

North Adams Memories



*Completed by students in HIST371, Oral
History: Theory, Methods, and Practice
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Our Project

The North Adams Oral History Project is a product of *Oral History: Theory, Methods, and Practice* (HIST 371), a course offered at Williams College in the spring of 2016. Under the instruction of Professor Annie Valk, five students conducted oral history interviews to better understand the history of North Adams, Massachusetts, a small city that sits next to our college town in the northern Berkshires. This booklet includes excerpts of a dozen interviews that explore the history of industry and community life in North Adams. We have quoted, lightly edited, and contextualized the interviews to present residents' perspectives on the city's recent history and its prospects for the future. An online version of this material, including audio files, can be found at: <http://sites.williams.edu/hist371-16s/>

Many thanks to the individuals and organizations who have gathered and saved materials we used in our research, especially the North Adams Historical Society, the North Adams Public Library, Williams College's Sawyer Library, and MCLA's Freel Library, and local historians Paul Marino and Joe Manning. We also thank the people who shared their memories and personal stories; their interviews will be added to the archives maintained by the Williams College special collections library.

We welcome your comments and feedback.

By: Peter Hale, Tobias McCarthy, Joshua Morrison, Abigail Rampone, and Sofia Smith

Community Spaces

For generations, neighborhoods helped define the social structure of North Adams. Many neighborhoods represented the waves of immigrants that arrived in the city during the early twentieth century. Settling in areas close to places where they worked, residents soon established places of worship that became anchors of their community. The Italian and French neighborhoods represented two of the largest populations in the city, but throughout the twentieth century, immigrants from across the world formed their own communities in North Adams.

When immigrants first came to North Adams to find work, many settled in neighborhoods with fellow immigrants who shared their language and traditions. Robin Martin speaks of the French Canadian neighborhood that her grandparents' generation formed, saying: *The Canadian French came in together. They found the jobs together. They founded their church together. And the Irish did that and the Italians did that. That's because those were the people you knew and that's how you kept your culture.* Lorraine Maloney also describes the various communities where French immigrants congregated:

This neighborhood here which is called Greylock, basically, is mostly the French people and people migrated toward this area because they worked at the mill or the mill that's being converted over here used to be a cotton mill and most of the people from this area worked there. And the other area was up toward the Beaver Street area and that was other mills there and it was a lot of French people that lived in North Adams. The Polish people mostly lived in Adams at the time.

Billy Perenick describes the close-knit Italian community that remembers on the hilly roads near State Street by the Haskins School, close to what is now Western Gateway Heritage State Park:

They had an Italian import store there, he says, and everybody seemed, when they came from the old country, they knew someone and they gradually

moved in that particular area to be with their friends. Not too far from there, down on State Street, they had a bocce court set up, so every Sunday, some guy would come down with a cordeen [accordion] and a few people would come off the mountain, they would play bocce all day Sunday. And that was a very skilled game and if you didn't pay attention, you would hear about it! No fooling around with that!



View of downtown North Adams from the Hadley Overpass (Berkshire Eagle, Bonnivier, 2007)

Perenick and Martin share stories that speak to the potential of North Adams's ethnic neighborhoods to both unite and separate people. Perenick tells stories of his childhood as an Italian-American in a primarily French neighborhood and even shares a story of friendship between his mother and an English woman during World War II. Italy and Britain were enemies in the war but as Americans in North Adams, residents could ally to help friends and relatives in war-torn Europe:

I can remember going to the post office and my little red cart and I would bring down a bag of used clothes, and my mother would put tea bags and coffee in this big bundle and it had to weigh twenty-one pounds. And at that time, the war in England, we had a lady that lived on our same street, her family came from England, and we had some people in Italy. And I can

remember the lady that went to England, my mother would help her pack up a bag of used clothes, tea bags, sugar, anything you could put in there and we would send it to England and Italy, because my mother and father were born in Italy and they came here at a young age and they knew people over there. So therefore I think the young fellows over there probably had a couple of sweaters and jackets from Drury High School, I'm sure they did, and I can remember Houghton School we were championship there, and I'm sure that coat ended up in Italy!

Martin's story, on the other hand, demonstrates that ethnic neighborhood divisions sometimes led to tensions in the community:

If you were Canadian French and you went to the Irish church, the nuns frowned upon that. When I was in school, if your father was Canadian French, you were considered Canadian French. If your father was Irish or Italian, even if they were Catholic, that's what you were considered. And the nuns would... We had a boy in our class... we had two boys that were Italian. And their mothers were Canadian French. And [the nuns]... when they got mad at them they'd say, "we don't have to have you here. You're not Canadian." Their mothers were Canadian so they are as much Canadian as I am but that's how it was in school.

Many residents express a general feeling of community spirit and safety within neighborhoods, however. According to Lorraine Maloney, *the neighborhood was a very close-knit place at the time. You know, when you went out, your parents knew that you were safe no matter where you played in the neighborhood.*

Though ethnic neighborhoods no longer define community life to such a large extent, the memories linger. More recent generations have mingled or moved into neighborhoods defined more by shared socioeconomic class than by ethnic background, but many residents still recall the streets where children from specific ethnic groups gathered to play or the churches that offered services to immigrants in their native languages to ease their adjustment to life in an unfamiliar place.

Churches

For most of the 20th century, North Adams had five Catholic churches: two served the French Canadian community, two catered to Irish parishioners, and one was for residents of Italian descent. North Adams' small Jewish community built a downtown temple. The so-called Steeple City also claimed a Presbyterian Church, a Methodist Church, a Universalist Church, and an Episcopalian Church.

Residents recall the important role that churches played for every community and neighborhood in the city. Each Catholic community ran their own elementary school staffed by nuns. In the first half of the 20th century, many children were baptized, confirmed and



married by the same neighborhood priest; grandparents, parents and children usually belonged to the same parish. Church attendance was expected and mass was often conducted in Italian or French.

(Holy Family Church on State Road has been renovated into apartments.)

According to Billy Perenick, who grew up in North Adams in the 1940s, after Notre Dame church put down roots, the French Canadian community gathered nearby.

The French church wasn't too far from the library on East Main Street and the people kind of settled around the church, as people came in from Canada and people, the French old-timers, they had a mass there. When I was growing, it was always in French. They had a school there and they had a

convent and I can remember the nuns had a black outfit with a big hat with the white trim.

By the 1960s, the role of churches began to change. The Jewish Temple and St. Anthony's church were demolished as part of downtown urban renewal projects. Fewer nuns and priests made it harder to maintain parochial schools and separate parishes. Steve Melito recalled that while the city's ethnic communities were not geographically separated when he was growing up in the 1970s, churches continued to reflect and reinforce specific cultural traditions.



First Baptist Church of North Adams

By the time that I was born and alive I was a part of that generation that was really ethnically intermixed, but there still was ethnic identity in terms of the local Catholic church you belonged to. I was a part of St. Anthony's which is now St. Elizabeth's, but that was always known as the Italian church and people would call it that. And then there was Notre Dame, which they called the French church. And those divisions among older people are still in their minds but less so with my generation... When I was a kid I remember being in catechism at St. Anthony's church and we had an older lady who was the catechism teacher and she was a substitute so she was just kind of filling in and she asked their names to take attendance and she was surprised that there was a kid in there that was not Italian. And she asked this kid: what are

you doing coming to this church? To think that now is crazy, but that's how people thought.

Aside from their role as centers of religious life and cultural identity, the churches often doubled as community centers. Opening their doors to people of all ages in the surrounding neighborhoods, churches hosted recreational activities, sports leagues, after-school programs and other activities. Perenick remembers:

Notre Dame always had something going on. And they also had Boy Scout troops so we got to go to all these different churches. The churches also sponsored a basketball team, they called it Church League, so if you didn't play high school ball, and if you're working part-time you weren't able to

practice with high school, there was another group of the Church League.



(Notre Dame Church on East Main Street now awaits future use)

During many of our interviews, North Adams residents remarked on the diminished influence of structured religion in day-to-day life. As the population has decreased, and perhaps as the influence of religion has waned, many of the local churches have closed. While residents understand the factors that made it unfeasible to sustain so many churches, they found the constriction stressful. Judith McConnell remembered how the downsizing led conflict as multiple churches' traditions began to clash.

Initially when they yoked together St. Francis and Notre Dame and it was like "you can't sit here," you know. "This is my pew." Even though there's no names or reservations or any of that stuff. But they weren't very welcoming. And that's kind of going away. I mean some people probably still feel it but I don't, you know. That's minor. And I left St. Francis one Christmas Eve. My

kids were home and we went to midnight mass and it was up at Notre Dame because the priests were serving both places. And it was the worst mass I ever attended. And I always felt midnight mass was so joyous and so uplifting and it was horrible. And then we came out of there and somebody hollered at me for parking where I parked and I said to my kids, "that's it. I'm out of this place. What is with these people?"

