Story of Old Town:
Reimagining Community in Post-Industrial Rural America

RAR Video Essay

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Contents

1. Preface

I am fascinated by rural communities and their interactions and identity with nature

As a public policy student, I have an interest in how rural towns adapt to economic, social and climate changes.

2. Problem Definition

Who defines community **in the U.S.?**

Major cities (16% of municipalities) vs **Thousands of small towns (84%)**

2. Problem Definition

60 million Americans live in rural areas. As economies evolve, Many of these areas struggle to adapt.

2. Problem Definition

New England's **130 small mill towns** are the birthplace of America's industrial revolution

Regional identity was linked with building communities around **rivers**...

...where towns create wealth from natural resources (rivers) and create **sustainable local economies**.
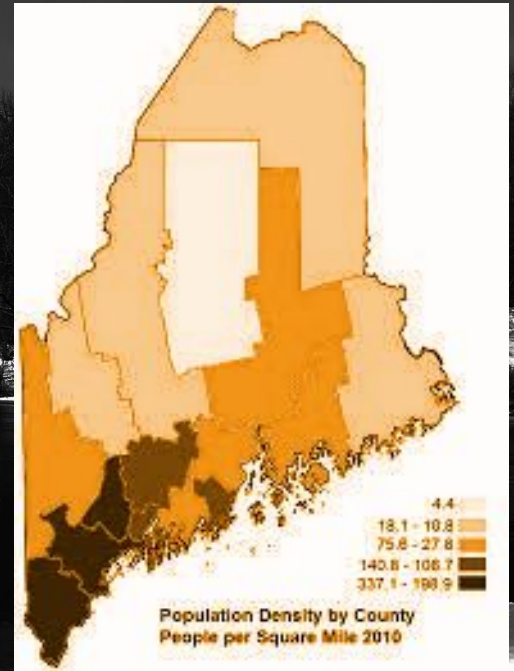
2. Problem Definition

Today rural areas face **challenges** and changes to how they work and present themselves **to the world.**

Research shows small towns succeed in economic redevelopment by understanding and embracing **their own identities**.

2. Problem Definition

Maine - Rural America

- Majority of ME counties 50%+ rural
- 500 municipalities. 150 have less than 1,000 people
- Projects only **96 new jobs** from 2016-2026 across ME
- Projected population decline across ME
- 97% white (but ⅓ non-whites Native)

Population Density by County
People per Square Mile 2010

4.4
18.1 - 10.8
75.8 - 27.8
140.8 - 108.7
337.1 - 198.9

Nearly all communities face declining populations, stagnant wages, and an ageing population.

2. Problem Definition

Old Town, Maine sits on an island in the Penobscot River in Penobscot County

Neighbors: Orono (college town), Bangor (small city), Penobscot Reservation

Penobscot County: slight population growth through 2034 (but not Old Town)

Mill closures meant loss of jobs, tax revenue, businesses

Brain drain; many who can will leave to seek jobs or education in the cities

Apart from demographic information, little data exists about how Old Town's residents interpret its own challenges

2. Problem Definition

If we want to encourage policies that respond to the realities of rural towns, we first need to **go visit them.**

Hearing how they construct their narrative may help guide **economic redevelopment** policy and construct a national narrative

3. Research Questions

How is Old Town reimagining its identity as an industrial town on a river in the face of economic, demographic & environmental change?

Who is telling Old Town's story? What is the story about? How is the story changing?

What can we learn in Old Town that may have broader policy significance in the rural United States?

4. Literature Review

Small Towns, Big Ideas: Local Ingredients for Innovation in Rural Econ. Dev, Lambe & Morgan (2010)

Vibrant Rural Communities, Bergquist and Schwartz (2013)

How Small Towns & Cities Can Use Local Assets to Rebuild Economies, EPA (2015)

Small-town **sustainability**: a case study, Bruen A. (2014)

Analytical Framework: Ganz, **Public narrative**, collective action, and power (2011)

4. Literature Review

Small Towns, Big Ideas: Lambe & Morgan (2010) studied small towns around U.S.

Research Goal: "...learn something from various communities that could inform small town development efforts elsewhere. These lessons, which address more the process than the substance of innovation, might be considered "local ingredients for innovation in rural economic development.""

