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Response and Consequence: The Asheville Flood of 1916

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This paper provides an overview of a larger project concerning the environmental, social, and economic ramifications of the Great Flood of 1916 in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. The proceedings served as an introduction to a Master's Thesis on the subject as well as a historiographical essay on the environmental history of southern waterways and disasters. The disastrous flood of 1916 was no "act of God." The actions of a few powerful white men and women added to the severity of the disaster. The socio-economic priorities of city leaders shifted. Tourism received the full support of Asheville's government leaders as river-based industries declined. As a result, hundreds of laborers, both black and white, lost their jobs, homes, and places in society. Forced by circumstance, they joined nation-wide migrations to the West and North. This story is about class, race, and the rise of industrial capitalism in America. It also adds to historiography a detailed analysis of the natural disasters that shaped regional socio-economies.

Key words: *natural disaster, flood, Asheville, industry, environment, Progressive Era*

1. Introduction

Darkness filled the Appalachian sky, but in the east a line of pink emerged. It was the dawn of July 16, 1916. The rains began on the fourth of July. Days came and went, showers ebbed and flowed; the coming hurricanes spared Asheville from the brunt of the rains. But unto the soils and rivers, the splintered ancestral brooks and creeks of the French Broad basin, water fell from the sky throughout the region too often to dissipate. Southeastern rivers rose exponentially and filled every basin. Where there were mountains, narrow valleys and shallow beds delivered disaster. At Biltmore Village, North Carolina, in the early morning hours, an exhausted seventeen-year-old girl named Katherine cohered alone on a tree, praying for her life and the safety of her family, most of whom sank into the turbid waters that day.

Biltmore Village stood at the confluence of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers in the greater Tennessee River Valley, southwest of Asheville, North

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Carolina. As the rivers rose, some fled. Others underestimated the event. Sarah Lipe gathered some belongings. She, her crippled daughter Nell, and her mother ran for higher ground, leaving behind her other daughters Bess and Katherine in the care of her husband James Cornelius, J.C. to villagers. James was Biltmore Estate's Superintendent of Skilled Labor and helped build the house he rented on the bank of the Swannanoa near the iron bridge that led to Asheville. The village was an experiment in culture, artisanship, and industry. It was George Vanderbilt's attempt at Utopia in the wake of rampant industrialism, of which his grandfather was a progenitor. More than 250 artisans and estate workers lived in the homes Lipe helped build. Gripped by fear and curiosity, the village was a spectacle just before dawn that Sunday.

Not too far away, in the riverside industrial district of Asheville, one of the fastest growing metropolises in early twentieth century America, workers for the Asheville Cotton Mill and other factories who lived in rented homes on company property in the area ran to the hills dragging their belongings and kin as the waters rushed through their households, disarming and dismantling the entire area. Sixty families lost their jobs and beds in the area that day. Within hours, gangs of black convicts worked tirelessly to dig the city from the muck, clear and rebuild the county's bridges, and repair the region's roads. To those who witnessed the disaster, the city never looked or felt the same.[2]

1.1. Thesis statement

This story is about class, race, and the rise of industrial capitalism in America's first frontier: Appalachia.[3] It discusses the lasting legacy of the exploitation of people and the environment in the twentieth century. The flood of 1916 was not an immutable act of nature. The actions of a few powerful white leaders added to the severity of the disaster, although the city was home to important black leaders as well. The social effects challenged the hegemony of Asheville's elites on the eve of their "golden age." By the 1920s, Asheville experienced an era of opulence infused by the capital of industrial barons and a heavy dose of recovery rhetoric. However, by the 1930s, the tourism bubble burst and Asheville entered a period of decline along with the rest of the world during the Great Depression. This study discusses the futility of the belief in the boundless potential of the environment and wealth in early twentieth century America (Chase, 2007; Martin, 2007). The flood represented a dual blow to Asheville; it forever changed its social and economic systems.

