

A Mountain by the Sea

Waste-scapes, Life-scapes and the Reinvention of Fresh Kills

Molly Greene

“It Won’t Cost You Anything to Change the Name,” read the banner above the ballot boxes as the citizens of Linoleumville walked by torchlight towards the Atlantic Hook & Ladder firehouse to cast their votes.¹ The American Linoleum Manufacturing Company had once employed two-thirds of the town, but following the closing of the factory, many residents felt embarrassed by the blue-collar allusions of the unusual moniker, and following the 1930 poll, the town name was changed to Travis. It was not the first, nor would it be the last time that Travis, located in mid-western Staten Island, would go through a dramatic process of reinvention. Today, Travis sits at the foot of the Fresh Kills Landfill, which served as New York City’s dumping grounds for more than half a century, during the apex of America’s throw-away era. Even as the twenty-story mounds slowly ooze leachate and hiss methane gas, operations are underway to convert the site into a 2,200-acre public park.² The plan is touted as one of the world’s most ambitious reclamation projects to date—a complete transformation of a wasteland into a “park of the future.”³

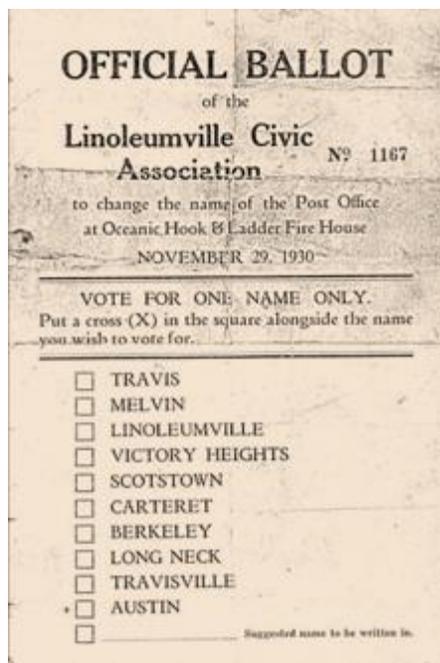


Figure 1 (left): Ballot from Linoleumville Election, courtesy of the NYPL, St. George Branch

Figure 2 (right): Map of the Region, created by the author

“Blue Heaven by the Sea,” was Marjory Wood’s suggestion for Linoleumville’s new name, but the precocious five-year-old was unable to garner any votes.⁴ Mrs. Wood is still sharp at 87, and as she spreads black and white photographs out across her floral kitchen tablecloth, she remembers her barefooted childhood days in Travis. Like many of the older residents, her ancestors were part of an earlier wave of Polish immigrants, who arrived in the mid-1800s. During Marjory’s youth, Travis was still a rural and remote town and she recalls picking wild blackberries, strawberries and cherries with her mother to make jams. Pigs and chickens roamed backyard pens and each household tended a garden plot or nearby fields. “Everything we had we made...” she says, “...we just lived off the land.” All of Travis was held within the quiet latticework of only a half-dozen streets alongside the quotidian shift of estuary waters.

The richness and bounty that Mrs. Wood remembers had long supported small communities along the Fresh Kills. After the glaciers receded between the hilly serpentine spine to the east and the sloping Palisades sill to the west, laying bare intertidal marshes and boulder-littered moraines, thick canopies of oak, chestnut and maple branched out above a dense understory of sassafras, cinnamon ferns, skunk cabbage and lady slipper.⁵ Fish, fowl and game were plentiful in area that the Leni-Lenape called Aquehonga Manacknong.⁶ During the year that he spent on the island, Henry David Thoreau commented that, “the whole island is like a garden, and affords very fine scenery.”⁷ The early farmers in the area grew maize, wheat, potatoes, buckwheat, turnips, and flax, and also kept sheep and cattle.⁸ Grain was ground in tidal mills like Beadle’s at the head of the Fresh Kills, which harnessed the ebb and flow of the waterway to generate power.⁹ The largest and most profitable export from the region was salt hay, cultivated or harvested “fresh” from the salt marshes. Locals would frequently wend their way through the pokeweed and bent-blue grass of the meadows to collect herbs, mushrooms, watercress and wild grapes.¹⁰ In many ways, rapid urban growth in neighboring Manhattan and Brooklyn helped to preserve the rural character of the Fresh Kills region, as both people and horses in the city center generated constant demand for agricultural products.¹¹

The site that would become the destination for 150 million tons of trash began not as a town, but as a crossroads known as New Blazing Star. While the title seems to hint at momentous origins, the title was in fact derived from the name of the local bar.¹² Situated on the Western Shore of the New Jersey ferry, both the bar and the town were places to seek respite along “the fastest route from New York to Philadelphia.”¹³ The town of New Blazing Star remained quite isolated until 1816 when the Richmond Turnpike Company established a highway, which ran from the

Northeastern shore, across the island to the Carteret Ferry. Writing in the late 1800s, naturalist William T. Davis described the ramshackle highway, noting that the outmoded stagecoach of Manhattan, “formerly used in the crush and jam of the city...is granted a probation, and having proved itself unsmashable, is allowed to spend its declining years on Turnpike road.”¹⁴ In 1860, the handful of families living in seclusion near the Fresh Kills were unable to convince the Staten Island Railroad company to lay tracks through the region, and the new lines forked to either side of the town. Even as wealthy New Yorkers erected mansions along the northern shore of the island, Fresh Kills remained a hinterland, where “even the house cat seem[ed] wilder.”¹⁵



Figure 3 : Views from Linoleumville, 1924-1925, Photograph by Percy Loomis Sperr, courtesy of NYPL



Figure 4: The Carteret Ferry, 1937, Photograph by Percy Loomis Sperr, courtesy of NYPL

The roads of Travis that now seem to dead-end at the foot of the North Mound once led to a small tributary of the Fresh Kills known to locals as simply “the Creek.” Today, fill from the dump has reduced the flow to a trickle, but at the turn of the 20th century, the Creek had been wide enough for the passage of small, wooden boats. Most Travis families had built docks along the marshy banks, or commissioned eager groups of young boys to do the work in an afternoon. The riverbank itself was seen as a land in common, where the time spent building a dock established one’s right to the space. The boats themselves were the property of specific families and individuals, but the only security needed was loop of straw rope to tether vessel to port.¹⁶ On the weekends, floral-patterned dresses were donned, hair was pinned back and combed, clean shirts were tucked in, and whole families would pack into the small boats to row along the Creek, which emptied into the wide arms of the Fresh Kills. After a quarter hour of paddling, the gussied group would empty out at Al Deppe’s snack bar for hot dogs and french fries, where “with five cents you were a rich man.” After arcade games, and socializing around picnic tables, the boats were rowed home full of sleeping passengers under a sky full of stars.¹⁷