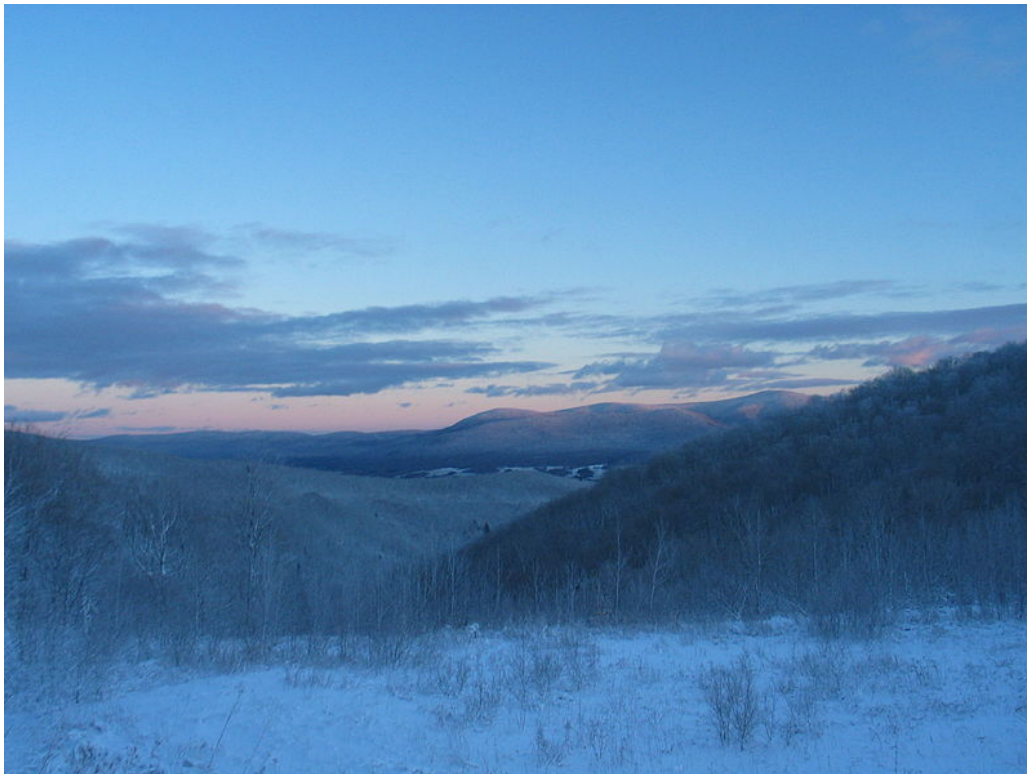
Today, only one Catholic church remains open in town, and many of the Protestant congregations have shrunk or closed as well. While many residents of North Adams are still deeply religious, the influence of churches in the public sphere has decreased as the community has become more secular. Robin Martin reflected on the reasons for this shift and its impact on community values:

I think that unfortunately for whatever reasons people have moved away from it. And like I say I'm spiritual but not religious. But those aspects of your world...getting up on Sunday morning, going to church with the same group of people. Doing that. We've moved away from that as a country. And again I'm very old but I think that everything being open on Sundays is what caused that... Sunday was a family day that always started with church and then the rest of the day was spent with family. You didn't take off with anyone. And even when our children were little that's what we did. Even if we weren't going to church it was a family day. People don't do that anymore. Everybody does their own thing. We go off. Sunday is just like any other day of the week.

Play

Nestled in the Berkshires, North Adams is ideally positioned for its residents to enjoy easy access to the world outdoors. Both city parks and public recreation areas further from downtown have been central features of community life for many years. In every season, residents have found ways to enjoy themselves and spend time with their friends and neighbors by going outside.

Many North Adams residents share fond memories of skiing, sledding, and ice skating in the winter months. *We used to go sliding*, Lorraine Maloney says, recalling her childhood in the 1940s. *You know where Brayton School is? The hill that has all the greenery there used to be all bare and everybody slid there in the winter time, it was the sliding place, you know, whether it was on a cardboard or on a sled or whatever and so we really enjoyed that.*



(Berkshires in winter, seen from the NY border)

Both Maloney and Billy Perenick describe the popularity of ice skating in the city when they were children. According to Perenick:

Volunteers from the neighborhood would shovel off the area and they would have ice skating. The town of North Adams had a public rink down on State Street and the city of North Adams took care of the rink, they had a small building with a pot-bellied stove in it and they burned wood and they had lights and music and so that was quite interesting. Also we had a pond, a lake, it was called Windsor Pond, on the eastern side of the North Adams and the neighbors in there, they would shovel off so they would have an ice skating rink there.

Perenick also describes going up to ski at Dutch Hill during his childhood in the 1940s:

Dutch Hill was twelve miles away from North Adams, they put a rope tow in and the dike was the trail that you could ski for beginners and they had a rope tow and in order to get the people up on the hill, they had a Model A engine. Four cylinder, Model A engine, 1930. And they had a heavy-duty, like a log and rope, and you would hold onto the rope and this pulley would take you up on the lower side of the mountain. That was a big thing back then and that was another thing that we skied, I can remember you could ski a half a day for a dollar, from 12:00 til 3:30. Now, I had a Sunday paper route, so I got up early, I delivered my papers, and at that time I don't know if we had a car, but I would take my skis, my poles, and I would walk down to Main Street and there was a place called the Hub Restaurant. The owner was part owner of Dutch Hill, there were three partners or four partners. You just had to go into that restaurant; there was someone there going to Dutch Hill. So that was a meeting spot, and if you didn't, you could go on the next street corner and hitchhike, and you would get a ride up, ski a half a day, have yourself a hot chocolate or maybe a hot dog, and come back with someone who would drop you off on the corner and you'd go home.

Outdoor fun wasn't limited to the wintertime, however. Many people remember the parks where children gathered to play baseball or fish, but any patch of woods could become a favorite gathering spot. When school let out for the day, Judith McConnell and other neighborhood children would explore in the woods behind North Street:

The years that I went to grammar school, we were allowed to come home for lunch. We didn't pack a lunch or anything. We came home for lunch and went back after lunch and were dismissed like at 3 in the afternoon. And we had woods that we used to explore and think we were Indians or cowboys and there was a huge rock. We called it a giant rock. And years later when I went strolling through the woods, I said, "this is what we called a giant rock? It's kind of like Plymouth Rock!" So it was a wonderful neighborhood to grow up in. You'd leave, you'd go out in the morning and you wouldn't come back til lunch time and then you'd go back out after lunch. And in the summer time you'd have to be called in at supertime or come in to go to bed, we were outside all the time.



Life guard at Windsor Lake, North Adams (Berkshire Eagle, 2014)

Brooks and ponds on the edges of the city were also popular places to go swimming. Lorraine Maloney describes going to Notch Brook and the Cascades trail on hot summer days in North Adams:

We'd go down there and play in the brook. We'd run down the street. I don't know why we didn't wear shoes or anything when we went down. With the tar

it was so hot you couldn't wait to get in the brook over there, but we had lots of fun. We had those big tubes that you played in and so forth down there. Usually in the afternoon most of the kids would gather down there and play. There were a lot of kids my age.

Within the city itself, street games were also commonplace. Steve Melito describes the some of the popular activities from his childhood in the 1970s:

When we played outside, when I was on Franklin Street before sixth grade, we would play tag and kick the can and whiffle ball and Nerf football, kickball. It was great and then over in the west end on Marion Ave it was really more baseball and football, but there were always kids in the neighborhood around and that's a big change I've seen that there's just not a lot of kids around anymore or else they're all indoors because everybody's scared.

For generations, children and adults alike have enjoyed spending time outdoors in and around North Adams. No matter the season, there was always some game to play or some new place to explore.

(Drury High School
Baseball Team, c.
1900. Courtesy of
North Adams
Historical Society.)



Schools

In the 1950s, seven public elementary schools provided education for North Adams' children: Freeman, Johnson, Brayton, Haskins, Greylock, Mark Hopkins, and Houghton. Scattered in neighborhoods around the city, these schools offered classes for kindergarten through eighth grade, preparing students to enter Drury High School.



(Johnson Elementary School)

Alongside the public school system, a network of Catholic schools provided education for parishioners' children. Three Catholic elementary schools including Notre Dame, and Holy Family were run by nuns, each catering primarily to a different ethnic group, such as Irish, or French Canadian. For high school, many Catholic students continued their studies at St. Josephs, the parochial school. A third high school, McCann, only admitted boys.

Beyond their religious focus, the Catholic schools offered a very different experience. Lorraine Maloney remembers the shock she felt when switching into the public school system after attending school at Holy Family.

French school is very different than a public school. Here when you had lunch: quiet, nobody talked. You ate all your lunch and that was it. When you went to high school and it was just such freedom to go up and there and everybody conversed during lunch times over there so it was really a learning experience when I went up there.

Judith McConnell grew up around the corner from Johnson School. All the kids in her neighborhood – and there were many – walked to school, even returning home in the middle of the day for lunch.

We had no cafeteria so we came home for lunch. And years later on, they did provide food at school. But the years that I went to grammar school we were allowed to come home for lunch. We didn't pack a lunch or anything. We came home for lunch and went back after lunch and were dismissed like at 3 in the afternoon.

McConnell's positive memories of going to the Johnson School contrasted with stories she heard about her father's experiences as a student at Notre Dame School.



(Notre Dame School)

The nuns were, oh my gosh. They wouldn't get away with what they did in those days... My dad was, of course he didn't like us kids to know this but my grandmother used to tell us these stories. So he was in class one day and I don't know if he wasn't paying attention or he did something and the teacher picked up somebody's rubber that they wore to school, and threw it at him.

Outside the classroom, schools provided many activities to keep children busy and out of trouble. For boys, school sports facilities and teams filled their time and gave them a way to meet young people from other areas of the city. Billy Perenick remembers that the city had *schools on every corner and they were all designed by the same architect, I would say. We had basketball leagues in grammar school, every school, every basketball team, so we got to know the other boys and girls from the different area and that kept us busy. And all these schools also had a little*

baseball diamond, so we played ball with the schools, made it interesting, and in the wintertime, some of the schools had an ice skating rink.

Justyna Carlson attended Mark Hopkins School. She recalls that the school's role as a site for teachers training at the State College made a Hopkins' education special.

Mark Hopkins had been the training school for teachers, training students from the college. We thought it was great. We complained when we were students, but the preparation was phenomenal, because we had had every type of teacher you could have, from the best to the worst. And we'd had every kind of project you could imagine because they had to practice with quizzes and they had to practice with tests and they had to practice with dioramas. There were times when we complained because compared to the other schools in the city we seemed to have an awful lot more work. But it showed once we got to high school, we had done everything before and really had an advantage over the other students.

For the many students who did not attend college, Drury offered classes to develop useful working skills. The school also allowed students to begin to gain job experience during the school day. While preparing to be a secretary, McConnell took advantage of many of these opportunities. By the time she graduated from Drury, she was employed already in a busy office at Sprague.

I was in the commercial course, which was secretarial, actually. In our senior year... they would release us at noontime and we could go and work in the areas that we were interested in, to be a secretary or whatever. And in high school I took typing. Originally it was on a manual typewriter and then one year we got electric ones and that was like, whoa! And I did short hand and book keeping and all the stuff that you do for commercial.

