Research Strategy Essay

In the spring my sophomore year, I conducted an independent study on the environmental history of the South Natick Dam, a spillway on the Charles River near Wellesley’s campus. I undertook this project at the urging of my Environmental Studies advisor, Professor Jay Turner, who learned at a town meeting that residents were struggling to decide the dam’s future. The structure needed to undergo extensive renovations, but some residents had urged a halt to construction to consider the spillway’s removal based on environmental and economic concerns. To make their decision, officials needed more information on the history of the dam site and its value to the surrounding community — information I hoped to provide.

To refine my project’s focus, I first met with the Town Engineer and officials from the Natick Office of Sustainability, Department of Water and Project (DWP), and Community and Economic Development Department (CED). My goal was to learn which information would be most helpful to them (and to town residents) in deciding the spillway’s future, and gain a deeper understanding of the dam’s socio-historical significance. My research was primarily guided by the needs of the town as explained to me in this and subsequent meetings; I did not advocate for or against removal, but sought to offer residents a comprehensive history of the dam, its historic and contemporary functions, and future prospects.

After conferring with Natick officials, I began a period of intensive research. Using multiple databases — including Wellesley’s online research catalog, Nexus Unis News Sources, America’s Historical Newspapers (1600-1922), Early American Imprints, and US News Stream — I combed through archived articles and photographs from the Boston Globe, MetroWest Daily News, and small-town papers across Middlesex County, looking for mentions of the dam, adjacent sites, and relevant property owners or businesses. I contacted the Morse Institute Library and virtually explored the Boston newspaper collection in Natick, searching through archived newspapers for additional information on the dam’s history. I scoured the Middlesex Registry of Deeds website and paid a visit to the Town of Natick Assessor’s Office to learn which companies and individuals operated dams and industries along the Charles River in South Natick, how these holding changed over time, and where they were located in relation to the current dam. I searched for old maps and textual descriptions of South Natick in the Leventhal Map Collection at the Boston Public Library; spent a long afternoon examining and scanning relevant materials at the Harvard Map Collection; and paid multiple visits to the Natick Historical Society, where I uncovered maps, articles, town meeting records, public works reports, photographs, and more.

The sheer scope of this project was my biggest challenge. Anything related to the dam or the dam site — from any historical period — was fair game. To stay organized, I kept a running list of references, lingering questions, leads, and a timeline of the dam’s history. Researching the pre-20th century history of the damsite was also particularly frustrating; as I went further back in the historical record, it became increasingly difficult to track important people and locations since property lines, street names, town boundaries, and the spelling of locations and family names changed over time. To understand and synthesize this information, I established methodical research methods and a system of constant cross-checking. Over time, I learned to focus on a particular location or person and attempt to track that name through the historical record — with maps, property records, photographs,
articles, and even family trees — making note of any inconsistencies or gaps in order to fully capture that person or place’s role in the dam’s history.

After months of research, I presented a summary of my findings in the form of an original ArcGIS StoryMap, encouraged and guided by Wellesley’s GIS-technician Dani Brown. I also contributed a recorded lecture on the dam’s history to the town’s Earth Day event, and collaborated with the Natick Historical Society to publish a summary and discussion of my research on the Society’s website, all of which were all circulated in town newsletters to help inform public debate. Ultimately, my research reinforced my understanding that local history doesn’t happen in isolation — it is informed by broader social, ecological, political, and economic trends, all of which are manifested in local changes. My research not only reinforced this connection, but reminded me of the importance of learning from local history, which can make the vague “past” feel relevant and personal.