

Rivers, Politics, and Power in the United States

Scot McFarlane, wsm2116@columbia.edu

Office hours: Thursdays 1:00-3pm or by appointment



Course Description:

Rivers have played a central role in the creation of the modern United States whether through the trade networks they formed or the rise of the environmental movement in the twentieth century, when stinking and burning rivers across the nation made it impossible to ignore the costs of economic progress. This seminar begins by defining rivers as a unique natural and historical process, followed by an exploration of rivers' connections to the rise of capitalism and nationalism, but the course focuses on the history of the twentieth century when rivers became important international borders, cities boomed, and citizens debated how to control rivers and the people who lived along them. While rivers such as the Columbia River have served to concentrate wealth and political power through government-built dams administered by an elite group of bureaucrats, others like many of the flood-prone rivers of the South have limited both economic development and landlords' ability to control people. This seminar is an environmental, political, and social history of rivers in the United States, that uses the two rivers closest to Columbia's campus, the Hudson and Harlem rivers, as case studies for the entire course.

Our readings will range from first-person accounts in the early 1800s to contemporary historians and scientists who study rivers, covering the ways that Americans have shaped the rivers around them and in turn been changed by living on rivers. In addition to two short papers earlier in the semester, you will have an opportunity to showcase your historical skills and understanding of rivers through a final project that focuses on a single river of your own choosing.

Course Objectives:

Over the course of the semester students will learn:

- To define rivers and their effect on society.
- To understand the role of rivers in shaping our present-day economy and politics.
- To consider the role of environmental history and how to combine the study of people and places.
- To critically analyze primary and secondary sources and make clear arguments in the classroom and through their writing.
- To present thoughtful and useful information to peers while listening to and learning from each other.

Course Requirements:

20% Participation- (This includes attendance and lateness. Participation expectations are detailed on page 4. All students will be responsible for generating guiding questions and leading discussion of our readings.)

15% Weekly discussion postings - (These will be due by 9pm the night before class meets on the class discussion board. Posts should be 250-300 words in length. They should address key insights or controversies from the readings. I encourage you to be free in your speculations-this is the time for bold experimentation. You may choose to respond to your peers' posts, but your response should be grounded in evidence from the readings. You will be evaluated on the clarity of the ideas you present and their reflection of your ability to highlight the arguments, themes, and important details from the reading. Posts will be graded on a check or check minus system. You may choose two classes in which you don't write a post, for a total of 10 posts.)

30% Write 2, 4-5 page reflection papers due in first half of the semester (Detailed on p.5)

35% Final 10-12 page research paper (5%) for proposal and (30%) for essay (Detailed on p.5)

Required Materials:

The following books are available to purchase at Book Culture. They will also be available on reserve at Butler Library and most should be requestable through Borrow Direct if you order them promptly. The Mark Twain book can be found online for free.

- Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995)
- Ellen Whol, *Disconnected River: Linking Rivers to Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)
- Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co, 1883)
- Eddy Harris, *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (New York, N. Lyons Books, 1988)

All other course materials can be found under course files in Courseworks or will be handed out in class.



Unique Resources:

Though our readings will explore a breadth of approaches, we will use a place-based focus to understand the history of rivers in the United States. The two rivers closest to Columbia's campus, the Hudson and Harlem rivers, will serve as case studies. Columbia University's two rivers provide useful contrasts in their differing scales and uses even if they have both long been used as a sink for pollution. We will canoe in the rivers, walk along the shore of the Harlem River, and attend a community meeting on urban rivers. You are required to participate in two of our outings and are welcome to attend all three. Field trip options are posted below:

- A canoe trip on the Harlem River and meet with the volunteers of the Bronx Council for Environmental Quality dedicated to bringing people back to the river and reducing pollution.

- A walk along the Harlem River with the photographer Duane Bailey-Castro who has drawn attention to this beautiful and neglected stream.

- Participate in a citywide meeting where different community advocacy groups have united to restore and reopen NYC's waterways.



