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Researchers at the Library of Congress Internet Archive today announced an important discovery. Previously unknown records dating to early in the 21st century, and only recently recovered from the Digital Dark Ages, provide incontrovertible evidence of the grass roots origins of the expansion of Greater New York in 2016.

New York had been the largest city in the United States since the consolidation of 1898, which joined Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island into a single municipality with a population of 3.3 million spread across more than 300 square miles. During the 20th and 21st centuries its population continued to grow, reaching well over 8 million by the time of the New Jersey Annexation of 2016. That singular event added another 1.5 million people to New York's population, as well as 200 square miles to its area. According to figures from the 2110 U.S. Census, the city's seven boroughs are now home to 15 million people.

In 2101, the LOC acquired a trove of aged Dell PowerEdge servers (ca. 2010 models) from a storage container facility in Bayonne, where they had languished for almost a century in city-leased containers lacking climate controls. Physically damaged and technologically obsolete, the usability of the servers was not guaranteed, but after painstaking restoration, which included a 10-year effort to retrieve content from hidden and encrypted disk partitions, researchers were finally able to access the servers' files.

What they found in what have been dubbed the "Bayonne files" is astonishing—data from dozens of former municipalities; email messages and browser histories of thousands of municipal employees; text, image, and video content from hundreds of thousands of websites, ranging from local news outlets, governments, and non-profits, to personal blogs, group wikis, and social networking updates. Taken together these files are the largest intact cache of readable historical documents from the early part of the 21st century. Though this period saw the rapid expansion of electronic communication and digital recordkeeping, it lacked preservation strategies focused on data longevity of hardware and software.

Scholars have only recently recognized the depth and significance of this information lacuna, which has been particularly acute for those trying to understand a momentous event—the 2016 expansion of the nation's largest city in the midst of profound countervailing tendencies from coast to coast, notably the advance of ex-urban sprawl, shrinkage of older urban cores, and devotion to suburbia's twin pillars of the private automobile and the detached dwelling. Now, however, thanks to the Bayonne files, scholars have evidence that a single event precipitated citizen action that resulted in the most important regional realignment in modern U.S. history.

In the fall of 2010, work was well underway on the nation's largest public works project, the "Access to the Regional Core" Hudson River rail tunnels. Across the political spectrum, and on both sides of the river, the ARC was deemed the region's most critically needed piece of infrastructure, one necessary for the continued growth and future viability of the metro area. In October of that year, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie cancelled the ARC project citing concerns about cost overruns. What Christie saw as fiscal prudence was interpreted by many of his constituents as hubristic, parochial partisanship that seemed destined to confirm perceptions of New Jersey's subordinate status within the NYC region. While some shook their heads at politics as usual, others embarked on a five-year campaign that began with a failed gubernatorial impeachment effort and ended, improbably, in a successful secession vote.

In November 2015 the majority of voters in the 82 municipalities that made up Hudson and Bergen Counties voted to secede from New Jersey and join the metropolis across the Hudson River, which had simultaneously voted to receive the annexed communities. What the Bayonne files reveal is the way that organizers of the secession campaign used social media and cyber activism to deftly exploit two of New Jersey's most enduring political traditions—home rule and pay-to-play. These grass roots organizers demonstrated how each community would benefit materially from annexation and they secured support from such key players as real estate developer Samuel LeFrak, whose organization helped turn downtown Jersey City into "Wall Street West," and Arthur E. Imperatore, who redeveloped the Weehawken waterfront across from Midtown and was responsible for the reintroduction of Hudson River ferry service in the 1980s.

Bergen and Hudson (respectively, New Jersey’s most populous county and its densest in 2016) had been oriented towards “the city” for nearly two centuries. Annexation made this relationship a concrete reality as independent municipalities merged themselves into the NYC Boroughs of Hudson and Bergen. While there were difficulties along the way—layoffs, school closures, bureaucratic consolidations, and higher taxes—the rewards quickly became evident.

NJ Annexation allowed for the merger of the P.A.T.H. and Hudson-Bergen Light Rail lines with the New York City Subway, and paved the way for the expansion of Manhattan subway lines across the Hudson using existing bridge and tunnel infrastructure (the A train to Fort Lee from West 168th Street; the 7 train to Secaucus from West 42nd Street). Annexation spurred the introduction of new Hudson ferry lines connecting with express bus service on both sides of the river as the Port Imperial Ferry Corporation (NY Waterway) allowed public takeover of its operations. On the other side of Manhattan, consolidation of transit precipitated changes required to establish equity across the system, including the reintroduction of fares on the Staten Island Ferry and the imposition of tolls on East River bridges.

NJ Annexation also resulted in the transformation of the Hackensack Meadowlands into the largest urban park east of the Mississippi. Before 2016, 14 municipalities had jurisdiction over this 30 square mile area, which stymied reclamation efforts for decades, even after the establishment of a single planning commission in 1969. After 2016, the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation, relying on its experience at the Fresh Kills Park built atop the Staten Island landfill, restored 8800 acres of wetlands for public use. Critically, the NYC Department of Transportation made the Meadowlands, and adjacent Hudson and Bergen neighborhoods, fully accessible via a network of pedestrian and bicycle routes. By the middle of the 21st century, a comprehensive greenway network extended across all seven boroughs, and, in particular, opened the Meadowlands to extensive use by non-motorized traffic for the first time in nearly 100 years.

In the years after 2016, New York became one of the most efficient and sustainable cities on the planet, with a robust economy balanced between service and manufacturing, a solid housing stock balanced between affordability and luxury, and mass transit and urban park systems that are the envy of the nation. Thanks to the records retrieved from the Bayonne servers, historians are now able to reconstruct the citizen movement that created Greater New York between 2010 and 2015. This reconstruction has such political and historical significance that the Bayonne files may prove to be the Dead Sea Scrolls of the information age.



Photographs retrieved from Bayonne files showing Weehawken waterfront, George Washington Bridge, and the Meadowlands prior to the NJ annexation of 2016.





Borough of Bergen

Meadowlands Park

Borough of Manhattan

Borough of Hudson

Borough of Brooklyn