

An aerial photograph showing a winding river flowing through a lush, green landscape of terraced rice fields. The fields are arranged in curved, concentric patterns, creating a complex, organic shape. The river is a dark, narrow channel that meanders through the center of the terraces. The overall scene is vibrant and verdant, with various shades of green and some small structures visible on the right side.

ISSUE EIGHTEEN : SPRING 2021  
OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# WATER FUTURES

<http://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is by Ivan Bandura, <https://ivan.graphics/>.

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*Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community* is produced by the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing](#) and the [University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study](#).

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ISSN 2471-190X

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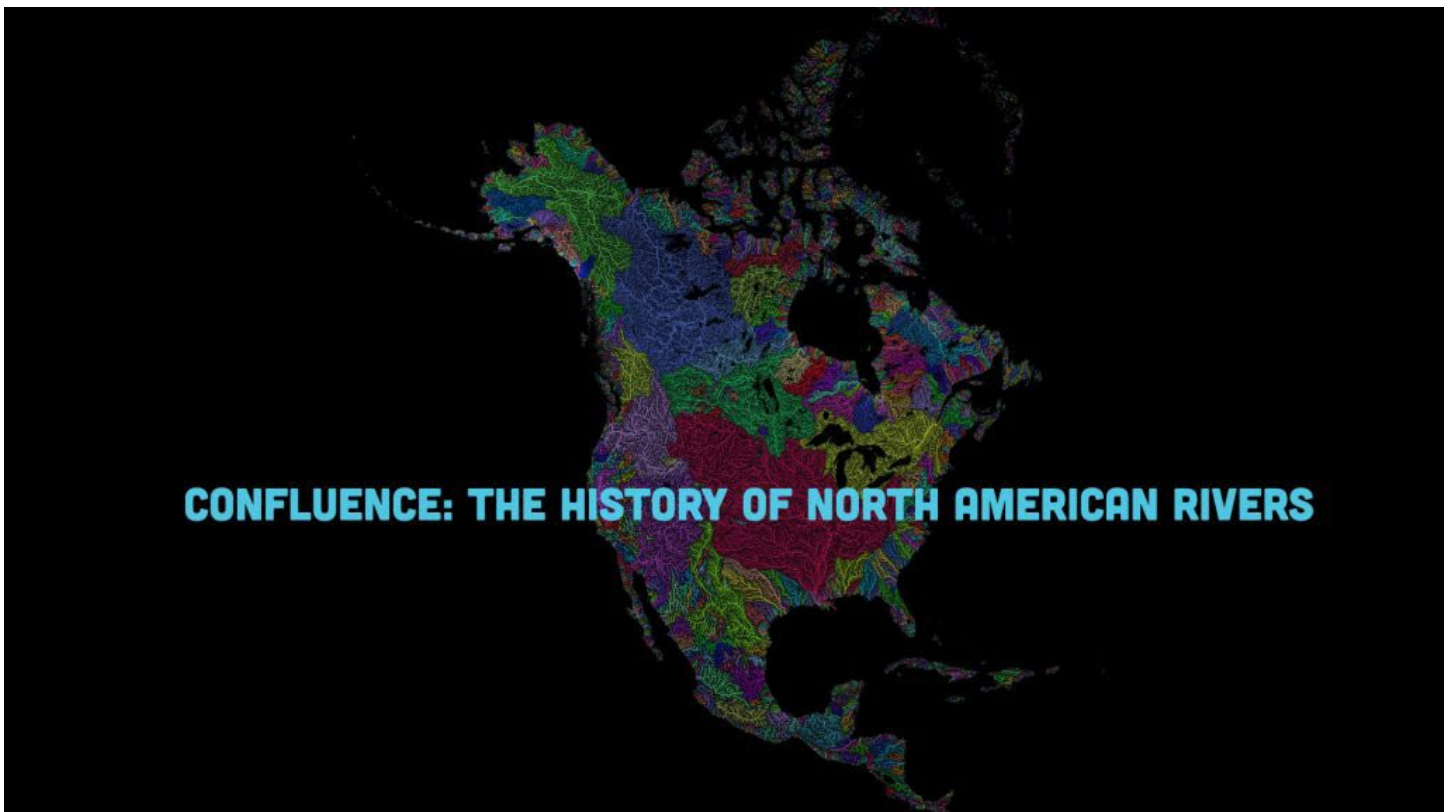
TEACHING AND PRACTICE

# TEACHING THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN RIVERS

By Scot McFarlane

Like *Open Rivers*, I have long tried to answer the question of the value of river history and how can it be put to work to achieve environmental justice. While we each have a home or favorite river that captivates us, there is a broader, if unspoken, understanding of rivers and the role they play in shaping our history. Last fall I organized a conference that attempted to address this challenge. Called *All Water Has a Memory: Rivers and American History*, the conference featured presenters from academia, nature

writing, and environmental and community activism who shared their history and experience of individual rivers in three sessions: Slavery and Freedom, Indigenous Resistance, and The Environmental Movement. I hoped that we could all learn something about each of these topics individually and show how river history's perspective offers a uniquely effective approach to restorative justice for people and places. This conference, now available as online videos, is part of a larger project to teach river history in



*Illustration of major rivers for 'Confluence: The History of North American Rivers' courtesy of Robert Szucs, [www.grasshoppergeography.com](http://www.grasshoppergeography.com).*

classrooms and communities across the country that goes beyond a strictly scientific perspective on rivers and helps individuals understand how waterways have shaped our societies and relationship with the natural world.

