

12-2019

## The River Gave and the River Hath Taken Away: How the Arkansas River Shaped the Course of Arkansas History

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The River Gave and the River Hath Taken Away:  
How the Arkansas River Shaped the Course of Arkansas History

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

The Arkansas River molded the history of Arkansas. It also shaped human to human interactions and human relationships with the physical environment. Since humans first encountered the river their lives have been influenced by it. The river played a significant role in creating the environmental conditions that contributed to a specific existence within the river valley. It affected what types of flora and fauna existed, the quality of the soil, and the climate. The river was a vital component in the evolution of the cultures and societies that developed in the river valley. Conversely, humans affected the river. The ways humans perceived and used the river impacted the physical characteristics that defined the river. Ever since the first humans interacted with the river there has been a dialectic relationship put into motion, a cycle of constant change where humans and the environment renegotiated their understandings and relationship with one another. Throughout every time period of Arkansas history, prehistoric through the 1970s and on, the river has been a vital factor in the existence of the river valley and state.

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## Abbreviations

AAA- Agricultural Adjustment Act

AAESP- African American Extension Service Program

ABC- Arkansas Basin Committee

ARNS- Arkansas River Navigation System

AVA- Arkansas Valley Authority

BSLC- Board of Swamp Land Commissioners

EPA- Environmental Protection Agency

LULUs- Locally Unwanted Land Uses

MKARNS- McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System

MVC- Mississippi Valley Committee

RFC- Reconstruction Finance Corporation

TPA- Taxpayers' Protective Association

TVA- Tennessee Valley Authority

TVAA- Tennessee Valley Authority Act

USACE- United States Army Corps of Engineers

## Introduction

### Dangerous Waters

#### Dangerous Waters: No Wading or Swimming

— National Park Service, US Department of the Interior



Figure 0.1 Flooding on the Arkansas River at Fort Smith, Arkansas in May 2019. Photo taken by the author.

The Arkansas River shaped the history of Arkansas in specific and significant ways.

When combined with the societies and cultures of people in the Arkansas River Valley, the river became the multi-purpose system it is today. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century humans have felt confident that the engineering marvels of our age have controlled the river and thereby eliminated, or at least



muted, its ability to cause distress in our lives. The Arkansas River was not always a danger to humans. Before humans began living and working along its banks, there was never a natural disaster that claimed people's lives or caused massive property damage. For the last several centuries the river has been a source of concern. The problem many people have with the river is that the river behaves like a river, and sometimes rivers flood. The flow and flooding of the river were instrumental in creating the characteristics that defined Arkansas and in altering the natural environment of the river valley.

If life on earth crawled out of the oceans, then Arkansas, as it is known to us today, crawled out of the Arkansas River. The river transported people to the area, provided fertile soils for agriculture, and created an environment that contained edible plants and animals. Different groups of people have lived and worked in the Arkansas River Valley, and their various societies, cultures, economies, and perceptions of nature have led them to interreact with the river in numerous ways. All human contact with the river resulted in consequences that defined the parameters of how people responded to the river's actions. Although the river did not determine human action, it did limit their agency. The human dialectical relationship with the Arkansas River in Arkansas was shaped, not only by the river but by culture. The river that flowed by Fort Smith and the river around Arkansas Post, although the same river, was viewed by different people in different places and at different times, and resulted in different human interactions. The river became a combination of human imagination, the laws of nature, and the constant struggle between those two powerful forces, a struggle that continues today, often resulting in dangerous waters.

The world around us is a complicated web of intertwining systems including, water, animals, plants, soil, air, and people. Our planet, as we know it today, is changing, in part due to

our perceptions and actions. The act of change is nothing new; aspects of the physical environment have always been in a state of change in varying degrees. What is new is how our culture and society perceive the changes that are happening and how we react or ignore them. Human interaction with the Arkansas River is no different. For centuries humans have assigned values to characteristics of the river and the river valley. Furthermore, when the river does not meet expectations, humans have tried, with varying levels of success, to mold the river into what they want physically. Nevertheless, despite humanities' best efforts, the Arkansas River continues to behave, at times, contrary to the wishes of those who would control it.

Since the creation of our planet, the changing combinations of elements that make up earth have been repeating a cycle of bonding and separating. Carbon bonding with other carbon atoms makes organic matter, plentiful amounts of nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen bond with carbon to make the nucleobases for DNA and RNA, while sulfur's electrons help catalyze reactions, and phosphorus allows metabolism to occur.<sup>1</sup>

When two hydrogen atoms bond to a single oxygen atom, water is created (H<sub>2</sub>O). Biological life on our planet requires water. Luckily, water is the second most common molecule in the universe, with hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) being first. Seventy percent of Earth's surface is liquid ocean, and 5 percent is frozen (for now, although by the time you read this, those numbers have probably changed). If an enterprising person wanted to measure how much water was on Earth's surface, they would find that among all the rivers, oceans, ice, groundwater, rocks, and organic matter there is roughly 1.9 billion billion tons of water on the earth.<sup>2</sup> Water not only sustains

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Wolchover, "What are the Ingredients of Life?," *Live Science*, February 2, 2011, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.livescience.com/32983-what-are-ingredients-life.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Chaplin, "Liquid Water is not a Bit Player in the Theatre of Life—it's the Headline Act," *Water Structure and Science*, last modified December 21, 2018, <http://www1>.

organic life, but it also maintains our climate. Earth's atmosphere usually has a minimal amount of water in it, but the water that is in the atmosphere mediates "our weather and climate through a complex set of feedback loops."<sup>3</sup>

Water, whether in a river, lake, or ocean context, in addition to affecting the climate, weather, and physical environment, also mediates human activity through a "complex set of feedback loops."<sup>4</sup> Water in all its forms influences human activity but does so with some variation depending on the people, the place, and the time in history. Joyce E. Chaplin's "Climate and Southern Pessimism" explains the climate's role in developing a distinctive quality within the South. Although the climate impacts humans, Chapline argues that it does not eliminate the agency from a historical actor. She refrains from the "fatalistic acceptance" that earlier historians of the South have espoused.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Mikko Saikku adds that "environmental conditions set the ultimate boundaries for human societies and activities."<sup>6</sup> Themes of environmental determinism combined with agency have suffered a delayed start, relative to Western history, within Southern historiography.

Although environmental aspects of the South have been prominent in Southern historiography, Southern environmental history is a more recent practice. Perhaps Southern historians would have adopted environmental history into their works earlier if not for a historian, eighty years ago, who organized the themes of his book the way he did. How about this

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lsbu.ac.uk/water /index.html; John Finney, *Water: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>3</sup> John Finney, *Water: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce E. Chaplin, "Climate and Southern Pessimism," in *The South as an American Problem* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 12.

weather? Asking somebody about the weather is a seemingly familiar and straightforward enough question. A discussion of the weather is often a great “ice breaker” when beginning a conversation or extending the life of one that is drying up. When Ulrich B. Phillips’ *Life and Labor in the Old South* began with the weather, he set the course Southern environmental historiography. Phillips’ great sin lay not with discussing the weather but in arguing that it was the “chief agency in making the South distinctive.”<sup>7</sup> Later historians fretted over Phillips’ ideas regarding race, agency, and determinism. Because *Life and Labor in the Old South* argued that slavery was benevolent and paternalistic and he combined that discussion with environmental determinism, similar studies that used weather or the environment to explain aspects of southern history became susceptible to being stigmatized as racist.<sup>8</sup>

Thankfully, the scholarship has moved on from Phillips. Within a couple of decades from the publishing of *Life and Labor in the Old South*, historians such as Kenneth Stampf, began dismantling histories, like Phillips’, that fit within the Dunning School of historiography. Beginning in the 1960s, historians used the topic of agency to argue against older schools of historiography. Like a voice in the wilderness, W.E.B. Du Bois predated the historians of the 1960s as an early documenter of the “history of the American Negro” as they longed to “attain self-conscious manhood” and “make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately for southern environmental history, as many southern historians frowned upon Phillips’ ideas of benevolent paternalism and distanced themselves from Phillips’ Dunning School ideas, his environmental analysis was rolled up into his racism and lack of understanding

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<sup>7</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1937), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid..

<sup>9</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990), 9.

regarding black agency. Historians still wrestle with the question of to what degree does the weather make the South “distinctive.”<sup>10</sup> Some attribute the climate to producing characteristics such as slurred speech, dietary habits, porch-sitting, and traditions of leisure and hospitality. Mart A. Stewart argues that Phillips and other historians like him are “Old South apologists,” that used the environment as a tool to rob humans of agency or responsibility in studying the south.<sup>11</sup>

An individual’s ability to act are complicated further when layered with discussions of culture, society, economics, race, biology, geology, hydrology, and all the variables that complicate life on this planet. As a result, human behavior is complex, varied, and ever-changing, and when combined with the laws of nature, create a feed-back loop that results in change. There is a rich environmental and river historiography that illustrates these complexities.

The foundation of river historiography is Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire*. In contemplating the need for an environmental history of the Arkansas River it is useful to explore the historiography of environmental history and to a degree Western history. Finding an environmental history of the complete Arkansas River is difficult; locating one that investigates human interaction with it while engaging with Western and Southern historiography is impossible. Only two books examine the whole of the Arkansas River, Clyde Brion Davis’s *The Arkansas*, published in 1940, and William Mills’ *The Arkansas: An American River*, published in 1988, and neither are scholarly works. Although they do not deal with the entire river, there are

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<sup>10</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Mart A. Stewart, “Let Us Begin with the Weather: Climate, Race and Cultural Distinctiveness in the American South” in *Nature and Society in Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 240-241; Edward N. Andrus, “The Pine, the Bluff, and the River: An Environmental History of Jefferson County,” M.A. Thesis University of Arkansas 2011, 8.

more contemporary books examining parts of the river. James Earl Sherows' *Watering the Valley: Development along the High Plains Arkansas River 1870-1950*, published in 1990, concentrates on the river from Leadville, Colorado to Dodge City, Kansas. Although it is a history of the Corps of Engineers, Mary Yeater Rathburn's *Castle on the Rock: The History of the Little Rock District Corps of Engineers*, published by the Corps of Engineers in 1990, is a useful study of human interaction with the river within the Little Rock District of the Corps which entails the Arkansas River from Pine Bluff, Arkansas to the Oklahoma and Arkansas border. Charles Bolton's *25 Years Later: A History of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System in Arkansas*, published in 1995 (also a Corps of Engineer publication) examines the manipulation of the River from Tulsa, Oklahoma to the Mississippi River during the 1940s to 1960s.

There are not many books that examine the whole Arkansas River. Currently there are two and neither is written by a historian or situated within a historiography. The first, Clyde Brion Davis's *The Arkansas*, was published in 1940 as part of The Rivers of America series. The second is William Mills' *The Arkansas: An American River*, published in 1988. During the Great Depression of the 1930s a Canadian-born historian and editor working in New York developed the idea to create a series of books to "kindle the imagination and to reveal American folk to one another," and to do this the focus was on rivers because "We began to be American on the rivers."<sup>12</sup> Constance Lindsay Skinner's idea became the Rivers of America series that gave work to authors, artists, and editors while simultaneously reconnecting Americans to a folk history she believed had become overlooked and forgotten. She wanted to tell a history of

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<sup>12</sup> Constance Lindsay Skinner quoted in Christopher Armstrong, Matthew Evenden, and H.V. Nelles, *The River Returns: An Environmental History of the Bow* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 12.

America different from the one that she believed had been “formulated by scholastics instead of by the artists.”<sup>13</sup> Writing a book series focused on rivers, Skinner argued, reconnected people to folk history while demonstrating how Americans overcame a rugged wilderness full of wild rivers to establish a great nation. The Rivers of America series quickly grew, from the twenty-four volumes Skinner originally planned in 1937 to sixty-five when the series ended in 1976. The authors of the series were not trained academic historians, but usually various types of writers with backgrounds ranging from non-fiction to journalism.<sup>14</sup>

The Rivers of America series book dealing with the Arkansas River was written by Clyde Brion Davis’s in 1940 and does not let truth get in the way of telling a good story. Davis’ first chapter colorfully and generally illustrates the physical and geographic environments the river passes through from Colorado to Arkansas. Much of the book is based on dreamt up situations and imaginary dialoged, such as Davis’ treatment of Coronado, “I can picture the scene there in that low-ceilinged and dusky room- the imperious Coronado decked out and in velvet and soft gleaming silver with the beady-eyed, poker-faced chief opposite him.”<sup>15</sup> Davis’ work also suffers from the, at the time of publication, prevalent Dunning school approach to Southern history which was full of lost-cause sentiments as a prostrate South struggled to overcome the burdens of Northern impudence and savagery. He explains, “Arkansas suffered with the rest of the South from the stupid, vicious reconstruction legislation. In 1868 practically every able-bodied white man in the state was robbed of his citizenship—because he had borne arms against the Union. The Negro, utterly untrained for citizenship at that time, was given the franchise.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 12- 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>15</sup> Clyde Brion Davis, *The Arkansas* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1940), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 280.

he finds the KKK to be paradoxically a group of outlaws who also helped keep law and order, “The white-robed Klansmen, mostly former Confederate soldiers, committed many crimes themselves, even murder. But they also moved effectively against the wave of outlawry that afflicted Arkansas following the war.”<sup>17</sup>

The other book that examines the Arkansas River in its entirety is William Mills’, *The Arkansas: An American River*, published in 1988. Mills book is a collection of beautiful photographs that accompany a log of his travels down the river from its headwaters to the Mississippi. Sprinkled throughout his narrative are thoughtful observations of the flora and fauna and the interactions man has had and currently (at the time of publication) is having with the river. The primary concern of Mills’ work is to “reflect a river of contrasting natural communities.”<sup>18</sup> Mills’ properly points out that the “story of the river cannot be told without including man: how he has drunk from it, used it, channeled it, poisoned it, dammed it,” and that “the Arkansas has been the scene of much American history that is in the domain of the trans-Mississippi west.”<sup>19</sup> Although Mills’ work is useful, it is not a scholarly environmental history; he only uses 19 sources for a 239-page book. He acknowledges that a more scholarly work needs to be done on the river as he concedes “I will leave such a history to a justly endowed Arkansas River institute.”<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately there is no well-endowed Arkansas River institute to write the history of the river.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>18</sup> William Mills, *The Arkansas: An American River* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> There is an Arkansas River Coalition, it is a non-profit organization that attempts to “protect, restore and improve the entire Arkansas River watershed and enhance the well-being of all life it sustains,” <http://www.arkriver.org/AboutUs.html> (accessed, March 20, 2013).



The difficulty in writing a history of the Arkansas River is partially due to its enormous size. Not only does it run through four states but through two very different historiographies. The Arkansas River Basin contains 160,645 square miles and is approximately 12.8 percent of the entire drainage area of the Mississippi River. The length of the basin is about 870 miles in an east-west direction with approximately 185 miles in average width, and extends from the Rocky Mountains on the west to the Mississippi River on the east. The drainage basin occupies parts of the states of Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, and Arkansas. It is bordered on the north by the Missouri River Basin, on the northeast by the White River basin, and on the south by the Red River Basin.”<sup>22</sup> At its beginnings, the Arkansas River rises in the Rocky Mountains near Leadville, Colorado, where the elevation is about 11,500 feet above mean sea level (msl) and the elevation at the mouth is approximately 105 feet msl, and flows southeasterly through the states of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas to join the Mississippi River at a point about 575 miles upstream from the Head of Passes, Louisiana. The first 125 miles of its course run in a deep narrow channel and then flows through a narrow valley bordered by foothills to the vicinity of present day Pueblo, Colorado. Continuing downstream from Pueblo, the valley widens and the river continues as it snakes its way in a sandy channel to the Kansas-Oklahoma State border, where it continues in a crooked manner through Oklahoma and Arkansas.<sup>23</sup>

The total length of the river is about 1460 miles. Due to differences in topography, soil, and climate, runoff characteristics vary widely over the Arkansas River Basin. The River slows

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<sup>22</sup> Corps of Engineers, *Flood Plain Information Part II Bayou Bartholomew and Tributaries, City of Pine Bluff, Arkansas* (Vicksburg, Mississippi: Department of the Army, Vicksburg District, Corps of Engineers, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1973), 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

down from the Rocky Mountains in Colorado to the Hutchinson, Kansas area, and increases in size from Kansas to the Mississippi River. In addition to the varying physical conditions of the environment and the climates that host the river, different human cultures perceive and manipulate the river differently. Using established studies of western environmental history is necessary to writing a history of the southern Arkansas River.

Donald Worster has arguably made some of the largest contributions to the field. Donald Worster's 1985 *Rivers of Empire* establishes a theoretical framework and offers a comprehensive and extensive explanation that details what environmental history consists of. He later rounded out what he believed environmental history should be. In his 1990 article, "Transformation of the Earth: Toward and Agroecological Perspective in History," Donald Worster argues that wherever the "two spheres" of the nature and culture intersect "environmental history finds its essential themes."<sup>24</sup> This new field born out of the 1970's fear of global over-population is built upon three levels. The first deals with the ecology of an environment. The second is concerned with the modes of productions that go on within a given environment. Thirdly, the last level of environmental history examines the "perceptions, ideologies, ethics, laws, and myths" that people have created in the context of their natural environment.<sup>25</sup> In asserting these three levels of environmental history, Worster has firmly, as Richard White argues, made it "difficult... for most historians to force [environmental themes and environmental history] to the periphery of historical concerns."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Donald Worster, "Transformation of the Earth: Toward and Agroecological Perspective in History," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March, 1990): 1090.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1091.

<sup>26</sup> Richard White, "Environmental History, Ecology, and Meaning," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March, 1990): 1111.

In Worster's *Rivers of Empire*, he establishes his theoretical framework in a forty-four page section titled, "Taxonomy: the Flow of Power in History." Throughout this section (with title chapters such as: "Wittfogel, Marx, and the Ecology of Power," "The Local Subsistence Mode," "The Agrarian State Mode," and the "Capitalist State Mode"), Worster examines the theoretical and historiographical underpinnings of his research in which he examines the usefulness of Marxist theory in the study of the environment and human interaction with it. Worster argues that the best way to study environmental history is to engage in an "unending dialectic with human history" in which humanity and nature are in a relationship of "challenge-response-challenge" that does not allow either to achieve "absolute sovereign authority" over the other.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the influence of Karl August Wittfogel is evident as Worster incorporates his theory of "hydraulic societies" based upon Marx's ideas concerning modes of production. In 1928, Wittfogel interjected agency into the relationship between the study of man, work, nature, and society. Worster expounded upon this theme of agency, careful not to let environmental determinism seep into environmental history.

In *Rivers of Empire* Worster argues, "Water has been critical to the making of human history," and therefore omitting water from history "is to leave out a large part of the story."<sup>28</sup> Worster contends that attempts to control flooding rivers have resulted in "profound implications for the course of history," and have attributed to consolidation of power within societies.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Worster posits that the historical relationship between people and flooding rivers offers a relatively diminished opportunity to explore power structures within society. Due to the

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<sup>27</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 20.

“sporadic and unpredictable” nature of floods, flood control’s influence upon society, according to Worster, has been “limited” and “ambiguous.”<sup>30</sup> While this may be the case in the West, flooding in Arkansas and Oklahoma have had a monumental impact on society. In the South, as in other places, such as the West, “control over water has again and again provided an effective means of consolidating power.”<sup>31</sup>

Although Worster is concerned more with irrigation in an arid region, comparisons and arguments can be made that the examination of water within the context of environmental and agricultural history of the South can assist in understanding the region’s history. Despite aridity being a useful category of historical examination in the West, anxieties over the sporadic and often unpredictable extreme water levels in the South are no less influential than the lack of water in the West. There is a small, but ever growing, environmental historiography that deals with hydraulic societies and the control of water in the South, most notably John Berry’s *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, Pete Daniel’s *Deep’n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood*, and Christopher Morris’ *The Big Muddy: an Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples From Hernando De Soto to Hurricane Katrina*. All three of these books focus on the southern part of the Mississippi River within a relatively small time frame. Only Morris employs a *longue durée* in his examination of the river. The *longue durée*, to a degree, is needed to examine the unique cultures and societies along the Arkansas River in order to engage in the “dialectic of time spans, [which] in its own way [is] an explanation of society in all its reality.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Fernand Braudel, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 38.

Worster's *Rivers of Empire* applies a *longue durée* as he examines the rise of hydraulic societies that influence the history of the West. He defines hydraulic societies as "a social order based on the intensive, large-scale manipulation of water and its product in an arid setting."<sup>33</sup> The definition of a hydraulic can easily enough be tweaked and applied to a non-arid setting such as the South. Just as in the West, the South presents a situation that on the surface may appear to be natural but underneath lies a "techno-economic order imposed for the purpose of mastering a difficult environment."<sup>34</sup> For both the West and the South, controlling water allowed and influenced environmental manipulation and economic growth thus creating or strengthening divisions within society. Although the field of environmental history of the South is relatively younger than that of the west, there are environmental themes in the South to be explored and examined. Perhaps it will be helpful to briefly explore the evolution of environmental and southern environmental history and its ever-coursing theme of water.

*Rivers of Empire* enriches a historiography that was originally dominated by Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis that was devoid of "water, aridity, technical dominance" and lacked a significant geographic discussion.<sup>35</sup> Walter Prescott Webb also influenced the study of the West. Webb attempted to improve upon Turner's frontier thesis by arguing there was not a single frontier settlement process. Instead, there were two—one that settled humid forested landscapes and another that adapted to an ecology lacking trees. Turner viewed the West as a process and Webb viewed it more as a place. One weakness in Webb's work, according to Worster, is Webb's perception of the West and the South as a colony of the East. Worster disagreed with Webb's analysis and argued that the West achieved a "modern technological

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<sup>33</sup> Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

domination of nature” much sooner than the South thereby allowing the west to become “not so much a colony as it is an empire,” thus breaking with Webb’s interpretation of West.<sup>36</sup>

Webb’s apparently “misleading comparison” is partly responsible for Worster’s focusing on water issues in the West and privileging them over those in the South. In terms of the Arkansas River, specifically its southern parts, there is a point to be argued that technological domination, or at least the attempt of, was taking place, but it took different forms in the West. In Oklahoma and Arkansas, technology took the forms of flood control such as dredging, levee construction and steamboats, while in the West it was more oriented to irrigation and later dam building. Thus we see a difference between irrigation versus navigation, both developed technology to suit their unique challenges as cultures and power structures evolved with both styles of environmental manipulation.

Despite the manipulation of the Arkansas River in the South, Worster’s interests float on a society’s lack of water and their strivings to control what precious little water is available thus he argued, “More than any other single element,” water, “has been the shaping force in the region’s [the American West] history.”<sup>37</sup> Worster argues that water, particularly in the West, is the base upon which culture and society are built on, partly due to their dependence upon it. This dependence creates a relationship between humans and nature that is “managerial” and “alienating” as capitalism’s exploitative nature facilitates an ever-increasing decline in society and nature. This study of the lower Arkansas River is patterned after Worster’s work regarding his three levels of doing environmental history, which involve examining the ecology, ideology, and economy of a given location, while using water as a platform from which to examine various

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5.

aspects of the place of study. He effortlessly weaves the ecological characteristics and changes throughout his narrative as human interactions with the natural environment expand and evolve.

Worster is well known for his conclusion regarding the large-scale industrial development and management of water that produced an “imperial, stratified, undemocratic, and environmentally spoiled West.”<sup>38</sup> These claims rest upon his theory that a societies’ development mirrors the people’s “attitudes and interactions with nature.”<sup>39</sup> Here perhaps is where Worster is strongest, in his treatment of perceptions, ideas, and laws that reflect how people thought about nature, coupled with his ever-present discussion of capitalism, money, and economics. His materialist undercurrent broods over the narrative like a heavy dark raincloud pregnant with an outpouring that seems to tantalizing hang on the precipice of breaking loose with a deluge of Marxist rancor strong enough to make any free market loving American question their own perceptions and interactions with nature. A large portion of Worster’s argument is materialistic and revolves around the “market culture thesis.”<sup>40</sup> The market culture thesis is a framework developed by Thomas Clay Arnold that allows for “historical dynamics” to be evaluated and compare in an attempt to better understand “water and the West.”<sup>41</sup> This thesis is also helpful when applying it to the southern portion of the Arkansas River. Arnold’s application of this thesis to his comparison of *Rivers of Empire* and *Watering the Valley* allow for further inquiry of a more expanded exploration of the Arkansas River.

For many historians who based their work on studies of the western wilderness, the South’s agrarian proclivities, land use practices, and conservation traditions have made the

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Clay Arnold, “Theory, History, and the Western Waterscape: The Market Culture Thesis,” *Journal of the Southwest* 38 no. 2 (Summer, 1996): 217.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

region a complex and difficult place to understand.<sup>42</sup> According to Paul Sutter, recent trends in environmental historiography focus on a renewed examination of agricultural landscapes, paying close attention to themes such as the social and racial histories of environmental thought.<sup>43</sup>

Echoing Sutter's remarks Christopher Morris explains that the most "promising" southern environmental histories combine agricultural history and historical geography to create "landscape history."<sup>44</sup> Landscape history allows historians to place humans within an environment that people—past and present—have manipulated by different methods and to different extents. Furthermore, landscape history is derived from agricultural history, particularly from closely examining cultivated spaces. Differing from agricultural historians, who focus on the farmer's actions upon fields, landscape historians examine all land as "fields of manipulated nature and all people as cultivators."<sup>45</sup> Landscape history works well in the South—an area deeply concerned with agriculture and a region certain that geography is the "foundation of its regional identity."<sup>46</sup>

Hybrid landscapes are a common theme that flows throughout more recent trends in environmental history as the stages of ecological intensification are pursued in man's domination of nature.<sup>47</sup> In *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, Mark Stoll argues, "The most

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Morris, "A More Southern Environmental History," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 593.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Worster argues that there are three stages of "ecological intensification" that resulted in "more and more economic yield from the rivers and their watersheds." The first stage, "incipience," began with pioneers and consisted of small diversion of small waterways that were often destroyed by flooding. Some monetary gain was made in this stage from private corporations but most failed at their exploits. The second stage, "floreescence," witnessed the federal government taking control of waterways that flowed throughout the West. A combination of government money and engineering experts further developed the region beyond what was



significant aspect of Christian doctrine about nature is its understanding of God as the creator and sustainer of the universe,” and if God loves his children and provides for them also, then nature was created for the benefit of man.<sup>48</sup> Mark Fiege’s *Irrigated Eden* skillfully laces his narrative with the theme of human perceptions regarding the environment and their actions that result from them. He exemplifies how environmental historians should examine how the word “nature” is used and how the “boundaries” between “human” and “natural” should be explored.<sup>49</sup> Fiege’s posits that the “interaction between irrigators and nature created a new, complicated landscape in which human and natural systems overlapped, intermingled, and finally merged.”<sup>50</sup> Within the hydrological spaces, Fiege explores a “site of ongoing interaction between people and the land, a reciprocal interplay in which irrigators seldom if ever achieved the control they desired.”<sup>51</sup> Fiege contends that the irrigated farmland of Idaho should not be viewed as a “departure or degradation of nature,” but as a “new environment, a new ecological system” that has been “created and formed...into a hybrid landscape” that, if it is to be properly understood, needs to be studied and appreciated within its own unique characteristics.<sup>52</sup>

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accomplished during *incipience*. Additionally, corporations began to make from “farming rivers for substantial profit” thereby creating class divisions. The third stage, “empire,” began during the 1940s as the federal government became confederate with private wealth to control all major western waterways as they seceded in “perfecting a hydraulic society without peer in history,” Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>49</sup> William Cronon, “Toward a Conclusion,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, William Cronon ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 458.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

This concept of hybrid landscapes offers a valuable addition to the historiography while simultaneously channeling the argument of Richard White in *The Organic Machine*. In a similar manner to Richard White's *The Organic Machine*, Fiege examines how human construction or machines mask nature and that despite environmental engineering, nature still exists. White argues that to understand history we must understand the "relationship" between "energy and work" as they have "linked humans and rivers, humans and nature."<sup>53</sup> There is a historiographic gap in Southern environmental history that allows for the exploration of hybrid landscapes. Morris' *The Big Muddy* is one of the few who do examine hybrid landscapes in the South. The Arkansas River provides a perfect opportunity, particularly with the creation of lakes on the lower half of the Arkansas River throughout Oklahoma and Arkansas. The lakes are manmade and carefully maintained by humans and are used for varying purposes ranging from shipping to hydroelectric power, yet they appear to be natural and are perceived as such by many people.

Despite the relative lack of scholarship on the Arkansas River other rivers are receiving much needed attention by good historians. There are a growing number of books on other rivers ranging from the Columbia River to the Mississippi to the Hudson. Internationally, several studies have been done on Canadian, English, Scandinavian, and German rivers. Perhaps, most importantly, a framework has been established to use when examining the history of rivers and man's interactions with them. The application of theory, as established by Worster, created for exploring the relationship of man and the environment in the west can be used in examining the man/nature relations in the south and thereby provide opportunity for a new perspective of southern history. The use of environmental theory applied within Western and Southern historiographies is vital to a study of the Arkansas River because "a history of water use without

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<sup>53</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 3-4.

any theory in it becomes a mere massing of details—specifics without conclusions, data without consequences.”<sup>54</sup>

Once we apply environmental theory to human and non-human actions, whether planned or spontaneous, throughout the Arkansas River Valley, we see that the history of the regions was influenced by various factors ranging from weather to culture. Interactions between human and non-human actors in the river valley developed relationships with the river that was beneficial to their existence, but mindful of the dangers the river possessed. In a report and presentation created by the Arkansas Basin Committee (ABC) for the Mississippi Valley Committee (MVC), the ABC argued that specific flood control projects along the Arkansas River were “feasible as to technical and economic soundness,” and perhaps more importantly, the “projects [were] of local and national benefit.”<sup>55</sup> Throughout the history of human interaction with the lower Arkansas River, it has often proved to be a benefit for those that lived among it and its valley, but with good comes bad. For generations, the river was a source of pleasure and pain, riches and ruin, life and death.

Chapter One explores how native populations were skilled in utilizing the river for their benefit. The river was used to demarcate space between tribes and for fishing, hunting, and transportation. European explorers used the Arkansas River to travel into what would become the state of Arkansas. As Europeans increased in number and trade began to occur, the native tribes became adept at using their knowledge and control of the river to work towards their benefit in their relationship with the newcomers. With the use of the river, more goods, ideas, and diseases

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<sup>54</sup> Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Arkansas Basin Commission, “Request for Approval of the Arkansas Basin Flood Protection Project Located on the Arkansas River and its Tributaries in the States of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico,” December 26, 1933, Wilburn Cartwright Collection, Box 14 File 31, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

traveled up the Arkansas River, leaving change within its wake. Eventually, the Europeans achieved possession of the river and control of the region but lacked control of the river itself.

Chapter Two examines the changes that occurred as white settlers moved into the river valley and established their dominance over the Indians and attempted to control the natural environment. The river created a space that supported large scale agriculture and a plantation society to develop in the river valley. As white people emigrated west into Arkansas and along the river, they took land from the natives. The river helped make possible the transportation of scores of natives from their homelands into Indian Territory logistically feasible. Furthermore, a reduced native population opened opportunities for white settlers to come into the area. Many of these settlers brought slaves with them and established plantation agriculture along the river, especially in the delta region along the Arkansas River from Little Rock to the Mississippi River. The introduction of small and large scale farming along the river quickly altered the landscape and human perceptions and interactions with the river. The river became increasingly important as a transportation highway and grew in economic importance. To the dismay of many planters and steamboat captains, the river did not always cooperate. Floods and droughts caused the navigability of the river to fluctuate widely. A struggle to control the river ensued. During the Antebellum period, the river valley's relationship with Corps of Engineers began and created quasi love/hate relationship between local citizens, state politicians, and the Federal government regarding control of the river.

Eventually, the Antebellum period gave way to Chapter Three and the Civil War. The Arkansas River played a critical role in the Civil War, not only in Arkansas, but it influenced the war on the Mississippi and in the trans-Mississippi West. Fort Smith, Little Rock, and Arkansas Post were strategic points in the war. The fort at Arkansas Post was involved in the struggle for

Union control of the Mississippi River. Fort Smith played a role in the war ranging from Missouri to Indian Territory. Little Rock was the state capital and center of operations on the Arkansas River for whoever controlled the city and wanted to control the state. Once the Union controlled the Arkansas River, the battlefield lines were redrawn, strategies rethought, and the Federal troops possessed an new advantage in the conflict. Additionally, when the Union gained control of the Arkansas River, it reoriented political and military boundaries and cut the state in half diagonally from northwest to southeast.

In the aftermath of the Civil War confusion, fear, hope, violence, were on full display. Chapter Four examines the role the Arkansas River played as Reconstruction transitioned into the rise of Jim Crow, which witnessed planters using control of the river to reestablish themselves at the top of Southern society at the expense of poor whites and disenfranchised African Americans. Regaining control of lands along the Arkansas River contributed to the return of elite planters to power. Throughout this period, elite Arkansans renegotiated their relationship with the federal government. As environmental disasters rocked the Arkansas River Valley, a very tenuous relationship—fraught with mistrust and dislike—formed as Arkansas planters and politicians became skilled at using the resources of the federal government to control the Arkansas River and fortify their positions in society. This power struggle is highlighted by the flood of 1927 and the aftermath, as people along the river attempted to rebuild their lives while walking the fine line between federal assistance, government overreach, and Southern culture. The flood and the resulting need for outside assistance parted the curtain of Southern race relations and gave the nation a peek at how the proprietors of white supremacy controlled much of the black population in the South.

The flood of 1927 altered the role the federal government played in disaster relief. Chapter Five investigates how New Deal programs, starting in the 1930s, altered the landscape, the river, and the relationship Arkansans had with the river, federal and state governments, each other, and the physical environment of the Arkansas River Valley. The early 1940s witnessed a series of devastating floods that, in conjunction with the Great Depression, and later World War Two, called for a rethinking of the federal government's role in environmental policies in Arkansas. Although WWII caused the suspension of many domestic engineering projects in the United States, several projects that the Army Corps of Engineers began before the War were allowed to continue. Due to the war, the government put a freeze on appropriating money for new river projects. These environmental, political, and economic conditions in Arkansas created a perfect storm in which local citizens and lobbyists formed relationships with their elected officials—who were becoming influential in Congress—to alter the river valley in the name of prosperity and as a victory in the war. Senators John McClellan and Robert S. Kerr were instrumental in helping Arkansas and Oklahoma institute the creation of a river system that offered multiple applications and changed Arkansas and Oklahoma in ways that reverberate today. In a sense, they attempted to make the dangerous waters of the Arkansas River safer, more dependable, and compliant to human desires. Whether or not they succeeded is debatable.

The conclusion offers an overview of the Arkansas River's impact on the state's history. The river became more than just a body of water, it became a key to survival, power, control, and influence. For a long time Natives in the river valley held that key and used it in ways that reflected their views, beliefs, and values to improve their lives and support their cultures. Eventually, Europeans, and later Americans, competed with Indians for the valuable finite resources of the river. White Arkansans acquired control of the river valley by physically

removing the Indians from it. With Natives no longer a threat, combined with technological advancements, plantation agriculture swept into the river valley and once again brought change to the physical environment and the relationships between people. Some of those relationships, primarily between master and slave, caused a civil war that was fought to end slavery put down the rebellion and reestablish the power and authority of the federal government. The Arkansas River was a vital factor in the trans-Mississippi west. Ultimately, the Civil War took a terrible toll on the environment and people of the Arkansas River. Following the war, culture, economics, society, and the environment were combined in a way that restored white supremacy and reestablished the plantation system, only this time it was organized a bit differently. The implementation of sharecropping, the weak agricultural economy, politics, and natural disasters created a scenario that witnessed elite whites reevaluating their relationships with the federal government in an attempt to retain their power and influence in the river valley. Following the second world war the changes that had been evolving regarding the responsibilities and roles of the federal government, citizens, and the river resulted in large scale tangible changes to the physical environment as a new era of Congressmen, Corps of Engineer leaders, and government officials, combined their efforts to manipulate the river in a manner that served their purposes and mostly pleased the populace. Despite all the efforts humanity has made to manipulate the river, however the river occasionally exerts its power and reminds us we are never completely in control.

## Chapter One

### Changes

Change is the handmaiden Nature requires to do her miracles with.

— Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

The story of the lower Arkansas River is one of change. The river and the surrounding landscape interacted for millenniums, but early humans arrived relatively late and Europeans even later. Native Americans developed and implemented methods of manipulating the river and the river valley in ways that increased their quality of life. The river and the landscape it created became enmeshed into Indian culture and society. Eventually, Europeans arrived and brought with them different perspectives regarding the river valley. They monetized many aspects of the river valley and believed they were destined to tame the wildness of the river. The practice of harvesting natural resources from the Arkansas River Valley and attempting to control the river transformed it. These interactions between Arkansans, the river, and the natural environment shaped the course of history for the state, the region, and the nation. Before the river and Arkansas shaped each other, the river had undergone a long evolutionary process.

The space where the present river valley exists has been in a state of flux for billions of years. Eons of elements interacting, bonding, and breaking apart led to the creation of our planet and ushered in epochs that witnessed the growth of life on earth. The relationships between the living and non-living entities on earth shaped the evolution of life and the transformations of the physical environment. Geologic events occurred that influenced where, how, and when, humanity spread across the globe. Eventually, humans traveled to what is now North America as they negotiated the space around them and manipulated the environment for survival. Wind, water, and ice were integral components to the formation of a river that bubbles up in the Rocky



Mountains and flowed toward the Mississippi River through modern-day Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas to the Gulf of Mexico.

The earth is in a constant state of geologic transformations, changes that created the Arkansas River Valley. Millions of years ago, our planet was covered in water. Within the oceans that engulfed the planet, the life cycles of shellfish and other creatures created sediment that became limestone. Eventually, water levels dropped, and land appeared. Plants lived and died, eventually creating coal seams. The climate changed from being warm into an ice age. The Pleistocene epoch (2.6 million to 11,700 years ago) created the natural environment of the lower Arkansas River Valley that modern people would recognize and that humans have inhabited and used for thousands of years. During the last glacial period of the Pleistocene, ice sheets formed, trapping atmospheric moisture and causing the oceans to drop about 400 feet. The ice around the top layer of the earth created silt and clay. When the climate began to warm about 16,000 years ago, ice from the Laurentide ice sheet began to melt. The changes in the climate directly affected the geographic ranges of vegetation and animal populations and soil formation. Climate change resulted in different species of plants migrating to different areas as they follow the changes in the climate. With the movement of ice, water, and climates, animal populations began to shift. By 12,000 years ago forests throughout the present day south consisted of a mixture of shade-tolerant and shade-intolerant species such as oaks, maples, beech, basswood, tuliptree, ash, and ironwood, although throughout the deep south, pines, oaks, and hickories constituted the most numerous tree types in forested spaces.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Andy Russell, *The Life of a River* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 27-28; Donald E. Davis, "Pleistocene: The Big Chill," in *Southern United States: An Environmental History* eds. Donald E. Davis et al. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2006), 1-10; A.F. Miller, *A Survey and Assessment of the Cultural Resources of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System in Oklahoma, 1976* (Norman: Oklahoma Archaeological Survey, 1977), 15.

The stabilizing of the temperate climate, in what would become the Arkansas River Valley, and the growth of diverse landscapes with numerous plant and animal populations, created an environment appealing to humans. Conversely, the human populations in the Arkansas River Valley influenced the river basin. Human manipulation of the rivers' streamflow affected the chemical and biological processes, the solid matter in the runoff, the formation of bottom sediments and the banks, which altered the local climate, soils, and vegetation. Human alterations to the river, often to support agriculture and money-making endeavors, resulted in the river's character and purpose evolving in step with population increases in the area.<sup>57</sup>

The standard narrative of human migration into the Americas, and eventually to the Arkansas River Valley, was that they crossed from Siberia to Alaska via a land bridge roughly 12,000 years ago following their stomachs in search of woolly mammoths and other large animals with their trusty "Clovis" tipped spears in hand. Details about those who make the trek are scarce leaving the particulars to archeologists, educated guesses, and wild imaginations.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, over the last several decades science and history have made advancements regarding our understanding of the first peoples to populate the Americas. Within the last forty years or so, historians have moved away from narratives that introduce Indians only in the context of dealing with Europeans in a straight forward manner that results in the loss of Native culture. Historians like Richard White and James Merrell wedded Indian agency with social science methodologies to present a more in-depth and richer understanding of Native Americans. Science is also injecting new information into our understanding of the first Americans. In 1996

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<sup>57</sup> Gilbert F. White, ed., *Environmental Effects of Complex River Development* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), 30-31.

<sup>58</sup> Amy Turner Bushnell, "The First Southern: Indians of the Early South," in *A Companion to the American South* ed. John B. Boles (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 3,5.

weapons and tools were discovered in Chile that were 12,500 years old. Furthermore, in Brazil, the remains of a human were unearthed that dated back more than 11,000 years ago. In 2016, archaeologists found a stone knife outside of Tallahassee, Florida that dated back to 14,550 years ago. Even more radical, in 2003, a study of skulls in Baja California, Mexico, suggested that the first Americans may not be the decedents of the group that crossed the land bridge from northeast Asia. Instead, the skulls from Mexico support the theory that Americas' first people traveled from Southeast Asian to Australia 60,000 years ago and then to America 13,500 years ago. Although the Australia to America theory could be possible, recently researchers have continued to study the crossing of Beringia. Some scientists argue that there were multiple migrations from Asia that paralleled the Bearing Strait, although DNA studies do not support this theory. Additionally, the theory that some humans used boats to travel along the shoreline in addition to or in lieu of walking over the land bridge is becoming more plausible. The likelihood that boats were used to travel via the "kelp highway" along the Pacific coast of North America became certain when scientists from the Hakai Institute and the University of Victoria found footprints on Calvert Island (along Canada's Pacific Coast) in 2014 that dated back 13,000 years. Additionally, through new DNA research, scientists have discovered that those who did come via Beringia split from East Asians around 36,000 years ago and began their cold trek 20,000 to 25,000 years ago. Furthermore, once the migrants reached south of the North American ice sheets, they split up around 17,000 to 14,000 years ago. One group traveled south while the other stayed in the far-northern part of North America. The Natives that are in the northern tip of the continent are not completely descended from the initial group that split and

stayed north. Studies suggest that northern Native Americans are the result of a “back migration that replaced or absorbed the initial founding population of Ancient Beringians.”<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of when or how humans arrived in the Arkansas River Valley, after their arrival they began to spread out and as they traveled to different geographic locations they encountered different environments. Environmental variations influenced the development of unique cultures and societies. The earliest humans that manipulated the environment of the lower Arkansas River Valley did so in four phases. The first period was a time of long-distance migration, hunting, and gathering called the Paleoindian period from about 14,000 to 10,000 B.C.E. Next came the Archaic period as culture and society developed and became more complicated from roughly 9,500- 650 B.C.E. Throughout this period Indians in Arkansas had to change with the changing climate and environment as the Ice Age ended and the weather became drier and warmer. Glacial ice sheets retreated, and forests took hold and enabled wildlife to flourish. The exiting of the ice sheets ushered in the Woodland Period (with its three phases)

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<sup>59</sup> Amy Turner Bushnell, “The First Southern: Indians of the Early South,” in *A Companion to the American South* ed. John B. Boles (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 4; National Geographic Society, “Who Were the First Americans,” *National Geographic*, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/09/who-were-the-first-americans/> (accessed April 2, 2018); Glenn Hodges, “Discovery Points to Earlier Arrival of First Americans,” *National Geographic*, [https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160513-first-americans-clovis-mastodon-florida-pageladson/?beta=true&\\_ga=2.126350404.897833715.1523653350-1134487552.1523649964](https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160513-first-americans-clovis-mastodon-florida-pageladson/?beta=true&_ga=2.126350404.897833715.1523653350-1134487552.1523649964) (accessed April 13, 2018); Andrew Curry, “Ancient Migration: Coming to America,” *Nature*, <https://www.nature.com/news/ancient-migration-coming-to-america-1.10562> (accessed April 13, 2018); “The Oldest Footprints in North America are Right Where Native Historians Said They Should Be,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2018; J. Victor Moreno-Mayar, Ben A. Potter, Lasse Vinner, et. al, “Terminal Pleistocene Alaskan Genome Reveals First Founding Population of Native Americans,” *Nature*, <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature25173#author-information> (accessed April 13, 2018).

from around 500 B.C.E to 700 C.E. and witnessed Natives building ceremonial mounds, making pottery, creating settlements, and engaging in intensive crop cultivation <sup>60</sup>

The Arkansas River was an essential component in the survival of humans along its banks, in part because the river helped to maintain the humid and warm conditions that were advantageous to those who could cope with being damp, hot, and sticky for most of the year. Environmental, social, and cultural change among the Natives evolved in concert with one another. The Arkansas River Valley served the natives of the state in two significant ways. First, the river provided soil and water that supported the flora and fauna that sustained human life. Secondly, the Arkansas River Valley served as a protection that acted as barrier against invasions from those who would plunder and raid.<sup>61</sup>

Throughout the Arkansas River Valley, large tracts of hardwood forests with dense undergrowth characterized the vegetation along with long summers and a humid climate. Winters were relatively mild, although cold waves did occur, and the temperatures hovered in the high 40s and low 50s. Summer temperatures were 20 to 30 degrees warmer than winter ones. Droughts were rare, and rain fell often.<sup>62</sup> Tree growth in the river valley consisted of walnut,

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<sup>60</sup> Michael B. Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey: The Saga of Arkansas from Prehistoric Times to Present* (Little Rock: Rose Publishing Company Inc, 1994), 14-15; Juliet E. Morrow, "Paleoindian Period," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=541> (accessed April 13, 2018); Robert C. Mainfort Jr., "Woodland Period," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture* <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=543> (accessed April 13, 2018); Marlene G. Levy, "Imported Ceramic Vessels and Status Levels in the Arkansas River Valley," (master's thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 1984), 10,31.

<sup>61</sup> Louis F. Burns, *A History of the Osage People* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service in cooperation with Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station, *Soil Survey of Jefferson and Lincoln Counties, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1980), 2-3; Corps of Engineers, *Flood Plain Information Part 1 Bayou Bartholomew and Tributaries City of Pine Bluff, Arkansas* (Vicksburg, Mississippi: Department of the Army, Vicksburg District, Corps of Engineers,

hickory, pecan, various types of oaks, cottonwood, sycamore, maple, elm, and ash. Trees provided nuts, and in the undergrowth, humans found berries which supplemented native diets. Along the river's shore, they fished among the cane breaks that grew thick. Oxbow lakes, created by the Arkansas River's shifting currents, supplied roots and other plant-life for "the people of the middle waters," as the Osage were known. The wild plant foods, including fruits, nuts, seeds, and roots, were just as vital to Natives' health as hunting and fishing were. They used deer, bear, and buffalo for meat, hides, and other products they needed, and buffalo.<sup>63</sup>

The Arkansas River Valley, in addition to providing many wild items that indigenous people hunted and gathered, also provided fertile loamy and alluvial soil that supported agriculture. Many Natives, such as the Quapaw and Caddos, engaged in agriculture and grew corn, beans, squash, gourds, melons, sunflowers and tobacco. Agriculture was communal and was a way for Indian villages to interact with the environment in a collective way that reinforced their culture.<sup>64</sup> How the Natives manipulated their physical environment, whether to kill or grow, often involved clearing, burning, and cutting forests which changed the environment. Intensive agriculture reorganized what plants grew where. Increased populations altered the landscape as

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Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1973), 2; Gerald T. Hanson and Carl H. Moneyhon, *Historical Atlas of Arkansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Original General Land Office Survey Notes and Plats for the State of Arkansas, 1815-Present, Charlie Daniels commissioner of State Lands, Township 5 South, Range 9 West, 1825-1826; Nutall, *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory*, 100-101; Louis F. Burns, *A History of the Osage People* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 23; George Sabo III, *Paths of Our Children: Historic Indians of Arkansas* (Fayetteville: Arkansas Archeological Survey, 1992), 34-35, 46;

<sup>64</sup> Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 24; Sabo III, *Paths of Our Children*, 34-35, 46-47, 56; Rennard Strickland, *The Indians in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 16; Jeffrey S. Girard, Timothy K. Perttula, and Mary Beth Trubitt, *Caddo Connections: Cultural Interactions within and beyond the Caddo World* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 26.

homes, towns, villages, farmsteads, ceremonial mounds, and defensive barriers began to dot the river valley.<sup>65</sup>

Maize was an important food for larger populations. Despite the positive characteristics of maize, Native Americans' extensive cultivation of corn throughout the Arkansas River Valley became problematic. Maize was so ubiquitous in some Indian's diets that it rose from accounting for five percent of food consumption to fifty percent. The rich fertility of the soil in the river valley aided in the rise of corn production and consumption. Too much corn resulted in dietary deficiencies, particularly an insufficiency in lysine (a vital amino acid) and niacin. Natives accounted for these deficiencies by reorienting their spatial relationship with the fish populations in the river, mainly by taking them out of the water and putting them in their stomachs. Eventually, beans and squash were also widely grown to improve their diets. Although extensive corn cultivation fueled population growth, and despite dietary alternatives, dependence on corn, a nutritional foundation, led to cracks in the edifice of overall health. The Arkansas River Valley's productive soil allowed plant life to grow bountifully, but wherever human populations existed, they decided the types of plants that thrived. Studies show that general health in the river valley decreased after Indians implemented agriculture. Like with maize consumption, overdependence on certain types of plants in the river valley could be unhealthy. Heavy reliance on cultivated foods not only exposed people to dietary deficiencies but also threatened the population's health during food shortages.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Rebecca Wiewel, "Constructing Community in the Central Arkansas River Valley: Ceramic Compositional Analysis and Collaborative Archaeology," Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 2014), 3-4; Claudine Payne, "Mississippian Period," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopedia ofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=544> (accessed, April 13, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 42; Claudine Payne, "Mississippian Period," *The*

Agriculture in the Arkansas River Valley had additional negative consequences for natives. The punishing act of manipulating the alluvial soil of the river valley could lead to injuries and degenerative conditions like arthritis. Prosperous agriculture in the river valley, in some places, led to less exposure to open spaces as people began to build non-mobile housing within close range of each other. Agriculture redefined how natives viewed and used the environment. Larger populations occupied close quarters, which increased the risk of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Furthermore, people became more sensitive to climate changes. No rain, no food. Too much rain, no food. Too hot, no food. Not warm enough, no food. Despite the difficulties and drawbacks of agriculture, Indians during the Mississippi phase in Arkansas River Valley continued to raise crops.<sup>67</sup>

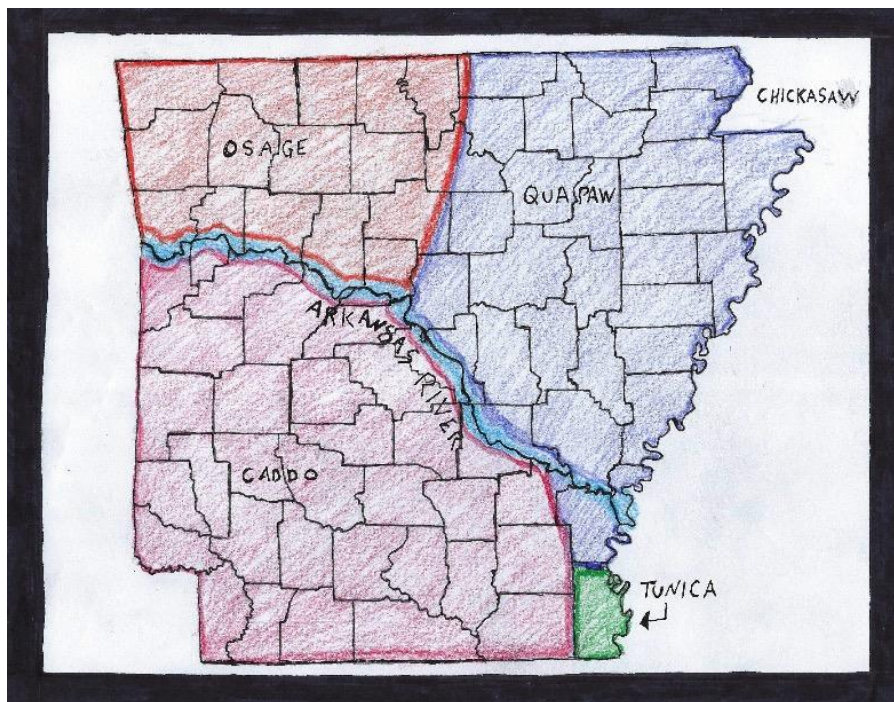


Figure 1.1 General Native Territories in Arkansas. Based on the map, “Native Americans,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=408#> (accessed May 3, 2018).

*Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=544> (accessed, April 13, 2018).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



The Arkansas River worked like an electrical conduit for electric foreign influences to jolt change into the Native peoples along its banks. Some artifacts illustrate how the river assisted the introduction of outside ideas, goods, and people. Artifacts indicate that Mexico influenced the Late Woodland culture around 900 C.E. and after 1200 C.E., the Mississippian culture overtook the Mexican influence and spread to the lower Mississippi River, throughout the present-day southeast of the United States, and up the Arkansas River.<sup>68</sup> Native uses of the river could be paradoxical. While the river, at times, was used to bring people into contact, humans also used it to divide.

The Arkansas River acted as a border for many of the Natives that lived in Arkansas. Although the Caddo Indians would later be forced south to inhabit the area around the Red River in Arkansas and Texas they originally ranged as far north as the Arkansas River.<sup>69</sup> The first Caddo Conference explained the boundaries of the Caddo people as:

The adjoining sectors of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas, bordered (approximately) by the Arkansas River on the north, by a line about 100 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico on the south, a line running from about Tulsa to Dallas to Waco on the west, and by Bayou Macon in eastern Louisiana and Arkansas on the east. The western and eastern boundaries just mentioned apply to historic times, whereas earlier “Caddoan” remains are confined to a much narrower belt stretching north and south along an axis formed by the Oklahoma-Arkansas and Texas-Louisiana borders.<sup>70</sup>

The area occupied by the Caddo groups was “an extensive cultural landscape” that was a “complex mixture of environmental features, archeological traits, and the projection of historic

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<sup>68</sup> Burns, *Osage Indian Customs and Myths*, xiii, 4-5.

<sup>69</sup> Arrell Morgan Gibson, *The History of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 25.

<sup>70</sup> Alex Krieger D. “The First Conference on the Caddoan Archaeological Area,” *American Antiquity* 12 no. 4(April, 1947): 199.

information into the past” that “constitutes a diverse, highly dynamic cultural landscape with complex interconnections and relationships with surrounding areas.”<sup>71</sup>

Like the Caddo Indians, the Osage’s territories bordered the Arkansas River. The “compact core” of the Osage area was in west central Missouri and it was favorable geographic location pre-1800 C.E. After 1800 C.E. Euro-Americans in tandem with political, social, and technological changes diminished the geographic advantages the Osage enjoyed at which point many different peoples surrounded the Osage. To protect their people and lands, they used the Arkansas River as protection and a deterrent to the south. To the uninitiated, large and swift rivers were challenging barriers, but to the Osage, who had incorporated rivers into their culture, they were advantageous. Osage river culture dictated that when the Osage war parties came to daunting rivers, they offered up the *Ne tse* (water songs), that were sung as prayers when crossing large rivers. The Osage also appealed to the eel and the beaver, otter, and large turtles, which were all believed to be strong swimmers. To protect their bowstrings and food while crossing the river, the Osage made small boats out of the skins of these animals. Three land animals were also appealed to because they were thought to be strong swimmers: the black bear, the panther, and the gray wolf.<sup>72</sup>

The homeland of the Osage offered a secure base for expansion. The Osage were in an area that lay across three of the four routes to the American West, with the Arkansas River, on their southern border being one of them. For more than one hundred and twenty-five years the Osage controlled these routes, often to the chagrin of whites. The western edge of the Osage

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<sup>71</sup> Jeffrey S. Girard, Timothy K. Perttula, and Mary Beth Trubitt, *Caddo Connections: Cultural Interactions within and beyond the Caddo World* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 26.

