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# THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY

For two years in the late 1980s I lived in a small town on the Hudson River, ten miles east of Saratoga. It was named Schuylerville after the old Dutch patroon family, whose most illustrious scion was the Revolutionary War general Philip Schuyler. The village lies nestled along the western side of the river valley, which rises steeply to a sort of hilly plateau. The gridded blocks are bisected by service alleys lined by barns and carriage houses. The nineteenth-century houses were cobbled over with 1960s redos, and the materials they used—aluminum and asbestos siding, fake brick—have entered a secondary stage of decay.

Many blue and yellow New York State historical markers stand scattered around the town today. Each tells a little piece of the story of the Battle of Saratoga, which took place in woods and farm fields nearby in 1777. "Here the British Army parked their artillery," says one marker near the driveway of the High School. "Site of the Continental barracks where General Stark tried and condemned the Tory Lovelass as a Spy," says another at the north end of town. A marker in the parking lot of the supermarket commemorates the surrender of the British commander "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne. The British grounded their arms on what is now the town ballfield beside the river. Looming over the town on top of the hill that rises out of the valley stands a 100-foot-high granite obelisk that was erected a century after the great battle. It is a fine structure, decorated with statues of the generals who fought there so valiantly, and with other fine touches of carved stonework. Inside the monument an iron staircase spirals up to an observa-

tion tower. The view must be superb, but, alas, the interior has been locked for years because teenagers got into the habit of having wild parties inside.

Civilian deeds are also commemorated: "Site of the first flax mill in the United States," declares a marker at the edge of the woods beside Fish Creek, which empties into the Hudson at the south end of town. There is nothing left of the flax mill itself, which was demolished before the turn of the twentieth century, but Schuylerville's economic history is otherwise highly visible in the landscape.

The years I spent there, in a little brick cottage near the river, were the years when President Reagan proclaimed that it was "morning in America." For Schuylerville, it was more like 4 P.M. on the first day of winter. Its economy lay in tatters. In this respect it was not unlike many other old towns that dot the banks of the Hudson and Mohawk river valleys in upstate New York.

Six of the seven factories that once produced paper products in and around town had closed by 1970, and the remaining plant employed fewer than 100 people. Men and women long used to steady jobs at good wages during the best postwar years now had to spend their final working years cobbling together a living from part-time work at lower pay, often a long drive from town. Their children and their children's children, who had no hopes for steady work at good pay, fell into the abyss of welfare, drugs, petty crime, and teen pregnancy—behavior that Americans more usually associate with inner-city ghettos. To understand what the town has lost it might be useful to consider what it had.

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First, Schuylerville was a canal and river town. The Champlain Canal was dug through the Schuyler family's settlement in 1819 to bypass a series of unnavigable rapids in the Hudson River, and a substantial village quickly sprang up along it. The canal completed a direct water route between New York City and Montreal, and for decades it was the only route. It was a great feat of engineering. At the time, American canals were wonders of the world, for they ran much greater distances than the canals of Europe.

In the canal's heyday before the Civil War, Canal Street was lined by warehouses, cold-storage facilities (cooled by block ice), mule barns,





boat yards, and hotels for boatmen and teamsters. It was colorful and rough, as any district full of transient laborers is apt to be. Today, all but one of those buildings are gone. On one side of the canal is a two-acre patch of weeds and trees too unkempt to be called a park. It is never used by anyone. At the far end of it the village road crew keeps a mound of sand piled up for their wintertime street-grooming operations. On the other bank of the canal stands a neighborhood of small, motley, run-down trailers—affordable housing.

A block over from Canal Street runs the town's main thoroughfare, Broad Street. Its rows of commercial buildings extend two long blocks. In the canal days, the "downtown" business buildings were full of the offices of freight forwarders, commercial insurers, bookkeepers, and others concerned with the business of shipping. There were about twenty-five stores in operation at any given time, three hotels, and three theaters. The people who owned and operated these businesses took pride in their buildings and they took care of them. Many owned dwellings in the village as well. The value that their businesses accrued remained in town.

The chief products shipped through Schuylerville during the canal years were lumber from the Adirondack forests, burnt lime (used for plaster) from the hills across the river in Washington County, and potatoes grown locally for a bottomless market in New York City, 175 miles south. Two hundred farms operated in the vicinity of Schuylerville. These were diversified farms, growing local market produce as well as potatoes, and also hay for the mules that worked the canal. Today, only a handful of dairying operations remain. The town had an additional role as an agricultural trading center; here the farmers came to buy seed and tools. Local merchants profited. The population of the village proper was roughly 2500.

