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Politics as Usual or Political Change: The War on Poverty's Community Action Program in Albany, N.Y., 1959-1967

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On April 14, 1967, longtime Albany County Democratic Party Chairman Daniel P. O'Connell walked up the County Courthouse steps amid newspaper and television cameras. An Albany County Grand Jury subpoenaed O'Connell, the behind the scenes kingpin of the Albany Democrats, to testify in the hearings on allegations of vote buying and election fraud by the Democratic Party. Local community activists initiated the hearings because of frustration with delays and the exclusion of local African Americans from planning and administration of the local War on Poverty. The Albany Democratic Party was ending a nearly three year struggle with community groups, social welfare professionals, and civil rights activists over the 1964 War on Poverty's Community Action Program (CAP). Much has been written about the power and patronage of the Albany Democratic machine, yet very little has been written about groups and individuals that challenged their power and legitimacy, specifically the impact of CAP on local political power.

The historical narrative of the Great Society in general, and the Community Action Program in particular, has largely reflected the events and experiences in large cities such as New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago, ignoring smaller

communities' implementation of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (EOA). This article examines the struggle to develop Albany's CAP and provides a greater understanding of city's race relations during the early 1960s. The Community Action Program was a monumental effort to alleviate poverty by empowering poor people at the grassroots level and in October 1964, Congress appropriated $300 million for CAP in 1965. By the end of 1966, more than 1,000 community action agencies were in existence. The most controversial part of the legislation required "maximum feasible participation" from residents of poor neighborhoods.[2] The debates over the participation of the poor in developing Albany's anti-poverty program was the primary obstacle and resulted in Albany having the dubious distinction of being the last major American city to develop a an anti-poverty program.[3] During that same period, Rochester New York's CAP had an annual operating budget of four million dollars.[4]

I argue that the conflict over community action exacerbated race relations in Albany and contributes to the ongoing narrative about the significance of the War on Poverty in smaller urban areas. A study of Albany's experience's with the CAP suggests that the city and county government leaders went to extreme measures to resist outside interference, intimidate political opposition, and ignore the repeated call for involvement of the poor in the decision making process. The events surrounding community action indicate that the Albany Democrats saw an opportunity to further strengthen their patronage system by marginalizing the poor out of the decision-making process. A liberal coalition emerged in Albany that engaged in a fierce political battle with Albany

Democrats surrounding the control and implementation of the CAP and President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. The political deadlock between competing forces in Albany over community action and participatory democracy caused the city to lose access to critical funding for social welfare programs and created tensions that are still felt today.

For decades, Albany Democrats successfully refuted state and federal interference in local affairs and politics. Led by Erastus Corning, Mayor of Albany from 1941 until his death in 1983, and Daniel O'Connell, the Albany Democrats promoted steadfast resistance to dissent since taking over Albany politics in the 1920s. The Albany political organization withstood earlier investigations into corruption by Governors Thomas Dewey and Nelson Rockefeller, and by 1960 was at the height of its power. Author Paul Grondahl noted that in Albany "the machine was a seamless apparatus of raw political power because it reached down through past generation of machine families."[5] During Governor Dewey's investigation of O'Connell and the Albany Democrats, journalist I.F. Stone referred to "Albanians as having the civic patriotism of a Greek city-state."[6]

Albany experienced little of the political violence that swept through similarly sized cities such as Rochester and Newark. But after clashes between community organizers and Albany's political elite over community action, activists took to the streets and submitted legal challenges to the power and legitimacy of the Albany Democratic Party. Pulitzer Prize winning author William Kennedy, born in Albany, is best known for his "Albany Cycle" of novels that capture the colorful nature of local Albany politics. Early in his career,

Kennedy worked as a journalist for the *Albany Times-Union* and during the 1960s spent time covering the civil rights movement in Albany. Kennedy wrote that by the 1960s, all of the "Tammany Hall tricks and traits were adapted to Albany" and quotes O'Connell saying that the community action programs as "being a lot of horseshit."[7]

