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## From Conservation to Recreation: Al Smith and Robert Moses and the Dawn of the Modern Liberalism

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It was with gratitude and no small amount of surprise that I received Professor Torre's recommendation that I submit this piece for your consideration. Truthfully, I thought he was cross with me for over-writing, the paper being twice the length called for in the assignment! (As in Lincoln's quip about the preacher of long sermons, I suppose that once I get to writing, I get too lazy to stop.)

In any case, since receiving his suggestion I have had a chance to review the parameters and goals of the Friends of Drake Library Research Award and must admit that, despite my native discomfort with putting my work forward so, it would seem that this paper is a fairly good candidate. As a commuter and history major, Drake is my base of operations, my first destination each morning when I deboard the seven-thirty from Rochester. There is no class, and there has seldom been a paper, whose research has not benefitted from my proximity to the library's considerable holdings.

Which of course made this year all the more difficult. While I managed to withdraw much of the material needed for this and other classes before library services were curtailed, I have always found it worthwhile to roam the stacks, wheedling out fresh strains of information and developing new lines of thought. I hope to get the opportunity to do so again. Though I have no doubt this paper would have been even better if full engagement with the library and its staff had been possible, what I borrowed before the shut down was nonetheless substantial and I was able to get by.

About this piece: Professor Torre required, as the final paper for his course on the 'History of New York' (HST 311), a "brief essay . . . based on a theme or topic developed by Stradling in *The Nature of New York*," one of the two texts assigned to the class. Starting there and following Stradling's novel use of environmentalism as an indicator of social and political change, I formulated a thesis situating Al Smith as a sort of political midwife, helping deliver modern liberalism out of turn-of-the-century progressivism. I have edited and expanded my Works Cited page to an annotated Works Consulted one, to give you a sense of the considerable debt this work owes to Drake, as well as the Rochester Central Library and various digital libraries. I hope this note and that detailed description of my sources and process suffice as a Library Resources statement.

I doubt this will be the last time I engage this fascinating topic: I think there is more work to be done addressing Smith's and Moses' complicated relationships with FDR, for example, but I have every confidence that, with full access to the reference sections (Assembly speeches, statutes, presidential libraries, *et cetera*) of the libraries I would normally patronize, this present effort may some day be honed to something I might consider more to your standards.

In any case, here we are. Thank you for your consideration

From Conservation to Recreation:  
Al Smith and Robert Moses and the  
Dawn of the Modern Liberalism

John Michael Ryan  
History of New York – HST 311.01  
due: Monday, May 11, 2020  
AMDG

Turn-of-the-century New York was a place of giants. Silent Charlie Murphy and Emma Goldman forged political movements, Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth captivated the sporting public, Manhattan skyscrapers and Coney Island rollercoasters drew city-dwellers' gaze upward, all under the jaundiced eyes of Pulitzer and Hearst. Standing sentinel on opposite ends of this era are the Roosevelts: Theodore bold and brash astride the expropriative Gilded Age, Franklin smilingly braced against the ravages of the Great Depression. Both left the state and the country very different places than those they entered, but the story of New York State in the early twentieth century is not fully told without a vital intermediary between their two traditions. Al Smith – the inheritor and greatest champion of the Progressive Era Theodore Roosevelt fostered – occupied the Capitol Building and the Executive Mansion longer than the cousins did in their combined New York careers, and his failed bid for the White House ensured that his considerable legacy as governor would never be overshadowed by his presidency. He represented, more acutely than any of the state's leaders in the early part of the century, the new New York, where the Roosevelts represented the old: poor, urban, not Protestant, standing in stark contrast their privileged, old Dutch heritage; where they had to stoop to comprehend the state of the working class, he knew it intimately. A profane altar boy, waddling the halls of Albany with a cigar clenched between gold teeth, this Tammany tiger seemed the very opposite of these to-the-manner-born patricians who proceeded to the highest office in the land, and yet his squat frame is a no less giant in the history of the state than theirs.

This examination of Smith's legacy views it through the seemingly innocuous lens of state parks, which in many ways epitomized a vital link between the Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt eras. But this aspect of Smith's governorship cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of his protégé, Robert Moses. Like Frances Perkins and Franklin Roosevelt himself, Robert Moses' start in Al Smith's New York would be the beginning of a nationally prominent career, and his vision for a parks system – along with the wholesale reform of the state government that he designed and the governor implemented – would prove among his longest-lasting legacies. Smith and Moses' vision of a park system for the people – all the people – marked an important shift from the passive conservation movement of TR's day to the active, development-minded one of FDR's, a fact that is perhaps obscured by the nationwide impact of the New Deal and Moses' later notoriety. But the fact remains that much of the development ethos associated with twentieth century liberalism – muscular, forward-thinking, pluralistic – has its roots in the governorship of Al Smith.

– NYS Conservation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century –

The first environmentalist impulse in New York was not practical in character. The notion that natural spaces should be preserved for their own sake was quite sufficient to the romantics of the mid-

nineteenth century, and any ancillary benefits – be they spiritual,<sup>1</sup> ecological,<sup>2</sup> or otherwise – were to be appreciated but not necessarily prioritized. The romanticized idea of the wild forest or the untilled glen, encouraged by the influential painters and writers of the day, became a sort of Edenic ideal to a middle- and an upper-class increasingly wearied by the crush and hurry of a rapidly industrializing and diversifying New York. Fostered first by canal and then by roads and rail, a blossoming tourist industry established itself in the state as New York City's more affluent citizens embarked on the 'American' Grand Tour, said by patriotic New Yorkers to rival Europe's in beauty.<sup>3</sup> But the same transportation revolutions that made such tours possible likewise encouraged commerce and the 'improvement' of the landscape, which, in the form of woodland clearance and farming, threatened the untouched splendor these tourists had come to cherish.

