

The Importance Of Place

By Thea Burgess, March 28, 2021

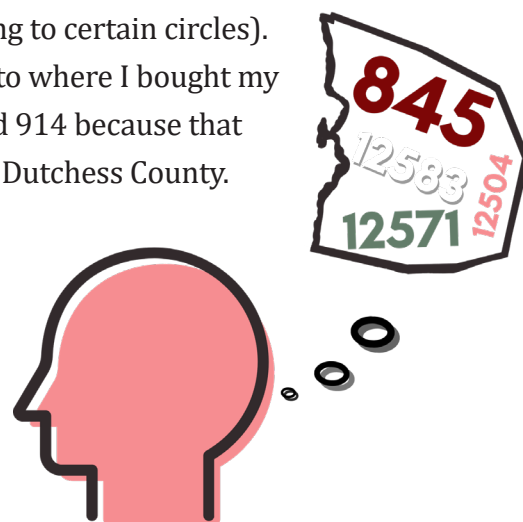
What was the zip code of the address where you lived five years after high school?

The artist, cartoonist, writer, teacher, and MacArthur ‘Genius’ Grant winner Lynda Barry asked us this during the Omega Institute workshop “Writing the Unthinkable.” Most couldn’t remember. A few of us still were doing math in our heads related to Lynda’s first query when she asked who our fourth grade teacher was. A couple of names were stated but not many. “Mrs. Onody,” I smugly murmured to myself. Building suspense, and our worries that we desperately needed a memory tonic, Lynda hesitated before asking her final question: what was your phone number when you were a kid? We all shouted the digits, although the more “mature” attendees substituted letters for the first few numerals, like in the movie *Butterfield 8*. Giddy with joy (and relief), we high-fived each other. We knew our phone numbers. Of course you did, Lynda smiled, of course.

Lynda Barry had illustrated her point. **We are tied to touchstones from our past.** Those details are us. Even as we switched teachers each September and our addresses were in flux, the first phone number, the one our families made us memorize, the one we gave to our friends, the one we can still rattle off decades later, established us as part of a community. It identified us. Before private lines, that community went beyond our house’s walls. Those who grew up with a party line knew to answer the phone only when it rang once. (Two rings were for the people across the road.) If there was a neighborhood crisis, however, everyone picked up the receiver, and the predecessor of a Zoom call occurred. Everyone up and down the way would chime in with what they knew. No one was seen, yet everyone was heard.

In the last decade or two, with the prevalence of cell phones, it’s harder to identify where others are from, even if we recognize the area code. It’s become complicated. For example, when the 716 area code of western New York was split—lucky Buffalo retained those digits and Rochester had to adjust to 585—it led to an identity crisis. When the availability of the 212 prefix was running low in New York City, it was grim for newcomers who received a substitute (one that was subpar according to certain circles). When I got a cell phone, I faced the dilemma of a 518 area code tied to where I bought my phone or the 845 of Dutchess County where I live. (I secretly wanted 914 because that was my area code in the early 1980s when I first moved to southern Dutchess County. Now 914 is mainly for the truly downstate.) I chose 845, of course.

I thought of this during the recent Meet Your Neighbor event, hosted by Historic Red Hook. We connected via Zoom, and I’m sure a lot of area codes were represented. Participants were life-long residents of Red Hook and new arrivals of just a few months. This is a long-established pattern in the Hudson Valley. Its implications intensified during the past year as we all grappled with the pan-



demic. It's been harder to find each other. Community organizations like Red Hook Responds, the library, the Red Hook Community Center, the Ascienzo Foundation, Historic Red Hook, and neighbors looking out for one another have stepped in to bring us together even while we've had to be physically distanced.

We're all facing change.

We are rediscovering our neighborhoods and connecting with nature. We're addressing difficult things in our collective pasts and navigating how to do better going forward. We've experienced various home comings here in Red Hook where place, identity, community, and history converge. More and more, experts across many disciplines emphasize the significance of place to who we are, not just in our current day-to-day existence but also factoring in the impacts of times past. Concepts like stewardship, environmentalism, bioregionalism, smart design, a sense of place, and so on acknowledge who we are and where we are—past, present, and future. Historians (and those passionate about history) have known this all along.

Further Reading:

- *Mill Town: Reckoning with What Remains* by Kerri Arsenault
- *The Art of the Commonplace* by Wendell Berry
- *Clearing Land: Legacies of the American Farm* by Jane Brox
- *My Reach* by Susan Fox Rogers
- *Writing Toward Home* by Georgia Heard
- *The Rural Life* by Verlyn Klinkenborg
- *How to Do Nothing* by Jenny Odell
- *The Place You Love Is Gone: Progress Hits Home* by Melissa Holbrook Pierson

About the Author

Thea Burgess has lived in the Hudson Valley for over 30 years and has been involved with Historic Red Hook since the town's bicentennial celebration when her students at Red Hook High School researched local sites, wrote pieces inspired by the town, and created altered books. She taught English at Hudson High School for 12 years and at Red Hook High School for 18 years. She retired from teaching in June 2020 and now serves as Vice President on the Board of Historic Red Hook