Expectations

Attendance: Students are required to attend all of our meetings. Come to class on time, ready to contribute to our conversation and learning. In the event of an emergency or illness, students should email me before the start of class to inform me of their absence. All absences will be excused at the discretion of the instructor. Any absence requires a two-page response paper on the readings we discussed for the class you missed.

Class Participation: We will spend most of our brief time together discussing the course reading. Actively reading all of the assignments means taking notes and preparing questions that you can use as evidence and prompts for our discussion.

Participation—and not just your attendance—is a key part of your overall course grade. Do not be surprised if I invite you directly to contribute. You should participate in classroom conversations by listening to and engaging with the observations of your classmates as well as contributing your own analysis and questions. You may want to draw attention to moments when the insights of your peers allowed you to reconsider a problem or confusing idea. On the other hand, disagreeing with a comment can also help us to come to a better understanding, but disagreements are only productive when you respect others' differences and focus on the evidence.

Electronic Devices: Use of electronic devices (computers, phones, etc.) will be extremely limited.

Contact Policies: I am available outside of class to discuss your work, and I strongly encourage you to meet with me when you are writing your papers and when you have questions about the course content that remain unanswered after the seminar.

I will hold office hours in 503 Fayerweather Hall. You may also email me with questions or concerns. When you email me, I will respond as promptly as possible, but note that I do not respond to email after 8 pm and may take up to two business days. If you cannot attend my regular office hours please email me to arrange a time to meet. If you have a general question about the course or your assignments, double-check the syllabus before you contact me. I will not answer questions already addressed in the syllabus.

Accommodation: I am committed to fostering an inclusive and empowering classroom environment, and I am happy to discuss accommodations that will support your learning. If you believe that you might have a disability requiring accommodation or support services, you should contact the Office of Disability Services at (212) 854-2388 or disability@columbia.edu. If you are a student with a disability and have a DS-certified Accommodation Letter, please email me or speak with me in conference to confirm your accommodation needs.

Plagiarism: I have included the full statement on academic integrity at the end of the syllabus. Do not plagiarize. If you have any question about whether or not you might be improperly citing or using someone else's work, please ask—I am here to help!

Assignments:

Reflection Papers– These papers will allow you to focus on a specific theme from the course, either taken from one of the weekly themes or concepts that relate to rivers throughout the course such as flooding, droughts, dams or pollution. No outside reading is required for these assignments. You should use the course materials to make an argument about the topic you have chosen. By putting the readings in conversation with each other you should explain how the authors have understood these concepts. You should also question the readings and make your own claim for the best way to study your chosen topic through time.

Final Research Paper– By the end of the semester you will know far more about rivers than you did at the outset of the course. You will use this expertise to write a history of a specific river in the United States of your choosing. In order to write this essay you will have to conduct research on primary sources and historiographical articles and books written about the river. Your knowledge from the course as a whole will allow you to place your river in the context of rivers across the United States and to make an argument about its role in American history.

Your proposal should be 1-2 pages and address your reasons for choosing the river and the sources you will consult in order to write your paper. Unless the river is close to campus you should choose a river that is significant enough to have sources that can be found online and through the library. For example, the Connecticut River; Colorado River; Ohio River; Los Angeles River; Tennessee River would all make good case studies even though they are dramatically different rivers.

Your thesis should make a clear argument about what makes this river unique and how it has shaped the lives of the people who live along it. Some questions to consider answering in your paper include: How has this river been represented, and how have these representations changed over time? What role has it played in fostering or limiting economic development? How would American history be different without this river? How has the river influenced the region's culture?

Evaluation

I will hand out a detailed rubric in class for each assignment as a guide for my expectations. Please ask for an extension at least one week in advance, otherwise late papers will lose a third of a letter grade each day after the deadline. Included here are the expectations for an A paper:

- A clear thesis and introduction that describes the significance of your argument
- The texts are put into conversation to support your argument, they are not just summarized, but show strong analysis.
- Relevant evidence from the archives is used when necessary, its connections to your argument is shown, limited use of direct quotes
- A well-organized essay structure that strengthens your argument
- A clear and accurate understanding of the history is conveyed throughout
- No more than one or two grammatical or spelling errors

Formatting

All written work should use footnotes and follow the Chicago Manual of Style. It should be double-spaced and include page numbers. Use a standard 12-pt font and do not have margins wider than 1.5 inches. You will need to include a separate bibliography which does not count towards the total number of pages for your research paper.