The town's semipastoral canal years ended with a sudden, stark shift to a new economy. Seemingly overnight, Schuylerville became a factory town. An abundance of water power lay close at hand. Fish Creek offered two waterfalls within the village limits. The aforementioned flax mill went up first. A much larger factory was built a quarter mile upstream in 1868. It produced high quality cotton cambric cloth. (In the twentieth century it was converted to make cardboard.) On the other side of the Hudson and less than a mile to the north, another stream,

called the Battenkill, empties into the river with even greater force and volume than Fish Creek. Through the second half of the nineteenth century six factories went up in and around the place where the Battenkill joins the Hudson: a box mill (its specialty: cardboard cartons), a sash and blind works (windows, et cetera), two paper mills, a pulp mill that ground up logs into the raw material for the paper mills, and a wallpaper factory. At their peak, around 1900, the plants provided about 1000 jobs in the area. By the standards of the day, the workers were well paid. The money they earned was spent mostly in town. The factories were owned locally. Their owners built impressive houses and lived locally. The money they spent, in turn, supported local tradesmen and local merchants. Part of the wealth that these mills generated was invested in public buildings. No state grants were involved and hence decisions made about public works were made locally, rather than by distant bureaucrats.

The Fitchburg Railroad laid a branch line through Schuylerville in the 1800s (it was rather late in coming) that made the town a link between Albany, New York, and Rutland, Vermont, with its connecting routes to Canada and northern New England. Later, the Boston & Maine took it over. The train tracks ran right up the center of town on Green Street to a depot at Spring Street and then out of town past the cluster of six factories just mentioned. A decade later, a group of private investors backed an interurban light rail service—a trolley system—that ran from Troy, thirty miles down the river, up through Schuylerville, and onward to Fort Edward, Hudson Falls, Glens Falls, and finally to Warrensburg in the southern Adirondacks. That line linked up to another trolley out of Saratoga Springs, and the cars ran every thirty minutes. A spur of the trolley veered east across the Hudson River to the factories on the eastern shore of the Hudson.

Barely any sign remains that the trolley system existed. Occasionally a patch of blacktop at a street intersection wears away to reveal a glimpse of shiny tracks set among fat cobblestones. And a file of twelve massive stone bridge piers stand mutely in the Hudson River stripped of their iron girders near the derelict United Board and Carton factory.

In 1913 the Champlain Canal system had a major overhaul, mainly to accommodate larger boats and oil barges. A channel in the Hudson was dredged and bigger locks installed below the rapids. The stretch that ran





through Schuylerville was no longer necessary, and it was simply abandoned. But it wasn't filled in. It still exists as a feature in the town's landscape, a narrow, peaceful backwater full of bullfrogs, carp, and snapping turtles, overhung with trees and largely hidden from the active life of the town—though some houses have yards that back onto it. The water is quiet but not stagnant. It flows in imperceptibly from the abandoned lock at the north of town end and flushes out below Fish Creek. Every year or so a troop of Boy Scouts goes up the old towpath—a turf road once trod by the mules that towed the canal boats—and clears out sumac saplings with a brush hog so townspeople can enjoy walking the mile length of it, all the way up to the modern Lock Number 5.

There was a time just before the First World War when a person could get around this part of the world by train, trolley, boat, automobile, horse, or on foot, and in fact each mode of transportation had its place. This rich variety of possibilities is hard to imagine in our age, when the failure to own a car is tantamount to a failure in citizenship, and our present transportation system is as much of a monoculture as our way of housing or farming. Factory workers walked or took the trolley across the Hudson. Shoppers walked to market. Stores delivered orders too big to carry. Freight moved long distance by rail or boat, and by truck or wagon only locally. Anybody who had urgent business with the greater world at large could hop on a train and get to Albany in an hour or New York City inside of five.

The yearly percentage of town revenue devoted to street and highway maintenance was much smaller in proportion to the lavish amounts that our overblown system requires today. Because of our outlandish expenditure, there is nothing left over to purchase public amenity. For example, in the 1920s, the village of Schuylerville supported an elaborate public bathing beach at the riverside. The setup was complete with bathhouse, picnic tables, lifeguards, white sand brought in from elsewhere, and an impressive battery of floats with diving platforms and slides. The beach has been closed now for many years, the white sand invaded by cattails and pickerel weed, and the changing rooms bashed apart by bored teenagers. Incidentally, the village couldn't even afford its two-man police force, and got rid of it, too, in the early 1980s.