Starting in the 1950s and 60s, as more mills began to downsize and close, North Adams Public School system began to shrink as well. Many of the schools had been constructed

during North Adams' population boom at the turn of the century, and the buildings were quickly aging. When asked about the consolidation of schools, Justyna Carlson recalls that

I don't think it was as noticeable because, as I said, the parochial school graduated 125 a year and they closed in early '70s. Let's say that's an influx of 75 into the public school once, per class, once they closed. So it wasn't as noticeable. Same thing with the elementary schools. For a while they were really bursting at the seams and when Notre Dame Elementary closed, the city rented the school building and called it East School Annex because with that school closing there were too many, East School they couldn't handle them. And Holy Family had an elementary school so there were three Catholic elementary schools and a high school and when all of them closed and they came into the public schools, the numbers didn't change a lot right away.

However, even though North Adams had its own college with many local students, for the children of many factory families, finding a job after high school was almost a given. Linda Saharczewski remembered that when she graduated from high school in 1975, there were two choices: you either went to work at Sprague or GE in Pittsfield. She never seriously considered college. Similarly, Robin Martin recalled that college never seemed to be an option for her friends or something she was encouraged to consider:

The way we grew up, every one of my family as far back as I knew had been farmers and then they had come into this country as factory workers. even though I always did very well in school. And my grandmother would just say to me "I expect good things from you" but the word college never came up. And I remember even being in high school and having the counselor say, "so what about college" and I'd say "what about it?" In my life how would I pay for that? How would I do that? And there was no one those... today we have all kinds of people that sit down about financial aid and all of this... There was no one there to do that. So it just wasn't... It wasn't on my radar. Not that it wasn't something that I always wanted to do but it wasn't something that I ever thought was possible.

As the city's population shrank and factory jobs disappeared, the schools had to keep up. One by one many of the neighborhood schools shut down, forcing the students to travel much further to get to class and fracturing many of the close-knit neighborhoods they had served. Today there are only three public elementary schools. Drury High School is still open (albeit in a new location), and McCann, now coeducational, serves as a technical high school for the city.

Over the last century, North Adams's only college also has changed to meet the shifting needs of its community. In 1960 it expanded its curriculum, becoming North Adams State College. The college's current iteration, the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, mirrors the city's attempts to reinvent itself as something more than a struggling post-industrial community. MCLA draws students from across the state and even outside the area. Lorraine Maloney, who worked at the college for many years, experienced some of these changes first hand.

It's a great college... I worked in the education department. The education department was the largest department in the college at that time, but it's changed a lot now. Teaching isn't as prominent as it used to be over there... Then I worked in Student Affairs for quite a while and worked in the President's Office and in the President's Office we had a turnover during that period of time... I started a program at the time. It was the four Cs, there was Campus Community Coexistence Council. When you live in North Adams, the college is part of an elderly community over there and there is a lot of friction. You know, if you're 18 to 20 years old you're partying late at night but if you're 60, 70, 80 years old you want to go to bed at night... It changed the relationship between the college and the community a lot, over there. And we also started the community cleanup day during the springtime... We'd work with people from the city and we'd go look at the sites that really needed cleaning up. And then we'd bring the students, faculty staff and city people would come and we would clean up the different areas in North Adams. It was fun.

Colleen Taylor, a local business owner considers the college an important part of the city's culture today: *the college, North Adams State College, is also changed. It used to be, it went from North Adams State College to MCLA. Just that gave North Adams a little bit more momentum with people I'd say.*



(Drury High School recently underwent renovations and reopened as Colegrove Elementary School)

Main Street

For North Adams' longtime residents, the city's busy downtown remains fixed in memory and those images mark the many ways North Adams has changed over time. In 1940, North Adams' Main Street bustled with activity. The street contained at least five major department stores (J.J. Newberry, WT Grant, FW Woolworth, JC Penny, The Boston Store), three hotels (The Wellington, The Richmond, The Sterling), three theatres (The Paramount, The Mohawk, The Richmond Theatre), all four of the city's banking institutions (North Adams National Bank, North Adams Savings Bank, North Adams Trust and Hoosac Savings Bank), an assortment of specialty clothiers (McGraw and Tatro and Lume & Co), fraternal organizations (Empire Order), and numerous restaurants (Lyn's Restaurant (sit-down), DeLaigo's (quick bite)). Many of the buildings on both sides of Main Street stood over three stories high, and while store-fronts and restaurants occupied ground floors, insurance firms, lawyers, dentists, dancing clubs (Johnny's Dance Palace) and a few residential tenants filled the floors above.

Life-long North Adams resident and former Sprague employee Lorraine Maloney vividly remembers how Main Street's businesses not only provided places to shop but also helped structure people's working weeks:

It's so very different. There were stores everywhere. Every building had a store in it. Now, they say shop local. I think that the idea is wonderful, but there are very few stores on Main Street where you can shop any more over there. In those days, it was wonderful. We got paid on Wednesdays, when we moved to Marshall Street at the Sprague Electric Company. And you'd go up on Wednesday or Thursday nights, the stores were open late, just mobbed with people. Now you see a few people here and there, it's just sad. You know, once they started doing the malls it killed the small cities. We used to have specialty shops. They did all the bedding, towels and so forth. They could no longer exist. So those all closed up. But it was just wonderful. You go down Main Street and you knew just about everybody and now you don't. The city has changed a lot.

Like Maloney, many people explain that not only has commercial activity on Main Street declined, but also the nature and composition of its businesses have changed. In addition, interviewees discussed Main Street's role in the community and its importance to their own experience living, working, and shopping in the North Adams in the past and the present.



Left: westward view of Main Street circa 1940s. Right: roughly the same view present day.

Rose Marie Thomas describes Main Street as a vibrant commercial center in the 1940s when she accompanied her father on Main Street excursions as a child:

Oh well I used to go places with my father, he would take me to Newberry's, which of course is gone, so he'd go in and get a seat, order me a donut, and I'd immediately go right over to the donut machine and watch it. Donut go down, into the grease, and it would go around, turn over, and go out the door and I'd just stand there and watch it. I liked to do that it was fun. Newberry's was fun there was a lot—you could buy everything there, all kinds of stuff there. I remember downstairs they also had cookies, and then the five-and-dime. We had a lot of stores back then.



75 Main Street originally housed the clothing store of Morris Gatslick. From 1920-1990s J.J. Newberry was a popular shopping destination. The Shear Madness hair salon now occupies the space.

Delaigo's Diner, a victim of urban renewal in the 1970s, emerges as another landmark Main Street business. Thomas remembers trips to DeLaigo's with her father where she enjoyed other sweet treats:

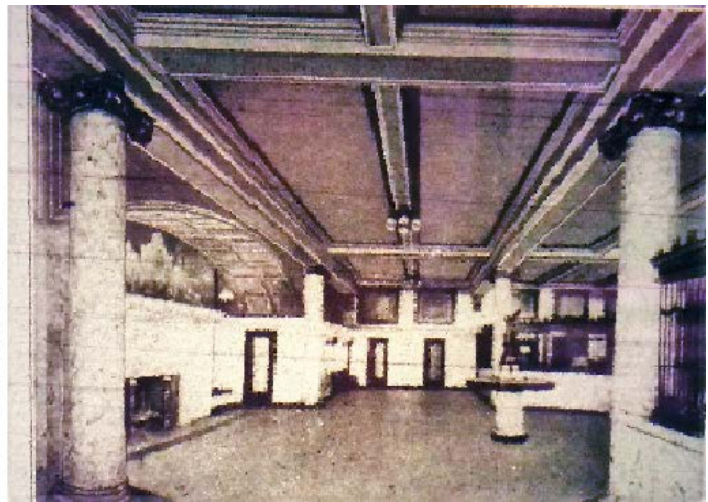
When I was a little girl my mother used to say "now Tom, don't you take her in Jack's or Delaigo's diner!" I guess because there was going to be men in there. My mom wanted three perfectly, perfect little ladies--I'm sorry I was a tomboy back then. She didn't get me into a lady. So my father would take me where? Jack's. Delaigo's. I loved it, I loved it! I'd go in Delaigo's I'd get the strawberry pie and a red cream soda. I remember that. In fact I've got a book with a recipe in it from Delaigo's, and a picture of the diner. We had a lot of places we could go in North Adams.

Similarly, Billy Perenick remembers DeLaigo's as an important local eatery.

On the south side of Main Street, there was a place called DeLaigo's Restaurant, it was a diner, and it was three brothers- and the family ran this diner, and they had the best pie, all homemade pies, you know, after a ball game or a dance at the Blue Haven Hall which was held over on Webber Avenue.

DeLaigo's was one of many social nodes on Main Street, and its connections to other institutions and traditions suggest how its loss, and the loss of those like it, may have had rippling and confounding effects on the community. For Perenick, Main Street businesses were memorable and important for many reasons:

But the buildings, the part of the buildings there, they were, the architecture was beautiful. The North Adams bank was the National Bank, I can remember my mother taking me there and open up a savings account. And I was just a young guy. And we knew, my mother and father and I, where we lived, down the road there was the vice president... So we knew, so that's the place you want to go, you open up a account there, and I don't want to say it too loud but I still do business there, after all these years.



The North Adams National Bank building (left) was one of urban renewal's early casualties. To the right its opulent, marble interior and mural above the mantle.

As Perenick suggests, the commerce on Main Street reflected the strong communal bonds of the North Adams of his youth, which he broadly describes as both a time and a place when “everybody knew everybody.” Resident Robin Martin considers that the loss of this sense of community is one of the most important differences between the North Adams of her youth and today:

About North Adams? I was on East Main St., that's where all the Canadian French families, there and Front Street, and, you know, ten or fifteen kids

would go wandering off and come down and watch a movie together, that type of thing, something that kids today don't know because you can't leave your neighborhood unless you're 14 years old. That's one of the earliest things, just coming down on Main Street. Penny Candy... Just silly stuff like that. You know, riding your bicycle, ... saying bye to your mom after breakfast, riding your bicycle all over the place, coming back for dinner. You know, it was a different world.