The Slavery and Freedom session featured Adrienne Troy Frazier, J. T. Roane, and Tony Perry discussing the Combahee, James, and Potomac Rivers. In the Indigenous Resistance session Dustin Mack, Zachary Bennett, and Ashley Smith focused on the Mississippi and Kennebec Rivers. The final session on the Environmental Movement featured Janisse Ray, Fred Tutman, and Chris Manganiello presenting on the Altamaha, Patuxent, and Savannah Rivers. To have as much continuity as possible between the three different panels, I asked the same guiding questions for all of the speakers to consider in their presentations and discussion. They were: What can river history tell us about this particular theme in American history? And, how might river history contribute to both a stronger

environmental movement and environmental justice?

*[See the Slavery and Freedom session here.](#)*

A thousand people registered and several hundred attended each session, with a roughly even mix of people from conservation, academia, and the specific places being discussed. Without the necessity of having a virtual conference it would have been impossible to bring so many people together for an unproven concept. The large turnout suggests that there is an audience for this type of event and these conversations about the complex histories of rivers. Many of the audience members, especially those from the environmental community, attended with a sense of urgency following last summer's protests against racism and inequality, which made it clear that supporting movements like Black Lives Matter required action rather than public relations statements. The attendees looked to the intersection of people and place for ways to make their work more



*Conference poster for 'All Water Has a Memory: Rivers and American History' courtesy of Edyta Lewicka.*

inclusive and committed to justice. The speakers challenged many of the audience members' preconceptions. For example, the idea of giving legal personhood to rivers has generated a lot of excitement among environmental activists. Yet in the Slavery and Freedom session, J. T. Roane and Tony Perry pushed back against this enthusiasm: if American history suggests that many people have been long denied their own rights to protection, then why not solve that problem first?

*See the [Indigenous Resistance session here](#).*

Together the three sessions highlighted another contradiction about American rivers. On the one hand, many people can look at an image of any of these rivers and their blood pressure instantly drops. On the other hand, the terrible violence of enslavement, massacres, and toxic pollution takes place on these rivers. These histories suggest a great ambivalence: the rivers served as a source of resistance but could not end slavery or colonialism. Rivers represent both tragedy and hope, and it remains for individuals, communities, and organizations to use narratives of individual and ecological resilience to sustain themselves and take action. The history of struggle shows that such emotions as despair are inevitable but also fleeting in the face of crisis. As the anthropogenic causes of climate change have become widely understood over the past two decades, people are becoming more open to river history's possibilities. If the engineering of the floodplain, development, and even rainfall that all contribute to causing a river to flood have been shaped by human beings, then the solution must take into account each river's history. Environmental justice is explicitly political because of the ways in which communities have been unequally affected by environmental degradation; river history makes clear how we are all connected to our waterways and also that environmental change and decisions about how to manage these waterways are always political.

*See the [Environmental Movement session here](#).*

With the exception of two individuals, all the speakers for the *All Water Has a Memory* conference focused on different rivers, and yet they often arrived at the same conclusions. Following their individual presentations on a specific river, panelists participated in discussions at the end of each session. These dialogues highlighted how new ideas could be generated through the framework of river history and these understandings will lead to a search for more knowledge. I approached the conference discussion much as I would a classroom. I provided some guiding questions and then I gave the speakers as much space as possible. The fact that the presenters came from a range of backgrounds in academia, community organizing, or environmental activism and converged on the power of water to shape the possibilities for social and environmental justice exceeded my hopes for the conference. Finally, audience members also grappled with how to apply river history to their own work in the policy and conservation world. Several people asked questions such as whether frameworks beyond the existing language of watersheds would be needed to consider the parallels of water networks and human networks. Though the video recordings of each session do not allow for further questioning and engagement with the speakers, the discussions make clear the utility of river history for promoting diverse perspectives on our relationship with the natural world and for highlighting best practices to support both people and places.

Rivers can shape our cultures, economies, and perspectives, but rarely do we have an opportunity to center our relationship with them. One of the major goals of my work creating the river history site *Confluence*, of which this conference is a part, is finding ways to teach river history in the classroom. In K-12 settings, often the only time students may learn about or visit a river would be in the context of a biology or environmental studies class rather than through the humanities. If we don't teach students to understand the connections between people

and place, then it will be much more difficult for them to contribute to environmental justice or conceive of climate change as a scientific *and* political problem. Eventually I plan to work with organizations to create river history curriculums that align with state standards. In the meantime, however, students continue to study the history

of slavery or Native American history and the presentations from *All Water Has a Memory* will be a great way for them to learn about that history regardless of its emphasis on rivers. All of the sessions have been uploaded to *Confluence* where people continue to watch them, and hopefully, teach these histories too.

## Recommended Citation

McFarlane, Scot. 2021. "Teaching the History of American Rivers." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 18. <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/teaching-the-history-of-american-rivers>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.8018>

## About the Author

Scot McFarlane is a river historian who collaborates with conservation groups and educators on river history projects. His writing on rivers has appeared in *Environmental History*, *Slavery & Abolition*, and major newspapers such as the *Washington Post*. You can learn more about Scot's dissertation on Texas' Trinity River, watch his documentary on the Neches River, and explore his digital scholarship by visiting <http://www.wsmcfarlane.com>.