

Wading in the Water

What do you do when they want to destroy your village?



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MAY 03, 2023



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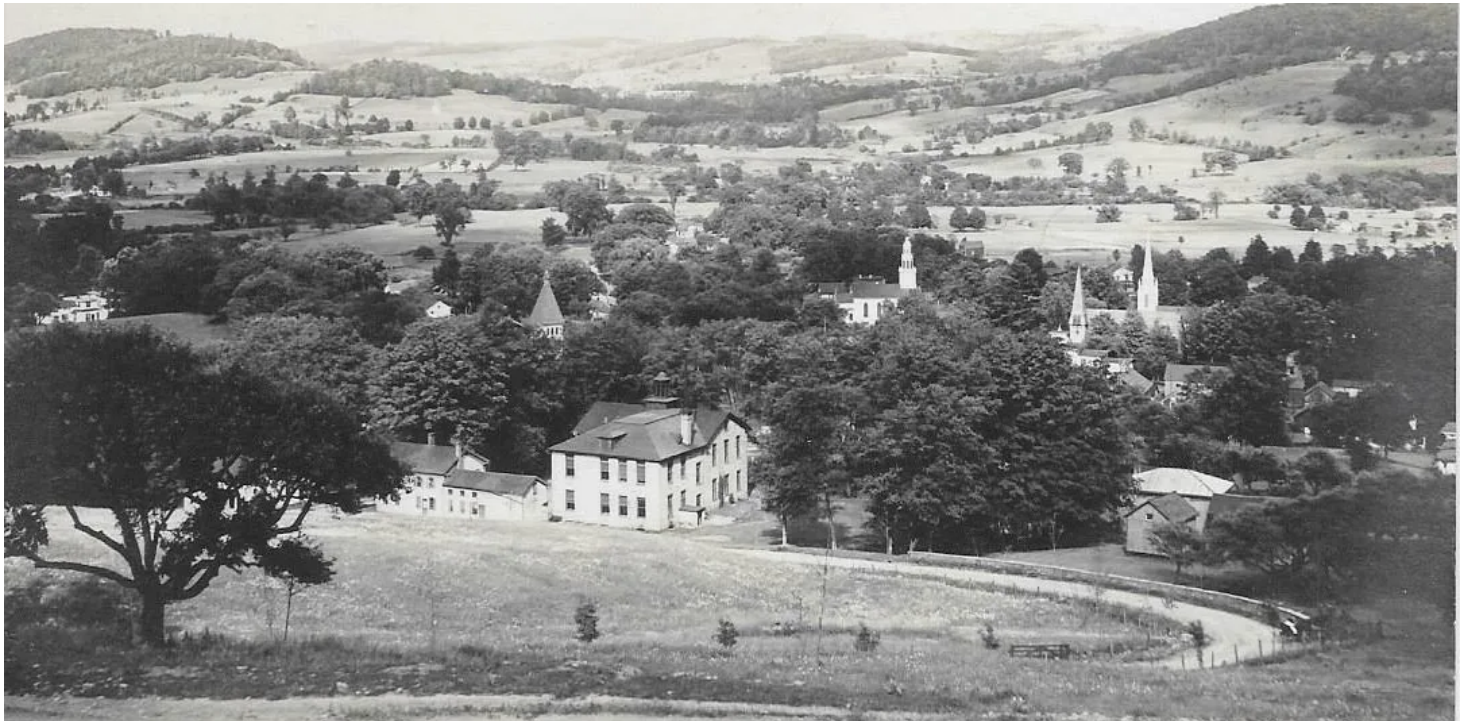


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The Village of Gilbertsville, as seen from the hill above the village. The Gilbertsville Academy is in the foreground.

Fresh water can be a hard thing to come by. Even before 1842, the efforts to supply New York City with clean, fresh water had been monumental. Surrounded by salt water, the city looked to Westchester and the Catskills for potable water. The first large project directed water from Westchester's Croton River watershed down to the city by means of aqueducts and huge underground tunnels. The water ended up in the Croton Reservoir, which once took up the entire block where the NY Public Library and Bryant Park stand today.

When that water wasn't enough to supply an ever-growing city, officials began tapping the rivers and creeks running through the Catskills. Beginning with the Ashokan Dam

and Reservoir in Ulster County in 1907, over the course of the 20th century, five more dams and reservoirs were built, channeling water from Esopus Creek, Schoharie Creek, the Delaware River (twice), Rondout River, and other tributaries.