There were two principal reactions to the encroaching forces of industry and population growth, one within the cities and one without. In New York City, where green space increasingly gave way to development to accommodate the booming population, Central Park was conceived as a way to recreate the idyllic landscapes so appreciated upstate. The appropriation of the initial site at Jones's Wood (in what is now the Upper East Side) was abandoned as unconstitutional following a challenge by wealthy landowners unwilling to part with what were then country estates.<sup>4</sup> The land eventually chosen had no such elites to object, being the home of sixteen hundred poor New Yorkers, mostly black freedmen and Irish and German immigrants, "a class of population similar to that of Five Points." Thus did the acquisition of this strip in the heart of Manhattan accomplish two goals considered worthwhile to the city fathers: as a "breakwater to the upward tide of population," forcing out less desirable elements – "persons of limited means" – in favor of the new park's serenity.<sup>5</sup> The enjoyment of the park followed the same line of thought as its procurement and development. In theory, Central Park was put forth as a public space in contrast to such private preserves as Gramercy Park, but in practice it was considered the domain of the middle- and upper-classes. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who won the design contest for the park in 1857 and completed it in 1876, envisioned a place where communion with nature would engender a sense of contemplation and wonder in the visitor. Olmsted described his vision thus:

It is not simply to give the people of the city an opportunity for fresh air and exercise . . . It is not simply to make a place of amusement or for the gratification of curiosity or for gaining knowledge. The main object and justification is simply to produce a certain influence in the minds of people and through this to make life in the city healthier and happier. The character of this influence is a poetic one and it is to be produced by means of scenes, through observation of which the mind may be more or less lifted out of moods and habits into which it is, under the ordinary conditions of life in the city, likely to fall.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Stradling, *The Nature of New York: An Environmental History of New York State*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2010) p. 97 "God appears to have wrought these old mountains with His highest power, and designed to leave a symbol of his omnipotence. Man is nothing here, his very shouts die on his lips."

<sup>2</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 101

<sup>3</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 82

<sup>4</sup> Dorceta Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600s-1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change*, (Duke University Press: Durham, 2009), p. 259

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities*. p. 260. Quoting a letter from Daniel Tiemann to James W. Beekman, February 23, 1852.

<sup>6</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 93. Quoting Frederick Law Olmsted.

While consistent with the spiritual needs of the classes who so valued nature as a romantic and restorative good, such a park did not really lend itself to play – active recreation – in any meaningful sense, and the same attitudes that ousted the lower classes from Pigtown and Seneca Village to make way for the park largely kept them from enjoying it once it was built. Olmsted would go on to replicate his Central Park triumph in Buffalo’s Delaware Park and Rochester’s Genesee Valley Park, creating beautiful spaces primarily intended for passive recreation.

Outside of the city, preservation of natural spaces followed much the same lines. The first major acquisition by the state government was of the area around Niagara Falls, where tawdry tourist traps and heavy industry threatened to spoil the august experience of the great wonder. Olmsted was once more employed to create an area of appropriate reverence there, the first place “in the nation’s history [that] the government purchased land for aesthetic purposes.”<sup>7</sup> But this would soon be dwarfed by the preserves carved out of the Great North Woods by a series of laws passed from 1883 to 1904, among them an amendment to the state constitution stipulating that this land be kept “forever wild.” By that later date, New York State owned more than 1.5 million acres of wilderness in the Adirondack and Catskill mountains.<sup>8</sup> Like Central Park, however, these massive preserves were primarily for the enjoyment of those who could reach them, primarily gentleman hunters such as Theodore Roosevelt, for whom the spiritual and sporting attraction of the wild was a welcome diversion from the city. For his part, in Roosevelt’s brief tenure as governor he was responsible for the preservation of the Palisades and the Hudson Highlands – a primarily aesthetic venture with backing from other such wealthy residents as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller<sup>9</sup> – and for the professionalization of the state’s forestry service, whose mandate included the stewardship of a responsible hunting culture. This work, informed by the pioneering New York State preservation tradition from which TR emerged, certainly influenced his extensive actions on the national scale. These entirely laudable acts – establishment of the United States Forest Service, the creation of five National Parks and eighteen National Monuments under the Antiquities Act, and the use of executive orders to create forest preserves – were nevertheless consistent with a mindset common among patrician conservationists of the era. That is – as exemplified in the cities and in the wilds of New York alike – that the ambition of conservation was to leave natural spaces alone, not to fashion artificial means for the benefit of the rabble. “Forever wild” land was meant to be preserved from, not enjoyed by, the masses.

– Fulton Fish and Yale Ivy –

Alfred E. Smith was pure Tammany: born to an Irish mother and an Italian-German father in 1873, he spent his entire life in the Lower East Side’s Fourth Ward, where he liked to recall that he “grew up”

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<sup>7</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 96

<sup>8</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 103

<sup>9</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 145

with the rising Brooklyn Bridge, spending “a lot of time . . . superintending the job in [his] boyhood.”<sup>10</sup> Moses would eulogize his old boss in the *New York Times Magazine*, describing the vibrant New York of his Smith’s childhood:

[W]ithin a radius of five miles Alfred E. Smith could see . . . Neapolitans who brought into Little Italy the colors and passions of the Mediterranean; refugees from the Knout in Russia, sturdy Germans of the Turnverein Sangerfest, pre-Nazi variety; old Americans being elbowed aside by Irishmen who understood the art of reconciling nationalities before the League of Nations and Dunbarton Oaks were thought of.”<sup>11</sup>

A fifteen-year-old Smith left school just short of graduation upon the death of his father, working as a newsboy, a shipping clerk, and finally in the Fulton Fish Market for thirteen hours a day (fourteen on Fridays) to support his mother and sister. Young Alfred’s jovial manner and eagerness to help his neighbors won him a great deal of friends, so it seemed only natural that he enter the machine politics that were like a second religion to the Irish of the Fourth Ward. He stood out – his natty style of dress occasionally bordering on the ridiculous, and he was possessed of an unnaturally loud voice which he deployed, with equal exuberance, for speaking and singing alike – in the informal center of local political action, Tom Foley’s saloon, and soon caught Foley’s attention as a candidate for advancement. His first political appointment was to the office of the Commissioner of Jurors in 1895; in 1904, Foley and the Tammany machine put him in the State Assembly.