<sup>72</sup> Burns, *Osage Indian Customs and Myths*, 25-27, 60-61.

empire was a border that represented the threat of invasion and the possibility of expansion. The northern and eastern nations could not realistically invade the Osage empire, and conversely, they could not expand in that direction. A lack of buffalo south of the Arkansas River resulted in the Osage infrequently occupying that space unless they were in raiding parties. Thus the river acted as a southern border.<sup>73</sup>

Native Americans occupied and manipulated the environment long before the Europeans arrived. Indians, as Charles C. Mann argues, were “both [the] poster children for eco-catastrophe...[and] as green role models.”<sup>74</sup> Some arguments contend that there was no such thing as an “Ecological Indian,” particularly those arguments evoking Paul Martin’s *blitzkrieg* theory that portrays Indians as killing machines that decimated animal populations into extinction.<sup>75</sup> Other scholars posit that Indians strove for a “balance of nature,” or a “flexible landscape,” by manipulating their environment, often with fire, to support both farmland and areas of forest for hunting.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, Indians shared some of the same problems whites later encountered. Floods and mudslides, in part due to deforestation, within the river valley was an issue long before the more well-known flood disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>77</sup>

The Quapaw, also known as the “downstream people,” also utilized and manipulated the Arkansas River Valley to support their existence, and by 1673, they established villages along the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers. Some Quapaw villages, such as Osotouy, were located at

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>74</sup> Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 247.

<sup>75</sup> Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 29.

<sup>76</sup> Mann, *1491*, 249, 265; Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 57-58.

<sup>77</sup> Mann, *1491*, 263.

the mouth of the Arkansas River. At the mouth of the Arkansas River, they guarded the father of waters (the Mississippi River) and the entrance to the Redwater (the Arkansas River). These locations allowed the Quapaw to regulate travel up and down the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. Enemies could be barred passage on the river from either direction. Furthermore, the Quapaw were positioned to warn potential trade partners upstream of danger farther south. Thus, the space occupied by the Quapaw established them as regulators or mediators between the upper and lower Mississippi valley and the lower Arkansas River valley.<sup>78</sup>

In 1673 Marquette and Jolliet traveled down the Mississippi River and visited a Quapaw village located on the west bank of the Mississippi a few miles above its confluence with the Arkansas River. In 1682, La Salle visited the same village and three others: one on the east bank of the Mississippi, one near the confluence and on several miles up the Arkansas River. These early meetings set into motion a shift in the power dynamics in the Arkansas River Valley. The Quapaw attempted to find power in their changing world and at various times became allies of the French, the Spanish, and later, the Americans. The rearrain of the power dynamics in the Arkansas Valley during the nineteenth century resulted in the Quapaw being forced to give up their Arkansas homelands and they were moved to the Red River Valley in present-day Louisiana, and then later to Indian Territory.<sup>79</sup>

Despite early European's pejorative perceptions, Natives in the Arkansas River Valley and elsewhere throughout North America, had achieved an advanced state by the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Joseph Patrick Key, "Masters of This Country': The Quapaws and Environmental Change in Arkansas, 1673-1833" (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 2001), 7; Rennard Strickland, *The Indians in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 218-219; Additionally, see Albert S. Gatschet, *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians, with a Linguistic, Historic and Ethnographic Introduction*, ed. D. G. Brinton (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), 29-30.

<sup>79</sup> Sabo III, *Paths of Our Children*, 27.

centuries. Environmental conditions influenced their cultures and vice versa. The environment also influenced how people thought about and treated each other. Europeans often used the same disparaging language to describe natives and the physical environment. Unbeknownst to many Europeans, native cultures included complex religious beliefs that centered on the sun, ancestor worship, warfare, and fertility. Chiefdoms controlled large delineated spaces populated by thousands of kin and contained diverse natural resources.<sup>80</sup>

Between the time of Hernando De Soto expedition until the next European explorers arrived in the early 1670s, environmental changes, including disease and drought massively reduced the native population, making it a “vast graveyard.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the Caddo, Osage, and Quapaw were likely relatively newly created “tribes” made up of the survivors. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Arkansas River Valley hosted a diverse native population including tribes in the Mississippian culture. The Caddo, Osage, and Quapaw were joined by – and competed with -- the Shawnees, Miamis, Cherokees, and Choctaws. These native peoples competed with the Spanish, French, English, and Americans for control over the Arkansas River valley’s resources. The Arkansas River Valley was integral to hunting, farming, and trade. The complex negotiations that ensued between these diverse groups witnessed each faction seeking to control the culture of diplomacy and trade while defining themselves and others in ways that advanced their interests.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Michael P. Hoffman, “Protohistoric Tunican Indians in Arkansas,” in *Cultural Encounters in the Early South: Indians and Europeans in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 61.

<sup>81</sup> Willard H. Rollings, “Native Americans in Colonial Arkansas,” in *Cultural Encounters in the Early South: Indians and Europeans in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 38.

<sup>82</sup> Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 3-4.

Kathleen DuVal posits that Indians and Europeans carefully constructed and advanced ideas of *them* and *us* in ways that were more complex than merely *Indians* and *Europeans*. Relationships in the Arkansas River valley depended on clarifying distinctions. For example, there were distinct ways the Spanish and French, and the Osages and the Quapaw interacted with the Arkansas River, which impacted their world views. Additionally, when new Indians or Europeans arrived in the Arkansas River Valley, they found themselves recruited by the current inhabitants, who wanted to teach the newcomers their interpretations of the history, customs, the environment, and peoples of the area. The group, who was most persuasive verbally, economically, and militarily, established their point of view.<sup>83</sup> On a smaller scale it was “individuals” who “shaped...the frontier [as] Indians, Africans, and French men and women, used sexual and kinship diplomacy to achieve and maintain political, economic, and legal gains during their encounters.”<sup>84</sup>

Europeans, in their attempts to gain power along the Arkansas River, used it as a transportation network and perceived it as a spatial point of reference in the wilds of the “new world,” they had “discovered.” Europeans first came into contact with the upper region of the Arkansas River before the downstream lower eastern section. Spaniards, in search of gold, stumbled upon the Arkansas River and its western tributaries before any Europeans happened upon the Mississippi and the mouth of the Arkansas River. Explorers came from the Southwest through the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma, moving northward across the Canadian, North Canadian, and Cimarron rivers, all tributaries of the Arkansas River. Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and thirty men, on June 29, 1541, reached and crossed the Arkansas River near

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>84</sup> Sonia Toudji, “Intimate Frontiers: Indians, French, and Africans in Colonial Mississippi Valley,” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2012), 23.

present-day Dodge City, Kansas, using buffalo and Indian crossing points as a guide. Coronado continued down the north bank of the Arkansas River to the Great Bend and then traveled inland in search of the legendary Quivira.<sup>85</sup> Although Coronado never found the riches he was searching for he did name the Arkansas River the St. Peter's and St. Paul's.<sup>86</sup> Other Europeans soon followed.

The Arkansas River greatly impacted Hernando De Soto's quest, a quest that occurred almost simultaneously with Coronado's. The river hindered and aided travel and was home to several native populations that influenced the conquistador's adventures. Hernando De Soto encountered the Natives in the Arkansas and Mississippi River Valleys at the apex of their Mississippi phase, about the same time that Coronado was searching around the upper Arkansas River. Hernando De Soto was searching for the famed Coligua. De Soto was the first European explorer in the lower Arkansas River Valley.<sup>87</sup> He came to present day Arkansas in early summer of 1541 when he crossed the Mississippi River below present-day Helena, Arkansas. After weeks of exploring Crowley's Ridge, the Spaniards happened upon a large Indian village near the area of present-day Arkansas Post on the Arkansas River. In the village of Quiguate, he learned of a large city to the northwest. In true conquistador fashion he wondered if there were treasure to and precious metals there. So he took his party in that direction. In September, De Soto arrived at the settlement of Tanico in the province of Cayas. They spent three weeks there then left. From

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<sup>85</sup> Oliver W. Holmes, *The Arkansas: Lifeline of Empire* (Falls Church, Virginia: The Pioneer America Society Press, 1969), 2-3.

<sup>86</sup> Charles Robert Goins and Danney Goble, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2006), 10.

<sup>87</sup> Oliver W. Holmes, *The Arkansas: Lifeline of Empire* (Falls Church, Virginia: The Pioneer America Society Press, 1969), 3; Claudine Payne, "Mississippian Period," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=544> (accessed, April 13, 2018).

Tanico De Soto crossed the Arkansas River and traveled upstream to a mountainous area where they entered the province of Tula in the present-day Fort Smith area. Finding no gold in this vicinity the Spaniards traveled back to the southeast until they intersected the Arkansas River midway between Little Rock and Pine Bluff where they spent the winter of 1541-1542.<sup>88</sup>

As natives and explores were getting acquainted, the Arkansas River significantly affected the development of their relationships. Natives established a tactical edge over the Europeans when rivers were involved. Due to cultural differences and varying degrees of acculturation with the rivers of America, the Spaniards were at odds with and struggled against the environment, especially when on the water. De Soto's use of the river for travel left his party vulnerable to attacks from hostile natives. In some instances, Indians would come within "bow-shot, whence they could assail without being assaulted, or receiving injury...so that the Christians had little else to do than to stand as objects to be shot at, watching for the shafts.<sup>89</sup>

Natives used the river to maintain control of the area. The indigenous population overpowered their foes by using larger canoes to attack their enemies and when close enough engage in "hand to hand" combat.<sup>90</sup> During canoe battles, some Indians remained in the canoes, while others, using their familiarity with the river, jumped out of their canoes and into the water to capsize Spanish canoes. The Spaniards and their ignorance of the river's characteristics and their arrogance hurt them as their plans failed to include the environment and "by the weight of their armour" sank to the bottom of the river.<sup>91</sup> Those that did not immediately sink remained

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<sup>88</sup> Walter M. Adams, *North Little Rock: The Unique City, a History* (Little Rock: August House, 1986), 14-15; Sabo III, *Paths of Our Children*, 10-12.

<sup>89</sup> *Narratives of the Career of Hernando De Soto*, translated by Buckingham Smith (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1904), 199.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*



afloat by holding on to a canoe, but only long enough to be struck on the head by an Indian and slip unwillingly to a watery grave. The heavy metal conquistadors were swallowed by a hungry, uncaring river that rendered any hopes of rescue impossible. To their dismay the “force of the stream would not allow them” to aid the doomed soldiers.<sup>92</sup>

The Spaniards were talented at making their journey unnecessarily challenging. Native relationships with Spaniards were often confused. For example, once a local Cacique and his warriors attempted to help and brought De Soto bread and fish, but as the Indians neared the shore, they saw that the Europeans were “on their guard” so the Indians began to move offshore at which time Spanish bowmen fired killing several Indians.<sup>93</sup> Crossing rivers were often a challenge to the Spaniards. Once it took them thirty days to safely navigate across the Mississippi River to the Arkansas side. They marveled at the sheer size of the river and were glad to have crossed this dangerous body of water, one that was “swift, and very deep; the water, always flowing turbidly, brought along from above many trees and much timber, driven onward by its force.”<sup>94</sup>

Environmental conditions throughout the wilds of present-day Arkansas were a difficult challenge for the explorers and they were often under duress by locals. Eventually, De Soto arrived at Tula hoping for a warm welcome where he and his men could stay during the cold winter.<sup>95</sup> The Indians at Tula, near present-day Fort Smith on the Arkansas River, straddled two Indian worlds. Tula was at the cross-section of a crucial trade route between Plains Indian tribes, who hunted deer and buffalo, and Southeast Indian tribes who engaged in agriculture. The

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

Arkansas River itself served as a significant trade route between these two groups. The Tula facilitated trade in “meat, hides, and tallow from the hunters, and salt, shells, beads, pottery, and fine copper adornments.”<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately for De Soto and his un-merry band, the Tula were not impressed or threatened by the Spaniards. They denied De Soto the accommodations he wanted and from there their relationship deteriorated from bad to worse. After an unhealthy dose of bloodshed, the Spaniards picked up on the Tula’s subtle hints to leave and did so. In October, De Soto and his men headed back down the Arkansas River Valley. The lucky/unlucky *extranjeros de España* who had survived made it to the town Utiangué, just south of present-day Little Rock, where they dined on corn, beans, nuts, fruits, and rabbit meat. With an adequate food supply, the Spaniards survived the icy winter of 1541/1542. Well, they all survived except for their best and most needed translator, Juan Ortiz.<sup>97</sup>

The Arkansas River continued to influence the conquistadors and in the spring of 1542 De Soto followed the Arkansas River south towards the Mississippi River through the province of Ayays to Anilco in present-day Arkansas, which were highly populated agricultural regions which they described as the “richest they had seen.”<sup>98</sup> By this point in their journey, the Spaniards were “blinded and crippled” as conflicting information had the Europeans lost and confused. Additionally, De Soto’s health was deteriorating. Upon reaching the west bank of the Mississippi, the frustrated and worried Spaniards managed to get one more murderous attack in as they burned the town of Anilco and executed all its males. Shortly after, on May 21, 1542, De Soto gave up the ghost and died. Luis de Moscoso then led the ragged group for several more months of hell on earth until they made it to Mexico in July, only half of them survived.

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<sup>96</sup> Kirby, *Mockingbird Song*, 50.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Sabo III, *Paths of Our Children*, 12.

Although the Spaniards never found the riches they sought along the Arkansas River, they were able to claim the entire Mississippi River Valley (including the Arkansas River Valley), for Charles V of Spain, not that it meant much to anybody in the river valley at the time. Despite the claim, it would be over 130 years before explorers of another European nation would visit or take an interest in the area.<sup>99</sup>

In 1673, the Jesuit priest Jacques Marquette and a trader named Louis Joliet were sent by the French government to explore the Mississippi River, and consequently the mouth of the Arkansas River, and find where it flowed into the sea. They left Canada with five rowers and two Indian guides on May 17, 1673, making their way, despite warnings from friendly Indians about monsters, waterfalls, and other perils, they went up Lake Michigan to Green Bay, up the Fox River to the Wisconsin River, down that river, and in June made it to a large river flowing south. Marquette wanted to name the river Conception, and Joliet lobbied for the name Colbert after the finance minister of France. They compromised and settled on the Indian name, the Mississippi.<sup>100</sup> They sailed down the Mississippi until they found the mouth of the Arkansas River. At the mouth of the Arkansas River, the French explorers found a sizeable Quapaw village called Kappa. Marquette called these people the “Arkansa” Indians, which was his rendition of “Ouyapas,” also spelled “Arknaas,” “Akancas,” and “Accancea.”<sup>101</sup> The French explorers learned that the Mississippi flowed into the Gulf of Mexico.

The French dreamed of rivers like the Mississippi River. French explorers envisioned an all-water route between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico. Robert Cavalier Sieur de La

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<sup>99</sup> Adams, *North Little Rock*, 14-15; Kirby, *Mockingbird Song*, 51-52.

<sup>100</sup> Gregory Carrera, *The Founding of Arkansas Post 1686* (DeWitt, AR: DeWitt Publishing Co., Inc., 1986), 13.

<sup>101</sup> Adams, *North Little Rock*, 15.

Salle grasped this dream and devised a plan to develop a series of trading posts along the entire length of the Mississippi River. Each post would be operated by a trader who would ship furs either north to Canada or downriver to a town La Salle hoped to create on the gulf coast. La Salle traveled to France in 1675 to obtain the favor of the royal court for his plan. Eventually, he secured a monopoly over the entire fur trade of the interior. La Salle, now in Canada, prepared for further explorations for the next four years. In 1678, La Salle returned to France seeking financial support. While in France, La Salle met Henri de Tonti.<sup>102</sup>

Henri de Tonti altered the course of Arkansas history when he established a post, the *Poste aux Arkansas*, at the mouth of the Arkansas River. Despite the large populations De Soto encountered, the French did not find as many Natives in the same areas, so much so that by the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the French discovered that eastern Arkansas was mostly uninhabited except for four Quapaw villages near the mouth of the Arkansas River.<sup>103</sup> The Quapaw were vital to the survival of the Europeans at Arkansas Post. While on a quest to find La Salle in 1686 de Tonti established Arkansas Post. Nobody knows precisely where de Tonti established Arkansas Post, all that is known is from Henri Joutel's description that the Post was located above the Arkansas River's mouth on the north bank. The Post served several functions including, a way station in de Tonti's search for La Salle, to house Jesuit missionaries, maintaining an alliance with the local Natives, protection against the Iroquois, and a place to trade. Although trading in the Arkansas River valley around Arkansas Post was new to the French, trade had been happening in the area for some time. Upon encountering various tribes

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<sup>102</sup> Roger E. Coleman, *The Arkansas Post Story* (Santa Fe: Southwest Cultural Resources Center, 1987), 6.

<sup>103</sup> Michael P. Hoffman, "Protohistoric Tunican Indians in Arkansas," in *Cultural Encounters in the Early South: Indians and Europeans in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 61.

around the Arkansas River, the Europeans noted that they already had guns and English goods. Although it is most likely that trade at Arkansas Post during de Tonti's lifetime was probably minimal, the trading and interactions between the French, English, Spanish, and Native groups demonstrate that Arkansas was, as Norman W. Caldwell argued, "from the beginning...[a] scene of international trade rivalries."<sup>104</sup>

The longer the French lived along the Arkansas River the more they understood it. In 1756 the French government ordered the relocation of Arkansas Post. The Post moved from the more fertile lands of the Grand Prairie to the soggy bottoms of present-day Desha County. At the onset of the Seven Years War the French Government reassessed their uses of the Arkansas River. They thought a new location would be better suited for receiving convoys traveling the Mississippi River between Illinois country and New Orleans. The French moved the Arkansas Post a third time because it suffered from flooding and they wanted to be nearer the Quapaw village. The Post, in 1779, was relocated to a bend in the river that provided three shores. The civilians settled one shore, the Quapaw another, and the fort and Spanish on the third. Additionally, this move was partially at the behest of St. Louis businesses men who did not want competition from Arkansas. The move stifled the Post's economy and opened it up to attacks from Osage Indians who were frustrated with the Post's lack of trading in its newest location.<sup>105</sup>

Whether French, Spanish, American, or from an Indian group, the Arkansas River served as an important conduit. People were drawn to navigable rivers such as the Arkansas River

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<sup>104</sup> Norman W. Caldwell, "Tonty and the Beginning of Arkansas Post," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 8 no. 3 (Autumn, 1949): 190, 192-193, 196.

<sup>105</sup> Gilbert C. Din, "The Spanish Fort on the Arkansas, 1763-1803," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 42 no. 3 (Autumn, 1983): 271-272, 276-278; Morris S. Arnold, "The Significance of the Arkansas Colonial Experience," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 51 no. 1 (Spring, 1992): 75, 79-80.



Figure 1.2 The Three Locations of Arkansas Post, Based on, *Map of the environs of Arkansas Post, Ark., January 1863*. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006635251/>; Morris S. Arnold, “The Significance of the Arkansas Colonial Experience,” 81.

because rivers were the best transportation means available. There were roads, of a sort, available in the form of Indian trade routes, warpaths, and buffalo trails. The Arkansas River in Arkansas was the lifeblood of the transportation network. Despite low water in dry seasons and occasional ice during the winter, making travel unpredictable, a good deal of the time, the river was clear. A range of watercraft plied the river including two-person canoes, dugouts, batteaux (large boats with a keel), cruised the rivers in search of financial opportunities or to protect their interests.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Morris S. Arnold, *Colonial Arkansas 1686-1804* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 8.

By the early 1720s, Louisiana stopped being the center for France's financial system. The French had divided Louisiana into nine judicial departments: Biloxi, Mobile, Alebamon, New Orleans, Yazos, Natchez, Natchitoches, Arkansas, and Illinois. French commissioners overseeing Louisiana ordered an officer to "be sent to the Arkansas River to find out whether it was navigable."<sup>107</sup> This order led to an exploration further up the Arkansas River beyond Arkansas Post.

The Council of Louisiana chose Bernard de La Harpe to undertake the expedition. La Harpe most likely knew more about this country than anyone else given that he explored it in 1719 when crossing Oklahoma to the Arkansas River. Bernard de La Harpe was ordered by the commanding general for the king in the province of Louisiana to "learn the quality of the land... [and] he shall keep an exact journal of all that he find on his journey, marking the course of the rivers, their rapidity, length and breadth, the qualities of the wood and rocks."<sup>108</sup> La Harpe's expedition was ultimately motivated by a need for the French to establish a post for the protection of the Arkansas Post and other settlements west of the Mississippi, and to obtain a trade route to New Mexico where they hoped to acquire horses and mules that were desperately needed.<sup>109</sup>

La Harpe's voyage did not establish a lasting trade route with the Spanish, but he did increase the French's knowledge regarding the Arkansas River Valley and the geography of the Arkansas River and the western region along its banks. Sadly, for La Harpe, the Council of Louisiana did not share his vision or excitement for the Arkansas River. The Council believed it

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<sup>107</sup> Lewis, *Along the Arkansas*, 61.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

was better to strengthen the French establishments along the Mississippi instead of expanding westward. Dejected and discouraged, La Harpe returned to France.<sup>110</sup>

He left a lasting legacy, quite unintentionally, by identifying a site that would later become the capital of the territory – and later the state – of Arkansas. In 1721, the French government, again, sent Bernard de La Harpe to explore the Arkansas River. His mission was to encourage and extend French trade with the Indians throughout the Arkansas River valley. Upon completion of his exploration, La Harpe recommended establishing an additional fort on the Arkansas River at a place marked by a rock which he called “the little rock,” opposed to the high bluffs a couple of miles up the river which he called the “big rock.”<sup>111</sup> He picked this spot because it was well suited for a trading post. It was on the point of the Arkansas River that passed through a low alluvial plane into a higher hill terrain. Throughout much of the year, the river was agreeable enough to ford, much more so than other parts of the river. Despite La Harpe’s recommendation, the French did not build a fort there. Nevertheless, scores of hunters and settlers used the little rock as a spatial reference on the Arkansas River, always including the article adjective “the” when referring to it.<sup>112</sup>

The site at the little rock was well known to the natives, mostly the Osage, long before Europeans settlers came to the area. It was the first visible outcropping of rock going up the Arkansas River. Additionally, it also marked the spot where the Old Southwest Trail crossed the river. The Old Southwest Trail had been used for years by the natives and ran from southeastern

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>111</sup> Dallas T. Herndon, *Why Little Rock Was Born* (Little Rock: Central Printing Company, 1933), 1.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 2-3.



Missouri to the Red River. The crossing at Little Rock was called the “Point of Rocks” by the Indians.<sup>113</sup>

Later, as Americans ventured into Arkansas Territory in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century many found themselves at the point of rocks on the Arkansas River. Settlement patterns in Arkansas moved further west during this time period. Settlers moved down the Southwest Trail and up the Arkansas River in a shift that witnessed the majority of Arkansas’ population move into the center of the state. In 1821, the Arkansas territorial legislature moved the capital from Arkansas Post and relocated it at present-day Little Rock. Little Rock’s location on the river provided settlers with opportunities for transportation, agriculture, mining, and other business ventures.<sup>114</sup> Arkansas’ most significant resource, S. Charles Bolton argues, was land, and some of the most desirable and profitable lands were along the Arkansas River.<sup>115</sup>

Early 19<sup>th</sup> century white settlers such as, Joseph Bonne, a French Trapper, and hunter, who settled on the site of Pine Bluff, became more numerous throughout the Arkansas River Valley. Locations that could sustain life for settlers became prominent as whites settled on Indian land and established permanent settlements of log cabins and other long-lasting structures that altered the look of the landscape in the river valley.<sup>116</sup> Although new France was relatively

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<sup>113</sup> James W. Bell, *The Little Rock Handbook* (Little Rock: Publishers Bookshop, Inc., 1980), 1.

<sup>114</sup> Walter B. Hendrickson, “Culture in Early Arkansas: The Antiquarian and Natural History Society of Little Rock,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 17 no. 1 (Spring, 1958): 21; S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas 1800-1860: Remote and Restless* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 10, 36.

<sup>115</sup> Bolton, *Arkansas 1800-1860: Remote and Restless*, 36.

<sup>116</sup> Goodspeed Publishing Company, *Biographical and Historical memoir of Pulaski, Jefferson, Lonoke, Faulkner, Grant, Saline, Perry, Garland and Hot Springs Counties, Arkansas* (Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1889), 129; Russell M. Lawson, *The Land Between the Rivers: Thomas Nuttall’s Ascent of the Arkansas, 1819* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 5.

the same latitude as old France, the French, and eventually other types of immigrants, quickly learned that new France's temperature and precipitation were different. Working with and learning from the natives helped the French to establish some lasting settlements in their new environment.<sup>117</sup>

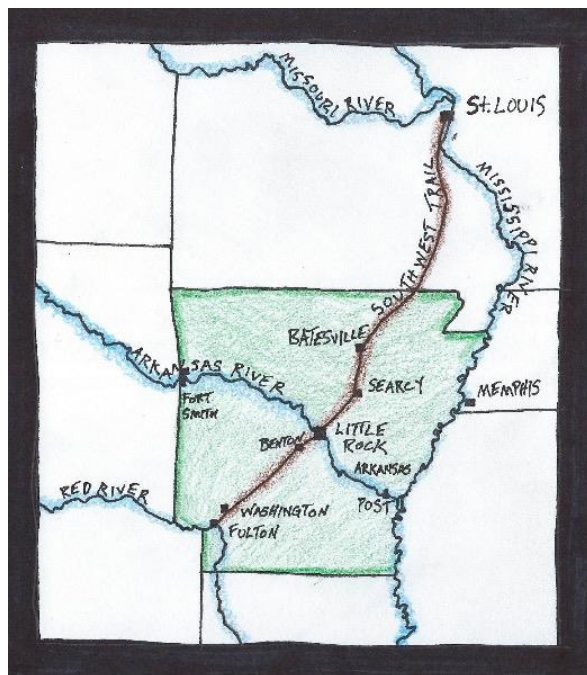


Figure 1.3 Southwest Trail. Based on information from Scott Akridge, "Southwest Trail," <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/southwest-trail-2305/> (accessed May 25, 2019).

The increase of European settlement resulted in further environmental manipulation as Europeans hunted, trapped, farmed, and cut down trees. For a time, Europeans and Indians occupied the same area and became agents of environmental change together, resulting in less flexible landscapes, areas that were used and defined for a sole reason, that made traditional native patterns of life impossible and eventually resulted in the removal of Indians from the area. Up until the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century the Indians in the Arkansas River Valley interacted with whites, who perceived their new Indian neighbors as a "united front, the Quapaws, Osages, and

<sup>117</sup> David M. Ludlum, *The Weather Factor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 11.

Chickasaws [who] promised an environment of peace, abundant hides, and a river that would easily carry those hides to sea” and international markets.<sup>118</sup>

Often rivers are described as the “arteries of a nation,” but perhaps we should think of them as the “heart of ecological health” within its watershed.<sup>119</sup> Each living organism needs water. Water is “a substance whose motion through these structures provides for their living conditions.”<sup>120</sup> The relationship between Europeans, Natives, and nature resulted in dynamic changes throughout the Arkansas River Valley and beyond. Although many Europeans originally came to the Americas looking for gold, they failed to find the element but did find it in other forms. Many Europeans perceived the abundant natural resources of the Arkansas River Valley as a money-making opportunity. The sheer size of America and its seemingly infinite wealth of land, forests, animals, water, and minerals left little room in the minds of businessmen to contemplate the consequences of rapid harvesting of raw materials from nature. A virtually insatiable desire for furs on the international market resulted in severe ecological changes in river valleys, including the Arkansas River Valley.

Beaver trapping had such an impactful influence on an area’s ecology because, save humans, they shape the landscape more than any other mammal. The beaver was instrumental in creating river valley landscapes. Beaver dams transformed forests to meadows and built up silt deposits in wetlands, creating an ecotone that supported a host of wildlife ranging from phytoplankton to larger mammals. Additionally, beaver dams and ponds influence the water

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<sup>118</sup> Kathleen Duval, “‘A Good Relationship, & Commerce’: The Native Political Economy of the Arkansas River Valley,” *Early American Studies* (Spring 2003): 62.

<sup>119</sup> William R. Lowry, *Dam Politics: Restoring America’s Rivers* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>120</sup> Vladimir Voeikov and Konstantin Korotkov, *The Emerging Science of Water: Water Science in the XXIst Century* (Middletown, Delaware: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 43.

cycle. The dams and ponds can hold millions of gallons of water and the wetlands that beavers create diminish chances of flooding and erosion throughout a watershed. Precipitation that falls within a river's watershed is destined to meet one of several fates. Fallen rain either evaporates, flows and collects in a channel, is absorbed by the ground, moves into plants then undergoes evapotranspiration, or it passes down into the groundwater. Swift running water is difficult for many animals to live in, but beaver dams trap water and in the process increase the water table resulting in new streams and purifying the water in the watershed. Without beaver populations, wetlands disappeared, and rivers and their nutrient-rich silt flowed into the ocean.<sup>121</sup>

As more settlers moved into the Arkansas River Valley many of them believed their property options were limited by Natives. To solve their problems of spatial constriction white Americans used the western portion of the lower Arkansas River Valley as a relocation center for unwanted eastern Indians. By 1790 the Creek Indians felt encroached upon by white settlers in their homelands of Georgia and Alabama, and throughout the next several decades their hunting grounds and fields were taken by whites. They tried to thwart the oncoming settlers with raids but eventually and reluctantly consented to a series of treaties relinquishing tracts of land to the white invaders. As these actions played out some of the Lower Creeks decided to accept offers of the United States and establish a new home west of the Mississippi River. The first of these emigrants settled at the "Three Forks" of the Arkansas, Verdigris, and Grand Rivers near the present-day Muskogee, Oklahoma in 1828. As the community grew with further emigration, they formed a compact settlement in the fertile Arkansas River Valley.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Alice Outwater, *Water: A Natural History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 20-21, 24, 26-28.

<sup>122</sup> Muriel H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 129; Angie Debo, *Tulsa: From Creek Town to Oil Capital* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), 6-7.

Most of the emigrants were from Coweta, Broken Arrow Big Spring, and other Lower Creek towns in Georgia. Two or three mixed-white/Indian families from Lochapoka joined the emigration. The more conservative Upper Creeks still hoped to remain in Alabama, but on March 28, 1836, U.S. officials called them to a council at Lockapoka and suggested that they emigrate. They agreed to emigrate, and the federal government planned for their excursion to begin at the end of April. Whites eager to seize the Indian's land were not as patient as Federal officials. They wanted the Indians to leave immediately. Their covetousness led to confrontations with the Indians. Some Creeks retaliated by attacking settlers in the neighboring town of Columbus. The attack provided a pretext for whites to drive out all the Creeks and take their land. Eventually, an unorganized mob of white settlers invaded the Upper Creek country, advanced on Lochapoka, drove the Indians to the swamp, and burned their town. The War Department then ordered General Thomas S. Jesup to remove the "hostiles" by force. Thus, the "Creek Uprising" of 1836 was put down, and the Creek Indians joined the chorus of other tribes moving west.<sup>123</sup>

The influx of Creeks continued along the Arkansas River around present-day Tulsa. The growing population formed a town in 1836. Tulsa's first "town council" was held under an oak tree on a hill near downtown and was presided over by Archie Yahola who was chief of the Tulsa Lochapokas. The Creek chose the name Tulsa because it was derived from the word "tellasi," which is a contraction of the Creek word "Tulahassee" or "Tallahassee," meaning "old town." The influx of natives and non-natives changed the physical landscape. They not only

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<sup>123</sup> Debo, *Tulsa: From Creek Town to Oil Capital*, 7-8.

constructed a town grew, but it also became a hub for ranchers with many of the Creek becoming cattle ranchers, farmers, and traders.<sup>124</sup>

As Americans were expanding and pushing Indians out, the young nation realized the need to, among a myriad of other concerns, develop a federal policy regarding the new nation's rivers and other bodies of water. Before the creation of the United States, there was a precedent of government participation in the administration of natural resources. The United States had a wealth of natural resources which provided a sort of grace period before the nation had to deal with resource supply and demand problems. With many natural resources, the Federal government adopted policies that primarily promoted or protected private ownership of natural resources. Occasionally, as with major river systems, the government instituted aspects of public control over the nation's natural resources. Public ownership of rivers, such as the Arkansas River, allowed the Federal government to protect the "public interest and achieve tangible and immediate returns from resource management programs," which in terms of the river meant, protecting commerce and the economy by regulating and controlling navigable rivers.<sup>125</sup>

Although the European population size and the amount of commerce occurring along the Arkansas River in the 1790s were relatively small, over the next 50 years the economy, along with white and slaves populations grew. The Federal government's influence followed the influx of traders, hunters, travelers, pioneers, slaves, and planters into the Arkansas River Valley as the

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<sup>124</sup> The City of Tulsa. About Tulsa. <https://www.cityoftulsa.org/our-city/about-tulsa.aspx> (accessed September 20, 2016); The Oklahoma Historical Society. Tulsa. <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=TU003> (accessed September 20, 2016).

<sup>125</sup> William J. Hull and Robert W Hull, *The Origin and Development of the Waterways Policy of the United States* (Washington: National Waterways Conference, INC., 1967), 1; Lawrence L. Durisch and Hersh L. Macon, *Upon its Own Resources: Conservation and State Administration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1951), 3, 11.

population established territorial and state governments. Along with the population growth came a diversification of peoples, including religions, ideologies, politics, and professions, who interacted with the river in varying ways. Despite the diversity of the population along the Arkansas River, they shared a number of commonalities, especially flood control. Flooding was one of the biggest concern for river valley residents, along with transportation. Before most people moved into the area, the Federal government had already established control over the river and stated that they would only manipulate it for navigation's sake. People had few options when it came to preparing for floods. They could move to higher ground, risk living in a flood plain, or band together and approach the problem as a community.<sup>126</sup>

The year 1802 was a big year for the Arkansas River. Two events that year impacted the river and the state itself. Water played a role in both incidents. The French regained possession of Louisiana and the United States created a corps of engineers (a forerunner to the modern United States Army Corps of Engineers). A French fire sale and the U.S. bureaucracy shaped the distribution of power in the Arkansas River Valley and influenced its applications and aesthetics.

When the Revolutionary War began in 1775, Washington, much to his chagrin, discovered that he did not have any military engineers. For the next two years, Washington and the Continental Congress assigned a handful of engineers to assist the army. Congress officially created a Corps of Engineers in the spring of 1779. The Corps' sappers and miners worked alongside army troops, but this iteration of the Corps was dissolved in November 1783.

Washington needed engineers again in the mid-1790s as European worries convinced him to

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<sup>126</sup> James M. Woods, "To the Suburb of Hell: Catholic Missionaries in Arkansas, 1803-1843," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 48 no. 3 (Autumn, 1989): 218-219; Marie Cash, "Arkansas in Territorial Days," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 1 no. 3 (September, 1942): 223.

strengthen some of the nation's harbors. In 1802, under President Jefferson, the government established West Point Military Academy. The creation of the Academy allowed the President to create a Corps of Engineers that "at no time, exceed twenty officers and cadets."<sup>127</sup> This new Corps was to be stationed at West Point and were "subject, at all times, to do duty in such places, and on such service, as the President of the United States shall direct."<sup>128</sup>

French thought profoundly influenced the young Corps of Engineers. In 1776 French recruits, with their diplomas from prominent technical schools, and under the leadership of General Louis Lebègue Duportail, exposed the U.S. Army to the formal study of tactics, artillery, and military construction. They also suggested that the U.S. create a military academy to teach engineering science. After the war, the government disbanded the army, and most of the French engineers left the country. Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant, who enjoyed America, stayed and championed the idea that the U.S. should create a department of public works staffed by full-time army engineers. He believed the United States should have a national staff of engineers like the French *corps des ponts et chaussées* to oversee all engineering projects involving forts, military and municipal buildings, maintenance of the infrastructure (specifically roads and bridges), and anything else constructed for the benefit of the public. L'Enfant called up Congress to take responsibility for public improvements using engineering science. Congress took a small step towards L'Enfant's idea when they reorganized the military and created the Corps of

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<sup>127</sup> United States Army Corps of Engineers, *The Spirit of Nation Building* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1993), 3; Henry C. Jewett, "History of the Corps of Engineers to 1915," *The Military Engineer* 14 no. 77 (September-October, 1922): 304; An Act Fixing the Military Peace Establishment of the United States, 7<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., chapter 11, section 26 (March 16, 1802).

<sup>128</sup> An Act Fixing the Military Peace Establishment of the United States, 7<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., chapter 11, section 27 (March 16, 1802).



Engineers, which retained and built upon ideology and application introduced by French engineers like Duportail and L'Enfant.<sup>129</sup>

The other future altering event concerning the Arkansas River in 1802 was when Thomas Jefferson made the single most significant land purchase of his life. Louisiana, especially New Orleans and its spatial relationship to the U.S. seemed to be simultaneously dangerous and desirable. Frustratingly, the city lay just beyond the United States' grasp as the aggressive Napoleon sent troops to New Orleans in an effort to secure his new world empire. Napoleon's plans worried the U.S. President who tasked James Monroe and Robert Livingston to buy New Orleans and West Florida; their budget was \$10 million. Surprisingly Napoleon offered to sell all of Louisiana for \$15 million as he needed to fund his primary objectives in Europe. Slave revolts and mosquitos on Hispaniola had thwarted French troops, and war with England loomed on the horizon. *Monsieur Bonaparte* needed *beaucoup d'argent* to fund his plans for world domination, or at least enough money to control western Europe. Bonaparte's patience peaked when, upon hearing the disappointing news from Haiti, he reportedly cried out, "Damn sugar, damn coffee, damn colonies."<sup>130</sup> His focus on Europe reoriented race relations in the Arkansas River Valley. Natives in the river valley would have to navigate a "radically new vision of Indian-white relations."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> The French schools of engineering were so popular in the Corps' early years that roughly 1/3 of their technical library was written in French; Todd Shallat, "Engineering Policy: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Historical Foundation of Power," *The Public Historian* 11 no. 3 (Summer, 1989): 9-10.

<sup>130</sup> Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. (2016), "Louisianans React to the Louisiana Purchase: Pierre Derbigny's Memorial to the U.S. Congress," *Digital History*, [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=261](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=261) (accessed June 4, 2018); Du Val, *The Native Ground*, 178-179.

<sup>131</sup> Napoleon was also known as the Corsican Fiend; Kathleen Du Val, *The Native Ground*, 178-179.

With the Louisiana Purchase came the Arkansas River. More than ever the government needed to address legal issues regarding rivers and bodies of water. The brainchild of the Continental Congress was a confederation of states that lacked a central authority. Under the Articles of Confederation, the National Government could not regulate commerce. Trade wars developed among the newly created states. Each state reigned over their ports of entry or river waterways like petty tyrants bent on fleecing whoever dared use their watery property for financial gain. Therefore, trade was a favorite theme at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. The attendees were aware of how competition and sectional differences had retarded water commerce in the U.S. and how it had severely restricted trade on European waterways. Germany was a specific example of the Federalists because Germany had “rendered useless” the navigable streams and rivers that “happily watered” that nation.<sup>132</sup> In this regard, the Constitutional Convention did not want to repeat Germany’s errors. Some founding fathers, Hamilton mainly, worried that sectional bias and taxes on navigation would hurt commerce. At the heart of the matter ran the Mississippi. The Founders wanted the Mississippi River to be duty-free to help commerce flow from the trans-Appalachian west to the east coast via the Mississippi River. Firstly, Congress had to bestow upon themselves the power to “regulate commerce,” which they did in Article 1 section 8 of the Constitution. Then in Article 1 section 9, of the Constitution, Congress cleared the way for free trade upon the Nation’s waterways stating that, “No preference shall be given by any regulation of commerce or revenue to the ports of one state over those of

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<sup>132</sup> Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, (1787-1788; repr., New York: Bantam Classic, 2003), 124; William J. Hull and Robert W. Hull, *The Origin and Development of the Waterways Policy of the United States* (Washington D.C.: National Waterways Conference, Inc., 1967), 1-2.

another; nor shall vessels bound to, or from, one state, be obliged to enter, clear or pay duties in another.”

In 1787 the young nation witnessed the creation of further legislation that influenced the Federal government’s role on waterways such as the soon to be purchased Arkansas River. Perhaps 1787 is best known as the year William Herschel discovered Titania and Oberon, moons of Uranus, or as the year that Mozart completed *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, or maybe even better remembered as the year Andrew Jackson was admitted to the bar. Additionally, in 1787, Congress established the first U.S. territory. The Ordinance of 1787 created the Northwest Territory, which consisted of land north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi (the future homes of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and a portion of Minnesota). This ordinance is usually discussed in the context of slavery in the United States. It is also of great importance to the history of American Rivers, including the Arkansas River. The Ordinance of 1787 is the “cornerstone of the free waterway policy of the United States.”<sup>133</sup>

Further legislation solidified America’s rivers as public highways. Article 4 of the Ordinance of 1787 states, “The navigable waters leading into the Mississippi and St. Lawrence, and the carrying places between the same, shall be common highways and forever free, as well to the inhabitants of the said territory as to the citizens of the United States, and those of any other States that may be admitted into the confederacy, without any tax, impost, or duty therefore.”<sup>134</sup> George Washington believed the nation’s waterways needed to be free not only to support

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<sup>133</sup> Hull and Hull, *The Origin and Development of the Waterways Policy of the United States*, 3.

<sup>134</sup> Northwest Ordinance, July 13, 1787; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M332, roll 9); Miscellaneous Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789; Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789, Record Group 360; National Archives, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=8&page=transcript> (accessed June 18, 2018).

commerce but to keep the young Republic joined together. He wrote, “My attention is more immediately engaged in a project which I think is big with great political, as well Commercial consequences to these States, especially the middle ones. It is, by removing the obstructions—and extending the inland Navigation of our Rivers, to bring the States on the Atlantic in close connection with those forming to the Westward, by a short and easy land transportation.”<sup>135</sup>

Early in the United States’ infancy, the federal government set precedents regarding their involvement with rivers and established control of America’s waterways. The young government understood the need for open shipping lanes, but control of rivers meant something much more in the early Republic than a means of transporting goods to market. Rivers and the control of them were essential to the overall health of the nation. As George Washington understood, Americans needed to go westward, and rivers offered the best travel options. Other presidents also valued rivers. Lawmakers in Washington D.C. concerned with waterways had perceptions, plans, and designs, some that included the Arkansas River. Those who lived along the river and interacted with it daily did not always agree with the government’s river policies but desired federal assistance in trying to control the river. Thus a complicated relationship evolved between state officials, government officials and agencies, business interests, and inhabitants who lived along the river. As had been playing out for a long time, the river brought change to humans just as humans did to the river.

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<sup>135</sup> “From George Washington to David Humphreys, 25 July 1785,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-03-02-0142>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series, vol. 3, 19 May 1785–31 March 1786, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994, pp. 148–151.]; Hull and Hull, *The Origin and Development of the Waterways Policy of the United States*, 5.

Humans influenced and were influenced by the Arkansas River as soon as they entered the river valley. They quickly learned that control of the environment secured social and cultural power. The river encouraged and supported growth of human, animal, and plant populations. As those population increased and diversified they interacted with the environment and each other in different ways. They engaged with the river valley in ways that modern readers would find as ecologically positive and destructive. Regardless of society's presentism, Natives manipulated the environment and how and why they did so evolved over time, especially with the introduction of Europeans. Explorers brought their world views and aspects of their lives that had a significant impact on the western hemisphere. Diseases, new animals, and new concepts that commodified the environment fed into a self-feeding loop of change that the Natives had lived with for years in the Arkansas River valley. Power struggles for control over the Arkansas River Valley intensified as Indian groups fought each other and European groups, who also fought amongst themselves, for control of the environment and political, social, and economic power. Early in the United States' history the government sought to solidify power and one method they used was to establish control over the new nation's resources, especially waterways. Attempts to control the Arkansas River evolved into a web of competing interests between locals who lived and worked in connection to the river, the states that the river flowed through, and the federal government. All parties involved, locals, Arkansan officials, and federal entities constantly sought to shift the power dynamic regarding the river into their favor.

Although the river was a vital aspect of Arkansas' economy, the river often behaved in a contrary manner to the wishes of locals and federal officials alike. The Arkansas River laid waste to the best of plans, punished the foolish, and brought death, but it also, in the best of times, offered many necessary services for the people of the river valley and the nation. When

the river was “wild” or “out of control” the results were so devastating that sometimes local people needed the help of the federal government and her resources to recover and make the river “behave.” The role of the lower Arkansas River and how it “should” perform became a matter of debate ranging from Tulsa to the Arkansas Post and from Little Rock to Washington D.C. The Federal government was unlikely to respond to the request of French trappers who complained about the Arkansas River, but state politicians and wealthy planters (who often were the same people), was a different story. Before the Federal government took notice and acted on the river, they needed to have a reason, financial and martial ones to be exact, before they expended time and resources on a river out in the western wilds of the country whose origin was unknown. Cotton and the river provided critical ingredients that resulted the government taking notice.

Circa 1810 a Frenchmen named Frederick Notrebe immigrated to the United States. By 1811 he was living at Arkansas Post, began work in the fur trade, and married Mary Felicite Billette (with whom he would sire six children with). Notrebe’s entrepreneurial endeavors included the purchasing of land in the Arkansas Post area (he would later expand to other counties) where he built a house and established a cotton production operation. He was instrumental in the growth of cotton agriculture in the State. Soon after Notrebe arrived in Arkansas, the fur market became a shadow of its former self, which gave Notrebe ample time to build his plantation kingdom. In 1817 Notrebe took another step towards becoming a planter and engaged in the slave trade. Notrebe became a powerful and influential figure due to his acquisition of land along the Arkansas River. When the capital of Arkansas moved to Little Rock, Notrebe stayed in southeast Arkansas and created a “virtual monopoly on the cotton

market in eastern Arkansas.”<sup>136</sup> When the river cooperated, it was a valuable tool for Notrebe and other planters in their cotton production. When it thwarted planters and destroyed property, control of the river became a hot topic as people grappled with the reality of their environmental and economic situations combined with their political philosophies.

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<sup>136</sup> Kathleen H. Cande, “Frederick Notrebe (1780-1849,” *The Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/frederick-notrebe-4126/> (accessed June 21, 2019).

## Chapter Two

### The Rivers Becomes King Cotton's Scepter of Power

Rivers must have been the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travelers. They are the constant lure, when they flow by our doors, to distant enterprise and adventure, and, by a natural impulse, the dwellers on their banks will at length accompany their currents to the lowlands of the globe, or explore at their invitation the interior of continents.

— Henry David Thoreau

As the Arkansas River flowed east out of Indian Territory and into Arkansas on its way to the Mississippi, the river met an equally persistent tide of settlers moving into the Arkansas River Valley. The Arkansas River played a vital role in the development of the territory and later the state. Coinciding with technological innovations, the river itself became a busier transportation route and with that transportation and technology came plantation agriculture into the river valley. Together, the Arkansas River and the influx of humans from all over the world created a new Arkansas.

At the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States was going through a metamorphosis. The young nation had fed on a steady diet of political and social theory and revolution and was now evolving into its next stage of growth. A growth that moved westward and, in part, into the Arkansas River Valley. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>-century antebellum period, tens of thousands of people migrated across the continent as change, and new opportunities, worked as a catalyst to spur on developing ideas of what it was to be American. Natives in the Arkansas River valley tried to maintain influence in the region as eastern Indians, white folks, and slaves flooded into the area, and the valley transitioned from Indian territory to Arkansas territory, and then into the state of Arkansas.



The Arkansas River was and remained a central player in the machinations of the groups seeking to control the “wilderness” of the river valley and the river itself, for whoever controlled the wild collected the most profits from it. Because the Arkansas River’s furry animals congregated in a relatively small space, that made it easier for trappers and hunters to find, kill, and sell their dismembered body parts. The river aided in the killing of the animals it succored with its life-giving water by providing—during certain months—a natural highway that reduced time and effort in transporting furs and hides to a world market. Additionally, white folks quickly discovered that the river created fertile soil, soil that gave birth to money. Money may not grow on trees, but during the antebellum period, many people hoped it grew on cotton bolls.

Plantation culture reorganized society and how people viewed and used the land. Additionally, large scale agriculture altered the physical environment. Furthermore, floods became more problematic. Floods became commodified. They had prices attached to them. The social and economic elite in the River Valley had to tame the river to reduce the risk inherent in growing crops near a river that often floods, but they could not always financially afford to mitigate risks associated with the river. Not long after Arkansas’ inception, the state bank was under water—financially speaking—so planters petitioned the Federal government to intervene on their behalf.

Government intervention, in the beliefs of elites, was acceptable if the largess was large and elite white people could monopolize it. Federal involvement in terms of river improvement—mainly through the Corps of Engineers—was a variation on a theme in the region. River valley residents, beginning with the natives, had long engaged in a complex and nuanced dance with foreign governments. Regardless of whose dance card it was, almost everyone in the river valley had the government at the top of their list, willingly or not. Planters

throughout the river valley learned how to dance with the government, often inventing the steps as they went along, and for a time, they found the interaction rewarding. The party would end eventually as relations between planters and federal officials became a ticking time-bomb. When the political tide shifted in the 1850s planters believed they could no longer rely on the federal government for help in river control or preserving their brand of agriculture, along with its cultural and social peculiarities. The state of politics deteriorated in the river valley, the state, and the nation.<sup>137</sup>

The travelers and settlers—forced and unforced—that flowed in and out of the Arkansas River Valley through the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought with them their social and cultural baggage and added new pieces to their baggage collection in Arkansas. River valley residents' social proclivities and world views influenced how the river was perceived and manipulated. All these changes impacted racial relations, the economy, local and national politics, and the river itself.

By 1802 the estimated population of Arkansas Post was 450. As the Arkansas River Valley transitioned from being a French possession to American, white settlers and explorers trickled into the area. The first census conducted by the United States government in 1810 counted 924 whites, 136 African slaves, and two free people of color. As the population grew a desire to be a United States territory increased also. By the end of the 1810s people who lived in the Arkansas area (many of them along the Arkansas River) prepared a petition for Congress to make Arkansas a territory. Congress accepted the petition, passed a bill accordingly, and President Monroe signed it on March 2, 1819, creating the Arkansas Territory. The 1820 census

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<sup>137</sup> G.W. Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion through the Slave States, from Washington on the Potomac to the Frontier of Mexico; with Sketches of Popular Manners and Geological Notices* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 95.

revealed a white population of 12,579, 4,579 slaves, and 141 free people of color. Over the next two decades, the population exploded to 77,174 whites, 19,935 slaves, and 465 free blacks.<sup>138</sup>

The Arkansas River was a motivating factor that influenced the ever increasing population of the river valley.

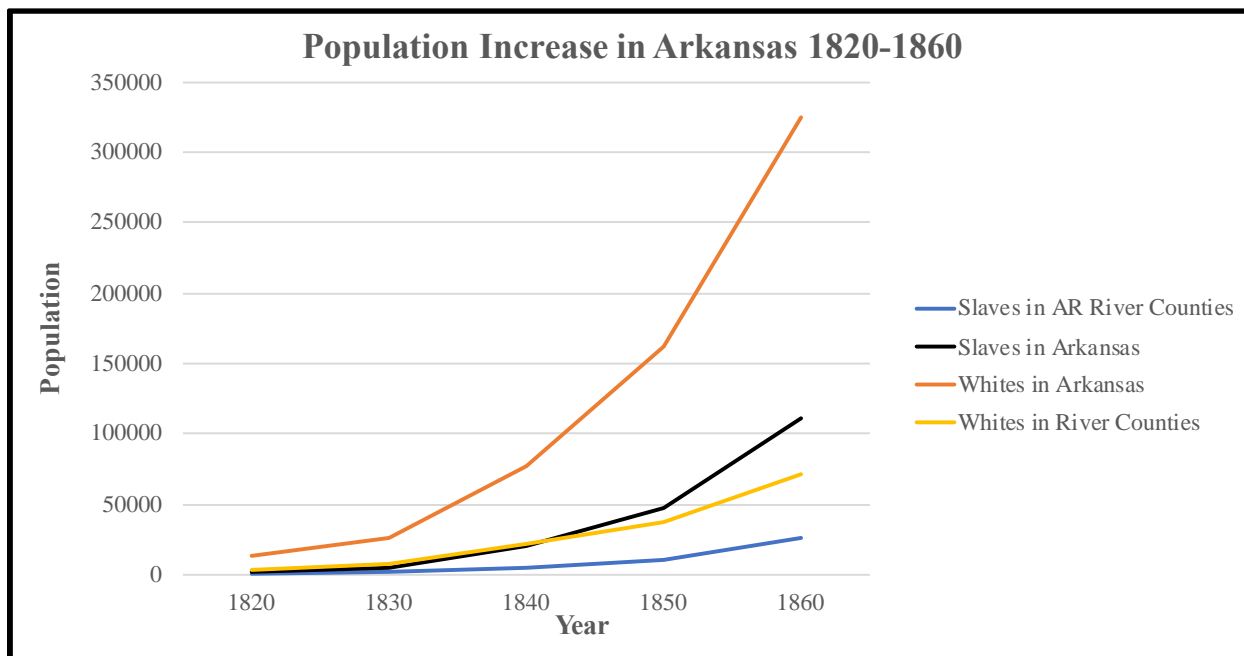


Table 2.1 *Source: United States Secretary of State, Fourth Census of the United States* (Washington D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1821), 162; *United States Secretary of State, Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census, Showing the Number of Free People, the Number of Slaves, The Federal or Representative Number, and the Aggregate of Each County of Each State of the United States* (Washington D.C.: Duff Green, 1832), 49; *United States Department of State, Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States, as Obtained at the Department of State, from the Returns of the Sixth Census* (Washington D.C.: Thomas Allen, 1841); 92-93; DeBow, J.D.B., *United States Census, The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington D.C.: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer, 1853), 535; *United States Department of the Interior Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 18.

On March 3, 1808, Congress declared that all traversable rivers south of the State of Tennessee were and would always be public.<sup>139</sup> Congress established its power to oversee the

<sup>138</sup> Woods, "To the Suburb of Hell: Catholic Missionaries in Arkansas, 1803-1843," 218-219; Cash, "Arkansas in Territorial Days," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*: 223.

<sup>139</sup> Hull and Hull, *The Origin and Development of the Waterways Policy of the United States*, 7.

Arkansas River, according to the statutes of the United States Congress, because they defined it as a public highway. Despite the declarations of the legislative branch, questions remained. Since the Arkansas River was considered a public river, did that mean the federal government was responsible for it? Would Congress be responsible for the damages it caused? Who oversaw making sure the river would serve the needs of Arkansas and the nation? Who controlled it? As more outsiders moved into the Arkansas River Valley, these were the questions that hung heavy on the minds of people whose lives depended on the river because if the government controlled the river and by extension the river valley, that relationship would have serious consequences to other relationships with the river.