Seeds of Discontent

Soon after World War II, many American cities endured significant demographic changes that ultimately affected employment opportunities, the availability of housing, and the role of government in urban administration. During this period, African Americans commenced a significant migration from rural areas to cities. Albany was no stranger to this population shift as meaningful numbers of African Americans came to Albany from Mississippi, Georgia and other areas of the South searching for better employment, housing, education and an end to racial discrimination. Consequently, a new Black political class emerged and cities across the nation experienced different levels of conflict. In Albany, a struggle ensued between an aging and entrenched Democratic political machine and Black activists from an emerging political constituency.

Thomas Sugrue and Arnold Hirsch critically examined the dynamics of postwar race relations in Detroit and Chicago.[8] Both authors illustrate the central themes in post-war urban history such as deteriorating race relations, the creation of a legal framework for housing segregation, redlining by banks, and the decline of manufacturing jobs. They argue that the tensions in the 1940s and 1950s over housing and employment presaged the War on Poverty, the turbulence of

the 1960s, and the eventual dismantling of the New Deal coalition. Richard Thomas argued that in the post-war era "patterns of class and racial segregation in large northern cities have persisted and hardened" and that development of urban areas should be examined in the context of struggle, empowerment, and a "community building process." Thomas defines the community building process in the urban areas of this period as the efforts of Black individuals, institutions, and organizations as agents of change and through coalitions among clergy, civic organizations, social welfare groups, and other community institutions in Detroit's African American community."[9]

In a critical examination of War on Poverty programs, Charles Matusow observed that further research is necessary to understand local experiences with the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, specifically programs such as the Community Action Program. He states that further examination of the varied experience with CAP on the local level is needed, as "remarkably little is known about Community Action Agencies in the great majority of communities and no final judgment will be possible until an army of local historians recover the program's lost fragments."[10] There is some evidence that CAP did bring about change in large urban areas. For example, Noel Cazenave looked at two community action projects in New York City to determine if there was an increase in political empowerment of low income people. Cazenave concluded that limited gains were made in increasing political participation and change, but the legacy of community action is the growth of community organizations that exist today and the dramatic changes in the political landscape brought on, in

part, by the civil rights movement and the community action projects.[11] The enormous changes that occurred in the nation's cities during the early 1960s led to increased political participation by local citizen groups, but also contributed to a conservative backlash toward social programs for the poor. Yet relatively few scholars have examined the effect on race relations of conflict over control and representation in community action projects in smaller cities.

Even though Africans and African Americans had been in the Hudson Valley from the beginning of European settlement, Albany did not have a significant African-American population until the 20th century. During the 1920s, African American migration doubled the city's African-American population from 1% to 2%.[12] Yet, Albany's greatest racial demographic change occurred between 1940 and 1970 as a larger population shift occurred. In 1940, there were nearly to 3,000 African Americans living in Albany constituting roughly 2% of the population. By 1970, as the overall Albany population remained relatively static, more than 14,000 African Americans represented close to 14% of the city's population.[13]

In Albany, African Americans settled predominately in two neighborhoods, Arbor Hill and the South End. The most dramatic population changes took place in the South End where the Black population increased from 1.5% in 1950 to 16% in 1960. The Council of Community Services of the Albany Area and the University at Albany's College of Education released a 1961 study of the South End's five census tracts that further illustrates the socioeconomic changes and provides data on the neighborhood's physical,

economic, and social characteristics. The report is noteworthy for a few of its conclusions, including that 35% of all South End families lived beneath the poverty level, 90% of housing in the South End was over 50 years old, a considerable amount of the housing did not have running water and that no new housing had been constructed since 1930. The report stated that "the population of the South End is undergoing rapid change" and compared with the rest of Albany, "the people are poorer, less well educated, and in less skilled occupations."[14]

