

APRIL 3, 2014



A DELICATE INTERPLAY

POLICIES OF THE GOWANUS CANAL SUPERFUND SITE

NAVIN RAJ
URB 2053, WOODS
Individual Paper

Introduction

A shocking 2010 home video of the Gowanus Canal, a canal bordering Park Slope and Red Hook, showed a thick layer of sewage overrun slowly making its way downstream. As the rain poured down, the brown wastewater sat on top of the murky, blue-green, polluted canal water like oil on seawater. To make matters worse, bags of garbage from the street dotted the unprotected canal, and journeyed out to the ocean unfettered.

The smell was so bad that the creator of the video even began to vomit while standing next to the canal. The environmental and economic situation of the canal had become too grave. As more neighborhoods of Brooklyn began to become populated, the canal posed a threat to the continued development of the four neighborhoods it bordered.

Thus, for the protection of the community, the Gowanus Canal was deemed a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Superfund site in 2010 for the purpose of using Federal funds to “remove contaminated sediment,” and “implement controls” (EPA 1). However, long before this designation, work had already been underway by community activists with the goal of cleaning up the canal, the DEP had set guidelines and regulations for its use in the beginning of the 21st century, and private developers had created plans for the development of the waterfront.

Rather than a one-off decision by the EPA, the redevelopment of the Gowanus Canal presented a policy interplay between the federal and local governments, as well as the private sector in the form of non-profits. It is a case study in compounding actions and overlapping methods that ultimately led to the widespread attention delivered to the canal today. This paper will explore the history of the canal’s pollution that ultimately led to the designation of the area

as a Superfund, as well as the history and actions undertaken by various interests that began the cleanup process. We can define our three compounding forces as: the voice, the regulation, and the funding that led to the cleanup of the canal. In it, we will see that the Gowanus Canal cleanup project was as much a community-driven movement as it was a national cleanup project.

Background

According to Kia Gregory of *The New York Times*, in her article “Industry Still Churns, Even as Cleanup Plan Proceeds for a Canal,” the majority of pollution along the canal was caused by “long-closed factories and by decades of untreated sewage carried into the canal by city drains” (Gregory). The canal has a long history of pollution, built in a time period when hygiene standards had not even been implemented in the many slums of the city.

The canal was built over the location of a number of creeks, according to Christopher Bonanos of *New York Magazine* in his article “A Brief History of Slime,” in the mid-nineteenth century (Bonanos). New York’s maritime trade needs were in need of expansion during the 1860s, and the two-mile long canal quickly became a hub of commercial activity (Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club). Originally referred to as the “Gashouse District,” the Gowanus Canal was built to serve foundries, coal yards, tanneries, and paint and ink factories (Bonanos). For the next 100 years, these heavy industries would transform the canal into a toxic dumping ground. Due to this development, the canal is filled with oily pollutants like coal tar, heavy metals like mercury and lead, and PCBs and pesticides.

Furthermore, the increased industry in the area created large, working-class communities. These communities required sewage connections that “ended up discharging raw sewage into the Gowanus Canal” (Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club). Despite this practice being discontinued,

sewage runoffs, as in the case of the 2010 video, have created a visible layer above the water. The waters of the canal are teeming with wildlife, from oysters to fish. However, the prevalence of toxins and microbes has made the canal a breeding ground for: “cholera, typhoid, typhus, gonorrhoea” (Bonanos). The map below shows some of the heavy industries formerly located around the canal:

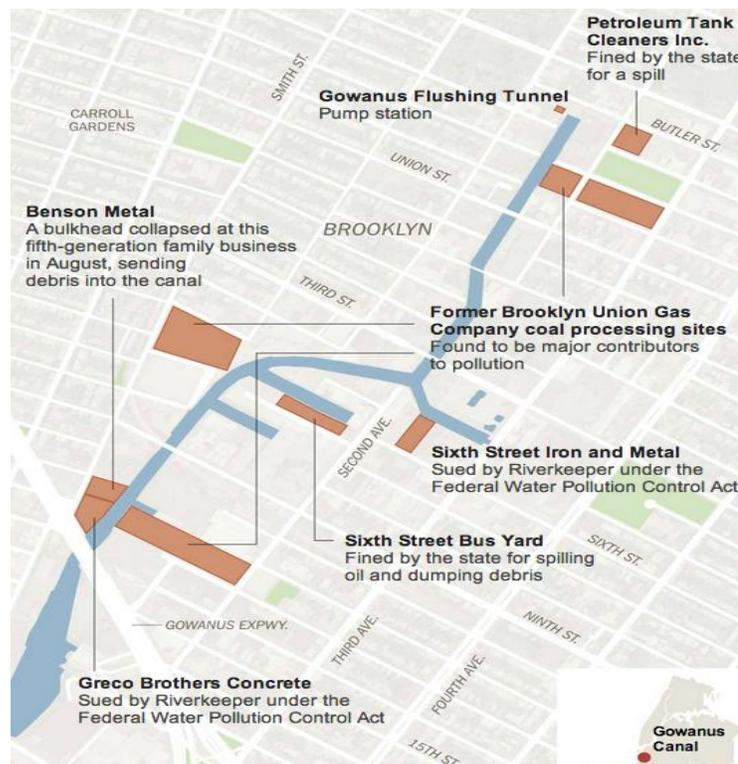


Figure 1. Map of Gowanus Canal Industries

(Source: *The New York Times*)

The Voice

Despite efforts to bring fresh seawater into the canal, and the US Army Corps of Engineers efforts to dredge the area regularly, “up to twenty feet of sediment has piled up” (Bonanos). Growth for the canal effort came in the 1970s with the establishment of the non-profit, the Gowanus Canal Community Development Corporation (GCCDC). The GCCDC is the

first community-driven organization that recognized the Gowanus Canal as a danger to the growth of the area, rather than a simple cleanup project. The GCCDC's goal is not just to remediate the canal, but to "revitalize the communities of South Brooklyn" (GCCDC). Their organization cites work in affordable housing, environmental remediation, and community activities in the canal area.

It was this shift in focus that empowered the community, and helped bring many people together to lobby for change in the area. Thanks to the GCCDC, \$225,000 was acquired from Congresswoman Nydia Velasquez to "create a comprehensive community development plan" (Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club). This is in addition to further funding from the state and federal government for studies. Similar community organizations exist throughout Brooklyn, now, that generate community involvement in the project.

A key pillar to the designation of the Gowanus Canal as a Superfund Site has been the spur of community activism. Without this development, the canal would have remained an abandoned project of the Corps of Engineers. Instead, the local community took charge of its land, and lobbied their representatives to take action.

The Regulation

Despite studies and funding for small development, pollution continued into the canal because many polluters refused to leave. With a mobilized community, the next major movement came from the state and local government. Through community lobbying, the state and city imposed sanctions on polluters that was a key step in forcing the polluters out, and the community in to the area. The neighborhood has changed dramatically since the days of coal fire

plants and chemical companies. While some remain, many have long left the heavily polluted area due to a combination of changing industries and government watchdogs.

Even today, the state tracks companies using the canal as a dumping ground. According to Kia Gregory, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation “fined Petroleum Tank Cleaners on Butler Street, about a block from the canal, \$32,500 for a spill and other violations, according to state records” (Gregory). Riverkeeper, an activist organization, acts as a watchdog for companies along the canal. These organizations report illegal activities to the state and federal government, sometimes even posting their own lawsuits (Gregory).

It is this activism from the local and state government that took the communities’ wishes, and brought about change. This change was necessary to allowing other forces to enter and begin the cleanup process that would return the canal to a livable state.

The Funding

The previous two sections have brought together the grassroots community activism with active regulation to remove polluters. The final step was to begin actual cleanup procedures. This required the input of the federal government and their large funding arm to truly cleanup the century of toxins. The EPA has reported investing \$506 million into the Superfund site (EPA 1). It is this infusion of funding that comes along with the establishment as a Superfund site, which has brought the Gowanus Canal closer to becoming remediated.

The cleanup of the Gowanus Canal Superfund Site is an ongoing project that dates back to the 1960s. The EPA predicts removing roughly 600,000 cubic yards of highly contaminated sediment from the canal (EPA 1). This massive project has been long underway, and has taken centuries of planning because of the many layers to the issue. It was not a simple matter of

entering and cleaning the site. Previous attempts failed because they did not address the interplay between the community, the laws, and the funding. Bringing these three forces together through the various levels of government was key to securing the canal as a Superfund site.

References

Bonanos, Christopher. "A Brief History of Slime." *New York Magazine*.

New York Media LLC, 12 Jul. 2009. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.

United States Environmental Protection Agency. "EPA's final cleanup plan for the Gowanus

Canal Superfund Site." *Epa.gov*. US Environmental Protection Agency, n.d. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.

Gowanus Canal History. The Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club, n.d. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.

Gregory, Kia. "Industry Still Churns, Even as Cleanup Plan Proceeds for a Canal."

The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 26 Sept. 2013. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.

History of the Gowanus Canal Community Development Corporation.

Gowanus Canal Community Development Corporation, July 2013. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.