Though the Albany toffs in the Capitol initially attempted to cow the green assemblyman, mocking his crooked Tammany backing and lack of formal education, Smith would defiantly and without shame declare that he was a graduate of F.F.M.<sup>12</sup> – Fulton Fish Market – and worked tirelessly to prove that *his* schooling, not theirs, was superior in politics. Prove it he did. Though he later said that the only book he ever read cover-to-cover was the biography of John L. Sullivan,<sup>13</sup> Smith would sit in his Albany boarding house reading every bill he could, cultivating an understanding of New York policy-making by sheer force of will. In time, he came to consider the Assembly Chamber his post-F.F.M. “school and . . . college,” remarking that “the very foundation of everything [he] attained was laid there.” Frances Perkins, the future Secretary of Labor to whom we are indebted for much of the information on Smith’s early life, would recall Churchill’s identification as a “House of Commons man” at heart, saying: “Alfred Smith too was a parliamentary man, an Assembly man. He thought and felt and reasoned in terms of that body. What he learned there from 1904 to 1915 was the very basis of a deep understanding and knowledge of the trade of a politician – a political leader in a democratic society.”<sup>14</sup> Smith’s thorough understanding of every facet of state politics – from the lowliest patronage job to the most lucrative government contract – combined with a rhetorical elan and a keen understanding of men soon made him a force with which to reckon; by

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Slayton, *The Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith*, (The Free Press, a division of Simon and Schuster: New York, 2001). p. 16-17

<sup>11</sup> Slayton, *The Empire Statesman*, p. 17

<sup>12</sup> Slayton, *The Empire Statesman*, p. 33

<sup>13</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 119

<sup>14</sup> Matthew and Hannah Josephson, *Al Smith: Hero of the Cities, A Political Portrait Drawing on the Papers of Frances Perkins*, (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1969), p. 100

1909, the *Tribune* called him the “Bowery statesman . . . easily the strong man in the Democratic ranks of the Assembly.”<sup>15</sup> While he always toed the Tammany line, there was with each passing year an increasing awareness of progressive causes on his part and that of a new kind of boss, Charlie Murphy.

Unlike Tammany bosses of the past, who had scotched reform efforts for fear they would interrupt the steady stream of graft that kept the machine moving, Murphy understood the political as well as (heaven forbid!) the moral benefits of the movement. Smith and Murphy still dismissed as “goo-goos” the Citizens’ Union – whose high-mindedness in civic reform, went Tammany wisdom, was matched only by their incompetence in enacting it – instead undertook their own kind of reform. The patrician “Good Government” types “showed more interest in civil service reform than in social legislation for the benefit of the poor,”<sup>16</sup> but they could never cut the gordian knot of the city and state bureaucracy. To their disgust, the entirety of “[t]he Democratic caucus is Charles Murphy at one end of a telephone wire and the Democratic leader [Smith] at the other.”<sup>17</sup> But Smith and Murphy knew better than any political scientist or efficiency expert how New York State worked and they put this granular understanding to work, not so much for civic reform – no profit in that, after all – but for the benefit of the people. At the municipal and state levels, Murphy assented to tenement laws, literacy programs, and in 1911 Smith – no doubt thinking of the father who fairly worked himself to death – passed the Workman’s Compensation Act. Smith even made some civic reforms as well: as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, his scrutiny of the state deficit enabled him to “pare \$15 million dollars from the expense side of the ledger,”<sup>18</sup> and while he championed New York City’s home rule – a pet project of the “goo goos” – ultimately Tammany reverted to form, watering down the measure in what would be referred to derisively as “Murphy’s Charter.”

But it was with the tragic Triangle Fire that Smith had his greatest opportunity for reform. The 1911 disaster galvanized New York reform politics in a way that no other event had, and as the co-chair (along with up-and-coming state Senator Robert F. Wagner) of the State Factory Investigating Commission, he reviewed the woeful conditions of industry across the state and recommended changes that we see even today: emergency exits marked in red, sprinkler systems, and the nation’s first Bureau of Fire Safety, endowed with unprecedented powers of building inspection and code enforcement. “As late as 1910 Al was responsible for only twenty bills, but by 1911, as he began to shepherd the Triangle reforms through the legislative process, he introduced seventy-three bills, forty-seven of which became law.”<sup>19</sup> While still suspect in the eyes of many of the Good Government types he once derided as “crackpots . . . wild-eyed, impractical, and, most important, incapable of producing results,”<sup>20</sup> his prominent commitment to workers’

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<sup>15</sup> Slayton, *The Empire Statesman*, p. 80

<sup>16</sup> Josephsons, *Al Smith: Hero of the Cities*, p. 95

<sup>17</sup> Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, (Vintage Books, a division of Random House: New York, 1975), p. 122

<sup>18</sup> Slayton, *The Empire Statesman*, p. 82

<sup>19</sup> Slayton, *The Empire Statesman*, p. 100

<sup>20</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 94

safety won him the respect of two decidedly clear-eyed female reformers, Belle Moskowitz and Frances Perkins. With their help and with a rapidly consolidating constituency of working class New Yorkers of all races and creeds, he geared up for a run at the state's highest office in 1918.

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One of these impractical “goo goo” types was a young Robert Moses. Born in 1888 to the privileged German Jewish community who referred to themselves as “Our Crowd,” Moses was raised in an environment of intellectualism and reform. His maternal grandmother was renowned for her intelligence and range of knowledge, and her independent streak led her to abandon Reform Jewish religiosity for the Society for Ethical Culture; his mother was heavily involved with the Settlement Movement, where in her capacity as a board member for Madison House she and other members of the ‘old’ Jewry of New York City endeavored to “help in the Americanization” of newly-arrived Russian Jews. Raised in New York and New Haven, Moses received the best education money could buy: Oxford-educated tutors, the Ethical Culture School, the Dwight School, the prestigious Mohegan Lake Academy; bachelor's degree at Yale in 1909, master's at Oxford in 1911, doctorate of philosophy at Columbia in 1913.<sup>21</sup> He evinced in his college days a marked earnestness and purity of purpose: he intended to go into public service and use all he had learned of political science to clean up what he saw as the broken politics of New York. His Ph.D. thesis was in praise of the British civil service, where he recommended that the empire's system be adopted in the United States: abandoning patronage appointments in favor of open competition based on merit. But in his writing was a clear admiration for the class-based stratification of Britain's civil service, where the administrative functions were reserved for a well-educated elite, and the “lower and more mechanical” positions were to be given to men of “ordinary education.” “We must decide how much encouragement we may honestly offer to those who expect to rise from the ranks without the almost essential early education of the university man.”<sup>22</sup>