Albany's South End neighborhood has historically been the destination for many immigrants - Irish, Italian, and Jewish - and also one of the poorest sections of Albany. By 1960, the South End lacked basic city services, contained substandard housing crumbling from age, lacked any discernible housing code enforcement, and its citizens had little or no political voice. The Albany government provided few city services in the poorer neighborhoods and mostly kept taxes low to appease their middle class political base. However, white flight from the city to suburbs posed a threat to the Democratic machine's political base, as the white population decreased from 127,564 in 1940 to 100,851 in 1970. By 1967, the South End and Arbor Hill contained more than 75 % of Albany's African American community.[15]

Albany citizens expressed concern about low and moderate income housing, economic development, and urban renewal so in 1946 the New York State Division of Housing conducted a housing survey using volunteers from the New York State College for Teachers in Albany. They surveyed 5,000 occupied dwellings in the South End and Arbor Hill,

which revealed that by 1950 Albany would see a shortage of 4,000 dwelling units due to below standard housing, lack of running water, and the lack of new construction for low and middle income families. In the South End, 69% of occupied dwelling units had no central heating, 40% had no running hot water, 28% were in need of major repairs, and 14% used a multi-family toilet. After passage of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, the Albany Housing Authority used state and Federal funds to provide low-income housing and constructed six three-story buildings in Arbor Hill that were completed in 1952."[16]

In 1955, Mayor Erastus Corning proposed the South End Project, a twelve million dollar federal urban renewal and economic development plan that included the construction of low-income housing units in the South End. To appease the local business community, Corning's plan included an ambitious five million dollar commercial center in Albany's South End on land cleared as part of urban renewal. However, by the end of 1958, because of unclear timetables, poor communication with local businesses regarding relocation, and dwindling tax revenues, Corning significantly scaled down the commercial center and focused on fostering private economic development in the outlining areas of the city to recoup tax revenue for the city.[17]

In November 1962, the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal released a survey of middle-and low-income housing in Albany concluding that the "successful rehabilitation of older, structurally-sound homes and vigorous enforcement of the housing and building codes can help erase urban blight and reduce the number of new

housing needed."[18] The Division of Housing and Community Renewal noted Albany's systematic problems of residential segregation and the lack of housing code enforcement, which soon became key political issues among advocates for the poor, as well as crime, police brutality, and quality of life issues such as the need for parks, adequate schools and city trash service.[19]

Grassroots Organizing in the South End, 1959-1965

In 1959, Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands toured Albany, a historic Dutch colony, and were aghast at some of the poorest areas of the city, notably the pervasive blight and urban decay of the South End. Soon after the Queen's tour, Rockefeller began planning for the most expensive urban renewal and slum clearance project at that time with the building of the South Mall/Empire State Plaza. In May 1962, Rockefeller announced a massive, statewide initiative to demolish 1,150 buildings that would displace roughly 3,600 households and build a colossal complex for state workers. At first, the city administration fought this state action because of the loss of tax revenue, the destruction of a strongly Democratic neighborhood, and its resistance to any outside influences. Eventually, Corning negotiated a lease-purchase deal with the state that was financially beneficial to the city, Corning, and to other Democratic Party regulars as the state awarded millions of dollars in no-bid contracts through local unions and companies, including Corning's own insurance and banking businesses, to the Empire State Plaza.[20]

But New York's Governor and the Dutch Queen were not the only people concerned about the growing poverty in Albany's