The issue of water rights on the Arkansas River in Oklahoma and Arkansas differed from the doctrine of Prior Appropriation that evolved in the western United States. Because of the Arkansas River's remarkable flooding tendencies and the region's dependency on the river, Arkansans in the river valley eventually developed a close, if not symbiotic, relationship with the federal government in terms of river improvement projects. Riparian rights were subordinated to flood control, flood control that Arkansans needed help with from the Federal government to implement.<sup>140</sup>

Initially, a power struggle over the river erupted as Arkansans attempted to shift the power and control of the river, according to federal law, away from the government into their, so they believed, more experienced and knowledgeable hands. After all, who knew more about the river than those who lived and worked in and on it daily? When the United States bought the

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<sup>140</sup> Walter U. Garstka, *Water Resources and the National Welfare* (Fort Collins, Colorado: Water Resources Publications, 1978), 394.

river, they did not even know much about it. President Jefferson had to send explorers to figure out precisely what he had purchased.

The explorer William Dunbar, regarding the Arkansas River, believed that “hills or mountains...gave rise to this little river” and flowed through “the immense plains or prairies which extend beyond the Red River, to the south, and beyond the Missouri...to the north.”<sup>141</sup> Despite not knowing the exact nature of the place the river flowed from, Dunbar understood the water to be “cool and [of] excellent quality.”<sup>142</sup> Dunbar’s description of the river was very romantic, others would also see the river and its surrounding in similar terms, throughout the next several decades. The weather on November 17, 1832, was “warm and genial,” Washington Irving recalled, “The forests very much stripped of leaves—young cotton-wood groves—grey branches—light tinge of green on tops—golden sunshine—loneliness & stillness of the scene—the Sabbath of the woods.”<sup>143</sup> Once more people began to experience the river for themselves, it would not take long for the state, and the Arkansas River, to develop a national reputation and not everyone’s perception of the region was as idealized as Irving’s.

As people flooded into the river valley and experienced the river they came to understand it intimately. Although many white Americans around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not fully realize the length and features of the Arkansas River’s course from the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi Delta, a handful did come to understand the characteristics of the river that flowed through modern-day Arkansas. The reputation of the southern portion of the Arkansas River in the early 1800s was that it was “subject to those deluges of rain...[that] tear up and sweep away

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<sup>141</sup> “Observations, Extracted from the Journals of William Dunbar, Esq. and Doctor Hunter,” *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*, 10 Nov. 1806.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Washington Irving, *The Western Journals of Washington Irving*, ed. and annotated by John Frances McDermott (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), 155.

with irresistible fury, the crop and soil together.”<sup>144</sup> Rumors good and bad swirled around and washed over those that migrated to the Arkansas River Valley. Many people who visited Arkansas throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century perceived the people who lived in the river valley to be just as wild, dangerous, and unpredictable as the river and natural environment that enveloped them.

The first step, many people believed, to making the Arkansas River Valley usable and inhabitable was to push the Indians out.<sup>145</sup> President Jefferson’s long term plan for Arkansas was to turn its Indian lands into a “dumping ground” for unwanted and expelled eastern Natives that once controlled real-estate whites wanted.<sup>146</sup> Despite the influx of newer groups into the Arkansas River Valley the Osage and Quapaw continued to implement their previous policies regarding foreigners. Quapaw Indians stuck to tried and true methods of polite manners and soft power to influence whites and other Native groups, the Osage opted for a different *modus operandi*, a dual attack of violent expansion and strategic diplomacy. The Osage had successfully pushed the Caddo into present-day Texas and had reason to believe they could do the same to other native groups – such as the Cherokee – new to Arkansas.<sup>147</sup> Overcrowding in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became more complicated as eastern tribes – Illinois, Sauk, Delaware, Miamia, Potawatomie, and Shawnee – began moving west.<sup>148</sup>

As the Native Americans within Arkansas – new and old – jockeyed for position, the United States government established an administrative foothold in the region enhancing the

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<sup>144</sup> “Observations, Extracted from the Journals of William Dunbar, Esq. and Doctor Hunter,” *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*, 10 Nov. 1806.

<sup>145</sup> Kathleen Du Val, *The Native Ground*, 179, 189.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 178, 180.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185.

area's connection to the global market in furs. But the reality of establishing its position proved more daunting than officials of the United States might have imagined. In March of 1804 Lt. James B. Many of the U.S. took over control of the Arkansas Post from the Spanish Captain Francisco Caso y Luengo. With Many manning the helm there were many monumental money-making modifications to be made throughout the Arkansas River Valley. The following year William Treat established a factory (government trading post) to facilitate trade and foster friendship with the Natives. It worked, initially. The factory that the Office of Indian Trade opened on the Arkansas River gave Natives a place to exchange Spanish medals and flags for similar American "tokens of friendship."<sup>149</sup> The Superintendent from the Office of Indian Trade's policy stipulated that the location of the factory be well-located. The Arkansas Post at the mouth of the Arkansas River was the best option at the time. As spring sprung in 1806, Treat simultaneously started construction of factory buildings. Treat also built a house that acted as a Holiday Inn Express for visiting Indians who were there on business. The ultimate goal of the government trading posts was not to make money; it was to put private traders out of business and in doing so monopolize and control the relationship parameters between whites and Indians along the Arkansas River. Once the Federal government controlled trade, the next phase of the plan was to put Indians in such deep debt that they were forced to sell land to Uncle Sam. President Jefferson was an inventor who invented "curious little inventions for his own personal comfort," and dabbled in diabolic schemes to "obtain lands" from "savages" that lacked sufficient debt counseling.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> David Andrew Nichols, *Engines of Diplomacy: Indian Trading Factories and the Negotiation of American Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 13; Bolton, *Arkansas 1800-1860*, 4; Du Val, *The Native Ground*, 187.

<sup>150</sup> Margaret Bayard Smith, "Reminiscences of Life at Monticello," *Richmond Enquirer*, July 29, 1809; Wayne Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," *The*

Unfortunately for those whose livelihoods depended on business done at the factory, the project encountered difficulty and only lasted just shy of a decade before ending. The factory and the soldiers stationed at the Arkansas Post could not accommodate each other. Trouble for the Arkansas Post factory partially stemmed from the War Department's allowing private-sector traders to establish businesses in town. For example, the trading firm of Bright and Morgan, having close ties to New Orleans and Philadelphia, acquired a government trading license that allowed them to do \$25,000 annually and provide up to \$10,000 a year in credit. As part of the federally sanctioned Indian trade, factors and agents doled out annuities to tribes and organized treaties. Additionally, they could grant trading licenses. Government merchants throughout the Arkansas River Valley bemoaned the new competition, and they were frustrated that agents and the troops in the area neglected to prohibit unlicensed traders from operating in the river valley.<sup>151</sup>

The business transactions that occurred at the government factories, primarily offering goods for pelts, was an elaborate exchange. Government trading posts sold their products above cost to offset transportation costs, which allowed them to offer lower costs that forced private merchants to alter their prices. This business model created the first instance where customers in Arkansas could save money and live better. Despite offering low prices, factors discovered that extending credit was useful and necessary. President Jefferson viewed credit as a handy tool in

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*Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 28 no. 1 (Spring, 1969): 28-29; Aloysius Plaisance, "The Arkansas Factory, 1805-1810," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 11 no. 3 (Autumn, 1952): 184, 186; Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison, Washington, February 27, 1803, in Clarence E. Carter, ed., in *The Territorial Papers of the United States vol. 7, The Territory of Indiana 1800-1810* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office 1939), 91.

<sup>151</sup> Plaisance, "The Arkansas Factory, 1805-1810," 184, 186; Du Val, *The Native Ground*, 187; Wayne Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," 29, 35.



gaining new land. Factors found that many Indians had become dependent on American and European goods and needed credit. Without credit, Natives could not adequately equip themselves with firearms, ammunition, clothing, and other needful supplies used on winter hunts. A lack of credit resulted in no pelts, no trading, no successfully established beneficial relationships between natives in the Arkansas River Valley and the United States.<sup>152</sup>

The fur trade of the Arkansas River Valley at Arkansas Post connected Arkansas to a broader global economy as it had done as early as the period of French occupation. Trading and loaning usually occurred at the factories as the government did not want trading to happen in Indian villages because it was too hazardous and too far from the concerned gaze of Uncle Sam's eyes. The deeper into the interior a factor went to trade, the greater the temptation grew to focus on personal gain or acquire pelts by trading with alcohol. At the Post, once the factor acquired pelts, they were packed and drenched with turpentine then stored in cellars until they could fetch an acceptable price. Once shipped the furs floated to New Orleans. Upon arrival, the furs were quality checked and poor specimens were culled then, most likely, shipped overseas to Bordeaux, France or Amsterdam. The price of furs from the Arkansas River Valley fluctuated between 1803 and 1815 because the international market was volatile. Due to the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, the Congressional embargo of 1807, and the War of 1812 the market dipped but began to recover in 1817 when international relations started to cool.<sup>153</sup>

For specifically environmental reasons, fur trading in the Arkansas River Valley was relatively less lucrative than the trade in the famous *pays d'en haut* area around the Great Lakes

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<sup>152</sup> Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," 31; Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 68, 71, 73, 99.

<sup>153</sup> Nichols, *Engines of Diplomacy*, 69; Wayne Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," 31-32.

region. Furs from a southern frontier region like the Arkansas River Valley went for 40%-60% less than northern furs. The warmer climate of the river valley resulted in animals with lighter pelts, which were also more likely to rot once harvested. Due to these characteristics of the river valley deer hides drove most of the fur trade in Arkansas. Additionally, to a lesser degree, muskrat, mink, bear skins, raccoon skins, buffalo robes, and beaver pelts were also harvested and sold into a global market. By 1809 the number of hides Natives were trading in the Arkansas River Valley Factories had significantly dropped. Government traders could not compete with private traders. Private traders outperformed the government factories at Arkansas Post and in the Three Rivers area of modern-day Oklahoma because they made house calls. Natives, who often complained about traveling to factories, stopped making the trip. Thus the trade was lucrative if a trader traveled to the Indians and did not require the Natives to come to them. Additionally, private trades offered more credit to their prospective business partners. <sup>154</sup>

The Osage presented perhaps the biggest challenge to the fur trade and to U.S. hegemony in the region. If the Osage could have built a wall to keep immigrants out, especially the Cherokee, they probably would have. Immigrants from the east flooded into Arkansas between 1790 and 1820 and with immigration came the redistribution of power. . The struggles that raged through the Osage's native ground hampered trade and commerce throughout the river valley. United States officials hoped to entice eastern tribes with land west of the Mississippi as a place where they could live peacefully, and hopefully live a life based on agriculture. In 1809, the Osage in Arkansas, also known as the Chaniers, a group of Osage from Missouri who relocated to eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas, signed a treaty that ceded all their land in northern

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<sup>154</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, xxv-xxvi, 11; Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," 32-34.

Arkansas north of the Arkansas River and the southern part of modern-day Missouri.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, the Chaniers continued to patrol the area unleashing attacks on white traders and immigrant Indians. The Osage harbored a particular hatred for the Cherokees, whom the federal government encouraged to go westward and settle along the Arkansas river on territory claimed by the Osage. The situation continued to disintegrate as Cherokees hunted and trampled throughout the balance of Osage controlled lands. The Cherokee agent William Lovely attempted to settle the regional tensions in 1816 by persuading the Osage to give up the land between the Verdigris River ranging eastward into Arkansas. Lovely's Purchase proved unhelpful as hostilities continued. The Osage not only warred against the Cherokee but the Cherokee allies including Caddos, Chickasaws, Comanches, Choctaws, Delawares, Kickapoos, Shawnees, and Tonkawas. In 1817, the Cherokee responded to continuous Osage pillaging by attacking and destroying an Osage village and killing several villagers. Repercussions were forthcoming as Osage warriors unleashed their wrath on white traders and immigrant Natives. The Federal government needed to subdue the violence occurring in the Arkansas River Valley around the modern-day border of Arkansas and Oklahoma.<sup>156</sup> James Monroe's Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, initially, and to the chagrin of many whites, was not ready to coerce reluctant tribes off their land and instead hoped to persuade Indians of the benefits of removal but reaching a settlement was further frustrated by friction between the Osages and the Cherokees. To calm

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<sup>155</sup> Julius H. Rubin, *Perishing Heathens: Stories of Protestant Missionaries and Christian Indians in Antebellum America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 101-102; Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," 33, 39-40.

<sup>156</sup> Rubin, *Perishing Heathens*, 101-102; Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," 39-40.

the region down and make it more attractive to white settlers, Calhoun sent a single company of riflemen up the Arkansas River in 1817 to Belle Point, the future site of Fort Smith.<sup>157</sup>

General Thomas A. Smith ordered Major William Bradford to take his rifle company up the Arkansas River and establish a fort in the midst of the hostilities. Once they arrived at Arkansas Post Bradford and Major Stephen H. Long devised their plans for traveling up the river and decided that Long should lead the way up the Arkansas River in his six-oared skiff. The officers selected seven reliable men to accompany Long up the Arkansas River, two of them African-American soldiers, Peter Caulder and Martin Turner. The party departed on their journey the first day of November 1817, and after twenty days on the river, Major Long and his seven soldiers pulled their skiff ashore at Belle Point. For two weeks, Major Long explored the countryside around Belle Point. He liked what he saw. The surrounding area played host to forests of ash, walnut, and oak trees, which indicated a good water table. Hand-dug wells could supply the fort with its most essential requirement, water. Fifty feet above the river was a pleasant plain that seemed suitable for growing crops and raising livestock.<sup>158</sup>

In 1817 Major Long, a topographical engineer, followed his orders and selected a site for a fort constructed on the border of the Indian lands. He reported his findings to General Thomas A. Smith, the commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Military District. Major Long chose a site located on a high bluff at the junction of the Arkansas and Poteau Rivers. The bluff rose out from the river for twenty to thirty feet. The location was a favorite area of French explorers from Arkansas Post

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<sup>157</sup> Brad Agnew, *Fort Gibson: Terminal on the Trail of Tears* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 3; Arrell Morgan Gibson, *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1981), 30; Odie B. Faulk and Billy Mac Jones, *Fort Smith: An Illustrated History* (Muskogee: Western Heritage Books, 1983), 13.

<sup>158</sup> Billy D. Higgins, *Fort Smith: Vanguard of Western Frontier History* (Lawrenceburg, Indiana: The Creative Company, 2007), 12-13.

who traveled upriver to trade with the Indians. The French called the location La Belle Pointe.

Major long reported that:

This place is situated...at the junction of the Poteau River four hundred and sixty miles from the mouth of Arkansas, pursuing its meanderings and about twenty miles above the Osage boundary line. This situation selected for the garrison is secure and healthy, and affords a complete command of the rivers above mentioned...In selecting the position, a particular regard has been paid to your instructions, which require a site as near the point where the Osage boundary lines strikes the Arkansas as circumstances would permit.<sup>159</sup>

By this point in time, there were three principle settlements on the Arkansas River:

Arkansas Post, Little Rock, and Fort Smith. And just as the Arkansas River shaped the physical environment, it inspired the lines cartographers drew regarding the political borders in western Arkansas. The Choctaw Treaty of 1825 set the western boundary of Arkansas and

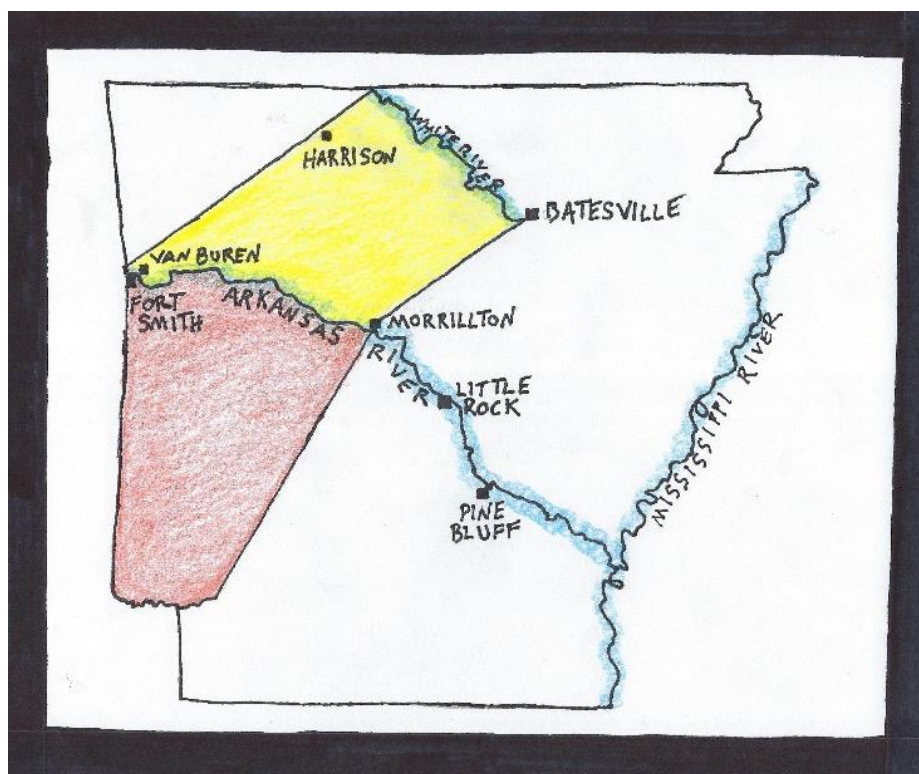


Figure 2.1 Territory Ceded by the Choctaw and Cherokee. Lands granted to the Choctaw in 1820 (in red) but nullified by the treaty of January 24, 1826. The area in yellow was ceded by the Cherokee Nation on May 6, 1828. Map based on information in, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the*

<sup>159</sup> Ruth B. Mapes, *Old Fort Smith: Cultural Center on the Southwestern Frontier* (Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1965), 6-7.

*Smithsonian Institution 1896-97* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1899), 709, Arkansas map 2.

the eastern boundary of the Choctaw Nation as “lying east of a line beginning on the Arkansas, one hundred paces east of Fort Smith, and running thence, due south, to Red River: it being understood that this line shall constitute, and remain, the permanent boundary between the United States and the Choctaws.”<sup>160</sup> The Choctaw Treaty placed Fort Smith into Choctaw Country. The War Department reviewed the situation followed by a government decision to build a permanent military post within the boundary of Arkansas. There were three possible locations to build the new fort, all of them influenced by the Arkansas River. The first locations, at Massard Bluff, was eight miles from Fort Smith and owned by Dr. Joseph Bailey, the army surgeon at Old Belle Point (the original name of Fort Smith). Secondly, another option was at Lee’s Creek Bluff, on the north side of the Arkansas River, between Fort Smith and Van Buren, and owned by Dr. Jonathan McGee. Finally, the third consideration, was on the south side of the Arkansas River, in Fort Smith and owned by Captain John Rogers. Commissioners were appointed by the government to select the new location. One of the commissioners was Captain Bonneville, a friend of Captain Rogers, and due, in part, to their friendship, the government acquired Rogers’ land.<sup>161</sup> The *Arkansas Gazette* of May 23, 1838, read:

Captain Rogers passed up last week, on his return from Washington, where, we understand from him, he affected the sale to the government of a portion of his tract of land at Fort Smith, as a site for the permanent military post on our western frontier. He sells 296 acres, having a front of 100 yards on the south side of the Arkansas River, immediately below the Choctaw line, and running back for quantity, for the sum of \$15,000...It is the intention of the government, we understand, to construct strong works at this point, and Captain Charles Thomas has been selected to superintend their erection.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, vol. 2 of *Treaties* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 212.

<sup>161</sup> Mapes, *Old Fort Smith*, 9.

<sup>162</sup> Editorial, *Arkansas Gazette*, May 23, 1838.

In the fall of 1827, Captain John Rodgers advertised in the Arkansas, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Louisville, Nashville, and Cincinnati newspapers that he would convert 160 acres of land at Fort Smith into town lots.<sup>163</sup>

The United States commander of the Southern District, Andrew Jackson, knew well the need for soldiers and a fort on the Arkansas River. The governor of Missouri Territory, William Clark, had kept Jackson well informed regarding warring Indians in the Arkansas District. Clark had asked the War Department for a deployment of troops along the Arkansas River to prevent raids by the Cherokee and Osage on each other. Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, heard Clark's cries for help and devised a plan that revolved around preventing further warfare and the frequent raids by Osage and Cherokee tribe on each other. A fort on the Arkansas River aided the U.S. in attempting to stabilize the region while appearing to be neutral and benevolent.<sup>164</sup>

Fort Smith was established as part of a plan the War Department had devised to create a chain of fortifications, in Fort Smith's case against the Osage and Cherokee, along the length of the western frontier of the United States. The Army installed a rifle regiment company at each fort. These frontier posts formed a line of defense for the nascent country's western border that stretched from Green Bay on the Fox River in Wisconsin to Fort Claiborne on the Red River. The forts, such as Fort Smith, situated near the middle of this belt looked outward for any enemies that might appear to threaten U.S. territory on its western border.<sup>165</sup> Security for farming, commerce, and government investments in the forts, acted to encourage white settlement. Although the initial troop deployments to Belle Point (Fort Smith) along the Arkansas River did ease tensions a bit, such as small detachment of troops alone was unable to

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<sup>163</sup> Mapes, *Old Fort Smith*, 11.

<sup>164</sup> Higgins, *Fort Smith*, 15.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

quell the fires of war in the area. In 1824 more troops were sent to reinforce Fort Smith. Soldiers were then sent further up the Arkansas River to the Grand River, the geographic heart of the Indian hostilities. The United States troops eventually established Fort Gibson, in present day Oklahoma, and spent the next twenty years attempting to keep the peace as fifty thousand immigrant Indians spilled into the area and competed for limited resources. Brad Agnew argues that the soldiers at Fort Gibson

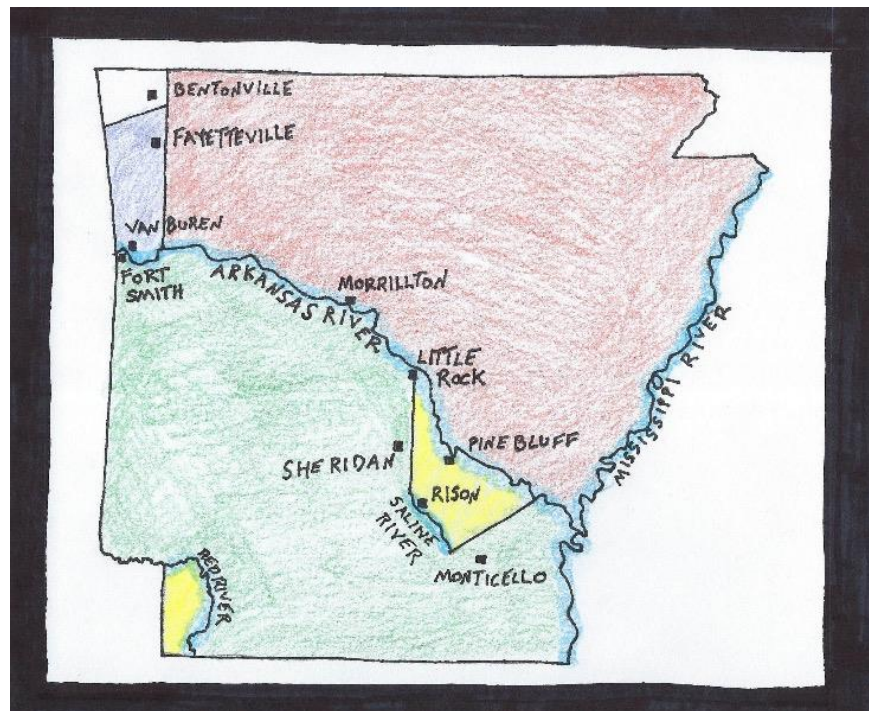


Figure 2.2 Lands Ceded by Natives Throughout Arkansas. Quapaw Cession of November 15, 1824 (the yellow area encompassing Rison, Arkansas), Area in white was Osage territory ceded due to a treaty from June 2, 1825, Area in purple was Osage territory ceded due to a treaty on September 25, 1818, Red area was Osage territory ceded due to a treaty from November 10, 1808, Yellow area in southwest corner of Arkansas was Caddo territory ceded due to a treaty from July 1, 1835, The green area was Quapaw territory ceded due to a treaty on August 24, 1818. Map based on information in, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1896-97* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1899), 706, Arkansas map 1.



were not the “shock troops of white expansion but rather a cultural buffer between the whites and Indians,” although some Indians would probably disagree.<sup>166</sup> Troops at Forts Gibson and Smith helped to implement the United States Indian policy and retain control of the Arkansas River Valley. In turn, the United States’ control of this region impacted the changes that were taking place in Antebellum Arkansas and the United States.<sup>167</sup>

While Native Americans and the United States government struggled with each other, travelers to Arkansas were offering the world alternative views of the region. One of the earliest travelers who wrote about Arkansas was Thomas Nuttall. On January 12, 1819, Nuttall (an English botanist) encountered the wilds of Arkansas for the first time. Nuttall, upon his flat-boat, entered into Arkansas and was greeted by “woods almost impenetrably laced with green briars” while enduring “torrents of rain.”<sup>168</sup> After experiencing the lawlessness of Arkansas first hand by thwarting a robbery attempt, Nuttall traversed the White River to its confluence with the Arkansas River. Nuttall’s first impression of the Arkansas River was that its current was “rapid” its water level was “low,” its color was “reddish brown,” and it was full of “snags.”<sup>169</sup> “Snags” and “low” would be descriptions that many people would, in frustration, use for the next century and a half to describe the Arkansas River. Nuttall quickly noticed several vital characteristics of the river that influenced future settlements: sandbars, bends, and cane breaks. Inhabitants in the river valley knew about these features for a long time and acted accordingly, but as more people migrated into the region throughout the early/mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, riverside real-estate became so

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<sup>166</sup> Agnew, *Fort Gibson*, 1,6.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 205.

<sup>168</sup> Thomas Nuttall, *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory, During the Year 1819 with Occasional Observations on the Manners of the Aborigines* (Philadelphia: Thomas M. Palmer, 1821), 62-63.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

desirable and tempting to cultivate that some people used and occupied portions of the river valley that were in a threatening/dangerous state of flux.<sup>170</sup>

First, canebrakes, many people believed, denoted healthy soil capable of sustaining a valuable crop. Early travelers on the Arkansas River often remarked that the surrounding land. “The scenery is almost destitute of everything which is agreeable to human nature; nothing yet appears but one vast trackless wilderness of trees, a dead solemnity, where the human voice is never heard to echo, where not even ruins of the humblest kind recall its history to mind, or prove the past dominion of man. All is rude nature as it sprang into existence, still preserving its primeval type, its unreclaimed exuberance.”<sup>171</sup> One traveler, having traveled down the military road that runs between Memphis and Little Rock, knew he had arrived in the river valley because the soil changed to “rich black alluvial bottom.”<sup>172</sup> Another traveler remarked how the river valleys in Arkansas were full of “trees and of the thick American canes, or reeds, which form impenetrable thickets, and are the favorite haunts of bears.”<sup>173</sup> Cane breaks along the Arkansas River, many optimistic farmers hoped, were an “x” on the agricultural treasure map.

The growth of particular plants marked the soil as nutrient rich. Vegetation such as cockleburs and blackberries illustrated the growing potential of the dirt. Even more specifically, gum trees betrayed the soil as being fit for cotton and oak trees highlighted areas suited for corn.<sup>174</sup> Like a beacon blasting through a thick fog, the appearance of canebrakes screamed to

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>172</sup> Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion through the Slave States, from Washington on the Potomac to the Frontier of Mexico; with Sketches of Popular Manners and Geological Notices* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 94.

<sup>173</sup> Gerstaecker, *Wild Sports in the Far West*, 157.

<sup>174</sup> DeArmond-Huskey, Rebecca, *Barholomew's Song: A Bayou Hisotry* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books Inc., 2001), 225-227.

would be river valley cotton growers, “plant here, this soil is great for growing cotton and making money!” The westward spread of agriculture across the Mississippi River throughout the nineteenth century witnessed farmers clearing the most abundant and healthiest canebrakes and replacing them with cotton and corn. Farmers avoided poor soil called buckshot or gumbo, and as a result, different types of soils determined the shape of the crop’s field. Early agricultural endeavors, therefore were manipulated and shaped according to the soil type and not an aesthetically pleasing square or rectangular shape. Quickly a relationship emerged between permanent settlements and the removal of the cane as settlers commodified the canebrakes and the land they inhabited. Although not a permanent settler, Frederich Gerstaecker realized he could cash in on the verdant Southern riverbanks. He made a couple of trips to the South just to cut and collect cane, and he successfully sold all of them to a cane hungry market in Louisville and Cincinnati.<sup>175</sup>

Secondly, the swift currents and silty payload of the Arkansas River created an environment possible of doling out life and death. “The sand of the river,” Thomas Nuttall explained, “appears to be in perpetual motion...its instability is indeed often dangerous.”<sup>176</sup> Native Americans and early white settlers of the river valley knew not to set up camp in specific spaces along the river. They realized that settlements and villages along the water were better served being establishing on bluffs overlooking the river (bluffs did not provide automatic safety from floods as the river created and destroyed bluffs). Additionally, individual tracks of land along the river were tantalizing rich, but observant farmers understood that the fertile alluvial

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<sup>175</sup> DeArmond-Huskey, *Barholomew’s Song*, 225-227; Gerstaecker, *Wild Sports in the Far West*, 202-206

<sup>176</sup> Nuttall, *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory*, 67.

soil was deposited outside of the river channel by the river. Thus smart river valley residents knew the river could reclaim or augment the nutrient-rich ground with little to no warning.

Farmers had a backward way of looking at environmental processes involving the river. Many farmers believed they “reclaimed” land from the river but, in reality, the river created, man “claimed,” and the river “reclaimed.” The sediment deposited by the river was ideal for agriculture and made the land highly sought. Take Sebastian County for example. Most of the county’s soil is not suitable for intensive mono-agriculture except in the river bottoms. The soils outside of the Arkansas River flood plain often lack sufficient levels of nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, calcium, and organic matter to be naturally fertile. Although the soils in the flood plain are fertile, they are easily erodible, lack efficient surface or internal drainage, and are inclined to flood. The closer the soil is to the Arkansas River’s confluence with the Mississippi, the more productive the soil. Sebastian County soil that was enriched by the river covered roughly 8,977 acres. Almost nine thousand acres may seem like a sizable area that could support lots of plantations, but these lands only account of 2.7% acres within the county.<sup>177</sup>

Roughly 183,430 acres in Pulaski County (34.9% of the county’s acreage) was made up of nutrient loaded soil along the river. The Arkansas River bottomlands ran parallel to the river downriver through Pulaski County until the Little Rock area. The capital city sat on the Arkansas Delta’s western border, and as the river hit the emerging lowland plains of eastern Arkansas, where the river’s course becomes less fixed, oxbow lakes began to appear more frequently. Additionally, more sloughs and bayous shaped the landscape in this region. As the river penetrated further into the Delta and came closer to the White and Mississippi Rivers, higher

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<sup>177</sup> John B. Cox, Billy A. Garner, and Frank M. Vodrazka, *Soil Survey of Sebastian County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 1, 8, 26.

quantities of land were nutrient rich. The soil surrounding the river in Desha County contained substantial quantities of plant nutrients. Only 3,634 (.7%) acres of Desha soil were not naturally fertile. Another 76,072 (14.8%) acres of soil were not conducive to growing crops, not because it lacked fertility, but because it was often flooded.<sup>178</sup> All the river bottom lands throughout the state along the Arkansas River were more fertile and more nutrient dense than many other places throughout the state. Unlike most other spaces within the various counties, places that had contact with the river were loaded with attributes that favorably affected agriculture, because of the river's deposits of alluvium, or soil that was sandy, silty, clayey, and loamy.<sup>179</sup> The expanding and contracting of the river through the seasons of the year allowed the river to deposit these soils as it journeyed to the ocean.

Moving into the 1820s new relationships were forming between the river and settlers causing the Arkansas River Valley to evolve economically and environmentally. "The privations of an infant settlement are already beginning to disappear, grist and saw-mills, now commenced, only wait for support; and the want of good roads is scarcely felt in a level country meandered by rivers. Those who have large and growing families can always find lucrative employment in a country which produces cotton."<sup>180</sup> Mirroring similar developments across America, a burgeoning market economy and the agricultural community began to develop throughout the river valley in the 1820s.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> George J. Haley, Randle O. Buckner, and Dorris F. Festervand, *Soil Survey of Pulaski County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 3, 9; Hiram V. Gill, Fred C. Larance, Hardy Cloutier, and H. Wade Long, *Soil Survey of Desha County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 1,5.

<sup>179</sup> Arkansas Geological Survey, *County Geologies for Arkansas*, [http://www.geology.ar.gov/county\\_reports/cgr-G.htm](http://www.geology.ar.gov/county_reports/cgr-G.htm) (accessed June 3, 2018).

<sup>180</sup> Nuttall, *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory*, 101.

<sup>181</sup> Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 40.

The year Arkansas became a territory (1819), the United States experienced an economic panic. Banks failed money depreciated, and those that lived in cities were hit hardest as consumers stopped consuming and businesses failed, resulting in an estimated half million laborers unemployed.<sup>182</sup> Luckily, most (95% in 1800), Americans like those in the Arkansas River Valley, lived and worked in rural agricultural settings which insulated them, to a degree, from the woes associated with banks.<sup>183</sup> Many Antebellum American families often engaged in what historians refer to as “composite farming.” Part of their production was for their consumption and the remainder for sale or barter. Farm families could not expect to satisfy all their wants by purchase. Thus they developed a set of skills and tools necessary for self-sufficiency. Additionally, families involved in composite farming often practiced “safety first” farming. This type of farming meant that food was primarily grown for their consumption, then as quickly as they could, they produced something they could market. Their “market” varied from neighbors to “factors” that shipped the product to distant markets. For many farmers, market success and some self-sufficiency were not incompatible goals.<sup>184</sup>

Large Landowners who produced staple crops for export and commanded large labor forces achieved the utmost degree of self-sufficiency. They could afford to refine their product and employ artisans. Conversely, when ordinary farming families needed something they could neither produce for themselves nor swap with a neighbor, they had to visit the local storekeeper. Due to the scarcity of currency, people rarely paid for their purchases with coins or banknotes. Instead, they used financial credit that was accounted for and controlled by the storekeepers in

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<sup>182</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 137.

<sup>183</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

their account books.<sup>185</sup> Thus, the long and terrible story of agriculture, credit, and debt began to emerge in the Arkansas River Valley.

By the time mass immigration began in the Arkansas River Valley the river had long been used for one group of people to gain an advantage over another. Floods and droughts could ruin the best-laid plans to acquire power, status, and money in the river valley. Despite the frustrating and often unpredictable cycles of the river, people in antebellum Arkansas continued their attempts to harness the power and opportunities the river provided. For years, the only way to navigate the Arkansas River by boat was by self-propulsion. This method included the use of canoes, keelboats, or flat-bottom barges. Humans managed to move barges and keelboats through the water utilizing poling, rowing, or cordelling (towing with ropes), and when conditions permitted, sails.<sup>186</sup> Although self-propulsion would remain an option of river navigation, the year 1820 witnessed the implementation of technology upon the Arkansas River that revolutionized transportation, steam-powered boats.

The boats that traversed the Arkansas River and those of other western rivers were most often of the design of Henry M. Shreve. Shreve was a famous riverboatman who designed boats to travel in broad rivers, like the Mississippi and the Arkansas rivers, that often used materials like wood, tin, shingles, canvas, and twine. On the main deck, cylindrical boilers worked as the heart of the vessel producing a high amount of power, but also represented an ever-present source of explosions and fire. The western boats were of two main types. Side-wheelers, which had paddle-wheels mounted on each side of the engine, they were the easier of the two to maneuver. The second type, stern-wheelers, employed a single paddlewheel mounted at the rear

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> DeArmond-Huskey, *Bartholomew's Song*, 155.

of the boat, could hold more freight on the main deck and was more adept at operating on shallower rivers which made it more common than the side-wheelers on western rivers. Often, passengers traveled and slept on the main deck with the cargo. Others found better accommodations in the cabins on the second or “boiler” deck. On the third deck or “hurricane” deck and above the cabins on the second deck, was the pilothouse. To the front of the boat, booms held up one or two long gangplanks hinged to the deck, until needed for embarking or disembarking freight and passengers.<sup>187</sup>

The early steamboats on the Arkansas River hardly resembled the eastern steamboats or the large floating palaces that later graced western waters. These steamboats lacked an attractive design. The first steamboat on the Arkansas River was the *Comet* in March of 1820 and docked at Arkansas Post. In March 1822, the *Eagle* became the first steamboat to reach Little Rock. The *Eagle* displaced slightly over a hundred tons and took seventeen days to make the trip upriver from New Orleans to the capital. Steamboats meant that travel time was significantly reduced, and the consistency of goods transported increased with the application of steam. Overland travel was difficult, dangerous, and time-consuming. With a steamboat, a traveler could travel from Arkansas Post to New Orleans in eight days. By the mid-1830s larger steamboats like the *Arkansas* were operating up and down the Arkansas River. The *Arkansas* was over 150 feet long and displaced well over 200 tons. Its cabin was spacious and well-lit, and it contained four staterooms. By 1836, boats of this sort would make the round-trip from New Orleans to Little

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<sup>187</sup> Walter Moffatt, “Transportation in Arkansas, 1819-1840,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 15 no. 3 (Autumn, 1956): 194; Deblack, “Prosperity and Peril, 138-139; Chris Branam, “Database of Steamboat Wrecks on the Arkansas River, Arkansas, Between 1830-1900,” MA Thesis, University of Arkansas, 2011, 42.



Rock and back in sixteen days. Not only did steamboats carry goods and passengers, but they also carried excitement to the towns they passed by.<sup>188</sup>

Steamboats were only useful when they could float and, to the consternation of many, the Arkansas River did not always accommodate them and despite all of the human-made powers the boats had at their disposal they were always thwarted by low water. To account for such possibilities steam boats often towed keelboats or accomplished their deliveries by unloading and shipping the last stage of the journey on wagons. By 1831 boats were traveling the Arkansas River to the Three Forks area, around the eastern border of Oklahoma, on a regular schedule. The highpoint of river traffic was the 1840s and 1850s when there were 22 landings between Fort Smith and Fort Gibson.<sup>189</sup>

Navigation on the Arkansas River usually occurred during the months of the year that witnessed sufficient snowmelt and rainfall to fill the river. Shipbuilders that made boats to travel in rivers, like the Arkansas River, were uniquely constructed to carry 75 to 150 tons of cargo while using the smallest possible draught, and even then they still had difficulties. The shallow rapids at Webbers Falls and the Devil's Race Ground (located 17 to 20 miles below Fort Gibson) were very hazardous and required a skilled pilot and favorable water conditions to make it through safely. Delays often occurred due to low water, boats hitting sandbars, snags, and concealed rocks and trees.<sup>190</sup>

Even the most skilled pilots found it difficult to keep up with the ever-changing channel because "shoals built up overnight after an upcountry rain, and snags and sawyers and caved in

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<sup>188</sup> Deblack, "Prosperity and Peril," 139-140; S. Bolton, *Arkansas 1800-1860*, 50.

<sup>189</sup> Settle Jr., *The Dawning*, 13.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

banks lurked beneath the surface of the river.”<sup>191</sup> Snags were a major obstacle to river transportation. River communities tried to devise ways to “clean out the river,” but it was all but hopeless, “logs, snags, and bars” always returned to “obstruct navigation.”<sup>192</sup> Hitting an obstruction on the Arkansas River, especially going downstream with the current adding to the speed, was almost always fatal, for the boat usually sank quickly into deep water.”<sup>193</sup> The Arkansas River gained the reputation as “the graveyard of steamboats” due to its swift currents, sandbars, and continuously changing depth.<sup>194</sup> People commonly speculated that the Arkansas River had claimed the lives of hundreds of boats. Reading the reports in the newspapers of sunk boats on the river became a regional pastime. By 1872 the *Arkansas Gazette* gave a list of 117 steamboats “whose bones still lie at the bottom of the river.”<sup>195</sup> In 1912 the *Pine Bluff Commercial* published a list of boats lost on the river over the previous sixty years that totaled 153. More recently Chris Branam has compiled a database of steamboat wrecks that illustrates how many boats failed to survive.<sup>196</sup>

The average lifespan of a boat was less than five years. Even if a boat did survive the snags and bars in the river, excessively low or high water levels could keep it from reaching its destination. Newspapers regularly listed steamboats that did not make their scheduled destination on time. Newspapers would often run stories concerning travel disruptions or the sad sinking

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<sup>191</sup> Carl Lane quoted in Thomas A. Deblack, “Prosperity and Peril: Arkansas in the Late Antebellum Period” in *Arkansas a Narrative History* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 140.

<sup>192</sup> Cleaning Out the River, *Southern Standard*, August 14, 1869.

<sup>193</sup> Deblack, “Prosperity and Peril,” 140.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> James W. Leslie, *Land of Cypress & Pine: More Southeast Arkansas History* (Little Rock: Rose Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 1.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.; Branam, “Database of Steamboat Wrecks on the Arkansas River, Arkansas, Between 1830-1900,” 43.

affairs of certain steamboats. “The *W.A. Caldwell* was due from Memphis last night, but may have been detained by water and way business, the latter being very heavy on the river just now.”<sup>197</sup> Parts of the Arkansas River were un-navigable during the late summer and early fall. Despite the liabilities that accompanied steamboat operation, steamboats were an invaluable economic asset, partially due to the scarcity of not only roads but acceptable roads. They delivered merchandise to the growing commercial center along the Arkansas River and transported the river valley’s agricultural products to internal and external markets. <sup>198</sup>

Although navigating the Arkansas River had been significant for hundreds of years, a shift in temporal perception and the cultural make-up of the river’s inhabitants (and those with economic ties to the river valley) began to occur. This change, along with the evolution of the market economy, resulted in many people developing an attitude of impatience and umbrage when the river did not behave as they thought it should. They wanted a river whose water levels were always adequately high, had an acceptable current and offered a detritus free navigable course. Most importantly, they wanted a river that was safe and dependable. The person or group that could make that dream a reality and control the river would be a very power entity in the region and beyond.

The government wanted the power to control significant waterways, such as the Arkansas River, so they declared that the “improvements” of the Arkansas River was legally the responsibility of the Federal government and by extension, the controversial and politically entangled Corps of Engineers. Within a handful of years, after the first steamer bustled up the Arkansas River, Congress argued that the Constitution allowed the government to build and

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<sup>197</sup> Editorial, *Pine Bluff Weekly Press*, September 2, 1869, in Leslie, *Saracen’s Country*, 22.

<sup>198</sup> Deblack, “Prosperity and Peril,” 140.

supervise internal improvement projects. Henry Clay championed the congressional western bloc's support of federal internal improvements. Clay and his supporters contended that navigable waters were not a state matter, but a national concern because rivers often formed between and flowed through multiple states at once; therefore they were for public use and within the federal government's purview. Another boon to the argument of the pro-federal internal improvement of waterways camp was the 1824 Supreme Court decision in *Gibbons v. Ogden*. The court ruled that the commerce clause of the Constitution supported the federal government's role to regulate and improve the navigable waters of the United States.

To understand the court's decision requires some mental gymnastics but the majority decision's argument revolved around the definitions of "commerce" and "power." Commerce as used in the commerce clause of the Constitution they argued, "[was] always understood to comprehend, navigation within its meaning; and a power to regulate navigation is as expressly granted as if that term had been added to the word commerce."<sup>199</sup> Because the Constitution grants the Federal government power to regulate commerce, and because the Supreme Court ruled that commerce is "every specie of commerce" between "foreign nations, and...the several states, and with the Indian tribes," and because the court defined "among" as "intermingled with," commerce, therefore, "cannot stop at the external boundary line of each state, but may be introduced into the interior."<sup>200</sup>

*Ergo ipso facto*, "The power of Congress...must be exercised within the territorial jurisdiction of the several states" and by power, Congress means "the power to regulate, that is,

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<sup>199</sup> *Gibbons v. Ogden*, 22 US 1 (1824); Mary Yeater Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock: The History of the Little Rock District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers* (Little Rock: U.S. Army Engineer District, Little Rock, 1990), 13.

<sup>200</sup> *Gibbons v. Ogden*, 22 US 1 (1824).

to prescribe the rule by which commerce is to be governed. This power, like all others vested in Congress, is complete in itself, may be exercised to its utmost extent, and acknowledges no limitations other than are prescribed in the Constitution...the power over commerce with foreign nations and among the several states is vested in Congress.”<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, “The power of Congress, then, comprehends navigation within the limits of every state in the Union so far as that navigation may be, in any manner, connected with commerce with foreign nations, or among the several States, or with the Indian tribes.”<sup>202</sup> Therefore, If a river is navigable, crosses states lines, and is used for commerce, then the Federal government has the power to regulate it. Following the court’s decision the Federal government gained legal power over the Arkansas River and by extension over the people and businesses who depended on and interacted with Arkansas’ namesake river.

Even as the federal government was flexing their legal power over rivers and Indians were traveling along the trail of tears, a significant plantation agriculture economy was developing, and a planter class was emerging. As enterprising white Americans’ learned of the fertile alluvial soil in the Arkansas River Valley, coupled with the increased use of steamboats on the river, more cotton plantations employed the systematic chattel slavery of African Americans. Cotton culture and identity in the Arkansas River Valley evolved together and influenced each other. As cotton production unfurled from the Atlantic seaboard to the Arkansas River Valley, it brought with it a specific way of life, one that was “a class bound society run by planters, acknowledged by white farmers, and fueled by slave labor.”<sup>203</sup> A nascent Arkansas witnessed

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 3.

almost every county engage in slavery. The practice remained an integral part of life in the river valley until the Civil War. As entrepreneurs made money, more people entered the market economy. The financial connections of people resulted in them establishing centers of commerce along state's rivers, particularly the Arkansas River.

While most Arkansans practiced subsistence agriculture, particularly farmers in the north and west of the state, Along the rivers of the state's southern and eastern lowlands, a slave-based plantation style of agriculture emerged. Cotton facilitated the transition from subsistence farming to raising cash crops. Due to Eli Whitney's creation of the cotton gin in 1793, short-staple cotton production drastically increased as it spread from the Atlantic seaboard throughout the black belt. When Arkansas became a state in 1836 cotton was already the cash crop of choice among large landholding farmers throughout Arkansas delta. Cotton production skyrocketed throughout the 1840s and 1850s. During the first year of the 1840s Arkansas grew a relatively small amount of cotton that weighed in at six million pounds. Ten years later, cotton production in Arkansas exploded with a collective crop of over twenty-six million pounds.<sup>204</sup>

Cotton production grew proportional to the increased use of slavery throughout the river valley. Most white Arkansans did not own slaves. Nevertheless, the increase in the percentage of slaves was explosive. From 1830 to 1840, the number of slaves in Arkansas grew by 335 percent! Additionally, from 1840 to 1850, slaves increased by 136 percent. By 1860 Arkansas enslaved 110,000 people, tainting one in five white people with a connection to the institution as slave owners or as a member of a slave-owning family.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, prince cotton ascended the throne and became king. Southern farmers began growing their staple crops more efficiently and cheaply. The rise of scientific farming contributed to the growth and spread of agricultural production. Planters began using complimentary crops combined with crop rotations, fertilizers, erosion reducing techniques such as contour plowing, drainage ditches, and cover crops. For the cotton producer in the Arkansas River Valley, two advancements in agriculture were instrumental in the development of the valley, the cotton gin and the development of new varieties of cotton. In the early 1800s farmers in the southwest began using a Mexican hybrid variety of cotton. Leading up to the development of hybrid cotton, growers grew Georgia Green Seed and the Creole Black Seed. Although these kinds of cotton were hardy and adaptable to various growing conditions, they were not as productive as desired, and they were hard to pick and clean. Additionally, both varieties were inferior competition for Sea Island Cotton which had better length and quality of lint. Planters in the Mississippi River Valley searched far and wide for improved varieties that would be successful in delta and river valley conditions. Imported varieties from around the world would occasionally provide an excellent first crop but peter out in subsequent plantings. Eventually, some farmers attempted selective breeding to create a desirable strain of upland cotton; the result was Mexican or Petit Gulf hybrid.<sup>206</sup>

On a trip to Mexico, Walter Burling, a well-known planter in the Natchez area, acquired some long staple cotton seeds that had been harvested by the natives of the Central Mexican plateau for hundreds of years. Upon his return home, he gave some to his friend William Dunbar who experimented with it. When Dunbar died in 1810, his experiment with the Mexican hybrid

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<sup>206</sup> John Hebron Moore, "Cotton Breeding in the Old South," *Agricultural History* 30 no. 3 (July, 1956): 95-96.

resulted in an annual increase of more than three thousand pounds of ginned cotton. Other planters took notice. The Mexican hybrid became very popular, but many planters planted the Mexican hybrid mixed with the Creole and Georgia Green varieties. Luckily for the planters, but unluckily for the slaves, the three types of cotton cross-pollinated, and the results possessed the best qualities of each strain. The Mexican strain provided woolly white seeds, large bolls, easy to pick, and rot resistant characteristics. From the Georgia Green strain, the cotton obtained an improved ability for the pod to hold on to the lint after ripening. By 1820 agricultural publications were touting the positives of the new hybrids, the staple was longer, the lint a better grade, its bolls opened more consistently among mature plants and did so earlier during harvest season.<sup>207</sup>

Planters continued to modify the Mexican cotton in the 1830s. Mexican cotton seeds went through a screening process that weeded out the seeds they did not want to use based on how they looked. Planters began choosing seeds that were the biggest and fuzziest of the white seeds. This simple selection process allowed the seeds to retain the benefits of the Mexican strain while keeping out the undesirable traits from the Georgia Green Seed. In 1833, these seeds quickly became popular and were sold from Louisiana to Georgia and became known as Petit Gulf cotton. Disease decimated a third of the Georgia Green Seed cotton in 1834, but those who planted Petit Gulf discovered that their cotton was immune to the ravishing disease even when planted next to plants that suffered from the rot. Planters in eastern states began using the Petit Gulf strain because it did well in their red clay soils.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 98.



By the late 1830s, not all cotton growers in the Arkansas River Valley used the Petit Gulf strain. Between 1837-1849 King Cotton was brought to his knees as an economic depression pummeled the industry. A year before the depression hit, the first general assembly in Arkansas met to create a way to convert the value of cleared acreage into usable funds. They settled on creating two central banks: The Arkansas State Bank and the Real Estate Bank. The Real Estate Bank was composed of four branches whose primary goal was to promote the plantation system.<sup>209</sup>

Donald McNeilly eloquently describes Arkansas' early foray into banking as "short-run policies" enacted by a "reckless and nearsighted group of planter-politicians" that managed to "destroy public finance...[and] maroon the state in a sea of red ink."<sup>210</sup> The banking crisis resulted in Arkansas' economic development being "profoundly narrow...restricted to cotton monoculture and subsistence farming," while other programs (education, transportation, mining, manufacturing, and urban development) suffered.<sup>211</sup> The State banks consisted of the main branch in Little Rock with branches in Fayetteville, Batesville, and Arkansas Post and began operations when they possessed \$50,000 in legal coin. The banks received coins from federal surplus revenue and the sale of state bonds. Despite having a plan in place to raise capital, the banks encountered some difficulty in issuing state bonds due to a general economic depression that inflicted the whole country in 1837. In 1848 Governor Thomas Drew devised a plan to eliminate state debts. His plan called for the Federal government to give the state public lands

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<sup>209</sup> Harry S. Ashmore, *Arkansas: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 110; Moore, "Cotton Breeding in the Old South," 98.

<sup>210</sup> Donald P. McNeilly, *The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 164.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

that surrounded rivers or were subject to flooding and in turn, the states would agree to build levees. The money generated from the levee building would go toward paying off state debt.<sup>212</sup>

The Depression weakened the planters' power in the river valley. Credit dried up, halting the purchase of land and slaves. Debts were called in by banks scrambling to remain viable, resulting in property foreclosures. Cotton prices began to slip in 1839 until they crashed to a new low of six cents a pound (the only other times cotton would hit six cents a pound was during the depressions in the 1890s and 1930s). Prices on cotton remained low until 1845. Planters cut costs where they could while increasing the amount of cotton under cultivation to compensate for the fall in market value.<sup>213</sup> It was as if they believed one plus negative one would equal two and were disappointed when it came out to zero. This mentality greatly affected the physical environment of the Arkansas River Valley.

Whole Sale Raw Cotton Prices 1836-1847							
Year	Dollars Per Pound	Year	Dollars Per Pound	Year	Dollars Per Pound	Year	Dollars Per Pound
<b>1836</b>	.17	<b>1839</b>	.13	<b>1842</b>	.08	<b>1845</b>	.06
<b>1837</b>	.13	<b>1840</b>	.09	<b>1843</b>	.07	<b>1846</b>	.08
<b>1838</b>	.10	<b>1841</b>	.10	<b>1844</b>	.08	<b>1847</b>	.11

Table 2.2 *Source:* Data from Susan B. Carter et al., *Historical Statistics of the United States: Volume 3 Part C Economic Structure and Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 3-208.

The depression resulted in increased use of Gulf Petit cotton and a change in the strain. Planters need to maximize their efforts with all frugality possible. For the uninitiated, switching to Gulf Petit was just the boost legitimate planters needed. For the host of would be planters

<sup>212</sup> Ted R. Worley "The Arkansas State Bank: Ante-Bellum Period," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 23 no. 1 (Spring, 1964): 67,71-72.

<sup>213</sup> Susan B. Carter et al., *Historical Statistics of the United States: Volume 3 Part C Economic Structure and Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 3-207- 3-211; John Hebron Moore, "Cotton Breeding in the Old South," *Agricultural History* 30 no. 3 (July, 1956): 98.

looking to make a quick buck, planting did not go so well as their charlatan activities hurt the market. Dedicated planters continued to improve the Gulf Petit strain of cotton throughout the 1840s. Planters in the Arkansas River Valley and beyond were searching for a solution to their problems. In an effort to improve crops during the depression some planters reinvented the wheel, as it were. They collected the planting seeds that had a specific physical appearance and believed that using seeds with the same characteristics would provide an increase in yields. After two years of experimentation, they concluded that appearance alone is an insufficient marker of quality.<sup>214</sup>

Next, enterprising planters attempted a method of selective breeding used by Northern corn and wheat producers. They chose seed from the healthiest and most productive plants in their fields regardless of how they looked. After a few years they discovered that within the crop yields, there were several distinct varieties. Selecting the best varieties created new strains, an process they continued, until they developed one of the most popular and productive strains of cotton used in the cotton kingdom until the Civil War.<sup>215</sup> Despite the progress made in the selective breeding of cotton, the cotton needed the right kind of soil, water, and sunshine in the right amounts to maximize the genetic gains made with the seeds. The natural environment of the Arkansas River Valley and the new strains of cotton created waves of change that resulted in conflict and ruin for many inhabitants.

The Arkansas River Valley's environment met the criteria planters looked for as cultivation shifted westward in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The temperatures, season lengths, soil quality, number of rivers, and amount of rainfall, marked the river valley as a suitable

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<sup>214</sup> Moore, "Cotton Breeding in the Old South," 99-100.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

environment for growing cotton. Interestingly, the same environmental characteristics that made the river valley appealing to large scale monoculture operations also contributed to lower levels of improved land. Not all physical environments in the South were the same. Variations in soil quality, topography, and livestock diseases correlated with the degree of land improvement. Planters rarely had all of their lands under cultivation at the same time. Unimproved spaces existed on plantations to allow for crop rotation. Once used soils exhausted and eroded, planters abandoned them, and cultivation shifted to the unused portion of the plantation.<sup>216</sup>

The Arkansas River itself heavily influenced cultivation within the Arkansas River Valley. Topography, soil composition, and erosion patterns were all subject to the river's power. Humans would attempt to remove the destructive powers of the river, thereby reducing the destructive risk to their money-making operations.