Moses threw himself into work at a progressive think-tank called the Bureau of Municipal Research, where he experienced firsthand the difficulty of enforcing this meritocratic approach in the entrenched American spoils system. He recommended in his 1915 *Detailed Report on the Rating of the Efficiency of Civil Service Employees* a complete overhaul of the system, crafting a byzantine assessment regimen by which civil servants at every level – sixteen categories in all, with subcategories for specific jobs<sup>23</sup> – could be mathematically graded for their ability irrespective of political patronage. No one epitomized the progressive ideal of ‘efficiency’ more than Robert Moses: no compromise, no exceptions. But his stubbornness ran headlong into a machine whose life's-blood was patronage; through maneuvers

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<sup>21</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 35, 38-55

<sup>22</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 55

<sup>23</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 75. “All government service . . . could be divided into sixteen categories: executive, legislative, judicial, professional, subprofessional, educational, investigational, inspectional, clerical, custodial, street cleaning, fire, police, institutional, skilled trades and labor.”

on the Board of Estimate and incitement of the civil servant class Moses' plan threatened, Tammany stonewalled the proposed standardization. The progressive mayor Moses had counted on for support demurred in the face of public pressure and was nevertheless ousted for his trouble in 1918, and the Tammany man who replaced him dismissed all Bureau of Municipal Research staffers from the city's payroll. A dejected Moses took a bitter lesson away from the experience: "When a program of standardization work is first made, an effort should be made to get the persons responsible to pledge themselves to stand squarely behind the program."<sup>24</sup> Without support from the top, he saw, nothing meaningful could get done. He would get his chance when Belle Moskowitz, impressed by the young man's doggedness if not his judgement, approached him about a job for the governor-elect.

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It would be difficult to think of two men with backgrounds as dissimilar as Al Smith and Robert Moses. Smith grew up playing in the streets of Bowery, Moses lived just off of Fifth Avenue and even had a pony in his New Haven days; Smith left school just shy of eighth grade, while Moses was positively chauvinistic in his elite education; Smith was a devout Catholic, Moses a nonpracticing Jew whose parents never bothered to have him circumcised or bar-mitzvahed; Smith went to work at age fifteen, Moses' mother supported him for years as he found his footing in government; Smith's brand of reform was socially-minded and realistic, Moses' civic-minded and impractical; the shortish Smith dressed immaculately but somewhat outlandishly, the taller Moses fashionably but with an affected carelessness for his appearance. Most notably, Moses in the first years of his career evinced an almost fanatical idealism which, coupled with his high-born arrogance, kept him from getting anything done. Smith on the other hand understood people, and could work within a flawed system to be their champion. As the usually taciturn Charlie Murphy once quipped in response to someone lamenting that the otherwise bright young Smith was not a 'college man': "If he was a college man, he wouldn't be Al Smith."<sup>25</sup>

What they held in common was a preternatural understanding of the mechanisms of government – Smith from legislative experience, Moses from feverish study – as well as a faith in that government to improve the lives of citizens, even if they viewed those citizens from somewhat different vantage points. While Moses would always have something of a condescending approach to 'the people' – he maintained a lifelong conviction that he knew what was best for them – but what he learned from Smith was an ability and a willingness to work for them within a system he once condemned as corrupt and unworkable. It was this unlikely pair – with their respective characteristics, their flaws – whose work in New York politics would ultimately act as forerunner and model for that national apotheosis of progressive and liberal thought, FDR's presidency and the New Deal.

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<sup>24</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 85

<sup>25</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 122

## – The Side of the Angels –

Robert Moses' first job in Albany was a massive one. As Belle Moskowitz's chief-of-staff, he was tasked with no less than the complete overhaul of the state's governing structure. The quiet, matronly Mrs. M., as Smith called her, was as savvy a boss as the young man could have asked for: like Smith, she possessed a keen understanding of state government and an impatience with impractical reform. Nonetheless, she understood that "without improvement in the machinery of government, it was useless to talk about the social reforms of which she had long dreamed," and encouraged Smith appoint a Commission for Reconstruction, Retrenchment and Reorganization before even assuming office.<sup>26</sup> This was no blind idealism, either: Moskowitz reasoned that, by appointing to this commission both loyal Democrats and prominent members of the reform-minded, TR-style wing of the Republican Party, Smith could split the GOP down the middle and theoretically ensure his reelection. The three components of the commission were designed to be attractive: the necessary 'reconstruction' needed at the end of World War I had an appealingly Lincolnesque quality; 'retrenchment' had connotations of "economy and prudence"; and 'reorganization' evoked the kind of efficiency in government Smith sought to champion.<sup>27</sup>

Tammany had squashed a similar proposal from the Bureau of Municipal Research in 1915's Constitutional Convention, a proposal Moses had had a hand in drafting. But now, with Tammany's favorite son at the helm, he was confident of success. His proposal echoed many of the 1915 report's recommendations, but was tempered by Moskowitz's political insights and sense of practicality. The *Report of the Reconstruction Commission to Governor Alfred E. Smith on the Retrenchment and Reorganization in the State Government* provided for an array of fundamental changes. First, it recognized the need to rearrange the unwieldy and redundant system of 187 state agencies into sixteen departments, the heads of which would serve at the governor's pleasure, compose his cabinet, and submit line-item budgets to him for review. An executive budget would be instituted, by which the governor would submit a budget to the legislature, public hearings would be held to review it, and an independent comptroller would oversee executive expenditure. The governor's term would be extended to four years, and the only elected offices statewide would be that of governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, and comptroller. The sum effect of these organizational changes was an increase in the power of the executive and, while not an elimination of bureaucracy, a scheme by which the vast government of the state would be much more efficient. Moses was eloquent in the report's "Underlying Principles," where he anticipated opponents' objections to the governorship's expansion of power:

Those who cannot endure the medicine because it seems too strong must be content with waste, inefficiency, and bungling – and steadily rising cost of government. The system here proposed is more democratic, not more "royal" than that now in existence Democracy does not merely mean periodic elections. It means a government held accountable to the people between elections. . . . A Governor with a Cabinet of reasonable

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<sup>26</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 98

<sup>27</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 95

size, responsible for proposing a program in the annual budget and for administering the program as modified by the Legislature, may be brought daily under public scrutiny, be held accountable to the Legislature and public opinion, and be turned out of office if he fails to measure up to public requirements. If this is not democracy then it is difficult to imagine what is.