Pre-submission feedback

Writing is a process and good writing depends above all else on revision—not on writing the whole paper the night before it is due. We will schedule meetings at my office hours to discuss your final paper and I strongly encourage coming to office hours to discuss the reflection papers. All papers will receive peer feedback. Please review your colleagues' papers as you would want your own paper to be read, with a thoughtful, critical, and considerate eye. You should include the peer-reviewed drafts when you submit your papers. Also consider making an appointment or going to the drop-in hours at the [Columbia Writing Center](#).



Schedule of Meetings, Readings, and Field Trips

Week 1- September 5- Introduction

Ellen Whol, "Why Should We Care About Rivers?" and "American Rivers" in *Disconnected Rivers*

William DeBuys, "River of Traps" in *River of Traps: A New Mexico Mountain Life* (1990)

Week 2- September 12- Defining rivers

Richard White, *Organic Machine* p.1-130

Nicolaas Mink, "A Narrative for Nature's Nation: Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Making of Rivers of America" in *Environmental History* (2006)

D.M. Browning, "Wisham Fisheries on the Columbia River" in *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (1895)

Week 3- September 19- The Rise of Capitalism

Harry L. Watson, "The Common Rights of Mankind": Subsistence, Shad, and Commerce in the Early Republican South" in *Journal of American History* (1996)

Daegan Miller, "A Map of Radical Bewilderment" in *Place Journal* (2018)

Ellen Whol, "Conquering a New World: Pioneer Impacts" in *Disconnected Rivers*

Daniel Vickers, "Those Dammed Shad: Would the River Fisheries of New England Have Survived in the Absence of Industrialization?" in *The William and Mary Quarterly* (2004)

Field Trip Harlem River Tour with Duane Bailey-Castro at 5pm on Wednesday

Week 4- September 26- Freedom and slavery

Tiya Miles, "Of Waterways and Runaways: Reflections on the Great Lakes in Underground Railroad History" in *Michigan Quarterly Review* (2011)

Thomas C. Buchanan, "Levees of Hope: African American Steamboat Workers, Cities, and Slave Escapes on the Antebellum Mississippi" in *Journal of Urban History* (2004)

Ari Kelman, "Nature's Highway to Market" in *A River and its City* (2003)

Lisa Brady, "Hostile Territory: Union Operations Along the Lower Mississippi, 1863-1863" in *War Upon the Land* (2012)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Mother's Struggle" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)

Paper #1 Due and Canoe Trip with BCEQ

Week 5- October 3- Controlling nature, controlling people

John McPhee, "Atchafalaya" in *The New Yorker* (1987)

Richard Mizelle Jr., "Black Levee Camp Workers, the NAACP, and the Mississippi Flood Control Project, 1927-1933" *Journal of African American History* (2013)

Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta, "Living with Risk: Beyond Vulnerability/Security" in *Dancing with the River: People and Life on the Chars of South Asia* (2013)

Ellen Whol, "Institutional Conquest: Bureaucratic Impacts" in *Disconnected Rivers*

Lucy Somerville, "The Mississippi Flood of 1927" in *Woman's Press* (1927)

Week 6- October 10- Nationalism

Tricia Cusack, "The Chosen People: The Hudson River School and the construction of American Identity" in *Riverscapes and National Identities* (2010)

Rich Heyman, "Locating the Mississippi: Landscape, Nature, and National Territoriality at the Mississippi Headwaters" *American Quarterly* (2010)

Frances F. Dunwell, "America's River of Empire" in *The Hudson America's River* (2008)

"Steamboat on the Hudson Announcement" in *American Citizen* (1807)

Week 7- October 17- Borders

Paul Kramer, "A Border Crosses" in *The New Yorker* (2014)

Sam Grainger and Declan Conway, "Climate Change and International River Boundaries: fixed points in shifting sands" in *WIRES Climate Change* (2014)