The best conditions for cotton cultivation included fertile soil, an adequate water supply, and warm temperatures. The soil needed to be reasonably level, effortlessly turned, and devoid of impediments. The weather needed to be hot during the summer and have 200 frostless days. Most of the South's rich soil sat between the 30<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> parallels. Cotton also needed twenty-four inches of rain a year. Much of the Arkansas River Valley met the essential criteria. The Arkansas River in Arkansas ran between the 33 and 36 parallels. The average temperatures for Arkansas River Valley counties were in the sixties. Most of the average daily minimum temperatures ranged from the upper forties to the low fifties.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> John Majewski and Viken Tchakerian, "The Environmental Origins of Shifting Cultivation: Climate, Soils, and Disease in the Nineteenth-Century US South," *Agricultural History* 81 no. 4 (Fall, 2007): 523-523, 527

<sup>217</sup> Delmar Hayter, "Expanding the Cotton Kingdom," *Agricultural History* 62 no. 2 (Spring, 1988): 226; George R. Maxwell, Dempsey G. Binkley, and Donald G. West, *Soil Survey of Arkansas County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 70; Cornelius Harris, Kenneth Crader, and Edgar Mersiovsky, *Soil Survey of Arkansas County*,

The plantation system also required good dirt. Healthy soil aided in providing clean air and water, plentiful crops and thick forests, quality rangeland, and diverse wildlife. Soil provided five essential functions that helped keep ecosystems functioning. The first was regulating water. Soil helped guide runoff from rain, snowmelt, and irrigation. In doing so, water and dissolved solutes flowed over and through the soil. The second function was sustaining plant and animal life. Productivity and diversity of living things depended on the soil. Third, soil filtered out potential pollutants. Within the soil were a host of mineral and microbes that filter, buffer, degrade, immobilize, and detoxify organic and inorganic materials. Fourth, soil cycles stored and transformed nutrients such as carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus. The final function of soil was to

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*Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), 14; William R. Townsend and Curtis R. Wilson, *Soil Survey of Conway County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 66; B.A. Garner and J.B. Cox, *Soil Survey of Crawford County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979); 53; Hiram V. Gill, Fred C. Larance, Hardy Cloutier, and H. Wade Long, *Soil Survey of Desha County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 47; William R. Townsend and Curtis R. Wilson, *Soil Survey of Faulkner County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 52; Frank M. Vodrazka and Francis H. Stephens, William K. Goddard, and James W. Spots, *Soil Survey of Franklin County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 91; Hiram V Gill, Fred C. Larance, and Thomas W. Fortner, *Soil Survey of Jefferson and Lincoln Counties, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 71; Billy A. Garner, Frank M. Vodrazka, William K. Goddard, and James W. Venard, *Soil Survey of Johnson County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 77; Bill A. Garner, John B. Cox, Frank M. Vodrazka, and Alex L. Winfrey, *Soil Survey of Logan County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 69; William R. Townsend and Leodis Williams, *Soil Survey of Perry County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 78; Frank M. Vodrazka, Alex L. Winfre, Tom H. Arnold, and Jimmy M. Gass, *Soil Survey of Pope County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), 81; George J. Haley, Randle O. Buckner, and Dorris F. Festervand, *Soil Survey of Pulaski County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 2; John B. Cox, Billy A. Garner, and Frank M. Vodrazka, *Soil Survey of Sebastian County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 3; Frank M. Vodrazka, *Soil Survey of Yell County, Arkansas* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 105.

provide a firm foundation for supporting structures. Soil provided the base for erecting stable buildings.<sup>218</sup>

Good soil for cultivation was nutrient dense. To complete a life cycle, most plants required 16 chemical elements or plant nutrients. Often these elements were found in the soil. Unfortunately, the soil does not retain these necessary elements after repeated use. Years of agriculture and natural processes can deplete the soil of nutrients. Scientists categorized the nutrients that plants needed into three groups: primary, secondary, and micronutrients. The primary nutrients were nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, and the secondary nutrients were calcium, magnesium, and sulfur. The micronutrients were boron, chlorine, copper, iron, manganese, molybdenum, and zinc. Plants needed the elements in the last category in much smaller amounts than those in the primary and secondary categories. The final needs of plants included carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. Nitrogen was abundant; nitrogen accounted for 78 percent of air. The difficulty in utilizing nitrogen was due to the energy and technology needed to convert this nitrogen into useful compounds used by crops. Even if the soil was nitrogen rich, each crop diminished the soil's nutrient levels; therefore, planters needed to replenish the soil or find new soil.<sup>219</sup>

Good soil was only one of the many worries planters in the river valley and elsewhere encountered. At every turn of plantation operations, lurked another snag that could complicate a planter's navigation of the system. Many planters faced issues regarding clearing land, tilling the land, planting cotton, breeding cotton, labor control, ginning, transportation, market prices, and

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<sup>218</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, "Soil Quality," Natural Resource Conservation Service, [https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/nra/rca/?cid=nrcs143\\_014198](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/nra/rca/?cid=nrcs143_014198) (accessed June 29, 2018).

<sup>219</sup> Lewis B. Nelson, *History of the U.S. Fertilizer Industry* (Muscle Shoals, Alabama: Tennessee Valley Authority, 1990), vii-viii.

politics. Planters along the Arkansas River knew as the 1840s and 1850s dragged on trouble was brewing. The nation and its politicians were brewing a draft of destruction made from a dash of sectional politics, a sprinkle of westward expansion, and a boatload of slavery, which gave this bitter drink its overall flavor.

Following the end of the Mexican War, many Americans experienced a sense of euphoria regarding the decisive victory over Mexico. Things were looking optimistic for the United States. Within a relatively short period, the nation gained almost a half-million square miles, partially from a treaty between the United States and Great Britain that settled disputes about Oregon territory. The United States enlarged its land holdings by twenty five-percent. Unfortunately, the jubilation would wane, and grief and contention replaced it. The quarrelsome question embedded in everyone's minds was, "should these new states be slave or free states?" Southerners, many of those in the Arkansas River Valley, argued that the new territory should permit slavery while growing numbers of northerners and northern politicians disagreed. Due to the complexities of the issue, Congress found that it could not adequately make a decision that would ameliorate the worrisome concerns many people struggled with regarding the slavery issue. Thus, a breakdown within the political party system occurred that eventually led to war.<sup>220</sup>

In addition to its role with slavery, the Arkansas River, during the 1840s, established itself as an important transportation network for cross-country travelers headed west. Fort Smith, like other towns across the nation, kept a watch on Congress with skeptical eyes, but soon the town would be forced to focus all their attention on one thing, gold. Early on January 24, 1848, James Marshall noticed peculiar specs on the millrace—or channel for the water wheel—of a

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<sup>220</sup> Michael Fellman, et al., *This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008), 43-44.

sawmill. On this fateful day, Marshall discovered gold in Coloma, California. Although the initial discoverers of gold tried to keep their find a secret, within several months, it was a well-known fact, and word spread like wildfire around the Pacific Rim and from the west coast of the United States to the east. Soon vast hordes of people representing various sexes, shapes, sizes, nationalities, ethnicities, and classes, flowed into California, which witnessed her population dramatically swell as a result. Many of the emigrants that headed west from the eastern U.S. departed from within the Arkansas River Valley at Fort Smith or nearby Van Buren.

Despite the increased usage and familiarity the gold rush brought to the Arkansas River and the Arkansas River Valley, as Arkansas ushered in the 1850s, it still found itself to be a frontier state and much of the nation thought of them as one. The physical environment of Arkansas, especially in the Arkansas River Valley, shaded people's perceptions about the state and its inhabitants. An Arkansas newspaper article in 1854 titled "Our State—its Reputation," illustrated the concern Arkansans had with their image.<sup>221</sup> Interestingly the article repurposed negative ideas about the state; many of them regarding the environment, and spun them as positives. The article argued that Arkansas' poor reputation was due to its "continuous swamps...marshy flats or over flown bottoms...with their hundred sloughs, bayous, cypress, &c., &c."<sup>222</sup> Furthermore, the article asserted that outsiders misunderstood Arkansas regarding the state's "health of the climate, the development of our resources, and the adaptation of our soil."<sup>223</sup> It also posited that Arkansas had "extraordinary fertility" on its plantations.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Our State—Its Reputation, *Democratic Star* July 5, 1854.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.



There was some support of the *Democratic Star's* viewpoint. Not everyone perceived Arkansas, the river valley, or the physical environment negatively. Thomas Nuttall recognized Arkansas' verdant capitalist possibilities as early as 1819:

Throughout this country there certainly exists extensive bodies of fertile land, and favoured by a comparatively healthy climate. The cultivation of cotton, rice, maize, wheat, tobacco, indigo, hemp, and wine, together with the finest fruits of moderate climates, without the aid of artificial soils or manures, all sufficiently contiguous to a market, are important inducements to industry and enterprise. The peach of Persia is already naturalized through the forests of Arkansas, and the spontaneous mulberry points out the convenience of raising silk. Pasturage at all seasons of the year is so abundant, that some of our domestic animals might become naturalized, as in Paraguay and Mexico; indeed several wild horses were seen and taken in the forests during the preceding year.<sup>225</sup>

People who shared Nuttall's beliefs continued to flow into the river valley hoping to acquire the riches they desired. Soon cities on the Arkansas River grew in size. The capitol, Little Rock, was nicely situated in the center of the state at the point where the Old Southwest Trail intersected the Arkansas River. Little Rock was well positioned, as the state capitol and due to its geographic location, to exert financial and political influence throughout the state. Along the extreme northwest of the Arkansas River in Arkansas, the cities of Fort Smith and Van Buren promoted the stationing of U.S. Army troops, trade with the Indians, and serving the needs of the surrounding area. The location of the state's thriving commercial centers situated on rivers was not a happy coincidence; it was a deliberate strategic placement by early settlers and town inhabitants. River travel was quicker and cheaper when the rivers were running, especially compared to overland travel—whose bumpy roads and lack of bridges made it an unpleasant option—and travel by rail—which held a relatively thin presence in the state during the 1840s and 1850s compared to the uptick in railroad production outside the state. Arkansas had laid less

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<sup>225</sup> Nuttall, *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory*, 101.

than fifty miles of track by 1860 whereas the rest of the United States' railways were longer than the entire world's combined. Therefore, the preferred method of travel and shipping in Arkansas were on steamboats.<sup>226</sup>

In general, Arkansas benefited from the economic gains of the 1850s, but some regions profited more than others. Plantations regions, particularly in the Mississippi river delta and along the Arkansas River, stood to gain more than other areas where there was a dearth of slave labor and loamy soil. The trend of southern and eastern parts of the state increasing their slave population worsened the sectional differences within Arkansas. As a result, Arkansas's economic growth was uneven throughout the 1850s, causing a strain that touched upon the state socially, economically, and politically between the highland and the lowlands.<sup>227</sup>

The heart of Arkansas politics was nestled along the Arkansas River in the central Arkansas River Valley and as a result had a substantial impact of the state. In Arkansas, the political fissures of the day were somewhat muted, for a time, due to the ongoing control of the state's Democratic political machine known as the Dynasty. Nevertheless, the second half of the 1840s witnessed several deaths of political leaders which rocked the state politics.<sup>228</sup>

The passing of such looming features from within Arkansas' nascent state government concluded the first generation of the state's political leadership. With the exit of the more established politicians from the main stage, new generations of younger politicians were poised to assume command. Additionally, the Dynasty was experiencing dynamic changes. The changes stemmed from the demise of some of its first members, the stinging memory of a banking disaster, and the increase of dissenters within the Democratic Party that threatened to thwart the

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<sup>226</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 2-4.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>228</sup> DeBlack, "Prosperity and Peril: Arkansas in the Late Antebellum Period," 149-150.

dominance of the Dynasty since Arkansas had become a state. Through these difficulties rose Robert Ward Johnson to take the helm of the second generation of Family politicians. As a U.S. congressman, Johnson was a staunch supporter of John C. Calhoun, a well-known defender of Southern rights.<sup>229</sup>

Thomas Hindman, a staunch supporter of Southern rights, argued on February 15, 1859 from the “metropolitan heart of Arkansas” on the Arkansas River that the sectional argument over politics and the Constitution “will be the life-and-death grapple of the constitution with its foes—the Armageddon, in this government, of Centralism and State Rights. If Black Republicanism triumphs, its shout of victory will be the dirge of the Union. The Southern States have been so often driven to the wall by the ferocious, brute force of the North, and have so begirt themselves with solemn pledges and recorded vows to resist this crowning outrage, that they will scarcely humiliate themselves by further retreats and surrenders. If not, ‘the die is cast.’”<sup>230</sup>

Once the die was cast and the Civil War began, the war sucked the Arkansas River into the fray. Control of the river was strategically important. Arkansas’ capital city, Little Rock, was on the river as were a number of the most populated cities in the state. Additionally, the river was part of a major transportation network that connected Indian Territory to the Mississippi River and on. The river aided in the deployment of troops and supplies in the Trans-Mississippi West. Throughout the conflict, the rise and fall of the river combined with the river valley’s physical environment impacted military strategies and outcomes. The eventual fall of Little Rock and

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>230</sup> Thomas C. Hindman, “Federal and Arkansas Politics” in James J. Gigantino II, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas: A Documentary History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 8-9.

control of the river by the Union ushered in a new spatial paradigm slicing the state in half diagonally. The Confederate capital moved south of the river and north of the river, particularly in northwest Arkansas, guerilla warfare brutally dragged on.

Throughout the antebellum period, cotton production in the Arkansas River Valley seemed, to many observers, to only be limited by a lack of human labor that could work longer, faster, and harder. The 1860s brought about more change to the lands and people of the Arkansas River Valley, some changes posed new limitations to cotton production. The Civil War broke out in 1861, and with it came a blue wave of Federal military might. The Union Army, through various measures, denied many planters the means to produce cotton and thereby, the Union deprived the Southern elite of their ability to create the world physically, socially, and culturally, as they saw fit. Southern planters believed that the Lincoln administration threatened their safety and well-being and once proslavery enthusiasts believed the Union had taken their King Cotton and their peculiar institution from them they were willing to kill to get it back.

## Chapter Three

### The Rise and Crash of the Blue Wave

After crossing a river, you should get far away from it.

- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The Arkansas River played an essential role in Arkansas and the Trans-Mississippi West during the Civil War. Union and Confederate decision makers realized the importance of the Arkansas River and fought to take control of and maintain a presence on the river. The three largest Arkansas cities, including the state capital, were strategic locations on the Arkansas River that played important roles in the execution of the war in that area. Additionally, the river impacted the transportation of soldiers and goods. River levels impacted military strategies as low levels of water meant transportation had to be accomplished overland or delayed until the river rose. Navigable depths to the river allowed not only troop and supply transportation but also allowed Union warships to bombard Confederate-held cities, forts, and troops who ventured too close the river's banks. Men and material were not the only things to travel on the river. Large groups of soldiers and refugees, often suffering from various sickness, carried their illnesses with them along the river. The Arkansas River connected the war in southern Missouri and northwest Arkansas, the Mississippi River, and Indian Territory, and facilitated the transportation troops and supplies, the transmittal of information and illness, and implementation of strategies that impacting the fighting in the trans-Mississippi west and beyond, especially in the Union's quest to control the Mississippi River.

The Arkansas River, at times, provided defensive and offensive opportunities for Confederate and Federal forces. Each side discovered throughout the Civil War that the river was an awesome tool or a major impediment, especially when it limited maneuverability and

influenced troop movements. River conditions focused how and where troops could cross the river and these areas were often known to enemies thus allowed attacking forces to concentrate their firepower upon these points. The military strategy around the river provided troops with an additional variable to take into account when making decisions, primarily the issues of depth, width, and velocity of the river. Even smaller streams proved influential in battles. The larger the river the greater its “potential as a military obstacle [that] increases at an exponential rate.”<sup>231</sup> Historically, military leaders and their troops have dealt with rivers during war. Shrewd military leaders have known that it is inadvisable to be surprised and disorganized on the wrong side of a river. For forces advancing or regressing across rivers, the chance for catastrophe increases for those that lose control of its crossing point. In Arkansas, armies fought battles in river forts and cities and used their locations and resources to gain an advantage in the fighting.

Before the Civil War, the United States Army exerted some influence in Arkansas and on the Arkansas River through the Corps of Engineers. The Army Corps of Engineers’ primary concern on the Arkansas River and all U.S. rivers was not flood control but transportation and keeping a navigable depth to the river. Congress had reservations concerning federal involvement regarding flood control, especially on large rivers such as the Arkansas or Mississippi. It was thought to be the province of local or state officials to address flood control. Keeping channels open for commerce was another matter. Congress passed the 1832 River and Harbor Act that appropriated \$15,000 and authorized the Corps of Engineers to maintain a channel in the Arkansas River.<sup>232</sup> The Act tasked the Corps with creating a channel that was

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<sup>231</sup> Harold A. Winters, et al., *Battling the Elements: Weather and Terrain in the Conduct of War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 141.

<sup>232</sup> The U.S. Army Engineer District, Little Rock, Arkansas, *The Arkansas: Renaissance of a River* (Little Rock: U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Little Rock District, 1975), 3.

wide enough and deep enough for the “free passage of heavy boats” for a distance of 465 miles into the heart of Indian Territory.<sup>233</sup> The act did not call for any permanent improvements but did provide for snagging and dredging.<sup>234</sup> Corps activity occurred on the Arkansas River occurred in 1842, 1843, and 1844 in which snagging and dredging took place.<sup>235</sup> Despite these few projects, in the decade or so leading up to the Civil War, Corps activity on the river began to slow down. Corps’ waterway improvement projects from 1842 to 1860 were scattered and sporadic throughout the state and the nation. Once the Civil War began the Corps focused on military projects.

The Civil war demanded that the Corps focus on combat missions, missions that included the Arkansas River. Throughout their history, the Corps has had two main military missions: one, military construction, reconnaissance, and mapping and two, combat services. Both U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Confederate States Engineer Corps carried out these essential functions. Throughout the Arkansas River Valley they provided military construction and logistical support, including planning and constructing fortifications; topographic reconnaissance; and building temporary pontoon bridges, roads, and railroads. Additionally, they fought when necessary.<sup>236</sup> The Corps’ participation in Arkansas demonstrated the strategic importance of the Arkansas River’s relationship to control of the state and the region. Engineers were vital in making it possible to cross the Arkansas River during the Civil War and strengthen

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 15.

<sup>234</sup> The U.S. Army Engineer District, Little Rock, Arkansas, *The Arkansas: Renaissance of a River*, 3, 15.

<sup>235</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 16.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 18.

forts along the river. Following the war many people continued to view the Corps' waterway improvement projects as military engineering projects with secondary civil applications.<sup>237</sup>

The river played a role in the geographical and political divisions within the state before the war and aided ending the war. Arkansans, a large percentage of them anyway, were understanding of South Carolina's decision to secede, but not sure what course of action their state should take. Similar to South Carolina, Arkansas had a politically powerful slave owning population, mainly along the Arkansas River and in the delta. In the State's capital on the banks of the Arkansas River, the Governor of Arkansas, Governor Henry Massey Rector, declared to the state legislature on December 21<sup>st</sup> that South Carolina's secession permanently disassembled the unity of the United States.<sup>238</sup> A domino effect proceeded to crash throughout the South. Concern rose as Southerners wondered how the Federal government would "maintain" the "power, the authority, and the dignity of the Government" by "put[ting] down...resistance at every hazard?"<sup>239</sup>

Arkansas secessionists were especially doubtful about the safety of their rights to maintain the peculiar institution throughout the Arkansas River Valley. All this mistrust occurred even though the election of 1860 resulted in Democratic control of Congress. Therefore, as Thomas Holt posits, "In many ways secession was an anti-party, anti-politician movement."<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Carl Moneyhon, "1861: "The Die is Cast," in *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas*, ed. Mark K. Christ (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 1; Yale Law School, The Avalon Project, "Confederate States of America-Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union," [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/csa\\_scarsec.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_scarsec.asp) (accessed 2 February 2017).

<sup>239</sup> "What Shall be Done with a Seceding Sate? Henry Clay's Opinion," *New York Times*, 10 November 1860; James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 235.

<sup>240</sup> Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 219-221; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 246.



With the secession of South Carolina, a political crisis emerged in Arkansas. Planters in the Arkansas River Valley and the delta, many of whom were former Whigs lent their voices to the choir of Democrats who sang the song of secession. Meanwhile, in keeping with the political and geographic divisions, upland counties of northern and western Arkansas, which housed most of the yeomen farmers, perceived all the secession rhetoric to be a tool by the planter class, mainly located in the Arkansas River Valley and Delta, to increase their power. Therefore, in these counties, stronger ties to the federal government remained and some of them even mused they “could not see wherein the election of Abraham Lincoln had injured [them].”<sup>241</sup> As South Carolina was publicly feuding with the Federal government, more Arkansans were persuaded to support secession. Albert Pike exacerbated the situation by releasing the pamphlet, *State or Province? Bond or Free?*, which touted his opinions supporting states’ rights and called upon Arkansas and other upper South states to secede.<sup>242</sup>

Before war began the Arkansas River played a role in the eventual secession of Arkansas. Events along the river in November 1860 fanned the fires of secession. Captain James Totten employed river boats to transport a force of sixty-five troops of the Second U.S. Artillery Regiment into the unoccupied Little Rock Arsenal in November. The recently arrived troops from Kansas did not initially cause any consternation on the part of Arkansans until January of 1861 when rumors of a reinforcement of the arsenal spread to the seedbed of secessionist support in Helena. Despite the rumors being false, planter extremists called upon the governor to take control of the arsenal and offered five hundred men to make it happen. Governor Rector would

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<sup>241</sup> Jack B. Scroggs, “Arkansas in the Secession Crisis,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 12 no. 2 (Autumn, 1953): 190.

<sup>242</sup> Rachel Skoney, “Large Planters and Planter Persistence in Antebellum Arkansas, 1850-1860,” (master’s thesis, University of Arkansas, 1991), 128-129; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 20-21.

not acquiesce to what he believed to be an illegal action. He prepared a statement that countered the secessionists; Arkansas was still a member of the United States, and as governor, he had no authority to take control of federal property. However, he also remarked in his statement that any attempted reinforcement of the arsenal would be grounds for war. Rector's chief administrative officer reworded the statement before he released it. The newly finagled statement appeared to call for volunteers to take the arsenal. Towards the end of January, hundreds of men from Helena, Pine Bluff, and other locations along the Arkansas River and in the Delta, traveled up the river and converged upon Little Rock with rumors circulating that more men were on the way.<sup>243</sup>

On January 28, 1861, to reassure the Federal troops at the arsenal on the Arkansas River, Governor Rector wrote to Capt. Totten explaining that:

The Public exigencies require me to make know to you that the U.S. Arsenal at this place will be permitted to remain in the possession of the Federal officers until the State, by authority of the people, shall have determined to sever their connection with the General Government, unless, however, it should be thought proper to order additional forces to this point; or, on the other hand, an attempt should be made to remove or destroy the munitions of war deposited in said arsenal.<sup>244</sup>

Despite the Governor's reassurances, within a matter of weeks, his tune changed.

On February 5<sup>th</sup>, the planters made known their position regarding the arsenal. Three companies of volunteers from Helena arrived in Little Rock aboard the steamer *Frederick Notrobe*. Their mission was to take control of the arsenal. Troops from Jefferson, Phillips, Monroe, and Prairie counties reinforced the original three companies of volunteers within a matter of hours. The inhabitants of Little Rock were not pleased with the sudden appearance of

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<sup>243</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 21.

<sup>244</sup> U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880), ser. 1, vol. 1, 8: 638; cited hereafter as *OR*.

unauthorized troops bent on upsetting the authority of the Federal government. The city council, on February 5<sup>th</sup>, declared that if the upstart paramilitary troops took any actions against the arsenal without the consent of the state authorities, that it was an “insult” to the governor. Furthermore, they urged the governor to “interpose his authority” and turn back any unauthorized actions.<sup>245</sup> The council was told, later, that the troops were not there on the governor’s orders. The governor was now in a political bind thanks to the Little Rock city council. If he distanced himself from the attempt to take the arsenal, the secessionists would rail against him. Conversely, if he joined forces with them, the unionist majority of the state would repudiate him. Prominent, less radical, Democratic politicians and citizens advised him “For God’s sake do not complicate matters by an attack,” or, “Don’t attack [the] arsenal unless success is certain.”<sup>246</sup> Despite the advice, Rector took responsibility for the amassing of troops intent on taking the arsenal.<sup>247</sup>

Captain Totten sought instructions from his superiors but found himself “in the dark,” and decided to abandon the arsenal himself on February 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>248</sup> Before he handed the arsenal over, Totten made three demands of Governor Rector. First, that the governor would take control of the arsenal’s munitions in the “name of the United States Government” until he is “legally absolve[d]” of their “responsibility.”<sup>249</sup> Second, that his troops be allowed “unmolested passage through the state” and that they would be allowed to take their belongings.<sup>250</sup> Lastly, that the governor “guarantee [them] the right of marching away from said place with all...honor due to

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 641.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 682-683.

<sup>247</sup> Passing Events, *Arkansas State Gazette*, 9 February 1861; Scroggs, “Arkansas in the Secession Crisis,” 202-203.

<sup>248</sup> U.S. War Department, *OR* ser. 1 vol. 1, 8: 640.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 643.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

them as Federal officers and soldiers who do not surrender their trust, but simple evacuate a post” because they did not receive instructions on how to act and did so to avoid starting a “civil war among their fellow countrymen.”<sup>251</sup>

On February 7<sup>th</sup> Governor Rector agreed to these conditions as long as they did not take any cannons from the arsenal. The loss of the federal fort in Little Rock weakened the United States government’s control of the Arkansas River and of the state. The Governor and secessionists were pleased, but many citizens were not amused. Additionally, the Governor’s and secessionists’ actions particularly perturbed the citizens of Little Rock. Totten’s report reflected the general attitude of the city as he referred to them as “peaceable, law-abiding, and loyal citizens of the United States.”<sup>252</sup> Due to the surrender of the arsenal, Governor Rector’s approval ratings suffered. Many Unionists disapproved of the Governor’s actions and blamed him for creating an unnecessary calamity. Even some secessionists believed he mishandled the situation.<sup>253</sup> By this point, some Arkansans were becoming aware of the path they were headed down. One planter on the Arkansas River explained, “my faith of the Union being preserved has been getting weaker and weaker until I have given up all hope and now I am for immediate secession.”<sup>254</sup>

In his inaugural address, Lincoln made a spatial argument against secession. He argued that “Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced,

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 645.

<sup>253</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 24.

<sup>254</sup> Edward C. Morton to Elizabeth Parker, February 7, 1861, Edward Parker Correspondence, MC1887, University of Arkansas Special Collections, Box 1 File 8 Correspondence 1861.

and go out of the presence, and beyond the reach of each other; but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them.”<sup>255</sup>

Although Lincoln was referring to the northern and southern sections of the United States, his spatial argument applies to Arkansas. Arkansas’ upland and lowland counties found in the northwest and southeastern parts of the state often found themselves divided due to several factors including slavery, politics, and culture. These two sections of the state not only shared a space in which they bordered each other, but a river that ran through the state that created a conduit that connected them. Goods, people, ideas, and beliefs flowed between the two sections. During the Civil War control of the Arkansas River determined who controlled the state, its capitol, and its institutions.

Arkansas Slave Populations					
1840	1840	1850	1850	1860	1860
AR River Counties	Non River Counties	AR River Counties	Non River Counties	AR River Counties	Non River Counties
<b>5078</b>	<b>14852</b>	<b>9741</b>	<b>37359</b>	<b>25637</b>	<b>85478</b>
Average Per County	Average Per County	Average Per County	Average Per County	Average Per County	Average Per County
<b>564.2</b>	<b>436.8</b>	<b>885.5</b>	<b>933.9</b>	<b>2136.4</b>	<b>1987.8</b>

Table 3.1 Counties along the Arkansas River had higher average slave populations. *Source:* United States Department of State. *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States, as Obtained at the Department of State, from the Returns of the Sixth Census.* Washington D.C.: Thomas Allen, 1841; DeBow, J.D.B. *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850.* Washington D.C.: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer, 1853; United States Department of the Interior. *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census.* Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864.

<sup>255</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Don E. Fahrenbacher (New York: Vintage Books/ The Library of America, 1992), 287, 291; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 24.

Despite the harsh words of some prominent Arkansans, Arkansas did not secede, Nevertheless, the river helped carry secessionist wave through the state. Secessionists in the delta became more convinced of the need to secede and started making preparations to do so. A secessionist militia along the Arkansas River in Pine Bluff fired upon the steamer *Silver Wave* in March of 1861, believing that the boat contained weapons and munitions intended to supply federal forts in Indian Territory. Secessionist militia forced the boat to dock and summarily searched it. They did not find any weapons or munitions, and the steamer was allowed to continue on its way after it was relieved of its medical supplies. Another incident similar to the Pine Bluff affair played out in the spring of 1861 in Napoleon, Arkansas, a port town on the Arkansas River near the confluence of the Mississippi. Operating upon information that claimed federal authorities in Cincinnati had confiscated a shipment of lead and powder headed for Memphis and New Orleans, secessionists mounted two six-pound canons on the riverbank, and they forced steamboats traveling up the Mississippi to dock for inspection. Local militia even went so far as to fire upon the steamer *Westmoreland* after its captain refused to release his cargo. The attack resulted in the death of one passenger and the wounding of another.<sup>256</sup>

Soon, control of the river translated into control of the state. These episodes of violence and coercion upon the Arkansas River acted as a precursor that highlighted the important role the river played in the War after Arkansas officially seceded. After the hostilities at Fort Sumpter on April 12, 1861, many Arkansans began to change their stance regarding secession. Governor Rector took advantage of the situation and swiftly ordered Solon Borland to take command of

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<sup>256</sup> Michael D. Hammond, "Arkansas Atlantis: The Lost Town of Napoleon," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 65 no. 3 (Autumn, 2006): 214; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 25- 26; "Resolutions Presented in the Secession Convention, March9-12," 1861, in *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, ed. James J. Gigantino II, 162.

the state militia and commandeer the federal outpost at Fort Smith. Controlling Fort Smith was vital to controlling the western part of the lower Arkansas River. Whoever controlled the river would have an advantage in gaining control of the state and influence the war in the trans-Mississippi West. The control of the Arkansas River between Arkansas Post and Little Rock allowed Arkansas to send a thousand men on three steamboats to Fort Smith. The first of Colonel Borland's transports to arrive in Fort Smith was the *Frederick Notrebe* and *Tahlequah* carrying three hundred Arkansas volunteers and eight pieces of light artillery. When they arrived, the fort was virtually empty, as all the troops had evacuated to Fort Washita. Later, the steamer *Leon* delivered more troops from Little Rock and N. Bart Pearce was appointed to command the Western Division of troops with headquarters at Fort Smith. Pearce arrived at Fort Smith on May 20, 1861, (a mere two weeks after Arkansas officially seceded). The next day he initiated an offensive mission that sent one company of infantry and two cavalry companies to attack a Union train of thirty wagons traveling from Fort Cobb to Fort Leavenworth. Although Pearce's forces failed to reach the Union wagon train before it arrived at Fort Leavenworth on May 31. Fort Smith continued to act as a base of operations for engaging with Union Forces in the Northwest part of the Trans-Mississippi West. On May 25, 1861, the steamer *Tahlequah* arrived at Fort Smith carrying supplies and passengers including General Ben McCulloch, commander of Confederate forces in Indian Territory and Albert Pike who promptly traveled to Indian Territory to meet with the Cherokees.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Ed Bearss and Arrell M. Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 242-244; Higgins, *Fort Smith*, 47; Hicks, *The Fort Smith Story*, 45; James McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 158, 163; Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation Calling Militia and Convening Congress," in *Lincoln: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 296; James Gigantino II, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 193.

The Confederate seizure of Fort Smith began three years of Confederate control in the area that lasted until September 1, 1863. The fort's strategic location on the Arkansas River in the northwest part of the state played an essential role in the Confederacy's transportation and communications network and made it a tactical location for storage facilities. The fort also served as a defense in the protection of states west of the Mississippi. Confederate strategists thought their river defenses would buffer any Union attempt to infiltrate the South via the Mississippi. They believed that Federal troops would be deployed along the western frontier, moving from the Grand River Valley or along the Telegraph Road from southeastern Missouri. Control of the Arkansas River, they hoped, would limit Union troop movements and thwart any attack on the Rebels in eastern Arkansas and western Indian Territory. Therefore, Fort Smith, for a time, acted as the nerve center for Confederate operations, protecting the Trans-Mississippi West states of Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana from threats emanating out of the northwest.<sup>258</sup>

Fort Smith and control of the river also played a part in Confederate relations with the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory. Indian Territory was a tactical location for the Confederacy because it provided a geographic buffer vital to protecting the Trans-Mississippi Confederate states from a Union assault. Essential communication and transportation highways traversed Indian Territory including The Arkansas and Red Rivers and the Texas and Butterfield roads. Additionally, Indian Territory provided various resources such as beef, hides, horses, grain, salt, lead, and tribal labor. Native American slaveholders generally controlled tribal affairs and displayed an understanding of the Confederate cause and a desire to join the Confederacy. The Confederate government assigned Albert Pike the task of negotiating treaties with the Five Civilized Tribes. Pike choose Fort Smith as his base of operations. Throughout the spring and

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<sup>258</sup> Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith*, 244.



summer of 1861 Pike negotiated agreements with the Cherokees, Creeks, Seminoles, Choctaws, Osage, Senecas and Shawnees, Quapaws, and Chickasaws in which these tribes renounced their connection to the United States and joined the Confederacy.<sup>259</sup>

Civilian reactions to the Arkansas militia's seizure of Fort Smith varied. The attacks left many residents of the Fort Smith area filled with "deep regret that the post of Fort Smith is to be abandoned by the General Government."<sup>260</sup> Following the capture of Fort Smith, a portion of the militia returned to Little Rock. Upon their arrival, exuberant supporters met them with shouts of victory.<sup>261</sup> The *Arkansas Gazette* declared that "The Work of the Coercion Commenced—Let the People of Arkansas Resist it as one Man."<sup>262</sup>

Despite the early jubilation of many Arkansans following secession, the effects of war in the Trans-Mississippi west would soon cause pause for thought throughout the Arkansas River Valley. In some parts of the Trans-Mississippi theatre, fighting had been raging since 1856 in Kansas. For many Indians in the Trans-Mississippi and Western theaters of the war, they had been living, trading, raiding and fighting as guerillas for hundreds of years. Therefore, as Megan Kate Nelson argues, Native Americans viewed the struggles of the 1850s and 1860s as a continuation of fighting in their long history. As the Civil War deepened, hard feelings were strong, guerilla warfare was terrible, and incidents of brutality were frequent throughout the

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<sup>259</sup> War Department, *OR*, ser. 4 vol. 1, 359-555, 636-666, 669-687, 785-786, 792; Bearss and Gibson, *Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 245.

<sup>260</sup> War Department, *OR*, ser. 4 vol. 1, 655.

<sup>261</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 27; War Department, *OR* ser. 1, vol. 1, 8: 686.

<sup>262</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, April 20, 1861, in Gigantino II, *Slavery and Secession in Arkansas*, 204; War Department, *OR* ser. 1 vol. 1, 8: 687, 691; DeBlack *With Fire and Sword*, 28; Arkansas Convention, *Journal of Both Sessions of the Conventions of the State of Arkansas* (Little Rock: Johnson & Yerkes, 1861), 142, 212; W. McDowell Rogers, "Seizure of United States' Lands By Seceding States," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 18 no. 3 (September, 1934): 266-268.

western Arkansas River Valley. The Trans-Mississippi theatre was also unique in the increased role cavalry played and the diversity of the troops. This theatre of war witnessed Native Americans fighting on both sides, and by late 1862, African American troops entered into the fray. Early on in the conflict, many Arkansans believed war to be something of a great adventure, but that sentiment would not last long. For many of them, their only joyful experience during the conflict consisted of the peaceful and successful boat ride along the Arkansas River to take the Little Rock arsenal and the post at Fort Smith. The young and somewhat naive men that began to fill out volunteer companies all along the Arkansas River bristled with confidence and “looked as though they could whip their weight in wild cats.”<sup>263</sup> The reality of the situation soon deflated the spirits of the volunteers. As more and more troops collected in places along the Arkansas River, the boredom and monotony of camp life and drilling set in. Many began to wonder as one young man, “We think of having a fight some of these days.”<sup>264</sup> Additionally, with growing populations of young men from different places began to live in close quarters disease put a damper on many a soldier’s outlook and ultimately ended many lives. Measles, mumps, the chills, malaria, dysentery, and diarrhea ran rampant in camps along the river.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Megan Kate Nelson, “Indians Make the Best Guerrillas: Native Americans and the War for the Desert Southwest, 1861-1862,” in *The Civil War Guerrilla: Unfolding the Black Flag in History, Memory, and Myth*, ed. Joseph M. Beilein and Matthew C. Hulbert (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 102-103; J. Fred Patton, “History of Fort Smith, Arkansas,” (master’s thesis, University of Arkansas, 1936), 120; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 32-33; J.W. Felts to Wm. W. Woodruff Sr. Esqr., May 24, 1861 in *A Documentary History of Arkansas*, ed. C. Fred Williams (Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1984), 98.

<sup>264</sup> William Clendenin Porter, Journal entry, July 17, 1861, in “War Diary of W.C. Porter,” ed. J.V. Frederick, *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 11 no. 4 (Winter, 1952): 288; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 32-33.

<sup>265</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 32-33.

With an ever-growing health crisis developing along the river and in troop camps early in the war, officials worried about the toll taken on soldiers' health. Following the first Battle of Bull Run a report to the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), *Demoralization of the Volunteer Army at Washington*, highlighted the horrors and challenges troops faced before, during, and after a battle. If lucky to survive a battle, soldiers were then forced to suffer a host of maladies that included, "Blistered Feet, rheumatic pains, aching limbs, diarrhea, and nervous debility."<sup>266</sup> As the war continued soldiers suffered from physical and emotional distresses caused by several variables ranging from battle wounds to the environment they inhabited. Health conditions for troops along the Arkansas River could disintegrate quickly as thousands of soldiers used the same water source for preparing food, drinking, bathing, and human waste removal, and as a trash dump. Water related disease escalated when the river was low and the water stagnant. Stagnant water, whether from a low river or the surrounding swampy environment of the river valley, was fraught with mosquito born illnesses. Additionally, floods, especially those that came on quickly, disrupted camp life and battle preparations. The effects of camp life and battle and battle-related injuries, mental and physical, were summed up by Frederick Law Olmstead to be "soul sickness."<sup>267</sup>

The spatial distance between the Arkansas River and the Confederate capital contributed to divisions within the Confederate ranks in Arkansas. Adding to the problematic situations many Confederate soldiers faced was the unequal relationship established between Rebel troops

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<sup>266</sup> Lisa A. Long, *Rehabilitating Bodies: Health, History, and the American Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 84; Frederick Law Olmsted, *Report of the Secretary with regard to the Probable Origin of the Recent Demoralization of the Volunteer Army at Washington: and the Duty of the Sanitary Commission with Reference to Certain Deficiencies in the Existing Army Arrangements, as Suggested Thereby* (Washington: McGill & Witherow, Printers, 1861), 11.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

in the Trans-Mississippi West and Confederate command in Richmond. Due to its distance, the Trans-Mississippi West had a perception of being a peripheral location that was not vital to the main fighting in the War. As a result many Rebel forces in the Trans-Mississippi West were often undersupplied and understaffed despite the strategic nature of Arkansas geographically. Arkansas was essential to the Confederate war effort because, without control of Arkansas, the Confederacy would find it difficult to maintain its light grasp on Indian Territory or control western Louisiana. Furthermore, the Arkansas River in northwest Arkansas was a critical staging point for Rebel operations and missions into Missouri, which was a slave state that did not secede but contained the biggest arsenal in the Union and controlled Saint Louis, a major river port on the Mississippi. Until the Union secured Missouri and St. Louis, it would be a struggle to split the Confederacy in half and gain control of the Mississippi River. Confederate troops along the Arkansas River engaged in skirmishes ranging from Arkansas into Missouri and in doing so tied up thousands of Union troops that Union commanders could have used elsewhere in the eastern theatre.<sup>268</sup>

The richness of the soil and the high agricultural production of areas like the Arkansas River Valley throughout the Trans-Mississippi West proved the region to be a vital reservoir of agricultural commodities such as cotton, sugar, and rice. Additionally, the Trans-Mississippi West provided close to one million horses, 800,000 oxen, over 300,000 mules, and millions of cattle. Throughout the war, tens of thousands of men, 45,000 from Arkansas, served in the Confederacy. Often the Arkansas River served as a lifeline to the Confederate cause by sending men and goods down the Arkansas River to wherever they were needed. Despite the strategic

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<sup>268</sup> Jeffery S. Prushankin, *The Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi Theater 1861-1865* (Washington D.C.: United States Army, Center of Military History, 2015), 7-9; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 35-36.

importance of Arkansas, leaders in Richmond perceived Arkansas as a source of men and material that was better put to use in the eastern theatre. Additionally, Confederate high command often treated Arkansas as a “dumping ground” for generals that were considered the “leftovers, invalids, and rejects, the flotsam of the war in the east.”<sup>269</sup> Confederate high command tasked these disappointing military leaders with interacting and utilizing the Arkansas River in the contest for control of Arkansas and survival of the Confederacy in the trans-Mississippi west.

Despite the perceived unqualified character of leaders in the Trans-Mississippi West, the region was still tactically important so Union and Confederate armies deployed their troops to the area. The Confederacy appointed General Ben McCulloch to build a frontier army at Fort Smith to protect the Confederate rear from a Union invasion. Fort Smith’s location on the south side of a pronounced bend in the river helped provide a barrier on the towns’ east, north, and west sides. Three regiments made up McCulloch’s original force: two cavalries and one infantry, one each taken from Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. McCulloch’s commanders gave him the option of, if able, raising two more regiments from Arkansas and Indian Territory to be at his disposal for “such service as [his] judgment may determine.”<sup>270</sup>

By the early summer of 1861, the Confederate government supplied Fort Smith with men, material, and food. The fort was now prepared to utilize its strategic location to influence the war in its region. A short time after McCulloch arrived at Fort Smith he wrote to the

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<sup>269</sup> Prushankin, *The Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi Theater 1861-1865*, 7-9; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 35-36.

<sup>270</sup> War Department, *OR*, ser. 1 vol. 1, 575-576; Bearss and Gibson, *Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 246.

Confederate Secretary of War Walker and explained that due to pro-Union sympathies in Missouri he believed that an invasion of northwestern Arkansas was imminent. McCulloch

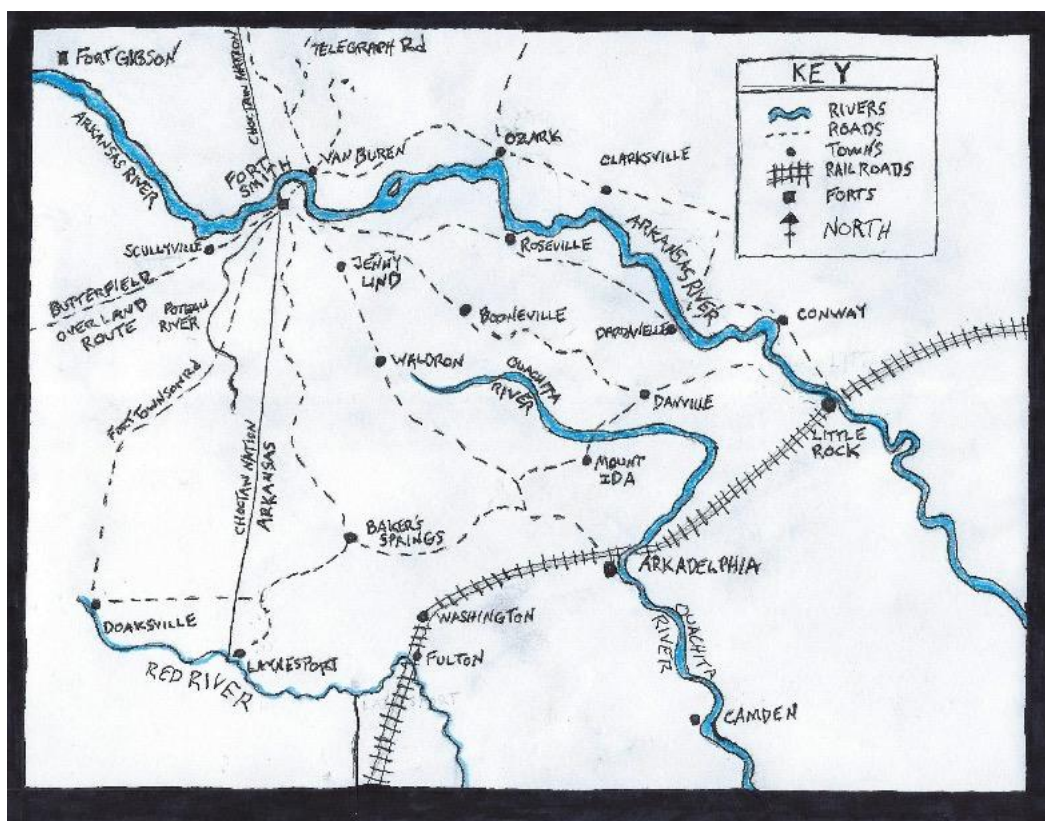


Figure 3.1 Western Arkansas During the Civil War, Based on map by Helmuth Holtz, *Map of Louisiana & Arkansas*, [S.l.,?, 1864] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99447188/> (accessed March 16, 2019).

preferred to take the fight to the enemy instead of reacting defensively closer to the Arkansas border. The pro-Confederate governor of Missouri, Governor Claiborne F. Jackson, wrote to Fort Smith relating his coerced evacuation from Jefferson City. He tipped McCulloch off to Union troop movements and advised the General to send troops north into southern Missouri. McCulloch contacted Walker and explained the situation in southern Missouri and suggested that he be allowed to send a brigade north to stop the Union advance, capture Fort Scott and seize a portion of Kansas. He argued that these actions would buoy the resolve of Confederates in Missouri and assist in preventing a Union invasion into Indian Territory. Before McCulloch

received a response from Walker, Jackson and his men were overwhelmed at Booneville by twenty-four hundred Union troops. Additionally, a group of Union troops nine thousand strong was getting uncomfortably close to the Arkansas border with the occupation of Springfield, Missouri, less than eighty miles from the border. McCulloch issued a proclamation inviting Arkansas men to join with him in defending northwest Arkansas from Union forces. On July 3, 1861, McCulloch joined up with General Sterling Price, swept into Neosho, captured 137 Union troops and pushed the advance Union column back into Springfield.<sup>271</sup>

Meanwhile, back at Fort Smith the river aided in supplying Confederate troops. Major W. Clarke, the fort's quartermaster, provided the supply train with all the guns, ammunition, food, and clothes to support the Missouri offensive. Steamers continued to pull into port at Fort Smith, delivering arms and ammunition. On July 27, Colonel Greer's Texas regiment arrived at Fort Smith. After being outfitted at the fort and crossing the river, they marched into Missouri. On August ninth, the Union troops under General Nathaniel Lyon and Franz Sigel advanced towards Confederate troops in southern Missouri. On August 10, 1861, the two armies clashed at Wilson's Creek, twelve miles southwest of Springfield, Missouri. The battle was deadly, and the Rebels were victorious resulting in a Union retreat to a supply base at Rolla, one hundred miles northeast of Springfield. Following the battle, McCulloch's force returned to Fort Smith in late August. Troops and citizens flocked to Fort Smith in the wake of McCulloch's victory and celebrated with parades, dances, speeches, and barbecues. McCulloch's success was one of the last times these people would have anything to celebrate. Similarly, civilians became disillusioned with the war and the expensive cost of supporting soldiers. Even if a civilian could purchase goods, commodities became costly due to high demand and short supply. The short

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<sup>271</sup> Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 246-248.

supply was often due to foraging parties as soldiers stripped civilians of their fruits, vegetables, eggs, chickens, hogs, and almost anything that was edible or not bolted down.<sup>272</sup> With nutritional deficiencies and other health issues plaguing the troops, many women in the city of Fort Smith found themselves taking care of the sick and wounded. Often women opened their houses to feed, tend to injuries, and bathe those that were not able to care for themselves.<sup>273</sup>

Meanwhile, a battle was taking shape in northwest Arkansas which would threaten Confederate control of Fort Smith and subsequently the western part of the river. In March of 1862 Union and Confederate forces met up at what became the Battle of Pea Ridge. The Union victory was significant as it marked a turning point of the war in Arkansas. For the Federal government, they had smashed Price's troops to smithereens and preserved Missouri's place in Union control. The Confederate defeat was such a disaster that they did not fully recover from it. In the wake of Pea Ridge, things continued to worsen for Arkansas Confederates. During the retreat of Stand Watie's Cherokees into Indian Territory, the Cherokee regiment made up of John Ross's followers switched their allegiance to the Union, which resulted in increasing the divide throughout the Cherokee nation.<sup>274</sup> Although the Union won the battle, the Confederates remained a significant presence in the area because they retained control of the Arkansas River.

Further complicating issues for Arkansas Confederates, during the summer of 1862 Federal forces captured the Cherokee capital at Tahlequah and took John Ross, as a prisoner. Ross quickly declared his allegiance to the United States and issued a proclamation outlining

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<sup>272</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 41-43; Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 251.

<sup>273</sup> Orville W. Taylor, "Joseph H. Haney, An Arkansas Engineer in the Civil War: The First Phase," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 14 no. 1 (Spring, 1955): 70; Mrs. George Lyman, "Fort Smith Women During War Between the States," *Fort Smith Historical Society Inc., The Journal* 4 no. 1 (April, 1980): 32.

<sup>274</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 49-51.



Cherokee loyalty to the Union. Further weakening the strength of Confederate Arkansas was the Federal successes at Forts Donelson and Henry in Tennessee. After those forts fell into Union control Confederate general P.G.T. Beauregard asked Van Dorn to move the remainder of his army across the Mississippi in an attempt to take Cairo, Illinois, and Paducah, Kentucky in a wild chance they might regain control of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Van Dorn moved his troops leaving Arkansas, Indian Territory, and Fort Smith vulnerable. Furthermore, Van Dorn's movements out of Arkansas resulted in increased guerilla warfare in the area.<sup>275</sup>

With the Van Dorn and the Confederate Army of the West out of Arkansas, Halleck saw an opportunity and sent Curtis to take control of Little Rock. Because the Union did not control the river, Confederates were able to limit U.S. troop movements and force Curtis to devise a strategy that required him travel overland to Little Rock. This meant being harassed by guerilla fighting with Confederate partisans, many of whom were remnants of the Army of the West. Additionally, not having control of the river meant that Federal supply trains and Union soldiers were always susceptible to attacks and death. Even though a centralized command structure was lacking among these early guerillas, they thwarted Curtis' march towards Little Rock at Batesville. With an easy path to Little Rock unattainable to Curtis, because he lacked the use of the river, he redirected his troops to Helena. On his way, he instituted a policy of total war and destroyed everything in his path. On July 12 1862, Curtis seized control of Helena thus reestablishing supply and communication lines along the Mississippi River.<sup>276</sup>

Confederate support began waning in Arkansas as political troubles and war weariness set in. Nevertheless, Confederate General Thomas Hindman reestablished a firm grip on the

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Prushankin, *The Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi Theater 1861-1865*, 28-29.

Arkansas River and in doing so reenergized the Confederate cause in Arkansas. General Beauregard had, back on May 3, appointed Major General Thomas C. Hindman as commander of the newly created Trans-Mississippi District, which encompassed Missouri, Arkansas, Indian Territory, and Louisiana north of the Red River. Hindman, with great zeal, began to replenish the Confederate Army in Arkansas and docked the gunboat *Pontchartrain* at Little Rock and sent other gunboats out on the Arkansas and White Rivers to discourage reinforcements for Curtis.<sup>277</sup>

Disagreement regarding Confederate troop placement in the trans-Mississippi west led to a reorganization of command in the area. Troops from Texas and a Missouri Brigade from east of the Mississippi were transferred to Arkansas to augment the Confederate fighting forces therein. Hindman also seized control of all the Arkansas state troops from the governor, thus creating unwanted political drama. Further complicating matters, Hindman ordered Pike to send his troops to Fort Smith which resulted in Pike resigning. The complaints of the governor, Arkansas Congressmen, and Pike made their way to the Confederate War Department's attention. Instead of dealing directly with the problem of Hindman the Confederate government created a new layer of command that cushioned the interactions between The War Department, the politicians of Arkansas, and Hindman. The lucky new layer was the reluctant General Theophilus Holmes, who was now in charge of the Trans-Mississippi Department.<sup>278</sup>

The Arkansas and White Rivers became hot spots for activity as U.S. and Confederate gunships and transports attempted to establish dominion over and use the waterways to their

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<sup>277</sup> Robert E. Johnson, "Fort Smith and the Civil War," *Fort Smith Historical Society Inc., The Journal* 4 no. 1 (April, 1980): 6; Martial Law in Little Rock, *True Democrat*, May 22, 1862; Affairs Become Brighter in Arkansas, *True Democrat*, June 5, 1862; General T.C. Hindman Assumes Command at Little Rock, *True Democrat*, June 5, 1862.

<sup>278</sup> Johnson, "Fort Smith and the Civil War," 6; Martial Law in Little Rock, *True Democrat*, May 22, 1862; Affairs Become Brighter in Arkansas, *True Democrat*, June 5, 1862; General T.C. Hindman Assumes Command at Little Rock, *True Democrat*, June 5, 1862.

advantage. Union forces needed to control the Arkansas River before they could complete their mission to take the Mississippi River. In June of 1862 they came one step closer to their goal with the fall of Memphis. Meanwhile to the west, General Samuel Curtis, who had been fighting Confederate forces in Northwest Arkansas and southern Missouri for the past year, feared he was in trouble. Curtis believed that Hindman had received reinforcements from Texas and that they now had superior numbers. Curtis gathered his men at Batesville, Arkansas and requested more troops and supplies but the army quartermaster corps did not have any available transports to send up the White River and could not meet his needs. Fortunately for Curtis, Davis was glad to help Halleck. Davis believed that the *General Earl Van Dorn* was most likely hiding on the Arkansas or White Rivers. Davis aimed to clear the Arkansas and White Rivers of the enemy craft before the Union flotilla began operations against Vicksburg. The Union did not want to give Confederates the option of attacking them from the Arkansas River causing them to engage in a naval battle on two fronts as they established control of the Mississippi River. If things went according to Davis' plans, he would clear the river of Confederate gunboats and allow Curtis to be reinforced with a detachment of Indiana infantry and supplies.<sup>279</sup>

Davis' hunch was right; Hindman did have designs concerning the Arkansas and White Rivers. Hindman had ordered engineers to survey the Arkansas and White Rivers to prevent Union movements on those rivers. The summer of 1862 witnessed the Arkansas River lacking a sufficient depth to support boats as big as steamers, so Hindman focused his attention on the White River. Hindman's tactical choice was sound as, indeed, Union boats went up the White River in attempts to erase the Confederate presence on the river and bolster Curtis' forces. After

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<sup>279</sup> Gary D. Joiner, *Mr. Lincoln's Brown Water Navy: The Mississippi Squadron* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 71-71; Deblack, *With Fire and Sword*, 55.

a series of skirmishes, Davis succeeded in clearing the White River of Rebel threats. Davis then encountered low and quickly falling water levels that slowed and halted his advance up the White. Curtis' situation at Batesville grew more desperate with each passing day, so much so that he decided to rendezvous with Davis on the river.<sup>280</sup>

As Curtis marched along the river to meet up with Davis, he engaged in total war, in part because they were utterly cut off from their supply lines. Curtis' men seized what food and animals they could and burned everything in their path. In response to Davis' actions, Hindman countered with an equally ferocious total war policy. Hindman urged civilians to attack Curtis whenever possible and destroy any crops, food, or material that might be useful to the Union troops. Because of total war tactics by both sides, the landscape was significantly altered throughout northwest Arkansas and in the Arkansas River Valley. The destruction of private properties and the natural environment was, as Megan Kate Nelson argues, "deliberate and pointed, part of a hard-war strategy that allowed soldiers to enact their class resentments and their desires for vengeance."<sup>281</sup> Similar to Van Dorn's usage of irregular troops to protect crossing points along the Arkansas River, Hindman organized bands of guerrillas to harass and thwart detached Union units and supply lines. Hindman hoped partisans would:

For the more effectual annoyance of the enemy upon our rivers and in our mountains and woods all citizens of this district who are not subject to conscription are called upon to organize themselves into independent companies of mounted men or infantry, as they prefer, arming and equipping themselves, and to serve in that part of the district to which they belong....[they] will at once commence operations against the enemy without waiting for special instructions. Their duty will be to cut off federal pickets, scouts, foraging parties, and trains, and to kill pilots and others on gunboats and transports, attacking them day and night, and using the greatest vigor in their movements.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Deblack, *With Fire and Sword*, 55-57.