South End. By 1961, a number of private interest groups, including social service and interfaith organizations, focused their efforts on building a grassroots political movement that illustrates the rise of a new political constituency and constitutes a significant development that altered Albany's political landscape. Richard B. Collins, Trinity Institution's first secular executive director, introduced plans for a social action program as a long-term solution to Albany's growing poverty. Located in the South End, Trinity was founded in 1921 as a Christian settlement house to assist immigrant families in the transition to life in America. For decades, Trinity developed programs such as lunches for school children, dental clinics, English classes, recreational programs, and occupational workshops to assist families in maintaining basic levels of subsistence. Collins stated that in the early 1960s "there emerged the concept of Trinity as a social institution geared to precipitate social change and they began to speak out politically on issues concerning housing, employment, health, trash collection, street lights," and other quality-of-life issues. Mike Nardiello, Trinity's Associate Director at the time recalled that "by the 1960s Trinity moved towards the notion of affecting social change. There were individuals in the neighborhoods that needed help and it was felt that the neighborhoods could only improve by people getting together and changing their environment through involvement" in the political process.[21] Trinity nurtured this emerging political coalition, which included a resurgent NAACP chapter, the Albany Council of Community Services, fledgling neighborhood improvement groups, college students, Albany Independent Movement, the interfaith Capital Area Council of Churches, and the League of Women Voters of Albany. This new coalition would soon challenge

the political status quo and alter the power and discourse in local politics.

Late in 1963, Trinity formed the South End Advisory Committee to spearhead grassroots organizing and social action. In June 1964, Trinity hosted an open meeting to encourage the formation of neighborhood block organizations and over two hundred residents attended and expressed their concerns over the community's housing and employment situation as well as the lack of attention from city government. Numerous groups formed after this meeting such as the Catherine Street Civic Association, Orange Street Organization, Grand Community Organization, Progressive Community Association, as well as groups in Arbor Hill. [22] Many groups held meetings in people's homes or at Trinity and would meet with landlords to request that rental properties meet livable standards and meet housing code. If there were no responses from landlords, they went to Mayor Corning to file complaints about lax or non-existent housing code enforcement. They also petitioned Corning about the lack of playgrounds, street lighting, and the need for a city-wide trash collection program.[23]

One person at the June 1964 meeting was Olivia Rorie, who in 1963 the founded Better Homes and Community Organization, which was dedicated to delivering quality housing and better living conditions by confronting slum landlords whenever necessary and organizing rent strikes. Rorie was called the "the matriarch of Albany's poor" and became one of the leaders during the fight for Albany's War on Poverty.[24] In 1995, the Albany Community Action Agency building was named in her honor. The Better Homes

and Community Organization was vocal, outspoken and received significant local press coverage by inviting elected officials for tours of the dilapidated neighborhoods and going after slumlords. Rorie spent more than four years advocating for the city to provide trash removal for the residents. Prior to this, each resident had to secure private removal service, a policy that proved to be a burden to many low-income families and led to many backyards and vacant lots being overrun with trash.[25] When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act on August 20, 1964, an emerging political organization of neighborhood groups continued to pressure landlords and the Mayor to comply with their demands.

Albany's and the War on Poverty, 1964-67

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (the centerpiece of the federal effort known as the War on Poverty) was a historic effort by the Federal government to address urban and rural poverty in the United States that signaled a new era for American liberalism. The Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which implemented programs such as Job Corps, Head Start, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Upward Bound, Legal Services, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, the college Work-Study, and the CAP. Over the next decade, the federal government collaborated with state and local governments, non-profit organizations, and grassroots groups to create a new institutional foundation for antipoverty and civil rights action.[26]

The Community Action Program was a bold public policy experiment that created tremendous controversy and became

inextricably intertwined in the political struggle for racial equality. Attempting to change the political and institutional status quo, Sargeant Shriver, OEO Director, stated that the purpose of community action is to change the environment which keeps the poor in their place. Part A, Title II of the EOA, authorized "federal financial assistance for the development of a *community action program* which: mobilizes and utilizes resources, public or private, in an attack on poverty; is developed, conducted and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas; and promotes institutional change on behalf of the poor."[27] The most controversial provision of the CAP legislation called for the poor to have "maximum feasible participation" in identifying problems and in developing solutions, which heightened the concern among mayors and local government officials. Mayors across the nation objected, stating that the federal government was funding an attack on city hall and undermining local influence and authority.