All in all, the NYC water system gets its water from 19 reservoirs and controlled lakes in seven counties east and west of the Hudson River. The engineering and manpower that it took to channel that much water makes for a fascinating story. There are hundreds of miles of tunnels, pipes and aqueducts, some running under and across the Hudson River, all working to allow someone in the city to go to the tap and get a drink of clean, pure water.

The human cost of this dam and reservoir building was high. Thousands of acres of woodlands and fields were flooded. Nineteen towns were destroyed, others picked up and moved, and at least 5,765 people were displaced. Entire cemeteries had to be moved, and forests cleared. It's an enduring fantasy that the flooded towns still lay at the bottom of a reservoir, the tops of steeples rising out of the water during a drought. In actuality, the towns were burned down and/or torn down. The bottom of the lakes, most quite deep, are scattered with long dead trees and the foundations of small villages and buildings.

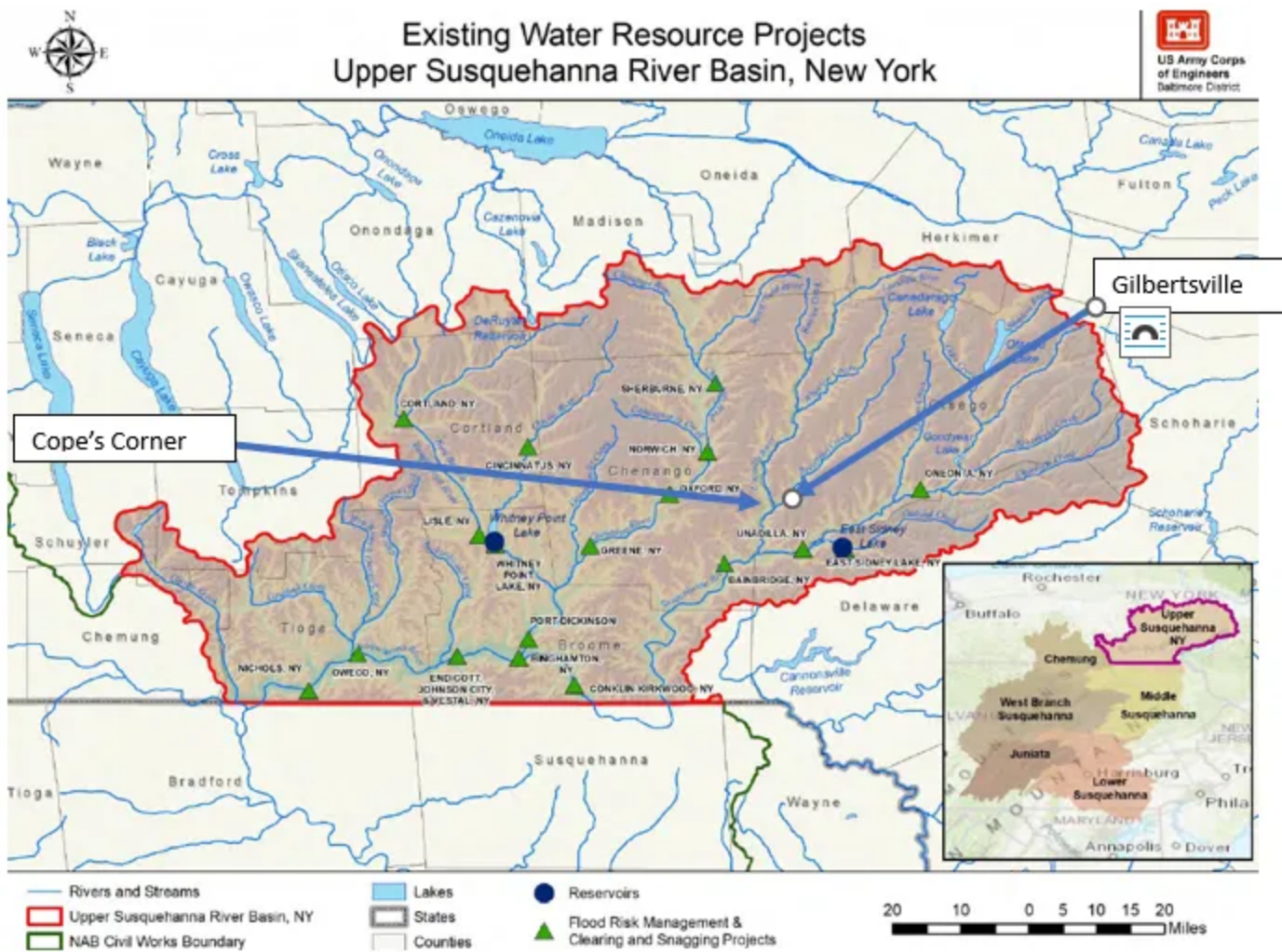
One could go on about the controversies over money paid to landowners, farmers and townspeople, or the horror of watching a long-held family home or farm burned to the ground and then flooded. Amazingly, studies have shown that more than half the people who were displaced stayed within 25 miles of their old homes. The pull of tradition and familiarity remains strong no matter where one lives.