[2] The entire passage above is a summary of comments found in; Betty Carter Brock, "The Lipe Family in the 1916 Flood," *The Heritage of Old Buncombe County, North Carolina. Vol 2* (Old Buncombe Genealogical Society: Asheville, 1987).

[3] The term "America's First Frontier" refers to the title of a book by Wilma Dunaway.

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This paper focuses on the interplay of social powers during environmental disaster. Rather than viewing industrialization as a battle between northern capitalists and southern agrarians, this study argues that southern industry was an integral part of the American economic rise to global dominance and southerners were active participants in the American social power paradigm that grew from industrialization. Even further, the paper argues that Asheville's industrialization and the social power infrastructure it supported provided a foundation for disaster response that carried broad demographic implications. An environmental and social study of Asheville in the times of the flood unveils an unexplored, and potentially unique, American story.

2. Historiography

Rivers beget change. Large-scale manipulation of western waterways commanded the attention of historian Donald Worster, who studied the social and political power derived from river development and control (Worster, 1985). Yet few researched non-western rivers. Twentieth century conservation ignited interest in fluvial environmental history. Natural disasters revealed bleak social realities during the southern industrial age. After a devastating Mississippi flood in 1927, tenuous class and racial relations surfaced. It became national news and tested the partnership between southern elites and the federal government (Barry, 1997). The Mississippi flood precipitated the federal government's interest in flood disasters and produced the modern era of waterway manipulation (Wright 2000). A study of the "great flood" of Asheville in 1916 reveals a similar paternal system rooted more in the ideologies of industrialization in the Progressive Era than in the "Old South" *noblesse oblige* epitomized in 1927 Mississippi. Asheville's socio-economic system resembled the Progressivism of the Southern Sociological Congress discussed by George B. Tindall in *Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (1967). The Asheville flood unveiled the confluence of national and regional ideologies and an environmental consciousness of one of the era's largest and most developed Appalachian cities, which directly affected power relations between civic and business leaders and marginalized populations.

Southern environmental history is a burgeoning field that inherently suffers from a lack of riverine attention. However, the advent of western environmental history provided a vast library of comparable resources. Global and national precedence explains the need for regional environmental history to understand the form, function, and fruition of industrialization (Boomgaard and Hart, 2011). Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985) is the best study on the relationship between social power and riverine development in America. Still, succeeding narratives on southern waterways, such

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as Christopher J. Manganiello's *Southern Water, Southern Power: How the Politics of Cheap Energy and Water Scarcity Shaped a Region* (2015), highlighted the nexus of power, politics, and southern water throughout the twentieth century. Like many aspects of the field of Environmental History, the work on southern waterways begs for more questions than currently answered, which leaves an incredible knowledge gap in the ways the people of the southeastern United States related to their surroundings throughout history.

Recently, an array of riverine histories expanded discourse on human and waterway interrelations but focused primarily on "activist" agendas, characterized by historical revision, to explain the success or failure of river conservation. A few notable efforts are: *Environmental History of the Hudson River: Human Uses that Changed the Ecology, Ecology that Changed Human Uses* (2011), edited by Robert E. Henshaw and Daniel McCool's *River Republic: The Fall and Rise of America's Rivers* (2012). This study steers clear of such agendas by focusing on the contemporary reasons for environmental, political, and economic decisions to attempt to better understand the social conditions caused by the event. The flood uncovered the interplay of social powers during environmental crisis and the cultural heritage of disaster. It also ignited the dramatic shift in Asheville's priorities, from factory industrialization to tourism, which dramatically changed the social structure and function of the city, all of which are angles previously untested by environmental historians.

