

COMMENTS BY HISTORIAN JESSIE RAVAGE FOR OTSEGO 2000

ON THE IMPACT TO THE HISTORIC LANDSCAPE AS PROPOSED BY THE DRAFT SUPPLEMENTAL GENERIC ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT ON THE OIL, GAS AND SOLUTION MINING REGULATORY PROGRAM, WELL PERMIT ISSUANCE FOR HORIZONTAL DRILLING AND HIGH-VOLUME HYDRAULIC FRACTURING TO DEVELOP THE MARCELLUS SHALE AND OTHER LOW-PERMEABILITY GAS RESERVOIRS ISSUED SEPTEMBER 30, 2009.

I have lived in Otsego County for twenty years and have researched and conducted historic resource surveys and National Register of Historic Places (NR) nominations on a consultancy basis for seventeen years. In my home county, these projects include historic resource surveys in the towns of Cherry Valley, Hartwick, Otsego, Roseboom, and Springfield, and National Register nominations for districts in the mill hamlets of Roseboom and Fly Creek, the Village of Milford, and the Main Street district in the City of Oneonta. Moreover, I prepared the Lindesay Patent (9,200 acres) NR nomination in the western portion of Cherry Valley and the Glimmerglass Historic District nomination (15,000 acres) taking in the viewshed of Otsego Lake. A third large district nomination for 17,000 acres in the Waggoner Patent in Springfield is determined eligible. (Attachment 1: Resume of Jessie Ravage)

The intensive documentation of landscapes in Otsego County for their historic merit over the last decades has provided me with a unique perspective on how the disruptive to the historic environment the generic permitting of the proposed horizontal gas drilling will be.

Otsego County, retains extensive historic resources representative of its development as an agricultural region from the 1780s through the mid-twentieth century. The proposed drilling would have deleterious impacts on these resources. The proposed numbers of drilling sites scattered over the county's rural landscape would compromise its historic integrity because this landscape's greatest significance is embodied in the consistently high degree of preservation across broad spans. The scale of individual wells and their associated structures would overwhelm the mainly nineteenth century rural scale of these resources, intruding upon their contexts and potentially eliminating the sense of place they engender. Finally, the volume of heavy truck traffic associated with drilling wells would inflict damage to both the historic rural road network—itsself a cultural resource, and the densely settled hamlets and villages connected by that network. These resources should be first identified, documented, and assessed for their historic significance and integrity using an established standard before any drilling commences.

THE RESOURCES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

One thousand square miles is a comparatively large area, and existing NR documentation and historic resource surveys assess only small portions of it in any detail. At present, most NR-listed properties in Otsego County lie along the Susquehanna River corridor and in the northeast corner of the county—the region surrounding the Village of Cooperstown and Otego Lake. Since local people usually initiate survey and subsequent listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the lack of consistent survey documentation and NR listings does *not* indicate a lack of historic resources and landscape in other parts of the county. Rather, it indicates that so

far, planning efforts in many Otsego County towns have not yet reviewed these resources. Such planning efforts tend to be deferred in economically stressed communities, and the lacunae in Otsego County historic resource documentation generally coincide with areas of the county where economic conditions are weak. I would add that people living in these sections might also be most likely to accept at face value the touted potential boost to the local economy offered by companies wanting to execute leases to drill for natural gas.

Otsego County's historic resources are chiefly related to its longtime development and use as farmland beginning in the 1780s through the post-Civil War era. By the latter period, much of the county's land was cleared, and vernacular farms were scattered across its hilly surface broken by glacial valleys. In areas where the land remains open, Otsego County visually preserves the spatial organization established during the first eighty years of its cultivation. This period is represented by numerous contiguous historic farm properties bounded by property divisions following the earliest plats surveyed by patent holders and land speculators. These properties form a sweeping patchwork of individual farms, each with open land, fields, meadows, pastures, fields, and woodlots. Most of these farms retain a cluster of buildings representative of the period of significance. These clusters usually include a farmhouse, most often a vernacular example with details illustrating stylistic tastes popular in the nineteenth century, and a group of outbuildings built and reused for the various agricultural endeavors of Otsego County farmers throughout the period of significance. Many of these properties are potentially eligible for listing on the National Register as they are representative of a settlement pattern significant in New York State. Not only do these properties individually retain a high degree of historic integrity dating to the period of significance; their placements and plans over wide stretches of Otsego County's landscape match historic development densities dating from settlement and persisting to the present day. Thus, all are more significant and provide a greater sense of place when considered as components of a larger historic landscape extending over many hundreds of acres.

Otsego County's circulation patterns are often overlooked as a significant component integral to historic rural landscape. Roads comprise the greatest part of the county's transportation network. These thoroughfares include virtually all local roads as well as former turnpikes chartered in the early 1800s, New York State highways designated in the early 1900s, and county highways, also designated in the latter period. The bulk of its road system, however, is maintained by small town crews on tight budgets. These highways still connect scattered historic farm properties with the hamlets and villages located chiefly along the main valley routes.

