The Salafia Property

A Report for the Jonah Center for Earth and Art

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Along the eastern edge of the Coginchaug River, south of the confluence of the Coginchaug and Mattabesett Rivers, in the North End of Middletown, Connecticut, lie 20.8 acres of floodplain land, currently known as the "Salafia Property." This property has been in the hands of the Salafia family since December, 1967, when it was "conveyed to Philip Salafia and Angelina Salafia from Walton E. Donahue" (Middletown Land Records, Volume 355: p. 111). The property is immediately to the west of, and separated by a steep and wooded hillside from Saint John's Roman Catholic Cemetery, which sits along the western edge of Johnson Street. If one were looking at a street map and imagined Spring Street and North Main Street extending all the way to the Coginchaug River, the Property would be along the River between the extensions of those two streets. The Property is within about 800 feet of the site of Middletown's closed Municipal Landfill and within 1000 feet of the adjacent former Remington Rand industrial complex.

The swampy wetland where the Property lies is situated at the southwest edge of the 496-acre Cromwell Meadows State Wildlife Area, an area which has been created over time by the overflow of the Coginchaug and Mattabesett Rivers, and which is habitat for several state-listed plant and animal species," including "the state-endangered American Bittern, and the state-threatened blue-winged teal. The area provides important

habitat for migrating wood ducks, black ducks, teal, and nesting wood ducks. American shad, blueback herring, alewives, and other fish migrate from the ocean to spawn in the rivers. In addition, several rare plant species occur in the area (Brawerman, 1998: p. 11).

For a long, long time, humans and their activities have affected the meadows and floodplain land where the Salafia Property is now situated. According to archaeologist Nicholas Bellantoni, Connecticut "was probably not ice free until about 16,000 years ago." Eventually tundra grasses and mega-fauna invaded the region, and fossil evidence indicates that, at some point, there were mastodons and caribou (p. 2). It may have been humans who were eventually responsible for the extinction of those animals. Jared Diamond reported that the Americas were "originally" full of big mammals, including elephants, horses, lions, cheetahs, camels, and giant sloths (p. 46). Although those big mammals had survived the ends of 22 previous ice ages, they became extinct around 13,000 years ago, not too long after the arrival of humans throughout the Americas. Diamond suggested that human hunters, expanding southward through the Americas, may have found those animals easy to kill, as they (the animals) had never seen humans previously (p. 45, 46, 47, 48, or 49).

It was probably about 10,000 years ago, as the last glacial ice retreated from Connecticut, that humans first settled along the Mattabesett and Coginchaug and rivers (Brawerman, p. 5). Over the next 9,000 years, the climate warmed, plant and animal life became more diverse, and the humans in the area developed an ever more technologically advanced and socially more complex system of survival. Although there may not be any recorded evidence as to the uses which the first humans in the area made of the Coginchaug River and the floodplain land that would become the Salafia Property,

archaeological research has suggested a number of credible images. Archaeologist
Nicholas Bellantoni reported that, by about 7,000 years ago, there were "fishing camps
[in Connecticut] adjacent to natural waterfalls or where "rivers narrow or bend, . . .
excellent places for capturing schools of anadromous fish migrating upstream to spawn in
the spring" (p. 4). Such a river could have been the Coginchaug. In addition, Bellantoni
reported evidence of "hunting and gathering camps established near meadows, marshes,
and other open sites during the summer to exploit wild vegetables and animals" (p. 4).
Such an area could have been the Cromwell Meadows. Archaeologist Roger Moeller
(2006) reported evidence that humans of that time had tools for "felling and limbing trees,
for making dugout canoes from large logs, and for roughly shaping logs" and evidence
that they used "fishing implements for netting, hooking, spearing, and trapping large
numbers of fish." Perhaps they put their canoes into the Coginchaug River from the
Salafia Property.