Figure 5 (top): Al Depe's circa 1925, courtesy of Old Staten Island
Figure 6 (bottom): Al Depe's Arcade Coupon, courtesy of Old Staten Island

Things remained quiet in Travis until 1873, when more than three thousand miles from the banks of the Fresh Kills, Frederick Walton, a young inventor from Yorkshire, forgot to put a lid on a pot of paint. The seemingly minor mistake would revolutionize New Blazing Star, along with millions of American homes forever. Upon examining his blunder, Walton noticed that a thick scum had formed on the surface of the paint where the linseed oil had oxidized. Intrigued by the rubbery substance, Walton began to experiment, mixing small quantities of gum with the film to form a binder for cork dust, wood flour, tree resins, ground limestone, and color pigments. He then pressed the mixture into a backing of flaxen burlap and named his new invention linoleum, from the Latin of flax (lino) and oil (oleum). The product, which was remarkably long lasting, pliable, and relatively inexpensive, soon caught the eye of floor covering mogul Joseph Wild of New York, who secured the patent rights for the process.¹⁸

Wild chose the northern banks of the Fresh Kills as the site for his new American Linoleum Manufacturing Company, buying up three hundred acres of land at the mouth of Arthur Kills and

Fresh Kills. Joseph Wild made use of newly invented electrical lighting in order to keep the factory in operation for both day and night shifts, eventually employing two thirds of the local residents. The manufacturing process consisted of cleaning and grinding the cork, wood, minerals and pigments and then combining them with “linoleum cement.” The linoleum material and burlap were then heated and passed through the huge, mechanical rollers of “the calendar,” and then moved to enormous ovens to be “long-baked” and hardened into the finished product.¹⁹ Wild’s ovens were fifty feet high and could hold more than a mile of linoleum.²⁰

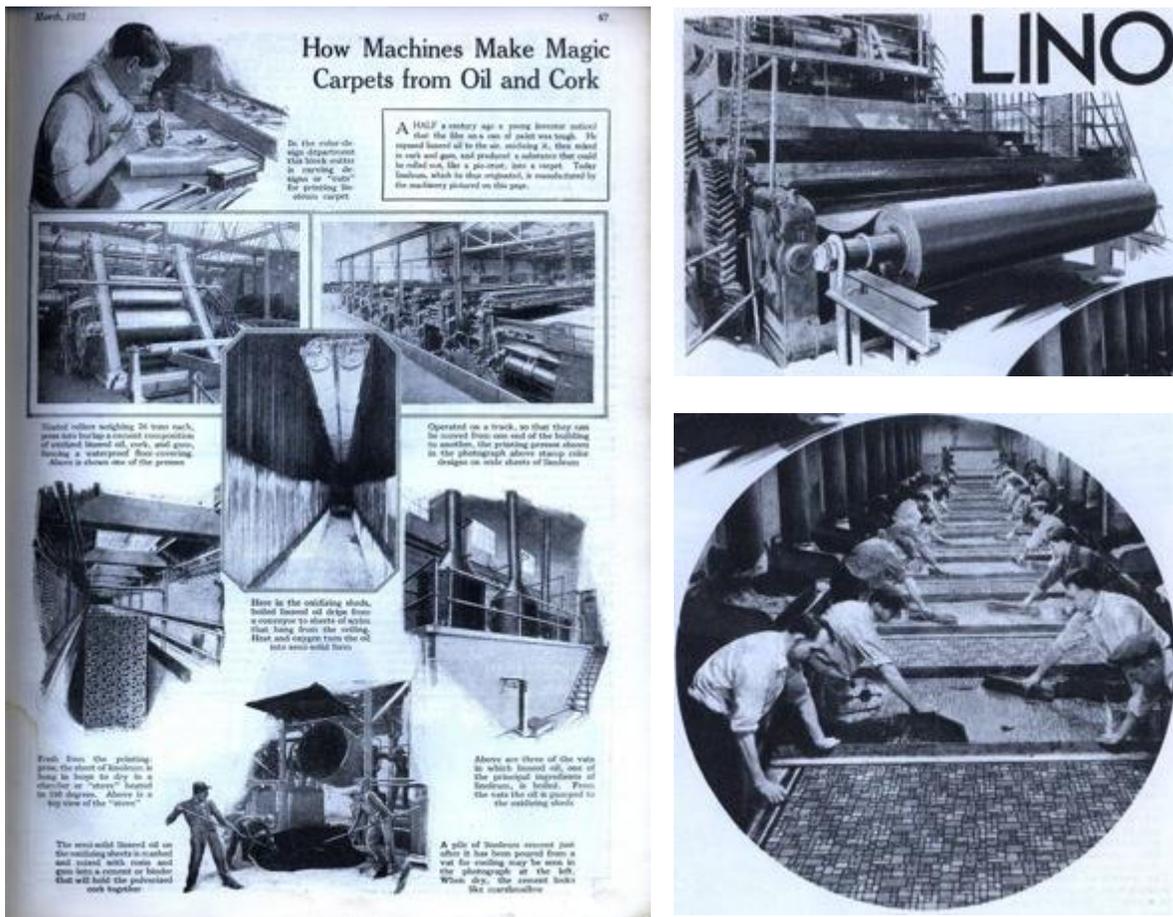


Figure 7: Linoleum Manufacturing Process, Modern Mechanix Magazine, 1922 (left) and 1936 (right), courtesy of Yale University Manuscripts and Archives

Initially, the product was marketed as flooring for battleships with the slogan “Wild’s for Wear.” However, with the help of savvy marketing, the material quickly became popular as residential interior flooring, prompting designers at the American Linoleum Manufacturing

Company to develop a rotary inlay machine, which cut small jigsaw-like blocks and automatically shuffled them into ornately patterned “blankets.”²¹