4. Literature Review

Small Towns, Big Ideas: Lambe & Morgan (2010) (Cont'd)

Key Strategies:

Economic Gardening... cultivating local entrepreneurs, supportive environment
  - towns offer mentorship, technical assistance, networking, start-up funds

Place-based development... focus on unique natural/cultural heritage of area
  - arts/crafts traditions, rivers, trails, reoccupying downtown buildings

Creativity & talent cultivation... attractive location for "creative class" to thrive
  - artist in residency programs, music festivals, recreational opportunities

Innovative industrial development... collaborating to create regional biz hubs
  - creative incentives, sharing tax revenues, eco-friendly development

4. Literature Review

How Small Towns & Cities Can Use Local Assets to Rebuild Economies, EPA (2015), studied small towns (p=2,900 -> p=98,000)

Identify and build on existing assets
Engage all members of the community to plan for the future
Take advantage of outside funding
Create incentives for redevelopment, and encourage investment in the community
Encourage cooperation within the community and across the region
Support a clean and healthy environment

4. Literature Review

Vibrant Rural Communities, Bergquist and Schwartz (2013)

1. Identify local concerns like demise of downtown 2. Engage legislators to incentivize businesses that share those concerns

Focus on broadly-held community values like conservation/access to nature, overcome long-held divisions based on politics, religion, race
Re-brand old industrial buildings & embrace preservation (museums in factories)
Mix historic preservation, street redevelopment, and support for arts/culture
Leverage public $$, guide community space growth, invite private $$

4. Literature Review

Small-town sustainability: a case study, Bruen A. (2014).

In-depth interviews, narrative analysis & planning to study a town with p<10,000 to ask **WHY** small towns focus on sustainability and resilience.

"This project reveals that while narratives are constantly being lived, they are not always known in their entirety even by the main characters. By condensing the story, we can gain insight into the unique characteristics of a community, how latent potential morphs into actualized progress, how a city engages with and characterizes sustainability, and how they are able to continuously make change and improve their quality of life and the environment."

5. Analytical Framework - Public Narrative

Reimagining community means creating, maintaining & evolving the town's self-image.

But what is **that image?**

5. Analytical Framework - Public Narrative

The best way to answer questions about Old Town is to **go to Old Town**.

5. Analytical Framework - Public Narrative

Stakeholder mapping

Semi-structured on-site interviews:
1) People who speak **of the past** or

2) Shape how **today's challenges** are perceived.

5. Analytical Framework - Public Narrative

Examples could be **museum directors**, **teachers**, **former mayors**, and **students**

6. Method & Data

Operationalize research questions by figuring out how to gather data.

Most data comes from interviews w/ people identified during stakeholder mapping.

Main tasks:

1) Stakeholder mapping
2) Generate questions for semi-structured interviews
3) Ethical Protocol (ask same questions, avoid bias/leading questions)
4) Desk research (quantitative & qualitative information; archival & found footage)

6. Method & Data

Timeline

Problem Definition, Research Questions, Scope (Sept-Dec 2018)

Literature River (Oct 2018-Jan 2019)

Preliminary visit to Old Town, stakeholder mapping (Nov 24, 2018)

Update Literature to include research on community (Dec 2018)

Refine subject matter/scope (Jan 2019)

Develop Shotlist/Film Schedule, Treatment, Interview Questions, Stakeholder Diagram, Slide Deck, Script and Storyboard (Jan 2019)

Film Production (Feb 2019-Apr 2019)