It is as pure a distillation of the theory of efficient government as one will find:, comprising all the core tenets of accountability, economy, and transparency. He went on to remind the governor's political rivals in the GOP that this recommendation was "not partisan": "Republican leaders and Democratic leaders of the highest standing and widest experience have endorsed the principles upon which they rest. They have appeared in Progressive and Socialist platforms."<sup>28</sup>

Smith fought hard for the proposal in his first term, but the fight to reform the state government hit a significant snag when the governor lost reelection in 1920. Republican Warren Harding's election to the presidency swept every statewide Republican candidate into office, but Mrs. M's strategy for splitting the GOP was nonetheless quite effective: Smith ran more than a million votes ahead of his ticket, losing by only 74,000 votes compared to 1.2 million for the Democrats' presidential candidate, James Cox. The constitutional amendments would have to wait until his reelection in 1922 and would take much of Smith's remaining governorship to pass. But one immediate effect of the drafting of the proposal was a relationship between Al Smith and Robert Moses. Smith was impressed with the young man's competence and enthusiasm and, in the interregnum period, he made a habit of inviting Moses to dinner in his humble Fourth Ward home. Moses' education in the practical politics and administration, begun with Belle Moskowitz in 1919, was completed in these evenings with the Bowery statesman. He learned how the rough methods of Tammany Hall – railroading of opponents, martialing of public opinion, and sneaking seemingly innocuous legislation past the opposition – could be effectively deployed to champion progressive causes. Upon their return to Albany, Smith would see to it that his new protégé had every opportunity to put these skills to work.

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Moses did not intend to disappoint him and, between Smith's election and inauguration in 1922, he revealed the scope of his ambition. First, he submitted – under the aegis of the New York State Association, a reform organization for which he served as secretary in the interregnum – a comprehensive plan to create a state parks system like nothing ever proposed before. The Reconstruction Commission had had an informal committee on parks, but the issue had been ignored in the considerable debate over the main issue, reorganization. Moses asked the trustees to complete their study of the state's parks and, assembling their findings and adding the language for a bond issue, released *A State Park Plan for New York*. It framed the impending exhaustion of the 1916 bond issue, the \$10 million of which went primarily to the Forest Preserve and the Palisades Interstate Park, as an opportunity "to take the first steps toward the development

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<sup>28</sup> New York Reconstruction Commission, *Summary of Report of Reconstruction Commission to Governor Alfred E. Smith, on Retrenchment and Reorganization in the State Government, October 10, 1919*, (J.B. Lyon Company: Albany 1919), p. 12

of a really comprehensive and unified state park plan which will take into consideration the anticipated growth of the state's population and more particularly the growth of the larger cities."<sup>29</sup> He noted the immense popularity of Palisades as evidence of such need (attendance in 1921 was 3.1 million and in 1922, the year of the report, it reached 4 million) and, reminding the reader of the imperative of maintaining the Preserve, pointed out that its remoteness and mandate of 'forever wild' precluded it from being a true park in the sense of practical use by the public: "Even in uses popularly called recreative the Forest Preserve is more of a necessity than a luxury in New York State. Here we have the greatest concentration of any state in the Union; the greatest strain of intensive application to work; and the greatest need for places and facilities for relaxation from the nerve-tension and for health conservation." New York State needed more parks and would need even more of them, he established, and the acquisition and maintenance of such assets would not be a loss to the state, but would be "investing capital in the constitutions of her people."<sup>30</sup> Moses had a plan for this investment, one that he only hinted at in his report.

It remained, however, to convince his boss of his plan. Smith was at first skeptical, remarking in a characteristic turn of phrase, "You want to give the people a fur coat when what they need is red flannel underwear." He had already endorsed the old conservation methods of the past – on the campaign trail he had said "To protect our forests from fire and disease, our streams from pollution, our wild life against extermination, our sources of water power from exploitation and alienation, is not only a function of government but an obligation of every citizen . . ."<sup>31</sup> – but thought that, in terms of recreation, smaller parks, not the massive projects Moses proposed, were sufficient to the task. Moses knew how to convince him, however. Taking Smith on a tour of the sites he proposed, he offered a number of reasons that this could be of benefit to the people but also a political boon. On Long Island, the prospective jewel in the proposal, he noted several points. The oceanfront land on the north and south shores were the domain of the super-rich, the antagonism of whom could prove an asset to the governor's reputation as a fighter for the common man. The roads to these beaches were totally inadequate, necessitating an infrastructure overhaul that would employ thousands and allow a doling out of government contracts that to the old Tammany man was certainly attractive. And above all, the plan would help people: Palisades not only had thousands of people visiting each weekend but left thousands more out of luck when the ferry across the river was full. Parks, in short were a winning political issue, as well as doing the right thing. Convinced, Smith in 1923 announced his intentions to submit a bond proposal of \$15 million to the people the following year and encouraged passage of legislation creating a State Council of Parks within the Conservation Department. And he instructed Moses to make the plan even bigger.

