

# A Review of the Implications of the Love Canal Disaster and the Subsequent Actions of the State and Federal Government

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## Introduction

There is much literature written about environmental law and policy. The one focused on in this poster presentation is “Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present” by Richard S. Newman. The novel focuses on the Love Canal tragedy in upstate New York, where a chemical plant caused housewives to turn into activists after their neighbors, friends, and even their own families became extremely ill or succumbed because of the toxic waste. The tragedy at Love Canal was the precursor to grassroots movements across the United States.

## Main Themes

Power of Grassroots Revolutions. A grassroots movement is one that uses the people in a community as the basis for a political movement. By using collective action at the local level, you can create change at the state and federal level. Love Canal started with housewives turned activists, showcasing the intellectual and emotional capacity of ordinary citizens being able to make a change. This is prevalent with today’s times as more issues have arisen that are being addressed by citizens and brought to the attention of state and federal legislators and government officials.



Young residents in Love Canal joined the protest. (Center for Health, Environment & Justice)

## Timeline of Events

- **1894:** William T. Love begins a canal to link the Niagara River to Lake Ontario. The partially completed canal is later abandoned.
- **1942-1952:** Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation takes over the 15-acre canal site in 1942 and by 1952 has buried over 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals there.
- **1953:** Hooker Chemical sells the canal to the Niagara Falls Board of Education for \$1.00 and writes into the deed a disclaimer of responsibility for future damages due to the presence of buried chemicals. The board subsequently builds a school there and sells land that is developed with residences.
- **1976:** The Niagara Gazette prints 3 reports in a span of two months on issues arising. Materials from a chemical landfill between 97th and 99th streets have been seeping into basements of homes in the area. Chemical analyses of residues near the old Love Canal dumpsite indicate presence of 15 organic chemicals, including three toxic chlorinated hydrocarbons. The toxic chemicals seeping into cellars of homes are being carried through city storm sewers and improperly discharged into the Niagara River.
- **1978**
- **April:** The New York State Health Commissioner, Dr. Robert Whalen orders the Niagara County Health Department to restrict access to the Love Canal area and begin health studies.
- **August:** The Love Canal Homeowners Association is formed as a way to give a voice to the residents of Love Canal. It grew out of the Love Canal Parents Association founded by Love Canal resident Lois Gibbs.
- **August 2:** Acting under wider powers, New York State Health Commissioner, Robert Whalen declares a state of emergency exists at Love Canal. He also orders the closing of 99th Street Elementary School, and the evacuation of pregnant women and children under the age of two from the surrounding neighborhood.
- **August 7:** President Jimmy Carter approves emergency financial aid for the area so New York State can start buying the homes of 236 Love Canal families. The families are eventually relocated at a cost of \$10 million.
- **1980:** President Carter declares Love Canal a national emergency paving way for relocation of another 710 families.
- 1980 Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act—better known as Superfund is created.
- **1982:** The first of 227 Love Canal homes is demolished.
- **1983:** The 99th Street Elementary School is demolished.
- **November 28, 1990:** First new family moves into Love Canal

## Laws and Legislation

In July 1978, Governor Hugh L. Carey signed legislation granting emergency powers to New York State Health Commissioner Robert Whalen to deal with Love Canal Problems. Less than a month later, Whalen declares a state of emergency in Love Canal.

On August 7, 1978, President Jimmy Carter approves emergency financial aid for New York to begin buying the homes of families in Love Canal.

The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act of 1980, now known as the Superfund law, was created by the federal government due to the severity of the Love Canal sites contamination in order to manage the disposal of hazardous waste across the country.

On May 21, 1980, President Jimmy Carter declares Love Canal a national emergency and relocated 710 families in the city.



Lois Gibbs, a housewife turned activist and president of the Love Canal Homeowners Association.

## Important People

William Love: Built the Canal in 1834 as a failed attempt to connect upper and lower Niagara Rivers.

Hooker Chemical Company: Disposed of 21,000 tons of hazardous chemicals into Love Canal, contaminating soil and groundwater.

Niagara County School Board: Hooker sold the canal property to the local school board for \$1, who then built the 99th Street School.

Lois Gibbs: Formed the Love Canal Homeowners Association and was the primary environmental activist for Love Canal.

Dr. Beverly Paigen: The scientist of Love Canal who made the connections between human health effects in the community and the dangerous chemicals.

## Impacts

The tragedy at Love Canal was avoidable, however, it also sparked the beginning of grassroots movements for environmental protection. More and more communities were speaking out about the environmental issues that their neighborhood or community was facing rather than living in silent pain. As a result of the Love Canal disaster, there are various tours and education programs available at the once hazardous site. There is also a Love Canal Monument dedicated to the memorial of the disaster and all that was taught because of it.

## References

Newman, R. S. (2020). *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present*. Oxford University Press.