

Setting the Record Straight...
By Ellen Apperson Brown

"Robert Moses...was the man who wanted to build a highway along the shore of Lake George at Tongue Mountain, a plan that conservationist John Apperson foiled."

(Anthony F. Hall, "Robert Moses and the Lake George Park Commission," *Adirondack Almanack, August 21, 1912*)

According to local lore, Robert Moses, secretary of the State Parks Commission, and John Apperson, leading defender of the "forever wild" clause of the NY constitution, had a confrontation of historic proportions, one summer day in August of 1923. Moses, who was already carrying out an ambitious scheme to grab power, had convinced Governor Al Smith that the development of state parks would be a very popular election issue. As the center-piece of his plan, Moses wanted to build a parkway on the Tongue Mountain peninsula (plus, eventually, gas stations, scenic overlooks, and hotels). Apperson wanted to prevent development altogether. He dreamed of bringing the central portion of the lake (Tongue Mountain, the Narrows, Black Mountain and Paradise Bay) under state ownership, and thus under the protection of the NY constitution.

The battle over the highway at Tongue Mountain happened quietly, behind the scenes, and out of the headlines. In fact, Robert Moses' biographer, Robert Caro, never mentioned this story, and apparently knew little about the work of John Apperson at Lake George. Fortunately, we can now examine letters and documents long hidden from view (in the Apperson archives, in the Adirondack Research Library, at Union College) that shed considerable light on the politics concerning the creation of a Lake George Park.

One of Apperson's most influential friends in Albany was Senator Ellwood Rabenold, Chairman of the Conservation Committee, who sent a letter to Apperson on August 16, warning about proposed legislation to build a highway along the edge of the Tongue Mountain peninsula. The next day Apperson replied, "...the information in your letter is important news and the location of the road has probably been decided in the minds of certain people who have no conception of the physical characteristics of the mountains, and others who might make money out of such an enterprise."

He then told the senator what he had heard about plans for Governor Smith to visit Lake George. "The Governor, who is to visit the lake next Thursday will, no doubt,

be urged to carry out the Tongue Mountain project by the opposition, and I do wish you could be with us at that time." The meeting was planned for Thursday afternoon, August 23rd at Fort William Henry, and Apperson was busy making plans of his own. He continued, "It would not only be a great pleasure to see you again but a great help to have you with us, and, if possible, keep you after the meeting for a day or two at my camp on Lake George."

To get a slightly different perspective on Apperson's preparations, here is a letter he sent to a friend, probably a former camping enthusiast, named "Harold."

August 11, 1923,

Dear Harold:

...In respect to the park, Chapter No. 1 was very tense, thrilling, and dramatic at times but finally ended with an appropriation of \$75,000 for the acquisition of land for park purposes on the Tongue Mt. peninsula and the islands adjacent thereto. I am now in the midst of Chapter No. 2 which is somewhat different but just as difficult and uncertain as the first chapter. The State Superintendent of Forests has just finished talking to me over the 'phone and will go up today to my camp for a week. When you come up I will tell you some of the high-spots in detail.

With best regards to the family

Cordially yours,

JSA

Two wealthy landowners who shared the dream of creating a Lake George Park were William K. Bixby and George Foster Peabody. Because they both admired and supported Apperson, they occasionally shared copies of their correspondence with him, such as this excerpt, from March 23, 1923:

Dear Mr. Bixby:

....As I understand it, the road plans and general scheme of development make it most desirable that all of Tongue Mountain shall be held by the State. A relatively high price was paid for the corner, and will have to be, I fear, for Amphitheatre Bay in order to preclude the putting up of shacks and other features leading to nuisance development.

I am, with hope of seeing you at an early date,

Faithfully yours, [Peabody]

Peabody became a frequent advisor and political strategist, as in this letter from August 17...

Dear Mr. Apperson:

...I fear Governor Smith is under such pressure that it is doubtful whether he would be willing to take two days. I would like him to take this trip quietly, rather than in the midst of a crowd of officials.