Natural disasters caused rapid social and economic change but also carried long-lasting cultural and intellectual legacies. Roderick Frazier Nash virtually established intellectual environmental history in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967). Americans, according to Nash, hitched faith, esteem, and identity to their ability to control nature. In the post-bellum south, rivers became metaphor for the glory of Dixie and frequent floods promulgated watershed development. Christians found countless examples of biblical flooding, which provided limitless rhetorical opportunity in a racially segregated paternal society. In *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1989), journalist Michael Davis investigated the use of fear by boosters to gain political power while destroying the waterways of the Southwest. These sources legitimize an examination of political rhetoric in a flood-torn society and the social power it produced. The 1916 flood turned Asheville's elites against one another, as it became an omen for riverine development. A culture of fear gripped the city, which never rebuilt the factories within the flood district, and shifted their focus to other opportunities such as investment in hotels, resorts, golf courses, and other forms of tourism. Also, a sense of panic derived from post-flood conditions spawned an environment of abuse in Asheville between the police and lower class citizens, especially blacks, in the name of crime prevention and the protection of assets.

Appalachian environmental historians touched on river development but stopped short of producing deeper studies. Primary examples are *Transforming the*

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Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920 (1998) and *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (2000), by Donald Edward Davis. These authors touched on mountain industrialization in the era but did not elaborate on the specific subjects of this study. The history of the social, political, and environmental impacts of rivers and floods in Appalachia is largely untold.

The Appalachian environment had an impact on national identity during industrialization. Romantics portrayed the mountains as idyllic and pristine, while Calvinists highlighted its evils and impetuousness. Examining the environmental and social ramifications of flooding in Appalachia further dismantles mountain "myths" of "otherness" described in Henry Shapiro's *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978). A collection of historians who succeeded Shapiro provided detailed disputation of Appalachian "otherness," including John C. Inscoe's *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (1989) and Wilma Dunaway's *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (1996), both of which decried the isolation myth of Appalachia and placed the mountains within a national context. This study is a continuation of that scholarly debate by focusing on the large economic, communication, and transportation network of which Asheville played a central role.

Also, Asheville became an Appalachian anomaly according to natives who have long seen the city as having a more northern than mountain heritage. The city's transition into a metropolis cost them Appalachian distinctiveness, which becomes troublesome within the fields of Appalachian studies and history because it represents an abnormality. But by focusing on the urban-rural nexus discussed by William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991), this study incorporates Asheville into the very land use practices and folkways that are distinctive to the region. To some, Asheville is more southern than Appalachian, and American above all else. The city and its inhabitants also shared a landscape and history with the rest of Appalachia, which provides an interesting lens into the complexity of the region instead of fixing on its homogeneity.

The flood was a catalyst that culturally separated Asheville from the rest of the southern highlands, which combined the reality and mythology surrounding the city. This study underscores the futility of the myth of a coherent Appalachian culture or industry separate from mainstream America. By examining the role of tourism and environmental disaster in the region, the study of this flood detracts from the predominant focus on extractive industries and capitalization on folk-based tourism. Ultimately, the story complicates the narrative of Appalachia as a colony of the North by disputing the common exploitative analogy.

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3. Methodology

This project will be a social and environmental history of Western North Carolina at the beginning of the twentieth century. There must be some overlap into political and economic history, but the bulk of the research questions for the thesis involve the interrelation of environmental disaster and social institutions. To properly frame the research, theories from two prominent academics, one a sociologist the other a historian, will serve as the model for the research and structure for the end product.

Immanuel Wallerstein's "world systems" framework provides a basic binary model for this thesis (Wallerstein, 2011). While this study is firmly planted in a regional context, the social system that impacted the daily lives of Asheville's citizens before and after the flood was not. Wallerstein's work provides the social context for this thesis. However, a binary approach is limited in scope and applicability on a smaller scale, such as Asheville, and is more suited by design for global comparatives in the *Longue durée*.

In the late 1980s, sociologist Michael Mann published a theory on the four sources of social power in global empires: ideology, economy, military, and politics. He denounced the thesis that capitalism alone caused globalization. Social groups "sought to expand their collective and distributive powers" and extended global markets through the interplay of these sources (Mann, 2013). Mann's theories expanded on Wallerstein to provide a more complicated framework but one that is applicable to regional studies. By examining the political, ideological, economic, and military institutions in Asheville at the time of the flood, an interrelated social system could be unveiled that may further explain the complex history of Appalachia during industrialization.