The response from the public was immediate. Telegrams and letters rolled in praising the plan, showing the administration just how politically advantageous it could be: "[S]upporting parks meant that

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<sup>29</sup> New York State Association, *A State Park Plan for New York*, (NYSA: New York, 1922), p. 5

<sup>30</sup> New York State Association, *A State Park Plan for New York*, p. 17

<sup>31</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 155

the Governor would be helping the lower- and middle-class people, and thereby winning their support, and that the intellectuals would be for him because they saw parks as part of a new pattern of social progress. So you'd have all three groups supporting you. And besides, 'parks' was a word like 'motherhood.' It was just something nobody could be against." Not strictly "nobody," though. Standing in the way of the Long Island plan, quite literally, were the most rich and powerful men in the country, whose estates on the so-called 'Gold Coast' they wished to keep pristine. The massive public beaches and the wide, manicured parkways to reach them that Moses proposed would jeopardize their solitude, and they resolved to fight it tooth and nail, deploying their considerable political and legal power to stop the plan. In doing so they played right into Moses' hands. Al Smith's greatest pupil set to work, using time-honored Tammany tactics to dismantle the opposition with a thousand cuts. And his greatest asset was one he held before the fight even began.

He had slipped into the language creating the Long Island State Park Commission the power to acquire land by "condemnation and appropriation," with the provision that this understanding of "appropriation" was drawn from section 59 in the conservation law. *That* law had been written to prevent lumber concerns from clearing legally condemned land before the state had the chance to physically take control of it, and it did so by empowering the Conservation Commission to "appropriate" such land by simply "walking on it and telling the owner he no longer owned it."<sup>32</sup> This obscure provision was a relic and had only been intended to apply to unoccupied forest land – which was the extent of the Conservation Commission's remit, after all, before Moses' proposal – but now, before anyone even realized it, Moses was empowered to use it throughout all of Nassau and Suffolk County. It was, in short, a sneaky trick. But while its legality would be challenged by the Gold Coast's lawyers, Moses used their constant court battles to stall for time, all the while proceeding with physical work on his projects. If he got enough done before the legal situation was resolved, he reasoned, no one could countenance undoing it. "Once you sink that first stake, they'll never make you pull it up," he would recall.<sup>33</sup>

An anecdote from the legal fight illustrates how Smith and Moses intended to pursue the politics of their campaign for parks:

When one of the [wealthy landowners], Horace Havemeyer claimed that the new parks meant that his town, East Islip, might be "overrun with rabble from the city," the mood became ice, as Al's eyes flashed. "Rabble?" he bellowed, "That's *me* you're talking about." Havemeyer tried desperately to change the tone with a feeble joke, "Why, where's a poor millionaire to go nowadays if he wants to be alone?" Al told the rich man to try the Harlem River Hospital, an institution for the mentally insane . . .<sup>34</sup>

This exchange – an indignant son of the working class looking a man of great wealth and privilege square in the eye and telling him to screw – was exactly the politics the administration intended. Tammany's man in the state Senate, the infamous Jimmy Walker, was even more blunt. "These millionaires made their millions out of the poor despised kikes and wops of the tenements whom, through you [the Senate opponents

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<sup>32</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 174

<sup>33</sup> Goldberger, Paul, "Robert Moses, Master Builder, is Dead at 92" (New York Times: July 30, 1981).

<sup>34</sup> Slayton, *The Empire Statesman*, p. 173

of the plan], they are now seeking to shut out . . . from a day in the country.”<sup>35</sup> Moses had learned well the lesson of his failed standardization scheme for the Bureau of Municipal Affairs: he had a strong executive behind him and, by using the baron’s outrage against them in the court of public opinion, he had people behind him, too. Rather than the gadfly trying to interfere with civil servants’ livelihood he had been back in 1915, now the people lauded him as their champion. “As long as you’re on the side of parks,” he realized, “you’re on the side of the angels.”<sup>36</sup>

When the public saw what he had built, they admired him all the more. The most famous of his new parks was Jones Beach, where Moses built the most splendid bathhouses anyone had ever seen,<sup>37</sup> as well as every kind of recreation imaginable – “pitch-and-putt golf, table and paddle tennis, shuffleboard, roller-skating rinks, baseball fields set in a little stadia.”<sup>38</sup> These were no nature preserves for the Romantic’s contemplation or a gentleman hunter’s vacation; these spaces were made to be *used*, designed with the average citizen in mind and with an attendance to detail on a level that previous public works had never even approached.<sup>39</sup> Jones Beach and the other parks he sank stakes into – Fire Island, Hecksher Park, Sunken Meadow, Belmont Lake – were parks for the people, and to get them there Moses built a system of parkways, again, like nothing that had been seen before. The increasing availability of the automobile to the average citizen, in the first decades of the century, enabled Americans to spend their newfound free time out of the cities, but residents of New York City had nowhere to go. The only beach available to them was Palisades, which filled up – and the roadways leading to it filled up – so fast as to make it nearly as congested as the city itself. Moses gave the public places to go and safe, attractive parkways on which to get there. Traffic could flow continuously, rather than wait at stops and train tracks. Motorists could take a leisurely pace, taking in the sights, or they could zip down the road and start their day at the beach. Not merely a sea change in the field of recreation, Moses’ Long Island venture was hugely influential in the field of infrastructure.

Al Smith and Robert Moses, already responsible for the most significant overhaul of New York’s administrative apparatus in decades, were now responsible for a fundamental change of the nature of public works. They had triumphed over the moneyed interests in a way that has an interesting serendipity about

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<sup>35</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 201

<sup>36</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 218

<sup>37</sup> Note: He made these bathhouses to last, out of brick and marble, and for no small reason: in a particularly egregious case of the Long Island barons reclaiming their property, just ten years before Louis Comfort Tiffany had instructed his employees to dynamite an Oyster Bay bathhouse out of existence because it spoiled his view! [Schlichting, Kara, “‘They Shall Not Pass’: Opposition to Public Leisure and State Planning in Connecticut and on Long Island” *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 41, Issue 1 (Sage Publications: Charlotte, North Carolina, 2014).]