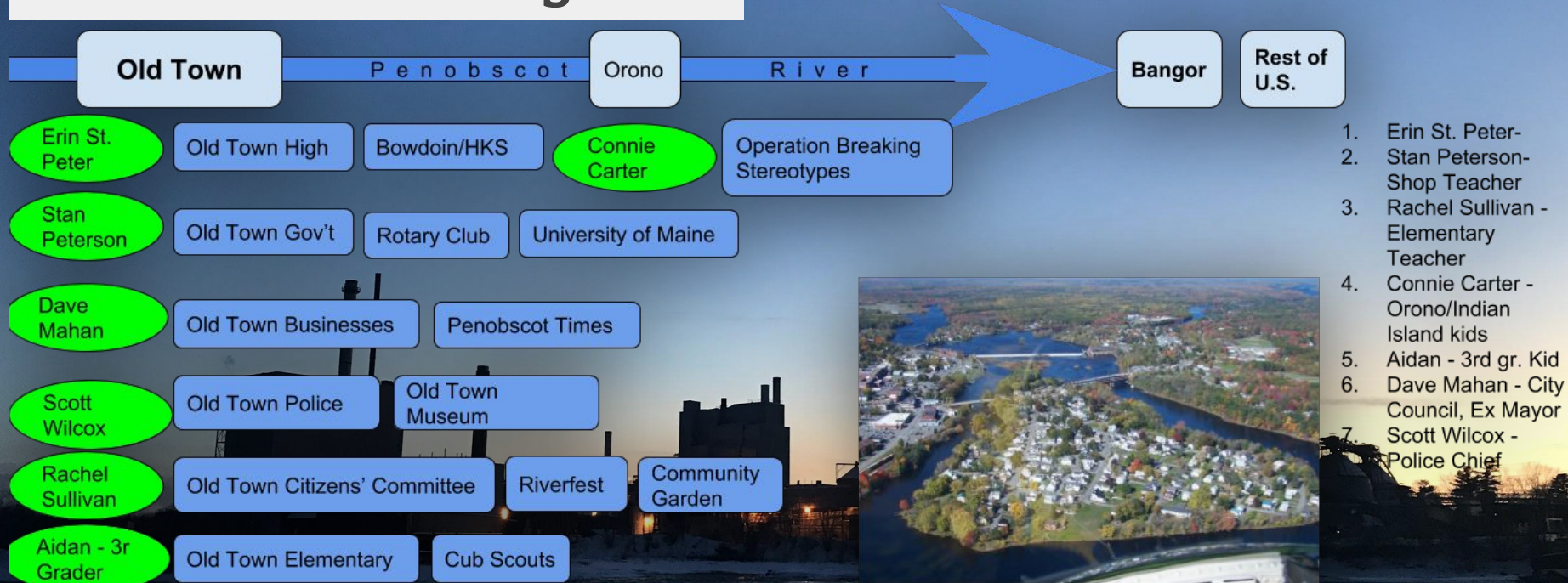Submission of Video Essay & Slide Deck, Documents (Apr 2019)

Screening at Ash Center (May 2019)

7. Film Schedule

- Nov 24: 1st visit to Old Town. Establishment shots.
- Feb 1-5: Interviews: Boston/Cambridge.
- Feb 9-11: 2nd visit to Old Town. Interviews and B-Roll.
- April 4-7: 3rd visit to Old Town. Interviews and B-Roll.
- April 19-21: Final visit to Old Town. B-Roll.

8. Stakeholder Diagram

Old Town   P e n o b s c o t   Orono   R i v e r   →   **Bangor**   **Rest of U.S.**

Erin St. Peter

Old Town High   Bowdoin/HKS   Connie Carter   Operation Breaking Stereotypes

Stan Peterson

Old Town Gov't   Rotary Club   University of Maine

Dave Mahan

Old Town Businesses   Penobscot Times

Scott Wilcox

Old Town Police   Old Town Museum

Rachel Sullivan

Old Town Citizens' Committee   Riverfest   Community Garden

Aidan - 3r Grader

Old Town Elementary   Cub Scouts

1. Erin St. Peter-
2. Stan Peterson- Shop Teacher
3. Rachel Sullivan - Elementary Teacher
4. Connie Carter - Orono/Indian Island kids
5. Aidan - 3rd gr. Kid
6. Dave Mahan - City Council, Ex Mayor
7. Scott Wilcox - Police Chief

Act I: Introduce Old Town, the river, towns attached to Old Town via River (Orono, Indian Island, City of Bangor), and people

8. Interviewees
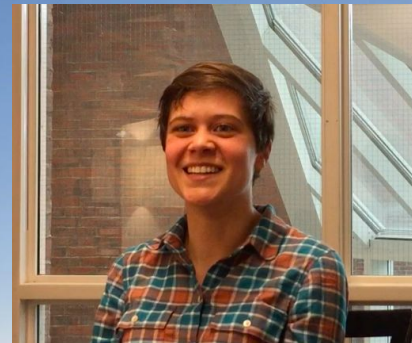
9. Interview Protocol

Research Questions (if asked what my main goal is): 1) How is Old Town, Maine reimagining its identity as an old industrial town on a river in the face of dramatic economic, demographic and environmental change? 2) Who is telling the story of this place and how? What is the story about, and how has it changed? 3) What can we learn in Old Town that may have broader policy significance in the rural U.S.?