According to Bellantoni, by about 1,000 years ago, "in the floodplains of the river valleys" [in Connecticut], humans had established large "villages centered around agricultural fields" with "acres of maize and other plants" (1999, p. 6). If Mary Guilette's (1979) conclusions for southern New England apply, "hunting, fishing, and gathering were supplementary activities in a predominantly horticultural economy" (p. CI 5). After the seasonal harvest, people moved to temporary villages in the forest to hunt. "Come winter, they removed to more substantial villages in a warm valley or some protected place close to firewood. Come springtime, groups . . . moved to fishing stations to take advantage of spawning fish before returning to their summer settlements around the cornfields" (p. CI 6).

About 396 years ago, Dutch traders arrived in the area and found people who called themselves the Mattabesic living along the Coginchaug and Mattabesett Rivers (Brawerman, p. 5). English settlers began to arrive about 376 years ago, coming from the Bay Colony and Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts. They soon established a settlement in the area known today as Middletown's North End. According to Elizabeth Warner

When Main Street was laid out, soon after the first settlers arrived, the proprietors chose its northern end for the core of their settlement. A fresh spring was nearby, and the ground was elevated enough to protect land from the yearly rising of the river. The meeting house was built near Main Street's intersection with the road to the spring (Spring Street) in 1652, and most families clustered nearby (1990, p. 78).

Those familiar with the streets in Middletown's North End will recognize that that settlement was probably on the edge of the floodplain land that would become the Salafia Property.

Unfortunately, the Dutch and English brought diseases to which the people already in the area had no resistance. By the end of the 1633-34 winter, the indigenous population of the Connecticut River valley had been reduced from over 8,000 to less than 2,000 people, smallpox being a major killer (Wikipedia History of Connecticut, 2006). There were also some violent conflicts between the indigenous people and the English settlers. By 1680 there were "only 1,000 Mattabesic left in Connecticut," and, by1800, only 77 (Lee Sultzman, 2002).

The English settlers took over "the lands of the Mattabesic tribes adjoining the Connecticut River and the coastline of western Connecticut" (Sultzman, 2002), and transformed the area into a farming region. In the year which the English counted as "1651," they declared the area known as "Mattabeseck" to be a "town," and, in the year they counted as "1653," they approved that the name of the "Plantaytion shall bee called

Middletown" (Perkins, Prue, and Kosinski, 1996, p. 17). At that time, the area of Middletown included the towns known today as Cromwell, Portland, Middlefield, and East Hampton as well as the City of Middletown. According to Peter Hall (1981), There was "a nucleus of thirty families who . . . laid out home lots and divided adjacent meadows, fields, and woodlots among themselves" (p. 8).

By the latter part of the 1600's, Middletown's farmers were obtaining a wide variety of goods from Europe and the West Indies, "paying" for them with lumber, livestock, corn, and fish (Schoenfeld Associates, 1968, p. 6). Middletown had become an international port, and shipping and ship building had been established as important industries (p. 6). In time, however, sustainability issues arose. According to Peter Hall (1981), "By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Middlesex County was in the grips of a full-blown ecological disaster caused by overpopulation and intensive commercialized agriculture" (p. 11). Hall reported that, in 1819, the Reverend David Dudley Field reported in a *Statistical Account of Middlesex County* that

Wood, the basic material with which the population constructed its houses and the basic fuel for heating and cooking, had become so scarce as to be prohibitively expensive. The destruction of woodlands by money-hungry farmers supplying demands for cordwood in New York and timber in the West Indies, and the ruination of pasturelands by sheep—in great numbers to supply the nation's new and growing textile industry—were causing drainage and erosion problems. The area which had once been remarkably healthy, was being ravaged by epidemic diseases—yellow fever, typhus, and cholera . . . traced to commerce, poverty, and drainage problems (pp. 11-12).

Many left the Middletown area. According to Brawerman, "The availability of more fertile lands in western New York, northern Ohio and Pennsylvania led to the mass abandonment [of farms] and [a] great migration of Connecticut farmers during the 1800's" (p. 6).

A new economy was emerging, however. Brawerman reported that "Those who stayed [in Middletown] worked in the many factories that were springing up along the rivers and streams . . ." (p. 6). The Coginchaug River was a part of the change. Its "central and northern sections . . . had enough slope for power generation" (p. 6). Thus, at the time of the War of 1812, two pistol factories were established, one on each side of the Coginchaug, about one mile up river from the Salafia Property.