New York Route 4 runs up Broad Street. From the 1920s on, it was a major highway to Montreal. For decades this meant that a great deal of regular truck traffic plied up Route 4 through Schuylerville. The noise must have been a terrible nuisance, but the truckers stopped and spent money in the restaurants and hotels. The interurban light rail system, the trolley, went out of business right after the First World War, having lost too great a percentage of its riders to private cars and buses. Regular train service on the Boston & Maine continued. A special kind of fine sand used in the process of molding cast iron was shipped in gondola cars out of Schuylerville in vast quantities. Drifts of it lay scattered across local farms by retreating glaciers. In the ensuing millennia a layer of rich topsoil formed over it. Extracting the molding sand was easy. It did little damage to farmland, while it put quite a bit of extra money in the farmers' pockets.

In the 1940s there were three major hotels in town, five barbershops, several grocery stores, clothing shops for men and women, three drug stores, four lunch counters, a newsroom, a bicycle shop, a movie theater, and a local newspaper—the Schuylerville *Standard*. Saturdays, shoppers filled the sidewalks. On summer nights, there were street dances for the teenagers. With seven factories humming, the town enjoyed a strong industrial base.

What happened to Schuylerville since then typifies the fate of farm and factory towns throughout upstate New York, parts of New England, and the Midwest: as our national economy became more gigantic, local economies ceased to matter. And with that, they ceased to be communities in the most meaningful sense, though people and buildings remained.

The Boston & Maine terminated rail service through Schuylerville in 1957. The track was too expensive to maintain. It crossed Fish Creek on trestles in several places, and the trestles, subject to spring floods and other stresses, required constant repair. Anyway, it was a period when the entire American railroad industry was stumbling into insolvency. A little trunk line like the B & M spur into Schuylerville was not worth maintaining. They tore up the tracks along Green Street, disassembled the railroad bridge that had crossed the Hudson, and knocked down all





the trestles across Fish Creek. And so the tracks are now gone. Even if we wanted to return to a mixed transportation arrangement—and we should not doubt that it will be necessary in the future—it would be fearfully expensive to replace them.

Interstate 87, the four-lane, limited-access superhighway that opened in 1967, was now the main route between New York City and Montreal. It was routed to go through Saratoga Springs, ten miles to the west of Schuylerville, because Saratoga with its famous racetrack is a popular tourist destination. Overnight, long-haul truck traffic vanished from Route 4 and with it vanished part of Schuylerville's economy, because truckers no longer stopped for hash and eggs or a night's rest. With the railroad gone, and canal traffic limited to an occasional heating-oil barge, and no long-haul truck traffic, Schuylerville's restaurants and hotels began to fold. The shopping mall at Saratoga, built in 1972, put the last clothing stores in Schuylerville out of business.

For all practical purposes, Schuylerville became a colonial outpost of another America. Its impoverishment is one of the untallied costs of the policy of limitless "growth." The leading business establishments in Schuylerville these days are the two convenience stores, each operated by large chains—call them X and Y. The main east-west road through town, Route 29, has become a major "feeder" for Interstate 87, and the convenience stores were built to take advantage of that traffic. They sell gasoline, milk, beer, cigarettes, soda, and snacks. Plenty of local dollars are spent at the X and Y stores too—at times, the whole population of town seems to subsist on Pepsi Cola and Cheez Doodles. Perhaps in the future people will look back at convenience stores with fond nostalgia, because they are the late twentieth-century successors to the old general store that sold a little bit of everything. But there is one big difference—the X and Y stores are not owned by local merchants.

The X and Y Corporations pay property taxes to operate their stores in Schuylerville, and a percentage of the county sales tax they pay is returned to the village via a rather abstruse political formula. The stores also furnish a handful of minimum-wage jobs. But what they contribute to the town is far less significant than what they take away: the chance for a local merchant to make a profit, to keep that profit in town, where it might be put to work locally, for instance, in the upkeep of a

hundred-year-old shopfront building downtown, or a Greek Revival house on Pearl Street, or in the decent support of a family. But that profit does not stay in town. Instead, it is funneled directly into distant corporate coffers. The officers of the X and Y Corporations, who do not live in Schuylerville, have no vested interest in the upkeep of the 100-hundred-year-old shopfront buildings or the Greek Revival houses there. (They may not even know what the town looks like, or a single fact of its history.) Their success is measured strictly by the tonnage of Cheez Doodles and Pepsi Cola they manage to move off the shelves. The income they derive from their jobs is spent supporting and maintaining distant suburbs—and the cost of that is fantastic. The presence of convenience stores has eliminated many other local operations—the newsroom, several lunch counters, mom and pop groceries—which couldn't compete in volume of sales. The volume of sales is the *sole* measure of what makes Schuylerville a worthy community from the point of view of the X and Y Corporations. So no local businesses thrive and the old buildings fall increasingly into disrepair.