As the fad gained momentum, people across the country laid to rest the hardwood floors that so reeked of yesteryear, replacing them with “Tomorrow’s Idea of Home Decoration.” Like a long list of materials that would follow it, Linoleum was a product associated with the image of modern housewifery, and was marketed as part of a broader dream of convenient home maintenance. Many ads emphasized the seamlessness of the new material, with “not a single gap or crack,” fully concealing the dirt, sod or rough boards below.²² One advertisement from the late 1940s reads, “A woman’s work never done? That’s what I used to think. Now even the floors seem to take care of themselves! Imagine, me, having spare time for sewing! I still have to pinch myself to believe it.”[see Figure 9]²³ Another linoleum ad from 1936 states:

Through all the centuries man’s progress is reflected in the homes he has kept and is readily traceable in the floors of those homes. Prehistoric men paid little attention to the floors, but when the long arm of the Caesars reached out into the Orient, they found floors of inlaid ebony, teakwood, mosaic and pearl, but online the homes of the rich.²⁴

Linoleum, the ad goes on to state, had democratized the opulence of the tiled floor, making it available to any American household. In order to keep up with demand for the product, the American Linoleum Manufacturing Company was producing 90,000 square yards of linoleum every week.²⁵

In the early days of Linoleumville, a daily parade of mothers, sisters and daughters would deliver tin pails of sandwiches and coffee to the men at work at the Linoleum Factory. During the war, when mothers donned coveralls and plodded the muddy path to the factory, the young girls would be called upon to lead this midday procession. Linoleum passed from the churning catalogues into the kitchens and bathrooms of Linoleumville, and each house in town had its own signature pattern and color palette.²⁶ From the banks of the Fresh Kills, linoleum and a new aesthetic of American progress was shipped far and wide to the cities and the suburbs, where it would become a shining, tiled stage upon which bare feet would trod early in the morning, upon which coffee was spilled, upon which dinner was readied.

Sure, there are more ways than one to color-scheme your kitchen
 HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS TO GIVE YOU THE RIGHT START...



Before you touch the magic wand of color to your kitchen, may we tell you the secret of the room pictured here? You see this room divided in four different color schemes. In each, a different floor of Armstrong's Linoleum sets the color pace for the rest of the room. And each has a happy ending because it got the right start! We tell your dream kitchen if you begin its planning with that large area underfoot, the floor. Local stores are displaying dozens of "right beginnings" for kitchens, for every room in the house. Any of these Armstrong Floors will open the door of your imagination to the prize-winning rooms you've always wanted—and show the door for all time on heavy floor-bleating cats.

It's so easy to keep an Armstrong Floor looking its best...just a quick dry-mopping, an occasional washing and freshening-up with Armstrong's Linoleum Wax (see page 10). And think of the comfort such a floor brings you—the comfort of warmth, quietness, and springiness underfoot—the comfort of long years of wear from the day your new Armstrong Floor is permanently cemented in place over a cushioning lining of felt.

More color schemes, plus the whole story of how to make some home improvements, are yours if you write for "Tomorrow's Idea in Home Decoration." This book, illustrated in full color, comes to you promptly on receipt of 50¢ (United States). Write to Armstrong Cork Company, Floor Division, 4000 Pine St., Lancaster, Pa. (Write of such products since 1920).

And for the name Armstrong's on the back of the matchboxes:

1. "Start with the floor and your room will have a happy ending." In the office of Armstrong, there the floor is Armstrong's Linoleum, No. 1011, with plain black linoleum borders. Counter tops, sink, and stove, and which fronts are also covered with black linoleum. Write to Armstrong's Linoleum, Room 1011, for a list of linoleum-see lists.

2. "Start with the floor and your room will have a happy ending." In the office of Armstrong, there the floor is Armstrong's Linoleum, No. 1011, with plain black linoleum borders. Counter tops, sink, and stove, and which fronts are also covered with black linoleum. Write to Armstrong's Linoleum, Room 1011, for a list of linoleum-see lists.

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ARMSTRONG'S LINOLEUM FLOORS
 for every room in the house

FLAIR • HOLIDAY • ENDOUSER • MARBLES • JALIFE • MONOBELLE • PRINTED • ARMSTRONG'S DECKER ROUGES AND LINOWALL

Figure 8 (left) and Figure 9 (right): Armstrong's Linoleum Advertisements circa 1940, Yale Library Collections



Figure 10 (left) and Figure 11 (right): The Linoleum Factory, from The Staten Island Collection, courtesy of NYPL St. George Branch

Long before linoleum became entwined in the image of the modern American home, the region just south of Linoleumville had become the “away” in throw-away convenience. By the late 1800s, New York City’s garbage problem had been looming large for more than half a century. Waste was becoming not only a health hazard and sensory assault for the citizens of New York, but

also a major arena for corporate and political wheeling and dealing. For much of the nineteenth century, garbage was simply heaped in the streets to decompose in the hot sun where it was partially consumed by vermin and free ranging pigs, or loaded onto trains and simply jettisoned at the end of the line. Ocean dumping was standard practice and “reclamation” dumping along the shorelines became a common method for manufacturing valuable new real estate. Today, about 25 percent of Manhattan rests atop a landfill, as do both of New York’s airports, Flushing Meadows, Battery and Orchard Beach Park, and the majority of Riker’s Island.²⁷

Incineration facilities were also becoming a common fixture in the city. In The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s describes one such operation between New York City and his fictional West Egg, which was based on the very real Corona ash landfill that would one day become Flushing Meadows Park and the site of two World’s Fairs. Gatsby recounts the landscape:

This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-gray men who dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight...The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a small foul river, and, when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour.²⁸

In addition to incineration plants, private and politically well-connected contractors constructed reduction plants. At the time, the materials being euphemistically “reduced” were dead horses and other miscellaneous entrails. Using a process similar the fat rendering of early candle and soap factories, the putrid carcasses, as well as water and solvents, were loaded into vertical, steel cylinders with tapered bottoms, and heated until grease rose to the top to be skimmed off and used in the production of fertilizer, glycerin and oil.²⁹ Reduction plants had proven to be highly profitable on Barren Island in Jamaica Bay, and in 1916, Manhattanite real estate tycoon J. Sterling Drake, decided to get into the business. In search of viable property for such an endeavor, Drake came across the series of small, low-lying islands that dotted the mouth of the Fresh Kills and anticipated a profitable venture. What Drake did not anticipate was Edward P. Doyle.