<sup>281</sup> Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 62; Deblack, *With Fire and Sword*, 58.

<sup>282</sup> U.S. War Department, *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 13, p. 835.

By doing so, Hindman furthered the frightful and harsh guerrilla actions that were, as Daniel Sutherland has argued, the “real war” in Arkansas. As guerrilla warfare often devolved into lawlessness, civilians were in constant danger, and Union troops were frustrated as irregulars influenced Federal tactics in Arkansas ranging from troop deployments to supply line protection.<sup>283</sup>

Hindman’s failure to stop Davis’ relief efforts resulted in Hindman trying to intercept Curtis’ troops with the hope of forcing him to retreat or surrender. Union and Confederate forces skirmished over the next couple of days. Eventually, Curtis’ troops prevailed and pushed through to Clarendon where they received supplies. Unfortunately for the Union troops, the steamboats with the supplies reached Clarendon on the last day of June. After waiting until July 8, they moved back down the river fearing the falling water levels. Curtis realized that *sans* new supplies he could not march on Little Rock in his current state and decided to move on to Helena where he could establish a supply line with Memphis.<sup>284</sup>

No staged battles between Confederate and Union troops took place for the remainder of the summer in the Delta. Federal troops found they did have to contend with the miserable weather and the equally frustrating attacks of mosquitoes and ticks. Although they were mainly on the lookout for enemy troops, Union soldiers in the Arkansas River Valley and the Delta quickly learned the need to watch out for snakes, lizards, and other dangerous animals that inhabited the swamps. Additionally, slaves from surrounding farms and plantations used their knowledge of the densely wooded and swampy natural environment to escape to Union camps.

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<sup>283</sup> Daniel E. Sutherland, “Guerrillas: The Real War In Arkansas,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 no. 3 (Autumn, 1993): 257, 261, 266, 269, 283; Deblack, *With Fire and Sword*, 58; Daniel R. Doyle, “The Civil War in the Greenville Bends,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 70 no. 2 (Summer 2011): 135.

<sup>284</sup> Deblack, *With Fire and Sword*, 58-59.

Curtis did not even try to return the runaways to their masters. On July 12, 1862, Curtis and company arrived at Helena where Curtis took Hindman's house as his headquarters and freed his slaves.<sup>285</sup>

Hindman meanwhile, returned to his headquarters in Little Rock on the river where he created a lot of hard feelings towards himself. As the short-timed commander of the Trans-Mississippi, Hindman managed to create a significant fighting force, prevented Union soldiers from crossing the river invading Little Rock, and enraged many people due to his cumbersome and draconian methods. Citizens and Soldiers alike disliked Hindman's harshness. Following the Confederate loss at Pea Ridge desertions were a problem. Lieutenant Commander James W. Blackburn offered a reward of \$30 for the delivery of each deserter from Company B, 14<sup>th</sup> Regiment Arkansas Volunteer Infantry to him in Little Rock. Soon after Blackburn issued this notice, Hindman assumed command in Little Rock and was reported to have executed twelve deserters by firing squads.<sup>286</sup>

If Arkansans were weary of Hindman's methods, they were more afraid of Federal troops and their supposed barbarous actions to citizens of the State. The Little Rock newspaper, the *True Democrat*, warned and related to its readers that:

We have received various accounts of the acts of the Federal s in our State and the atrocities committed by them, giving the names of the sufferers and the particulars of their infamous deeds. Those who have not witnessed their acts would scarcely believe that human beings, in the present century, could be capable of such villainies. After leaving Independence County, where they seduced a great many negroes from their masters, and lavishly supplied them with pewter money, they commenced a systematic destruction of all property they could not steal. Everything portable they carried off, and that which they could not carry, they destroyed. They broke open bureaus, trunks, wardrobes, etc., and such clothing as the Negro wenches who they had with them did not

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>286</sup> \$30.00 Reward For Each Soldier, *True Democrat*, May 1, 1862; J.H. Atkinson, offered some analysis on this newspaper article in "\$30.00 Reward For Each Soldier" *The Pulaski County Historical Society Review* 10 no. 2 (June, 1962): 23; Deblack, *With Fire and Sword*, 61.

want, they tore into shreds before the eyes of the persons whom they robbed. Every morsel of provisions they carried off, tore down fences, turned in stock and destroyed the growing crops. In some cases they tore the rings from the ears and fingers of ladies and offered other indignities too disgusting for narration here. A favorite amusement with them was to put a rope around the neck of the owner of a plantation and hang him unless he told where provisions or valuables were concealed. They caught women, and putting bayonets to their breasts made them tell where negroes were concealed or property hid. Every law book or other book of value they destroyed and were careful to burn the records of all counties that they could lay their hands on.<sup>287</sup>

Unfortunately, despite some embellishments, there were some truths to these indictments of Union troops. Union troops were not the only ones engaging in such heinous activities as many Confederate troops, and irregular bands were also doing their best to rob, plunder, murder, and more. Because much of the population lived in the river valley, violence and theft throughout the area were commonplace. Sometimes Union and Confederate troops demanded Arkansans' generosity right after each other. After one eventful day of catering to the needs of Union soldiers (who, in this instance, paid for their food) and Confederate soldiers (who did not pay for their food) one Arkansas woman recorded in her journal, "Heaven be praised. They are all gone but only after stealing whatever they could."<sup>288</sup> Arkansas continued to wallow in the "depth of misfortune and misery" for the remainder of the war.<sup>289</sup> The misfortunes that Arkansans experienced were no respecter of persons. It descended upon white and black, poor and wealthy. Plantations along the river were large targets for looters. In addition to pillaging, the plantation system was further disturbed as men went to war, and slaves escaped leaving fields to lay fallow.

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<sup>287</sup> Federal Excesses in Arkansas, *True Democrat*, July 30, 1862.

<sup>288</sup> Nani Hermann, Journal entry for November 23, 1862, in "Memoirs, Letters, and Diary Entries of German Settlers in Northwest Arkansas, 1853- 1863," trans. and ed. by Clarence Evans, *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 6 no. 3 (Fall, 1947): 244.

<sup>289</sup> Edmund G. Ross, quoted in Matthew M. Stith, *Extreme Civil War: Guerrilla Warfare, Environment, and Race on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2016), 74-77; N.J. Kelly, "William F. Rowe of Company H, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Arkansas Cavalry, U.S. Volunteers," *Fort Smith Historical Society, The Journal* 4 no. 1 (April, 1980): 27.

The spatial location of the Arkansas River in the Trans-Mississippi and Little Rock's central position on it made the Arkansas capital a strategic location for the military administration of the region. By mid-August 1862, Major General Theophilus Holmes arrived in Little Rock to assume the post as commander of the Department of the Trans-Mississippi. He now oversaw Confederate Arkansas, Missouri, Texas, Louisiana, and Indian Territory. The fifty-eight-year-old Holmes, although having an impressive record from his service in the Mexican War, proved to be a disappointment to the Confederacy in the Civil War. Due to a poor performance in the eastern theatre, he was relieved of command. He then requested dismissal from military service. Jefferson Davis had other plans, and instead of relieving him of duty, Jefferson gave him the burden of the Trans-Mississippi theatre of the War. Holmes was sickly and failed to inspire confidence in his men. A lack of supplies and men relentlessly dogged him as the Union increased their control of strategic points along the Arkansas River. Additionally, the focus of activity was now on the Mississippi, and Richmond requested more men to defend Vicksburg. Adding to Holmes fraying nerves was the fact that he had to wrangle with Hindman. On August 20, 1862, Holmes divided up the Trans-Mississippi into three parts and placed Hindman in charge of the district Arkansas, which included Arkansas, Missouri, and Indian Territory. Holmes was weary, but he understood the importance of holding as much of the river as possible. After all, Holmes could use the river as a defensive barrier. Therefore he deployed about half his troops along the Arkansas and White Rivers to stop any threats from Helena or the Mississippi and the rest he sent to Fort Smith and Fayetteville.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Michael B. Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas: The People and Policies of a Frontier State in Wartime* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1976), 92-93; Deblack, *With Fire and Sword* 63-64.



With Holmes concentrating on the larger picture of the Trans-Mississippi Department Hindman focused on upcoming battles in Northwest Arkansas. During the summer of 1862, Fort Smith became Hindman's base of operation as he attempted to hold the western part of the river and the region. Hindman situated his troop positions in a manner that mirrored those of 1861 as he continued to build up his fighting force. Because many of his troops were conscripts, Hindman eagerly sought for a rousing victory that would discourage desertions and build morale in one fell swoop. His hoped-for victory would have to wait, as the Battle of Prairie Grove was an ambiguous draw at best.<sup>291</sup>

Hindman and the Confederates were losing control of the river, and in doing so, they were losing the war in the northern part of the Trans-Mississippi theater. A lack of transportation options on the river forced Hindman to withdraw due to dwindling supplies, although he claimed victory. Following Prairie Grove Union commanders Blunt and Herron went on the offensive. Between December 1862 into January 1863 Union cavalry raids swept through and captured Van Buren and sank the C.S.A. steamships *Frederick Notrebe*, *Rose Douglass*, and *Key West* (and the Rebels were forced to destroy the *Arkansas*). The destruction of these ships made resupplying Fort Smith difficult for the balance of the time Confederates controlled the fort.<sup>292</sup>

The lack of complete control of the river and the dependence and hope in cotton meant that acquiring supplies and food was problematic. Poor harvests in 1861 and 1862 created food shortages throughout the state. Making matters worse, many farmers along the Arkansas River continued to focus on cotton production. Newspapers pleaded with farmers to not plant cotton but something edible so that the soldiers "composed of bone and sinew" may have bread to

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<sup>291</sup> Johnson, "Fort Smith and the Civil War," 6-9.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

eat.<sup>293</sup> Additionally, writers beseeched farmers to “be of good cheer but plant no cotton.”<sup>294</sup> If food and supplies were available, they were expensive not only due to the laws of supply and demand but also because of tariffs. Planters, wealthier farmers, and everyday citizens were asked to donate “corn, vegetables, beeves, etc.”<sup>295</sup> The military and the state of Arkansas found it difficult to supply and feed its soldiers. Arkansas relied on the charity of her citizens to donate to the War effort primarily because Arkansas could not afford it. Throughout 1861 and 1862, Arkansas spent \$3,303,437.46, leaving it to begin 1863 with only \$68,698.50.<sup>296</sup>

Officials dedicated most of the state’s spending on control of the Arkansas River and the larger river cities. Despite all of the spending Arkansans found it difficult to justify this amount on the War when all they had to show for it was the Little Rock “arsenal, [the fort at] Fort Smith, a few steamboats, and the clothing of a few soldiers.”<sup>297</sup> People within the state began to grow restless of Governor Rector and his “excessive extravagance.”<sup>298</sup>

Although Arkansas’ inhabitants had been sorely tried by their experiences, they were asked to do more. Much of the aid they gave was focused along the Arkansas River which acted as a spatial gathering point for civilian interactions with troops. While sending aid along the river was relatively easy, Arkansas and the Confederate government found it difficult to supply soldiers in the field. Without the river they their forces would be more disadvantaged then they

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<sup>293</sup> Plant No Cotton?, *True Democrat*, April 3, 1862; Deblack, *With Fire and Sword*, 73.

<sup>294</sup> Plant No Cotton?, *True Democrat*, April 3, 1862.

<sup>295</sup> Prices in Little Rock in 1862, *True Democrat*, June 5, 1862; Scarcity of Produce, *Arkansas State Gazette*, November 15, 1862; Aid for Soldier’s Families in Little Rock in 1862, *True Democrat*, March 6, 1862. Beeves is an old English word for beef but is also applicable to all ruminating animals except camels; Provisions Wanted, *True Democrat*, May 22, 1862.

<sup>296</sup> Soldiers Benefit, *True Democrat*, March 6, 1862; State Expenses-1861-1862, *True Democrat*, September 10, 1862.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> State Expenses-1861-1862, *True Democrat*, September 10, 1862.

already were. Newspapers urged citizens to donate needed materials ranging from blankets and socks to drawers. Hospitals established primarily in Little Rock, and Pine Bluff asked for: homes to be made available to them, African Americans to staff the hospitals, stoves, bed clothing, and herbs for medicinal purposes such as Virginia Snakeroot, American Ipecac root, Fever root, Hemlock leaves, Fleabane, and Woody Night Shade. Women created organizations such as the Daughters of the South and the Ladies Aid Association migrated to the necessary gathering points along the river to clothe and outfit soldiers.<sup>299</sup>

Amid the difficult circumstances of 1862, the Confederate Lieutenant General Theophilus Holmes prepared a plan to defend Little Rock via the river. Holmes directed Col. John W. Dunnington of the Confederate States of America Navy to start construction of an earthen bastion at Arkansas Post on the Arkansas River almost 120 miles downriver from Little Rock. Two engineers, Captains Robert H. Fitzhugh, and A.M. Williams assisted Dunnington. Additionally, Captain A.W. Clarkson's company of sappers and miners and several slaves were used to construct the fort. The new Confederate defensive position was almost complete by mid-November and was called Fort Hindman. Confederate planners situated the fort on high ground at the head of a horseshoe bend in the river. Additionally, the fort was shaped like a diamond with each side measuring three hundred feet and fitted with three heavy and eight smaller cannons. The fort's position offered a clear view of the river for a mile in either direction.

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<sup>299</sup> Our Hospitals, *True Democrat*, April 24, 1862; Clothing Needed, *Arkansas State Gazette*, November 22, 1862; Stoves are Needed for the Hospitals, *Arkansas State Gazette*, October 18, 1862; Contributions for the Soldiers, *Arkansas State Gazette*, October 25, 1862; Attention All, *True Democrat*, December 10, 1862; William W. O'Donnell, *The Civil War Quadrennium: A Narrative History of Day-to-Day Life in Little Rock, Arkansas During the American War Between the States 1861-1865* ([Little Rock ?]: Civil War Round Table of Arkansas, 1985), 24, 28-29; Ted R. Worley, "The Civil War Comes to Van Buren," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 25 no. 2 (Summer, 1966): 149.

Furthermore, there was a line of rifle pits that stretched westward for a mile. Soldiers outfitted the fort with four 10-pound Parrott rifles, four 6-pounder smoothbores, and three 9-inch columbiads. To make firing upon the enemy easier, the Confederates installed a line of piles into the south side of the Arkansas River, which forced oncoming traffic into close range of the big guns. Holmes retained McCulloch's division in Little Rock and sent a brigade of troops to Fort Hindman. The fort housed roughly five thousand troops from Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana with Brigadier General Thomas Churchill in command. By the end of November 1862, the soldiers expected an attack to happen soon. They were underfed, lacked clothes, unpaid, and many of them were sick. Churchill's primary mission was to protect Little Rock from a river invasion and to make Fort Hindman a base of operations for disturbing Union supply and communication lines along the Mississippi River. For example, the Confederate detachments struck at the *Blue Wing*, with its cargo of ammunition and mail, on its way to William T. Sherman's base of operations at Milliken's Bend near Vicksburg. Sherman established the base to coordinate and support his impending attack on Vicksburg. The *Blue Wing* was seized and taken to Arkansas Post where its cargo of weaponry augmented the Confederate stores.<sup>300</sup>

Incidents like the *Blue Wing* became more common as Confederates on the Arkansas River hampered U.S. operations on the Mississippi River. Sherman knew that eliminating the

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<sup>300</sup> Anne J. Bailey, "Henry McCulloch's Texans and the Defense of Arkansas in 1862," in *Civil War Arkansas: Beyond Battles and Leaders*, ed. Anne J. Bailey and Daniel E. Sutherland (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 26; Brian K. Robertson, "Theophilus Hunter Holmes," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1673> (accessed February 17, 2017); DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 78-79; Roger E. Coleman, *The Arkansas Post Story*, 103-104; Shelby Foote, *The Civil War Narrative: Fredericksburg to Meridian* (New York: Random House, 1963), 134; George W. Allen to Parents, August 25, 1862 and George W. Allen to Mother, November 30, 1862 in "Civil War Letters of George W. Allen," ed. Charleen Plumly Pollard and George W. Allen, *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 83 no. 1 (July, 1979): 51-52.

threat on the Arkansas River would make his task on the Mississippi easier. Fort Hindman quickly became a thorn in the side of Lincoln's "brown navy" as they patrolled the Mississippi. Following a failed attack on a Rebel defensive position at Chickasaw Bayou, a couple of miles north of Vicksburg in December of 1862, Sherman sought an opportunity to reclaim his lost swagger. Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter and Sherman devised a plan to attack Fort Hindman. If successful the Union would then threaten Little Rock, which would release some of the pressure on the Mississippi. Additionally, it would provide Union troops with a feel-good victory after the Union Navy's recent defeat at Chickasaw Bluffs. Porter took control of the naval forces calling into action the *Baron De Kalb*, *Cincinnati*, and *Louisville*; the Ellet ram *Monarch*; his flagship *Black Hawk*; the timber-clad *Tyler*; and the tinclads *Glide* and *Rattler*. Sherman, for his part, devoted 30,000 men who traveled by army river transports. This forceful movement of men and weaponry was mobilized to attack a fort with 5,000 men on the Arkansas River.<sup>301</sup>

The Union flotilla began their approach towards Fort Hindman on January 4, 1863. They traveled up the White River to the Arkansas cutoff and then up the Arkansas River. On January 9, General Churchill was alerted to the movements of a Union flotilla headed his way. To prepare for the upcoming confrontation, Churchill ordered his men to prepare rations for three days, gather their ammunition, and to occupy the entrenchments.

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<sup>301</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 579; Joiner, *Mr. Lincoln's Brown Water Navy*, 104-105; Ivan Musicant, *Divided Waters: The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 265-266; A.T. Mahan, *The Navy in the Civil War: The Gulf and Inland Waters* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), 120; Coleman, *The Arkansas Post Story*, 107; Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *The Civil War on the Mississippi: Union sailors, Gunboat Captains, and the Campaign to Control the River* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 202.

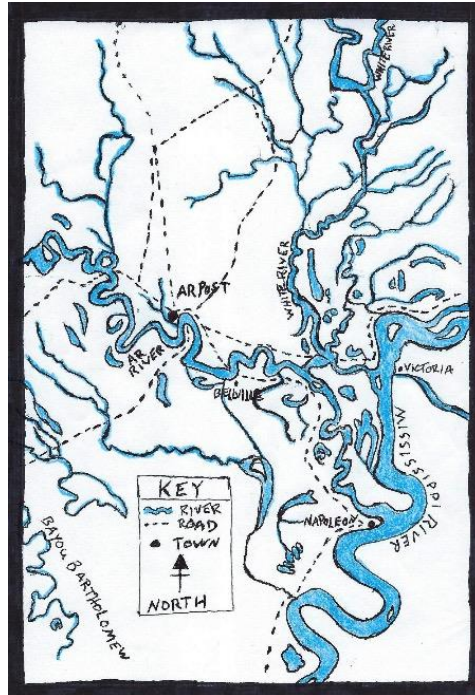


Figure 3.2 Area Around Arkansas Post During the Civil War, Based on map from the Library of Congress, *Map of the Environs of Arkansas Post, Ark. January 1863*, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4004a.cws00018/?r=0.034,0.463,0.883,0.37,0> (accessed February 5, 2019).

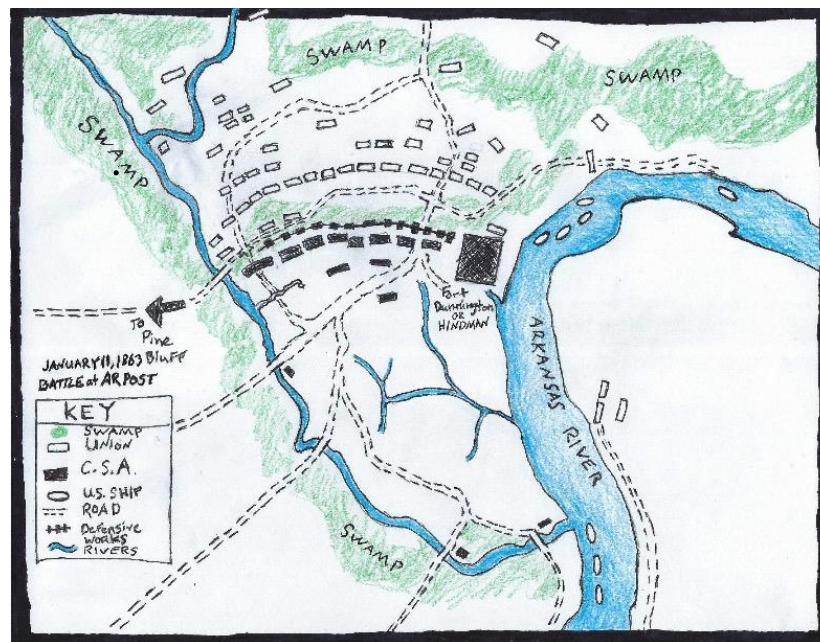


Figure 3.3 Battle Lines at Arkansas Post, January 11, 1863, based on map from, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, "The Battle of Arkansas Post: Stepping Stone to Vicksburg," [https://www.nps.gov/arpo/learn/education/upload/ARPO-CW\\_Lesson-Plan.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/arpo/learn/education/upload/ARPO-CW_Lesson-Plan.pdf) (accessed February 5, 2019).

He also sent for reinforcements. Porter's fleet and Sherman's men arrived at and held a position three miles south of the fort on January 10. On the 11<sup>th</sup> Sherman's men landed at a farm landing below the fort and spread out on both banks of the river to seal off a possible Confederate escape. The tinclads led the way up river with two seamen casting a lead, and there were boats at the ready for sweeping mines. Behind the tinclads came the *Louisville*, *Baron De Kalb*, the *Cincinnati*, and the *Black Hawk*. Then came the army transports that were protected by Ellet's rams. The *Lexington* and *Conestoga* held the rear. Union troops loaded their projectiles with shrapnel and cut the fuses to one second. They were under orders not to wait for orders before firing upon their targets. The countryside the sailors and soldiers passed along on the Arkansas River towards Fort Hindman was depressing. It bore the terrible scars of war. There was almost no signs of towns or villages, just a handful of desolate farms, burning corncribs, and a dilapidated plantation here and there.<sup>302</sup>

The ground troops struck out for the fort head on moving across a cotton field but hunkered down for the night while the gunboats opened a barrage of fire upon the fort. The *Rattler* and the *Black Hawk* fired on the rifle pits near the fort and cleared them out. General Churchill, who was ordered to "hold out till help arrived or until all dead," spurred his Rebel troops on in the face of superior firepower as shrapnel and exploding shell's wreaked havoc on the fort. The gunboats did not fire upon the fort until they were within 70 yards. As darkness descended upon the battle, firing upon the fort dwindled to only one or two boats.<sup>303</sup> The light-draft steamer the *Rattler* attempted to break through the *chevaux-de-frise* of massive logs across

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<sup>302</sup> J.H. Atkinson, "Historic Arkansas Post," *The Pulaski County Historical Society Review* 10 no. 4 (December, 1962): 64; Musicant, *Divided Waters*, 266.

<sup>303</sup> Musicant, *Divided Waters*, 226; Clement A. Evans, ed. *Confederate Military History*, vol. 10, (Atlanta: Confederate Publishing Company, 1899), 10: 157.

the shallow channel. The *Rattler* was grounded on the logs only 50 yards from the fort and suffered through a hailstorm of fire from the fort; eventually, she backed out and got out of range of the fort. The *Lexington* pulled up to within 400 yards of the fort and poured in quick rounds of fire. The *Black Hawk* came to within 800 yards of the fort with the light-drafts and hammered the fort with shrapnel very successfully. The night became dark and there was so much smoke from the shelling that neither side could see what was happening. The fighting stopped for the night.<sup>304</sup>

Throughout the night the Confederates made repairs on the fort and prepared for the next day's fighting. The next day at noon the army moved into a more favorable position despite the landscape's impediments of low bushes, fallen and upright trees, and cuts and depressions in the ground. The gunboats moved back into the same positions as the evening before and resumed their assault on the fort. After about two and a half hours of a punishing deluge of force (from 1 p.m. to roughly 3:30 p.m.) every gun in the fort was disabled, and the "fort knocked all to pieces."<sup>305</sup> The ground troops then moved in and were initially thwarted then the reserves came up to mount another attack when the admiral ordered all vessels to open fire again. The result of this latest assault resulted in the Confederates raising the white flag. Colonel Dunnington, the commander of the fort, surrendered to Admiral Porter and General Churchill, commander of the ground troops, surrendered to General Sherman's corp. Due to the fighting and subsequent surrender of the Confederates, upwards of five thousand Rebels became prisoners of war, the

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<sup>304</sup> Musicant, *Divided Waters*, 266; United States Naval War Records Office, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* series 1 vol. 23: *Naval Forces on Western Waters April 12, 1862- December 31, 1862* (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1910), 399-400. (hereafter cited as *ORN*)

<sup>305</sup> Edwin C. Bearss and Lenard E. Brown, *Structural History Post of Arkansas, 1804-1863 and Civil War Troop Movement Maps January, 1863* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Office of History and Historic Architecture Eastern Service Center, 1971), 239; United States Naval War Records Office, *ORN*, 400.



Union confiscated six fieldpieces and the guns in the fort. The U.S. Army took possession of the works, removed the smaller guns, threw the larger ones down a well and partially destroyed the fort and evacuated it. Confederates later recovered the guns in the well and used them to secure Little Rock. After the successes at Fort Hindman, the Union fleet moved up the White River to take out another Confederate stronghold but found it deserted after the Rebels heard about the actions taken at Arkansas Post. Therefore, within a week the lower Arkansas and White Rivers were mostly free of a substantial Confederate presence, thus allowing Union gunboats and transports free passage.<sup>306</sup>

The fall of Fort Hindman strengthened the Union position along the lower Arkansas River and in the Trans Mississippi West and allowed them to fully concentrate on one of the last Confederate hold outs on the Mississippi River, Vicksburg. The fall of Vicksburg severed the Trans Mississippi West, along with her materials and goods, were cut off from the rest of the Confederacy. Additionally, Union troops controlled the lower end of the Arkansas River in Arkansas, along with the cities and properties that dotted along the river's banks.

Meanwhile, at the northwest end of the Arkansas River in Arkansas, January 1863 marked the beginning of Confederate General William Steele's command of Fort Smith. He found conditions to be deplorable. The fort only held 1,000 troops who lacked proper equipment and clothes, and their morale had bottomed out. The number of unhealthy troops, 1500, outnumbered the healthy. The sick and wounded that survived the battle at Prairie Grove,

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<sup>306</sup> William Tecumseh Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman, Post of Arkansas January 12, 1863, William T. Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, CSHR 1/150 Folder WTS-EES 1863, January 1-12- 1863/0113+; United States Naval War Records Office, *ORN*, 400-402.

somehow clung to life in appalling conditions for months in 1862. Fort Smith did not have a monopoly on lousy conditions; there was plenty for all.<sup>307</sup>

West of Fort Smith other forts struggled all along the Arkansas River, all the way to Colorado. Fort Gibson was also facing life-threatening conditions. During 1862, Cherokee slave owners sent their slaves to Fort Gibson for protection. Fort Gibson's location on the backwaters of the Grand, Verdigris, and Arkansas rivers contributed to its unhealthy conditions. Federal troops at Fort Gibson had been dying of disease there for thirty years before the Civil War increased the death rate. With the influx of slaves and refugees combined with the number of troops, there was nowhere for people to cook or eat. Many people made shelters out of scraps of cloth or from brush or dug caves out in the side of the riverbanks. With such a large amount of people scraping out an existence in a place that lacked sufficient sanitation, housing, and food, diseases ran rampant. Smallpox brought back from a trading party to Mexico, struck out like lightning throughout and between camps along the Arkansas River. The contagion spread up the Arkansas River like a fully charged pinball ricocheting off healthy immune systems leaving a wake of death that spread upriver to Colorado into Comanche and Kiowa camps near Fort Wise.<sup>308</sup>

Hunger was also a glaring issue at Fort Smith. The fort and the town of Fort Smith lacked food. There was only a little beef (though it was questionable as to its edibility) and some cornmeal. Horses and mules also suffered from empty stomachs due to no forage and little feed available. Contributing to the headache that was Fort Smith, were Union cavalry strikes and

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<sup>307</sup> William J. Butler, *Fort Smith: Past and Present; a Historical Summary* (Fort Smith: The First National Bank of Fort Smith, Arkansas, 1972), 89.

<sup>308</sup> Butler, *Fort Smith: Past and Present*, 89; Mary Jane Warde, *When the Wolf Came: The Civil War and the Indian Territory* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2013), 179-180.

guerrilla bands that swirled around Fort Smith as private property and civilians alike were sacrificed in the name of war. Union artillery made shipping supplies such as food, medical supplies, and ordnance by boat to Fort Smith up the Arkansas River difficult. Steele remained optimistic despite his desperate situation. He advised Confederate supply officers to send provisions from Texas via the Butterfield Road because the Arkansas River was too risky. Steele requested more troops from Confederate high command, but they denied his petition. Steele did receive some help in the form of General William L. Cabell. Cabell attempted to find and return deserters into the fold and drive Union forces out of Fayetteville, but he was unsuccessful on both accounts.<sup>309</sup>

Even in its weakened state, Fort Smith remained the nerve center for Confederate activities in the area. Throughout 1863 Confederate troops focused their actions again in northwest Arkansas as guerilla fighting continued to be nasty and common. In mid-April, Confederates attempted to attack the Federal garrison in Fayetteville. Brigadier General William Cabell charged into Fayetteville on Saturday, April 18 where fighting took place most of the morning. The Rebels were eventually driven out of town only to witness the Union troops evacuate to Springfield, Missouri which allowed the once defeated Confederates to walk into town and claim control.<sup>310</sup>

Up until this point, the Confederacy had utilized the river as a defensive barrier, but now it became a liability. At roughly the same time as Cabell's attack on Fayetteville, 170 miles to the east Brigadier General John Marmaduke planned a raid into Missouri in an attempt to gain needed supplies and lessen the pressure the Union was putting on Arkansas. Marmaduke's

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<sup>309</sup> Butler, *Fort Smith*, 90; Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 263-264.

<sup>310</sup> Deblack, *With Sword and Fire*, 83-84.

attempt to invade Bloomfield, Missouri failed after repeated skirmishes with Union troops. Eventually, Marmaduke was forced to retreat along Crowley's Ridge with eight thousand Union troops on his heels.<sup>311</sup>

Marmaduke, realizing there were some rivers in the path of his retreat, sent a construction crew ahead to build a bridge over the St. Francis River in the bootheel area of southeastern Missouri. With the help of M. Jeff Thompson, they built a large raft that succeeded in carrying Marmaduke's troops across the river. The next river blocking the path of the Confederate retreat was the Arkansas River, and it would not prove so easy to cross. The night of May 1-2 witnessed Marmaduke's men vainly attempting to cross a suspect bridge that traversed part of the Arkansas River known as Chalk Bluff. Even with them crossing in single file line, the men and horses proved to be too heavy for the old bridge. The next course of action available to the desperate outfit was to try and swim across the Arkansas River. This option was inadvisable due to the river's swift current, yet they tried. Their horses were so tired that they were not physically able to make it across the river and were swallowed whole in their attempts. The next day scores of dead horses were seen bobbing up and down on the crests of the rivers' currents. Near sunrise on May 2, the Rebel rear guard slipped back to the bridge and cut its supports. Marmaduke's retreat was successful, but he failed his primary mission. Like a bad nightmare, Confederates watched as the Union took control of the Arkansas River and weakened Confederate power in Arkansas and throughout the Confederacy.<sup>312</sup>

As defeats greeted Confederates throughout April 1863 in northwest Arkansas, events in Indian Territory paralleled Rebel fortunes in Arkansas. Union Colonel William A. Phillips, under

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 85-86, 91

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

the command of Major General James G. Blunt, attacked Fort Gibson on April 13, repulsed the Indian defenders, seized the fort and renamed it, Fort Blunt. General William Steele was concerned that Fort Blunt would become a base of operations against Fort Smith. Steele's fears were recognized, when on June 25, Colonel James H. Williams (U.S.) departed from Baxter Springs for Fort Smith with two thousand men, four guns, and two hundred wagons. His mounted companies included detachments from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Colorado and 3<sup>rd</sup> Wisconsin Infantry and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Kansas cavalry regiments and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas Battery with two heavy guns.<sup>313</sup>

On the heels of the reported movements of Colonel Williams towards Fort Smith, Confederates were splashed in the face with a cold splash of bad news. July 4, 1863, gave many Confederates reasons to worry. Confederate commanders attempted to retake Helena on July fourth and failed. The defeat at Helena stung but was made worse with the news of Lee's defeat at Gettysburg and the surrender of Vicksburg on the same day (July fourth). With the fall of Vicksburg, the usefulness of the Arkansas River diminished for the Confederacy. Furthermore, as a result of the assault on Helena, Arkansans and the press called for Holmes' removal. Making matters worse for Holmes, the Confederate army publicly disparaged his command. Saddened and disgraced, on July 23 Holmes resigned command of the District of Arkansas to Sterling Price. Holmes cited illness as the excuse he gave for stepping away.<sup>314</sup>

Despite the change of leadership in Little Rock, Confederates continued the struggle to hold the river between Little Rock and Fort Smith. Steele devised a plan to intercept Blunt's vanguard before it could reach Fort Smith. He commanded Colonel Stand Waite and General Cabell to ambush Blunt on the Cabin Creek crossing of the military road from Baxter Springs in

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<sup>313</sup> Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 264-265.

<sup>314</sup> Albert Castel, *General Sterling Price and the War in the West* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 152.

the upper Cherokee Nation. Waite arrived at the agreed place first and waited on Cabell. Despite heavy rains and swollen creek and river beds, the Union column marched ahead to set an ambush. Cabell never joined the fray because he was unable to cross the Grand River's swift currents that were spilling out of their banks. Union Cherokee sharpshooters constricted the movements of the Confederates until the artillery was brought up. Union gunners pummeled the ambush positions with heavy fire from six and twelve-pounders. In the face of such fierce opposition, Waite sounded the retreat, the first Battle of Cabin Creek came to a close, and the Union troops advanced.<sup>315</sup> Union troops were strengthening their hold on the territory west of Fort Smith and therefore further loosening the grip of Confederate control of the river.

After his ambush failed, General William Steele devised another plan to spare Fort Smith. He decided to attack Fort Blunt (which is the Union name for Fort Gibson) and destroy its Union troops before they could be mobilized towards Fort Smith. Cabell's Arkansas brigade was supposed to rendezvous with Cooper's brigade at Honey Springs in Indian Territory and then proceeded to Fort Blunt. Union spies unearthed Steele's plan, and Blunt quickly mobilized his forces to Honey Spring and attacked Cooper before Cabell arrived from Fort Smith. Blunt deployed his troops and artillery into position on July 15, 1863. Two days later he attacked the Confederates straight on. Cooper was outgunned, and Cabell was late in arriving. Blunt pushed Cooper's forces from the battlefield, thus weakening the Confederate defenses of Fort Smith.<sup>316</sup> The Union now controlled a critical fort that sat on the intersections of the Arkansas River and the Neosho River.

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<sup>315</sup> Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 264-265.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 265-266.

The defeat at Honey Springs was but a setback for Steele as he continued to push forward to Fort Blunt. After arranging for some troops to stay behind and protect the fort, Steele left Fort Smith and arrived at Honey Springs on July 28, 1863. Steele hunkered down and awaited reinforcements from Texas that were also bringing fresh powder. While at Honey Springs, Steele received word that an ordnance train and troops commanded by General Smith P. Bankhead were on their way. The master plan was to attack Fort Blunt when Bankhead arrived. Steele utilized his time while waiting on Bankhead to deploy his regiments in a fashion that protected both Fort Smith from attacks along the Texas Road and the west and secured Steele's line of supply and communications. Throughout August, the temptation of running away proved too much for many soldiers to resist as desertions became commonplace. Whole squads, platoons, and companies slipped away when able. One busy night witnessed nearly two hundred soldiers, including officers; successfully make a run for it. A great many of the Confederate deserters did not run too far. Most of the fleet-footed soldiers defected to the Union as a good number of them were originally from northern Arkansas.<sup>317</sup>

Through the use of spies, General Blunt knew about the state of Steele's troops and their placements. With Steele's cavalry scattered about, Blunt decided to go on the offensive. In a move that would later serve the Third Reich so well in the early parts of World War II, Blunt launched a *Blitz Krieg* of his own. By loading his infantry into wagons, the Union infantry was able to smash Steele's lines so quickly that on August 23, 1863, Steele had to retreat down the Texas Road. Steel's main body of troops reached Perryville on August 25. At Perryville Steele learned that Bankhead's Texans, who had been held up because of an attack along the Gulf Coast

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<sup>317</sup> U.S. War Department, *OR*, series 1, volume 22, part 2, 953; Warde, *When the Wolf Came*, 182; Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 266, 956-957.

of Texas, were on route to rendezvous. At this juncture, Steele decided to send Cabell back to Fort Smith to augment its defenses. Steele pleaded with Bankhead to quicken his pace. Blunt's troops' movements were just too fast as they caught up to Steele and drove him through Perryville on August 26. Steele desperately retreated again and pushed his men to march all night yet on the 28<sup>th</sup> Blunt caught Steele on the Middle Boggy River. Steele had hoped to return to Fort Smith and help Cabell.<sup>318</sup>

Blunt had driven a massive wedge between Steele and Cabell and in the process weakened Confederate control of the Arkansas River in that area. After burning the Confederate depot of Perryville, Blunt quickly rushed his troops about one hundred miles in just four days to within four miles of Cabell's outer defensive perimeter at Fort Smith. Knowing the strength of the Union army in front of him and that Steele was too far away in Choctaw Nation to help, Cabell planned for the evacuation of the fort. Cabell's men loaded what they could into wagons and sent them away. On August 31, 1863, at nine at night, Cabell called for a general retreat from the fort. As day broke on September 1, 1863, Blunt's forces swept down upon the fort only to find it empty. After sending a detachment of cavalry and 2<sup>nd</sup> Indiana Battery guns to fluster Cabell's retreat, he entered Fort Smith and took control of it.<sup>319</sup>

Cabell's abandonment of the fort allowed the Union to concentrate their efforts on Little Rock. The United States Army now controlled the two ends of the Arkansas River in Arkansas, from Arkansas Post to Fort Smith and into Oklahoma at Fort Blunt. The only hold out was the middle portion of the river and the capital at Little Rock. Union troops marched towards the

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<sup>318</sup> U.S. War Department, *OR*, series 1, volume 22, part 2, 963, 981; Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 267-268; Warde, *When the Wolf Came*, 183.

<sup>319</sup> U.S. War Department, *OR*, series 1, volume 22, part 2, 984; Bearss and Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 268-269.



capital with a mind to evict the current tenants. Many Confederate leaders tied the fate of Vicksburg and the Mississippi River to Little Rock's and the Arkansas River. In time they would be proved correct. The fall of Vicksburg allowed for the Union Army to deploy needed troops elsewhere. To the consternation of many Arkansan Confederates, the Union considered Arkansas a place where troops were needed. Now the Federals could focus on re-establishing control in Arkansas and of the Arkansas River, which would allow them to supply their positions at Forts Smith and Blunt by steamboat. By the end of July, Major General Fredrick Steele arrived in Helena and took command of all Union troops in the state. He wasted no time in devising a plan to retake Little Rock. In mid-August Steele's force of close to six thousand departed Helena to rendezvous with Brigadier General John Davidson's six thousand cavalry coming out of Missouri.<sup>320</sup>

In Little Rock Sterling Price, now in charge (although Holmes remained in command of the district), was contemplating how best to defend the capital with eight thousand men.<sup>321</sup> Moral was low as many citizens and soldiers believed that Confederate leaders had given up on northern and central Arkansas and were now focusing on defensive positions along the Red River in the south. Despite the mood that hung over the city like a damp blanket, Price was keen to get to work. At his disposal, Price commanded three divisions: his own, Brigadier General John S. Marmaduke's division, and Brigadier General L. Marsh Walker's division. Additionally, there were Brigadier General Williams Steele's forces, but they had their hands full in Indian Territory at the time, and Brigadier General Daniel M. Frost's brigade, which had been

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<sup>320</sup> DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 92-93.

<sup>321</sup> Holmes turned over 31,933 soldiers to Price but only 14,509 were present for duty and this did not take into account the losses at Helena. Price would later claim he only had a fighting force of 8,000 troops. Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 153.

defending the lower Arkansas River at Pine Bluff. Price sent cavalry units to watch and strike Union positions.<sup>322</sup>

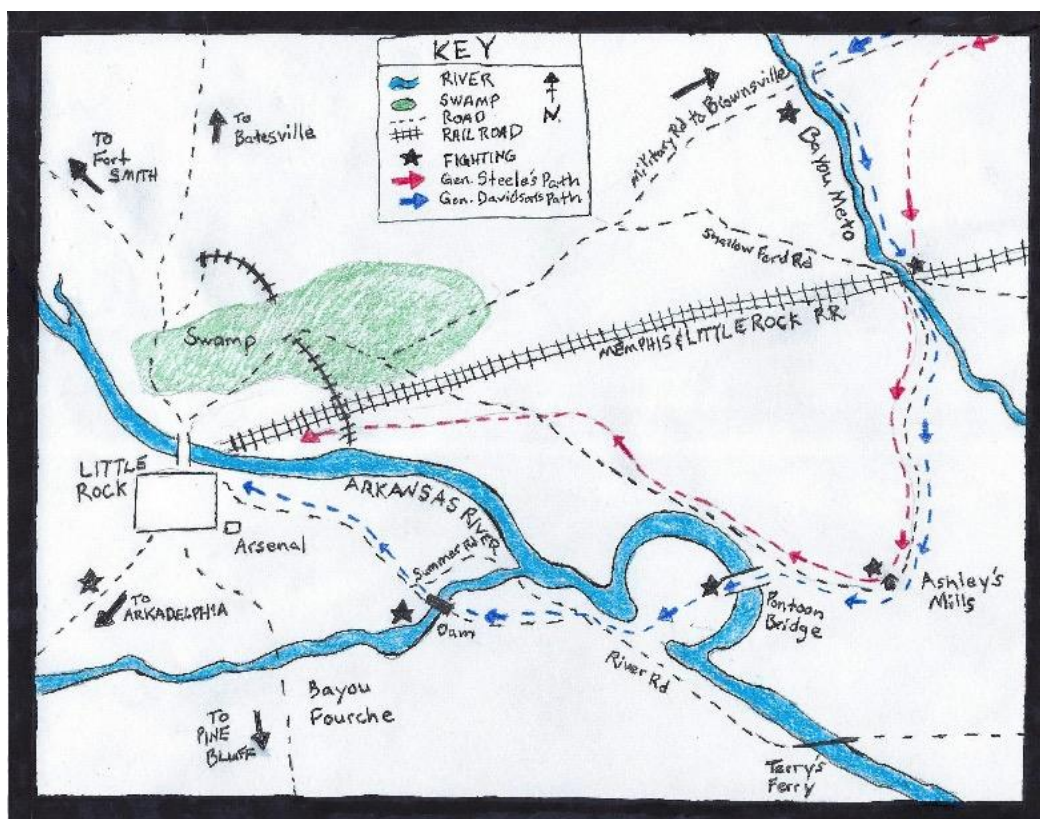


Figure 3.4 Battle of Little Rock or Bayou Fourche, August-September 1863. Based on maps from, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, “Report on the Nation’s Civil War Battlefields—State of Arkansas,” <https://www.nps.gov/abpp/CWSII/ArkansasBattlefieldProfiles/Arkansas%20Post%20to%20Devis%20Backbone.pdf> (accessed February 8, 2019); and map by David Fike, Little Rock Campaign, August- September 1863, in DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 97.

Additionally, Price built a menacing series of redoubts and rifle pits on the north side of the Arkansas River nearly two and a half miles east of the city. These fortifications stretched along the east and south in a semi-circle from a stony ridge called Big Rock to a place three miles downriver. Price also had pontoon bridges erected across the Arkansas River opposite

<sup>322</sup> Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 110; Leo E. Huff, “The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 no. 3 (Autumn, 1963): 225-227; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 93.

Little Rock. He even urged the inhabitants of Little Rock to come to their cities defense and threatened to impress into military service capable men who shirked their duty to fight.<sup>323</sup>

Although the overall situation in Little Rock was dreary, Lieutenant General Kirby Smith did not think an attack would happen any time soon. He believed the Union would wait until winter to attack when the Arkansas River was higher, and they could shell the city with their gunboats. Even though Smith did not think there would be any “serious operations,” he planned a path of retreat. Price hoped that Smith might send him reinforcements, but due to his lack of men to spare coupled with his disbelief in an immediate threat to Little Rock he did not send any men Price’s way.<sup>324</sup>

Price deployed his units along Bayou Meto, twelve miles northwest of Little Rock. He sent Marmaduke’s forces to blunt the advance of the Union troops and then fall back to Bayou Meto when necessary. Walker was ordered to keep up surveillance on Helena until August 2, where he was to pull back and meet up with Marmaduke. Although Price had his troop strategically positioned and his rifle pits dug, he was still somewhat leery that his men could hold Little Rock. He believed that if the Union concentrated their attack on the entrenchments, he might have a chance. Unfortunately for him, the Arkansas River was low at that time within several miles of the town, providing many crossing points for the Union to take advantage of on foot and attack Little Rock in the rear.<sup>325</sup>

On August 11, 1863, Major General Frederick Steele’s Arkansas Expedition Army was ordered by Grant to take command of the entirety of Arkansas north of the Arkansas River. He

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<sup>323</sup> Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas*, 110; Huff, “The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863,” 225-227; DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, 93.

<sup>324</sup> War Department, *OR*, series 1 vol. 22, part 2, 916; Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 153.

<sup>325</sup> Huff, “The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863,” 227.

had about 7,000 infantry and cavalry, five artillery batteries, including 39 cannons, and Davidson's cavalry division of over 6,000. Price's mission was twofold, militarily to control the tactical location of Little Rock on the Arkansas River and politically to establish a Union state government in the capital. Union leaders hoped that control of Little Rock and the river would result in Unionists and disaffected Confederates in Arkansas migrating to the capital to assist in Union control of the state.<sup>326</sup>

The river and its surrounding environs influenced the fighting in central Arkansas. Clashes between the two armies began on August 13, 1863. Davidson reported that he drove Marmaduke across a bridge near Searcy then destroyed the bridge. Skirmishes broke out on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> as the Union troops pressed onward towards Little Rock. On August 25, 1863, Price's cavalry under Marmaduke and Walker attempted to delay Steele's advance, despite the animosity that resulted in a dysfunctional relationship between the two cavalry-men. The Confederates burned bridges and blocked roads while simultaneously destroying cotton and seizing slaves. The battle on the 27<sup>th</sup> at Bayou Two Prairies near Brownsville resulted in the Confederates slipping away through Brownsville and establishing a position four miles south of town. Union troops once again caught up with the Confederates. Again, the Rebels retreated, this time to Bayou Meto where they positioned themselves along a steep-banked stream traversed by Reed's Bridge. The dealing of death on August 27, began with Marmaduke succeeding in retarding Steele's advance by burning the bridge. Price had an opportunity to repulse the Union

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<sup>326</sup> Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 154; Huff, "The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863," 228.

forces, but instead, his fear of being outflanked caused him to pull his forces back. The Confederate troops retreated to the unfinished rifle pits north of the capital.<sup>327</sup>

Price was sure that the Union troops would attack Little Rock, but Kirby Smith was not. Smith was operating under false information. He reported that the Federal troops withdrew to the White River following the skirmish at Bayou Meto. Furthermore, he believed that the movement of Union troops in the area was part of a reconnaissance mission and not an advance on Little Rock.<sup>328</sup>

Despite Smith's beliefs, after being turned back at Reed's Bride on August 27, Davidson's division headed south down the east bank of Bayou Meto. Davidson's advance guard arrived at Shallow Ford Road at Bayou Meto on August 30 and found Colonel R.C. Newton's 5<sup>th</sup> Arkansas Cavalry. Fighting broke out and continued for the next couple days. By this time most of Steele's Union troops reached Brownsville and met up with reinforcements. Meanwhile, in Little Rock, Price ordered Walker to position his troops on the south side of the Arkansas River to guard the river crossings and to thwart and advancements by enemy troops in the area. At this point, Price was more worried about saving his men than with protecting Little Rock from invasion. Price knew his troops were outnumbered. Furthermore, he was aware that Union forces had taken Monroe, Louisiana, and Fort Smith, thus threatening his communication lines from the south and west. The situation was becoming dire for Price. He believed his only chance of

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<sup>327</sup> Leo E. Huff, "The Last Duel in Arkansas: The Marmaduke-Walker Duel," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 23 no. 1 (Spring, 1964): 37; Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 154-155; Huff, "The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863," 229-230.

<sup>328</sup> Huff, "The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863," 230.

success was if Steele made a full-frontal attack on the rifle pits two and a half miles east of Little Rock on the north side of the Arkansas River.<sup>329</sup>

Price was soon to see his chances of success rapidly dwindle. The Arkansas River was fordable in several spots, and by crossing to the south bank, the Union forces could overrun the Confederate entrenchments. Price knew the noose was tightening around him and that is why before the Union troops arrived at Bayou Meto he had prepared for the evacuation of Little Rock across the Arkansas River and south to Arkadelphia. Additionally, he shipped as much of the public stores as he could south and erected a pontoon bridge across the river to provide an smooth evacuation of his troops. By this point in the conflict, Governor Flanagin had already relocated the pro-Confederacy state capital to Washington, Arkansas.<sup>330</sup>

The river influenced the tactics Price and Steele deployed. Price sent Walker south of the Arkansas River to protect the crossings and delay the enemy as much as possible. At his disposal, Price had 7,749 men available to fight. Most his troops, 6,500, he sent north of the Arkansas River to the entrenchments, while the other 1,250 men he stationed with Walker guarding the river crossings south of Little Rock. During the third and fourth of September, Steele probed the landscape and Confederate troop placements to find the ideal path into Little Rock and determine which flank of the Confederacy was the weakest. Steele then decided to attack the Rebel's right flank and cross the Arkansas River at Terry's Ferry roughly ten miles below the capital.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Huff, "The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863," 231; Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 155.

<sup>330</sup> Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 155.

<sup>331</sup> Huff, "The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863," 231-232.

The river at Terry's Ferry looped eastward in the shape of a giant U-shape that enclosed several hundred acres. At the point in which the U-shape almost closed there were roughly 500 yards across. South of the river a road followed from Terry's Ferry along the river banks to the city, while a second road ran from the south of Little Rock about four miles down to Fourche Bayou. Steele planned to install a pontoon bridge at the loop of the U-shape whereby his artillery could cross and move in either direction while a cavalry division, with the support of one infantry division, would cross the river. After crossing, Steele's troops under Davidson were to seize the two roads that led to the city from the east and south which would put pressure on the Confederate right flank and rear. Simultaneously, Steele would advance with the infantry up the north bank of the Arkansas River and attack the right flank of Price's earthen fortifications.<sup>332</sup>

Throughout the night of September ninth, the Union troops moved the artillery into position and cut and hauled timber to the bridge site. As the sun rose on the tenth, it shone upon one-fourth of the new bridge that began to stretch forth across the river. Confederate sharpshooters attempted to thwart the Union construction, but Federal artillery provided sufficient cover. The bridge spanned the river by 10 a.m. on the tenth. The Union succeeded in laying down artillery suppression fire as two infantry regiments crossed the river. The infantry then pushed back Rebel troops allowing Davidson's division to cross the river without much trouble.<sup>333</sup>

Despite attempts to retard Davidson's advance, Rebel troops were not up to the challenge. For a time, the Confederates did halt the Union advancement, but eventually Federal artillery focused on Marmaduke's line near Fourche Bayou and minimized him as a threat. While

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 233-234.

Union artillery fell on the Rebels, Union troops left the river road and trekked across the bayou and positioned themselves in the rear of Newton's Confederate brigade. With their rear compromised the Confederates retreated.<sup>334</sup>

Davidson moved his forces along the south bank of the Arkansas River while Steele and the Federal infantry traveled along the north side of the river. Price, not wanting to reenact Pemberton's trap at Vicksburg, called for an evacuation of the capital. Confederate troops began emptying their positions north of the river and around 11 a.m. Rebel forces fled south across the river into Little Rock via a series of pontoon bridges. As the Confederates vacated the city, they burned the pontoon bridges, set alight the gunboat *Missouri*, plundered what supplies they could, and attempted and failed to destroy the fort. By 5 p.m. the sound of fire crackling and the sight of billowing black smoke had replaced the sights and sounds of battle. By the evening of September 10, the municipal government of Little Rock capitulated. The Confederates had abandoned their last stronghold on the Arkansas River and the capital of the state. The Union opted against pursuing their enemy as they scrambled across the river and south to Arkadelphia.<sup>335</sup>

Control of the Arkansas River, and an enlarged Union military presence in Arkansas was a pre-cursor to the fall of the Confederacy. Union troops continued to gain control of rivers throughout the trans-Mississippi west. An inability to use the Arkansas River or other rivers in the trans-Mississippi hampered the Confederacy's capability to ship men and materials to locations where they would be most effective. The Confederacy's failure to maintain control of the Arkansas River helped the Union take Vicksburg and further geographically divided the

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>335</sup> John L. Ferguson, ed., *Arkansas and the Civil War* (Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1966), 187; Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West*, 156-158; Huff, "The Union Expedition Against Little Rock, August-September, 1863," 234-235.



Confederacy. Although fighting continued in Arkansas for the duration of the war, the Eastern Theatre hosted the majority of major battles that resulted in Robert E. Lee surrendering to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House on the ninth of April 1865. With the Army of Northern Virginia defeated other Confederate troops surrendered and the formal fighting between the Union and rebels ended. Although the war had ended, the conflict throughout the rebellious states continued. The Federal government was now tasked with bringing a divided nation back together, reasserting control, and figuring out what to do with the millions of newly freed slaves.