The examination of Appalachia's social and environmental history through the combined theoretical framework provided by Wallerstein's "world systems" and Mann's "social powers" theories further complicates the history of Appalachia and America. Wallerstein insists that the "world system" in place at the time of the flood was based upon a "geoculture" propagated by what he called a liberal centrist ideology (Wallerstein, 2011). If this "geoculture" existed in Asheville in 1916, and all preliminary research indicates that it did, this thesis will further connect the Appalachians to global trends. Economic and political trends through the colonial model were established in Appalachian historiography. However, there is no study linking the environmental and social history of Appalachia within a global framework, especially in a tourism-based industrial city. Mann's theory supports these pursuits by providing the framework for inquiry into the sources of social power in Asheville. For instance, we know the Asheville Police Department seized all gasoline for city use in the hours after the flood (*Asheville Citizen*). An examination into their ability to acquire and maintain this type of power over *all* citizens of Asheville could reveal an unknown facet of the social system. Or, inquiry into this incident could possibly unveil irregularities in the application of this "martial" period along class and racial lines. Either way, Mann's framework gives reasons to be skeptical of "assumed" powers that beg for historical explanation. Mann's theories will provide a model to apply Wallerstein's theories in Asheville.

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4. Planned chapters

To answer the most prominent questions surrounding the event of the flood, this study will explore three key topics within the same number of body chapters bookended by and introduction and conclusion. The first chapter will tackle the meteorological facts concerning the flood. To do so, it will include a brief, but seminal, meteorological history of the Southern Appalachians as well as the unique circumstances of the two hurricanes fueled by the El Nino Southern Oscillation. It will also explore the nature of private dam building throughout the region and the damage caused by their failure. The second chapter will tell the story of the City of Asheville's immediate response to the disaster. Detailing both heroism and folly, this section will explain how relief fell across class, ethnic, and racial biases, which created an uneven recovery for citizens. Finally, the third body chapter will elaborate on the legacy of the flood within the context of the city's economic and social history, regional folklore, and Appalachian art. The essential element to this chapter will be a discussion on how disasters shape the future as well as the present.

The narrative of the study will place special focus on the way the flood and the uneven relief efforts affected marginalized groups. There is very little written about the African American community in Asheville, but this event occurred within a tenuous period in American history as the strengthening of "Jim Crow" laws further severed ties between communities. Also, Asheville was a cosmopolitan metropolis that housed many different ethnic groups, both immigrant and naturalized. The social and economic panic that followed the disaster led to a wave of policies that harbored anti-immigrant sentiment. The flood also damaged relations between Business Progressives and Industrial Capitalists in the region that epitomized the early twentieth century revolutionary Progressive movement that favored new industries over monopolies, such as the railroads. This tension led to dramatic social and economic shifts that had far-reaching consequences for the burgeoning metropolis.

5. Conclusion

The story of the greatest natural disaster in Southern Appalachian history is largely unknown, underrated, and unappreciated. This thesis will explore the social structure of Asheville, the hardest hit city, through the lens of the Great Flood of 1916. The study will contribute a vast understanding of Appalachian meteorological, environmental, and social history but will also add to the history of America during the transition to industrialization, which leads to the exploration of the burgeoning middle class, consumption habits, transportation, and communication. By using the theories of Immanuel Wallerstein and Michael Mann as a framework for the

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research, a more complicated narrative of Appalachia within the world economic system can be revealed through the examination of the sources of economic, political, ideological, and military powers in the mountains. By design, Asheville is a unique American city. The Flood of 1916 forever changed its trajectory. This thesis will explain why and how the fear of natural disaster, the confluence of regional, national, and global ideologies, and an exploitative and capital-dominated social class created a truly unique social and environmental legacy.

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