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# How prisons became the North Country's normal

by [Brian Mann](#), in Chateaugay, NY

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Dec 02, 2013 — This year, North Country Public Radio has been looking in-depth at New York's Rockefeller drug laws and how those laws reshaped our state over the last forty years.

This week, the series will focus on the North Country, which is home to more than a dozen state and federal prisons.

Corrections work has grown into one of the region's biggest and most controversial industries, providing thousands of high paying jobs, and anchoring the economies in towns from Malone to Moriah.

As part of our Prison Time Media Project, Brian Mann has a special report on how the North Country became a magnet for new prisons and how the industry is facing new scrutiny.

In May 1973, Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed two controversial laws that would change life in the Adirondacks.

The Adirondack Park Land Use and Development Plan, which the governor pushed through the state legislature, established new zoning rules for private land that aimed to protect open space and limit residential development. The other law set minimum prison sentences for drug users and pushers.

***This version of the Prison Time Media Project story first appeared in the Adirondack Explorer magazine and differs substantially from the audio version which can be heard by clicking the play button above.***

"I have one goal and one objective, and that is to stop the pushing of drugs and to protect the innocent victim," the governor insisted, promising that the harsh new penalties would stem the epidemic of cocaine and heroin addiction in New York City.

As it turned out, the Rockefeller drug laws—which also included tough penalties for marijuana use—would rival the land-use regulations in their impact on the Adirondacks.

The tough-on-crime policies quickly sparked an explosion in the number of men and women serving time in New York's corrections system.

The state's inmate population surged from fewer than twenty thousand



Community leaders meeting in Chateaugay to orchestrate fight to save the state correctional facility. Photo: Brian Mann

*"Any time there's an extra prison, Ron Stafford will take it," joked a member of Governor Mario Cuomo's staff.*

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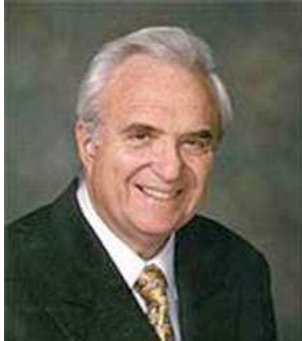
when Rockefeller took office in 1959 to a peak of nearly seventy-three thousand four decades later.

To house those prisoners, state officials scrambled to build new prisons in the North Country, converting towns that relied on logging, mining, and tourism for their prosperity into one of largest prison complexes in the United States.

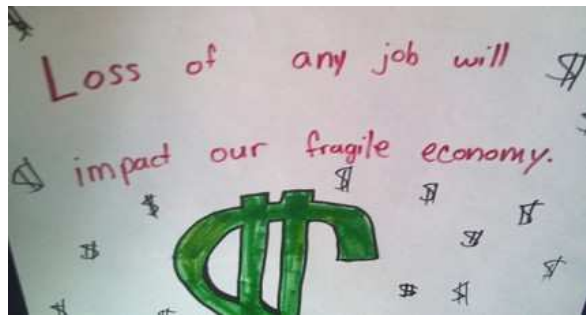
"They needed to build additional prison space, and it was hard to do in New York City because of the cost," recalled Peter Repas, who served as legislative director for Ronald Stafford, the longtime state senator from Plattsburgh who represented most of the Adirondack Park.

Rockefeller's laws inspired tougher federal drug laws as well. Before the Park's prison-construction boom abated in the late 1990s, about twenty state and federal correctional facilities would be operating in the Adirondacks or within

a short drive of the Blue Line. New York's Corrections Department would emerge as the region's single largest employer, hiring thousands of prison guards and civilian employees, usually in much-prized middle-class jobs.



Former state Sen. Ronald Stafford (R-Plattsburgh) was a chief architect of the North Country's prison economy. NCPR file photo



Prisons exploded onto the North Country's landscape in the 1980s, becoming a pillar of the economy and the region's culture. Photo: Brian Mann

**Stafford's Legacy**

Senator Stafford, who passed away in 2005, was the son of a corrections officer and grew up in the Adirondack prison town of Dannemora, spending his childhood in the shadow of Clinton Correctional Facility's massive walls and guard towers. Beginning in the late 1970s, the powerful Republican worked aggressively to persuade state officials to locate new prisons in his district.

"Any time there's an extra prison, Ron Stafford will take it," joked a member of Governor Mario Cuomo's staff, speaking anonymously in a 1990 interview with Newsday. According to Repas, Stafford never expressed doubts or regrets about expanding the prison industry in his rural district. "He saw new prison construction as an opportunity to create jobs in an area where people were desperately looking for jobs. Many downstate communities didn't want prisons. I still think it was a good decision," Repas said.

Other local officials agreed. In their eyes, the prison industry offered an economic lifeline as factories, logging operations, and mines shut down.

Consider the case of Moriah in the Champlain Valley. When an iron mine closed in 1971, the community went into a prolonged downturn. New York State moved to fill the economic void in 1989 with construction of the Moriah Shock Correctional Facility, creating more than a hundred full-time positions.

