

Preface

I first became aware of the Rapp Road community in 2000 when I enrolled in a graduate seminar in local and regional history at the University at Albany. Each student was asked to find a different aspect of Albany's history and write a twenty-five page research paper. After listening to other students' topics and still not having one of my own, the instructor asked if anyone would do a paper on African American history in Albany; I volunteered. At the time, I was employed at the Albany Institute of History and Art and decided to talk with the Curator of History, Wesley Balla, for some ideas on possible African American research projects. Balla came back with a list of ideas that spanned the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries. The very last one he mentioned, which he said could be very interesting but potentially difficult to research, was the Rapp Road community. Balla had visited Rapp Road and had spoken with community leader and resident Emma Dickson, because she was hoping to have the community placed on the New York State Historic Register in an effort to slow down commercial development that threatened her community.

Balla shared his initial research regarding the community and invited me to a lecture on the history of Rapp Road given by Emma Dickson. I attended the lecture, where Dickson showed family photographs and told stories about growing up on Rapp Road. Several family and church members were in the audience who told stories as well. I remember sitting in the auditorium during the

presentation thinking “How on earth could a group of people from Shubuta, Mississippi, end up in Albany, New York?” The stories I heard that night were so dramatic and interesting that I knew then that I wanted to research the Rapp Road community.

I contacted John J. McEneny, New York State Assemblyman and local historian, who put me in contact with former Rapp Road resident and the New York State Assembly’s Sergeant at Arms, Wayne Jackson. Jackson in turn gave me Dickson’s phone number. I called Dickson and told her I wanted to write a research paper on the history of her community. She invited me to her home on Rapp Road and we spoke about the project at length. Dickson told me that she wanted the community placed on the New York State Historic Register in an effort to stop the Pyramid Crossgates Corporation from infringing on the community more than it already had. I told her my research paper could serve as the basis of the historic registry nomination, but I would have to conduct oral history interviews with community members in order to gather information. Dickson knew that an outsider of the community, whether white or black, could not just show up at residents’ homes and ask for information. Dickson arranged for all of my initial interviews. Her oldest sister, two cousins, two first-generation Rapp Road residents, and one of the church mothers were my first interviewees. These interviews served as the basis of my research paper.

After that semester, I still found the history of the community fascinating and felt there was still much more to research. I told Dickson that I would write the nomination for the historic registry. We both worked with John Bonafide, Historic Preservation Services Coordinator at the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. He told us what information he needed for the nomination process and we either gathered the information together, or I gathered it and reported my findings. As this process continued, Dickson and I became friends, and I think she enjoyed that I took a genuine interest in her family’s

stories and community's history. Anytime I went to visit her, she would tell me multiple stories about her family. She also pestered fellow community members to tell their stories and insisted that they give me old photographs.

As word about the Rapp Road history project spread around the Capital District, Dickson and I began giving lectures. Rapp Road history became popular with local history organizations, particularly during Black History Month. I discussed the history of the Great Migration, and Dickson told stories about her family and the community.

During this time, I decided to expand my Rapp Road research and make it the basis for my doctoral dissertation. Dickson was genuinely excited by this. In November 2002, Dickson and her oldest sister, Girlie Ferguson, and I spent five days in Shubuta, Mississippi, conducting interviews with family members and others associated with Albany or the Rapp Road community. Our research trip to Mississippi was a complete success. Many of the stories we heard from migrants in Albany about how hard life was in Mississippi were validated by stories from those who stayed behind in Shubuta.

As my dissertation research continued, my relationship with the Rapp Road residents grew. In September 2002, I sat with Dickson and other Rapp Road residents—all of us anxiously waiting—at the New York State Historic Preservation Board meeting while the community's proposal was reviewed and voted on. When the nomination passed, I was just as excited as the community's residents. The designation of Rapp Road as a New York State Historic District encouraged the residents to take a new pride in their community and family histories. One of my proudest moments came the following summer during the annual Rapp Road family reunion weekend when the community not only celebrated the historic designations, but also honored Dickson and me at a black-tie reception and dinner.

My dissertation was completed in 2004, but my research and relationship with the community continued as Rapp Road became the subject of two museum exhibitions, countless public lectures, walking tours, and the impetus for the establishment of the Rapp Road Historical Association. If anything of historical significance was going on in the community, I usually received a call and happily participated. After I found out I was pregnant with my first child, one of my initial calls was to Dickson to see if there was room at her day care on Rapp Road. As it turns out, I am on Rapp Road everyday to pick up my daughter. On many days, Dickson and I have a quick Rapp Road history-centered conversation before I get the report on my child. Our research continues as we try to piece together the past. Even in 2007, as I was preparing the manuscript for this book, residents relayed new stories and old photographs were still being brought out of albums and boxes.

This study would not have been possible without the support of the entire Rapp Road community and most of all Emma Dickson who supported this research from the beginning. She shared the information she had been collecting for over two decades. It is because of Emma Dickson that I was able to conduct oral history interviews with community and church members. My two research trips to Mississippi would not have been possible without the support of a University at Albany Initiatives for Women Research Grant and a University at Albany Office of Research Benevolent Grant. During these trips to Mississippi, much information was collected because of the help of Girlie Ferguson, Emma Dickson, Alonzo McCann, Jerry Mason, James Sheeche, Jr., Brian Buff, and the staff at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

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Lastly, I am grateful to my family: to my parents Janeen and James Sheehe and Joseph Lemak, Jr., for the love, education, and encouragement imparted to me, and to my husband, Brian, and children, India and Duncan, whom I love very much.