The buildings that the X and Y Corporations put up express the companies' attitudes perfectly. They are cinder-block sheds that have no relation to the local architecture. They do not respect the sidewalk edge of building fronts that line Broad Street, but are set back behind parking lagoons. Their garish internally lighted plastic signs tower above the town's rooflines, and the mercury-vapor lamps in their parking lots cast an unearthly pinkish-green glow far beyond the edge of their properties. What they contribute to the village visually is ugliness and discord. The people who design them and build them do not have to live with the consequences of their shabby and disruptive work.

Today, many of the old shopfronts along Broad Street stand vacant, or have been rented by marginal businesses—a tattoo parlor, a room full of video games, a store that sells dented cans and damaged boxes of food at cut-rate prices. Quite a few shopfronts were converted into cheap apartments—dingy curtains hang across the old display windows—because the Saratoga County Department of Social Services uses Schuylerville as a welfare dump. There is a system in which landlords get grants from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to fix up their property on the condition that they rent to people on public assistance. The people on public assistance often wreck the





apartments, for which new grants are then obtained, and so on in a downward-spiraling cycle, until the buildings are finally trashed beyond repair. For the landlords it is a sort of extractive process, like mining buildings for profit, with the same kind of destructive consequences as strip mining coal.

The people who live here are losing ground steadily and drastically. Their institutions have failed them. Two generations ago, they were hardworking mill hands who earned decent wages and looked after their families. Now people don't work, or only sporadically, at lower pay, and in any case, no longer in town. They commute to Saratoga, Glens Falls, Albany—an expense that only puts a further drain on their finances. The $4500 it costs to own and operate a car each year could cover a year's payments on a $30,000 mortgage. Often, it is absolutely necessary to keep two cars operating in a family so that two adults can drive long distances to work low-wage jobs. The cost of driving everywhere, to work, or to obtain the necessary goods and services of life, impoverishes families. It makes it impossible for them to own their own home.

Families crack under the pressure. Fathers unable to cope take off for good. Mothers slip into public assistance, depression, obesity, alcoholism. Yet they keep having babies. There are parasitical boyfriends and a heightened incidence of child abuse—county-wide reports of abuse more than doubled between 1983 and 1992.

One night around Halloween I interviewed eleven children between the ages of eight and fifteen at the village youth center, a prefab aluminum structure next to the town ballfield that was put up with a state grant and some money from private charity. Filled with Ping-Pong and pool tables, video games, a computer, a stereo, some battered sofas and card tables, it was clearly a refuge for the kids, and more than once they expressed their gratitude for its existence. It was better than being home. Ten of the eleven kids came from families where the natural father was not present. A few had stepfathers. Four had never even met their real fathers. Most had half-brothers and half-sisters. Only four out of eleven ate breakfast on a regular basis, and all four—including an eight-year-old—said they made their own breakfasts because there was no parent present in the house when they got up in the morning. The majority said that a television was turned on in their house at all hours,

whether someone was watching it or not. Later in the session, I asked how many of them knew a teenager who was, or had been, pregnant. All hands went up.

The signs of decay are visible everywhere in the village. The decay of property is the physical expression of everything the town has lost spiritually while the American economy "grew" and the nation devised a national lifestyle based on cars, cheap oil, and recreational shopping. The movie theater where families came to watch Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed in the 1940s is a burned-out hulk, the roof caved in, the entrance on Broad Street blocked off with a chicken-wire fence. For a few years before it burned, it was converted into a drinking establishment for bikers. The customers were known to ride their Harley "hogs" through the front door right up to the bar. One afternoon the bartender put a bullet hole through a patron's forehead. Not long after, the place caught fire.

The sidewalks downtown are all broken up, the concrete squares sunken or heaved at angles that make it hard to ride a bicycle over them. The facade of almost every building has been cobbled over with some kind of cheap and preposterous material in motifs that have no relation to the original: fake brick asbestos shingles, fake fieldstone, fake slate, enameled metal in alarming colors, aluminum and vinyl siding. The American Hotel at the south end of Broad Street, with soaring four-story pilasters and pedimented gables, was stripped of its once-magnificent porch and the ground floor was given a "rustic" exterior redo with gray barn board—it is now a welfare apartment building.