I am,

Very truly yours,

George Foster Peabody

P.S. I hear that Mr. Colvin is to surround him with a great company. Just the way not to find out how to do but it will make capital for the Park Scheme probably. GFP

Another important aspect of this battle was playing itself out in Bolton Landing, at meetings of the Lake George Association, where Bixby was a prominent member. On August 22, 1923, Apperson wrote:

Dear Mr. Bixby:

...Your talk before the Lake George Association made the situation so clear, I was somewhat surprised that any further discussion was thought necessary, but there still appears to be a number of people who are more susceptible to misinformation than they are to the truth...

Hoping you will be able to add to the pleasure of my guests by a visit to my camp during their stay, I remain

Cordially yours,

JSA

Moses threw all these plans into confusion in a letter dated August 20, 1923.

Dear Mr. Apperson:

Thank you for your invitation. It seems now that the Lake George visit will be on Friday and not on Thursday. --- Friday at 1:30 at the Fort William Henry Hotel. Senator Strauss is going up and I am not yet sure of Senator Rabenold. Mr. Myers will also be there. Quite probably Senator Strauss and Mr. Myers will be glad to take advantage of your invitation. Maybe Colonel Greene will join them. Could you leave it open until Thursday? I might say that none of these people are interested in the various events which are planned between the Saratoga and Lake George visits – that is, they plan to drop out after the Saratoga visit and then rejoin the whole party at Lake George. I do not know how they could spend the intervening time better than at your camp.

Cordially yours,

Robert Moses
Secretary

We may never know which individuals (Al Smith, Moses, or Rabenold) spent a night or two at Appy's camp in Huddle Bay, but it seems that a group of dignitaries did climb aboard a large boat (perhaps belonging to William Bixby), on Thursday or Friday afternoon, and head up toward the Narrows. They may have started out from Lake George Village, from Huddle Bay (the docks near the old Lake View Hotel), or perhaps from Bixby's elegant boat house, just a few miles to the north.

According to the legend, John Apperson "kidnapped" Governor Smith, whisking him away from whatever other meetings and obligations were on his schedule, and took him for a boat ride, giving him a breath-taking glimpse of the most beautiful lake in the world. He must have pointed over to the steep slopes of Tongue Mountain and made a little speech, listing practical and esthetic arguments (such as the cost, and the destruction of the majestic scenery) against the proposed highway.

We don't know who the passengers were, who participated in that conversation on the boat, or whether Moses and Apperson "bared their teeth"...but it is undeniable that something significant happened to scrap the plans for that costly and foolish highway, forever establishing Apperson's fame as a scrappy and effective politician. He had squelched Robert Moses' pet project and beat him at his own game! Apperson did it through a combination of personal charm, political savvy, and by being in the right place at the right time!

Robert Caro, in his massive and detailed biography of Robert Moses, argues that *Moses* (not *Apperson*) was the champion responsible for bringing the entire Tongue Mountain range under state control. He wrote:

The state had never bothered to buy a single foot of Lake George's hundreds of miles of shoreline, and cheap resorts and rooming houses were proliferating on its shores. Lumbermen had stripped the surrounding mountains of their softwood forests and were starting on the hardwoods. The denuded soil was being washed away by rains. But midway along the lake a branch of water jutted to the northwest, and of the eleven thousand virgin acres on the tongue of land thus formed – most of it called Tongue Mountain – six thousand were owned by *a group of wealthy men who were also public spirited. He [Moses]*

persuaded them to donate their land to the state. (Robert A. Caro, The Power Broker, New York: Random House, 1974, p. 239)

Many of the individuals who decided to donate or sell their land to the state might have disagreed with Caro's conclusions. Some of them passed down wonderful stories about John Apperson and his unselfish work to protect Lake George, but horror stories about the callous and inconsiderate treatment received at the hand of state officials. It is high time we begin we set the record straight!