In 1848, Charles Alsop and several other Middletown men organized the Middletown Railroad, and, in the spring of 1849, they built a "nine-mile line from Middletown to the Hartford and New Haven main track at Berlin" (Turner and Jacobus: p.24). The Price, Lee, & Company Map of the City of Middletown, dated 1888, shows the tracks leaving Bridge Street at the base of Portland Street, along the Connecticut River, and going across the northeast ends of Grove Street, High Street, and Johnson Street and then across the Coginchaug River, differentiating the flood plain where the Salafia Property would lie from the rest of Cromwell Meadows.

It is probable that part of what is now the Salafia Property was the location of a factory during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1875, Thomas Kelly and two partners organized the Ebony Lamp Black Company, building a factory near the corner of Johnson and Spring streets (Commemorative Biographical Record of Middlesex County Connecticut, Part II, 1903, p. 933). That location would have put the factory very close to, if not right on the Salafia Property. Furthermore, the Land Records of the City of Middletown indicate that the Salafia Property includes two parcels once owned by that same Thomas Kelly. Finally, the Price, Lee, & Company Map dated 1900 shows a road way designated as "private road" running along the southernmost edge of the "R.

Catholic Cemetery" down towards the Coginchaug River, at the southermost edge of what would be the Salafia Property. At the end of that road way, there is a symbol for a structure identified as "EBONY LAMPBLACK FACTORY."

According to the freedictionary.com (2006), lampblack is "fine soot collected from incompletely burned carbonaceous materials." It was "used as a pigment and in matches, explosives, lubricants, and fertilizers." According to longtime Middletown resident Bernard Prue (2006), the term "lampblack" was originally developed in response to the observation that black soot formed on the glass of kerosene lanterns. Prue said that the Ebony Lamp Black Company manufactured lampblack by hanging sheets of glass above smoky wicks. According to the articles of incorporation for the Company, printed in a Middletown newspaper called the "Penny Press," on July 12, 1890, the Ebony Lamp Black Company also manufactured "Creosote" and distilled "Coal Tar" (p. 2).

As more people established residences in that part of the North End, the factory came to be defined as a nuisance. On April 2, 1895, the "Penny Press" reported that Middletown's

"Alderman Ryan, of the committee on health and nuisance, reported an investigation of [a] complaint made against the Ebony Lampblack factory. Alderman Ryan found that when the factory was in full operation, a pall settled over that neighborhood that made an Egyptian darkness look white in contrast. A white shirt may be hung out on a line in that vicinity and taken in later resembling the garb of a convict.

No action was taken by the Committee that day, but time and changing technology eventually resolved the problem. By 1905, the Ebony Lamp Black Company no longer appeared in the city directory of street addresses, and the factory did not appear at all on the Price, Lee, & Company map of 1914.

The Price, Lee, & Company map of 1925 shows a symbol for a structure designated as a "SEWAGE DISPOSAL PLANT," off the end of Catherine Street, near the Coginchaug River. The map does not offer fine spatial precision, but the location of that plant appears to right on the floodplain land that would become the Salafia Property. According to a 1969 report by Cahn Engineers, Middletown's earliest sewer system (dating back to 1869) was in the downtown part of the City, and there were no major extensions of the system beyond the downtown area until the 1930s and 1960s (p. 12). Although a few of the pipes that took sewage from the northwest part of Middletown had been put in between 1900 and 1920, most of the pipes in that part of the City were put in between 1950 and "the present" (the "present," at the time of the Cahn Engineers Report, being 1969).

In 1955, about 100 feet from the point where Johnson Street crosses North Main Street, a small brick building was constructed on Johnson Street, right on the edge of the Salafia Property. That building houses the "Johnson Street Pumping Station." According to the Cahn Engineers Report, the Johnson Street Pumping Station was part of the Coginchaug River Valley Drainage Area (Drawing A-2). That Drainage Area included "numerous instances of catch basins, surface inlets, and building storm drains" connected to the sanitary sewers, and those "storm and drainage connections caused surcharging . . . [and] overflows to nearby streams and rivers, and even overflows from manhole covers at times of heavy rainfall" (p. 8).