"One of the reasons they chose this site for a facility was the economic devastation of the area," said Moriah Supervisor Thomas Scozzafava. "They actually rehabilitated the old mine buildings for the camp. Jobs like this, you never replace them."

Locating prisons in the Adirondack region also made sense to many downstate policy-makers. Land was cheap, and rural towns offered a reservoir of dependable workers eager for a paycheck.

"We have so many good people working in corrections in our area," said state Senator Betty Little, a Republican from Queensbury who replaced Stafford after his retirement in 2002. "It's kind of a generational job. There are people who are corrections officers whose parents and relatives were in corrections. It's been one of the stable, good jobs in the North Country."



**New York's Siberia**

As prisons grew into a mainstay of the Park's economy, controversy and resentment were brewing. While tourists marveled at the region's beauty—and environmentalists touted the Park as a model of land-use planning—many urban communities came to view the Park very differently, describing it as New York's "Siberia," a reference to the Soviet Union's system of prison camps and gulags.

"You try not to be bitter," said George Prendes, who spent fourteen years in New York prisons, including a stint in Dannemora, for a low-level drug conviction. He sells real estate in New

York City. "I lost some very good years, and there's a lot of things that I could have done and didn't do. I mean, I was twenty-three years old when I got arrested. I got out of prison when I was thirty-seven. That's a big chunk of my life. I get mad sometimes, but everything isn't always the way you want it to be."

During the 1980s and 1990s, as the state toughened penalties for crack cocaine, census figures showed the Park's population swelling with young black and Hispanic men, Prendes among them. Almost all of the new "residents" were drug offenders serving time in a bleak landscape characterized by razor wire, cinderblock walls, and solitary-confinement cells. Hundreds of thousands of young men passed through state prisons in Ray Brook, Gabriels, Lyon Mountain, Dannemora, and Moriah. (Ray Brook also has a federal prison.)

"One of the problems of using incarceration as a jobs program is the fundamental immorality of it," said Robert Gangi, a prison-reform advocate in New York City who has long called for the closure of North Country prisons. He

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contends that too many nonviolent offenders were caught up in the system. "You're locking up people in order to provide other people jobs."

Critics also pointed with increasing anger to stark racial disparities in the system. "Ninety percent of the drug offenders locked up in New York state prisons are people of color, either African-American or Latino," noted Gangi. "And virtually all of the prisons that have been built in recent years to house drug offenders have been located in upstate, white, rural communities."

The Park's prison industry eventually became a flashpoint for environmentalists as well. In 1997, as the prison-construction boom neared its end, a full-blown battle erupted over Stafford's plan to locate a \$130 million prison in Tupper Lake. The project promised between four hundred and six hundred high-paying jobs, according to some estimates, and drew strong support from local politicians and business leaders. But green groups opposed it, and the *New York Times* blasted Stafford for threatening to establish a maximum-security prison "smack dab in a valuable wilderness area of the Adirondacks."

"This does not capitalize on the special qualities of the Park—it diminishes those qualities," Eric Siy, who then worked with Environmental Advocates, said in an interview with the Associated Press. The Adirondack Council and the Adirondack Mountain Club also rallied against the prison. In December 1997, then-Governor George Pataki—a close ally of Stafford—announced that the facility would be built instead in Malone, just north of the Park's boundary.

### Hard Times for Prisons

Despite occasional controversies, the prison industry was widely seen as recession proof. Republicans, who dominated the Senate, blocked efforts to reform the drug laws. Meanwhile, the national war on drugs continued to escalate, which meant more inmates serving time at the federal correctional facility in Ray Brook.

For many Adirondackers, prison work seemed like a safe bet. "Being a corrections officer isn't for everybody," acknowledged Mark Siskavich, who worked for more than a decade at the Lyon Mountain prison, which closed in 2011. "But if you don't mind being locked up eight hours a day with the most notorious people in New York, you'll be all right. I wanted to stay until I retired, but it didn't work out that way."

A job behind bars meant a middle-class salary in communities where many workers earned minimum wage. It meant health benefits, paid vacation leave, and a generous state pension. But over the last five years, a series of developments have rocked the Park's corrections industry, triggering prison closures and making it harder for guards to find work.



The first was a sharp reduction in crime in New York City and urban neighborhoods in western New York. No one is sure quite why, but the crime rate has plummeted statewide by 15 percent since 2003, according to figures compiled by the Department of Corrections. To the surprise of many policy-makers, the downward trend continued despite the hard times produced by the Great Recession that began in 2007.

The second development was a dramatic shift in Albany politics. In 2009, Democrats briefly seized control of the Senate and moved quickly to ease Rockefeller-era penalties for drug crimes. "We will create drug courts where the judges have discretion to divert those who need help away from [prison]," announced then-Governor David Paterson.

As Paterson's reforms were implemented, the prison population in New York dropped by nearly twenty thousand inmates, leaving empty bunks and half-filled prisons. "It's a really big deal," said Adam Gelb with the Pew Center's Public Safety Performance Project, a group that works with state agencies to cut inmate populations. "Those of us who follow this thought that the corrections population was going to keep rising and rising almost forever, defying the laws of physics."