Many of the interviewees commented on the relationship between Main Street and local industry. Main Street was in walking distance of the town's major employers, in particular Sprague's Marshall Street location and James Hunter. Machinery Company Otto Wied, a former Sprague researcher, recalls:

It was a very nice community. The Hotel Richmond was on the corner of the main street and the road that leads to the old station. And the Wellington was across the street. That is no longer in existence and neither is the Richmond. We used to eat lunch, some of the pals that I had from Sprague, would meet for lunch at the Richmond.

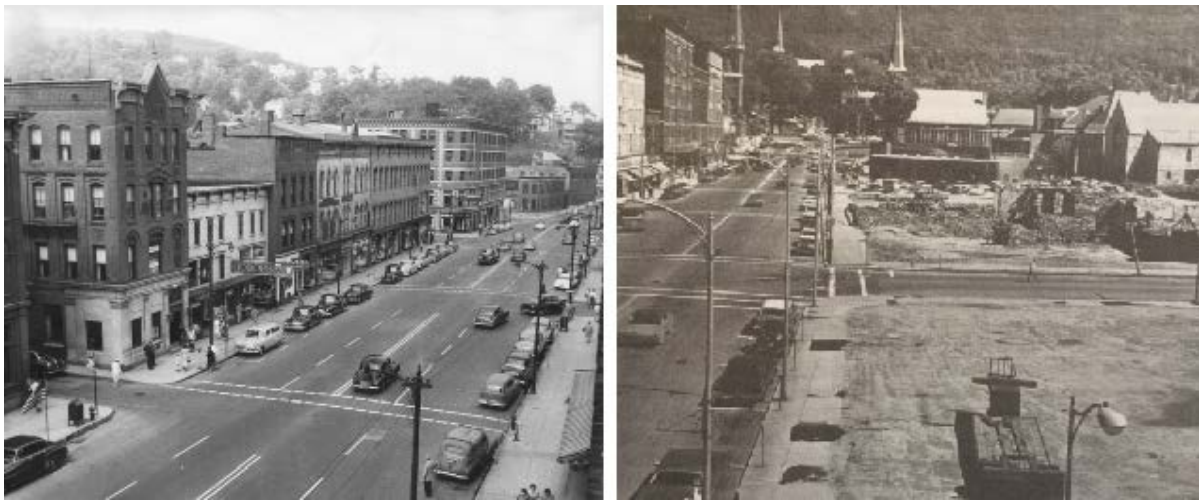
Wied also reveals a broader tradition involving Main Street that Maloney introduced earlier:

There were three movie houses, there were all kinds of...restaurants, little places. Nothing big, but local bistros where you'd stop in. Thursday night was the big night. Everybody went out, mainly because I think payday was on Wednesdays...cash their check on Thursdays and everyone went shopping! And Thursday night was 'Big Night Out', the town lit up, as much as North Adams could light up.

Thomas provides a linear outline of the process behind this Main Street tradition:

I remember when I worked at Sprague, Thursday was payday we'd all go down street, cash our check, go to our restaurant and eat, and then we'd shop in the stores, and then when Sprague closed that hurt Main Street.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, local government initiated a series of federally funded “urban renewal” projects as a means of clearing vacant and decrepit buildings, and to stimulate the town’s ailing, but increasingly important, commercial sector. When these projects concluded, Main Street’s south side was almost completely razed, along with Bank Street and other downtown areas. The redevelopment that followed was sluggish, and various retailers, including K-Mart and Sleepy’s, tried unsuccessfully to establish a lasting presence in the big-box lot that replaced Bank Street. Today’s Main Street differs from its predecessor a half century ago both in terms of its physical layout and the composition of its tenants.



The picture on the left depicts Main Street from the SW circa 1950. The tall building in the foreground is the PJ Boland block, originally home to a specialty tailor and clothier. In 1950, it was the home of NA Trust Company. The Richmond Hotel is in the background. The picture on the right depicts the south-side of Main Street looking east circa 1970.

By the time Steve Melito was a boy in the 1970s, Main Street had lost many of its businesses but still retained some of its former glory.

It was like this little counter ice cream shop and it was in the back of 85 Main Street. And 85 Main Street at the time had lots of little stores like a shoe store and if you were going to get your eyes checked you would go there and it was the one place in town that had an elevator so for us that was a big deal if you were going to take the elevator. The other store that I remember, thinking about these contraptions is England Brothers had an escalator and that was a big deal, going up and down the escalator and then I think it became, no it

was the Boston store first and then England Brothers but either way we had a clothing store that sold, you know, not discount clothing because we had jobs that weren't discount jobs at that point.

Like Melito, Linda Saharczewski experienced a newer Main Street but one that still retained many attractions. Saharczewski lived in Adams, but traveled to North Adams because *there were little things like that where when we went into North Adams, the stores were a little bit bigger, everything was just a little bit bigger up there, so that's what kind of made it exciting to be there.* Reflecting on the difference between the two towns, Saharczewski recalls:

Well, they had a movie theater there and everybody would go to the movie theaters and then they had lots of places to go shopping, either big shops, little shops. They had the J.J. Newbury Company, which was, being as a little kid going there with your parents it was so exciting because they had all the toys there and they had the different floors where you could go on, one floor had an ice cream counter so you could get sundaes and things like that. You know, there was lots of little places to go shopping or walk through. I used to love walking down Main Street in North Adams because just looking through the store windows and shops and things like that, it was great.

Today, the south side of Main Street contains a discontinuous series of new, single story buildings, which a large, and typically vacant, parking lot divides where Bank Street formerly intercepted Main Street. Franchises and national chains, such as Radio Shack, Label Shopper, Peeble's, Olympia Sports and H&R Block have replaced the specialty stores, local banks and restaurants (including DeLaigo's) that previously occupied multi-story buildings, some of which, such as the Davenport Block and the First Agricultural Bank, boasted magnificent facades comparable to the iconic buildings that remain on the north side of Main Street. A small Movieplex located within south Main Street's big-box development is all that remains of Main Street's theatrical heritage, and to the east, on the plot where the regal Richmond Hotel stood for nearly a century, sits the Holiday Inn, the sole hotel in North Adams today. Although the North Side has remained structurally intact, first floor vacancies are noticeable across many of its former commercial stalwarts.



Impressive as ever, the New Kimball building at 85 Main Street is no longer a thriving commercial block.

Urban Renewal

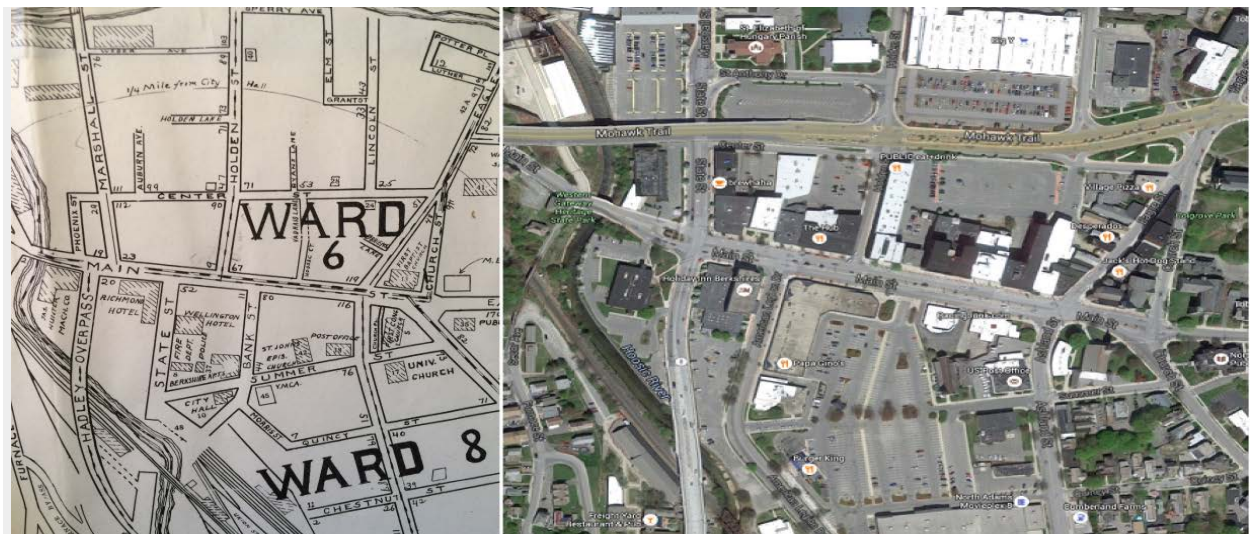
North Adams is one of many small cities across the country that developed alongside, and, in many respects, was built to accommodate, local industry. In the 1950s, North Adams received federal funds that the government dispersed to cities across the country to aid in their adjustment during their difficult transitions into the post-industrial era.