It was during that same period, the 1950's that Phillip and Angelina Salafia and their children lived in a house on Catherine Street, overlooking the Coginchaug River and the Property that carries their family name today. In a telephone conversation on May 10,

2006, their son Phil recalled his boyhood experiences there. "There were almost no trees down there," he said, "just a few intermittent oaks, "swampmaple," and cottonwood. You had the river and the overflow." Phil and other "kids used to swim in pools of water down there," and, during the winter, "kids skated on the ice." He said that "There were a couple of springs" and a few willow trees with vines. "Older guys put ropes on the trees and swung out over a pool of water and let go. It was ten to fifteen feet deep." There were many flowers, including "wild orchids which children brought to their mothers." Phil also said that the area was "full of turtle and deer and bear," and that there were "muskrats and plenty of fish: carp from the Connecticut River, yellow perch, johnny fish, and freshwater eels." He said that his father "took Carp from down there and planted it" in the garden of their yard on Catherine Street, telling Phil "the old stories of how the 'Indians' had used fish for fertilizer." Phil said, "You can find arrow heads down there, and skeletons, and skulls."

Asked about the Ebony Lamp Black Company, Phil said that he had never seen any sign of a building or factory on the Property. "As a kid, we never found any old foundations. The Property was all land and water, never a structure."

Whether or not there ever was a factory on the Salafia Property, it is highly probable that the Property has been affected by the various ways in which people have used the Coginchaug River and the wetlands at its end over the years. The former Remington Rand industrial site sits on the edge of that wetland, within 1000 feet of the Salafia Property. In 1897, that site was the location of the Keating Wheel Company which manufactured bicycles and some of the nation's first motorcycles. As of 1903, the facility was operated by the Eisenhuth Horseless Vehicle Company which manufactured

automobiles. From 1912 to 1934 the facility was operated by the Noiseless Typewriter Company. That company was bought out by Remington Rand in 1934 (Warner, p. 149). After several years of labor-management conflict, Rand closed the plant and moved it to New York, in 1936 (Warner, p. 149).

According to a "Remedial Action Plan" prepared by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin (VHB) in 2000, a "Phase I Environmental Site Assessment," dated April 6, 1993, there were numerous indications of contamination and hazardous wastes at the former Remington Rand site (p. 3). In addition, there were indications that "Industrial wastes, including ink, carbon, wax, oil, detergents, acetone, dye, and nickel [had] been historically discharged to the Mattabesset River and the City sewer system" (VHB, p. 3). On June 21, 1997, a "Phase II Environmental Site Assessment" indicated "mercury containing fluorescent tubes and vapor lamps and residual heavy metal dust within the Site buildings" (VHB, p. 4). In August, 1998, a "Phase III Subsurface Investigation" found a variety of fill materials in the Northeast Utilities right-of-way portion of the site [the outside "waste disposal area"], including: ash, cinders, glass, automotive parts, metal scraps, ceramic pieces, construction materials (brick, wood, tile), and plastic" (VHB: p. 5). In addition, "Automotive wastes (rusted vehicle bodies and buried automotive parts) were observed in the eastern corner of the property" (VHB: p. 5).

Even closer to the Salafia Property sits the closed City of Middletown Municipal Landfill. According to a 2005 report by a "group of Wesleyan University students" conducting research for an "environmental geochemistry class," that area was an abandoned 15-acre clay pit, in the 1940s, sitting on a "wedge of land between the Coginchaug and Mattabesset Rivers" (Bailey, p. 1). The students reported that the pit

was used for dumping which included a "mix of municipal and industrial trash" (Bailey, p. 1).