During his time as supervisor and secretary of agriculture at the turn of the 20th century, Doyle had become a prominent and well-liked man, and had purchased a charter once held by Queen Anne encompassing much of the land and underwater territory at the mouth of the estuary.³⁰

When the intentions of J. Sterling Drake came to his attention, Mr. Doyle hired the 71-year-old twins James and William Farmer keep vigil over his beloved, marshy islands. On the night of May 23rd, 1916, the unfortunate septuagenarians were asleep in a small tent, when fifteen armed men in a motorboat kidnapped the aged watchmen, leaving them bound and gagged on a Brooklyn Pier.³¹ In the early morning hours, a police boat was sent to the island, but the launch was promptly thwarted by the receding tide and became stuck in the mud. After what must have been a somewhat awkward standoff, the policemen were able to slog through the sandy muck and arrest Drake's men, eventually depositing them in the Richmond County Jail.³²

The following day, the island was returned to Doyle and the Farmer twins were returned to their posts. Hearing of the eventful night later that afternoon, 200 Staten Island women, lead by Mary Simonson, formed the Anti-Garbage League for Women and demanded an audience with city leaders. In the absence of the Borough President, the Commissioner of Public Works, Henry P. Morrison addressed the women stating, "the Russian autocracy at its worst could not equal the action of the city in forcing the garbage plant on Staten Island."³³ The Anti-Garbage League then resolved to collect names for a petition and to conduct meetings around the borough to raise awareness among Staten Island women about the movement against the dump.

As the Anti-Garbage League took shape in the Richmond Borough, in lower Manhattan, an unrepentant J. Sterling Drake revealed to reporters his plans to move his operation to Lake's Island, (which is today known as Isle of Meadows and was then also the property of Edward Doyle). He had already stationed twenty of his own men there. Expecting a tirade, locals looked to Doyle but were surprised to find the old supervisor at work on his boat in the front yard, seemingly unconcerned. As the day proceeded, the skeleton of ten, tiny houses began to emerge on the decks of the old scow, and a crowd began to form at Doyle's picket fence.³⁴ As the sun began its descent over the marsh, an increasingly mischievous looking Ed Doyle hung a sign on the vessel that read, "Doyle's Bathing Pavilion," and as a hired tug slowly motored up the sound, Doyle invited about a dozen men to serve as bathing patrons. The tug then pulled the scow straight for Lake's Island, positioning it to obstruct the passage of Drake's barges. The non-violent protest, by perhaps Staten Island's first environmental extremist, was deemed a tremendous success and Doyle announced that he would line the island with a whole fleet of scows including a "moving picture barge, a café barge, a hotel barge, a vaudeville barge, a marry-go-round and carousel barge, and generally turn Lake Island...into a wonderful Summer resort on barges," all in order to protect the site.³⁵ For his feat, Doyle was arrested on charges of obstructing navigation, but news of the incident had spread, and

droves of prominent Staten Islanders crowded into the courtroom to support the hero of The Garbage War.³⁶ Though his bail was set at one hundred dollars, it was said that Doyle could have obtained a \$1,000,000 bail from his backers on that day.³⁷

Just as it seemed that lengthy legal proceedings would deter Drake and save the kills, the Metropolitan By-Products Company, a joint venture of the conspiring garbage entrepreneurs Bailey, Greve and Gaffney, entered the fray. With the endorsement of good friend Mayor Mitchel, who was desperate for dumping grounds, the company assembled thirty private detectives and ninety city police from Brooklyn on Lake's Island at the mouth of Fresh Kills, ready to defend the territory as a new reduction plant was constructed. Anticipating retaliation by Doyle and the rest of the Anti-Garbage party, Mayor Mitchell announced the contract hearing only an hour and half in advance, and the mob of Staten Islanders arrived just in time to hear the official authorization of the new reduction plant, and be read a restraining order.³⁸ At the same time, in a remarkable feat of political chicanery, the wealthy residents of Jamaica Bay, in collusion with the Tammany Hall political machine, managed to shut down the Barren Island operation. When the question of a new destination for the city's refuse arose, the Jamaica Bay residents obligingly offered a facility that they had quietly managed to construct on the western shore of Staten Island—in a place called the Fresh Kills.³⁹

And so commenced the first trashing of the Fresh Kills. Once again, it seemed that Travis would have a new, and this time wholly unwelcome identification. To make matters worse, the plant had been contracted to receive 2,000 tons of waste each day, but had been built to accommodate only 800 tons, and that was assuming that operations were running smoothly, which was rarely the case.⁴⁰ By contract, the barges were supposed to be expediently unloaded from enclosed vessels, but the barges that delivered the waste were in fact never covered and were left to rot in the sun an average of 6 months before making their way to the plant. In 1918, a mandate by the Board of Health coupled with the election of John Hylan, whose platform included removal of the facility, led to the decommissioning of the Fresh Kills reduction plant. Unfortunately, due to a series of federal consent orders, the nearby landfill stayed open, looming larger and larger as landfills in the other four boroughs fell on to hard times and closed their doors. For almost 30 years, the unofficial landfill unofficially grew into what one newspaper called the "Alps of Garbage." By 1940, New Yorkers were producing the most trash per capita by weight than at any other point in the city's history, and the vast majority found its way to Fresh Kills.⁴¹



Figure 11 (left): Edward P. Doyle, The Staten Island Collection, NYPL St. George Branch
 Figure 12 (right): Anti-Garbage League Ribbon, 1936, courtesy of the Staten Island Historical Society



Figure 13 (left) and Figure 14 (right): Garbage Headlines in the Staten Island Advance, 1921 and 1969
 Staten Island Advance Archives, NYPL St. George Branch

As tugs hauled in barge after brimming barge, other offenses also encroached. For decades, Staten Islanders had been assailed by the noxious discharges of what would eventually become infamously known as New Jersey's Chemical Coast. By the 1880s, the waters of the Arthur Kill, which ebb and flow into the Fresh Kills, were thick with "sludge acid" and "oily refuse" emanating from the rows of oil refineries across the river. So thick was the mire that fisherman complained of being unable to dislodge their anchors from the greasy accretion on the seafloor. Oystermen became accustomed to removing their planted beds from the tarry Arthur Kill and transplanting them to the more pristine Kill von Kull for a period prior to sale so that the mollusks could "drink and freshen for market."⁴² In 1886, State Oyster Protector Joseph Mersereau, ordered the arrest of eight employees of the Standard Oil Company for dumping industrial waste onto the oyster farms in the Arthur Kill, and reported that it was not uncommon for 2,400 cart loads to be unloaded at the site each day. Mersereau later submitted a draft of what would come to be know as "the sludge acid law" to the State Commission on Fisheries to prevent such acts.⁴³