(Plans for urban renewal circa 1950)

City government used these funds to initiate a series of “urban renewal” projects intended to physically restructure the city’s downtown area to better accommodate the perceived needs of the modern resident and consumer. When urban renewal

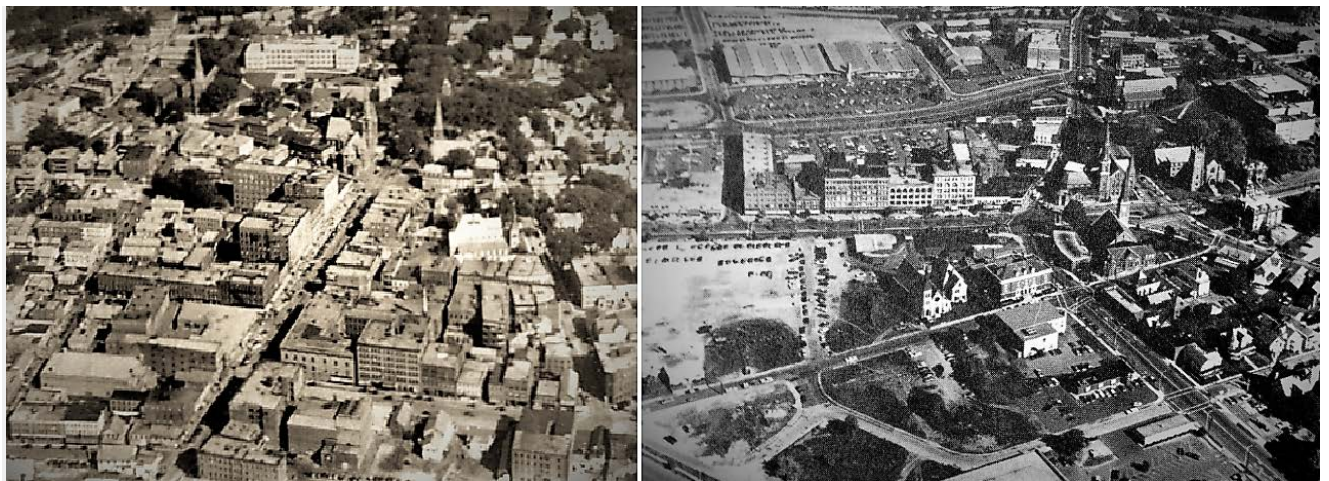
concluded in the 1970s, an astonishing number of downtown buildings and businesses were either demolished or displaced.



(On the left is part of the 1950 city directory map. The right shows current downtown North Adams and the parking lots and big-box retail complexes created by urban renewal.)

Urban renewal marked a turning point in North Adams' history, a watershed that affected the city's architecture, geography, social life, and culture. Billy Perenick portrays North Adams' various institutions, buildings and businesses as interconnected nodes, securing his sense of place within the community. His interview frames urban renewal's toll within these contexts. Perenick recalled redevelopment displaced people and dislodged important anchors in the local community, affecting people's connection to the city and community.

Urban renewal came in and they had, 1950s, they tore down the old Saint Anthony's church. And they built a new Saint Anthony's church over on Holden Street, next to the... Grand Army Hall. And right there there was a big tree in front, I would never forget, there was a horse chestnut tree and it's gone. You know, I hated to see that go because where are you going to find a hundred-year-old tree in downtown North Adams? And the Saint Anthony's church was there... then they had that urban renewal, they tore down Lincoln Street and all those people had to be moved to different areas in town... There was a place over there called....Clark family in town, two brothers, one was a schoolteacher, the other one ran the laundry, that was, you'd bring your linen there, they took care of the hospital, the motels or hotels, no motels- well, whatever they took care of. And that was in that urban renewal project, Lincoln Street that was all gone...that was an area that everybody missed.



(These pictures provide a sense for the sheer scale of demolition that occurred within the renewal period. Pre-urban renewal circa 1940s on left, post-urban renewal circa 1980 on right.)

Judith McConnell also has vivid memories of the "booming community" of downtown businesses before redevelopment.

And then coming down Eagle Street, there were shoe stores and, it was a booming community. I mean there were all kinds of, there was an army and navy store where the pizza house is, and all stores all the way down. Riseberg's dress shop. And across that little narrow Eagle Street there were all kinds of ladies' shops and where we used to get our gowns for the proms. And then even on Main Street the side that's all wiped out, there was a stationary store, there was Pizzi's right on the corner, which was a nice ladies' store.... I mean there was restaurants and banks and the banks were all marble that when you went inside the tellers' windows and floors, everything was all marble... And that was an empty hole for like, over 10 years. We used to set up a carnival there, so it was pretty bleak for a long time.

In the excerpt below, Perenick recalls Bank Street. The North Adams *Transcript* was originally located on Bank Street, and where Bank Street intersected with Main Street stood the city's most venerable banks (such as North Adams Savings and Trust, First Agricultural), which many of our interviewees consider some of Main Street's most beautiful buildings:

There was electric company office, there was a hat man there that used to form and shape hats, steam hats, you don't see that anymore, he's gone. There was the cobbler shop in there, a little small diner, there was a thriving, one-way street like a European street. They didn't have cobblestones but there was only room for one car, and you know, if you got too close to the curb... you stayed next to the building! Now that was all gone.

Many of our interviewees mention the banks, the hat store and the small diner [Delaigo's]. The beautiful buildings and the success of the businesses that occupied them continue to hold prominent places in people's memories of pre-renewal downtown and suggest that

urban renewal displaced not only people and businesses, but also affected their sense of familiarity and their connection with the area.



(To the left, Bank Street facing northward to Main Street circa 1968. To the right, the same view today.)

Furthermore, Perenick's comment regarding how narrow roads may have inconvenienced drivers, which the picture above illustrates well, highlights a potential justification for urban renewal. Many of the streets were similarly built, and many of the buildings were crowded together, as the construction of downtown largely occurred during the latter half of the 19th century. In conjunction with downtown's outdated layout, the poor condition of the buildings and the high cost of repairs likely made demolition seem much more viable to local government. Justyna Carlson, who now works with the city's historical society and historical commission, states that *Bank Street and the south side of Main, was in need of a lot of, of work. And people just weren't going to be living there anymore.* She recalls an anecdote from someone whose father worked demolition during renewal that suggests some demolition was likely unavoidable. At the same time, however, sturdy and often magnificent buildings were demolished alongside their dilapidated neighbors.

a great deal of that side [south] of Main Street was facades, and once you went beyond what you saw, it went to the back, where you had a beautiful...granite bank building on the front, the back was wood. They were fire traps, there were kinds of fire escapes.... The First Agricultural Bank, First

National at one time, which was beautiful, it was all marble inside, that and the YMCA building were the only two that---they had to work hard on to tear down. The others came down quite easily, they---really were in need of so much TLC and hadn't gotten it, and so they...they took them down very easily. The one story that we tell about is the Berkshire Bank which, on the front, was...massive, and when you went in the front door they took you all the way through the bank and went through the gates that they had locked to get into your safe deposit box, and when they were starting to take the building down, it was on the corner of Main and Bank Street, and on the Bank Street side it was brick, it wasn't these beautiful big stones that were on the front. And they took out one brick, and could reach right into the vault.

Regarding her excursions to Main Street as a teenager, Linda Saharczewski commented that there was *always some type of urban renewal stuff going on, so there was always some kind of an excitement*. Rose Marie Thomas recalls that she had been similarly optimistic, but the lack of subsequent development slightly disillusioned her: *urban renewal was good, but when you take a building down you got to know what you're going to put in its place; they didn't, they just took buildings down.*



(The view in 1981 of the north side of Main Street across the empty lot where south Main Street and Bank Street buildings once stood. Some residents were eager for the redevelopment local government promised. When development finally occurred, it fell short of many residents' expectations.)

In response to whether people viewed urban renewal as progressive or negative, Judith McConnell states,

There was a big dividing group. One group thought "oh, this is wonderful. We're going to have," because we were, they were promised this is going to happen and that. Well, for 10 years nothing happened. And then they put a

Kmart on our Main Street. Which I thought, you know, everybody they didn't think that was a good thing either.

McConnell's personal opinion regarding urban renewal is that it *was not good*, which she bases in part on its implementation: *some of it [buildings] was dilapidated and probably needed to be taken down but I think one fell swoop like they did was not good*. And she recalls that the victims of renewal included not only crumbling buildings, but also healthy businesses and people that lived in the vicinity: *I had friends that lived on the street where the Boston Seafood, where all those things are now.... They had to find other places to live*. Importantly, she emphasizes urban renewal's disrespect for the city's rich history,

And yes, in one fell swoop our whole, I mean we had a huge hotel on the corner where the hotel is now, the Richmond Hotel was there. And on the corner where the mayor's office is, that was Hunter Machine. So all that went. Hunter Machine did move down onto South Church Street. But these were old historic buildings. And I guess I liken it to the fact that I went to Austria one year. To Innsburg. And you see all the old buildings there. And they're not tall skyscrapers. It's from the old country. And I said to my sister, "they don't tear stuff down." I said, "look at us. Our whole history of North Adams, gone." I don't think that would happen in this day and age because you see they're doing the buildings that are here, the old buildings that were manufacturing cotton, they've turned them into artists' lofts and apartments, so they're preserving. They're not destroying. But some of it's a little too late because the stuff that's on Main Street you can't replace. And all the businesses, you know. For what? Time marches on.



On the top left is the Richmond Hotel (later renamed the Phoenix Hotel, although many residents continue to refer to it as the Richmond), one of the most prominent buildings in North Adams until it was destroyed during urban renewal. To its right are pictures of its lavish interior taken at various times. A hotel has occupied that corner since the mid-19th century, when the Richmond family built atop the plot of the North Adams House, which was one of the city's first hotels. In the right-hand corner is the present day Holiday Inn, which now occupies the plot where the Richmond sat previously (west end of Main Street on the corner of what today is American Legion Drive). Located just west of the Richmond on Main Street was James Hunter Machine Company, depicted in the bottom-left picture. It was once a leading manufacturer of textile machinery that a famous local family, the Hunters, owned and operated from 1840 to 1970.

Workplaces

For much of North Adams' history, the city has been the Berkshire County's industrial and manufacturing hub. In their interviews, residents stress the pride they took in their work, noting that their jobs helped developed a sense of community among employees. Residents of an older generation recall that even as children they understood the importance of hard work. Lorraine Maloney, who worked at North Adams State College for more than 20 years, describes her busy day-to-day childhood experiences,

I was born during the Depression and there was not a lot of money to go around so we had these huge gardens. As children, we all helped out. You know, it was just understood that we just helped out, and we didn't have to get paid or anything to do that. We used to go out into the gardens and my mother used to can all the goods so the cellar was similar to a supermarket cause you canned blueberries and tomatoes and peaches and then they, we had loads of potatoes and you'd pick those and put them in bags and they would last you the whole winter long over there.