Jeffrey Schulze, "The Chamizal Blues: A Wayward River, El Paso, and the Peoples in Between" in *Western Historical Quarterly* (2012)

"Mexico: Bending the River" in *Time* (1963)

Paper #2 Due

Week 8- October 24- Pollution

David Igler, "When Is a River Not a River? Reclaiming Nature's Disorder in Lux v. Haggin" in *Environmental History* (1996)

Ellen Whol, "Poisoning America: Commercial Impacts" in *Disconnected Rivers*

Conger Beasley, "Of pollution and poverty- Keeping watch in Cancer alley" in *Buzzworm*

Wallace Scot McFarlane, "Defining a Nuisance: Pollution, Science, and Politics on Maine's Androscoggin River" in *Environmental History* (2012)

John Cronin and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., "Enforcement" in *The Riverkeepers* (1997)

Grace McCoulf, "Testimony of Resident of Love Canal Area" for *Senate Subcommittee of Toxic Substances and Chemical Wastes* (1979)

Final Project Proposal Due

Week 9- October 31- Environmentalism

David Schuyler, "The Battle Over Storm King," in *Embattled River: The Hudson and Modern American Environmentalism* (2018)

Jenny Price, "Remaking American Environmentalism: On the Banks of the L.A. River" in *Environmental History* (2008)

David and Richard Stradling, "Perceptions of the Burning River: Deindustrialization and Cleveland's Cuyahoga River" in *Environmental History* (2008)

Tyler Huxtable, "Making an Icon out of the Los Angeles River" in *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi* (2016)

Pete Seeger, "My Dirty Stream (The Hudson River Song)" in *God Bless the Grass* (1966)

Week 10- November 7- Urban Rivers

Uwe Lubken, "Rivers and Risk in the City: The Urban Floodplain as a Contested Space" in *Remaking Rivers, Cities, and Space in Europe and North America* (2012)

Anne Whiston Spirn, "Restoring Mill Creek: Landscape Literacy, Environmental Justice and City Planning and Design" in *Landscape Research* (2005)

Matthew Klinge, "Death for a Tired Old River: Ecological Restoration and Environmental Inequity in Postwar Seattle" in *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (2007)

Nathan Kensinger, "One of NYC's underground rivers may soon be brought back to life," *Curbed* (2018)

Week 11- November 14- Resilience

Ellen Whol, "Trying to Do the Right Thing" and "Thinking in Terms of Rivers" in *Disconnected Rivers*

David Strayer, "PCBs and Other Pollution in the Hudson," in *The Ecology of an Iconic River* (2012)

Christopher Morris, "Disturbing the Mississippi: The Language of Science, Engineering, and River Restoration" in *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi* (2016)

Bethany Wiggin, "Forgotten Places and Radical Hope on Philadelphia's Tidal Schuylkill River" in *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi* (2017)

Richard Mizelle Jr., 2016. "Princeville and the Environmental Landscape of Race" *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi* (2016)

Evening screening of "Watermark"

Week 12- November 21- Rivers as History

Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, "Rivers in History and Historiography: An Introduction" in *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America* (2008)

Sigma Colon, "Watershed Colonialism and Popular Geographies of North American Rivers" in *Open Rivers* (2017)

Wendell Berry, "The Rise" (1968)

Mark Twain, "Part I" in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883)

Week 13- December 5- River Adventures and Presentations

Eddy Harris, *Mississippi Solo*

Students will come to class prepared to briefly (2 minutes) present their final projects, we will discuss common themes and key takeaways from your research and the course as a whole.

Week 14- Final Papers due

Final Papers will be due by Friday, December 13 at 12pm

Faculty Statement on Academic Integrity:

The intellectual venture in which we are all engaged requires of faculty and students alike the highest level of personal and academic integrity. As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity.

Scholarship, by its very nature, is an iterative process, with ideas and insights building one upon the other. Collaborative scholarship requires the study of other scholars' work, the free discussion of such work, and the explicit acknowledgement of those ideas in any work that inform our own. This exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited.

In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent.

Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated. Students failing to meet these responsibilities should anticipate being asked to leave Columbia.