From 1964-1966, the OEO established over one thousand local anti-poverty organizations with some being nonprofit groups, some being local government agencies, and some community-controlled groups with experienced board members and a professional staff. The goals were to develop partnerships among government and community organizations, and involve low-income clients in the agency's operations and decision-making. A full range of coordinated programs, such as employment, job training and counseling, health, vocational rehabilitation, housing and educational assistance were designed to have an appreciable impact on poverty.

Throughout the nation, a new group of community leaders developed out of these neighborhood organizations, voicing the concerns of the poor and insisting on change. In Albany, the passage of the EOA invigorated Trinity and the growing neighborhood movement as the legislation provided a clear blueprint and funding for attacking poverty and spurring political change. The guidelines for receiving Federal funding required that a CAP Board have triangular membership structure that included equal representation of elected public officials, private sector and social service representatives, and low-income residents. The board's role was to assess local needs and develop a program to attack the causes and conditions of poverty. Guidelines also required the support or participation of a local government body or a private agency with a history of social work activity and a local commitment of 10% of project funds from either private or government agencies.[28]

Soon after the passage of EOA, Trinity and other interested groups formed the Albany Citizens Against Poverty (ACAP) to spearhead and establish a CAP. During the fall 1964, ACAP met with Mayor Corning and the Council of Community Services (CCS), the lead social service agency in Albany, to determine the best course of action.[29] At this point, most were in agreement that the goal was to establish a county-sponsored CAP with support and representation of elected officials, social service representatives, appropriate grassroots organizations, and low-income residents. After consulting with the Council of Community Services (CSS), Mayor Corning recommended that the County take the lead because "this is a governmental operation and should not be delegated to a private agency" such as CSS, although they

would have input on the process. Many thought that the establishment of a county-wide community action program would better serve the community, acting as an umbrella organization for numerous anti-poverty projects. Following Corning's directive, the Albany County Board of Supervisors began working on a CAP proposal.[30]

In 1964, the Albany County Board of Supervisors (now the Albany County Legislature) had 35 members, 30 of whom were Democrats. At the November 9, 1964 Board meeting, the Supervisors passed a resolution creating the Albany Economic Opportunity Commission (EOC) and authorized the Albany EOC to prepare a CAP application to the New York State OEO. The resolution stated that the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors would appoint three members to an Albany EOC consisting of the Assistant Superintendent of the Albany School District, County Welfare Commissioner, and the mayor of the Town of Watervliet. The resolution further stated that the Albany EOC would consult with a 30 member Citizens Advisory Committee that had no power or decision making authority.[31] During December 1964 and January 1965, the Albany Citizens Against Poverty, by this time representing more than 300 people and 70 social service agencies held public meetings seeking input from local residents and met with Mayor Corning to present their ideas about creating a poverty program. In early February 1965, the Albany EOC and representatives of ACAP met to discuss suggestions for the Citizens Advisory Board and the Board of Supervisors appropriated $32,000 as the 10% matching funds to meet CAA guidelines.[32]

Work was progressing until February 25, when the Albany EOC announced the 21 members of the Citizens Advisory Board. ACAP strongly criticized the EOC makeup, asserting that only two members of ACAP's recommendations were appointed to the Advisory Board, that names submitted by the NAACP were "completely ignored," and that "contrary to the stated intent of the law" final decision making power rested with the three person commission. ACAP knew from earlier meetings with New York State EOC Director Esra Poston that an application with a structure lacking true representatives of the poor would not be funded.[33] Ignoring ACAP's criticism, the Albany EOC submitted a draft application that was rejected because the EOC included only three members, all of whom were public officials. The Albany EOC submitted a revised application on May 10, 1965 that included the addition of a 21-member Citizens Advisory Board, which was the County's attempt to meet the maximum feasible participation guidelines. In an August 18, 1965 letter explaining the decisions, James G. Crowley, Director, Community Action Program, OEO Northeast Regional Office, stated that the organizational structure of the Albany EOC did not satisfy CAP policy or guidelines because all decision making power still rested with the three-member commission.[34]