Staten Islanders also filed complaints with the State Board of Health about the "stench nuisances" wafting over from the Standard Oil Refinery at Constable Hook, NJ. In the report of the Special Committee on Effluvium Nuisances, the commissioners articulated the growing problem succinctly,

...as a result of the long-continued pressure of sanitary restrictions within the metropolis of New York, offensive industries and legitimate trades offensively conducted have been successfully crowded out from that city, not only into the cities and towns near by [sic] in the State of New York, but along water sides of extensive districts, in the State of New Jersey, from which the citizens of the suburbs of New York now justly seek protection.⁴⁴

Unfortunately for West Shore residents, the plumes were more than just malodorous, they also dusted the eastward region with toxins and carcinogens. In the 1930s New Jersey's pollution had caused so much crop damage that farmers along the Fresh Kills organized the Staten Island Growers' Association to lobby for pollution controls.⁴⁵ After many long battles, with a number of firms along the Jersey shore, the farmers pressured The United States Metals Refining Company to pay \$1000 of the \$1500 that it would cost for the Department of Plant Pathology of Cornell University to conduct a study on the industries' impacts on agriculture.⁴⁶ Despite these efforts, the companies frequently got away with paying small fines, even as crops withered and yellowed, air thickened with smog and tides slick with toxic effluvia lapped ashore.

Considering this state of affairs, it must have seemed like a terrible joke when in 1947 Robert Moses formally announced his plans for a landfill at Fresh Kills, making official a reality that Travis

residents had been intimately experiencing for decades. Moses had struck a deal with the borough president to build the West Shore Expressway in exchange for the three years of disposal and he assured the public that the arrangement was temporary. In his 1951 Report to Mayor Impellitteri on the landfill, Robert Moses emphasized that “the Fresh Kills project is not merely a means of disposing of the city’s refuse in an efficient, sanitary and unobjectionable manner” but also a means of creating “valuable new property in this presently fallow and useless area” and producing “a well rounded and diversified community.”⁴⁷ For Moses, unproductive nature was a “wasteland,” which needed to be acted upon by human hands in order to be redeemed. Like many of his contemporaries, he saw no place for marshes within the civilized nature amenities of an ordered society, but felt that at the very least such spaces could be made useful through the productive “reclamation work” of infilling.

For Robert Moses, trash was an opportunity. The problem was simply that New York’s trash was usually in the wrong place. As the steel and concrete matrix of highways and cityscape expanded across the five boroughs, land was increasingly at a premium. While political will and municipal budgets frequently presented formidable impasses, the land beneath Moses’ feet was malleable and more easily influenced. At Fresh Kills, as with so many other sites, the “master builder” needed to manufacture some solid ground where none had existed before, and as urban planners of the day knew well, trash was the cheapest land that money could buy. While waste was invaluable to Moses’ plans, he was well aware of the associated public relations issues. In response to public outcry, Moses assured his opposition that he had plans for eleven upgraded and five new incinerators spread across all five boroughs. The last of the promised incinerators were not completed until 1962, at which point Fresh Kills continued to receive two-thirds of the city’s waste, a total of eight thousand tons per day. The sanitation department had begun to practice what they called “landscape-sculpture” whereby garbage was mounded up rather than out to conserve square-footage and reduce fines.⁴⁸

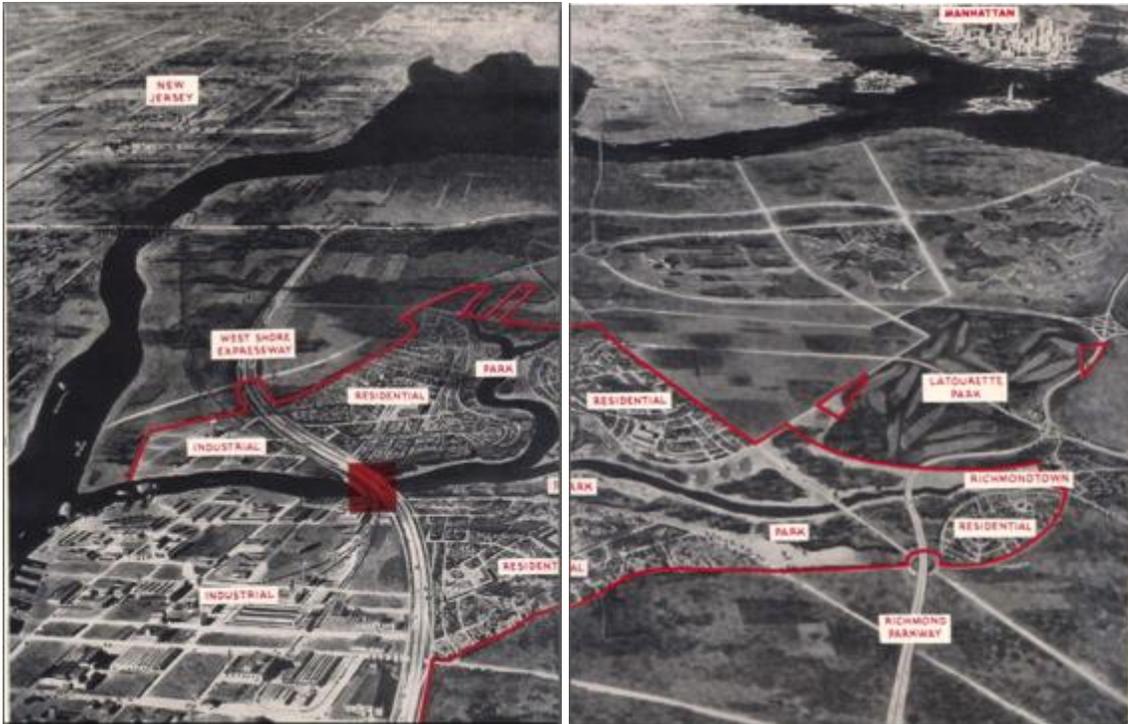
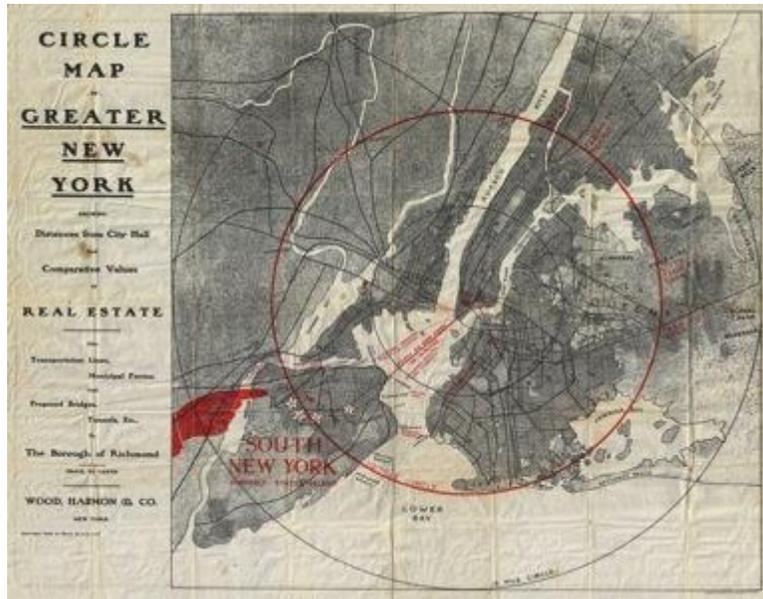


