.” (Doose) This means that the mayor acts as “the face and the voice” while the Council acts as the main governing body. (Doose) By attracting so much attention to Braddock through his outreach, Mayor Fetterman has been playing his role very well, but it is important to realize that for any real change to happen, many more equally important people must be involved. This distribution of power is very different from that of larger city governments in which the mayor typically plays the major role in decision making.

Mrs. Doose and the council have their own projects in the works to build a better Braddock as well. One of Mrs. Doose’s main goals since she first joined the finance committee of the council 13 years ago was to get Braddock off the list of “Act 47 communities.” (Doose) The Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, known as Act 47, was originally proposed and enacted by state Representative David Sweet in 1987. The impetus was the collapse of the steel industry which left thousands of people in towns such as Braddock unemployed and left the local governments with very little tax revenue. During these tough times, the Act essentially enforced a limited spending plan to help the municipalities to stay afloat. The intention was for this to be a relatively short-term solution, but now, over 30 years later, there are still 17 municipalities, including Braddock, which have retained Act 47 status. The main issue caused by the persistent restrictive budgeting is that the local governments have insufficient funds to hire a full-time police force. The police officers in Braddock are part-time employees with a starting salary of $11.80 per hour. During the most recent round of primaries, a first step toward Mrs. Doose’s goal was achieved when the people of Braddock voted to form a Home Rule Study Commission to apply for a home rule charter. Although this charter would not directly relieve Braddock of the Act 47 limitations, it would give the local government significantly more autonomy in determining tax policies. (Faina, 2018)

Aside from the clear economic needs of the community, Braddock also faces major environmental health concerns. Although the air quality in this steel town is much better than it was during the height of industrialization, Pittsburgh is still ranked in the top ten most polluted cities in the US for year-round and short-term particle pollution. (American Lung Association) Edgar-Thomson Steel Works in Braddock is a major polluter and is the only steel plant still in operation in the Monongahela Valley. Those living closest to this pollution source, especially lifelong residents, are most susceptible to the many related negative health effects. A recent article from City Lab broke down the major pollutants emitted from the plant in a much more colloquial way as not only “particulate matter (the smog stuff), but also sulfur oxides (the funky-smelling stuff), volatile organic compounds (the liver-damaging and cancer-causing stuff), and carbon monoxide (the stuff that can silently kill you).” (Mock, 2018) 90% of the Braddock residents are considered to be at high risk for particulate matter exposure. Also, many of the homes in Braddock are very old, and it is estimated that 73% of them probably contain lead paint. It can be difficult to draw direct correlations between pollution and negative health effects because of the multitude of factors which contribute to an individual’s health, but two major health concerns which are likely related to or exacerbated by pollution in Braddock are asthma and infant mortality. (Mock, 2018)

This pollution and the related health impacts are complicated by the geographic, racial, and social factors involved. At first it may seem like a coincidence that almost everyone in Braddock is African American or it may seem inevitable that poor people are clustered around factories, but when you scale up and see these same trends happening elsewhere, it is clear that this distribution was not determined randomly, and the lifelong residents are not necessarily there by choice. In fact, systemic racism, through practices such as redlining and workplace disadvantages, made it very difficult for most African Americans to leave Braddock during the era of deindustrialization and suburbanization. (Straub, 2008) According to Pennsylvania’s definition, Braddock more than qualifies as what is known as an environmental justice region, since its population is significantly more than 30% minority and more than 20% impoverished. (Mock, 2018) To explain what environmental racism is, Melissa Checker says, “Across the United States and around the world, countless studies show that communities of color and low‐income areas host a disproportionate number of toxic waste‐ producing facilities, and they bear the brunt of environmental degradation, natural disasters, toxic waste, and climate change.” (Checker, 2016) This “cumulative toxic assault” leads to disproportionate health impacts as well. (Mock, 2018) “Between 2008 and 2012, white infants had average infant mortality rate of 4.75 deaths for every 1,000 live births, while the rate for black infants was 13.73.” (Mock, 2018)

With increasing awareness of the problems pollution creates for both individual and environmental health, there is some work being done in Braddock to combat these issues. For example, Braddock Farms has been a great resource to the community as a source of fresh, organic produce and as a non-toxic space. Most of the other green initiatives in Braddock involve the recycling and repurposing of existing land, buildings, and resources. For example, the Free Store 15104 which opened in 2012 collects donated goods and redistributes them to community members. The goal is to minimize wasted goods while alleviating poverty. (“Braddock Redux”) These are all great projects, but not much is being done on the local level to improve air quality and address environmental toxins. When I asked Tina Doose about environmental issues and what is being done about them, she said, “We have a huge polluter. We have a steel mill. And we don’t welcome the fact that they have continually been an abuser of the environmental requirements for pollution.” (Doose) She said she believes that the problem lies mainly in the enforcement of the federal and state regulations since for most companies, the fee for breaking the law is cheaper than the cost of significantly reducing their emissions. She also boasted proudly about the many businesses and even some larger manufacturers which have expressed interest in possibly moving to Braddock. (Doose) It was evident in my discussion with her that environmental improvements were of secondary importance to economic redevelopment and growth in her town.

At this moment in time, I sense a lot of energy and pride emanating from the Braddock community. There are many people, both native residents and invested outsiders, who are piloting new approaches to solve both the economic and environmental crises in the area. Although their projects are varied, they all have the same broader goals and a community-minded focus. I believe that by empowering the current residents through new job trainings and opportunities and by directly involving them in the redevelopment initiatives, Braddock will be able to move forward with sustainable success and avoid gentrification in the process. I also believe that as Braddock rebuilds, they will serve as an example of what is possible for other struggling communities.

For the US, looking at Braddock is like looking in an ugly mirror. Back in the days of the steel age, the gritty air and bustling streets were representative of the success of industrialization. However, now that the economic gains of industrialization have been stripped away, Braddock is living proof of all the damage caused by the steel industry, especially on the most vulnerable populations and environments. By studying the past and current state of Braddock, we can contextualize the broader trends in US history of colonization, industrialization, suburbanization, deindustrialization, and environmentalism and understand the way these factors can impact an individual community. Overall, Braddock is a resilient town that holds a lot of pride in their past and has great hopes for the future.

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