With the Union victory over the Confederacy, the Corps of Engineers was free to resume their pre-war activities. Additionally, with a Republican-dominated Congress, the passage of internal improvement bills was relatively easy. In 1866 Congress passed a waterway improvements Act that allowed the Corps to focus on civil applications. The Rivers and Harbors Act of June 12, 1866, called for the Corps of Engineers to review all pre-Civil War waterway projects and to plan for more. As part of this legislation, the Corps was to renew their presence on the Arkansas River as the Act called for further channel clearing projects. The Rivers and Harbors Acts of 1868, 1871, 1873, and 1874 contain appropriations for work on the Arkansas River. Most of the work, except for some surveying work on the Arkansas River, consisted of the activities employed before the war, snagging and dredging.<sup>336</sup>

The Arkansas River played a vital role in the Civil War. Throughout the war the river provided transportation which was the river's greatest influence as it determined if slower overland travel was necessary or if quicker travel by boat was possible. In a conflict that took place over such an enormous geographic space and witnessed battle lines move, and cities

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<sup>336</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 18-21.

change hands, quick transportation was vital. The river allowed men, supplies, news, and sickness to travel quicker than if by land.

After the war, the United States military continued to maintain a presence in the state throughout Arkansas' Reconstruction period. Even after conservative Southern Democrats regained control of the state, a portion of the United States military remained. They were not combat troops, but engineers. The United States Corps of Engineers' influence over Arkansas continued to grow following the Civil War. In the subsequent decades, and most likely to the chagrin of a large number of their Antebellum predecessors, Arkansans welcomed the Corps in the state as they attempted to manipulate the Federal government into transforming the Arkansas River for their profit. Although slavery was abolished and the Confederacy destroyed, elite whites attempted to regain power. Instead of secession and war to protect white supremacy, they took advantage of racism and indifference and used legal loopholes to place Jim Crow into a position that allowed cash strapped planters to acquire the financial ability and political support, state and federal , to regain control of the Arkansas River and reestablish the plantation system.

## Chapter Four

### Floods, Paternalism, and Federal Largess

That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image.

-William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

The flood brought change. The river pushed cities and their inhabitants to their breaking points. Swelling and contracting, overflowing and disappearing, the river's many disguises fooled and toyed with the livelihood and wellbeing of many Arkansans. When the river altered course or its banks fluctuated, cities and people were forced to adjust to the river's cruel whims. Those who lived along the river craved consistency and dependency from the waters that flowed around them. This need for stability influenced the changing relationships between the river, Arkansans, and the Federal government.<sup>337</sup>

Unfortunately, the Arkansas River Valley following the Civil War was bereft of stability as whites, blacks, planters, Freedmen, Republicans, and Democrats tried to create a reality that fit within their world views. Amid these struggles, Arkansans in the river valley had to contend with the river and the environment as a series of floods and droughts complicated their lives. Eventually, conservative whites restored the plantation system, and they dominated politics, but control of the environment proved more elusive. Weather and river conditions tested practitioners of agriculture in the Arkansas River Valley as they negotiated new relationships between bosses and laborers, the social elite, federal government agencies, and humans and the physical environment. Despite people's differences, they shared in the conflict between these

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<sup>337</sup> Walter U. Garstka, *Water Resources and the National Welfare* (Fort Collins, Colorado: Water Resources Publications, 1978), 1.

forces as they sought power and control in the Arkansas River Valley. Natural disasters, such as flooding, created an opportunity for city and state leaders to flex their political and social muscles. Whilst in the throes of chaos caused by a wild Arkansas River, state, city, and federal agencies did not always agree on how to handle the destructive forces of the river or its aftermath. When possible, state and city leaders seized at chances to control the river instead of allowing federal policymakers to enact decisions that affected the daily lives of river valley residents. Power struggles between city, state, and federal agencies regarding flooding created a process that allowed cities and the state to redefine their connections to the river. The Arkansas River's destructive characteristics, combined with its beneficial role in Arkansans' lives, created opportunities for the concerns of different special interest groups, agencies, politicians, businesses, and citizens to intersect. In post-Civil War Arkansas, Arkansans learned to use the machinery of state and federal politics to accomplish their environmental and social agendas. Initially planters used federal largess and resources to reinforce the plantation system. Eventually, the cost of flooding became too much for elites to handle alone. Cities had always been impacted by the river but as they grew and populations increased and employment opportunities diversified outside of agriculture, planters and farmers were no longer the only people that had to account for the destructive capabilities of the river. Residents in the river valley needed a river they could depend on to fulfill their needs. Before they could shape the river into a dependable tool, their relationship with the federal government had to change. That change set in motion a redistribution of power in the river valley. The Arkansas River, more than ever, became a crucial part of the "political economy" in Arkansas.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Christopher J. Manganiello, *Southern Water, Southern Power: How the Politics of Cheap Energy and Water Scarcity Shaped a Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 17.

The Civil War caused a great deal of physical destruction throughout the Arkansas River Valley and the South. Compounding the problems of destroyed property was the lack of investment capital available for rebuilding. In the post-war South, Confederate currency and bonds were worthless, inflation was high, specie was scarce, and emancipation had removed the propertied classes of much of their valuable and productive assets: their slaves and lands (although many regained their land). Recovery could not take place until a new labor system replaced slavery. It was understood by many, North and South, that Southern prosperity depended on cotton and the plantation system. Among the dense cloud of confusion that hung about the river valley following the war, questions arose regarding plantation labor forces. Free labor was no longer available, nor was there capital to pay wages. Additionally, whites continued to hold stubborn views of white supremacy and the notion that blacks would only work if coerced. Unfortunately for planters, the Freedmen did not want to work in situations reminiscent of slavery. African Americans wanted the power to determine their economic relationships, and for a time, they hoped the federal government would support them in their bid for freedom throughout the Arkansas River Valley.

Freedmen in the Arkansas River Valley were in a tough situation following the war. They were thankful to the Union for their freedom, but conversely, they were frustrated that the federal government did not share their ideas of what freedom for African Americans should be.<sup>339</sup> Ultimately, freedmen wanted equality, but despite the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution, whites found ways to disfranchise and exploit African Americans with a combination of violence and legislation. Within a couple of decades, white attitudes towards

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<sup>339</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 238.

blacks hardened. Soon newspaper headlines such as “Two Negroes to Hang” and a mentality among whites that any sort of equality between the races would be bad for blacks because it would “not...increase the slowly growing kindness of disposition toward them by Southern whites” were prevalent throughout the South.<sup>340</sup> However, following the Civil War, and before Jim Crow arrived, Reconstruction attempted to change the relationship and power dynamic between southern blacks and whites in the Arkansas River Valley. During the Reconstruction period, there was some fluidity and elasticity in the connections between whites and blacks that resulted in some compromises between the two groups, until the U.S. Army left then conservative Democrats and white supremacy filled the power vacuum. The new labor arrangements resulted in new(ish) ways to visualize and conceive of agriculture, the plantation system, and race relations.

Freedmen's relationship with the Federal government, via the Freedman's Bureau, during Reconstruction in the Arkansas River Valley highlights the struggle between whites and blacks. A change in labor relations between whites and blacks signified, for a time, that there was a “shift away,” as Steven Hahn argues, from the former elite class of slaveholders to a group of outsiders that included white northerners in the Freedman’s Bureau along with their Northern ideologies of “sustained racism, paternalism, ‘natural’ hierarchies, a work ethic, and self-help sentiments.”<sup>341</sup> The Freedman’s Bureau (the Bureau of Refugees, Freedman, and Abandoned Lands) was established in 1865 and ended in 1872. Despite their efforts to represent the interest of freedmen and freedwomen, southern whites were able to regain control of the labor force and

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<sup>340</sup> Two Negroes to Hang, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 19, 1903; Octave Thanet, the Novelist, Discusses the Color-line in Women’s Clubs, *Arkansas Sentinel* July 29, 1902.

<sup>341</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 238; Randy Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom: The Freedmen’s Bureau in Arkansas, 1865-1869* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 23.

again manipulate the environment for their own financial and social gain. Throughout the late 1860s, whites tried to regain power in the river valley while steering clear of the Freedmen's Bureau. White and black interactions with each other were controlled by the Bureau because the power dynamic dictated that Bureau agents controlled the Arkansas River District. One bureau agent noted that the bureau "act[ed] as a restraint to both parties" in terms of actions towards each other.<sup>342</sup>

Randy Findley argues that the "agents' philosophies molded policies and procedures in the local bureau offices."<sup>343</sup> Some agents supported African Americans in their quest to obtain freedom and equality while other agents' sympathies aligned with the planters. Regardless of the Freedmen's Bureau agents' beliefs on color and class, all agents agreed on the need for blacks to continue working for whites, and for whites to continue providing housing, clothing, health care, and sometimes pay a small wage.<sup>344</sup> Freedmen did not fully agree to situations that would convert them into wage laborers who produced solely for the market. Additionally, many freed

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<sup>342</sup> "Arkansas, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1864-1872," images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-89LD-B3P2?cc=2328125&wc=9VRS-FMS%3A1076658402%2C1076658403> : 4 June 2014), Pine Bluff (Superintendent of Arkansas River District) > Roll 19, Letters and orders received, Jul 1866-Feb 1867 > image 66 of 317; citing NARA microfilm publication M1901 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom*, 19; Harold D. Woodman, *New South—New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>343</sup> Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom*, 19; Harold D. Woodman, *New South—New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 4; "Arkansas, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1864-1872," images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-89LD-B3P2?cc=2328125&wc=9VRS-FMS%3A1076658402%2C1076658403> : 4 June 2014), Pine Bluff (Superintendent of Arkansas River District) > Roll 19, Letters and orders received, Jul 1866-Feb 1867 > image 66 of 317; citing NARA microfilm publication M1901 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

<sup>344</sup> Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom*, 22.

slaves wanted to stay on the land in the river valley that their families had spent generations farming rather than move and work different plots as individual farmers. As relationships between former slaves and masters were in a state of flux during Reconstruction in the river valley, freedmen took advantage of their new found mobility and sometimes chose to violate their contracts by abandoning a crop they were raising for a planter in the middle of the season. Conversely, some employers in the river valley were so desperate to acquire and keep laborers working on their plantations, that they made advance payments to the laborers, often in the form of clothes, housing, food, and other necessities, but rarely in specie, because it was scarce.<sup>345</sup>

While the federal government attempted to create a new economic base for the freedmen in the Arkansas River Valley, Lyman Trumbull's civil rights bill of 1866 contained a provision that gave blacks rights to lands that were set aside by General Sherman. The bill also allotted 3 million acres of public land in the South for homesteading by blacks and authorized the Freedmen's Bureau to purchase additional land. In the Arkansas River Valley, much of the land set aside for black homesteaders was in Pulaski, Prairie, and Jefferson counties.<sup>346</sup>

Confiscated and abandoned lands were, in theory, to be given to black settlers for three years after which they would have the option to buy the land at low prices. By June of 1865, forty thousand African Americans worked 300,000 acres of what they believed was to be theirs. In 1866, Congress passed the Southern Homestead Act that gave blacks the same rights whites

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<sup>345</sup> Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 40-50.

<sup>346</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863- 1877* (New York: Perennial, 1989), 243-245; "Arkansas, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1864-1872," images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QS7-89LD-B3MJ?cc=2328125&wc=9VRS-FMS%3A1076658402%2C1076658403> : 4 June 2014), Pine Bluff (Superintendent of Arkansas River District) > Roll 19, Letters and orders received, Jul 1866-Feb 1867 > image 94 of 317; citing NARA microfilm publication M1901 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).



had under the Homestead Act of 1862.<sup>347</sup> Blacks and loyal whites received preferential treatment when Southern public lands were made available. Unfortunately for those who stood to benefit from the Homestead Act, much of the land available was not good farming land. Planters held the majority of good land leaving others with the choices of land that was swampy, timbered, and far from transportation.<sup>348</sup> Also standing in the way of freedmen acquiring land were former Confederates.

President Johnson pardoned most owners of confiscated and abandoned lands that were given to freedmen by the Freedmen's Bureau, and proposals for new methods of land redistribution died in Congress. Most Congressmen could not support land redistribution and confiscation due to their strong beliefs regarding property rights and a fear that by giving Freedmen something that they had not earned Congress would deprive them of the motivation and desire to harvest cotton quickly and revitalize the economy. Furthermore, many African Americans that received redistributed land failed to acquire titles to the land. Thus, many Freedmen had little to no chances of land ownership. Despite their poverty and landlessness, many Freedmen were reluctant to settle down and commit to wage labor with their former masters. Many freedmen took to the road to find better labor situations and increase their bargaining power.<sup>349</sup>

During the late 1860s, labor contracts in the Arkansas River Valley allowed agriculture to continue. In postbellum America, the action of entering into a contract was a metaphor of

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<sup>347</sup> Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 85.

<sup>348</sup> Paul Skeels Peirce, *The Freedmen's Bureau: A Chapter in the History of Reconstruction* (St. Clair Shores: Scholarly Press, 1904, repr. 1970), 131; Foner, *Reconstruction 1863-1877*, 245.

<sup>349</sup> Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, 48-51.

freedom. The act “reconciled” human autonomy and obligation while imposing social order through personal choice rather than external force.<sup>350</sup> Contracts allowed both parties to feel a sense of autonomy and power over their situations. Although not ideal, both parties stood to gain from labor contracts. Workers felt they could exercise their agency in having a say regarding their working conditions, and employers retained their labor forces. Often under this system, laborers committed themselves to work for a year or an agricultural cycle in return for fixed wages. Often a large portion of the wage was withheld until after the harvest. Many planters did not pay fair wages, abused the Freedmen, and cheated them at the end of the year. Freedmen’s Bureau officers, whose charge it was to oversee the creation and enforcement of fair contracts, had different ideas of what it meant to be an agent in the bureau. Some agents wanted to align themselves with planters by forcing freedmen to agree to bad contracts, thus creating conditions uncomfortably similar to slavery. In *One Kind of Freedom*, Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch argue that after the war, it was only natural for planters to attempt to recreate the antebellum plantation system as much as possible. Planters had little experience dealing with free labor and therefore drew upon the established technology familiar to them—the overseer and laborers. This pattern of leadership led to the reestablishment of plantation systems that involved hiring freedmen for fixed wage payments and employing the work-gang system. The post-war system in the river valley was only slightly different from antebellum work arrangements in that corporal punishment was deemphasized, and the overseer was commonly called “manager” or “agent.”<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>351</sup> Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 57.

Towards the end of the 1860s and into the 1870s, the influence of the Freedmen's Bureau diminished. As the Bureau's power in the river valley waned, the planter's power waxed, and with it went the experiment with contract wage labor. While the Bureau tried to implement contract wage labor, planters and laborers simultaneously developed another contract system in the river valley, sharecropping, thus allowing landed elites to obtain a labor force while reinforcing their beliefs regarding racial and social supremacy. Sharecropping allowed planters to control the workforce and manipulate the land to extract the most gain possible, while keeping white supremacy intact.<sup>352</sup>

Sharecropping began as a compromise between planters and freedmen that allowed planters to regain their power over the Arkansas River Valley as they subdivided their farms and plantations into small plots to be worked by individual families, thus allowing less daily supervision by the landowner and a greater sense of autonomy by the laborer. Families working under these conditions fell into one of three categories: fixed-rent tenants, share tenants, or sharecroppers. Fixed-rent tenants rented a plot of land from the landowner in return for a fixed amount of cash or a specific quantity of farm products. Similarly, share tenants rented land for a share of the yield. Ideally, both groups used their *own* mules, seed, and tools. Both parties were legally vested in the crop, as the tenant used a portion of the crop to pay the landlord. The third group was a hybrid of tenancy and wage labor. Sharecroppers entered labor arrangement with only their labor, while the landlord provided everything else to make the farming operation possible. Unlike fixed rent tenants and share tenants, sharecroppers, legally, were wage laborers. Legislative acts and judicial decisions declared that sharecroppers possessed no legal rights regarding the crops before harvest and sale. Although it resembled tenancy, sharecroppers were

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<sup>352</sup> Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 57; Woodman, *New South—New Law*, 68.

legally wage laborers whose wages consisted of a portion of the crop they produced for the landowner. Often the line between share tenancy and sharecropping was blurred as these forms of labor grew in importance to the Southern economy.<sup>353</sup>

Whites enforced labor arrangements and social status in the Arkansas River Valley through liens, tenancy, and sharecropping. To understand the intent behind the authors of the original lien laws, it is necessary to, as Harold Woodman argues, “appreciate the significance” of the differences between tenancy and sharecropping in law and practice.<sup>354</sup> The creation of the crop lien in the Arkansas River Valley arose out of political and economic necessity for conservative whites and planters. During Reconstruction, the Democratic Party in Arkansas experienced a bit of an identity crisis and decided to return to their political roots. The resurgence of the Democratic Party resulted in changes that affected the environment, society, and economy. The reestablishment of conservative white southern politics, Michael Perman argues, did “more than anything else, to the readjustment of the economic forces in southern life which [were] occurring throughout the decade.”<sup>355</sup>

Unsurprisingly, restoration of the plantation power structure in the Arkansas River Valley and throughout much of the former Confederacy, coincided with a realignment within the Democratic Party that was already underway with the rising influence of the Redeemers. The

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<sup>353</sup> Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 371; Woodman, *New South—New Law*, 68.

<sup>354</sup> Woodman points out that many historians have mistakenly confused tenancy and sharecropping, specifically Ransom and Sutch’s *One Kind of Freedom*. This is due to the Bureau of the Census confusing the two tenure forms. It was not until the 1880 census that tenants were differentiated from farm operators, separating tenants into those who paid a money rental and those who paid a share of the produce as rent. The census did not use the designation of sharecropper until 1920 and then it did so incorrectly, listing the sharecropper as a special form of tenant found exclusively in the South. Woodman, *New South—New Law*, 1, 66.

<sup>355</sup> Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 221.

“redeemers” were the Democrats who reasserted themselves in the South – and in Arkansas – in the waning years of Reconstruction. As Democrats returned to power, considerable effort was undertaken to use government and law for the benefit of wealthy landed interests in their attempts to alter the system of agricultural credit and to discipline and control the labor force on farms and plantations. The laws that elite whites passed redefined the legal relationship between employer and employee, landlord, and tenant.<sup>356</sup> Shortly after conservative southerners were free of the U.S. Army and federal influence following Reconstruction, they realized that they needed the Army, specifically, the Army Corps of Engineers, but only as long as it served their agenda: to protect their money and power. Elites understood that the foundation of their abilities to make money and wield power depended on their use of the Arkansas River and the river valley. Planters needed help to achieve and maintain control over the river, which would help them obtain power in society.

Sharecropping was harmful, and it managed to taint every aspect of life in the Arkansas River Valley ranging from the soil to the soul of a man. In the post-Civil War period, state legislatures passed laws regarding liens on crops. The laws stipulated that anyone who provided supplies, or money to purchase supplies, necessary to produce a crop had the right to secure a lien on that crop when harvested. Southern farmers (especially planters) disliked the law because it compounded problems of overproduction, low prices, debt peonage, and rising tenancy. C. Vann Woodward remarked that the lien “represented one of the strangest contractual relationships in the history of finance” and was “a curse to the soil.”<sup>357</sup> State legislatures did not think the laws would cause farmers to lose their farms. The laws were created by conservative

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<sup>356</sup> Perman, *The Road to Redemption*, 236, 246.

<sup>357</sup> Woodman, *New South—New Law*, 5; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 180.

planter-dominated legislatures to encourage agriculture and solve the problems faced by emancipation.<sup>358</sup>

While other southern states passed laws to augment the power of the planter class, Arkansas did the same. In July 1868, the state legislature passed a crop lien law that allowed merchants and planters to provide security for advances they made to farmers and farm laborers. It also allowed them to secure a lien on the future crop farmers and farm laborers planted. The lien law included advances to farm workers who needed tools, fertilizers, draft animals, and other supplies, so that they could plant a crop for market. The wording of many contracts between merchants and planters and farm laborers often included a provision that they grow a specific crop: cotton, thus binding both the laborer and the planter to the cotton economy. The originators of this system soon learned that an unforeseen consequence of this system was that the advanced credit began to work against farmers. When a drop in cotton prices or a drought, flood, or epidemic of insects struck, farmers and farm laborers were unable to pay their mortgages and sank further into debt. This situation was disastrous for farmers but lucrative for merchants. In January of 1875, the Arkansas state legislature stipulated that planter liens, according to the law, were to be paid before any other debts the debtor held. Thus, the planter lien became superior to the merchant lien.<sup>359</sup>

Although some groups found the crop lien useful to exploit and control laborers, there was some opposition to the laws. There were movements, in the Arkansas River Valley and throughout the South, to repeal the crop lien laws. Legislators worried that if they did so then

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<sup>358</sup> Wodman, *New South—New Law*, 6.

<sup>359</sup> Jeannie M. Whayne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Feral Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 43-44; Perman, *The Road to Redemption*, 247; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 127.

what few means of credit struggling farmers had would disappear. In response to the financial mess that was occurring, legislatures throughout the South decided to leave the system intact, but with a slight modification. Instead of the merchant primarily benefiting from the system, power shifted to the planter as lien laws were revised whereby the planter's lien for rent established primacy. As a result, the merchant's lien for supplies and the laborers' lien on their labor diminished to a subordinate position. Landlords obtained complete control over what crops were planted in the fields by their laborers.<sup>360</sup> Unfortunately, that crop was almost always cotton, either because that is what the planter's credit source demanded of him, or they did so by choice because they believed the cotton market was predictable.<sup>361</sup> Cotton prices were never satisfying due to overproduction, both regionally and internationally. Sharecroppers, who were mostly black, received the brunt of this oppressive credit structure. Crop liens provided labor control and allowed white supremacy to reign once more. Most blacks soon found themselves in another form of slavery.

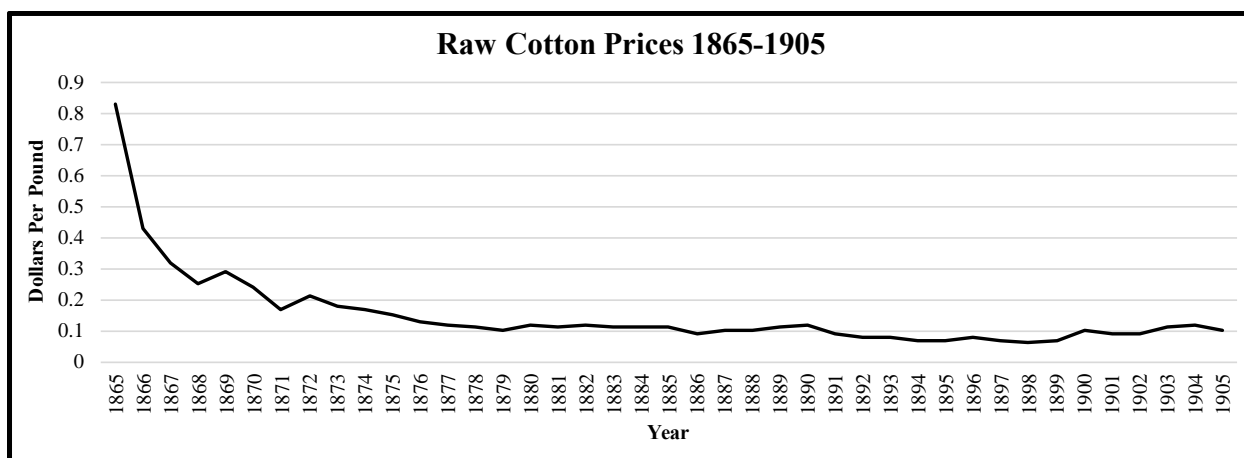


Table 4.1 The Civil War combined with increased international competition hurt prices. *Source:* Data from *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present* ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, and Michael R. Haines vol. 3 part C (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3-208,3-209,3-210.

<sup>360</sup> Woodman, *New South—New Law*, 14, 22; Perman, *The Road to Redemption*, 250-251.

<sup>361</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 57-69.

The end of legal slavery in the South did not put an end to the Southern plantation, because slavery was not the “critical element” that defined the plantation, according to Charles Aiken.<sup>362</sup> Although slavery was abolished by a constitutional amendment, “coercion” and “deference,” although some historians contend that it disappeared after 1867, survived and allowed plantations to operate.<sup>363</sup> Following the Civil War planters attempted to reestablish social, political, and economic control. Antebellum planters may have enjoyed “substantial wealth and ease,” but the fall of slavery reduced them to “relative poverty and drudgery.”<sup>364</sup> Many planters returned to their old mistresses and were wedded to cotton, in part because they depended on advances from cotton factors which resulted in many planters becoming debtors themselves. Despite some subsistence farming to sustain the workforce, the primary focus on plantations was usually a commercial cash crop, often cotton. Additionally, small landowning farmers depended on advances from cotton factors and signed agreements requiring them to grow cotton in order to secure the advances. Specialization within the plantation system aided efficiency, so it behooved plantation workers to know the natural environment they worked as they developed needed skills regarding planting, harvesting, and processing a crop.<sup>365</sup>

Additionally, slave labor was commonly associated with plantation labor, but it is the implementation of a large labor force, not necessarily slave labor, that distinguished the

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<sup>362</sup> Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South: Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.; Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 90; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 68.

<sup>364</sup> James L. Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 181, 196.

<sup>365</sup> Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 68; Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 90; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 68.



plantation. Plantations operated year-round and consisted of a managerial hierarchy that ranged from owner to manager to supervisors to field hands. The plantation was arranged as a nucleated settlement complex, that as Aiken argues is, “an overt element of the geography,” as demonstrated by the Dortch Plantation just east of Little Rock.<sup>366</sup>



Figure 4.1 The Dortch Plantation (Marlsgate). *Source:* The United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nominations, The Dortch Plantation,” <http://www.arkansaspreservation.com/National-Register-Listings/PDF/LN0123.nr.pdf> (accessed June 3, 3019).

Spatial relationships on plantations conformed to and altered the physical appearance of the plantation and in turn, the Arkansas River Valley landscape. Many plantations, such as the Dortch Plantation east of Little Rock, were built on land that was forests or swamps.<sup>367</sup> In the

<sup>366</sup> Aiken, *Plantation South*, 5-7.

<sup>367</sup> In 1880 a plantation house was built on the site of what would become the Dortch Plantation. When Marlsgage (the big house) was built and the Dortch Plantation established in 1904 consisting of 975 acres it replaced the original plantation house. The United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nominations, The Dortch Plantation,” <http://www.arkansaspreservation.com/National-Register-Listings/PDF/LN0123.nr.pdf> (accessed June 3, 3019).

latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the population of the Arkansas River Valley increased the landscape changed. Forests were swiftly cut down (and the cut-over land was sold by timber companies) and the soil tilled. Landowners converted swampland to fields, but it was an

Dortch Plantation Key									
Features of the Dortch Plantation that Corresponds to Figure 4.1									
1	Tenant House	2	Cotton Pen	3	Tenant House	4	Tenant House	5	Tenant House
6	Wagon Shed	7	Barn	8	Shop	9	Corn Crib	10	Mule Barn
11	Gear Room	12	½ of Original House	13	Storage Shed	14	Cotton Pen	15	Tenant House
16	Tenant House	17	Tenant House	18	Outdoor Toilet	19	Commissary	20	Farm Bell
21	Cotton Pen	22	½ of Original House	23	Marlsgate	24	Carriage Barn	25	Dairy Barn
26	Cow Barn	27	Mule-Cooling Tree	28	Underground Silo	29	Church	30	Tenant House
31	Fields								

Table 4.2 *Source:* The United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nominations, The Dortch Plantation,” <http://www.arkansaspreservation.com/National-Register-Listings/PDF/LN0123.nr.pdf> (accessed June 3, 3019).

expensive endeavor. In the early twentieth century drainage districts were formed to drain swamp lands and prevent flooding.<sup>368</sup> Additionally, drainage districts issued interest-bearing bonds and taxed drained lands to pay the interest. Although planters were able to afford the cost to support the drainage district, lands within the district owned by timber companies and land speculators (who were almost always not locals) failed to pay the taxes, and districts struggled to cover their costs. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, residents within drainage districts suffering from a

<sup>368</sup> John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers, 1880-1930* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 38-39.

lack of sufficient funds began to believe that the federal government should fund districts in debt.<sup>369</sup>

Plantation operations in the Arkansas River Valley were often on or close to a river, particularly the Arkansas River. At the heart of the complex there was a headquarters where management made decisions. In the Old South, this was often the big house, but often it was also an office building or was located in a related business such as a store. Large plantations contained a processing facility to reduce the bulk of the crop that was shipped to market, primarily since steamboats charged shipping fees based on weight. These facilities took the forms of rice and sugar mills, cotton gins, and tobacco barns. Another prominent facility on plantations was the buildings that housed the power supply, excluding human power. Included in this category were mule and horse barns and later tractor and machine shops.<sup>370</sup>

Housing units for the laborers were significant aspects of plantations. Historically, the construction of these buildings was in a row along a road near the headquarters and was called the “slave quarters.” Post-Civil War agricultural censuses deceptively appear to support the theory that southern plantations numbers dwindled or disappeared due to the increasing number of southern farms, while the average farm size decreased, but this is not the case. The census was counting tenant farmers as independent but tenant farms were part of a larger plantation complex. Between 1860 and 1880 the average number of Southern farms more than doubled from 549,109 to 1,252,249 and the average size of farms decreased from 365 acres to 157

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Aiken, *Plantation South*, 7, 9.

acres.<sup>371</sup> Nevertheless, by 1890 there were still 2,275 plantations in Arkansas and 621 of them were over 1,000 acres each.<sup>372</sup>

Planters throughout the Arkansas River Valley needed workers and were willing to go to great lengths to acquire them. Many planters cleared their land and offered black laborers free rent for a determined period if they brought the land into cultivation, after which they became sharecroppers. Whites entered into similar, but more privileged, agreements, often because they came to the bargaining table with mules and implements and could demand a better contract. Planters paid laborers to clear sections of forest and provided housing for them in the area they worked. Upon completion of clear-cutting, many of these families stayed on the land as tenants. Although labor negotiations during Reconstruction seemed to be an improvement, in reality, the systems of labor available to African Americans were used to reestablish antebellum white supremacy.

An added disadvantage to freedmen were laws that enabled whites to control freedmen, thus continuing their control of the environment.<sup>373</sup> Through contract and vagrancy laws, state and local officials were able to provide planters with the cheap and dependable labor force they needed. Radical Reconstruction put an end to the black codes, but once the Redeemers returned to power, methods were put in place to establish white supremacy through disfranchisement and segregation. The crop lien, in fact, proved to be an effective method of control over African Americans' lives and labor. Pete Daniel argues that peonage has been an "important and

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report on the Statistics of Agriculture in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 117.

<sup>373</sup> Otto, *The Final Frontiers, 1880-1930*, 40-41; Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), ix.

continuing theme in the history of postbellum southern labor.”<sup>374</sup> A sharecropper or tenant owing a debt (crop lien, for example) to the planter, was forbidden by law to leave the employment of the planter or farmer for whom he worked. Daniel explains that the difference between a sharecropper and a peon is slight. Peonage depended on “compulsion” that forced a man to stay and work on a plantation for an indeterminate amount of time, until the debt was paid.<sup>375</sup>

Although peonage has always been a critical theme in postbellum Southern history, Daniel explains that it is difficult to quantify the extent of peonage because not only did peonage have deep roots in history and custom, it often was isolated on plantations or in the backcountry, where few witnessed it occurring. The practice of peonage illustrates how whites used segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence, to control race relations. Peonage also affected immigrants who were forced to work in mines, on plantations, and in turpentine camps. Poor native whites were also affected by peonage. Planter’s reasons for supporting peonage often resulted from the pressures they faced in their lives, as John S. Williams a Georgia planter recalled, that African Americans, “boll weevil and low price of cotton just about cleaned me up.”<sup>376</sup> Williams goes on to explain that most farmers he knew bonded blacks out of jail and installed them into a system of debt peonage. Williams’ case illustrates how debt peonage, as Daniel explains it, “infected the South like a cancer.”<sup>377</sup> This cancerous infection not only had severe repercussions for the Southern people but the physical environment also. Peonage provided a cheap and disposable labor source that altered the physical environment in a myriad of ways ranging from raising crops, mining, construction projects, and the creation of mass

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<sup>374</sup> Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, ix.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 20, 22-23.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

graves. The spread of the cancerous peonage was partially due to the ignorance of most of America to its existence. The 1927 Mississippi River flood partially exposed the problem in the Arkansas River Valley as the destruction required help from non-Arkansas organizations, like the Red Cross, who received a shocking education in white supremacy when they arrived at river valley locations. Natural disasters, Daniel explains, have a way of “exposing the unnatural caste system of the South.”<sup>378</sup> White people in the South sought supremacy, not over non-whites alone, but over the environment as well. As whites were implementing Jim Crow to address their racial fears, the physical environment was another source of worry. African Americans were also concerned about the river, chiefly because many of them lived on or worked spaces within the river’s flood zone.

Many whites in the Arkansas River Valley perceived their relationship with African Americans through paternalistic lenses. As the “superior race,” they were never to be questioned. In their patriarchal and paternalistic role, elite white males believed they knew best, even better than uncles, especially Uncle Sam. In the early twentieth century flooding along the river gave rise to an opportunity for Arkansans, specifically river towns within the Arkansas River Valley, to demonstrate their independence from the federal government and undermine the Corps of Engineers. In doing so, they were able to respond to flooding in a manner that suited the situation regardless of what the strangers in the Corps thought they knew. Initially, town folk along the river reached out to their elected representatives, but when political channels dried up, local citizens took control of the situation and demonstrated their power to shape their relationship with the river independently of federal (primarily through the Corps) intervention. Furthermore,

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 150. For more on this issue see Pete Daniel, *Deep’n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood*, particularly chapter four, “Refugees.”

after taking matters into their own hands, Arkansans were successful in getting the federal government to assist in the recovery from future floods as they progressed towards one of the ultimate goals of river improvement, flood prevention.

Floods on the Arkansas River carried changes in their wakes. Locals often cut Federal levees to control the environment when they believed it was in their best interest, often contrary to the wishes of the Corps of Engineers. One such incident occurred in Jefferson County, Arkansas. The Arkansas River flooded over several days in 1908, and the process redefined Pine Bluff's northern border, which resulted in a changed relationship between the city, the Corps of Engineers, and the Arkansas River. Without the flood of 1908 and the citizens' responses to the flood, the government's role would be much less active in flood control and cleanup assistance. Additionally, the flooding and the human reactions to it influenced the role the federal government played in later floods.

Pine Bluff, the county seat of Jefferson County, was, at the time, a major cotton production center for the region. Pine Bluff serviced the agricultural community, but the citizens of Pine Bluff did not identify their town as solely as an agricultural hub or even as a river city, but the heart of the region. Therefore, a threat to the city was more than a threat to physical buildings within boundaries on a map. Their desire to save the downtown, especially the courthouse from destruction during a flood, demonstrated their reverence for their public image, civic pride, and civic responsibility.<sup>379</sup> The flood also highlighted divisions between occupations and class within the town and between the Federal government and Arkansas and Pine Bluff.

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<sup>379</sup> Jack Dougan, "The Many Roles of the Downtown, Part 2 Identity," [https://www.academia.edu/11699724/Roles\\_of\\_the\\_Downtown\\_Part\\_2\\_-\\_Identity](https://www.academia.edu/11699724/Roles_of_the_Downtown_Part_2_-_Identity) (accessed January 15, 2016).

Although citizens took pride in their town, agriculture in the surrounding area and the city was economically and socially significant for Pine Bluff and growing even more so. Between 1890 and 1900, the number of farms in Jefferson County more than doubled, from 2,186 to 4,770 due to the rise of tenancy and sharecropping. Furthermore, farming in the county was segregated. Some sharecroppers faced environmental racism and were required to work and live on land that was highly susceptible to flooding on the north bank of the Arkansas River. Whites farmed land less hazardous. When some planters east of Pine Bluff were confronted with the chance of flooding they had no reservations about letting the river destroy another planters land to save their own. Risky farming opportunities combined with a false sense of safety from local levees, helped planters shift flooding risks to poor laborers and simultaneously use the manipulation of the physical environment to support the Southern “hierarch[ies] of class and race,” unless the price was right.<sup>380</sup> If the land did not flood and it produced a crop, the planters benefited, but if the land did flood and a crop was damaged or ruined the consequences were softened for planters and absorbed by black sharecroppers. Planters had ways to recoup losses from flooding that were not available to sharecroppers. Blacks in Pine Bluff and throughout the South would be “disproportionately burdened with,” what Robert D. Bullard has termed, “locally unwanted land uses.”<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 3; Karen M. O’Neill, *Rivers by Design: State Power and the Origins of U.S. Flood Control* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 61; Garman, “The Agricultural Economy of Jefferson County, Arkansas,” *Jefferson County Historical Quarterly*, 10 no. (November, 2003): 45; Leslie, “Cotton Compresses of Pine Bluff,” 13.

<sup>381</sup> Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), 3.



The river acted as a border between race and class that was used to support white supremacy. The white citizens of Pine Bluff took actions to protect the southern bank of the river while allowing the river's course to shift north at the expense of African American farmers.<sup>382</sup> As cotton cultivation intensified in the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specific industries developed in Pine Bluff. For example, capitalizing on the value of cottonseed, companies such as the Emma Cotton Seed Oil Company, the Pine Bluff Oil Company, and the Pine Bluff Manufacturing Company focused on and expanded their productions of cotton and cottonseed. Cotton transformed Pine Bluff's and the surrounding area's landscape and skyline as planters and farmers cleared the land, built levees, and erected buildings to grow and process the plant. The county housed one of the largest cotton compresses and two of the largest cottonseed mills in the South during the 1880s and again in the 1910s.<sup>383</sup>

The economic prosperity of the preceding decades ebbed away as the 1890s witnessed the economic security of Jefferson County momentarily wash away. Jefferson County's economy reflected the national economic climate and suffered a financial depression that caused raw cotton whole sale prices to fluctuate between 6 and 12 cents per pound. This drop in price meant that farmers in 1898 earned half of what they would have been paid in 1890. Prices continued to fluctuate at a low rate until they rose during WWI.<sup>384</sup> Unfortunately for farmers, the price of cotton and other agricultural commodities was the only thing that fell. Production and

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<sup>382</sup> Hollis, "The Agricultural Economy of Jefferson County, Arkansas," 38; The number of "Total Farms" taken from census data available at Geostat Center, The University of Virginia Library, Historical Census Browser, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/> (accessed February 16, 2010).

<sup>383</sup> Garman, "The Agricultural Economy of Jefferson County, Arkansas," 45; Leslie, "Cotton Compresses of Pine Bluff," 13.

<sup>384</sup> Susan Carter, et al, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Volume 3 Part C Economic Structure and Performance*, 209.

transportation costs, such as steamboat freight rates on the river increased, making many farmers unable to ship their cotton to market, which often resulted in farm foreclosures. Due to the economic situation and the high volume of foreclosed properties, non-farming entities, such as merchants, manufacturers, and corporations acquired many of the farming operations. The land was still productive, allowing investors with enough capital, and with judicious business skills, to turn a profit of 50 to 100 percent by renting out their holdings, thereby increasing tenancy.<sup>385</sup> The economic and environmental climate of Pine Bluff led business people who dabbled in several different business interests to be particularly concerned about the overall economic and environmental health of the area.

The businessmen of Pine Bluff and the farmers and planters in Jefferson County, who at times were the same individuals, joined a chorus of voices from Mississippi River and Arkansas River delta counties expressing the difficulties they faced with flooding and safe passage on the Arkansas River. Although the Federal government provided services in altering the natural environment to facilitate economic growth, such as dredging the river channel and cutting bars, they did not focus on flood control. What work the Corps did was to protect navigation and almost always in the form of levees. The differing expectations of residents in Pine Bluff and the Corps illustrate the gulf between the Federal government's policies, and at times lack of action, and the citizens needs when the river threatened the city.

Throughout the existence of the Corps of Engineers leading up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century their mission, regarding river control, was primarily concerned with navigation. They made sure river craft could navigate the river and that there were functioning harbors to accommodate river travel. Flood control was not their focus. Congress had always been leery of getting into the

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<sup>385</sup> Garman, "The Agricultural Economy of Jefferson County, Arkansas," 45.

flood control business, and the result was a smattering of River and Harbor Acts that only funded the Corps with money to maintain the channel of the Arkansas River from Indian Territory to the Mississippi River. The Corps employed snagging and dredging to “improve” the river. The 1830s witnessed the most action by the Corps on the Arkansas River as they attempted to snag the river into obedience. Snagging was the preferred method to clear the river’s channel, and dredging was usually the second option for clearing the river of debris. With the passing of bills and acts that called for river improvements on the Arkansas River in 1866, 1868, 1871, 1873, and 1874 the Corps continued their work of civil applications on the Arkansas River but most of the work, except for some surveying work on the Arkansas River, consisted of snagging and dredging.<sup>386</sup>

Although the Corps’ priority was transportation, the Federal government, over time, realized the significance that flooding posed to navigation, commerce, property, and lives.<sup>387</sup> Because Pine Bluff was an essential economic hub in the Arkansas cotton industry, in 1879 Congress permitted the Corps to manipulate the river in an attempt to save Pine Bluff – and thus its harbor -- from flooding. In saving the harbor, the Corp was not abandoning its traditional role, to protect rivers and harbors. Located downstream of Little Rock and at the height of about 45 feet, Pine Bluff sat on the outside edge (on the south bank) of an acute bend in the Arkansas River.

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<sup>386</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 16-19.

<sup>387</sup> Martin Reuss and Charles Hendricks, “The U.S. Corp of Engineers: Brief History,” <http://web.archive.org/web/20000919190502/www.hq.usace.army.mil/history/brief2.htm> (Accessed November 5, 2010); Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 32.



Figure 4.2 Jefferson County 1872, Based on map by W.H.D. Wilson, *Wilson's Map of Jefferson County, Arkansas*, drawn and published by W.H.D. Wilson, Real Estate Broker & General Land Agent, Pine Bluff, Ark.: W.H.D. Wilson, 1872, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2012586234> (accessed June 30, 2019).

Pine Bluff, by 1879, began to witness the effects of the river cutting into the bluffs and sucking prime real estate into the river. Simultaneously, the river was threatening to straighten its course with brute force through a piece of land called Yell's Bend 4 miles upstream. If the river succeeded in altering its path, the city would find itself repositioned miles from the Arkansas River. In February of 1880 Major Charles Suter of the Corps of Engineers proposed, to Congress, a remedy regarding the situation in Pine Bluff. He shortly began work on revetments situated on the river's banks in front of the city and at Yell's Bend. He also started construction of a wire curtain dike that theoretically allowed water to flow in the channel on its old course around Pine Bluff. Unfortunately for Suter and Pine Bluff, the city was situated on alluvial soil, which is composed of silt, sand, clay, mud, and debris. The river drops its silt as the river flows,

and water levels fluctuate. These types of banks were susceptible to caving and eroding, and in the case of Pine Bluff, made even worse because the river's current crashed directly into the south bank. Thus, the river consumed the subsoil and transformed the subsoil into a "quicksand like substance" that dragged the clay topsoil down with it into the river.<sup>388</sup>

As Pine Bluff grew desperate to stay dry, Charles Suter, in 1880, created plans to construct an eleven-thousand-foot L-shaped curtain dike to shield the city. This dike was not entirely made of concrete, or stone, or brush, but was an experimental design by Suter. Suter expanded upon the idea of having a permeable barrier. His idea of a curtain dike involved driving a double row of piles at interims along the span of the structure, with a width of six feet between the pillars. He then crossed the piles near the top and fastened them together. Sutter constructed a continuous wire curtain in the river on a flatboat moored at right angles to the line of piles. The curtain dike boat was 50 feet long and 12 feet wide. Workers then weaved branches and sticks into the curtain. Heavyweights, made of sand-filled bags, pinned the curtain in place. Suter reckoned that the curtain would slow the pace of the water to a speed that allowed the water to deposit suspended matter. The gathering debris would then direct the primary current of the river toward the center of the channel and in turn, take the pressure off the banks. To keep the banks from eroding Yell's Bend, Suter devised an arrangement of bank revetments that utilized the idea of his curtain dike. Although the Corps failed to complete the Pine Bluff construction projects by the beginning of 1881, these projects represented an increase in the Corps' involvement on the Arkansas River, but only if the primary concern was the city's harbor.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 22- 23.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

Unfortunately, Suter's unique ideas were ineffective. By 1884 the Corps reported that the "erosive action of the river at Pine Bluff had taken in a street which bordered on the downtown area. All the houses along this street were lost to the river. The county courthouse was in very immediate danger of sliding into the river as was the city's commercial district."<sup>390</sup> Due to the failure of the Pine Bluff project, political and social elites of the city proposed manipulating the river's channel. They wanted to cut through the neck of the peninsula opposite Pine Bluff. Local citizens supported this plan although it meant the river and harbor would become situated nearly three miles from town. Economic forfeiture seemed a better option than forfeiting their city to the river, a scenario that seemed more and more plausible with continued inaction. Some Corps engineers thought this was a suitable solution since all other attempts to control the river had drowned along with the river banks. Major Adams, the officer in charge, believed the solution lay with installing conventional, unyielding, and solid jetties along the shore. Ultimately, Adams' replacement, Captain Taber, implemented Adams' plans. The Corps began a sizeable undertaking to construct impervious jetties. Although the Corps made progress by the late 1880s, they had not completed the project, and all the while, floods continued to wash away at Pine Bluff's northern edge.<sup>391</sup>

May 7<sup>th</sup> through the 13<sup>th</sup> of 1898 witnessed an overabundance of water pour into the Arkansas River which flooded Fort Smith, Little Rock, and Pine Bluff, and in many instances fully submerged roads. The "permanent" measures that had been installed under Taber's command to control the river were uprooted and swept down river with everything else caught in the river's wet grip. Many Arkansans believed it was now essential that the Arkansas River be

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

controlled to prevent future flooding, destruction, and death. This thought process was not unique regarding the Arkansas River but shared by most people in the nation regarding rivers in general. At the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, citizens and politicians began thinking about rivers in several different ways, not merely in terms of navigation or flooding. The United States broadened their ideas regarding the function a river played in human life and perceived them as multipurpose resources to be developed not only to help navigation but also in terms of flood control, irrigation, power generation, and as a water source for municipal and industrial uses. Politicians from various political persuasion promoted these ideas. In 1899, Congress passed the landmark Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899, which detailed how the Corps could lawfully manage the United States' water resources with federal funds. Although Congress was not authorizing the Corps to change the river for anything other than navigation purposes, the act did expand the Corps' options of river work on navigable waters. Adding to laws passed in the 1880s and early 1890s, Congress granted the Corps the authority to regulate bridges, roads, pipes, and wires crossing navigable waterways that might impede navigation. Additionally, the Corps became the arbiter regarding the type and location of structures installed on navigable rivers. Therefore, if someone built a pier or a dock on the river without the Corps' blessing, the structure was violating the law.<sup>392</sup>

A series of droughts and floods on the Arkansas River during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made river conditions difficult. Severe droughts hampered navigation in 1901 and 1902, followed by flooding in 1903. Furthermore, the frigid winter of 1904 halted river traffic. The condition of the river became dangerous again in 1908. By December 1, 1908, Pine Bluff

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

anxiously anticipated a rise in the Arkansas River. Upriver, Fort Smith and Little Rock reported flooding and damage and officials predicted a similar outcome in Pine Bluff.

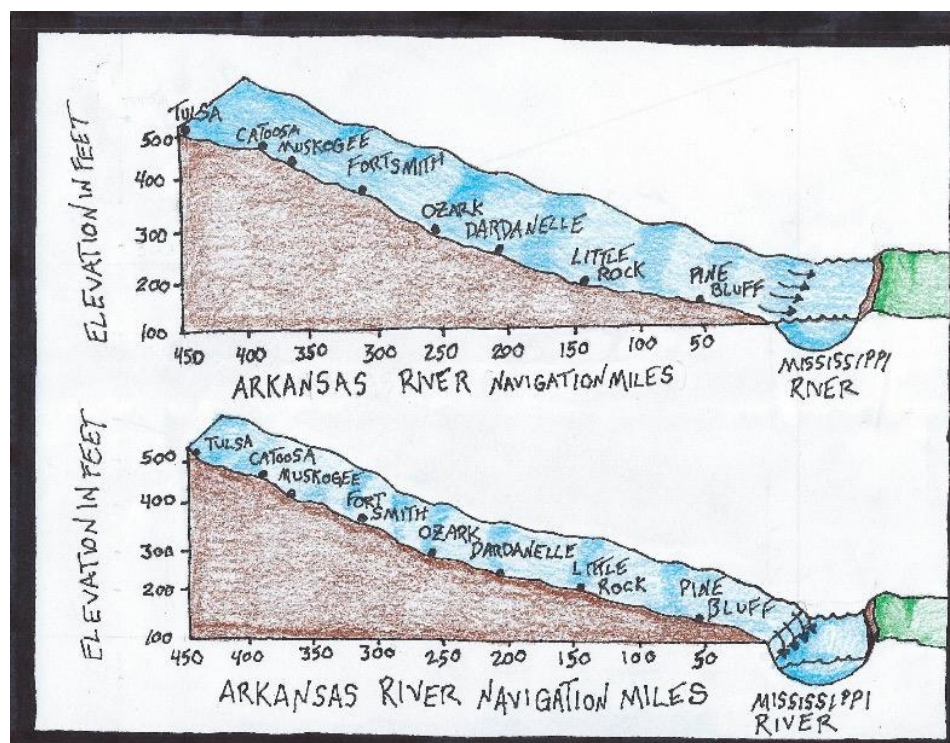


Figure 4.3 A Low Versus a Full Mississippi River. Based on a map from Heather Nachtmann, Othman Boudhoum, Furkan Oztanriseven, “Regional Economic Impact Study for the McClellan Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System,” <https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/29525> (accessed June 2, 2019).

Exacerbating the issue of levee failure around the city was the Mississippi River’s low stage downriver, which caused its water level to be lower than the Arkansas River’s water level. As a result the Arkansas River’s water flowed along a steeper slope resulting in a faster current.<sup>393</sup> As the Arkansas River rose, so did the threat of damage to cotton fields, the Courthouse, businesses, and homes. The heavy rains persisted, and the Corp of Engineers’ hastily erected levees drove the river’s current to flow against the south bank of the river. Despite the efforts of the government to build and fix levees, several levees were severely breached, pouring water into

<sup>393</sup> John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 37; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 32.



Pine Bluff. Locals tried to shore up the riverbanks by installing fascines (bundles of brush or wood). None of these efforts produced the desired results. As a sense of impending doom spread over the city, the residents of Pine Bluff began to explore other options.<sup>394</sup>

The swift rise of the river made an immediate response from Pine Bluff crucial. Many town residents knew what was coming based on past experiences with flooding. Stores held a sale to move their merchandise rather than waste it and people moved all their belonging out of their houses.<sup>395</sup> The town's citizens needed to take hasty action due to levee failures, levees which were supposed to protect the city from rapidly rising waters. Businessmen and property owners of Pine Bluff held two meetings over a couple days at the courthouse to discuss their course of action. It is here that they decided to take matters into their own hands and in doing so changed the river's course and alter the landscape. As a result, the northern border of the city increased and the river moved north away from the town. Also, to the detriment of the absentee ownership of the Pine Bluff North Land Company, their land and their black sharecroppers on the north side of the river they lost the ground right from under their feet for ever.

Interestingly, the 1908 flood at Pine Bluff highlights a paradox of flooding. Wealthy communities and individuals have more economic resources to combat flooding but are financially hurt the most. Property owning whites in Pine Bluff, on the south bank of the Arkansas River, used their economic and political clout to protect their racial, social, and monetary interest by saving the city, whereas black sharecroppers lacking financial, social, and political capital were helpless against the river and the decisions of the white community.

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<sup>394</sup> Worst Flood For Several Year, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 1, 1908; Betty Hollis Garman, "Transportation in Jefferson County, Arkansas," *JCHQ* 10 no. 1 (1982): 23; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 37.

<sup>395</sup> Newspaper Advertisement, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 1, 1908.

Additionally, the land owners of Boyd's Point were equally as helpless due to the magnitude of the flood and the desires of the other land holding elites. When there is a choice to save the city government buildings, a rail road yard, expensive homes, and several planters' lands or the holdings of one company and some sharecroppers' shacks, the Pine Bluff North Land company will lose every time. And they lost a lot.<sup>396</sup> Because flood disasters are a "human-induced phenomenon," protecting against them requires human action and humans, often, protect what matters to them or is deemed best for the community (in this case the majority of the white property owning community) to prevent future disasters.

"Pine Bluff is almost helpless as far as protection along the river front is concerned," cried out a local paper.<sup>397</sup> The city mirrored the worry exhibited by the press. After attempting to minimize the damage caused by the river using more traditional means and failing, they decided to implement a more extreme plan to save the riverfront. The plan they decided upon was twofold: first they needed to immediately cut the federal levee on the northern bank to offer relief to the southern bank, and, secondly they chose to completely change the river's course to prevent further flooding. The levee's intended purpose was to keep the river from moving away from the city so that they would have a harbor, but now public opinion flowed in the direction of a "unanimous opinion... that the river ought to be made to leave the city."<sup>398</sup>

The levee in question should have functioned, as designed, to control the river. Sadly, it did not. The levee exacerbated the damage at Pine Bluff. Construction of the levee did not take into account the strain and stresses the river exerted on its banks. Additionally, when the Corps

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<sup>396</sup> The Pine Bluff North Land Company lost 100 acres to flooding and the sharecroppers' houses valued at thousands of dollars. Losses More Than \$398,100, *The Nevada County Picayune*, December 10, 1908.

<sup>397</sup> Worst Flood For Several Year, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 1, 1908.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

built the levee, they should have done so according to the river's rate of flow, soil content, rate of saturation, and climatic conditions. Better yet, the levee probably should not have been built at all and a different solution used to combat flooding. The levee either failed to address several important variables or it succumbed to poor craftsmanship. Like the levee that caused the damage, the Corps and federal politicians were inflexible and misguided in their response to the flooding. Representatives from the city asked the Federal government for permission to cut the federal levee, but the government declined. Arkansas' Senator, James P. Clarke pressed the Federal government to aid the city to little effect. A newspaper added to the public desire to cut the levee when it ran a story that blamed the federal levee for causing the current problems with the river. The city engineer, W.J. Parkes, claimed that "That levee (the federal levee) has caused all this damage and it will continue to do so until it is cut and permits the current to change its course."<sup>399</sup>

Parkes' claims did not fall on deaf ears. At 9:40 p.m. on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, an explosion "shook buildings all over the city."<sup>400</sup> The explosion occurred on the point of land one mile opposite the city thus re-directing the raging flow of the river away from the heart of the city's business district, mainly along Barraque Street. As to the identity of the party responsible, the media claimed that "no one knew and what was more, no one cared to know."<sup>401</sup> There were rumors that the levee was destroyed by two Corps engineers, Captain William Parkin and Captain G.W. Lukesh. Whether the Army ever discovered they were the ones to illegally blow

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<sup>399</sup> Engineer Says The Couth House Will Go, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 2, 1908; Pavol Peter, *Canal and River Levees* (Bratislava, Czechoslovakia: Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, 1982), 69.

<sup>400</sup> Boyd Point Dynamited Last Night to Change River, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 3, 1908.