Pepacton Reservoir near Downsville, NY

However, this is not that story. This is the story of another large water project in upstate NY, one that had nothing to do with New York City's water supply, and everything to do with flooding, drowned villages and forests, and with the Butternut Valley and Gilbertsville, the town I grew up in.

The Upper Susquehanna Watershed is the northernmost part of the greater Susquehanna Watershed, which extends from central New York state to Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. The Upper Susquehanna is huge, covering approximately 4,520 square miles of the south-central portion of New York. This area covers all and parts of fourteen counties and runs from Otsego Lake in Cooperstown west to the Finger Lakes and south to the New York State/Pennsylvania border, including the cities of Binghamton, Endicott and Johnson City, known as the Triple Cities.



ArmyCorps of Engineer's map of the Upper Susquehanna River Map. It was created to show flood management projects and reservoirs.

As seen on the map, this includes a lot of waterways, the largest being the its namesake Susquehanna River, which originates in Otsego Lake, as well as the Unadilla, Chenango and Otselic rivers and the Butternut Creek. All these waterways begin and flow from higher elevations down from the mountains and hills, making their way through the state and down into Pennsylvania and beyond. Although weather patterns in the last couple of decades belie this, this part of the state always had snowfall from November through March, followed by rainy springs. Every spring, a lot of water was coming down from the north and flowing through these rivers and creeks.

Before the Europeans took over, the land in the watershed was home to the Haudenosaunee people, more familiarly known as the Iroquois. At that time, this part of New York state was completely virgin land, with the aforementioned rivers and creeks, plus hills and valleys, meadows and forests. A lot of forests.

After the Revolutionary War, when European settlement really started to take off, landowners and farmers cleared thousands of acres of forest for cultivation and grazing. Soon after, hamlets, villages and towns were established, a few of which became small cities. Many, if not most of these communities were established near the banks of bodies of water. Waterways were harnessed for industry, with local dams used to power mills or connect to canal systems. By 1868, Butternut Creek alone had 38 mills along its length. Most were local lumber mills, but there were also cider mills, grist mills, and even a cotton mill.

As we move into the late 19th century, an extensive series of roads, large and small, paved and unpaved, connected farms to each other and to the villages and towns. More forest land was eliminated as upstate NY continued to grow with dairy farming becoming the major industry in the rural areas. In Otsego county, Gilbertsville and Morris became local population areas.



Gilbertsville - The Major's Inn with the Gilbertsville Free Academy in the back. Overlook Park is between them. Photo: Suzanne Spellen

By the early 20th century, flooding was frequent in the spring, especially in those towns very close to rivers, like Unadilla, Sidney and Owego, and especially in the lower part of the state, where the Susquehanna and the Chenango River come together, right in the middle of downtown Binghamton.

Even before World War I, the Army Corps of Engineers decided that as a flood control project to protect the Southern Tier, they would build a dam on the Butternut Creek at Cope's Corners, a small crossroad, 2.6 miles south of the village of Gilbertsville. Had they done that, the resulting three-mile-long lake north of the dam would put Gilbertsville and the surrounding area underwater, its fate identical to that of the Catskill towns destroyed for reservoirs.

It's awful to say that going to war saved the village, but that's what happened. The idea was shelved because of World War I, and the following Great Depression ten years later put it off again. I'm sure the Army Corps thought, "Hey, we're only going to destroy one village, and it will prevent flooding in the much more populated and important Southern Tier. We've done worse to many more."

Needless to say, this idea was met with fierce opposition by the residents of the greater town of Butternuts and the village of Gilbertsville. It may be a small village, but Gilbertsville had some determined and tough folks. The village was a local commerce center and a nexus for local business, education, civic and religious activities. There were also some wealthy and well-connected families there, especially the Gilberts. Their ancestors were the founders of the village, they helped build or uphold many of the village's finest institutions and they owned a lot of land that would be underwater. Why in the world would anyone want to destroy such a place?