Over the next fifty years, the landscape of the area changed dramatically. Some of that change was captured in photographs. In the offices of the Department of Public Works of the City of Middletown, there are some black-and-white aerial photographs of the City, including the area that became the landfill. A photograph from August 2, 1951 shows a dull gray, undifferentiated area, more or less indistinguishable from the wetland all around it. A photograph from April 17, 1980, shows an unpaved drive way entering the area, and shadows which suggest that the area was no longer flat. A Topographic Map of The City of Middletown, based on the aerial photographs from that same day, shows a height of 40.4 feet above sea level there. A photograph from March 26, 1983 shows that an even more obvious drive way entered the area and then split off into several more narrow drive ways. In addition, there were more shadows in the area, suggesting more mounding and sloping. A photograph from April 28, 1992 shows even more defined shadows than previously, suggesting greater height and steeper slopes. A photograph of November 7, 1996 shows that the area was clearly mounded with dark shadows on its west side. A Topographic Map of the City of Middletown, based on the aerial photographs taken that day, indicates that the area had reached a height of 108.3 feet. According to the students, the landfill was closed, in 1991, and the mound "was capped with clay, then topsoil, and seeded with grass" (Bailey, p. 1).

In 2006, the mound of the closed landfill was so high that it provided what the Eastern Connecticut Environmental Review Team (ECERT) would refer to as "spectacular views of the Coginchaug and Mattabessett Rivers and the Cromwell

Meadows wetlands" (2006: p. 6). Moreover, after comparing aerial photographs of the area in 1934 and 1990, the ECERT concluded that there had been a "massive amount of alteration to the landscape" (p. 25). The ECERT asserted that "the geography of the area, and the accompanying wetland regimes, [had] been greatly altered in [the previous] several decades due to the establishment and growth of the landfill" (p. 25).

A July 15, 2006 internet search of the Superfund Information Systems at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicated that the Middletown Municipal Landfill, although not on the National Priority List, held the status of "Site Reassessment Start Needed." The Landfill had been the subject of an EPA "discovery" on January 1, 1981, a "Preliminary Assessment" on March 1, 1983, and a "Site Inspection" on October 10, 1991.

In addition, it is also possible that, for many years, the floodplain land that includes the Salafia Property has been contaminated by what the Coginchaug River has brought to it. According to Brawerman's report for the Middlesex County Soil and Water Conservation District (1998), "The Coginchaug watershed is . . . fairly urban, with the impervious surfaces that go along with that, roads, roofs, and parking lots"—all surfaces that prevent "rain and snow from percolating into the soil" where they fall (p. 9). Brawerman pointed out that the greater the percent of rainfall that is forced to flow above ground in a watershed, the more pollutants are transported directly into the river as opposed to seeping into the soil, "where [they] can be filtered naturally" (p. 9). The major pollutants are pathogens (in bacteria), nutrients (e.g. from fertilizers, yard and animal waste), sediment, toxic contaminants (e.g. heavy metals and pesticides), and debris or litter (p. 9). Brawerman reported that testing conducted from 1993 to 1997

indicated that the levels of phosphorus in the Mattabesset and Coginchaug rivers exceeded the 'warning flag' levels (p. 21). She explained that there are many human sources of phosphate, including wastewater treatment plants, runoff from fertilized lawns and cropland, failing onside septic systems, and runoff from animal manure storage areas, disturbed land areas and drained wetlands (p. 21). According to Brawerman, excess phosphorus can accelerate the aging process of a river by causing dramatic increases in aquatic plant growth and changes in the types of animals and plants that live in the river (p. 21). She also pointed out that, in the Coginchaug, fecal coliform levels exceeded the goemetric mean criterion in the Connecticut standards (pp. 22-23) and that enterococcus [bacteria] levels were high at all sites where it was measured, except for the one designated bathing area—the swimming pond at Wadsworth Falls State Park (p. 23).

Finally, whatever contaminants may have ended up on the Salafia Property from and the nearby industrial activities, the Municipal Landfill, and the watershed of the Coginchaug River, there probably has been at least one other source. On May 15, 2006, the rain had been falling on Middletown for several days. The water was high on the Salafia Property. The poles and towers supporting the electrical power lines crossing high above the area at the southwest corner of the Property were partially submerged. The rain had not missed the steep hill coming down to the property from Saint John's cemetery. Amidst the trees on that hill were automobile tires, empty motor oil containers, twisted and rusted metal shelves and cabinets, steel drums, several gasoline-powered type lawnmowers, a television, several plastic and metal buckets, a piece of a tombstone for someone who had died in 1876, and many other discarded items. The concentration of

these things was heaviest on the hillside between the end of Catherine Street and the River.

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