<sup>38</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, p. 223

<sup>39</sup> Note: Moses had little patience for the undeveloped park. Stradling p. 197, quoting Moses’ “Philosophy of the New York State Park System” (1947), where he addressed his frustration with the continued lack of development in the Forest Preserve: “‘The average city family cannot live in any comfort in a leanto or hut, and a few days of rain and cold make them sick and miserable.’ Moses wanted the Forest Preserve opened to a larger number of New Yorkers, not kept remote and useless for all but a ‘handful of fanatics.’”

it: When Central Park was conceived more than seventy years before, rich men had prevented the acquisition of land at Jones's Woods and the city opted to displace the poor communities of Seneca Village and Pigtown instead, building a park that largely catered to 'respectable' types. Now, at Jones *Beach*, the opposite had been achieved: the state had seized largely unused land from the rich and had made it available for the use of all.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, for all the political capital this triumph afforded Al Smith, the country was not quite ready to accept him as candidate for the highest office in the land, the presidency.

– Conclusion: –  
– From Albany to Washington –

The election of 1928 – its bigotry, its fearmongering, the Klan burning crosses – is a subject of such national shame that it hardly seems worth writing about, and one can only speculate what Al Smith would have done with the presidency if he had won it. There is no question he would not have taken the *laissez faire* attitude of the victor – Herbert Hoover, the conservative California who had the benefit of not being a Catholic – when the bottom fell out of the vaunted 'Hoover Economy' of which the former Commerce Secretary was so proud. What is clear, however, is how Smith's successor in the Executive Mansion and successor to the Democratic nomination, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, handled it and what lessons he took from the old master of New York politics.

Roosevelt, while no fan of Moses' to say the least, largely gave him free hand when he was governor of New York. While he relieved him of the Secretary of State job that was at the top of the long list of titles Smith conferred upon his protégé, Moses' popularity for bringing parks to the people largely insulated him from Roosevelt's influence. That and the fact that, along with the "appropriations" bit he used so skillfully, he had written into the statute establishing the parks scheme a number of provisions that ensured that he remain in control. FDR was not much interested in fighting, anyway: consistent with his lifelong tendency to replicate his older cousin's success, he viewed the governorship largely as a steppingstone to the presidency. But Moses' parks fight served as a good model of what he saw as government's role during the Great Depression. He seized dormant farmland for reforestation, which provided jobs to the unemployed as well as produced revenue for the state, which sold millions of trees to other states to the point that in 1931 "altogether New York planted 40 percent of all trees planted in the United States."<sup>41</sup> This work, which foreshadowed his nationwide efforts with the Civilian Conservation Corps, is very much in the vein of Moses' Long Island fight: seize idle land, use it to put people to work, and harness the positive press generated by this to keep up momentum.

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<sup>40</sup> Note: The poetic justice of this is hampered somewhat by Moses' elitism (e.g.: likely without his boss' approval, he purposely designed the underpasses on his beloved parkways to be too short for buses, excluding much of the urban public from getting to some of his parks) and especially his later career, where he rather callously razed entire neighborhoods to make way for public works in the name of the greater good, but rather consistently to the benefit of preferred contractors. There is little doubt that Moses' postwar work – a study in contradictions – is problematic to his legacy, but there can be little question of his early work's influence on FDR and the New Deal.

<sup>41</sup> Stradling, *The Nature of New York*, p. 161

Once instituted by President Roosevelt in 1933, the CCC did more than just plant trees. It and its sister programs, the Works Progress Administration and the National Youth Administration, followed very much the same lines as Moses' parks system. In addition to simple conservation such as he practiced in New York State, these programs installed such practical park amenities as lodges, barbecues, roadside rest stops. The WPA built hospitals, libraries, and other public buildings that, like Moses' bathhouses, were beautifully designed and built, and made improvements to roadways – again, like Moses' – previously unheard of on the federal level. Like Smith and Moses, he provided employment and means for enjoying public resources, stretched the law to accomplish his goals, and antagonized not a few wealthy interests in the process. And his efforts were wildly popular with the people, gaining him reelection in 1936 and 1940. Roosevelt had learned his lesson well, and one can see Smith's influence illustrated in the difference between the overall tactics of TR and his younger cousin. While Theodore Roosevelt was self-consciously righteous and upstanding, opting to accomplish his goals by moral suasion and public opinion, FDR was not above using strongarm, sometimes underhanded tactics to accomplish his. TR was able to get legislation across working with a friendly Congress, but – in an echo of Smith's consolidation of power with the reorganization of state government – FDR resorted to somewhat autocratic methods in the face of the somewhat unfriendly conservative coalition and hostile Supreme Court of his later years. In no small measure, the New Deal was carried out on much the same terms as Al Smith's governorship.<sup>42</sup>

One of the ironies of FDR introducing Smith's Tammany-style tactics was the collapse of machine politics in the cities. A passage from Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*, helps to illustrate this point. The 1956 novel ends with the hero, an old-school boss in an unnamed city named Frank Skeffington, ultimately defeated by a young challenger for his long-held mayoral seat. Contemplating the loss, Skeffington's nephew is advised by an ally of his uncle's that it was not his direct political opponents that defeated the great man, but a ghost:

"I don't get *that* at all," Adam said. "Why Roosevelt?"

"Because," Jack said patiently, "he destroyed the old-time boss. He destroyed him by taking away his source of power. He made the kind of politician your uncle was an anachronism, sport. All over the country the bosses have been dying for the last twenty years, thanks to Roosevelt. . . [T]he old boss was strong simply because he held all the cards. If anybody wanted anything – jobs, favors, cash – he could only go to the boss, the local leader. What Roosevelt did was to take the handouts out of the local hands. A few little things like Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the like – that's what shifted the gears, sport. No need now to depend on the boss of everything; the Federal Government was getting into the act."<sup>43</sup>

More than just in parks, but in an entire philosophy of government, one can see the influence of Al Smith. Franklin Roosevelt took what he learned from New York politics to the next level, proving once more the old adage that the states are the laboratories of democracy. The three happy warriors – TR, Smith, and FDR

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<sup>42</sup> Personal animosity soured the relationship between Roosevelt and Smith, who condemned the New Deal – a program one might have imagined he himself enacting had he been president – as overreach, but the similarity between the goals and tactics of the two men are unavoidable.