In 1935, severe flooding in eight Southern Tier counties resulted in millions of dollars in damages. Building Cope's Corner Dam was once again on the table, and this time, the funding was appropriated for the project. Again, a world war prevented further action. Gilbertsville stopped holding its breath on the dam and then sent its sons and brothers to war. Its dairy farms and other industries geared up for the war effort.



In the early 1950s, the specter of the dam rose up again. This time there was no war, no depression to stop it. America was booming economically, and the government had money to spend on infrastructure projects. Congress once again authorized the funding for the dam. But Gilbertsville was not going to go under without a fight. This little village of 400 or so people was going to fight and fight hard for their homes and property.

A small, but highly organized and persistent protest began, both locally and on the state and federal level. It grew and grew over the next 25 years. No action was taken by the Army Corps, but the valley was still living under threat. They just hadn't gotten around to it yet. Just protesting the loss of home and farm wasn't going to save the town of Butternuts anymore than similar protests saved the towns under the Catskill reservoirs. But Gilbertsville had a powerful weapon, a last-ditch effort to save it – the village itself.

In 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act was approved by Congress. Under the National Park Service, State Preservation Offices (SHPOs) in each state were tasked

with listing properties deemed significant in the history, architecture, archeology and culture of each state, and for the United States. Architectural historians, archeologists and on down to local preservationists were eager to get started in listing and protecting vulnerable buildings and sites.

In Gilbertsville, several architectural and historic studies had been completed. Gilbertsville had some important structures, some built by prominent architects, others with significant design elements and beauty, and were important places in local and state history. Prominent architectural scholars became involved in saving the village. They suggested that several buildings be placed on the National Register, and perhaps that would give the village enough state and national protection to save it.

A Committee for the Historic Preservation of Gilbertsville was formally organized to work with SHPO and architectural historians to prepare the necessary forms and photographs necessary for designation. The forms require information of the buildings themselves, architects, if known, the materials, and the historic significance of each. Because there were quite a few for a village that small, it was suggested that the entire village of Gilbertsville be inventoried as a Historic District. Such recognition could be powerful protection against the dam.

It took seven years for the Committee to prepare the package of documents. Under the leadership of Anne Gilbert Mangold and Margaret P. Moore, a team of nineteen volunteer researchers, typists, photographers and general helpers put together a package of 194 individual structures, plus the cemeteries, bridges, parks and five other additional structures just outside of the village. They included a sixteen-page presentation describing the importance of the district, its setting and architecture, with photographs. All was sent to SHPO as well as to the Congressional committee reconsidering allocating funds for the dam.

The delay in Congressional action also gave the village time for resident author Myrtie Light to conduct a detailed study of the weather patterns in the Upper Susquehanna River Watershed during flooding season in the Lower Susquehanna/Binghamton area. Using federal and state records kept since the late 1800s, she documented 100 years of weather in the region. Her study determined that no significant storms or rains

washing into the Unadilla River or the Butternut Creek were responsible for damaging floods that occurred further south. Building a dam at Cope's Corner would have little effect on the seasonal flooding in and around the Triple Cities.

The NR reports, photographs and weather evidence, along with the letters of support for the village and letters of protest all had a positive effect. In 1979, the congressional committee took back their support and funding. The Army Corps of Engineering built sea walls and other flood prevention construction instead. There would be no dam on the Butternut Creek, and no lake destroying Gilbertsville. The project was permanently dead. Gilbertsville won.



30—Commercial Street, Gilbertsville, N. Y.

In May of 1982, the entire village of Gilbertsville was placed on the National and State Registers of Historic Places. At the time it was one of only two entire villages to be so designated in the entire country. The next time you happen to visit Gilbertsville, tip a glass to the incredible townspeople who together fought the Congress of the United States, and WON! Long may this beautiful village stand as a testimony to their hard work, persistence and determination.

The story of the dam and Gilbertsville's fight to save the village is based on Gilbertsville and Butternuts Town Historian Leigh C. Eckmair's 2003 essay, "Goliath met David on the banks of the Butternut Creek," which is available [here](#). I couldn't have written this piece without it.

12—Birdseye View, Gilbertsville, N. Y.



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bob thomas Oct 8, 2023



A group formed about 2009 to protect and improve the entire Butternut Valley Watershed.

<https://butternutvalleyalliance.org>

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Karen Swift-Shannon May 3, 2023



Thank you for sharing this story Suzanne! I grew up worried that I would have to move, that my town would be flooded over. Maybe that is why I had serial dreams of drowning in a flood when I was very young 🙌

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