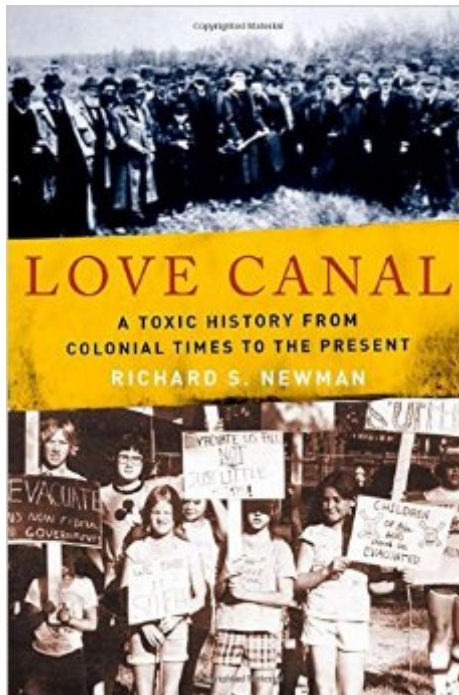


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Love Canal: A Toxic History From Colonial Times To The Present



Synopsis

In the summer of 1978, residents of Love Canal, a suburban development in Niagara Falls, NY, began protesting against the leaking toxic waste dump in their midst—a sixteen-acre site containing 100,000 barrels of chemical waste that anchored their neighborhood. Initially seeking evacuation, area activists soon found that they were engaged in a far larger battle over the meaning of America's industrial past and its environmental future. The Love Canal protest movement inaugurated the era of grassroots environmentalism, spawning new anti-toxics laws and new models of ecological protest. Historian Richard S. Newman examines the Love Canal crisis through the area's broader landscape, detailing the way this ever-contentious region has been used, altered, and understood from the colonial era to the present day. Newman journeys into colonial land use battles between Native Americans and European settlers, 19th-century utopian city planning, the rise of the American chemical industry in the 20th century, the transformation of environmental activism in the 1970s, and the memory of environmental disasters in our own time. In an era of hydrofracking and renewed concern about nuclear waste disposal, Love Canal remains relevant. It is only by starting at the very beginning of the site's environmental history that we can understand the road to a hazardous waste crisis in the 1970s—and to the global environmental justice movement it sparked.

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Newman was personal. I have lived near two toxic waste sites left by Hooker Chemicals. I was born in Tonawanda, NY an old industrialized area along the Niagara River. My hometown dump contains radioactive waste from the Manhattan Project. Just down river near the city of Niagara Falls, Hooker Chemicals took advantage of an unfinished canal to dump industrial waste. The canal had been part of William T. Love's plan to create a Model City. The chemical industrialist envisioned a self-contained city with homes and parks. Clean, hydroelectric power was to come from an artificial falls. A canal from the Niagara River would be built to divert water over another section of the Niagara escarpment. Love mismanaged his money. All he accomplished was to leave a big ditch. The city of Niagara Falls needed to expand and bought the land. A community of homes and a school was built over the filled-in canal. The young families living in Love Canal believed they were living the American Dream. Their dream turned into a nightmare. They noticed basement seepage, chemical odors, rocks that burst like fireworks, grass that left chemical burns, and a high rate of miscarriages. Their complaints were unheeded. Housewives turned into activists. It was the first grass roots movement for environmental justice. It took years for government leadership to act. The activists influenced the passage of environmental laws and in 1980 the creation of the Superfund for hazardous waste remediation. (Which under President Reagan was already being weakened with reduced funding in the battle between what is good for business vs. what is best for the people.

In the spring of 1953, the Niagara Falls School Board thinks itself mighty lucky for scoring the purchase of a site (Love Canal) for a new school for only \$1. Ok, so it has been warned that underneath the seemingly idyllic pastoral landscape, a seething 20,000 tons of toxic waste percolates the earth. How this may be relevant, no one (wants) to guess, not even when the foundation of the new school sinks into an oily fetid pit. Undeterred, construction moves a few paces north, and the school opens in 1955. Fast forward a couple of decades. Women in the Love Canal community have been experiencing a dramatic rate of miscarriages (as high as 1/3 by some estimates). Children have been dying mysteriously from curable conditions after playing in public playgrounds. People's hair has been falling out. They've been developing cancer. Suicides are spiking. Many are anxious, angry, or depressed. Public consciousness that something is terribly wrong in Love Canal is growing, and residents are beginning to mobilize. In 1978, the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA) is formed and immediately proceeds to file suit against Hooker Chemical (the prior owner of the property), the city of Niagara Falls, and the Federal Government. Journalists swarm into Love Canal, and explode the story of Love Canal's residents on the front pages of most national newspapers. The entire country is riveted. In the gripes of a contested

election, President Jimmy Carter declares a national emergency on August 7, 1978. It is the first time such an emergency has been declared over anything other than a 'natural' disaster (floods, tornadoes, and the like). People in other parts of the United States begin to ask questions about their neighborhoods.

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