<sup>401</sup> Boyd Point Dynamited Last Night to Change River, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 3, 1908.; Allie Banks Dawson, "The Home of My Youth," *JCHQ* 26 no.1 (1998), 9.

the levee is not clear. Interestingly, shortly after the flood Lukesh was reassigned (although he was filling a temporary position at the time). Not only did the explosion bring hope to the citizens of Pine Bluff that maybe the damage caused by the river might be over, but apparently, it did the impossible. Before the explosion, federal engineers in Little Rock proclaimed, “No human power can save the Jefferson Hotel and the court house.”<sup>402</sup> Perhaps they would have been surprised, and perhaps not, to read the front page of the *Daily Graphic* Friday morning the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1908 that stated, “Dynamite Saved Hotel Jefferson” as a second round of explosions blew 75 additional feet of Boyd’s point away.<sup>403</sup> Before the levee was cut and the courthouse saved from being sucked into the river Parkin wrote a letter, which was discussed in the news, to the Mayor of Pine Bluff. Perhaps to avoid suspicion, Parkin wrote a letter to the mayor of Pine Bluff, Mayor Tony, and informed him that he “had heard that it was the intention of some parties here to dynamite or cut the government levee” and he warned them “against any violation of that character,” and ended with a reminder that “the course of the Arkansas river was not to be changed in any way.”<sup>404</sup>

After the levee was cut on the west and south side of Boyd Point, the river naturally cut a new channel in Boyd’s Point and moved away from the city. The city was fine with that. Despite several home and business being destroyed, much of the river front property was saved. The courthouse, the symbol of their downtown, the heart of their community, had been spared along

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<sup>402</sup> Boyd Point Dynamited Last Night to Change River, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 3, 1908.

<sup>403</sup> Dynamite Saved Hotel Jefferson, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 4, 1908.

<sup>404</sup> Boyd Point Dynamited Last Night to Change River, *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, December 3, 1908.

with the Saint Louis- Southwest rail road's property, and the lands of several planters east of the city.<sup>405</sup>

Nevertheless, some portions of the city continued to fall into the river for a while after the river's levels fell. The city believed that they needed to defy the federal government to save the town.<sup>406</sup> They were sure they had a better understanding of the river than policymakers in Washington D.C. and were ready to act accordingly. At the time, no one reportedly revealed the identity of the individuals who detonated the levee. There were rumors that four men were responsible, in addition the idea that secretly a couple Corps engineers were in on it.<sup>407</sup> This event illustrates the complicated relationships that the city, factions within the Corps of engineers, the Federal government, land owners, rail roads, and large business had with one another regarding the river. Following the 1908 flood, a program of volunteer levee construction began, and Pine Bluff pressed state and federal governments to provide for increased flood control and funding to rebuild, which they received. The floods of 1908, combined with a massive flood that occurred four years later, continued to shape the government's role regarding river improvement.

The year 1912 witnessed yet another a destructive flood that gushed into the Arkansas River Valley. This time the relationship and understanding between local, state, and federal officials had changed. Local officials requested and received federal aid relatively quickly. This was the first time Arkansas received federal assistance so soon. The devastation of the flood

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<sup>405</sup> Jack Dougan, "The Many Roles of the Downtown, Part 2 Identity," [https://www.academia.edu/11699724/Roles\\_of\\_the\\_Downtown\\_Part\\_2\\_-\\_Identity](https://www.academia.edu/11699724/Roles_of_the_Downtown_Part_2_-_Identity) (accessed January 15, 2016).

<sup>406</sup> Although the cutting of the federal levee diverted portions of the river from the courthouse and the riverfront portions of downtown, Pine Bluff eventually built new ports on the river that were vital to their economy, culture, and identity.

<sup>407</sup> Garman, "Transportation in Jefferson County, Arkansas," 23.

encouraged President William Howard Taft to task Engineer officers from the Corp to strengthen levees and help deliver food and tents to flood victims. The following year, 1913, another ravaging deluge overwhelmed the same region as the 1912 flood. These floods resulted in the federal government awarding significant government aid for disaster relief.<sup>408</sup> With each flood from this point on the federal government's role in recovery increased and eventually reached a point where they began to take preventative measures against future floods.

Additionally, this incident and others to follow contributed to the government policies shifting from focusing on river improvement for transportation purposes towards a more direct involvement with river improvement in terms of flood control. In 1913 Congress appropriated \$60 million for the improvement of the lower Mississippi River system, allotting \$285,000 for the Arkansas River and its tributaries. The Corps used the funds to alter and constrain the river for navigation purposes, and part of the cost was to conduct reconnaissance studies. These studies included two phases, the reconnaissance phase, and feasibility phase. The Corps was responsible for deciding if a prospective project was in the nation's interests and to suggest alternatives.<sup>409</sup>

Despite assistance from the federal government to restrain the river, the river retained its ability to roll on regardless of human intervention. A "perfect storm" of environmental phenomena could ruin human-made "improvements" to the river at any moment. Conditions during spring of 1927 were awash in unusually heavy and constant rains that swelled the rivers

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<sup>408</sup> Committee to Assess the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Methods of Analysis and Peer Review for Water Resources Project Planning, *Analytical Methods and Approaches for Water Resources Project Planning* (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press, 2004), 7-8; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock 1881-1985*, 41-42; Garman, "Transportation in Jefferson County, Arkansas," 24.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

of the Arkansas and Mississippi Valleys. Heavy rains took their toll on the landscape, but they alone are not to blame for the devastation that occurred in 1927. Human manipulation of the environment contributed to the destructive force the heavens unleashed. The flood, although destructive, also created an opportunity for change and improvement.

Change followed in the wake of the 1927 flood. Houses needed to be rebuilt, fields needed to be nursed back to health, and farm animals needed to be replaced. The soil was not the only thing to be disturbed and laid bare by the rushing waters, the flood pulled back the curtain on race relations and offered a glimpse of Southern notions of white superiority, and its all too willing servant Jim Crow. Due to the awesome destructive power of the flood and the appalling number of people affected by it, many Southern states, such as Arkansas, could not cope with the total cost it would take to overcome the deluge. Outside help was needed. Planters were reluctant to ask for or accept help because, in large part, the help came from the National Government. The flood's aftermath required the Federal government, and Arkansas River Valley elites to interact. Following the flood of 1927, relationships between elites and the Federal government would continue to evolve. Planters, once they discovered that the government would not threaten white supremacy and race relations, welcomed the government's involvement and used federal largess to better their situations. Farmers received a great deal of assistance from government programs such as the Red Cross and cooperative extension services. These services allowed whites to maintain their social status while recovering from disasters. Southern Democrats became more comfortable, yet still weary, with active federal intervention as long as it served their purposes. Planters, once again, demonstrated their cunning as they manipulated the racial, political, and physical environment.

Decades of logging and clearing agricultural land removed the water's natural impediments which allowed water to flow from tributaries into main river channels all at once.<sup>410</sup> Thousands of acres throughout the Mississippi River Valley were submerged under 10 to 15 feet of water when levees broke in February. By April, the unceasing rains soaked 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces with a total of 250 cubic miles of water. Although absorption and evaporation removed 60 cubic miles from flowing to the Gulf of Mexico, the remaining water was enough to cover the entire area with a foot of water. Much of the water that rushed down the

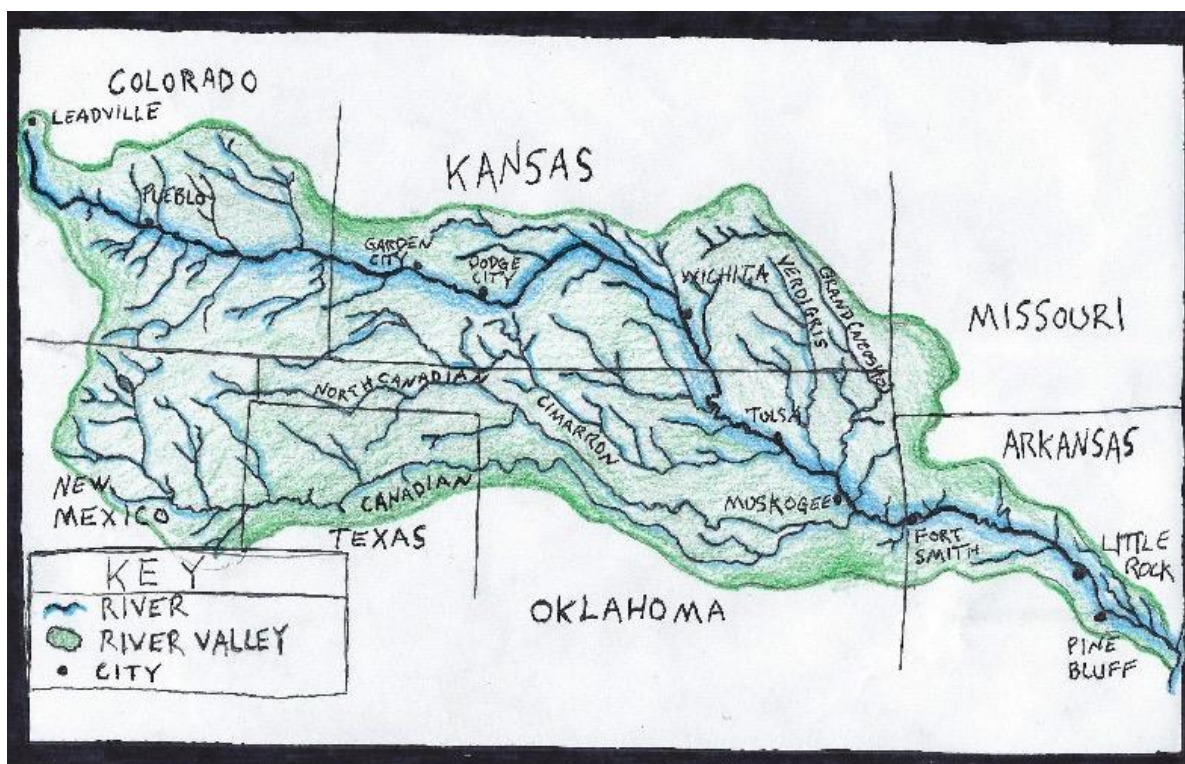


Figure 4.4 The Arkansas River Basin, Based on, World Maps, Thumbnail Us Political Maps, <https://pasarelapr.com/detail/maps-of-arkansas-river-27.html> (accessed May 5, 2019).

<sup>410</sup> Pete Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.



Arkansas River came from her larger tributaries which merge just upriver from Fort Smith in northeast Oklahoma. Flooding hit the state of Arkansas particularly hard as its rivers spilled out of their banks.<sup>411</sup>

As streams turned into raging rivers they flooded over five million acres of Arkansas farmland and created 325,560 refugees (69 percent of which were African American with the majority of them not owning the land the river displaced them from).<sup>412</sup> On April 19<sup>th</sup>, the flood covered the North Little Rock business district in 3 feet of water. At Pine Bluff, the river marooned approximately 500 people on a bridge northeast of the city. The river cut a bank at Poteau bend near Fort Smith that was over 220 feet wide. Arkansas City found itself 10 feet underwater because a levee on the Mississippi remained intact up river, thus diverting the upstream water into the city. Inland seas appeared in farmlands allowing side-wheeler steamboats that explored outside the riverbed and steamed into flooded fields and over treetops to rescue stranded men and livestock. Rescue parties could not save all the livestock. For example, an entire herd of steers was witnessed struggling against the current only to disappear into a whirlpool. Over 50,000 animals drowned in the flood. Flood losses along the Arkansas River exceeded 43 million dollars (approximately \$650,098,127.85 in 2018 dollars), excluding the millions of dollars lost by the three major railroads in Arkansas. All the levees between Fort Smith and Little Rock washed away. In total 16,570,627 acres (roughly 26,000 square miles) of the Mississippi River Valley were flooded. Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee,

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<sup>411</sup> Gary Zellar, "H.C. Ray and Racial Politics in the African American Extension Service Program in Arkansas, 1915-1929," *Agricultural* 72 no. 2 (Spring 1998): 441; The American National Red Cross, "American National Red Cross Mississippi Valley Flood Relief," November 16, 1928, Department of Accounts and Statistics, box 734, DR 224.08, National Archives; Peck Compiles Report on Cut in River Bank, *Southwest-Times Record*, May 1, 1927.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

Missouri, Kentucky, and Illinois suffered the most damage. These seven states contained 170 counties with a population of 4,459,238 that were affected.<sup>413</sup>

Arkansas could not handle the totality of the flood's aftermath and needed help. With so many people devastated on such a large scale, the American Red Cross contributed to the rescue and recovery efforts of the people and areas affected by the flood. Their first task was to save people threatened by the flood. With the use of radios and airplanes, they coordinated their rescue efforts to save refugees stranded in trees and on building tops. Boats transported the refugees to trains that then took them to several camps established throughout the state. The Red Cross was one of the largest organizations involved in the rescue and recovery effort. They had 3,429 chapters in 16,000 communities within the affected area. In addition to facilitating relief efforts, the Red Cross raised thousands of dollars. The monetary value of relief, both cash, and donations, was considerable. Although people contributed \$23,627,902.16 (approximately \$36 million in 2019 dollars) to the relief effort, it was not enough. The estimated value of the damage done in Arkansas easily exceed \$23 million, along with the priceless loss of 98 lives (25 alone in Jefferson County).<sup>414</sup> With few options of escape, many people flocked to high and dry areas, such as bridges and levees, that were not submerged and offered a hope of survival.<sup>415</sup>

In Conway (Faulkner County), about 100 farms and tenant houses were destroyed or damaged when their levees failed. An estimated 1,300 to 1,400 people were fed and clothed by a

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<sup>413</sup> Corps of Engineers, *Flood Plain Information Part II Bayou Bartholomew and Tributaries, City of Pine Bluff, Arkansas*, 12; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 182; *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927: Official Report of the Relief Operations* (Washington D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1929), 5.

<sup>414</sup> Russell Bearden, "Jefferson County's Worst Disaster: The Flood of 1927," *JCHQ* 11 no. 3 (1983): 4; Jeannie Whayne, "Darker Forces on the Horizon," in *Arkansas: A Narrative History* ed. Jeannie Whayne and Thomas A. Deblack (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 313.

<sup>415</sup> Bearden, "Jefferson County's Worst Disaster: The Flood of 1927," 5

local relief organization. The Conway relief committee's goal was to "bring the stricken people back to a point where they will be self-supporting."<sup>416</sup> Their goals and reality were disconnected in at least two ways. One, they would soon discover they did not have the means to address the area's problems and two, a significant portion of the people were not able to "self-support" very well before the flood, let alone after it. Large segments of the population were loaded with debt and hampered by Jim Crow. Many of the farmers lived in a perpetual state of debt and never acquired the means to better their financial situation. The "they" referred to was most likely a white "they." This language illustrates the racial situation at the time. Although the flood did not discriminate, the leaders of the affected areas did. It is scary to think of what would have happened to the black population, and the poor white one to a degree, if the federal government had not stepped in to help. The flood created along with classism and racism, a situation where those who offered aid became the focus, and the needy at times were an afterthought. Thankfully, not all people assisting in the wake of the flood were using aid to reinforce the social hierarchy in the river valley. Some people were heroic and color blind, risking their lives to save and help victims. Disasters of this nature sometimes open people's perspectives on life and society, and in these moments, social change can emerge.<sup>417</sup> Change did emerge from the flood, but many of the immediate changers were environmental.

Other Arkansas River cities and counties suffered from the floods, to varying degrees. Altus, Arkansas, was situated on the outside bend of the river and within two miles of the river. Environmental conditions helped shield them from the river's full fury, and they were able to replant their crops reasonably quickly and even predicted that the yield of some crops that year

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<sup>416</sup> Committee to Survey Conway Flood Area, *Southwest-Times Record*, May 1, 1927.

<sup>417</sup> Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 63.

would be “exceptional.”<sup>418</sup> Some farmers had not planted their cotton by the time the flood came, and they were able to save their seeds from the flood which filled them with the hope that they might be able to grow a crop and overcome the disaster that year.<sup>419</sup> Several counties affected by the flood were more agriculturally and financially flexible than other locations. In Poteau (La Flore County), Oklahoma farmers were able to plant crops within a couple of weeks from the flood, thanks to good weather and the support of their local banking community. Flooded counties in northwestern Arkansas were confident that “other crops will replace” the ones ruined from the flood.<sup>420</sup> Farmers on the western end of the lower Arkansas River Valley had more options when it came to which types of crops to grow. They were not shackled to planting cotton and the cotton economy like many of the farmers down the river.

Downriver between Little Rock and the Mississippi River, the Arkansas River spilled out of her banks and caused a great deal of damage. Pine Bluff, in particular, was walloped by the flood. Geology, geography, and population distribution around the river exacerbated the situation. If Pine Bluff had not cut the levee in 1908 and redirected the river to the north of the urban population, the destruction could have been worse. By Saturday, April 16, 1927, the flood had made its way south of Little Rock towards Pine Bluff where rising water levels caused 150 citizens to evacuate to the eastern part of the city. The mayor issued a flood warning after the flooding of East Second Avenue. Sunday witnessed the severing of eastern Pine Bluff from the rest of the city as the river rushed over eastern sections of the Pastoria, Frenchtown, and New Gascony Levees swallowing 150,000 acres of farmland. Later in the evening, the Plum Bayou

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<sup>418</sup> Valley Crops Good in Spite of Floods, *Southwest-Times*, May 1, 1927.

<sup>419</sup> Farmers Regain Hope After Water Recedes, *Southwest-Times*, May 1, 1927.

<sup>420</sup> Other Crops Will Replace Loss on Fruit, *Southwest-Times*, May 1, 1927; Poteau is Optimistic Over Flood Situation, *Southwest-Times*, May 1, 1927.

Levee failed, and the river engulfed the whole community. Other communities in the county were flooded as well, Sherrill, Stuttgart, Rison, McGehee, Monticello, everything between Pine Bluff and Reyddell. With so many people displaced

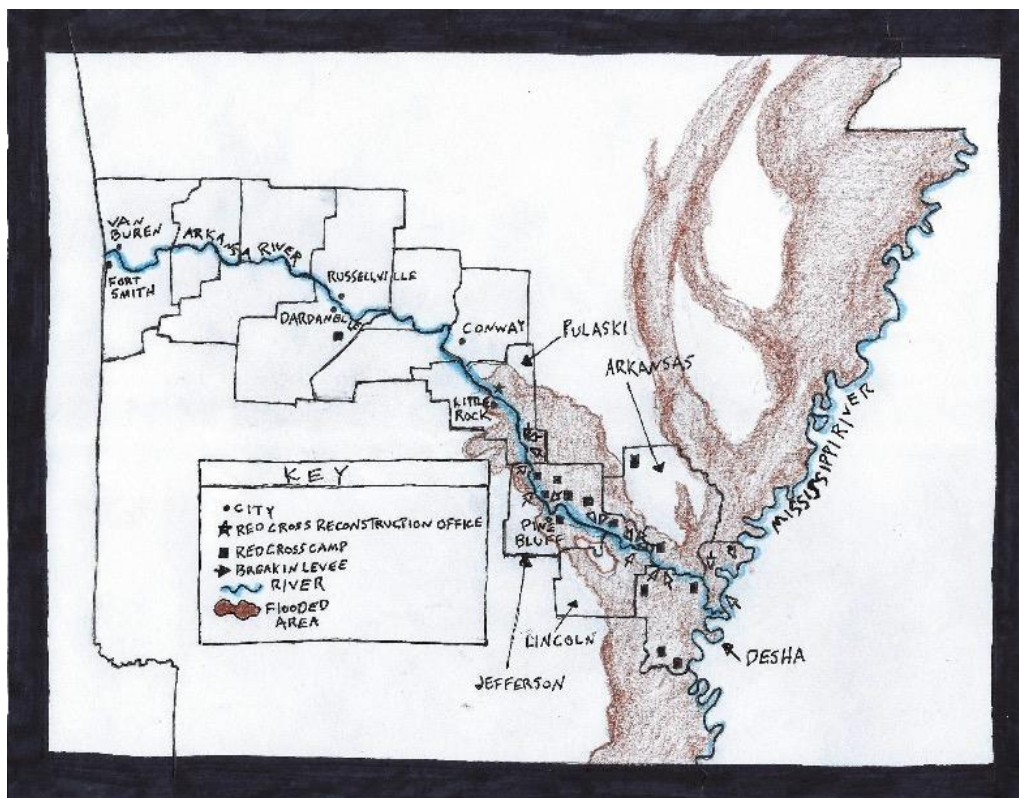


Figure 4.5 Approximate locations of levee breaks and Red Cross camps in Arkansas following the 1927 flood. Based on map by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, 1927, <https://sites.law.lsu.edu/coast/files/2011/06/coast-miss-flood-1.jpg> (accessed May 7, 2019).

from the flood, Jefferson County officials established a refugee center in the American Legion hall at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Pine Street. Additionally, local realtors provided temporary housing for homeless families.<sup>421</sup>

Late at night on April 16, the homeless totaled 2,000 within Pine Bluff, as thousands throughout the county were stranded. Because of the massive area affected, seaplanes and naval radio equipment were used, in addition to boats, to assist with the rescue efforts. The floodplain,

<sup>421</sup> Bearden, "Jefferson County's Worst Disaster: The Flood of 1927," 5.

within the Jefferson County alone, was 1,000 miles long and 20 to 80 miles wide. Rescue searches along with medical and food drops, allowed rescuers to save thousands of lives.

Unfortunately, many people could have avoided being refugees or stranded from the flood, but did not.<sup>422</sup>

Playing chicken with a rising river is rarely a good idea, and yet that is what many people did as they hoped for the best regardless of how quickly the river was rising. Rural delta and river valley families often refused to evacuate their homes. Even when they were aware of the weather forecast they did not believe the damage would be catastrophic, after all, delta families had seen floods before and its destructive forces, it was an expected and anticipated fact of life. Ray West recalled how his “Close friends...hesitated to leave, thinking that conditions would improve, but instead day by day they got worse.”<sup>423</sup> Sometimes the father remained with the home and sent his family away as in the case of Walter N. Trulock Jr. They moved all their furniture into the attic then, using a small boat, he took his family to a steel supported wide-span bridge seven miles north of Pine Bluff called Free Bridge.<sup>424</sup>

For those who did not have the luxury of being rescued, nor had access to a boat, they had to make their way above the water by themselves. Edgar Blackwell recounted a somewhat humorous account of a man and his “stout” wife using their pig trough as a boat. All the while, he was paddling; she was bailing water with one hand while the other patted her husband’s back

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>423</sup> Bearden, “Jefferson County’s Worst Disaster: The Flood of 1927,” 7; S. Ray West, “Memories of the 1927 Flood,” *JCHQ* 12 no.3 (1984): 22.

<sup>424</sup> Unsurprisingly, following the flood of 1927 the Trulock family would be very concerned about the Corps’ projects on the Arkansas River. They would write Senator John McClellan to stay informed of projects on the river; West, “Memories of the 1927 Flood,” 22.; Bearden, “Jefferson County’s Worst Disaster: The Flood of 1927,” 8.

as she kept saying, “paddle honey, paddle fast.”<sup>425</sup> If true, Mr. Blackwell’s account is fantastic given the swift nature of the waters and the need for motorized boats to navigate the dangerous waters. Many people did not have access to a boat and had to make their way to safety by swimming or floating or trudging along what the river had left of the levee. Most refugees in the Jefferson County area went to Free Bridge.

The scene at Free Bridge was weary and tragic. One victim recalled their experience:

Saturday and Sunday nights we worked on the Laster Loop Levee until it broke. Then we went to Pastoria and all day Monday we tried to gather up our livestock. We drove them and swam them out of water 15 to 20 feet deep; we worked like dogs! When the stock finally drowned, we got the women and children and managed to get to the levee. We spent a night there and then walked to the bridge. We had plenty of food, but that terrible storm this morning ruined it. There were only 40 or so folks on the bridge when we got there. There were near 200 when we got away. We tried to sleep on wet quilts, but we couldn’t sleep; we put our coats and things over the children. Everything as far as you can see from the bridge is nothing but water with people hanging in trees and on rooftops. I never saw the like of so many drowned creatures in my life. We haven’t had any food or water today!<sup>426</sup>

Although it was a bridge, Free Bridge took on the characteristics like those of the levee camps. Walter Sorrells Jr. recalled the bridge “looks very much like a levee camp. The middle runway contains six tents where 250 Negroes were housed at one time. At the north end of the bridge is another tent for the food supplies and the kitchen.”<sup>427</sup> The bridge was better than a tree or rooftop, but conditions were still arduous. Red Cross relief station often had a telephone, tents, pots, charcoal stoves, soup pots, and blankets. The relief stations attempted to relieve refugees of hunger or cold, but they could not erase the anguish they suffered from the losses in families,

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<sup>425</sup> Eyewitness Praises Work of Men in Area North of River, *Pine Bluff Commercial*, April 22, 1927.

<sup>426</sup> A survivor’s account of Free Bridge quoted in Bearden, “Jefferson County’s Worst Disaster: The Flood of 1927,” 9-10.

<sup>427</sup> Colorful Story of Free Bridge Relief Work is Recounted By Walter Sorrells, Jr., *Pine Bluff Commercial*, April 23, 1927.

friends, and property as the river swirled around them, and the skies stormed above. Upon being rescued from the bridge, victims found themselves in one of a couple of places, depending upon skin color. Officials placed whites in relief centers in Pine Bluff city limits. Conversely, officials placed African Americans in shelters located at the Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal College.<sup>428</sup>

After the flood receded, the waves of change continued to wash through the devastated area as outsiders witnessed the social, cultural, environmental, and economic conditions in the South. As the official report of the Red Cross Colored Advisory Commission stated, “The flood brought problems to the fore, [such as] social, health and economic.”<sup>429</sup> The Red Cross received camp reports concerning poor health, hygiene, and accusations of ill-treatment of the refugee black sharecroppers and tenants. Additionally, a Colored Advisory Commission was established by Herbert Hoover to investigate the conditions and treatment of the refugees. African Americans were complaining of peonage in addition to their other woes.<sup>430</sup> The Colored Advisory Commission had a two-part goal to improve the lives of the refugees; first to establish and fix the immediate problems, then to help with the long-term goal of reconstructing their lives. To accomplish their goals, they created guidelines to further their work. To discover the immediate problems within the camps, the Commission created a list of things to be aware of while visiting the camps:

1. Treatment accorded refugees, especially women and children.
2. Condition of sleeping quarters
3. Methods of feeding the refugees.
4. Sanitation—Isolation of disease.

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<sup>428</sup> West, “Memories of the 1927 Flood,” 22; Bearden, “Jefferson County’s Worst Disaster: The Flood of 1927,” 8-9.

<sup>429</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission: Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster, 1927*, 14.

<sup>430</sup> Whayne, “Darker Forces on the Horizon,” 314; Daniel, *Deep ‘n As It Come*, 153.



5. Plans for the future.<sup>431</sup>

Once the Commission dealt with the immediate problems, they focused on reconstructing the shattered lives of the victims by:

1. Contacting civil and financial organizations handling the location of families.
2. Ascertaining to what extent colored farmers who are not supported by landlords may secure advance funds.
3. As far as possible, trying to determine whether or not white landowners were charging colored farmers for supplies that the Red Cross intended to be free, or detaining labor against its will.
4. Reporting on housing.
5. Reporting on health.
6. Reporting on education.<sup>432</sup>

With the Commission visiting camps and writing reports for the Federal government, the long-drawn veil that covered race conditions over the South was beginning to be parted back little by little.

One of the most prominent immediate threats to the health of the refugee camps were diseases. Typhoid, malaria, dysentery, and venereal diseases caused concern for health officials. The Red Cross Director of Medical and Health Activities received one shocking report that stated, "Acute gonococcus infections among soldier-guards; promiscuity between guards and girls in both white and colored camps; intimacy between young people in refugee camps; use of a refugee tent for purposes of prostitution by a married woman whose husband secured the customers."<sup>433</sup> Sexually transmitted diseases were such a problem that the Red Cross brought in a team from the American Social Hygiene Association of New York to lecture about social

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<sup>431</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission: Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster, 1927*, 17.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>433</sup> Whayne, *A New Plantation South*, 64; Whayne, "Darker Forces on the Horizon, 314; Dr. Valeria H. Parker to Dr William R. Redden quoted in Daniel, *Deep 'n As It Come*, 170.

hygiene and the consequences of sex and venereal disease, likening it to a levee that starts with a leak and becomes an uncontrollable crevasse.<sup>434</sup>

Pellagra was the most significant health problem confronted by the Red Cross. Due to sharecropping's emphasis on cotton cultivation, many sharecroppers did not raise enough fruit and vegetables that promoted a healthy diet. Prevalent in the Mississippi River Valley, pellagra was a dietary deficiency that manifested itself in the forms of skin rashes and lethargy. It is a result of eating a diet consisting of fatback, molasses, and corn—staples of the impoverished and hungry. The Red Cross discovered that feeding the sufferers pure yeast for several weeks treated pellagra. Although the Red Cross had a remedy for pellagra, they did not know if treating it was within their jurisdiction. Before the Red Cross could deal with the high amounts of pellagra, they needed to decide if it was in some way a result of the flood. Otherwise they were afraid of crossing barriers planters did not want crossed regarding their laborers. The Red Cross could only help the flood victims with issues caused by the flooding. They could not help with problems that stemmed from the plantation system. The Red Cross eventually did treat the pellagra problem after reasoning that if the flood had not destroyed the vegetable gardens, if they even existed at all, then the pellagra problem would not be so substantial. How the Red Cross handled the pellagra situation was not solely governed by what they were and were not authorized to do. They needed to be and were, acutely aware of the dichotomy between the planters and their labor source in the river valley.<sup>435</sup>

Due to the flood, thousands of African Americans worried about their future situations because they did not have labor contracts or land to farm. Conversely, planters were afraid their

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<sup>434</sup> Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come*, 171.

<sup>435</sup> Wayne, "Darker Forces on the Horizon," 315.

labor force would take advantage of the situation and leave the area, thus leaving planters without a workforce and tenants, and where applicable, workers would then be in a breach of contract. Although difficult to prove, sharecroppers and victims of debt peonage made accusations they were held against their will in the refugee camps. By the time of the 1927 flood, there had been three Supreme Court cases and other federal cases dealing with the illegal debt servitude that reduced the victim to a slave. Pete Daniel called debt peonage a “cancer” that “infected the South,” and Douglas Blackmon argues that it was “slavery by another name...during an age of Neoslavery.”<sup>436</sup> Often a group of conspirators worked together to trap an individual into debt peonage. First, there was the owner of a plantation or sawmill who used coerced labor. Second, the constables rounded up the potential laborers. Third, the justice of the peace assisted in creating a situation of debt, and finally, the overseers acted as guards on the plantations.<sup>437</sup> So, when accusations of coercion came out of the refugee camps, people listened.

The influence the planters had on their labor force was, at times very subtle, so much so that the victim often did not know if he was an indebted peon or not and therefore it was difficult to prove in court (and even then, the jury likely would not render a guilty verdict). One of the responsibilities of the Colored Advisory Commission during their relief work in 1927 was to make sure African Americans were not “detained against their will.”<sup>438</sup> While some camps received no severe complaints, others did. The chief complaints from black refugees were “to go

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<sup>436</sup> Zellar, “H.C. Ray and Racial Politics in the African American Extension Service Program in Arkansas, 1915-1929,” 441; Sue Planter for \$31,129.10, *Pine Bluff Weekly Press-Eagle*, February 1, 1910; Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972 new edition 1990), 11; Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 4, 402.

<sup>437</sup> Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, 47.

<sup>438</sup> Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come*, 154; The American National Red Cross, *The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission: Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster, 1927*, 19.

in and out of camp passes were required. Negro inmates complained that whites came and went at will without passes, while colored people were not given similar privileges. There were also complaints relative to rough treatment of colored people and discrimination regarding labor conditions and distribution of food.”<sup>439</sup> While this report from the Commission is reasonably straightforward, it is even more telling that they referred to the black refugees as “inmates.”<sup>440</sup>

The Red Cross continued to assist whites and blacks after they left the refugee camps. The gave rehabilitation aid to 2,297 families in Jefferson County and helped plant 397,267 acres in 1927 and 1928, and throughout all of Arkansas they helped plant 115,621 acres in the state of Arkansas.<sup>441</sup> The agency repaired homes, supplied food, clothing, furniture, feed for animals, seed and replaced sixteen hundred farm implements. Herbert Hoover had lofty expectations for the recovery effort. Hoover recommended the creation of the Arkansas Farm Credit Corporation that sold stocks up to \$1,000,000 in shares of \$100 each. The Arkansas Farm Credit Corporation met with some success as it sold \$676,815 worth of stock. Although the system was established to help all farmers, the large plantations came out the big winners, especially as loans from the Farm Credit Company were not to be “made for the purpose of paying existing obligations,” such as the liens and mortgages sharecroppers were chained with.<sup>442</sup> Conversely, Black farmers, despite the efforts of dedicated African American extension agents, could not overcome the sharecropping system along with, its racism, economic woes, and class-consciousness. As Gary

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<sup>439</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission: Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster, 1927*, 20.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>442</sup> Daniel, *Deep 'n As It Come*, 186; Whyne, “Darker Forces on the Horizon,” 316; Arkansas Farm Credit Company “Arkansas Farm Credit Company: Loan Regulations,” Red Cross, box 742, 224.6511, National Archives.

Zellar argued, “Rural uplift proved no match for the overwhelming poverty found among African American farmers.”<sup>443</sup>

Despite their initial distrust of the Red Cross, the planters gained a sense of security regarding them and outside agencies. In *A New Plantation South*, Jeannie Whayne persuasively argues that the Red Cross’s actions demonstrated to planters that involvement of an outside agency would not disrupt the relationship between planters and sharecroppers. What planters failed to recognize was that although outside agencies such as the Red Cross and county farm agents may not have immediately interfered with the plantation system, they would change it over time.<sup>444</sup> The 1927 Mississippi River flood partially “expos[ed] the unnatural caste system of the South.”<sup>445</sup>

The Flood of 1927 was an enormous impetus for change. Although it was a tragedy for many, some good did result from it. From the destruction, survivors and volunteers rebuilt homes and communities. H.C. Ray of the African American Extension Service Program reported that people rebuilt 351 homes and they repaired 467 more. The fields as well as homes benefited from the African American Extension Service as the crop diversification program witnessed more progress in the year after the flood than in the prior fifteen years. Unfortunately, only a small fraction of black farmers received the needed aid.<sup>446</sup> The aid given to African Americans

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<sup>443</sup> Zellar, “H.C. Ray and Racial Politics in the African American Extension Service Program in Arkansas, 1915-1929,” 445; The American National Red Cross, “Memorandum of Instructions to County Committees for Carrying Out Reconstruction Measures,” Herbert Hoover and Jas. L. Fieser, May 19, 1927, 1, Red Cross, box 224, DR 224.031, National Archives.

<sup>444</sup> Whayne, *A New Plantation South*, 146-147; Whayne, “Darker Forces on the Horizon,” 316-317; Leflar “The Bankers’ Agricultural Revolt of 1919,” 276.

<sup>445</sup> Daniel, *Deep’n As It Come*, 150.

<sup>446</sup> Zellar “H.C. Ray and Racial Politics in the African American Extension Service Program in Arkansas, 1915-1929,” 443-444.

did not cure the cancer of Jim Crow, but addressed the immediate symptoms. To cure the sickness the Colored Advisory Commission that called for the:

Breaking up of the large plantations [therefore] encouraging the ownership of small farm units, and pointing the way to liberate both the white plantation owner and his Negro tenant from the more or less precarious one-crop system which hold both groups in virtual slavery because it is founded upon an unsound and unstable economic principle.<sup>447</sup>

Unfortunately, the Colored Advisory Commission was a lone voice in the wilderness. The flood may have washed away a good deal of soil, but it did not clear away the plantation system. The days of sharecropping were numbered, but even with its demise on the horizon, racism lived on, and the plantation system received a modern makeover.

As many farmers and planters returned back to work after the flood, many of them did so with the help of agriculture extension agents. Initially farmers and planters were cautious of the agents but eventually appreciated the help they offered. Unbeknownst to agriculturalist in the Arkansas River Valley, relationship and power dynamics were changing hand-in-hand with the environment. After the flood of 1927, farmers were no long as dependent on the Planter class. Working with extension offices expanded their agricultural network. Landless farmers rarely possessed the means to climb the agricultural ladder and gain anything resembling economic independence. Although planters and merchants remained a powerful influence, they were not

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<sup>447</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission: Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster, 1927*, 27; Interestingly, on September 23, 1968, Dr. Bruce Lohof, a professor at Heidelberg College in Ohio, wrote to the National Archives seeking any documentation to support his idea that President Hoover had a plan for land reform in the lower southern Mississippi River Valley that “would have given way to a yeoman-farming system wherein each farmer would own the land which he worked.” Dr. Bruce Lohof to Meyer Mathis, September 23, 1968, box 742, 224.651, National Archives. Lohof claims there is a memo from President Hoover to John Barton Payne (Chairman of the Red Cross) in existence that lays out the President’s plan. The National Archives replied to Dr. Lohof informing him there is no such “revolutionary” document in their records. Meyer Mathis to Dr. Bruce A. Lohof, October 4, 1968, box 734, DR 224.08, National Archives.

the only forces vying for the farmer's attention. The agricultural extension service and related agricultural industries, such as the fertilizer industry, sought the favor of the farmer.

The use of fertilizer in the Arkansas River Valley following the flood of 1927 illustrates how new relationships and knowledge changed landscapes and lives. Fertilizer was often used as a vehicle for transforming not only soil, but also in altering economic and social relationships between poor farmers, planters, and the federal government throughout the Arkansas River Valley. The ecology of the soil and the use of fertilizers highlights aspects of the Southern farmer's story throughout the 1920s, but soil use must be put into the context of culture and history to better understand the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Arkansas River Valley. Soil throughout the Arkansas River Valley was productive and provided many agricultural opportunities, but natural resources and geography alone cannot explain how a given landscape became a parcel of land farmed by a sharecropper whose time and resources were stretched to capacity—culture, economics, and history can explain that transformation.<sup>448</sup>

A Jefferson County agricultural extension agent declared that “The Farmer who doesn't take time to think when he is applying the fertilizer will probably have plenty of time to think when harvest days come. It is best to consult your county agent, for he is in a better position to help you than anyone else.”<sup>449</sup> For decades, agricultural extension agents in Arkansas attempted to teach farmers the importance of fertilized soil.<sup>450</sup> As the agents knew well, when soil functions

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<sup>448</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 55.

<sup>449</sup> Says Fertilizer Must Be Adapted to Soil, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 1, 1927.

<sup>450</sup> For example, one pound of humus can hold twelve pounds of water. De F. Hungerford, “Arkansas Soils Need Humus,” University of University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Records (hereafter cited as UUACESR), 1939, MC 1145, Box 3, Printed Ephemera, University of Arkansas Special Collections, Fayetteville, Arkansas. Healthy soil aids in providing clean air and water, plentiful crops and forests, quality rangeland and diverse wildlife. Soil provides five essential functions that help keep ecosystems functioning. The first is

were compromised, the effects can be severe and far-reaching. For a good example a farmer had to look no further than to sharecropping's focus on cotton as it degraded the soil quality, altered the environment, and impacted the cotton. Thus, by lauding the positive effects of fertilizer on the soil and crops and teaching fertilization methods, the agricultural extension agents overcame the distrust of "outsiders" and altered relationships between local planters and farmers with the Federal government.

Although the plantation system survived the flood and continued to exploit people and the land sharecroppers had a better chance at increasing their quality of life.. Often and despite the good intentions of extension agents (white and black), many could not make drastic changes to the Southern agricultural system. Planters were too powerful.<sup>451</sup> Agriculture agents walked a fine line and did not go so far as ending plantation agriculture, instead they suggested that "The old saying 'do not put all your eggs in one basket' should be emphasized in developing a sound program... [because] a well-balanced program...will assure income throughout the year and will

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regulating water. Soil helps guide runoff from rain, snowmelt, and irrigation. In doing so, water and dissolved solutes flow over and/or through the soil. The second function is sustaining plant and animal life. Productivity and diversity of living things depends on the soil. Third, soil filters out potential pollutants. Within the soil are a host of mineral and microbes that filter, buffer, degrade, immobilize, and detoxify organic and inorganic materials. Fourth, soil cycles store and transform nutrients such as carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus. The final function of soil is that of a supporting structure. Soil provides the base for erecting stable buildings for support. U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Soil Quality Concepts," Natural Resource Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture <http://soils.usda.gov/sqi/concepts/concepts.html> (accessed June 9, 2010).

<sup>451</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission: Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster, 1927* (Washington D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1929), 27.



protect the individual against the dangers of a one crop system, which has been a curse to the South for many, many years.”<sup>452</sup>

Extension agents, red cross volunteers, or the Corps of Engineers could not solve all of agriculture’s problems in the river valley. Money was always an issue. Vital ingredients inherent in the “curse” of the South involved credit, merchants, and planters. Sharecroppers who needed things such as fertilizer and wanted to follow the advice of the county agriculture agent needed credit to do so. W. M. Jardine’s 1927 report of the Secretary of Agriculture softly addressed this issue. “The rich alluvial lands of the lower Mississippi and its tributaries, if protected from flood danger, have a potential value far beyond the obligations now standing against them.”<sup>453</sup> Jardine and others believed the soil could and would be productive again and that once it was everyone would benefit from it. The optimism of a farmer is a fascinating phenomenon.

Tait Butler (editor of *The Progressive Farmer*) declared, “The more we learn about...soil fertility, the more rapidly will soil fertility be increased and the more abundantly will fertilizers be used.”<sup>454</sup> Butler took a bottom-up approach to fertilizer use. He was convinced that more attention needed to be given to the “inferior economic condition of the farmer.”<sup>455</sup> If the economic condition of the farmer is “ignored” then “we shall fail to understand his attitude toward his soil and shall make slow progress in our effort to encourage him in a more intelligent conservation of soil fertility.”<sup>456</sup> Butler argued that a focus on farm economics, farm peasantry,

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<sup>452</sup> Arkansas Agricultural Extension Service, “Arkansas County Agriculture Plan,” 1927, UUACESR, MC 1145, Box 2, Arkansas County, University of Arkansas Special Collections, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Tait Butler, “Soil Fertility a Nation’s Greatest Asset,” in *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Convention of the National Fertilizer Association* (The Association, 1928), 34.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

and the need for fertilizer education would help poor farmers and result in a trickle up effect that would increase profits in the agriculture industry. Scientific farming, economics, race, and class whipped farmers around in a vortex of an agricultural storm. Swirling around them were markets, merchants, bankers, and government agencies attempting to push their agendas on them, while in the middle of it all was the farmer, his crop, and the land upon which it was grown. One of the most influential forces in that emerged from the storm was the U.S. Department of Agriculture in cooperation with Arkansas' agricultural college, the University of Arkansas.

Alva Agee, a department head of the Department of the Agricultural Extension, explained that the agricultural extension operated from the “The viewpoint...of the practical man who wants cash compensation for the intelligent care he gives to his land.”<sup>457</sup> He continues, “The farming that leads into debt, and not in the opposite direction, is poor farming, no matter how well the soil may prosper under such treatment. The maintenance and increase of soil fertility go hand in hand with permanent income for the owner when the science that relates to farming is rightly used.”<sup>458</sup> Agee's comments highlight a disconnect that existed between the Department of Agriculture's Extension Service and thousands of farmers throughout the Arkansas River Valley and the South. Who are the “practical man” and the “owner?” Are they the same? Extension agents focused more on “successful” farmers, and as Agee admits, farm owners.<sup>459</sup> Although many large farmers and plantation owners reaped the benefits of agricultural extension agents' efforts, decades of work was done to help smaller farmers, even if small farmers had to demand

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<sup>457</sup> Alva Agee, *Crops and Method for Soil Improvement* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1921), 1.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Whyne, *A New Plantation South*, 144.

to be heard and helped. If agricultural agents were to be successful, they had an uphill climb in a flat river valley. Jim Crow met the department of agriculture head-on in a struggle to exert the most influence in the Arkansas River Valley in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Morrill Act of 1862 established land-grant universities, such as the University of Arkansas, whose goals included improving agriculture within the state. Additionally, the Morrill Act provided land-grant universities with a portion of the proceeds that resulted from the sale of public lands. In 1887, the Hatch Act provided funding for agricultural experiment stations at each land-grant institution. By 1900, land-grant institutions developed specialized faculties that concentrated on agronomy, agricultural chemistry (including fertilization), and animal husbandry. As programs continued to expand, many colleges established separate experiment stations and extension departments away from the land-grant institutions.<sup>460</sup> It was these extension departments and their agents that worked with local farmers to increase yields and overall living conditions.

Extension services seized advantage of a growing agricultural movement in the United States in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Smith-Lever Act created the Agricultural Extension Cooperatives in 1914, which allowed the government to disseminate agricultural knowledge from the land-grant institution. The Smith-Lever Act created a “partnership” between the land-grant college and the United States Department of Agriculture to cooperate and “aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture.”<sup>461</sup> Thus, the goals of “developing practical applications of research

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<sup>460</sup> Lewis B. Nelson, *History of the U.S. Fertilizer Industry* (Muscle Shoals, Alabama: Tennessee Valley Authority, 1990), 130-131.

<sup>461</sup> United States Congress, Smith-Lever Act of May 8, 1914, ch. 79, 38 Stat. 372, 7 U.S.C. 341 et seq. Section One.

knowledge” and “giving instruction and practical demonstrations of existing or improved practices or technologies in agriculture” were at the heart of agricultural extension work.<sup>462</sup> The Act also created a system of county agricultural agents so that by 1917, 4,100 people were extension employees and 1,434 counties had agricultural agents.<sup>463</sup> As the number of extension agents on the ground increased, so did their ability to educate farmers on the most efficient farming methods and uses of fertilizer. Soil productivity and fertilizer use were useful mechanisms extension agents throughout the river valley used to interact more with farmers, thus giving the farmer additional resources that diminished the power of landlords or merchants.

Despite their growth, the agricultural extension offices faced difficulties in reaching out to farmers. The history of agriculture extension work is laden with suspicion, “dislike,” and “contempt” on behalf of the farmers concerning agricultural extension agents.<sup>464</sup> Part of the dull outlook of county agents was due to money concerns. Many farmers implemented what the county agents taught them, yet their income decreased. Cooperatives sponsored by the Federal Farm Board, along with county agents, failed to adequately handle the marketing-surplus problem that farmers faced during the 1920s.<sup>465</sup> Due to a post-war agriculture depression, support for county agents and farm-bureau organizations dried up, in part because of the inability of farmers to understand why, despite better agricultural yields through the use of scientific farming methods including the use of fertilizer, the “economic system seemed to punish the

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<sup>462</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/qlinks/extension.html> (Accessed May 4, 2011).

<sup>463</sup> Nelson, *History of the U.S. Fertilizer Industry*, 135.

<sup>464</sup> Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 29.

<sup>465</sup> It was during this period that the extension service expanded the most rapidly in Arkansas.

farmer.”<sup>466</sup> Not only did the perception of county agents diminish, but their financial support was also in jeopardy as quorum courts throughout the Arkansas River Valley considered removing county agents. Ultimately, by the end of the 1920s, the naysayers lost out to the supporters of county agents, but not after much debate and a campaign by county agent supporters, namely newspaper editors throughout Arkansas.

The *Siftings Herald* in south central Arkansas wrote, “Recently there has been agitated a move to abolish temporarily at least, the offices of agricultural agent and demonstration agent...[s]omebody has suggested that it would be a good move of retrenchment especially during ‘hard times.’”<sup>467</sup> The *Siftings Herald* continued, “We believe one of the worst things that could happen...would be the suspension of farm extension work...We also believe the U.S. Department of Agriculture is one of the best, if not the most helpful agencies of the entire federal machinery,” and with a final plea, “why in the name of sanity, cut loose from the most practical aid to agricultural progress in a county that is backward in this respect.”<sup>468</sup> Especially after the 1927 flood, perceptions began to change. Suspicion and doubt were replaced by many farmers who exclaimed that they were “‘sold’ on extension work.”<sup>469</sup>

The change in the perception of county agents by locals is illustrated throughout the Arkansas River Valley in places such as Jefferson County whose 34 Justices of the Peace on the county’s quorum court, who represented every township in the county, voted to appropriate

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<sup>466</sup> Gladys Baker, *The County Agent* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), 57.

<sup>467</sup> Arkansas Agricultural Extension Service, “What the State Press Says: About the Agricultural Extension Service of the University of Arkansas College of Agriculture,” 16, UACESR, MC 1145, Box 3, Printed Ephemera, University of Arkansas Special Collections, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

\$13,500 (about \$197,906.28 in 2018) for the continuation of extension work in the county. They were especially pleased in the farm agents W.D. Ezell and Lloyd A. Donahue, home demonstration agent Vivian Hawkins, and the African American home demonstration and farm agent, Dorothea Smith and S.J. Phillips, who helped with flood recovery.<sup>470</sup>

The vote of confidence many quorum courts gave their county agents by voting to fund their continued services was reassuring to many Arkansans. The editor of the *Arkansas Farmer* put it succinctly, “It is certainly encouraging for farming to, not in spite of the rather squally times [of] our quorum courts, have voted to continue demonstration work in practically every county.”<sup>471</sup> Despite the support given to county agents, in most cases, their assistance depended on skin color. Black farmers’ agents fought ecological hardships in tandem with racism and poor economic conditions. Additionally, Black county agents labored under the same circumstances as black farmers, and they were also burdened by the bureaucratic structure in which they worked. Often, these struggles went unacknowledged by whites just as other aspects of the African American community were “naturally veiled and half articulate.”<sup>472</sup>

The flood of 1927 unveiled and exposed the conditions of sharecroppers and tenants in the South, especially among African Americans who were overly represented in relief camps where they continued to witness exploitation at the landlord’s hands, or as they have more accurately

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Jeannie Whayne, “‘I Have Been Through Fire’: Black Agricultural Extension Agents and the Politics of Negotiation” in *African American Life in the Rural South 1900-1950*, ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 152-153,158; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997), 189.

been described, “laborlords.”<sup>473</sup> County extension agents were needed if the Colored Advisory Commission was to improve the lives of African Americans as they had planned. Extension agents were vital because they were the ones who operated at the ground level and distributed aid and knowledge throughout the county.<sup>474</sup>

As the 1920s transitioned into the 1930s, county agents became very familiar with the homes and lands of struggling farmers and sometimes “devoted [their] entire time for weeks”.<sup>475</sup> Some farms required more attention than a week to improve. The effects of ecological upheaval were often long-lasting. Once the waters receded that did not mean that farmers’ troubles were over. Tom Newton’s plantation was “representative of a number of plantations” in the Arkansas River Valley that suffered from flooding.<sup>476</sup> The river inundated hundreds of acres of Newton’s land. Forty acres were washed away into the river, 100 acres eroded and formed into holes and gullies, and the flood covered an additional 450 acres with sand ranging in depth from 6 to 18 inches. Additionally, the loss of equipment, buildings, and livestock crippled the plantation’s operations. Despite these setbacks, agriculture agents contended that it was “entirely feasible and practical” to make the land arable.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Book, 1986), 18; Whayne, *A New Plantation South*, 148; Daniel, *Deep ’n As It Come*, 105.

<sup>474</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission: Mississippi Flood Disaster, 1927*, 17.

<sup>475</sup> Kathryn B. Moroe, Disaster Relief Representative, American Red Cross to Walter Wesselius, Reconstruction Officer, American Red Cross, July 27, 1927, “Narrative Report of County Extension Workers, Jefferson County, Arkansas,” December 1, 1926 to October 1, 1927. Fayetteville, AR, University of Arkansas Library, Microfilm.

<sup>476</sup> Pete Daniel, *Deep ’n As It Come*, 130.

<sup>477</sup> Following the flood, affected soils lacked necessary nutrients. Agricultural Extension Agents suggested repairing the soil with fertilizers. Fertilizers are made from phosphorus, potassium, and sulfur but only after they are mined from natural deposits and processed. Additionally, micronutrients are mined and are also retrieved as byproducts from various manufacturing operations. The Agricultural Extension Service in Arkansas attempted to explain

Sometimes floods in the river valley improved soil quality as silt deposits left from the floods enriched soil. D. J. Burleson, an extension agronomist at the University of Arkansas, explained “The soil deposits left on the land after the water has receded from the overflowed sections...have a considerable effect on the soil texture, the fertility, and even on insects and weeds.<sup>478</sup> The reason for the increase in soil fertility is due to slower moving waters in overflowed areas carrying “clay soil deposits made up of finely pulverized soil particles which are the best part of the soils which have washed in the streams from cultivated fields.” One agent in 1927 aided 32 Arkansas communities’ soil projects and helped 97 farms apply 287 tons of fertilizer for the year.<sup>479</sup>

The flood of 1927 upset the unequal balance of Power in the Arkansas River Valley. Planters and merchants now had to account for outside agencies such as the Red Cross, the Department of Agriculture, and the Corps of Engineers. As farmers continued to be receptive towards county agents and take their advice, the Cooperative Extension Service gained more power and clout, not enough to drastically alter the plantation system, but it was a start. Many of the farmers who received assistance from county agents and other agencies were planters. In many ways they gained the most from government programs. Nevertheless for the first time,

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that “the fertilization of cotton by the Agricultural Extension Service method is profitable,” especially after the rearrangement of landscapes and soils following the 1927 flood. Nelson, *History of the U.S. Fertilizer Industry*, vii-viii; Arkansas Agricultural Extension Service, “Area Programs: Arkansas River Valley Area,” UACESR, MC 1145, Box 3, Printed Ephemera, University of Arkansas Special Collections, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Pete Daniel, *Deep ’n As It Come*, 132.

<sup>478</sup> Overflows to Benefit Soil In Arkansas, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 1, 1927.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.; Of all the projects sponsored by the county extension agents, soil projects were the most popular in 1927. E. P. Dargan, “Narrative Report of County Extension Workers, Jefferson County, Arkansas.” September 1, 1926 to September 22, 1927. Fayetteville, AR, University of Arkansas Library, Microfilm.



smaller farmers, white and black, had an outlet they could approach for help in surviving the system (even if it was ever so slight). County agents showed farmers a different way to do things. They demonstrated that changes could be made to agriculture, society, and culture in the river valley. In some senses the watery flood was a mighty deluge that altered the landscape, in another, it was an equally powerful trickle that created and weakened a crack in the distribution of power. The flood of 1927 was a watershed mark that witnessed damage and destruction to lives, farms, and the landscape, but it also saw a federal response to flooding unlike anything before it.