During North Adams's industrial boom, paid employment also began at a young age. Although many parents hoped their children could avoid factory jobs, with their long hours and sometimes difficult conditions, many interviewees now describe manufacturing work as a positive influence on their future work habits. As Robin Martin, a former employee at Wall-Streeter Shoes and Sprague Electric, states,

I think factory work should be like a learning tool. You know what I mean. Like go into it. I think everyone should work at McDonalds, waitress or work in a factory. Because I think it helps you to have a much stronger work ethic when you get older... It's a really good experience. For me it was never a be all, end all. That's just not the way it was...

Residents also stress the ease with which high school graduates could land a job. The city's factories always seemed to have positions open for younger employees, even if the jobs

were low-paid. Robin Martin remembers that her first day on the job hunt was a successful one:

I turned 18 May 2nd. And went to look for work the next day. And it was a joke. My brother and I were walking around because then you could just leave your house and say I'm going to get a job and you'd have a job by the end of the day. So we just were going to all these places and putting in applications. And we went to the Wall-Streeter. And I put in an application. And they said 'we are not hiring.' And then they looked back and they went 'wait a minute you had three years of sewing in high school.' I said 'yeah...' 'Oh good we have a job for you. So my brother walked away going "they're not even looking at me but they hired you just like that."...So that was my first experience in a factory. Something that my grandmother swore she would never allow me to do.



Because she had worked in them.

(Industrial manufacturing was the most significant sector of North Adams' economy for much of the early 20th century. Picture courtesy of the North Adams Historical Society)

Billy Perenick, a former barber from North Adams, began his career at a young age, and remembers the interactions

between small businesses and factory workers fondly. The manufacturing work in North Adams helped sustain a healthy small-business sector. Downtown luncheonettes served meals in shifts from noon to 1:00 and factory workers would crowd in for a fast meal before returning to an afternoon's work. Along with diners, other establishments, like Perenick's barbershop, became spaces of interaction between the city's various social strata,

Listen, in 1955, there were thirty barbers in North Adams, this is 1950. Lot of old-timers, at the time I was the youngest barber, I came out of barber school from Hartford, Connecticut and I was very fortunate, I got my job with a good, respectable barbershop...The population was dropping...but one time, with all these barbers years ago, the [workers] came out of the factory and then...they would shave them, they would go to the barbershop, get a shave for a quarter or thirty-five cents, and that was it...We had a couple doctors, there were lawyers, we had some engineers from Sprague's, we had a variety. Everybody. The guy that worked on the rubbish detail, you know, he was faithful, he'd come in every two weeks and got a haircut...we had guys in Sprague's, everybody.



(Large employers, like North Adams General Hospital and Sprague Electric, helped promote a healthy local business sector. Courtesy of the North Adams Historical Society)

During the height of industry in North Adams, women tended to dominate work on the production line.

Gendered work-forces were common

in the city; companies argued that female workers were more dexterous, and therefore more adept at working with small components, than male employees. This became an argument in favor of male-dominated management and administrative positions. The characterization of women as temporary workers who would leave the workforce to raise children also justified their low pay. The unbalanced relationship between male management and female labor did not hinder women from joining the workforce, however. Rose Marie Thomas, a long-time factory worker at Sprague, describes why she started working for the company:

That's the way it was back then, even when I was young, there weren't a whole lot of jobs open back then for women. Let's see I could be a secretary,

or a nurse, or a teacher. There wasn't a whole lot open. I thought I was going to be a nurse, that didn't work out, so I ended up in Sprague, and here I am.

Many women started and ended their working lives in factory jobs. Whether they worked in assembly production or secretarial positions, most women did not expect that they needed education and training beyond high school.

For Robin Martin, this became a problem when she began to look for work outside of Sprague,

I remember, during that time a few positions opened at the library. And one of the men that was working with us at the time, his wife was getting a job and I said then 'gee, you know I would love to have a job at the library.' And he looked me straight in the eye and he goes 'you'll never get a job at the library. You don't have enough education.' So that was the whole thing, once you came to Sprague you were at Sprague for your life.

The steady and reliable employment provided by factory work was certainly attractive. Reliability was not only a defining feature of work in North Adams, but a defining quality of the products that were being manufactured. Companies took pride in the trustworthiness of their goods, which was then reflected in the pride that employers took in their work. The James Hunter Machine Company was so confident in the quality of its textile machinery that it guaranteed its products for life. As Justyna Carlson of the North Adams Historical Society recalls,

The Hunters were very proud, and they did a good job, they knew that their product was good. Consequently they guaranteed all of their machines forever, not for ten years or twenty years or even 100 years, forever. So for a few years they got telephone calls: need some repairs in North or South Carolina. So they would send people down to repair them, and then they sent people to Mexico to repair them. And it turned out that, they didn't expect all of this moving. They didn't expect people operating who hadn't had the same kind of training, and it was getting to be so frequent that they were getting

calls from all over the world: come fix your machine because it's guaranteed and they just couldn't stay in business any longer.



(The James Hunter Machine Company plant. Courtesy of the North Adams Historical Society)

Community pride and workmanship go hand in hand in North Adams. The city's manufacturing past has defined its workplaces, and the transition towards a more diversified economy after decades of economic decline

has left some residents a little rosy-eyed about their work experience during the height of industry. As some people see it, the loss of manufacturing jobs didn't just rob North Adams of good work opportunities, but also limited the chance for young people to develop healthy work habits and to take pride in their jobs. Work opportunities are not just a practical necessity for the residents of North Adams; the sense of community and comradeship that hard work provides is also a cherished part of life in this city. As the economic fortunes of North Adams improve, comments like Robin Martin's are becoming more common,

The immediate future of North Adams. I'm excited for it.

Sprague Electric

'Sprague's' occupies a unique place in the memory of North Adams, reflecting residents' work values and community pride. For decades, the electric components manufacturer served as the city's industrial backbone, employing more than two thousand people. Work at Sprague could be tiring, tedious, and not always steady. Nonetheless, many employees considered it a good job; they started and finished their careers at Sprague. Former employees frequently remark that the atmosphere at Sprague's was familial, sometimes literally so; it was not uncommon to see multiple members of the same family working the same shifts. As former Sprague employee Linda Saharczewski remembers, relations between workers were cordial and respectful.

I felt comfortable, I always felt comfortable there. I never felt as if... sometimes when you go to work somewhere, you know, you want people to like you and you want to get along with people...I never had to worry about that because there were so many people and they were all really friendly and really nice. And...the chief executive officers and the owners, they worked just down the hall from us and I think they kind of set the tone because here were the people that created this business and were running, I mean, they were the top people in the business, and they were just as friendly as the person working in the mill down the street, you know, they were very, very nice people and very friendly.

(Sprague-employed 'Rosies' constructing gas masks during the Second World War, April 15, 1941. Courtesy of the North Adams Historical Society)

The company encouraged a certain filial piety for upper management, and encouraged mutual respect between the assembly workers and administration. This policy was supported by the gendered separation of female-dominated



production work and male-dominated upper management. This sense of reverence was also reflected in the company's relationship with North Adams itself. Given Sprague's dominance in the city's economy, it was in the city's best interests to keep the company stationed in North Adams. As long as Sprague continued to keep its doors open for business, residents would tolerate lower salaries and limited benefits. Otto Wied, a former employee at Sprague's Research and Development Center, describes this unique relationship.

R.C. [Robert C. Sprague] ran, and I shouldn't even say ran it, it's just that...you had a patron. A kind of a laissez-faire. You had a patron at the top who controlled a certain area. The people there owed a respect to the patron. The patron owed a debt to the people. That was very much the way North Adams felt towards the Sprague Electric Company. Sprague Electric Company didn't pay us great pay, but it was good salary and it was a good place to live, and we knew when my kid got to be 18 and got out of Drury [High School] he would have a job. We can find something for him. It was that kind of an attitude.



(Robert C. Sprague [left] reads a protester's sign while inspecting the picket line. The CEO made frequent visits to the picket line; relations between management and labor remained relatively cordial during the 10-week affair. Courtesy of the North Adams Historical Society.)

While this hierarchy seems outdated from today's perspective, multiple interviewees describe their pride in the mutual respect

between management and labor. There was a sense that--in exchange for diligent work--Sprague would provide for the community, offering jobs for recent high school graduates and guaranteeing steady employment for decades. The job stability that Sprague offered played a large role in the community of North Adams. Lorraine Maloney, who started work at Sprague at a young age, found that employment at the company gave her a new sense of confidence and pride.

That was a really good learning experience...and you learned to deal with the public and you...felt better about yourself, you know, because you know that you're capable then of doing things. I've always been very quiet, very shy growing up, so that really helped me a lot.

Sprague's relationship with the city of North Adams changed in the spring of 1970. Starting on March 1st, Sprague's unionized workers went on strike against the company, hoping to gain leverage in a wage dispute. The strike has become something of a legend in the memories of former employees, and many mark it as the beginning of the end of industry in North Adams. Despite this, strikers like Rose Marie Thomas recall the sense of camaraderie and occasional moments of humor that sustained workers through the difficult 10 week work stoppage:

Oh! Well that was fun walking around and around...People would come in, of course we knew the bosses were in there doing our jobs, but we had to go on strike! Walked around, walked around and around, oh and if I wasn't there I was in the headquarters on Main Street, I don't know what I was doing there...I remember sitting in the window looking out. Must have been something I did in there but I don't remember, it was a long time ago. But I remember the parties they used to have on Main St. Boy they'd get drunk. And then we had our union meetings, a lot of yelling, you know a lot of yelling. I remember that, so...

The strike's impact spread to other employees at the company, many of whom were expected to continue production. Working during the strike meant confronting friends and

family on the picket line. As Saharczewski discusses, mutual understanding existed between workers on either side:

Having to walk through a picket line wasn't just kind of pushing your way through, you didn't know what was going to happen, you didn't know if someone was going to throw something at you, I mean, they actually really feared for their well being... They also didn't like the idea that these were people that they were friends with.... it's like what I had said before... you become friendly with anybody, with everybody, it doesn't matter what your stature is. People that you see every day and talk to every day and here they are, barring you from going in to make your living, to do your work, but you know the reason that they're doing it is good. I mean, they really, they really needed to fight to get some of the privileges that they deserved and get the pay that they deserved and the benefits and things like that. So that was a tough thing for a lot of people.