Before the Interview: 1) Identify myself 2) State purpose of interview 3) Make clear material will be used 4) Say how much time it will take (keep it short) 5. Focus on their Knowledge 6) Questions?

9. Interview Protocol

What Was the Identity of the Town?

1) Can your state your name, where you live?

2) Tell me about here. What things do you really like about this place? What about the people?

3) Have you been to other places that remind you of here?

4) What milestones & experiences do you think brought the town to today?

5) What do you see as main challenges in this area?

9. Interview Protocol

Who Tells the Story?

1) Are there people you think are really trying to do a lot to solve these challenges?

2) How do other people describe the town? Things I'd hear if I talked to everyone?

3) Do you see people changing the future of this place? Any younger people? Anyone not from here?

4) What are some ways you think people could work together more?

5) What do you hope for this place in the next 10/20 years?

6) Is there anything else you want someone not from here to know about?

10. Analysis of Findings

1. How is Old Town reimagining its identity as an industrial town on a river in the face of economic, demographic & environmental change?

The town's identity is steeped in a strong work ethic and sense of community. People are proud of their roots but they also want change. They want to get young people back into town. Conversations focus on ways to attract new families and businesses, getting back a thriving downtown area, providing services that make the town a great place to live, and getting families back into abandoned homes. This means embracing change and inviting different types of people, such as university professors or medical professionals who work in neighboring Orono and Bangor.

10. Analysis of Findings Questions 1 & 2

1. How is Old Town reimagining its identity as an industrial town on a river in the face of economic, demographic & environmental change?

The town wants to build both new industry and new appreciation for what it has to offer. They want to remove stereotypes about the town, particularly comparisons to neighboring towns like Orono. At the same time, they want people to respect their history and celebrate it with them.

They want their young people to be more engaged, but first they want them to leave and come back. This would build appreciation for the town's uniqueness. It also gets their story out there so more people know about Old Town. They want more people to know about Old Town.

These people are resilient. Town officials are proud of the great services provided by the town. They are actively working to break down the stereotype of being a working-class town and make that something that's attractive to families, students, professors and businesses.

10. Analysis of Findings Questions 1 & 2

2. Who is telling Old Town's story? What is the story about? How is the story changing?

The last 15 years have been difficult for Old Town, as mill closures led to a loss of jobs. Many families left the area and have not returned. Many young people did the same. This has changed the town's story and fractured the town's sense of unity.

In 2018 the mill was acquired by Nine Dragons Paper, an environmentally friendly recycled based paper manufacturer. ND Paper is creating 130 jobs. While this has brought hope back into the community, the town's leaders recognize the mill is not enough on its own for the community to thrive. They focus on attracting other businesses, revitalizing the downtown and waterfront areas, adding a music venue, and perhaps for the first time opening up their community to people "from-away" and inviting others to come in.

10. Analysis of Findings Questions 1 & 2

## 2. Who is telling Old Town's story? What is the story about? How is the story changing?

The people I spoke with are the ones in charge of telling the story of Old Town, particularly to outsiders (who are known in Maine as "people who are from away" or just "from-away.") They each lead different institutions trying to make Old Town better. They include the city council, citizen committee, Rotary Club, an alternative lending company, the school system and nonprofits. Some of their solutions echo what my Literature Review revealed; focusing on community values, revitalizing downtown areas, seeding local businesses ("economic gardening"), focusing on unique natural resources e.g. the river, etc.