The county's roads illustrate at least two main patterns of historic road development in the region. The older tendency, brought from earlier settlements, conforms to the topography. In the glacially carved ridge-and-valley landscape of the county's landscape overlying the Marcellus shale, this tendency includes two main road types. Relatively level highways conform to the first bench of land above the main watercourses. Even though these serve as the primary roads throughout the rural areas, most are still two-lane highways with little or no shoulder. They wind along the contours of the benches and often have short sight lines with few places safe for passing. These valley roads are connected across the ridges by steep, winding roads,

also paralleling watercourses. These streams descend rapidly in narrow clefts, and the connector roads were constructed using the traditional cut-and-fill method. The roadway was cut as narrowly as possible from the side of the valley and the fill removed was used to buttress the roadway from below. Many of these “cross” roads, especially those on the west faces of the ridges, remain unpaved. Few are cleared in winter because they cannot be safely maintained. A newer tendency to build straight roads following the ranges of a rectilinear plat was pioneered in central New York State and moved west with settlement on land surveyed entirely in squares. These straight highways cross fairly level uplands and also climb and descend the glacial ridges with little regard for grade. Built to connect scattered farmsteads, they are no wider than the more dominant pattern previously described. As Otsego County has numerous small streams, all of its highways have many small culverts and bridges designed for fairly light weight traffic—cars, vans, farm machinery, and short trucks. None of this historic infrastructure is designed to support the numerous heavy trucks required for the proposed drilling.

The local road network connected the region with the Erie Canal to the north and the former Delaware and Hudson Railroad running through the southern part of the county. Otsego County never had canals of its own, although the Susquehanna River’s spring freshets floated rafts of lumber to markets in Philadelphia in the early 1800s. Even earlier, it was used to carry supplies for General Clinton’s army to Tioga Point, where the Chemung flows into the Susquehanna, during the American Revolution. Within the county, historic railroad berms dating to the post-Civil War railroad boom, when leaders in remote communities chartered railroads to connect with the trunk lines, remain prominent features in some towns. An intact, partially used, heavier gauge late nineteenth century line parallels the Susquehanna.

Otsego County also preserves nine historic villages and many more unincorporated hamlets. Part or all of the villages of Cherry Valley, Cooperstown, Gilbertsville, Milford, Richfield Springs, and Unadilla are listed on the National Register. Similarly, the hamlets of Fly Creek, Middlefield, Roseboom, and South Worcester are at least partially listed. These centers punctuate the county’s landscape, providing local services at generally regular intervals, usually at road and stream crossings. The placements and buildings of these densely settled locales can often tell us why different hamlets grew up: mill seats on streams; turnpike or railroad intersections and with local highways; commerce and services like blacksmiths and wagonmakers; civil and religious centers. Most of these centers expanded throughout the nineteenth century, with contiguous house lots along narrow streets carved from land immediately surrounding the center. Without exception, these rural hamlets and village are composed of small, densely packed house lots, which sets these communities off from the surrounding open land. This historic scale, appearance, and function codifies them visually within the county’s larger rural vernacular landscape and illustrates their roles in the larger landscape.

As early as the mid-1800s, Otsego County’s rural landscape drew American summer holiday makers. Resort tourism in the nation’s youth was founded in great part by recently minted city dwellers returning to their rural roots in the warm months. Many found the embodiment of these roots in Otsego County’s highly intact rural landscapes. I described the evolution of this pattern in the area surrounding Otsego Lake in the nomination for the

Glimmerglass NR Historic District nomination. The sulfur springs spa at Richfield Springs also drew summer visitors. Riding out into the surrounding farmland land along country roads was among the most popular pastimes among all resort visitors. While the lake and the springs attracted large numbers, by the late 1800s, several other simply agricultural locales in the county could also claim summer clientele, and they continue to do so. Much of the county retains the rural mien that drew people then, and far more of the county than has been assessed for its historic integrity would, if evaluated, reveal high levels of historic integrity representative of its settlement and agricultural development in the 1800s.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

The proposed drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus shale underlying Otsego County using hydraulic fracturing could lead to the dense placement of industrial-scale well sites across the county's rural historic landscape. The height and footprint of individual wells far exceed the scale of any established buildings and structures, including outbuildings and fencing, in the region. This threatens the historic integrity of the entire rural landscape because the consistent visual relationships between these farms—encompassing their lands, structures, and buildings—play a critical role in defining the landscape's overall historic significance. Inserting much larger structures at regular intervals in this setting would sever these relationships and diminish its coherence as an intact and historically significant landscape.

Although the well drilling phase is seen as temporary, the road construction to access these sites will permanently disrupt the landscape's historic patterns of development, most especially its nineteenth-century circulation patterns. It will also disrupt the internal historic integrity of individual properties, an effect multiplied across the landscape of contiguous historic properties. Within farm properties, the new roads would create road patterns similar to suburban cul-de-sacs. The scale—width, grade, and lack of curvature—of road, culvert, and bridge structures required to safely carry the trucks is out of keeping with that of the county's established, historic, and largely locally maintained roads. Widening, straightening, and recutting roads would forever compromise an integral part of the county's historic appearance and the function of its roads as connections between communities and small, scattered properties. Within properties, the roads to reach well sites would superimpose a pattern of prominent suburban cul-de-sacs that has no place in the county's historic rural landscape.

Finally, while wells might not be drilled within village limits or in the county's hamlets, these small communities will surely feel the impact of this activity. Increased truck traffic on the county's roads, which function as connectors between these local centers, would quite literally shake their historic buildings to their foundations. Sidewalks, verge lawns, and historic trees lining streets might be compromised or removed by road widening to accommodate trucks. If bypassing is considered a solution, it would be wise to consider the importance of moderately paced traffic to the economies of these local service centers. Historic circulation systems play a pivotal role in sustaining local economies, and moving traffic away from these centers imperils their survival.

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