Figure 15: Rendering from Robert Moses' 1951 Fresh Kills Report, The Staten Island Collection, NYPL St. George Branch

Though Moses' interventions in the Staten Island landscape were unprecedented, master planning was nothing new to the borough. A hundred years earlier and a little over 2 miles south of Fresh Kills, Frederick Law Olmstead cut his teeth as a farmer and amateur landscape architect. In 1848, after working briefly as a seaman, merchant and journalist, the young Olmstead was given one hundred and thirty acres on Prince's Bay along the south shore from his father, calling his new nursery Tosomock Farm. However, the venture was a financial failure, and Olmstead soon sold the land. Following his rise to prominence as the Father of American landscape architecture, Olmstead returned to Staten Island when he was commissioned to prepare a "Preliminary Scheme of Improvements" for the island, a document in which he asserted that the central spine of the island, including the Fresh Kills region, was too beautiful, uneven and marshy for roads, and should thus be developed into a series of "water preserves and public commons."⁴⁹ The plan was consistent with Olmstead's more comprehensive vision of a necklace of parks, connected to each other by parkways, encircling all five boroughs. Today, the region that Olmstead sought to protect has been actualized as a broad, protected corridor of open spaces, but the fate of the area was not always so safeguarded. Ironically, the idea that would most threaten the region's preservation was Moses sly reinterpretation of Olmsted's "parkways."

While Frederick Law Olmstead and his partner Calvert Vaux were preparing their plans for Brooklyn's Prospect Park, they had become particularly intrigued by the latest improvements in carriage construction, realizing that the advances in transportation and mobility would revolutionize urban travel. The planners offered a new design for city byways—a 260 foot wide route with roadways, pedestrian paths and a central mall separated by rows of trees and green space, calling the creation a “parkway.” Years later, when Robert Moses became Park Commissioner, the insertion of the word “parkway” into municipal legislation would give him unbridled authority over not only parks, but also any highway that he could conceivably attach to one.⁵⁰ In his crusade to realize the auto-centric infrastructure that we know today, the semantic nuance would serve him endlessly. Moses' “Belt Parkway,” unlike Olmsted's “Emerald Necklace,” was first and foremost an expressway towards American car culture, designed in opposition to contemporaneous plans for public transit systems.

As the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge connecting Staten Island to Brooklyn neared completion in the early 1960s, Moses revealed plans, long since conceived, for the Richmond Parkway, which would run through the heart of the wild lands that Olmstead had once hoped to protect.⁵¹ He had long been preparing the western footing for his new highway by infilling at Fresh Kills, eliminating the need for costly bridges to cross the waterway.⁵² Though Moses' parkway plans were met with ire, they accorded with long standing attempts by the borough's Chamber of Commerce to reinvent Staten Island's image. The Chamber's public relations campaigns had long sought to strike a balance between industrial parks and idyllic suburbs, somehow fashioning the in-between geography of “South New York,” a title that would never quite catch on. The aesthetics of Moses' parkways appealed to the sensibilities of second wave suburbanites, while providing the transportation infrastructure necessary for large-scale industry. However, as environmental problems became increasingly widespread, the inherent tensions and contradictions of this spatial arrangement became starkly apparent to borough residents.



On Left: Greater New York, NYPL, On Right: South New York Lots for Sale, SIHS

Thus, the increasingly wary Staten Islanders mobilized in opposition to Moses parkway plans, citing Olmsted's earlier arguments for a series of parks. The newly formed Staten Island Citizens Planning Committee and the Staten Island Greenbelt Natural Areas League garnered local and off-island support through grassroots organizing and community planning initiatives, eventually defeating Moses. The hard-won victory resulted in an alternative route, running through the region north of Fresh Kills. During the later landfill years, pressure from environmentalists and Staten Islanders brought increased visibility, and aversion to, both raw waste, as well as ash waste from incinerators. The incineration process had come under scrutiny during the 1980s and concerns about cancer-causing dioxins, smog, asthma and a whole suite of other health issues associated with waste processing facilities turned the issue of current and future garbage disposal into a political quagmire. On two occasions, once by sea and once by land, the city had unsuccessfully attempted to send their waste to unwilling hosts outside of the state, only to have the vehicles circle and circumnavigate the country in full view of the media, before being embarrassingly sent back to Fresh Kills for dumping.⁵³ Finally, in 1996, despite the absence of a feasible alternative waste management system, borough president Guy Molinari, George Pataki and Rudy Giuliani agreed to close Fresh Kills, and on March 22, 2001, the last barge unloaded its final, stinking cargo. Currently, the out-of-sight-out-of-mind mentality lives on, as New York City's 13,000 daily tons of waste is shipped to private landfills and incinerators in Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Ohio.⁵⁴



Figure 16: Barges at Fresh Kills Landfill, 1946, Photograph by Chester Higgins, courtesy of the Environmental Protection Agency



Figure 17: Landscape Sculpture, photo courtesy of the New York City Parks Department

Many older Travis residents don't recall hearing anything about Moses' landfill until the day the barges began arriving on the banks of the Fresh Kills, but as eighty-year-old Anne Alvorson says, "we weren't the type of people who asked questions. We worked hard and did as we were told."⁵⁵ Some residents expressed embarrassment about being associated with the landfill; others just tried to go about their business. Regardless of each individual's temperament and tolerance, "the Dump" asserted itself into the sensory life of every Travis resident. "That's how we knew it was going to rain," says Anne, "we always smelled the dampness first."⁵⁶ Some worried that the smell indicated a danger to local residents, and many were hesitant to leave their windows open when the odor was particularly strong. Accompanying the stench was the constant clamor and sputter of the garbage trucks, arriving full and leaving empty, and scattering wind-blown styrofoam cups or plastic bags in their wake.