10. Analysis of Findings Questions 1 & 2

2. Who is telling Old Town's story? What is the story about? How is the story changing?

Young people are not yet telling the story. The people I interviewed do not see young people as contributing to Old Town. Nor do they see the "from-aways" as being relevant. This could be changing. Most of the people making Old Town a better place were born and raised there, though they each left for a period of time before returning. All of them would like to see more "from-aways" contribute. This will be a continuing challenge for Old Town and the rest of Central Maine, which is facing an ageing population and loss of younger people fleeing to coastal cities like Portland, Boston or further afield. Their only chance of survival is to bring in new people, and this can't be done without adapting the culture.
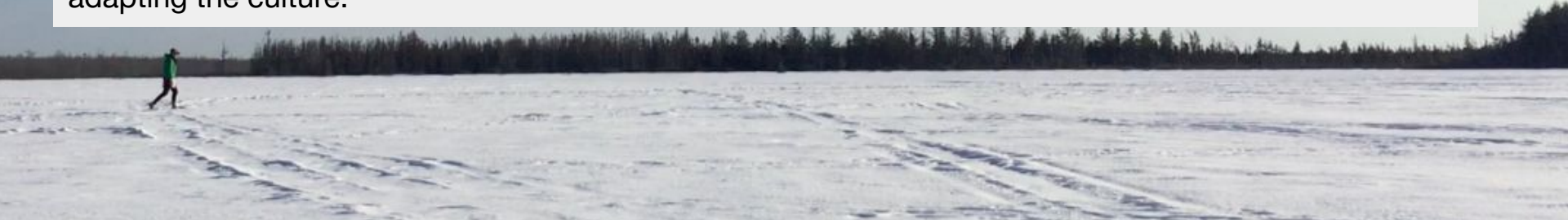
3. What can we learn in Old Town that may have broader policy significance in the rural United States? (these appear in the film)

1. The story of Old Town continues: it is being written/rewritten by the community in different ways:
   a. **Day-to-day interactions and special events.** Annual events like Riverfest, many of which celebrate the town's history and connection to the Penobscot river, are integrated into the town's sense of pride. The town's ability to provide public services (police, fire, library) amidst a shrinking tax base is held up as a major success. Policymakers may overlook how important it is to have services a town is proud of; things people talk about and for which they share pride of belonging to the town.
   b. **Education about the past and about the present.** The town's public school curriculum is an example of how a small community utilizes existing infrastructure to teach its own history. Every Old Town resident goes through that process of being taught Old Town's history and having to draw it out, slide by slide. This gives even your typical third-grader the ability to construct his town's narrative- at least the "official" one. This can plant the seed for future leaders to think more critically about what it means to be from rural places.

3. What can we learn in Old Town that may have broader policy significance in the rural United States? (these appear in the film)

1. The story of Old Town continues: it is being written/rewritten by the community in different ways:

    c. Engagement across generations and social groups. Research talks about creating economic clusters, as well as utilizing unique natural resources like a river or a mountain. These natural features connect communities in ways that may have in the past been ignored. Reconnecting communities to natural features and having neighboring communities engage more across borders to create a "shared strategy" may help solve some of the issues identified in the film, such as a lack of young people willing to remain in rural areas.

    d. Local politics, business and community action. In small towns, only a handful of individuals may be involved in city planning and community engagement. Local politics mirrors national politics in some ways, however local policymakers are also community members involved directly in the town's culture and social activities. This overlap creates both opportunities and challenges. Research shows small towns have succeeded in economic redevelopment when they became "motivated to take matters into their own hands and seize control of their destiny. They looked inward to find assets and strengths to build on in charting a new course." (Lambe & Morgan).

11. Conclusions & Recommendations - Question 3

3.   **If reimagining identity is a key to adapting to economic change successfully, understanding community narrative is essential to sustainable development.** More research could look at how community narratives are built, preserved, and adapt to changes, and how stitching together several local narratives may boost efforts to achieve economic, cultural and environmental sustainability. Research already shows how establishing community identities can lead to economic redevelopment; a more intentional effort to include these rural and smalltown narratives into our national narrative may lead to future innovation and perhaps even success at healing the deep divisions which exist in the United States.

4.   **The story of Old Town - and many communities like it - can be more than an account of its past. It can be a window into its future.** Community identity is not just a recounting of past events, but a celebration of the present. When town pride is also present, community identity also reveals a future where local values are upheld, businesses are invited back in, families move back, and the communities are healed. This future is uncertain, but it exists in the minds of the people of Old Town. Policy can then help make this future a reality by taking the steps identified in the research, such as converting historic buildings, revitalizing the downtown, attracting artists and other creatives, etc.

11. Conclusions and Recommendations

Q&A (after screening Video Essay)

On reimagining identity in the face of economic, demographic & environmental change?

On who tells Old Town's story? On the story and how it's changing?

On broader policy significance in rural United States?

Thank You!

Reading and Research submitted to Professor Jorrit de Jong and Cecily Tyler, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School, Spring 2019   - Patrick J. Lynch