By the summer of 1965, Albany social service agencies and public schools received federal funding to implement single agency programs such as Job Corps, VISTA, and Head Start, but progress on a County CAA was at a complete standstill thanks to the Board of Supervisors' opposition to maximum feasible participation. Many anti-poverty advocates thought that Albany County should oversee a CAA program, either

because they knew the County could easily provide the 10% matching funds or because they thought that the best course of action was a program which utilized all of a community's resources. Other activists asserted that the County would not adhere to the maximum feasible participation guidelines and that they should immediately draft a private CAA application so ACAP applied for non-profit certification as a first step in this process. In September 1965, ACAP applied to OEO, but its application was turned down because the regional OEO was expecting a revised Albany EOC application and because ACAP had no viable means of financial support or social service experience.[35]

In October 1965, Mayor Corning stated that the EOC was working with state and federal OEO officials to develop a revised application and that after the November 1965 elections, the Board of Supervisors would propose a revised Commission.[36] Anti-poverty groups and interfaith organizations continued to lobby Corning to expedite the process and to include diverse EOC representation. Although publicly the city indicated that it would develop a revised application to meet the federal guidelines, it was clear from subsequent actions that Mayor Corning and the Board of Supervisors had no intention of supporting a program that included any significant representation of the anti-poverty movement, contained any decision-making power outside their sphere of influence, or that would promote political opposition to the city government.

As the 1965 elections approached, political tensions in Albany were high and Trinity initiated a plan to monitor polling locations for the buying of votes and other unfair election

practices, widely known tools of the Albany Democratic ward leaders and committeemen. Trinity sought consultation on election law from the New York State Department of Law and requested assistance from the State Attorney General's office to lend them any "aid or comfort necessary."[37] On Election Day morning 1965, the Department of Law representatives met at Trinity and deputized a group of local citizens as "special deputy attorneys general," who then went to polling places in the South End and Arbor Hill to monitor for election irregularities.

A few weeks after the election, the City retaliated by using its own powers and influence. Mayor Corning announced that the city was removing $23,000 of city funding from Trinity's budget, a critical blow to their financial security. Mayor Corning stated that the city did not receive any reports of how the money was spent, although the Council of Community Services stated that periodic reporting was done.[38] After the elections, the Albany Catholic Diocese restricted the activities of Reverend Bonaventure O'Brien, a Siena College Professor active in civil rights and social work in the South End. A vocal member of the Interfaith Task Force during the summer of 1965, Father Bonaventure was one of the deputy attorneys general and poll watcher. The Bishop of the Albany Diocese, responding to criticism of the political nature of the decision, declared that the Diocese "is not now, never has been, and never will be in alliance with a political organization or its enemies."[39] However, others assumed these were political maneuvers and a response to Trinity's increasing social activist work. In an editorial, the *Knickerbocker News* wrote that "historically, things happen to organizations and individuals who either actively oppose the Albany

administration or show an independence of spirit and action."[40] In much the same vein, the *Times Union* stated that "the naked element of political retribution for political involvement is now out in the open" concluding that "political involvement by a social welfare agency has been penalized."[41]

As events intensified, the Board of Supervisors continued to work on a third application for a county-sponsored CAA program. On December 30, 1965, the Board adopted resolutions that increased the membership of the Economic Opportunity Commission from three to 20 members and resolved that an expanded EOC "be so selected as to be broadly based and organized on a community-wide basis involving the combination of a variety of anti-poverty actions with maximum feasible participation by the residents of areas to be served."[42] To encourage maximum feasible participation, the Board of Supervisors stated that ACAP and the NAACP would have three slots on a "special nine-person nominating committee" that would recommend twenty residents for the EOC. The Board of Supervisors would choose 6 of the 20 to serve on the EOC. ACAP and NAACP were clearly not satisfied with this arrangement and the President of the Council of Churches lamented that Albany's official approach was to "resist rather than assist" any attempts by local agencies to receive OEO funds, and wondered how city leaders could negotiate one of New York State largest capital construction projects (Empire State Plaza) "yet is incapable of devising an anti-poverty program." The Board of Supervisors referred the issue to its Public Welfare Committee, which would facilitate the formation of the nine-person committee charged with selecting a new EOC.[43]