<sup>43</sup> Edwin O'Connor, *The Last Hurrah*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2016), p. 374

– represent a continuum of how the Empire State’s progressivism and liberalism evolved and ultimately became the national politics of the United States.

## Works Consulted:

### Primary Sources

**New York State Association, *A State Park Plan for New York*, (NYSA: New York, 1922).** [Library of Congress, via HathiTrust // Cited] While technically the work of an entire staff, this document and the one that follows it are almost entirely from Robert Moses' own exacting hand. As such, they were vital not only to understanding the formation of the park plan and the reorganization of New York State's government respectively, but to a fuller appreciation of Moses' organizational and legal genius.

**New York Reconstruction Commission, *Summary of Report of Reconstruction Commission to Governor Alfred E. Smith, on Retrenchment and Reorganization in the State Government, October 10, 1919*, (J.B. Lyon Company: Albany 1919).** [Rochester Central // Cited]

**Smith, Alfred E. *Progress of Public Improvements: A Report to the People of New York* (J.B. Lyon: Albany, 1927).**

“ ” *Progressive Democracy: Addresses and State Papers of Alfred E. Smith* (Harcourt, Brace, & Co.: New York, 1928)

“ ” *Up to Now: An Autobiography* (Viking Press: New York, 1929). [Rochester Central // Consulted] Regrettably, I was only able to read these three titles briefly in the Rochester Central Library before everything was shut down and my access to them cut off. If there is any substantive deficiency in this paper, it is due to the exclusion of these titles.

### Secondary Sources

**Caro, Robert, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, (Vintage Books, a division of Random House: New York, 1975).** [Drake // Cited] This Pulitzer Prize-winning volume was an excellent resource, and one from which I drew a great deal of information on the two principal characters in my paper, Al Smith and Robert Moses. His description of the fight for land in Long Island is among the most in-depth treatments of the subject, and his and his wife Ina's extensive research provided, along with Stradling's *Nature of New York*, a vital jumping-off point for this piece. I was already familiar with Caro's engaging, literary style from my reading of his "Life and Times of Lyndon Baines Johnson" series, but I was not prepared for how influential his take on Moses was, to the point where an entire revisionist school of thought has sprung up against it since its publication forty-five years ago.

**Chiles, Robert, "Working Class Conservationism in New York: Governor Alfred E. Smith and 'The Property of the People of the State'" *Environmental History*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2013)** [Journal Storage // Consulted] As usual, JSTOR proved a vital resource for accessing such helpful scholarly articles as this one. Chiles, the author of *The Revolution of '28* (which tragically I could not lay my hands on, haunting me to this day), focuses here on three areas of Smith's conservationism, what the author terms a "redistribution of environmental wealth: 'parks for the people,' water power, and forests.

**Goldberger, Paul, "Robert Moses, Master Builder, is Dead at 92" (New York Times: July 30, 1981).** [New York Public Library // Cited] A classic Gray Lady obit. Makes note of Caro's wounding of its subject, but makes sure to quote Moses' robust, 3,500-word rebuttal. "I raise my stein to the builder who can remove ghettos without removing people as I hail the chef who can make omelets without breaking eggs."

**Josephson, Matthew and Hannah, *Al Smith: Hero of the Cities, A Political Portrait Drawing on the Papers of Frances Perkins*, (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1969).** [Drake // Cited] This was a really interesting find, almost a custom fit for a thesis linking NYS progressivism and national liberalism. Great personal remembrances from Frances Perkins abound, and her collected anecdotes from Smith's youth added a great deal to my understanding of his early life.

- Klein, Milton M., *The Empire State: A History of New York*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2001).** [Drake // Consulted] Our principal textbook for the course, this provided some sense of the framework of the topics at hand (government reorganization, parks, *etc.*) but did not deal with them in any detailed way.
- Natural Heritage Trust, *Fifty Years, New York State Parks: 1924-1974*, (Natural Heritage Trust: Albany, 1975).** [Drake // Consulted] This was an interesting find, in that it was among the last documents dealing with Moses' influence on the state park system before Caro's book had permanently colored the public's (and history's) view of him. It's a slim volume, mostly pictures featuring the various parks; likely something sold in park gift shops. Given his outsized influence on the park system, the section on Moses is understandably glowing – somewhat along the lines of a civic hagiography, at times – so I took this fairly uncritical point of view with a grain of salt.
- O'Connor, Edwin, *The Last Hurrah*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2016).** [Personal Collection // Cited] A book from my youth that I thought apropos. (Or, perhaps, the seed of my thesis all along! The subconscious is a tricky thing.). The model for the main character was Mayor James Michael Curley, who in many ways was the Massachusetts equivalent of Smith.
- Schlichting, Kara, “They Shall Not Pass’: Opposition to Public Leisure and State Planning in Connecticut and on Long Island” *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 41, Issue 1 (Sage Publications: Charlotte, North Carolina, 2014).** [CUNY Academic Works // Cited] Another very good study of the Long Island fight, Schlichting views this conflict along the lines of localism (home rule, NIMBYism) versus regionalism (central planning). She no doubt expanded on the many worthwhile ideas in this article in her new book *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore*, which I hope to get my hands on soon.
- Schwartz, Joel, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City*, (Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 1993).** [Drake // Consulted] This book mostly deals with Moses' Depression-era and post-war career (especially his work with low-income housing), which was interesting but largely irrelevant to the topic at hand.
- Slayton, Robert, *The Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith*, (The Free Press, a division of Simon and Schuster: New York, 2001).** [Drake // Cited] Pretty straight-ahead biography, which I found particularly useful for Smith's early career in the Assembly.
- Stradling, David, *The Nature of New York: An Environmental History of New York State*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2010).** [Drake / Cited] The source of all this trouble, Stradling's book was the first text consulted for this assignment. I found his study of early conservationism particularly helpful, especially his examination of the romantic artists and writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and their influence on urban upper- and middle-classes views of nature.
- Taylor, Dorceta, *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600s-1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change*, (Duke University Press: Durham, 2009).** [Drake // Cited] This was my main source for details about the Central Park land acquisitions, which I found a particularly telling episode about the unequal tendencies of early conservationism and park planning.