For much of the younger generation, learning to love the landfill was easy. "It was heaven out there for us," Mark Alvorson, Anne's son, says emphatically, listing off the endless diversions that made up his salad days.⁵⁷ Muskrat and rabbit were hunted and brought home to the cleavers of Polish grandmothers, abandoned cars and motorcycles were re-wired, bed frames were transformed into daredevil sleds. The operating backhoes made for mobile play structures, and the boys would spend afternoons sneaking up to the vehicles, climbing up into the raised bucket and then jumping away behind piles of deposited waste. As enterprising and handy young boys, the mounds also offered a variety of sources of income. The pumpkins, squash, tomatoes and melons that grew vigorously from the seeds within countless trash bags were quickly harvested and sold at make-shift farm stands and pedaled at the local pubs. Mark called the particularly productive areas "his gardens."⁵⁸

The mounds at the margin of the city grew not only through the formal, daily deposits of the Sanitation Department barges, but also through more nefarious late-night stashing. The corpses of those who ended up on the wrong side of Staten Island's mafiosos found their way to the marshes, and stolen cars were driven straight down Victory Boulevard and then abandoned atop the mounds. These unofficial material contributions scandalized mothers, and they barricaded the end of the street with a line of large, sturdy flower planters. But their mysterious additions delighted the youngsters who saw each new artifact for its possibilities.

From the rubble they would select the most promising vehicles, crawling down into overturned wrecks for the necessary replacement parts and making repairs with borrowed wrenches. The cars that could be coaxed into working condition were adorned with numbers and names, and

on the far side of the mounds the children and teenagers raced the refurbished vehicles around the packed fill. On other days, with hand-made satchels swung over shoulders, they would comb the mounds for bits of copper or batteries to exchange at the scrapyards for arcade money. Nearly the only plant that grew from the covered sections of the landfill was phragmites, and the tall, dry reeds were commonly caught by brushfire, igniting the compacted substrate below. A perpetual underground fire smoldered under certain parts of the landfill and the boys, though wary of the occasional sinkhole, would marvel at the blue flames slipping out of cracks in the debris. This aura of risk and alchemy enchanted the mounds and animated the play of young Travis residents.

And while children secretly whiled away their days on the swelling trash heaps, it seemed to the older residents that there was nothing left to do but to pray for westerly winds and attend to the act of living. The men of Travis returning from the war had gone to work at the Procter and Gamble Port Ivory soap factory, or took the ferry each day across the Arthur Kill plants like American Cyanamid. In the wake of the Great Depression, the American Linoleum Manufacturing Company had closed its doors, forcing Travis residents to commute to various points along the sprawling constellation of industrial plants that straddled the Arthur Kill. Some took the trackless trolley, Model-Ts or early buses to work along the chemical lane of the west shore of Staten Island, while others boarded the Carteret Ferry to points along the chemical coast of New Jersey.

As fathers found industrial jobs in the post-war production boom, mothers folded up their wartime dungarees and attended to the post-war consumption boom. Even in Travis, which for so long seemed a place outside of time, televisions slowly flickered on in upholstered living rooms, the old ringer washtubs were replaced with gleaming washing machines, and garden vegetables were displaced by grocery store produce. The grandmothers of the neighborhood continued to labor over handmade *wiejska kielbasa*, goose blood soup, and pierogies (to this day one is still served homemade *paczki* donuts in a Travis home). But as Anne remembers, “our mothers wouldn’t talk Polish to us, they talked English—they wanted us to be American.”⁵⁹ The pride of Travis, continues to be the annual Fourth of July Parade, which has been running since 1911, and is said to display the “three P’s of Travis...Pride, Patriotism, and Perseverance...despite the physical intrusions of modern times.”⁶⁰ The parade serves as a type of reunion, and once-residents of Travis filter in from far and wide to reconnect. “On the Fourth of July,” says Mark, this year’s Grand Marshall of the parade, “you can walk into anybody’s backyard and have a hot dog off the grill or a soda. You’re family.”



Figure 18: Parade Headline, 1965, Image courtesy of the Travis Parade Committee Archives.

During the rest of the year, the old Schmul's Park, was the beating heart of Travis. First opened in 1938, the park stretched along a large, donated tract of land between Victory Boulevard and the Creek [Figure 19 and 20]. Lefty, the park director, would walk down to the park gate each morning, trailed by a parade of children and their slightly older sibling chaperones. Mothers wheeled down Melvin Avenue later in the morning, docking their baby strollers alongside park benches to chat or knit or simply get out of their houses. The large asphalt slab at the center of the park changed with the seasons. In the winter it was flooded for skating and games of hockey by the light of a bonfire. In the summer it was for roller-skating, basketball, volleyball, and marbles. Every Friday night there was music and dancing under the lights of the handball court and "all the old people would watch the young people dance."



Figure 19 (above) and Figure 20 (below): Opening Day at the old Schmul Park, 1938, Images courtesy of the Staten Island Advance Archives

As of 2008, a new reclamation is progress. After winning the Parks Department design competition, design studio Field Operations will be reimagining Fresh Kills once more. The new park plans call for a “Life-scape” and comprises not only open green spaces and wildlife habitat, but also a list of commercial spaces, including restaurants, canoe rentals, an open-air market and ample parking.⁶¹ Landscape architect James Corner asserts that, “whereas small islands of nature have in the past persisted in the midst of urban sprawl, that unsustainable pattern can now be reversed: Staten island can assume its new identity as an expansive nature sprawl” with a “new nature-lifestyle.”⁶² Borough president Molinari articulated in his statement of “The Significance of Fresh Kills Park,” that the plan is a “once-in-a- lifetime opportunity to recapture what was lost, to rediscover and reincorporate into Staten Island’s geography almost 3,000 acres of land and a roadway system that I, for one, thought was lost to us.” Born afresh in this “organic blueprint” is a new generation of parkway, and a new attempt to redeem the fallen landscape of a past era.