On January 20, 1966, ACAP, NAACP, and the neighborhood groups formed a coalition known as the Federation of Community Action Organizations and held a teach–in attended by more than 500 people to rally for the development of poverty program. The Federation of Community Action Organizations was invited to present their views at the Board of Supervisors' Public Welfare Committee meeting on February 14.[44] The Public Welfare Committee was charged with transmitting recommendations for the revised Albany EOC and the representatives of the Federation of Community Action Organizations went to the meeting in good faith. This meeting was a significant turning point, leading Albany activists to discard the idea of a county-sponsored program instead of focusing on a private CAA program.

When the Albany NAACP President Joseph Cohen and Federation members arrived at the Public Welfare Committee meeting, the Committee presented itself as a "silent, faceless, and disinterested group, who per prearrangement sat with their backs to the" Federation members. The Public Welfare committee members refused to answer any questions and they completely ignored the Federation members. The meeting was a travesty of recognized meeting procedures. In a letter to New York State Senator Robert Kennedy, Cohen concluded that regarding a CAA, "the selection of the poor has been without injection, participation, or influence. It is the extending arm of the paternalistic father which has hung for so long and still hangs like the sword of Damocles, over the prospect of a meaningful anti-poverty program in this area."[45] The situation in Albany prompted Senator Kennedy to initiate an inquiry with the Northeast Regional OEO.[46] The Public

Welfare meeting proved to be a watershed moment for Albany politics as activists became more militant, organized demonstrations, cultivated media coverage, and aimed at attacking the Albany Democrat's power.

After the meeting, the Public Welfare Committee recommended the members of a reconstituted Albany EOC and the Board of Supervisors passed a resolution confirming their recommendations. No members of the Federation of Community Action Organizations were included. Two Supervisors proposed amendments to the resolution that would have added one member each from the NAACP, ACAP, and the Federation of Community Action Organizations and replaced the "six residents" on the EOC who were "unknown to many." The amendment failed 30-5. Also at the meeting, the Public Welfare Committee issued a derisive and belligerent report castigating the "pressure groups for deliberately frustrating its primary purpose," to develop a poverty program and that some of these organizations have other objectives besides assisting the poor.[47] The Board of Supervisors' resolution effectively ended the idea of County sponsored EOC as it was clear to activists that the County's motive for the EOC was to act as an extension of the Albany Democrats' longstanding patronage system.

In early March, Trinity's Board of Directors moved quickly to submit a $39,000 application for a single agency CAA project, the South End Neighborhood Community Action Project (SENCAP). Two months later it was fully funded, and Albany had its first CAP. SENCAP consisted of four neighborhood workers and four neighborhood aides to focus

on "mobilizing the poor through organization using the principles of self-help, self-determination, and democracy."[48] SENCAP organized new and existing neighborhood groups to take civil and political actions attacking the Albany Democratic Party's mix of loyalty, patronage, kickbacks and intimidation. SENCAP was radical from the start and one of its first projects was to support The Brothers, a fledgling group of local African American men formed in response to employment discrimination by local construction trade unions. The Brothers were outspoken and held press conferences attacking Albany's political corruption stating that no longer would the "bosses of Albany buy the Black people with $5, it will cost much more. Our people need better jobs, better schools, and safer streets." [49] Leon Van Dyke founded the Brothers because of hiring discrimination by local unions during a significant period of capital construction in Albany and because they "knew that there was connection between some of the labor bosses and some of the political machine because some of labor bosses were also Democratic committee men."[50] The Brothers published a newspaper, *The Liberator*, and were involved in a number of high profile events including the 1967 grand jury investigations into voter fraud by the Albany Democratic Party, tours for the press, elected official and clergy of slum housing conditions, and the support of candidates in the local 1967 Democratic primary elections.

