

NJS Presents**The 2016 NJ History and Historic Preservation Conference****Poster Session Winner*****Reimagining the Hackensack Meadowlands, 1968-1972*****By Cheryl Hendry****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i2.59>**

The 2016 NJ History and Historic Preservation Conference, “Building a Place for History,” occurred June 8 – 9, 2016 at Seton Hall University in South Orange. You can see more about the conference, co-hosted by the NJ Historic Trust, the NJ Historical Commission, the NJ Historic Preservation Office, and the Friends of NJ Heritage, at <http://www.njpreservationconference.org/>. Organizers invited students and “new professionals,” dubbed “the future leaders of our history and preservation professions” to submit poster presentations for display at the event. The Council for the Humanities sponsored the poster session, which was judged on site at the conference by Dr. Richard Veit of Monmouth University, Mark Dilonno of the Star Ledger, and Cristen Piatnotchka of the NJ Historical Commission. We are pleased to share winner Cheryl Hendry’s poster here, after some explanatory text and her brief biography.

In the decades leading up to the passage of the Hackensack Meadowlands Reclamation and Development Act in 1968, planners, journalists, and residents alike had described the Meadowlands as “dead” – humans had killed everything that lived in the Meadowlands except for mosquitoes, so they said. This idea was used to justify the comprehensive development of the Meadowlands as proposed in 1968. But the legislature passed the Meadowlands Act just as the national environmental movement gained strength. In New Jersey and elsewhere, citizens began

to argue for the value of a clean environment and open space. Planners at the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission (HMDC) called for scientific studies of the Meadowlands' ecology and these studies revealed that biological life did exist in this wetland. The image of a dead Meadowlands quickly gave way to the idea that it could be salvaged ecologically and that vision provided the foundation for the HMDC's Comprehensive Land Use Plan of 1970. In an ecologically salvageable wetland, planners could imagine people living, working, and recreating on the banks of the Hackensack River. Here wetlands were an asset to development rather than an obstacle and the plan made the argument that preservation and development could (and must) work together in an urban ecosystem.

Cheryl Hendry is a PhD Candidate in History at Montana State University. A native of southern New Jersey, Cheryl was introduced to the Hackensack Meadowlands while working at Hunter Research, an historical resource consulting firm located in Trenton. There she co-authored a report on historic drainage systems and water management features in the Meadowlands. After looking at the myriad ways in which humans have altered this wetland ecosystem, she is now studying efforts since 1968 to protect and preserve the remaining marshland in the Meadowlands. This poster conveys part of that story – a shift in perception of the Hackensack Meadowlands and planners' early efforts at balancing development and ecological needs in the country's most densely populated metropolitan area.

Reimagining the Hackensack Meadowlands, 1968-1972

Cheryl Hendry

Department of History & Philosophy, Montana State University

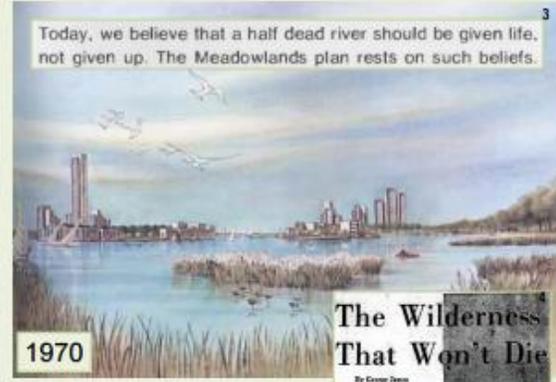
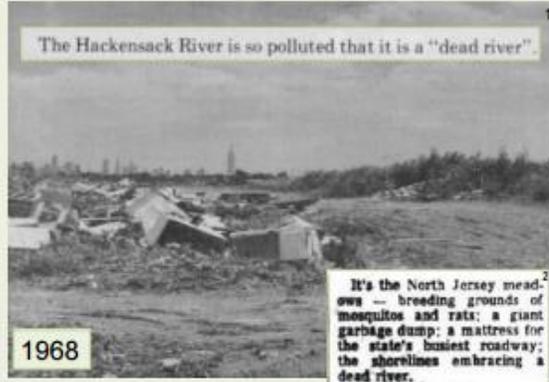
cheryl.hendry@msu.montana.edu



Abstract

In the early 1970s, perception of the Hackensack Meadowlands changed dramatically. In part due to the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission's (HMDC) scientific studies, use of local knowledge, and a rising national environmental awareness, what once was thought of as "dead" came to be understood as ecologically salvageable. This new image provided the foundation for the HMDC's *Comprehensive Land Use Plan* - a "salvageable" wetland could be integrated into development plans. In linking environmental restoration and development, the Plan suggested new ways to understand the relationship between humans and urban wetlands.

Shifting Perception of the Meadowlands: From "Dead" to Ecologically Salvageable



What caused this dramatic shift in perception?

Hackensack Meadowlands Reclamation and Development Act

- Legislative mandate to preserve the "delicate balance of nature"

Local knowledge and scientific studies

- showed that life existed in spite of chronic pollution and ecological stress

- Don Smith, growing up in the Meadows⁵
 - "Every day of the hunt. It was home from school, to the meadows."
 - Trapped over 1000 muskrats annually
- George T. Potera's study of Kingsland-Sawmill Creek⁶
 - Biological production of marsh grass = 4.9 tons/acre
 - Dense population of plankton
 - Forty-three bird species observed



National Environmental Movement

- Realization of wetlands' ecological functions and values
- Argument that the Meadowlands were the area's last vestige of open space

Implications: Development and Preservation Can Coexist

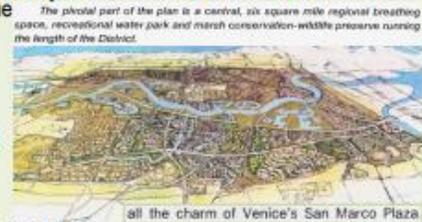
Kingsland-Sawmill Creek zoned as a Marsh Conservation Zone

Wetlands can be an asset to development rather than an obstacle

- They offer aesthetic and recreational value
- Residential development is possible

Planners' interpretation of the concept of "balance"

- *Comprehensive Land Use Plan* balanced preserved areas with developed areas
- The plan asked, can man "respect his environment yet live pleasantly in close proximity to the industrial sinews of his civilization"?
 - The plan said yes - human and estuarine needs could coexist!



Challenged idea that human intrusion into nature was always detrimental

References: ¹ State of New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, "The Hackensack Meadowlands 1968" (Trenton, NJ: Division of State and Regional Planning, 1968). ² Edward J. Flynn, "Time Has Passed Meadowlands By," *The Record*, December 18, 1968, A1. ³ *Hackensack Meadowlands Comprehensive Land Use Plan* (Lyndhurst, NJ: Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission, 1970). ⁴ George James, "The Wilderness That Won't Die," *The Sunday Record*, October 18, 1970, D1. ⁵ Interview with Don Smith, March 17, 2016. ⁶ George T. Potera, "A Preliminary Ecologic Study and Evaluation of a Section of the Hackensack Meadowlands," December 1, 1970, Meadowlands Environmental Research Institute Library, Archives, Vertical File, 1970-003 (Report).