The third development was New York's catastrophic budget crisis, triggered by the Wall Street collapse in 2007, which forced politicians to consider spending cuts that once seemed inconceivable. Governor Paterson moved to close Camp Gabriels, near Saranac Lake, in 2009, eliminating ninety-five local jobs. Two years later, in his first State of the State address, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that he too would push to shutter prisons and juvenile-correctional facilities as part of an austerity campaign.

In his speech, Cuomo adopted the language of prison-reform advocates who long decried the use of prisons as a means to boost the rural economy. "An incarceration program is not an employment program," he insisted. "If people need jobs, let's get people jobs. Don't put other people in prison to give some people jobs. That's not what this state is all about, and that has to end this session."

Cuomo followed through on his promise first by mothballing Lyon Mountain's prison and eliminating sixty-five corrections-officer positions. And this past July, the Corrections Department announced plans to shutter four additional facilities next year, including two located just outside the Park: Chateaugay in northern Franklin County, with 111 guards and civilian workers; and Mount McGregor, with 320 employees in Saratoga County. "We are continuing to right-size the state's costly prison system and saving taxpayers tens of millions of dollars annually," declared acting Corrections Commissioner Anthony Annucci.

The news sparked outrage from the prison guard union, which has played an important role in North Country politics, serving as the largest campaign donor to many of the region's elected officials. Donn Rowe, the union president, has argued that too many inmates are still housed in crowded double-bunk facilities, posing security risks to guards. He called the latest downsizing plan "insulting to the hardworking men and women" in the corrections industry.

Senator Little also expressed dismay at the impending closures. "My concern is for the correctional officers who would be affected and their families," she said. "Without a doubt, the closing of a facility [in Franklin County] is a financial blow to them and the community." Little has argued that state prisons should be closed first in other parts of New York that have stronger, more resilient economies.

Adirondack-area newspapers are split on the question of whether the closures were warranted with the Glens Falls *Post-Star* publishing a lead editorial concluding that Mount McGregor should be closed. "We've believed for some time that Mount McGregor had outlived its usefulness, and if there is any place that can withstand the loss of 320 jobs, it is Saratoga County."

But the *Adirondack Daily Enterprise* and the Plattsburgh *Press-Republican* both condemned the downsizing plan, pointing to the impact on the regional economy. "Let's save our communities from drug addiction, unemployment and a sinking economy by convincing the governor and state legislature to leave the facilities in the North Country off the list of closures," the *Enterprise* argued on its editorial page.

The two Adirondack prisons that already have closed were offered for auction repeatedly by New York State but garnered little interest. Camp Gabriels failed to win a single bid. The Lyon Mountain facility, with a complex of modern buildings and more than twenty-seven acres of land, sold to a Canadian buyer in July for just \$140,000. The new owner hasn't disclosed his plans for the property.

"It's just too bad," said Siskavich, the former corrections officer from Lyon Mountain. "There are a lot of big buildings here, but I don't see another use for it. I just don't see it. We're thirty miles to the closest store, no matter which way you go. People, especially industry, don't want to go thirty miles."

The number of drug offenders now behind bars is down 71 percent since 1996. If crime rates remain low and drug convictions continue to plummet, big questions will continue to be asked about the future of correctional facilities in Dannemora, Moriah, and Ray Brook as well as those on the periphery of the Park, such as those in Glens Falls, Ogdensburg, Johnstown, Malone, and Watertown, where prison-closures have been proposed in the past.

"The inmate population continues to drop," acknowledged Little, after the July announcement. "These are jobs in the North Country that will no longer be here in the future and that's very difficult."

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Pat Prue • 23 days ago



I believe it all comes down to all mighty bucks-you talk about jobs why don't the system provide more jobs for prevention [in drug and alcohol problems not in more prisons] it would be a win-win situation saving tax-payers and family structures .

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jj121 • 24 days ago



The maine reason is because there are not enough smart people who live here to bring in bigget compancies! Look around you at all the great JOBS the Watertown Mayor and others have talked to come in to the area ( TRY LIVING OFF WHAT YOU GET PAYED FOR BURGER FLIPPING, OR CLEANING HOTEL ROOMS!), and if it wasnt for Ft. Drum you wouldnt have them either!

The same reason for having something nobody else wants in your back yard TRASH DUMP is the same reason why we have all the PRISONS, and most of the people who work at the prison are from down state!

The MORON EFFECT is what is the norht countrys biggest draw after summer vacations are over and everyone goes home.

When I 1st moved into the area ( this say alot about me too!) I heard one of great Elected MAYORS say on the radio that most people up here like the low paying part time summer job because they enjoy the rest of the year off. At 1st I said BS, but now after many years living here

old Jeffery has it right!

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RancidCrabtree • 24 days ago



The State of NY has done nothing to help with economic viability in North Country. In fact, just the opposite. The State went into direct competition with private enterprise by building ski areas in North Creek and Wilmington. That pretty well killed off any chance of private entities making a go of their ski areas. Massive taxpayer funded purchases of land killed off even more chances for jobs. The State is involved in what amounts to economic warfare against the North Country.




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America the ? • 24 days ago



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