The plan proposes reclamation from the spoils of industry, but according to a 2011 proposal by the New York City Department of City Planning and Economic Development Corporation, surrounding the park-to-be is an area designated as “Working West Shore.” The document outlines renewed strategies for industrial development throughout the region, including container terminals, rail yards and a four-lane, sixty-foot-wide highway running directly through the center of the park.⁶³ The city seeks to replace abandoned brownfields and rusting tanker farms to the north and south of the new Freshkills Park with “industries of the 21st century economy,” marking a new attempt to harmoniously marry industry and Arcadia on the Staten Island landscape.

While construction of the Freshkills Park is on a thirty-year timeline, one of the first phases slated for completion is a new Schmul Park. The concrete slab of the old Schmul Park, worn down and cracked after decades of Friday night dances, has been paved over. At the center of the new park is a scaled-down model of the Fresh Kills mounds, recast in black asphalt as a playscape for local kids.



Figure 21 (above) and Figure 22 (below): “Sustainable Parkland Amenities,” Field Operations renderings courtesy of the NYDPR.



Figure 23: The New Schmul Park, photography by the author.

Though the park mounds are currently closed to the public, it is possible to weave ones way along a well-beaten path through the reedy marsh adjacent to Travis and slip through a break in the fence. After hiking up the steeply pitched slope past the craned necks of vents softly exhaling the gasses produced in the froth and decay below, one reaches the summit. At the prized vantage point of the future park, atop the 225-foot mound impersonally named 3/4, one's eyes are not drawn towards Travis, but rather to glistening tributaries, the endless fields of New Jersey gas tanks, the uncanny mesa-like mounds of the proto-park and the Manhattan skyline in the distance, perfectly framed. The wind above the mounds blows away all of the usual urban din, and the sprawling cityscape appears in a rare state of tranquility.

Notes

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- ² New York City Department of Planning, *Fresh Kills Park: Draft Master Plan* (New York, 2006), 6.
- ³ “Fresh Kills Park,” New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/freshkills-park>.
- ⁴ Interview with Marjory Wood, July, 2012. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality between May and August of 2012, and the names of interviewees have been changed by mutual agreement.
- ⁵ Elizabeth Barlow, *The Forests and Wetlands of New York City* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 92.
- ⁶ William T. Davis, *Days Afield on Staten Island* (New Brighton: D.W. Thompson, 1892), 105.
- ⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau, 1894*, (University of California Internet Archive), accessed January 5, 2012, <http://archive.org/details/familiarletters00thorrich>.
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- ⁹ Sachs, *Made On Staten Island*, 18.
- ¹⁰ Joseph Mitchell, “The Bottom of the Harbor,” in *Up in the Old Hotel*, (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 482-3.
- ¹¹ Sachs, *Made On Staten Island*, 17.
- ¹² Thomas Matteo, “A community by any other name would still be a small-town treasure,” *Staten Island Advance*, July 31, 2011.
- ¹³ William T. Davis, *Days Afield on Staten Island* (New Brighton: D.W. Thompson, 1892), 104.
- ¹⁴ William T. Davis, *Days Afield on Staten Island*, 114.
- ¹⁵ William T. Davis, *Days Afield on Staten Island*, 109.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Mark Alvorson, July, 2012. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality between May and August of 2012, and the names of interviewees have been changed by mutual agreement.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Emma Donaldson, June 18, 2012. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality between May and August of 2012, and the names of interviewees have been changed by mutual agreement.
- ¹⁸ Sachs, *Made On Staten Island*, 102.
- ¹⁹ “Linoleum,” *Modern Mechanix & Inventions* (1936): 83.
- ²⁰ Sachs, *Made On Staten Island*, 102.
- ²¹ “Linoleum,” *Modern Mechanix & Inventions* (1936): 82.
- ²² Frank Alvah Parsons, *The Art of Home Furnishing and Decoration*. (Lancaster: Armstrong Cork Company, 1918), 42.
- ²³ Armstrong’s Linoleum Floors advertisement, *Linoleum and Felt-Base Floor Coverings: Selection and Care*, (Ithaca: New York State College of Home Economics, 1943).
- ²⁴ “Linoleum,” *Modern Mechanix & Inventions* (1936): 82-84.
- ²⁵ Sachs, *Made On Staten Island*, 102
- ²⁶ Interview with Marjory Wood, July, 2012.
- ²⁷ Benjamin Miller, *Fat of the Land: Garbage of New York the Last Two Hundred Years*, (New York: Four Walls, 2000), 36-44.
- ²⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 26.
- ²⁹ Benjamin Miller, *Fat of the Land*, 45-47.
- ³⁰ A.V. Hubbell, *Prominent Men of Staten Island*, (New York: Hubbell, 1893) 75.
- ³¹ “Armed Men Seize Island,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1916.

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- ³² “Anti-Garbage Party Has Land After Raid,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 1916.
- ³³ “Staten Island Backs Doyle,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1916.
- ³⁴ “New Garbage Plant War,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1916.
- ³⁵ “New Garbage Plant War,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1916.
- ³⁶ “Indicted in Garbage War,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 1916.
- ³⁷ “Staten Island Backs Doyle,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1916.
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- ⁴⁰ Miller, *Fat of the Land*, 202-209.
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- ⁴² Eugene Gilbert Blackford, New York State Commissioner of Fisheries, *Second Report of the Oyster Investigation and of Survey of Oyster Territory for the Years 1885 and 1886, transmitted to the legislature January 20, 1887*. (Albany: The Argus Company Printers, 1887), 85.
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- ⁴⁴ New York State Legislature Assembly, *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York: One Hundred and Sixth Session, Volume V, 1883* (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company Legislative Printers, 1883), 288.
- ⁴⁵ p.101 of Working Staten Island
- ⁴⁶ “\$1500 Fund is Raised to Pay Costs: Laboratory Established Through Farmers Cooperation Will Check Nuisance,” *Staten Island Advance*, October 24, 1932.
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- ⁵¹ “Richmond Parkway,” New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/R065/>.
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- ⁵³ Miller, *Fat of the Land*, 14.
- ⁵⁴ “Fresh Kills Park,” New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed January 27, 2012, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/freshkills-park>.
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- ⁵⁶ Interview with Anne Alvorson, July, 2012.
- ⁵⁷ Interview with Mark Alvorson, July, 2012.
- ⁵⁸ For further discussion of the changing perceptions of rural dumps, see Kevin Lynch’s *Wasting Away*, ed. Michael Southworth, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 192.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with Anne Alvorson, August, 2012.
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