(In a gesture of reconciliation, IUE [International Union of Electrical Workers] members thank Robert C. Sprague after the conclusion of the strike. Picture courtesy of the North Adams Historical Society)

Multiple interviewees stress the change in labor-management relations that followed the strike. Tensions mounted as Sprague Electric began to

experience greater economic difficulties. By the late 1970's and early 1980's, it seemed evident that Sprague would leave North Adams. The stability and job security that Sprague had once provided began to unravel, and with that came the loss of the amity that had once defined the relationship between management and production. Robin Martin describes the pressures of working at Sprague during its decline.

You knew you couldn't count on your job. I remember one morning they called us all into the cafeteria and the head of the department had security guards all around him. When he announced that they were sending yet another line to Mexico, he was terrified of our reaction at that point. And then he lied and said he would fight to keep jobs. And he didn't. He moved with them.

Sprague closed down production lines starting in the early 1980's. In 1985, the company announced that it was moving out of North Adams. As the last major industrial manufacturer to leave the city, Sprague's departure represents a transition point in the history of North Adams. Steve Melito, a former summer employee at Sprague, notes that the loss of Sprague *is the hole in North Adams' soul...if you look at...the Sprague Electric Company's 'Long Goodbye'...it's still this process of saying goodbye to this very significant employer...*

As North Adams diversifies its economy, the city can hope to recapture the sense of community and employee pride that companies like Sprague once developed.

Surrounding Areas

In the mid-20th century, many North Adams residents grew up, went to school, found work, and raised a family in their native city. North Adams also drew workers and families from across Western Massachusetts, attracting them with the many factory jobs and social opportunities that the larger city provided. Robin Martin remembered the North Adams of her youth as a largely self-contained, inward looking community. As she put it, *we didn't have to worry about anything that was going on anywhere else unless it was a major war.*



Center Street Square, Adams, MA (postcard c. 1910)

Nevertheless, even if people living in North Adams didn't realize it, the surrounding towns were important to their success. Although smaller nearby towns such as Williamstown and Adams had their own economies and focuses, many of their residents were drawn to the size and potential of North Adams. Linda Saharczewski recalls the view from Adams during the '60s and '70s when she was growing up.

Adams was a mill town, we had the Berkshire Mills, it was a cotton mill in Adams, and it went out of business, of sorts. And when you were growing up in Adams during the time I was growing up, in high school, when people were

thinking about jobs in the area, there were two big places to go and one was Sprague Electric Company in North Adams and one was the GE in Pittsfield. Those are the places that everyone really wanted to get into and you would get good pay, you would get benefits and it kind of seemed to most people that they thought that it was going to be there for the long haul. North Adams was a rival of Adams, which, you know, most schools and places do have, I mean, we were the good town and they were the bad city, you know, but they also did have a lot more to offer than we did. We were very small, like I said, we had the mills but the mills had closed down so we just had a lot of smaller businesses in town.

North Adams's industrial reputation spread far beyond Berkshire Country as well. Sprague's factories across the country and its government contracts meant that many workers, managers and politicians across the U.S. knew of North Adams and its industry. Fred Scarborough, a longtime manager at Sprague, oversaw many of company's factories scattered across the country. Since North Adams housed its headquarters, Sprague periodically sent North Adams managers, including Scarborough, to the rest of its factories. Scarborough recalls:

In each of the plants I had, we had small production groups for which I was responsible. They were in Annapolis Junction Maryland, Dayton, actually right near the airport in Dayton, Los Angeles, San Ysidro, California, which handled the Mexican operations. And I'm sad to say I started the move to Mexico. Some of our labor contracts, jobs had Mexican people assemble the components which they brought back to my people in Los Angeles who finished them up and would satisfy customer orders from Los Angeles.



Downtown and Park Square, Pittsfield, MA

As Linda Saharczewski mentioned, North Adams wasn't the only industrial hub in the Berkshires. Pittsfield also drew many people from across the region, largely based on its large General Electric factories and the many shops and businesses that catered to GE's employees. Billy Perenick, a North Adams native, remembers visiting Pittsfield in his youth.

I used to go to Pittsfield for ballgames. My aunt lived in Pittsfield. You'd go down there when I was a teenager, go watch a basketball game. When Pittsfield played Drury or Saint Joe's down there, I used to go down to the ballgame. You couldn't walk the streets, you know, everybody was on the streets and there was a lot of money in Pittsfield down there at the time. The GE was booming ... you would drive around down there at that time, they had a good thing going.

As North Adams's economic fortunes began to change, however, so did its image outside the community. Fewer young people stayed in North Adams as jobs became scarce. The city's reputation changed from one of American ingenuity and hard work to a case study in post-industrial decay. Even in New Jersey, where Justyna Carlson attended college, North Adams was seen as a textbook example of the plight of American manufacturing. Significantly, Carlson's account dates to the early 1960s, decades before Sprague closed.

A number of them were taking intro sociology classes as freshmen, and about three or four chapters into the book they came running into my dorm room to say: our book mentions North Adams, Massachusetts as a prime depressed economic area where the population has gone down. And of course this is 1962, so it definitely, through the '50's and into the '60's was going down. And I said yes, that's true, we're one of the communities where population has gone down, a number of the mills have closed and families have moved out, and I agree. And then about...chapter 8 or 9 they all came running in again and said "You're in the book again" and I said, "What are we in this time for?" "Well they're coordinating crime statistics with economically depressed areas and so, your North Adams is there as high crime because of the economic situation." I said "no way! I agree with the first part, but I don't agree with this part. The last murder was in 1939," and I said, "they must have counted every parking ticket in order to get those statistics."

Over the last two decades, as North Adams has struggled to reinvent itself, the city's reputation has slowly begun to change. Perhaps the creation of Mass MoCA has had the biggest effect on the ways people see North Adams. Robin Martin credits Mass MoCA with helping to get rid of North Adams' negative reputation. In her estimation there are now *more people coming into the area that are not natives and settling here. I love the art that shows up on Main Street. I love that we have more music around. I just find it very enjoyable. I wish along with that we had a couple more big employers. That would be a wonderful thing. Or even a whole bunch of small ones that were steady. We see businesses come in for year or two and then go someplace else. That's too bad. I wish that we had more. But I think certainly MoCA helped to put us on the map for something besides being a factory town. And for that I thank them.*

Mass MoCA



MASS MoCA opened in 1999 and, since then it has become the largest contemporary art museum in the country, garnering praise and visibility. The museum draws thousands of tourists to North Adams every year, but local residents' views of the museum remain mixed. After Sprague closed in 1985, much of the community saw MASS MoCA as a beacon of hope for the struggling economy. At that time, many believed that as long as Sprague's former buildings were unoccupied, North Adams would remain stuck in the shadow of the factory's closing. But residents also worried over the lack of jobs in the city and whether an art museum could bring an economic revival. In 2016, MASS MoCA is on the precipice of another huge expansion project, largely funded by the state. It seemed important to revisit the relationship between North Adams and MASS MoCA and examine its role in North Adams' changing identity from a post-industrial factory town to a tourism-focused, culture hub, placing North Adams in the international sphere.

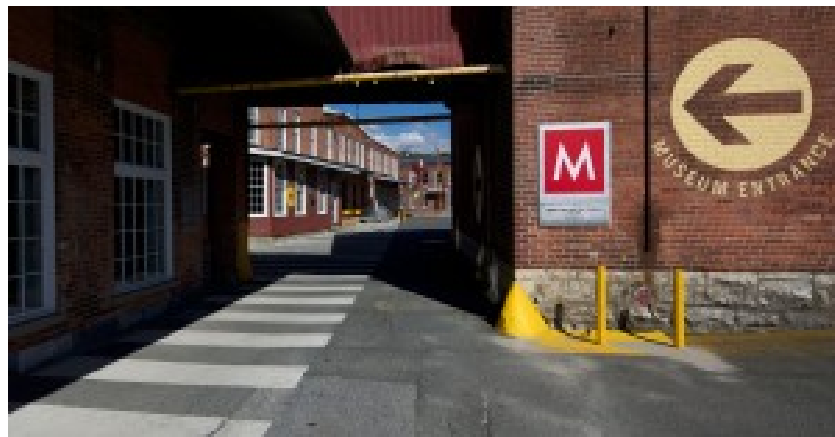
The museum both has failed and succeeded in meeting residents' expectations. Robin Martin, a lifelong resident of North Adams, credits Mass MoCA with connecting the city to life outside the area. Even so, MASS MoCA cannot fill the place of a single large employer the way Sprague did, which still is anchored to the North Adams identity.

I think it did change the face of North Adams in that it made us more aware of the rest of the world. Because before that, here we were. We didn't have to worry about anything that was going on anywhere else unless it was a major war. When Sprague went out and MoCA came in, many people resented the

whole thing. I don't think MoCA itself gives back that much to the community. However, all the little fingers that come off of it [do].

Like Martin, former North Adams resident, Steve Melito, questions who benefits from MASS MoCA. Is MASS MoCA here for, tourists or residents? And can both groups benefit?

MASS MoCA? I give a big sigh because it's better. North Adams is better that it exists, but North Adams is not nearly as well off as the hype would like us to believe. So why do I say that? You know, it's great that there's a world-class museum in that building. It's great that tourists come in, but MASS MoCA has not been a job creator for the people of North Adams and it tends to be an island unto itself so that when people come to visit North Adams, they stay on the MASS MoCA campus and they don't leave for whatever reason so the tax breaks go to MASS MoCA, the dollars go to MASS MoCA, but there's not a lot of jobs for local people.



Melito has seen first-hand the limited impact that MASS MoCA has on the local business community.

I think people are always willing to start their own shops in North Adams. My wife had a consignment-clothing store. So this is maybe kind of an example. She was on Holden Street which is not far from MASS MoCA and she was hoping to get some of the overflow traffic from MASS MoCA and when there were events at MASS MoCA she was, you know, pretty successful. But

there's not enough that happens at MASS MoCA for it to spill out and benefit the rest of the community.