Meanwhile, the Northeast Regional OEO received a third Albany County application on April 11, 1966 from the Board of Supervisors that was rejected in an April 27 letter. The application was declared unacceptable because of more than 15 factors including that the EOC's members were

predominately elected officials and Democratic committeemen, no Citizens Advisory board was appointed and that contrary to nearly every CAA nationwide, there is no NAACP representation, and there is no representation by poverty area residents. The letter further states that the EOC chair did not attend either of the two meetings prior to submitting the third application, and that John Clyne, County Attorney wrote the application with no input solicited from anyone.[51]

Soon after, Mayor Corning responded by asking the Board of Supervisors to abolish the Albany EOC because "it was impossible for a municipality to create a government agency without retaining complete authority over the expenditure of funds and that by meeting the OEO guidelines would force the county and city to discard its legal obligations." On May 9, the Board of Supervisors passed a resolution abolishing the short-lived Albany EOC and recommending that private agencies apply for funds, essentially starting the entire process from the beginning.[52] In response to Corning's actions, in June 1966, the Council of Community Services and ACAP created a development committee to establish an anti-poverty agency, and by September, Albany County Opportunity, Inc (ACOI), a private, non-profit, county-wide community action agency was operational, having incorporated with the state, approving by-laws and naming a president and 30 member Board of Directors that included individuals from neighborhood organizations, NAACP, ACAP, clergy, elected officials, and social service agencies.[53]

In December 1966, the County Board of Supervisors rejected a final resolution to endorse ACOI and to provide a 10%

matching funds. All but one of Albany County's 13 municipalities (the City of Albany) and the Council of Community Services endorsed and contributed funds providing for ACOI's required 10% matching. In March 1967 Albany finally had an anti-poverty agency with the award of $35,529 from the Federal OEO.[54]

Conclusion

On April 14, 1967, the Albany County grand jury ended its investigation on a dramatic note, calling the head of the Albany's Democratic Party Daniel P. O'Connell. The next day, the grand jury abruptly stated that they found "no proof of vote buying to sustain an indictment." Reform leaders issued "angry' statements and claimed that the discretionary use of the immunity waivers prohibited a complete investigation. The Brothers called the grand jury hearings a "whitewash" and SENCAP contacted Governor Nelson Rockefeller and the U.S. Attorney General's office calling for an investigation. Rockefeller was unwilling to take any action lest he upset the Albany machine thereby endangering the ongoing construction of the South Mall.[55]

By 1967, community action programs faced increased hostility from mayors and local politicians across the nation as maximum feasible participation came under heavy criticism. Ultimately, the Albany CAP had very little involvement by public officials as private efforts boosted ACOI's development, longevity and success. The early struggles over of community action in Albany revealed that unlike many CAP projects across the nation, Albany politicians failed to successfully manipulate the program for their own gain. Even though Albany lost access to millions in federal

funding, Albany community groups experienced a political awakening that for the first time created a liberal coalition of civil rights, social welfare, and progressive groups that would continue to foster dissent and cause the breakdown of the local power structure in Albany. Whereas CAP was intended to create programs that increased political participation and to use social protest as a method for reform, in Albany the political process to create a CAP politicized people of color and poor residents. Under "maximum feasible participation," the War on Poverty provided the momentum for the city's liberal coalition to mobilize citizens against the Democratic Party's domination of city government and that no longer would Albany be unresponsive to the community's needs. The process radicalized many activists in Albany as SENCAP was militant and vocal from the start and came to symbolize the rise of Black Power in Albany. Yet, the Brothers was also the key group that prevented Albany from experiencing the racial violence found in Rochester. In Albany, a tightly controlled political system was significantly altered as a person like Olivia Rorie in her role as a community organizer personified the empowerment of the poor.

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[1] Brian Keough, Head, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University at Albany, SUNY

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