The former Grand Union supermarket stands abandoned in the center of Schuylerville's business district with burdocks and spiky mulleins poking up through the heaving asphalt of the parking lot. Strictly on its own terms it was a bad building from the moment it was completed. It ruined whatever charm Broad Street possessed by making it, in effect, a one-sided street. The Grand Union closed up shop, by the way, because central management far away decided as a matter of general policy not to keep open stores that had less than certain square footage of space. The decision had nothing to do with local economic conditions per se; it was imposed on the village like weather. As in the case of the





convenience stores, the Grand Union was designed solely to maximize company profits. Not a damn thing about it provided anything in the way of civic ornament. The people who designed it didn't have to live with it. It is arguable whether it looks worse now that nobody takes care of it.

When Americans, depressed by the scary places where they work and dwell, contemplate some antidote, they often conjure up the image of the American small town. However muddled and generalized the image is, it exerts a powerful allure. For the idea of a small town represents a whole menu of human values that the gigantism of corporate enterprise has either obliterated or mocked: an agreeable scale of human enterprise, tranquility, public safety, proximity of neighbors and markets, nearness to authentic countryside, and permanence.

Despite the nearly universal imposition of the straight grid, with all its weaknesses, America's small town streets at their best had some powerful saving graces. The houses were scaled generously—families were larger then, and multigenerational. No matter how fanciful, nineteenth-century homes were built of natural materials that aged gracefully. The procession of porches along the street created a lovely mediating zone between the private world of the home and the public world of the street, further connected and softened by the towering elm trees and the lush foliage.

The organic wholeness of the small town street was a result of common, everyday attention to details, of intimate care for things intimately used. The discipline of its physical order was based not on uniformity for its own sake, but on a consciousness of, and respect for, what was going on next door. Such awareness and respect were not viewed as a threat to individual identity but as necessary for the production of amenity, charm, and beauty. These concepts are now absent from our civilization. We have become accustomed to living in places where nothing relates to anything else, where disorder, unconsciousness, and the absence of respect reign unchecked.

The small town life that Americans long for when they are depressed by their city apartments or their suburban bunkers is really a conceptual substitute for the idea of community. But a community is not some-

thing you *have*, like a pizza. Nor is it something you can buy, as visitors to Disneyland and Williamsburg discover. It is a living organism based on a web of interdependencies—which is to say, a local economy. It expresses itself physically as *connectedness*, as buildings actively relating to one another, and to whatever public space exists, be it the street, or the courthouse square, or the village green. "Most important," Wendell Berry writes, "it must be generally loved and competently cared for by its people, who, individually, identify their own interest with the interest of their neighbors. . . ."[1] That notion of community began to vanish in America after World War II. We have paid a lot of lip service to the idea, and indulged in a lot of easy nostalgia about it, but our small towns have never been worse off than they are now.

Many schemes have been advanced in recent years for promoting the economy of Schuylerville. The worst schemes, it seems to me, are pegged to tourism, playing up the Revolutionary War angle. Such schemes suppose endless supplies of leisure and gasoline in America's future. In this scenario, the townspeople will sell hamburgers and souvenir musket balls to tourists. Perhaps these tourists will be folks who make a living selling hamburgers where they come from—America as one big theme park, an endless circle of hamburgers.

Others continue to view the town's future as a bedroom community for Saratoga, and even Albany, over an hour away by car. I think these schemes are improbable. Neither has anything to do with building a true local economy, in the sense of practical skills, or the profitable manufacture of any useful product, or trade that benefits local merchants. They seek to inject prosperity from some outside source.

I believe that we are entering an era when small towns will be valued again, and that out of necessity we will reinvent truly local economies using local assets and resources. An old small town like Schuylerville has one particular hidden asset placing it at an advantage over the present power places of America: It isn't a suburb. When the suburban economic equation fails in America, the physical arrangement of life will fail with it, and many Americans will be stuck in places that no longer function. Schuylerville does not have to be retrofitted to function





as a coherent town in the future; it already is one, neglected and tattered as it may be.

Schuylerville's most obvious resource is the Hudson River, the ultimate source of the town's past wealth. Today, the life of the town could not be more disconnected from the river. But one thing we know for certain: the era of cheap gas is drawing to a close, and necessity will make the river valuable again. Schuylerville has water power to run machinery to make useful products in a way that does not have to be harmful and wasteful. It has direct water links to New York and Montreal. In any other civilized country, resources like these would make such a town and its people useful. It would have an economy and be a community.