Rose Thomas, who worked at Sprague for several decades, believes that many residents' have unreasonable expectations for the museum. An enthusiastic supporter of MoCA, Thomas frequently volunteers during performances and other special events.

Oh I think it's great now. When MASS MoCA first came out somehow people got the idea that everybody in North Adams was going to have a job at MoCA. It's a museum, not a job center, it's a museum! They hire a lot of people of course, but they can't give everybody a job... I love it but not everybody loves it. We need jobs, we need jobs; My mother was like that, "we need jobs." Well all small towns need jobs, it can't be helped. We need factories, well let's face it people the factories are gone, they're now museums, and various other things.

Like Thomas, Colleen Taylor, a local business owner, questions people's assumption that MASS MoCA would literally and figuratively fill the hole that Sprague left when they closed their factories in North Adams. Taylor owns and runs restaurants in Williamstown and North Adams and believes the museum has helped close the distance between the two neighboring towns.

When I first arrived they were all talking about this MASS MoCA happening. MASS MoCA coming to town and a museum coming to town. And so I think there's two things. When we first moved here there was this line, very thick. What I mean by that there was this you know, thick line between North Adams residents and Williamstown. And even though the line - it's an imaginary line - still exists, it has dwindled down to like, it's almost transparent it's dwindled so much.... people had a misnomer about what Williamstown was like and what North Adams was like. Williamstown thought North Adams was one way and North Adams thought, and as the line has dissipated it started to get quicker, the dissipation. It was a lot to do with the museum. The museum, I think some of the older people couldn't see how,

couldn't imagine the museum, Mass MoCA, transcending a few of these, you know, remaking the whole city. And it took a long time for them to get there. I mean it's been twenty years since I've been here, and when we first moved here they started doing things over there at the Mass MoCA.... In the beginning there was even from the – the locals wouldn't necessarily go into Mass MoCA. Now they've really come to accept it, and I think that has been done not just by the visual arts there, but by some of the businesses that are there now and some of the museum, some of the concerts they have. People have come on campus and once they go on campus it feels more comfortable for them to go back and forth. Along with these examples of positive experiences with MASS MoCA, Sprague's ghost remained a strong piece of the story and remains as a part of the legacy of North Adams.

Lorraine Maloney, Otto Wied and Linda Saharczewski, all former Sprague employees, still have vivid recollections of Sprague that trips to Mass MoCA rekindle. Lorraine Maloney appreciates that the museum continues to use equipment from Sprague that symbolizes the high quality work completed there:

If you go to MASS MoCA they have the little restaurant down there, not the big one but the other one and they have these little metal stools. These women sat on these stools all day long. Some of them brought little pads to put on them and I've got pictures you know of some of the women working in there doing the same thing over and over all day long but they took pride and they loved what they did over there.

Otto Wied, who used to work in the Research Division, feels mixed emotions when he recalls what was formerly in MoCA's space:

The first main big room right off the, entrance lobby, that was Building 4 and my original office and lab was on the top floor in the...northwest corner. And I can walk in there and look up there and I see a window and say: I used to have the office that looked right out of that window down on River Street. And it still bothers me. I don't enjoy going in there.

Like Wied, Linda Saharczewski feels reluctant to see what now occupies Sprague's space. Saharczewski expresses curiosity but mostly she is uncomfortable that the complex still holds many memories and signs of what is passed:

I haven't gone through a lot of the buildings. It's hard. I don't even know how to explain it but I mean, I want to one of these days, but I've gone through a few, I've gone, and... you immediately feel that feeling again, that you were back there. You know, when I go into the courtyard, I remember walking across the courtyard and I remember, I look and I can see in my mind the cars and whose cars used to be parked in the courtyard and it was, you know, Mr. Sprague's car and it was, you know, Mr. Welch's car and you knew that they were all there and you knew that this building here, this was where the security guys were all the time, you know, and you could always stop in and talk to them... it's kind of one of those things where when you're there and you look around and if they change something, it will bother me because I say, what was there before? There was something there before, what did they do to it? ... I'm happy that there's being something done there but it's really, it's kind of like going to a cemetery, in a way because it was a place that was, you know, full of life and it was vital to the community, vital to the whole area and... it's gone now, you know?



The Future

North Adams lives in the imagination of people — it's future, present and past. Many people assessed the tension between North Adams' previous identity as an industrial center and its new and changing identity as a home for the arts. What became clear through the interviews was North Adams' enduring sense of place. Sprague might have left North Adams, but the loyalty and persistence of its residents hasn't changed.



Linda Saharczewski, former Sprague employee, describes MASS MoCA's success after Sprague's closing and the way that progression has impacted the local community:

The closing of Sprague really left a gap, but I think that North Adams is starting to get on the right track. They went full-force into putting all their eggs into MASS MoCA and while a lot of people didn't think or didn't feel confident that that was ever going to do much for the city, I think it's slowly starting to show that it is helping. They have a lot of events that go on there that bring thousands of people into that city. And it's still kept its... it's still a small city, you know- and that's kind of what is nice about it, you know. It is a city, there's a lot going on, there's a lot of things happening there now because of MASS MoCA - things are starting to build up little by little, but it's still small enough that you don't get lost in it, you know, you really don't get lost in it.

Steve Melito, who grew up in North Adams and currently lives in Adams, reflects on the future of manufacturing. Melito remarks that North Adams' identity is still deeply tied to industry, and he points out the ways in which he sees Sprague's legacy living on in North Adams and Adams.

As much as people in northern Berkshire would like there to be another big employer, there really isn't. I'm sure some people went to the hospital maybe to work as custodians or got jobs in the school as custodians, but for the type of low skilled manufacturing labor, those jobs are gone and they're not just gone in North Adams, they're gone across the Northeast and the Midwest and they're not coming back. So that's been hard with that. I can tell you a couple interesting successor stories that came out of Sprague. There are two companies in Adams right now that have their roots in Sprague. One is Shinewire, they're in the industrial park and the current owner's father had worked for Sprague for many years and when Sprague imploded in the eighties he went off and started his own company and kept some people working, but not on the order of magnitude that Sprague itself did. Then there's another company in the Adam's industrial park, MRA Technologies and its run by a man whose dad was a Sprague scientist and they do ceramics or maybe even ceramic capacitors, so there are a couple of offshoots that survive but on a much smaller scale and they're more highly skilled than Sprague itself probably was.

Otto Wied, former Sprague employee, brought out another perspective when asked what he saw for the future in North Adams. As Wied explains, it is hard to think about the future in North Adams. Many who were closely involved with Sprague continue to have difficulty seeing beyond it.

Well, it's never going to be a manufacturing center. Location's just not good. It's difficult to envision it as becoming a tourist center. It's a little too far...out. And really all it's got going for it is MASS MoCA. And the Clark. I would hope...that it could grow from MASS MoCA as...an arts community. I can't imagine it growing it into much, but at least it's being sustained, as an arts community, and as a low cost pleasant place to live. I really, it's hard to think of what the future could be.

While others who have rich memories from Sprague see a lot for a future. Lorraine Maloney, lifelong North Adams resident is an example of this.

Well I think North Adams has changed so much from an industrial age. Now it's art and it is very difficult for older people to accept. Well, industry is never going to come back. You really have to accept, you know, the art and the changes and the things that are gonna come, like MASS MoCA. I mean that brings thousands of people to the area all the time. Let's see. And they have the [Eclipse] Mill on Union Street, I've been in that, where people are all artists and they also live there and they work, their art. I've been into the pottery studio up there. It's just lovely. They have beautiful apartments. Just like when it was a mill, all brick and everything and then they have the pottery studio you can watch them while they're working up there on it. So I think people have to learn to accept the city's changes and they're never going to bring factories back. There's not a need for it. So we have to go with what is going to happen. Like I think, North Adams with the [Greylock] Mill here, a lot of people from out of the area are investing in our city right now which I think will help North Adams a lot to grow. Like this mill down here will eventually be a really wonderful place, you know, for people to be. And they're talking about building a museum next to the airport over there as well. Tom Krenz who started MASS MoCA. He is going to probably do that. They're also down at Heritage State Park. They're looking at doing a huge railroad museum down there on it, I don't know if you keep track of that, what's going on. And that should be beautiful over there and they're going to build more buildings down there and that'll bring, again, more visitors to the area. We take for granted what is here and the beauty of nature and so forth. People that come from out of the area think that is fantastic. You know, like MASS MoCA has done the big concerts in the summertime over here and all the concerts they've brought here they've never had any problem with people. It's been wonderful, wonderful things for the community. Thousands of people come in for Wilco. I think they're coming here in the summer, but it brings a lot of money into the community. It's even hard to find a place to stay, the motels, hotels. Like the Redwood Motel when you're headed back toward Williamstown, that's bought by some people from Wilco and they're going to be making, it'll be all housing down there. And it also might have some bike paths and so forth. And they also bought the Blackinton Mill which is on Mass

Avenue and eventually you'll be able to cross over the river and go over to the Blackinton section over there. That's going to be really nice for the community over there.

Others still, such as Colleen Taylor identify a changing psychological atmosphere in North Adams.

I think that's an important part to your community. If you do not have a good education system you're going to always – you can't, you can't swim it's like a weight on your shoe, you know, holding you back. So I think that that's going to float up. Now with that happening I think also the idea of Sprague leaving and that wound is going to dissipate as that generation that remembers it goes away. And you are only going to remember MASS MoCA.... Nothing is wrong with North Adams, okay. North Adams is a beautiful community. Yes do they have a few empty stores, that's everywhere in America. We are coming out of that. I think 2016, 2017, I think you're going to see those fill in. And it's not a desolate city. It's surrounded by beautiful mountains. People just have to re-look at that mirror and see what it looks like inside that mirror and then they'll feel a little bit better themselves. They're just holding up a cracked mirror. North Adams is much more beautiful than what they perceive themselves to be. And Mass MoCA is one of those things that's saying, hey look at us.

North Adams' future remains unclear. But its residents care deeply and hope that the city - and the people who live here - can thrive.

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