## Chapter Five

### Arkansas Loves the Army to the Corps

Well the rails are washed out north of town, we gotta head for higher ground, we can't come back till the water goes down, five feet high and risin', well, it's five feet high and risin'

-Johnny Cash, "Five Feet High and Rising"

Arkansas wanted the power to control the Arkansas River on her terms. Unfortunately for the state, it lacked the resources and money to do much about it, hence the desperation following the flood of 1927. Arkansas could not take care of herself financially in the wake of such a devastating disaster. Many people watched as the Arkansas River washed their livelihoods away down the river to the ocean in 1927. If it had not happened to them personally, it probably happened to someone they knew, and even if they did not know someone directly affected by the flood, chances were good that they heard about it from gossip in the streets, on the wireless, or in the newspaper. In addition to the worries stemming from the most recent natural disaster, an oppressive society, and depressive economy, many Arkansans were fearful. The question on their minds was not if another flood would pound them, but when, because another flood could quickly occur again. Much of the state was financially limping along as it was with the help of the Red Cross. Natural disasters, coupled with a volatile economic situation, forced Arkansans to learn a hard lesson: let strangers help. The Corps of Engineers had been active in Arkansas for several decades by the 1930s, and the Red Cross had been a significant presence following the flood of 1927. Additionally agriculture extension agents had begun to win over communities and increase their influence. Arkansans learned that if they shared some control of the Arkansas River with businesses, the Corps, and special interest groups, the power they derived from the river would be increased.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the population grew, and many people moved into urban areas along the river. Arkansas' three largest cities (and many others) were on the Arkansas River. The population increases correlated with a rise in damage and death due to flooding. People put themselves in harm's way. Human manipulation of the landscape along the river affected the river's cycle of flooding and depositing silt in the river making process. As the relationship between Arkansans, the physical environment, and the federal government evolved, Arkansans attempted to benefit from these changing forces as much as possible, especially when it came to the Arkansas River. Conditions by the 1930s, had changed, no longer would people have to beg the Corps of Engineers to become involved in flood protection. The Corps of Engineers was also experiencing change. Control over the river that for so long eluded just about everyone who ever tried to master it was beginning to seem possible. Despite a Great Depression, Jim Crow, and a World War, Arkansas found a way to catch the rising tide of federal largess.

Arkansas watched Tennessee closely as that state participated in one of the earliest assistance programs from the federal government in the form of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The creation of the TVA in 1933 was divisive. Primarily, the TVA sought to develop the physical environment in the Tennessee River Valley, but the program also wanted to address the "economic and social well-being" of the region.<sup>480</sup> In general Arkansans and detractors of the TVA, were fearful that the regional authority of the TVA would usurp state and local

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<sup>480</sup> Tennessee Valley Authority Act of 1933, § 22; Roscoe C. Martin, "The Tennessee Valley Authority: A Study in Federal Control," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 22 no. 3 (Summer, 1957): 345.

governments.<sup>481</sup> When faced with the possibility of an Arkansas Valley Authority being created, Arkansas preferred to continue their working relationship with the United States Army Corps of Engineers.

For decades, several government agencies resisted getting involved with flood control but as flooding became a bigger threat to society, the federal government began to understand that flood control was too “large and complex” for local and state governments to handle on their own.<sup>482</sup> Additionally, many of the massive floods affected several states at once and the federal government realized that often interstate cooperation was insufficient to address the problems. Although the federal government’s involvement was increasing, they did not want to shoulder the full responsibility for flood control. The Flood Control Act of 1928 focused on the Mississippi alluvial valley and tributaries such as the Arkansas River and called for local interests to cover one third of the project’s cost as well as provide the Corps right-of-way for maintenance and operation. Throughout the latter half of the 1920s, Congress instituted “308 surveys”. These surveys required the Chief of Engineers to estimate the extent and price of projects. Throughout the 1930s, public work programs teamed up the Corps of Engineers to engage in projects that manipulated the physical environment such as building roads, parks, dams, and reservoirs. In 1933, the Arkansas Basin Committee, a committee of the Public Works Administration, proposed river improvements to the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works and argued that the projects were “of local and national benefit.”<sup>483</sup> The Arkansas

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<sup>481</sup> Joseph M. Ray, “American Government and Politics: The Influence of the Tennessee Valley Authority on Government in the South,” *The American Political Science Review* 43 no. 5 (October, 1949): 922.

<sup>482</sup> Luna B. Leopold and Thomas Maddock, Jr., *The Flood Control Controversy: Big Dams, Little Dams, and Land Management* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1954), 98.

<sup>483</sup> Arkansas Basin Committee, “Request for Approval of the Arkansas Basin Flood Protection Project Located on the Arkansas River and Its Tributaries in the States of Oklahoma,

Basin Committee was the missing link that those impacted by flooding on the Arkansas River had needed for decades. N. R. Graham, from Oklahoma and chair of the Committee, and the Arkansas Basin Committee created a conduit that allowed people to access the government and its largess. The Arkansas Basin Committee lobbied the federal government to provide “levees and reservoirs for flood control” on the Arkansas River.<sup>484</sup>

By 1936, the public began to see flood control as a government responsibility. Flood control officially became a federal responsibility with the Flood Control Act of 1936, which authorized federal involvement in flood control across the nation. The 1936 Act explicitly states that:

Flood control on navigable waters or their tributaries is a proper activity of the Federal government in cooperation with States,...and localities thereof; [and] that the federal government should improve or participate in the improvement of navigable waters... for flood control purposes if the benefits to whomsoever they may accrue are in excess of estimated costs, and if the lives and social security of people are otherwise adversely affected.<sup>485</sup>

Many Arkansans quickly and whole-heartedly supported the 1936 Act.

By the time of the Flood Control Act of 1936 the Corps of Engineers had undergone a change in flood control ideology. Building levees fell out of favor, and the building of dams and reservoirs became the preferred choice. This shift in thinking was a significant event in the history of the Arkansas River as the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System is the progeny of the new mindset that swept over the Corps in the 1930s. The year after the flood of 1927, Herbert Hoover was elected president. Hoover, when he was head of the 1927 flood relief

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Kansas, Arkansas, Colorado, and New Mexico,” 1933, Wilburn Cartwright Collection, Box 14, File 31, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> The Flood Control Act of 1936, Declaration of Policy of 1936 Act, 33 US Code §701a.

expedition, witnessed the troubles levee systems had on large rivers when confronted with too much water. Therefore, Hoover believed that upstream reservoirs on tributary streams were the solution to the flooding problem on major rivers. Conversely, Chief of Engineers Major Jadwin dismissed reservoirs as a solution and butted heads with Hoover over other river improvements the president preferred.<sup>486</sup>

Soon after becoming president, Hoover replaced Jadwin with Major General Lytle Brown who would hold his position from 1929 to 1933. Brown, like the president, believed upstream reservoirs were the better option for flood control. During Brown's tenure, the reservoir ideology became so prevalent that by the time he was replaced, it had become Corps dogma.<sup>487</sup> The flood of 1927 combined with the appointment of Major General Lytle Brown as Chief of Engineers and a flurry of Congressional legislation meant that the Corps had much work to do. The Flood Control Act of 1936 reiterated the need for a federal role in flood control. Building upon the Flood Control Acts of 1917 and 1928, the 1936 version of the Flood Control Act "recognized that destructive floods upon the rivers of the United States...constitute a menace to national welfare" and therefore it was "in the general welfare" of the United States that the "Federal government should improve or participate in...flood-control purposes."<sup>488</sup> Before the 1936 Act, the Corps of Engineers participated in flood control measures by justifying it upon the basis of facilitating navigation. The 1936 Flood Control Act, for the first time, declared that flood control was a proper federal endeavor. Additionally, in 1936 federal legislators determined that local

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<sup>486</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 50.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency, "History of Levees," [https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1463585486484-d22943de4883b61a6ede15aa57a78a7f/History\\_of\\_Levees\\_0512\\_508.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1463585486484-d22943de4883b61a6ede15aa57a78a7f/History_of_Levees_0512_508.pdf) (accessed August 28, 2017); Flood Control Act of 1936, Declaration of Policy, 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess. (June 22, 1936), 1570- 1573.

interests should share in the cost of flood control. Unfortunately, the United States was struggling through a Great Depression at this time. Money was scarce, and the allocation of federal funds was contentious, especially money for an Arkansas River Basin development project that some argued did not affect enough people to justify the cost.<sup>489</sup> Because of the economic hardships, local authorities could not contribute much for channel and levee projects. Therefore, only the federal government was responsible for flood control storage in reservoirs.

By the end of 1936, Secretary of War, Harry Woodring, announced that because of the large amount of flood control work the Corps was engaged in, the government would resurrect the Little Rock District. Within several months the Little Rock District was occupied with building roughly a quarter of the nation's ongoing projects regarding flood control. Unfortunately for some, The Flood Act of 1936 had not come quick enough to prevent flooding. Within several months of the 1936 Act's passage a devastating flood doused the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Water backed up into the Arkansas River and flooded the valley. Once again the Red Cross and National Guard swooped in to assist with relief. The flood of 1937 was a breaking point because in its wake the president actively supported giving the Corps the sufficient funding they needed to combat and prevent flooding. Furthermore, in 1938 Roosevelt allowed the Corps to oversee all WPA construction projects. Through the 1938 the Flood Control Act (building upon the 1937 Act) Congress increased the workload of the Little Rock District, thus saddling them with 62 projects while also tasking them with creating the associated studies and reports.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Alex Wilson to Elmer Thomas, October 2, 1933, Elmer Thomas Collection, Box 1 File 60, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok.

<sup>490</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 55.

The Corps' Little Rock District was struggling to keep up with demands in 1940 as their workload continued to increase. Despite being overburdened with several dams and reservoir projects underway, Congress approved the Secretary of War to move some defense construction projects to the Corps of Engineers, creating an even more considerable burden for the Corps.<sup>491</sup> With tensions rising in Europe, U.S. leaders began to revise the nation's military preparedness plan in 1936. Two years later, one of President Roosevelt's advisers suggested that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) increase their role in the building connected with rearming and preparing the country for a possible war. The Corps attempted to squeeze the WPA out of participation in construction projects by having the Quartermaster Corps call attention to the question of who controlled emergency projects. Once the Corps had raised their banner, supporters came to their aid attempting to place military construction under the purview of the Corps. With 1938 winding down, President Franklin Roosevelt tentatively supported allocating all military construction to the Corps if Congress would support it without endangering any of the president's other programs. Despite the shaky well-wishes of the president, the Corps and Congress needed time to put their plan into action. Roosevelt supported the Corps' desires with the stipulation that the WPA would perform some work under the Corps' watchful eye regarding projects tied to preparedness and rearmament. This stipulation was not a foreign concept to the Corps. With the Flood Control Act of 1936, the WPA assisted with and funded flood control measures led by the Corps.<sup>492</sup>

Despite their military duties, the Little Rock District in 1940 was still working on four upstream dam and reservoir developments: Nimrod, Blue Mountain, Clearwater, and Norfolk.

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 53, 56-57.



The Nimrod and Blue Mountain projects originated from plans developed by the Memphis district in 1937 as a flood control measure on the Arkansas River. The completion of the Nimrod dam resulted in the formation of the Nimrod Lake behind the dam. It was the first Corps lake built in Arkansas.<sup>493</sup>

Throughout 1940 and 1941 the Corps completed each task with increased efficiency inspiring some influential decision makers to call on the Corps to do even more. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson enquired after Congress in September 1941 for authority to make all military construction, maintenance, and repair of Army structures the duty of the Corps of Engineers. Lieutenant General Julian L. Schley of the Corps was worried that such a move was not right for the Corps. He believed that too many public projects would hinder the Corp from fulfilling its military role with the impending entrance into the raging war in Europe. Schley spearheaded an amendment to the legislation resulting in the Quartermaster Corps retaining its duty of upkeep on Army facilities. Towards the end of the next month, Lieutenant General Eugene Reybold replaced General Schley as Chief of Engineers and Congress, per Schley's wishes, passed the amended bill. President Roosevelt signed the bill into law on December 1, 1941, less than a week before the most infamous day in America's history.<sup>494</sup> Although the country would soon be mired in a world war, mother nature would take no notice and did as she pleased with the Arkansas River.

Residents of the Arkansas River Valley who did not join the battle overseas found themselves fighting against flooding at home. In 1939, Congress called upon the Corps to revisit the 1932 comprehensive Arkansas River basin report regarding sections of the Arkansas River in

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., 61.

Arkansas and Oklahoma. The Corps determined the feasibility of using the river for hydroelectric generation based upon the 1932 study. While undertaking Congress' request, the Corps took advantage of the situation and simultaneously managed a feasibility study for a new multipurpose improvement project focused on the Arkansas River and its tributaries. Engineer Reybold created the Arkansas River Survey Board to carry out the study. The newly created board included the Division Engineer (who also chaired the committee), the Little Rock District Engineer, the Tulsa District Engineer, and a civilian employee of the Southwestern Division. Although they had other projects that focused on the war effort, the board created a multipurpose plan for the Arkansas River basin. As the war effort eventually ended, the importance of the board's multipurpose design for the river would become evident.<sup>495</sup>

A series of floods in the first half of the 1940s destroyed millions of dollars worth of property. Floods in 1943, 1944, and 1945 were especially disastrous. The May flooding in June 1943 was one of the worst floods in the lower Arkansas River's history. Cities up and down the Arkansas River succumbed quickly to rising flood waters. Fort Smith, for example, buckled under the pressure of the river as it released water at a rate of 850,000 cubic feet per second resulting in a river that was a terrifying forty-one feet above flood stage. The Corps engaged over 19,000 troops and hundreds of German and Italian prisoners of war from camps in the surrounding area to combat the flooding.<sup>496</sup>

The flood of 1943 was particularly devastating. At the beginning of the year, a colossal mass of dense cold polar air moved southward from western Canada which then rested over the

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>496</sup> Lary M. Dilsaver and Craig E. Colten, eds., *The American Environment: Interpretations of Past Geographies* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1992), 185; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 63.

northwestern United States ranging from the central Great Plains to the upper Mississippi valley. Meanwhile, a warm air mass traveled up from the tropics south of the United States and collided with the cold air mass along a ridge stretching from the Michigan border to the Texas border. As the two fronts smashed into each other, the warm tropical air slid up over the cold, dense air. The warm air that flowed over the cold air was cooled, causing condensation, and after more than two weeks of mixing and mingling the clouds burst apart. The rain fell hardest in a thin swath of land from central Indiana and Illinois southwest into the center of Oklahoma. Parts of Oklahoma received 29.90 inches of rain, considerably higher than the usual 10 to 20 inches, which caused flooding.<sup>497</sup>

On May 7, 1943, as the sun set along the Arkansas River in Arkansas shortly after 8 p.m. on May 7, 1943, few people were concerned about rain. It had not rained much recently, and all month rain had only fallen in trace amounts. Many people failed to grasp the severity of the oncoming storm system moving towards the River Valley. Why would anybody be concerned? Rainfall totals were down 5.51 inches from what they were several months ago, and the Arkansas River was forecasted to fall above Little Rock, not change at Little Rock, and reach 23 feet at Pine Bluff. That spring the River Valley was warming up on its way to summer with high temperatures hitting the low eighties.<sup>498</sup> The warm temperatures of a maritime tropical air mass coming out of the Gulf of Mexico were about to collide with the cold winds of a continental polar air mass blowing out of the north. By May 8 a front had formed with rain behind it from

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<sup>497</sup> Hugh Park, "The Arkansas River Floods of 1943," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 2 no. 3 (September 1943): 205.

<sup>498</sup> The Weather, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 9, 1943; The Weather, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 10, 1943; National Centers for Environmental Information, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Record of Climatological Observations, May 1943 for Greenwood, Fort Smith, Little Rock Airport Adams Field, and Pine Bluff Arkansas," <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cdo-web> (Accessed September 16, 2017).

Buffalo, New York down across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois and ending in Springfield, Missouri. Additionally, rain fell from Fort Smith, Arkansas across southeast Oklahoma stopping at the Texas border.<sup>499</sup>

The rains that fell were, generally, welcomed in areas along the Arkansas River from Tulsa on down and at worst seen as a minor occurrence. The Fort Smith newspaper reported on May 9, 1943, of a storm that had caused “slight damage” but other than that there was no worry or foreboding found in the paper.<sup>500</sup> Farmers in Tulsa were “elated by [the] rain” referring to the precipitation as a “Life-Saver.”<sup>501</sup> On May 10, 1943, a Little Rock paper ran a mostly positive weather report. The previous day’s rain “greatly aided” Pulaski county’s crops. Although the rain that fell on Pulaski county was not exceptional, the County Extension Agent Stanley D. Carpenter hailed it as just what the county’s crops needed. The rain he explained was “sufficient moisture...to bring up crops now in the ground and to permit completion of planting.”<sup>502</sup> By early May, many farmers had not planted their crops because they were waiting for the rain to break down and decompose the vetch that covered their fields.<sup>503</sup>

*Vicia villosa* Roth, or hairy vetch, is a vine producing active winter legume. It thrives under colder temperatures and in loamy soil, but can also grow in sandy or clay soils. Additionally, vetch is only slightly sensitive to soil acidity. The plant produces a shallow root system with stems that grow 2 to 5 feet long and perpendicular to the stem. Vetch, in its early stages, produce leaves and stems covered with a soft woolly fuzz. This hairy plant protects the

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<sup>499</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Central Library Data Imaging Project, “U.S. Daily Weather Maps, May 8, 1943,” [https://www.lib.noaa.gov/collections/imgdocmaps/daily\\_weather\\_maps.html](https://www.lib.noaa.gov/collections/imgdocmaps/daily_weather_maps.html) (accessed September 16, 2017).

<sup>500</sup> Slight Damage Reported After Storm Here, *Southwest Times*, May 9, 1943.

<sup>501</sup> Farmers Elated by Rain; Life-Saver to Oat Crop, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 8, 1943.

<sup>502</sup> County Crops Greatly Aided By Rainfall, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 10, 1943.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

ground like a cover before the planting of corn, cotton, rice, tomatoes, and other vegetables. It is useful in situations that use no-till corn rotations and as a method of fixing the nitrogen levels in depleted soil. Furthermore, vetch performs well in rotations with conventional and no-till planted row crops. Farmers use vetch in rotation by planting in the fall and, during the following spring, it is killed mechanically or chemically 2 to 3 weeks before planting. Often the row-crop is seeded into the cover crop. As the cover crop dies and decomposes it provides nitrogen for the new crop.<sup>504</sup>

The rains in Pulaski County were beneficial to the area's food, feed, and cotton crops. Additionally, the cloudy weather aided in the absorption of moisture into the soil. Stanley Carpenter now believed that enough rain had fallen to grow the crops already planted and he thought it would also allow for completion of planting. Many people in the county feared that the oat crop would fail due to insufficient rain. And the oat crop did. However, despite the loss of the oat crop, rains around the state saved the strawberry crop in central, western, and northwestern Arkansas.<sup>505</sup>

Despite all the rain, agriculture in Pulaski County got better as time went on, but other locations were watching and waiting for certain doom. Despite the Weather Bureau warning of a flood crest reaching 37 to 38 feet on the Arkansas River at Fort Smith, initially, citizens of the town were somewhat pleased with the rainfall. Owners of victory gardens in the area were happy to see the drought broken and their plants receive the nourishment needed to survive. In smaller

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<sup>504</sup> United States Department of Agriculture and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, "Hairy Vetch," [https://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs\\_vivi.pdf](https://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_vivi.pdf) (accessed September 18, 2017).

<sup>505</sup> In addition to oat farmer the recent storms did not result in happy endings for everyone. Three carloads of wheat and corn were lost due to fire caused by lightning and four transformers were blown by lightning strikes resulting in the loss of electric service. County Crops Greatly Aided by Rainfall, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 10, 1943.

print, the paper fretted about the prediction of the Weather Bureau. It was worrisome because the record flood crests for Fort Smith was 38 feet in 1833 and, in 1941 floods reached a 37.3-foot crest leaving the area awash in loss and destruction. Trouble was rushing in. The main bed of the Arkansas River in Kansas and Oklahoma and tributaries were swelling and dumping their excesses into the Arkansas River as it rolled towards Arkansas along its path to the Mississippi with a watery fury. Fort Smith only had a few days to prepare for the deluge about to descend upon them while other cities along the river had slightly longer to prepare.<sup>506</sup>

Tulsa's inhabitants, relative to other places along the river, were not worried about the heavy rain. Although the floods "disrupt[ed] highway travel," Tulsa expected "no danger."<sup>507</sup> Many in the area felt secure knowing the Corps was "watching the situation closely."<sup>508</sup> After all, there had only been one casualty—Arlene Cupps who had been struck by lightning and suffered burns on one palm of her hand and one sole of a foot.<sup>509</sup> Additionally, people fell into a false sense of security as they put their faith in man's ability to tame the river (the Grand River dam, many area residents believed), would hold and the army engineers that operated it would be able to overcome nature's fury. As news of swelling creeks and rivers that fed into the Arkansas River poured throughout the area, residents felt that the surrounding countryside was prepared for the record-setting rains. Soldiers, the Red Cross, police, highway patrol, Tulsa county war council, Office of Civil Defense, and the Tulsa rescue squad were prepared and mobilized to mitigate the possible damage in the area.<sup>510</sup> Although roads were washed out, and some people

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<sup>506</sup> Crops of This Area Refreshed by Heavy Week-End Rainfall, *Southwest American*, May 10, 1943.

<sup>507</sup> Floods Disrupt Highway Travel, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 10, 1943.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*

found themselves stranded, Tulsa was “high [and] dry.”<sup>511</sup> The damage occurred throughout the river valley but generally spared Tulsa. The population most at risk lived in the lowlands, such as the Haskell County bottoms, and in places where creeks and rivers flowed into the Arkansas River.<sup>512</sup>

On Monday, May 11, troops from Fort Chaffee were activated in Fort Smith to help move factory equipment from the flood-threatened furniture factory district of the city. Additionally, the soldiers aided in the evacuation of families and livestock from the lowlands surrounding the Arkansas River. The time for inaction was over. The previous 72 hours of rain in the area helped create “rivers ...on [a] rampage.”<sup>513</sup> Reports from Oklahoma were dreadful. One person was already pronounced dead, two missing, and hundreds homeless in Muskogee, Oklahoma. As local streams and smaller rivers feeding into the Arkansas flooded, conditions deteriorated quickly. Everything in the region was flooded or quickly becoming so. The White River, Poteau River, Sandy Creek, Greenbrier Creek, Illinois River, Lake Waddington, Spring River, Elk River, and drainage ditches everywhere flooded. In eastern Oklahoma, 11 of the 42 flood gates at Grand Lake were opened to capacity to handle the sheer volume of water flowing into the reservoir. The Grand River engineer estimated more than 200,000 feet a second were flowing into the lake and that 125,000 feet a second were rushing through the gates. The difference in the amount of water flowing into the reservoir and the amount flowing through the gates was 75,000 feet a second or enough to flood 15,000 acres one foot every 34 hours. Unless

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<sup>511</sup> Floods Peril East Oklahoma Area, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 11, 1943.

<sup>512</sup> Soldiers Battle Flood To Save River’s Victims, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 12, 1943.

<sup>513</sup> Troops From Chaffee Aid Rescue Work, *Southwest American*, May 11, 1943; Rivers in Area on a Rampage, *Southwest American*, May 11, 1943.

the Corps opened more flood gates, the water was expected to rise three-feet at the reservoir every 24 hours.<sup>514</sup>

The region along the Arkansas River between Tulsa, Oklahoma and Fort Smith, Arkansas flooded at an astounding rate. C. F. Byrns' regular "Off the Record" column deemed the flood to be the "fastest and biggest flood we have ever experienced."<sup>515</sup> Byrns determined the severity of the flood based on its sheer size (which was predicted to be 37 to 38 feet), and he situated the flood into the context of previous floods. By comparing the 1943 flood with floods in 1941, 1927, and 1833, the people of the river valley understood the severity of the flood. Through the collective and experienced memory of the past floods, people knew how they should tailor their response to the impending disaster.<sup>516</sup>

Before the flood reached Fort Smith, people had already prepared for the event and applied for aid from the Sebastian County Red Cross. The Red Cross, with the help of the military from Camp Chaffee, swung into action. The military provided boats, rescue personnel, and other equipment as necessary to help the distressed. Local Red Cross officials, the military, and the county disaster committee quickly implemented flood relief plans.

Although many people in the river valley believed that God sent the storm to equally "rain on the just and on the unjust," they did not believe such equality applied to race.<sup>517</sup> Despite whites and blacks being affected by the same natural phenomenon, city officials assisted them differently in their moment of suffering. After all, Jim Crow was still in charge even during

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<sup>514</sup> Troops From Chaffee Aid Rescue Work, *Southwest American*, May 11, 1943; Soldiers Battle Flood to Save River's Victims, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 12, 1943.

<sup>515</sup> Off the Record, *Southwest American*, May 11, 1943.

<sup>516</sup> Hugh Park, "The Arkansas River Floods of 1943," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 2. No. 3 (September 1943): 202-203; Off the Record, *Southwest American*, May 11, 1943.

<sup>517</sup> Matthew 5:45 (King James Translation).



environmental disasters. White flood refugees were sheltered at the Welfare building in Fort Smith and could access other kinds of aid there. Unlike whites, black refugees could not rely upon the local government in the same way for assistance. They were not welcomed at the Welfare building but had to lean upon others within their community for aid. Black refugees in need of shelter had to “register” at the Mallalieu United Methodist Church or seek help from the Knights of Pythias.<sup>518</sup>

People’s opinions of the rainfall changed rapidly over a couple of days as the once welcomed rain became too much to handle. Although Tulsa was reasonably dry (they enjoyed some sunshine, relatively little flooding, and quicker receding water), eastern Oklahoma did not fare so well, especially Muskogee and Haskell Counties. The waters from the Arkansas, Illinois, South Canadian, and Big and Little San Bois Rivers spilled into Haskell County and walloped it. Rowboats were ineffective in the flood waters to help with the rescue efforts. Even with the use of pontoon boats fitted with outboard motors, rescue crews found it difficult to rescue the 150 refugees that were saved.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Red Cross in Action with Flood Relief, *Southwest American*, May 11, 1943; That African Americans would need to seek help from the local black Methodist United Church or from the black version of the Knights of Pythias—correctly known as the Knights of Pythias of North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa—is not surprising. The only safety net African Americans could depend upon in the Jim Crow South were their own institutions. Initially African Americans were not allowed to join the Pythias and learn their rituals. In 1860 Dr. Thomas W. Stringer, E.A. Lightfoot, and other light skinned mulattoes passed for whites and gained admission to the Pythias in Mississippi. Stringer and others took their knowledge of the Pythias’ rituals and created black Pythias lodges throughout the South. The first was in Vicksburg, Mississippi on March 26, 1860. Henceforth, Stringer—a Mason and minister in the AME church—is considered the father of black Pythias in Mississippi and the surrounding region. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips, eds., *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012), 90.

<sup>519</sup> Soldiers Battle Flood to Save River’s Victims, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 12, 1943.

Additionally, the river stranded four hundred people on the south side of the Arkansas River in Haskell County. Many more were believed to be drowned. Soldiers from Camp Chaffee piloted a barge up the Arkansas River in perilous conditions to assist Oklahoma in their rescue efforts. State Senator Guy Curry of Stigler worried, “there’s every possibility that some of these people or all of them have been carried away already,” the situation he explained was “desperate.”<sup>520</sup>

After a week of flooding, the casualties increased. Seven missing soldiers and four missing civilians were thought to be dead after their boat slammed into a bridge in Haskell County. Two African American families were lost (totaling 11 people) after 24 homes in their neighborhood had washed away. Six people were confirmed dead, 22 missing, hundreds homeless, thousands of livestock killed, and massive damage to crops. Some rescuers managed to thwart death and slip out of its wet grip. Not everyone that was swallowed by the river died.

Three civilians and two soldiers from Camp Gruber went out onto the Arkansas River in hopes of rescuing others. Little did they know, they were only a mishap away from quickly becoming rescuers in need of rescuing. While patrolling the Cache bottoms, the rescuers heard that there were farmers marooned and in need of help. On the way to rescue the stranded farmers, the river caught the rescue party’s boat in a cross-current near the Arkansas River bridge on U.S. 59. They were helpless to the whims of the current. The boat was dashed into the bridge and capsized. Roy Stigler recalled that he was “sucked under and shot about 50 feet underwater, coming up on the other side of the bridge. My lungs were bursting.”<sup>521</sup> Luckily, Stigler obtained some oars as they floated by, and soon after Corporeal Robert Gorman came up to him with a

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<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Soldiers Vanish After Boat Hits Arkansas Bridge, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 13, 1943.

life preserver. With the aid of the oars and the life preserver, the two men succeeded in grasping some trees along the edge of the wild river. The would-be rescuers held on for dear life until 2 a.m. when Millard Perdu and Palmer DeShazo, local farmers, rescued the wet and weary survivors in their rowboat. The three other men from the capsized boat (Howard Young, Charles King, and Lieutenant Watchman) were later found alive and well. Other missing men were not lucky to be found. Unaccounted for civilians included Lance Innis, John Easton, Joe Tyler, and Clifford Vance .<sup>522</sup>

On May 12, Mayor Moyer (Little Rock's mayor during the 1927 flood) warned that the oncoming flood would be more dangerous than the great 1927 flood. The elevated risk level of the 1943 flood was due to unfortunate human decisions regarding their natural environment. By 1943 the population of Little Rock had expanded into the eastern part of the city, land that was subject to flooding. Unfortunately for those living in the eastern part of the city, the quickness of the rising waters and the lack of "adequate preparation, to handle the present situation" worsened the situation.<sup>523</sup>

News upriver was dire from Fort Smith down into Conway County where one levee gave way, and five others were expected to burst. Army engineers were supplying sandbags and helping patrol dikes in Faulkner and Conway Counties for weak points. Three Hundred and Fifty families have sought refuge from the floods in those counties. While the levees on the north bank of the Arkansas River at North Little Rock were believed to hold, levees on the south side of the river between Little Rock to Pine Bluff were "seriously threatened" if the river continued to rise. By the 14<sup>th</sup>, 3,000 soldiers patrolled the levees between Little Rock and Pine Bluff placing sandbags on the low gaps of the levees. Because the damage was predicted to be so bad between Little Rock and Pine Bluff, in addition to all the infantry, 1,000 engineers, assault boats, 108 motor vehicles (including 50 ambulances) and a wrecker were moved into place and made available to contend with the oncoming liquid assault that was predicted to submerge 612,000 acres.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>522</sup> Soldiers Vanish After Boat Hits Arkansas Bridge, *Tulsa Daily World*, May 13, 1943.

<sup>523</sup> Mayor Says Danger Worse Than in 1927, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 12, 1943.

<sup>524</sup> Mayor Says Danger Worse Than in 1927, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 12, 1943; Flood to Cover 1,150,000 Acres in State: Arkansas Peak Passes Ozark; Waters Spread, *Arkansas Democrat*, May 14, 1943.

By Thursday morning, May 13, the nightmare appeared to be ending, but the disaster continued to threaten many people. The river level at Fort Smith hit its high point at 11 a.m. on Wednesday reaching 41.7 feet. The crest of the river maintained its high point for 4 hours until 3 p.m. when it began to recede at a tenth of a foot until 8 p.m. where it held at 41.3 feet.

<b>River Depths for May 1943</b>			
<b>City</b>	<b>Height on 12 May 1943 (in feet)</b>	<b>Change in last 24 Hours (In Feet)</b>	<b>Flood Stage (In Feet)</b>
<b>Fort Smith</b>	41.3	7.8	22
<b>Van Buren</b>	38.1	6.3	22
<b>Dardanelle</b>	30.4	2.3	22
<b>Danville</b>	28.1	8.9	20
<b>Morrilton</b>	25.0	8.9	20
<b>Little Rock</b>	22.7	6.9	23
<b>Pine Bluff</b>	23.1	17.8	25

Table 5.1 River Depths for May 1943. *Source:* "Mayor Says Danger Worse Than in 1927," *Arkansas Democrat*, May 12, 1943.

Nearly one-fourth of Fort Smith was under water Wednesday night. The flood displaced two hundred and fifty families and ruined a substantial amount of crops. Adding to the woes of Fort Smith, the flood caused a water main to break near Mountainburg, and the city found its water supply severely threatened. Although Fort Smith suffered the wrath of the flood, there were not any reported casualties in the city or the surrounding area. Unfortunately, Fort Smith's neighbors upstream in Haskell County, Oklahoma did not do as well.<sup>525</sup>

Why did Sebastian County, where Fort Smith, Arkansas is located, survive the floods better than Haskell and Muskogee Counties in Oklahoma? A combination of history, culture, location, and resources made the difference between surviving or succumbing to the flood. Haskell County, Oklahoma, is located on the south bank of the Arkansas River. The County's

<sup>525</sup> Thousands Homeless as River Recedes From 41.7-Foot Crest, *Southwest American*, May 13, 1943.

main farm products were corn and cotton. Thirty-six percent of Haskell County's soil was of the Stigler-Counts-Tamaha association, which was deep soil that drained poorly to moderately well. The minor soils associated with the Stigler-Counts, Tamaha association included the Collinsville, Dela, Enders, Gutyon, Hector, Kanima, Lival, Spiro, Vian, Whakana, and Wing soils. These soils were used to cultivate small grain crops, including cotton. These soils presented several challenges. It was laborious to maintain the soil structure, reduce surface crusting, and improve the soil's fertility. Another eight percent of the soil in the county belonged to the Rector-Guyton association. The Guyton soils were deep, drained poorly, and loamy. The flood plains of Haskell County were, in part, made up of Guyton soil. Small grain crops such as cotton grew well in this soil, but as with the previous soils discussed, it was a constant chore to maintain the soil's structure and fertility. Additionally, a combination of overflow and poor drainage easily damaged the soil.<sup>526</sup>

The soils that were adjacent to the river and creek beds in Haskell County drained well, but several of the series and sub-series did not. Crevasse-Oklared soils made up three percent of soils in the county. The soil existed throughout the flood plains of the Arkansas and Canadian Rivers. Crevasse soil was deep and sandy. Maintaining the Crevasse's structure was a maintenance issue for landowners who used the land for agriculture or grazing. The surface layer was "7 inches of brown loamy fine sand."<sup>527</sup> The next layer of sand extends "65 inches and is stratified light yellowish-brown fine sand, pale-brown fine sand, and light yellowish-brown

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<sup>526</sup> United States Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service, *Soil Survey of Haskell County, Oklahoma* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 3.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

sand.”<sup>528</sup> Much of the sand on the south side of the Arkansas River was a type of loamy sand soil, which can be washed away in an enormous flood.<sup>529</sup>

The soils in Sebastian County, Arkansas in the banks and floodplains of the Arkansas River were like those in Haskell County but with one significant difference: the amount of clay in the soil. Saturation of soil depends on the soil’s composition, the duration of water exposure, and the temperature.<sup>530</sup> Silt and clay deposits of the Arkansas River Valley usually have a higher “porosity, but the small size and poor interconnection of the openings lessen their ability to transmit water.”<sup>531</sup>

Clay is so efficient at repelling water that it is used in some earthen levees to waterproof the core trench.<sup>532</sup> The Arkansas River separates the northern part of Sebastian County (where Fort Smith is located) and the southern part of Crawford County (where Van Buren is situated). Much of the area composed of Carboniferous rock except for the clays and alluvial deposits along the Arkansas River. Most of the rocks are sandstones, shales, fire clays, and coal. The sandstones and shales were created by water as horizontal beds of sediment that supported vegetation growth that later became coal. All these beds were pressed into folds, lifted to dry land, and in many cases, worn away. Although coal is found in the Carboniferous rocks’ upper levels of the land, clay shales cover a much larger area than the coal. In some places, the clay is

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<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Hal P. Bybee and Clyde A. Malott, “The Flood of 1913 in the Lower White River Region of Indiana,” *Indiana University Studies* 2 no. 19-27 (January 1914- March 1915): 209.

<sup>531</sup> US Department of the Interior, Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper 1669-BB, *Reconnaissance of the Ground-Water Resources of the Arkansas Valley Region Arkansas, BB16-BB17*, By Robert M. Cordova (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963).

<sup>532</sup> LSU AgCenter, Louisiana State University College of Agriculture, “Using Levees for Flood Protection,” <http://www.lsuagcenter.com/NR/rdonlyres/C7AF40A9-0F32-42C8-8AE9-49B9E3657258/26062/pub2744Levees8.pdf> (accessed October 12, 2017).

found in the disintegration of these shales and ranges between 18 inches to 50 feet thick.<sup>533</sup> The clays that influence the course of the Arkansas River are from elevated Pleistocene terraces.<sup>534</sup>

The soil types in the Arkansas River Valley affect the severity and duration of flooding. The rise in the height of the groundwater table influences the flood water ponding depth.<sup>535</sup> These dense clay soils around Van Buren and Fort Smith kept the water from seeping down into the ground and caused ponding and flooding, allowing the water to run off. Ponding and flooding affect plant growth in the area and increase the severity of future floods. Plant growth is paramount for improving the soil quality and increasing soil organic matter. Soil that retains too much water is susceptible to diseases, substantial losses of soil nitrogen due to the “denitrification and leaching of nitrate,” and soil damage (especially if a significant amount of pressure is put upon the soil before enough water can drain away).<sup>536</sup>

By mid-May, the survivors of the flood were busy dealing with the aftermath of the environmental disaster. Although the river was slowly receding, inhabitants along the river began a return to normalcy. Oklahoma Gas and Electric workers restored power to Van Buren on Thursday, May 13. The line used to reconnect power to the city was a temporary one and as a

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<sup>533</sup> US Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey Bulletin 351, *The Clays of Arkansas*, by John C. Branner (Washington DC: Government Printing Press, 1908) 65, 67, 201- 202.

<sup>534</sup> The Pleistocene Epoch was 2.6 million to 11,700 years ago. University of California Berkeley, University of California Museum of Paleontology, “The Peistocene Epoch.” <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/quaternary/pleistocene.php> (accessed October 15, 2017).

<sup>535</sup> Guohua Zhang, Gary Feng, Xihu Li, Congbao Xie, and Xiaoyu Pi, “Flood Effect on Groundwater Recharge on a Typical Silt Loam Soil,” *Water* 9 no. 523, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&ved=0ahUKEwjQ9t3j4uzWAhXJjVQKHWghCBgQFgg9MAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.mdpi.com%2F2073-4441%2F9%2F7%2F523%2Fpdf&usg=AOvVaw08G49hhYSy8KDZmQCPazEc> (accessed October 10, 2017).

<sup>536</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, “Water,” [https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1187234.pdf](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1187234.pdf) (accessed October 15, 2017).

result, H.K. Huberthal, division superintendent of the Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company, cautioned people not to use too much power for fear of overloading the temporary line with more voltage than it could support. With power restored, repairing telephone lines was one of the next tasks to be completed.<sup>537</sup> The flood made life difficult in a plethora of ways, yet, newspapers continued to report on the situation “in spite of all obstacles.”<sup>538</sup> Although all the major highways in the surrounding area of Fort Smith and Van Buren were closed, except U.S. 71, newspapers delivered the news to inquiring minds both in town and the surrounding areas. <sup>539</sup>

The flood affected the water supply. It washed away and destroyed eighty feet of the main pipeline that carried the city’s water supply from Lake Fort Smith into the city. Fort Smith was left with an estimated two days’ water supply, four or five days with minimally controlled consumption. Compounding things sewage seeped into the river’s excesses that swamped the area. A conference that included state health authorities, army officers from Camp Chaffee, and city and county officials quarantined the flooded area, approximately 600 city-blocks north of North B Street and west of North Eleventh and Midland Boulevard in Fort Smith. Dr. Johnson of the Fort Smith district board of health issued a statement that declared:

Polluted waters and the flooding of the sanitary sewers in the flood areas of the city of Fort Smith have created conditions which can be detrimental to public health. Under authority granted by the rules and regulations of the Arkansas state board of health, the Fort Smith district board of health hereby quarantines all areas under its jurisdiction that have been affected by flood waters. The quarantine restriction forbids the inhabitation or operation of any house, business establishment or factory in the area until it has been inspected and approved as safe for human occupancy or operation.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>537</sup> Power is Restored to Van Buren, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943.

<sup>538</sup> Newspapers Kept Busy Figuring Ways to Outwit Flood Waters, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> City’s Water Reserve is Dwindling: Serious Disease Threat Appears in Wake of Disastrous Overflow, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943.



Dwellings, businesses, and factories deemed unfit were tagged with a red placard to signify that entry into the building was not allowed unless given special permission, or until city officials lifted the quarantine. Conversely, blue placards within the flooded area denoted that the premises were deemed safe and in satisfactory condition, thus the quarantine was no longer in effect and the grounds habitable.<sup>541</sup>

The lack of clean water meant city officials could not fight fire with fire, or more appropriately in this case, water with water. A low supply of potable water meant that quarantined establishments could not be cleaned or flushed out until the city's main water pipeline was operational again. When people evacuated, they only took the necessities, such as in Mrs. William Rainwater's case, clothes and diapers.<sup>542</sup> There was the possibility of returning with permission, but the penalty for unlawfully reentering a quarantined building could be rather steep, up to \$100 or imprisonment not to exceed one month, or both!<sup>543</sup> Some people refused to adhere to the evacuation notices in which case city officials forced them off their property. This happened when a 78-year-old grandmother greeted her potential rescue party with the declaration, "I've decided I'm not going. I've been here since 1868, and I reckon to stay here."<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Getting Out the Diapers, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943; City's Water Reserve is Dwindling: Serious Disease Threat Appears in Wake of Disastrous Overflow, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943.

<sup>543</sup> City's Water Reserve is Dwindling: Serious Disease Threat Appears in Wake of Disastrous Overflow, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943; \$100 in May 1943 was a hefty sum, when accounting for inflation that amount equals \$1,408.71 as of December 2017, which is a lot for people who have just lived through the Great Depression and are in the midst of fighting a world war, United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Inflation Calculator," <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=100&year1=194305&year2=201712> (accessed January 17, 2018).

<sup>544</sup> All Refugees Did Not Leave Willingly, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943.

Undeterred, her rescue party lifter her up and carried her away to an amphibious jeep. Within hours her home became the new residence of local fish.<sup>545</sup>

Many residents along the river felt grateful for the assistance they received in the aftermath of the flood. Nevertheless, they wanted the federal government to do more to prevent future floods. After all, the government had promised to aid in flood control along the Arkansas River. The federal government's model for defining their role regarding natural disasters was evolving. Hard lessons learned following the flood of 1927 and the drought of the 1930s in conjunction with the Great Depression shaped the constituents and elected officials of the 1940s. The Congressional Flood Control Committee report of June 9, 1941, emphasized the need for the United States to develop a "national program for flood control" and suggested the government continue "flood protection works in the large river basins where general comprehensive plans" had been approved by Congress.<sup>546</sup> These suggestions became Public Law 228 on August 18, 1941.<sup>547</sup> The Flood Control Act appropriated \$310,000,000 to carry out improvements and allocated \$10,000,000 to the Departments of the Army and Agriculture for examinations and surveys.<sup>548</sup>

After the flood, the wrecked area needed a massive cleanup effort. Although, in the past, residences along the river experienced other floods and recovered, the record-breaking size of the 1943 flood coupled with strains World War II put on the workforce and resources made recovery difficult. The war effort required most raw materials the nation could spare. Rebuilding houses,

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Committee on Flood Control, Authorizations for Reservoirs, Levees, and Flood Walls for Flood Control, 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1944, report 1309, 1.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> United States Congress, House, Flood Control Act of 1941, H. R. 4911, August 18, 1941.

factories, and farms were a challenge because fences, staples, nails, and other supplies were scarce. The Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce's jobs committee attempted to acquire needed materials. "After the 1941 flood,' Jobbers' Chairman Ralph Speer Jr. commented, 'farmers who needed fence, staples, nails and so forth went ahead and bought them. Today, however, those and other repair materials are not available here in the quantities needed.'"<sup>549</sup> Luckily for the survivors of the flood, the local office of the War Production board helped provide necessary materials.<sup>550</sup>

Could the flood damage have been prevented? R.P. Bartholomew of the University of Arkansas' college of agriculture argued yes. Bartholomew argued that "good soil conservation practices" within the watersheds of the Arkansas River would have allowed many people to avoid the destruction they experienced.<sup>551</sup> According to Bartholomew, reducing the impact of flooding involves implementing several simple scientific farming methods. Among the best practices include: "permanent pasture-crop rotation, keeping the soil covered as much as possible with close-growing vegetation, plowing land deeply not too long in advance of planting, and construction of terraces on the deeper slopes."<sup>552</sup>

Following the floods of May and June of 1943 along the Arkansas River, the Congressional Flood Committee adopted a resolution. They requested that the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors study previous reports on the Arkansas River and decide whether "modifications" to prevent flooding should occur along the main channel of the

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<sup>549</sup> Flood Repair Priorities Will Be Sought, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> Good Crop Practices Might Have Prevented Much Flood Damage, *Southwest American*, May 14, 1943.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

Arkansas River from Great Bend, Kansas to Pine Bluff, Arkansas.<sup>553</sup> The Flood Committee recommended that the federal government allocate \$4,171,800 to modify seven projects already underway and another \$10,299,400 for construction projects at 12 other locations along the river. These funds, the Flood Committee argued, would prevent “flood losses and [ensure] the welfare of the people residing in [those] area[s].”<sup>554</sup>

Senator John McClellan was instrumental in acquiring federal money for flood control in Arkansas. Fortunately, for Arkansas, McClellan was elected as a senator in 1942. As a freshmen senator, McClellan brought with him to Washington D.C. several years of experience fighting for flood control as a congressman. McClellan began his career as a congressman in 1934 and acquired a seat on the Committee on Flood Control. Congressman McClellan represented a constituency that was mainly agricultural and vulnerable to flooding. When McClellan began his career in Washington D.C., Arkansas was still dealing with the aftermath of the 1927 flood, drought, and the Great Depression. Unemployment was high as a quarter of Americans were out of work. The drought was plentiful, but when combined with a culture that “deliberately, self-consciously,” attempted to “dominate and exploit the land for all it was worth,” it led to disastrous results, and much of the nation’s soil blew around the country.<sup>555</sup> This same culture of domination and exploitation not only negatively impacted the southern plains but crashed the nation’s economy.<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Committee on Flood Control, *Authorizations for Reservoirs, Levees, and Flood Walls for Flood Control*, 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1944, report 1309, 16-17.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>555</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>556</sup> Sherry Laymon, *Fearless: John L. McClellan, United States Senator* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC, 2011), 53, 55; Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 5.

Before the stock market crash in 1928, the federal government's most recent disaster relief effort focused on the flood of 1927 and the government's role in that recovery influenced how aid was given and received during the drought years that followed. Hoover, rooted firmly in the ideas of self-help and volunteerism, believed that a combination of government and private aid injected with a healthy dose of good old fashioned American work ethic could alleviate much of the suffering that plagued the nation. The best relief programs, according to Hoover, could "preserve the cherished values of individualism and self-reliance" while simultaneously "bolster cooperation."<sup>557</sup>

Hoover preferred local leaders to lead the way. On August 14, 1930, Hoover invited the governors of drought-stricken states to the White House. The President instructed them to create local and state committees to tackle the problems originating from the lack of rain. Each committee was to include a banker, a state agricultural official, a member of the Red Cross, a representative of the railroad industry, and a farmer. Once a committee at a county level had exhausted its resources, it was to ask the state for help who, if facing difficulties would appeal to the National organization. The funding for these programs would come from established creditors such as the Federal Farm Board or the Intermediate Credit System. Additionally, the Red Cross had access to five million dollars if necessary, but only as a last resort. Arkansas was in a last resort type of situation, and she became the ward of the Red Cross because of the beating bestowed upon her from the flood of 1927.<sup>558</sup>

Although ambitious, Hoover's plan was ill-suited for Arkansas and the South in general. The cotton economy during the early 1930s was as withered as a deflated balloon. Limp and

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<sup>557</sup> Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *As Rare As Rain: Federal Relief in the Great Southern Drought of 1930-31* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 9-10.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

ragged, the Southern economy needed credit and credit was based on the cotton economy. No cotton, no credit. No credit, then no cotton. Banks were of little use, and cooperatives could have been useful if they had capital. Financial capital was wildly scarce. Hoover's solutions were not working for landowners, which meant that sharecroppers were hurting even more. Sharecroppers were not eligible for federal credit, and they had little hope for help from state and county drought committees, especially in the counties along the Arkansas River. Delta drought committees, notably, broke with Hoover's plans. The committees had a banker, a merchant, a planter, and a county judge. Because of a perceived deficit in character and collateral combined with dark skin color, many sharecroppers' only source of assistance was from the Red Cross. Unfortunately for the needy, the Red Cross only helped if a they officially announced a disaster, and they were very conservative with their disaster declarations.<sup>559</sup>

As the Arkansas River Valley baked in the sun and the dust smothered the farmers' fields, Arkansans and their natural environment were once again tied up in discussions regarding the role of the federal government in assisting those in need. President Hoover stuck to his long-held belief in self-help and voluntary cooperation. The president's ideology of planning and cooperation fell short in Arkansas' case. Additionally, the Red Cross was unsure how to respond to the drought. Officially, the Red Cross policy directed the organization to help victims of droughts. Politicians, drought sufferers, and the Red Cross debated about when relief should be administered to flood victims. Some contended that help should be given immediately, while others argued that the disaster needed to dissipate and no longer pose a threat before aid was doled out among the victims. Unfortunately for many Arkansans, the sickening conditions created by a feeble economic situation that was reliant on credit, cotton, and the exploitative and

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 12.

repressive nature of the plantation system doomed Hoover's relief plan from the beginning.<sup>560</sup> Perniciously, the leaders of the plantation system discouraged accepting outside help, especially among those who required help the most.

Amid the Great Depression, the government tried to ease the situation among farmers and the unemployed by passing various acts and instituting public works programs. Also, many Southern politicians saw an opportunity to help their states through New Deal programs. In these dire circumstances, McClellan sought out and obtained a position on the Flood Control Committee as he believed he could do the most good for his constituents in that capacity. The young congressman made his presence known early. McClellan quickly disagreed with the Corps of Engineer's plan to address flooding in the Lower Mississippi Valley.<sup>561</sup> Chief of Engineers, General Edgar Jadwin presented a plan to build levees on the eastern side of the Mississippi River that would be three feet higher than those on the west side. When flooding occurred, the excess water would flow over the west bank into Arkansas and down a ten-mile wide sluice that would direct the water to the Atchafalaya Basin in Louisiana. The senior member of the House River and Harbors and Flood Control Committees, William Whittington of Mississippi (the east side of the Mississippi River), favored the Jadwin plan. Freshman Senator McClellan and others opposed Whittington's plan, and eventually, that idea was scrapped and replaced by the Overton Plan, which was better suited for Arkansas.<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 8-9, 12.

<sup>561</sup> Sherry Laymon, *Fearless: John L. McClellan, United States Senator* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC, 2011), 55-56.

<sup>562</sup> Dewy W. Grantham, "The South and Congressional Politics," in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 22; Laymon, *Fearless*, 56.

McClellan, like many Southern Congressmen in the 1940s, was dedicated to preserving agriculture in his state. The rise in need of agricultural products during the war allowed Southern politicians to bend the will of the government to focus on the South and its needs. McClellan realized the need for flood control to protect agriculture in his state. On the heels of the 1943 flood, the now junior senator McClellan introduced the Arkansas-White river basin act on 9 November 1943. His bill called for the “construction, maintenance, and operation of flood control and navigation improvements, including dams, reservoirs, and allied structures.”<sup>563</sup> McClellan framed the projects in his bill as an “essential element in an effective, scientific system of water control and utilization of water resources.”<sup>564</sup>

Near the end of 1943, McClellan’s constituents continued to desire the help of the federal government in harnessing the Arkansas River. McClellan knew that federal assistance from the government was essential to his state, but he also knew that with a war ongoing it would be challenging to find the money necessary to change the river in a meaningful way. Many of the Corps of Engineers domestic projects were on hold during the war, so McClellan found a way to combine the war effort with river improvement. During the first session of the 78<sup>th</sup> Congress, McClellan introduced a bill, “Arkansas-White River Basin Act,” that sought to address the needs of his constituents. The bill called for improvements “in connection with navigation and flood control,” but also argued that these projects were for the good of “allied activities” and that, this bill would help “the federal government in the interest of employment...to facilitate preparations

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<sup>563</sup> Grantham, “The South and Congressional Politics,” 23; Cong. Rec., 78 Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943, vol. 89, pt. 7: 9322.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.



and planning for post-war construction.”<sup>565</sup> McClellan’s constituents also tried to persuade Congress. A few years before the end of WWII, special interest groups (of the Arkansas River) created a pamphlet that argued the need for a comprehensive development program for the lower Arkansas River Basin. Their main contention was that the federal government should spend money to develop the river because it would be, not merely a local, but a “national asset.”<sup>566</sup>

Congress approved some of McClellan’s projects included in his bill. The projects that had been started but lacked completion owed their unfinished state to the war. McClellan went to the Senate floor that day to ask Congress for a promise that the projects already approved in the Arkansas River Valley would all be finished and quickly. Arkansas, McClellan argued, was sorely affected by the recent flood that “turned the fertile fields... into murky lakes, and carry[ed] in their wake the loss of a large number of human lives and destruction and devastation of property to the extent of many millions of dollars.”<sup>567</sup> A significant part of McClellan’s argument was that Congress had a responsibility to aid the survivors of the flood, for as he contended, “That is primarily the responsibility of the federal government.”<sup>568</sup> Public opinion had changed course from before the Great Depression when the Federal government played a less active role. Due to the natural and economic disasters, Arkansans demanded that their representatives harness the powers of the federal government to enact real and meaningful

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<sup>565</sup> Memorandum, Charles F. Boots to Senator McClellan, October 19, 1943, box 11 file 5A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University; Cong. Rec., 78 Cong., 1st sess., 1943, vol. 89, pt. 7: 9322.

<sup>566</sup> “Neglected Riches, a River at Work: A Pictorial Story of National Assets in a Great Southwestern Area,” 1946?, Elmer Thomas Collection, Box 1 File 63, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman Ok.

<sup>567</sup> Cong. Rec., 78 Cong., 1st sess., 1943, vol. 89, pt. 7: 9322.

<sup>568</sup> Cong. Rec., 78 Cong., 1st sess., 1943, vol. 89, pt. 7: 9322.

environmental change. McClellan was attempting to do this, but World War II was a significant hurdle to overcome as the government froze many of the Corps' domestic projects to focus

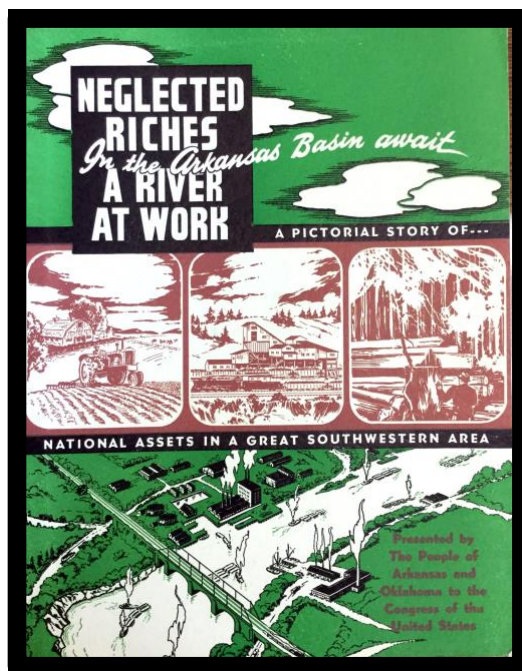


Figure 5.1 *Source*: “Neglected Riches, a River at Work: A Pictorial Story of National Assets in a Great Southwestern Area.”

money and human resources on the fight overseas. Supporters of improvement projects on the Arkansas River attempted to circumvent this obstacle in two ways: one, to argue that the project in question helped the war effort, or two, the project would improve the post-war period of “readjustment and reconstruction,” specifically by giving returning veterans a job without resorting “again to a W.P.A. made-work program.”<sup>569</sup>

When McClellan returned to the Senate floor he detailed seven specific points that if followed, he believed would improve the lives of Arkansans, Americans, and veterans. The seven points of his bill were:

**First.** For the use of existing permanent executive agencies of the Government of the construction, operation, and maintenance of all navigation, flood-control, and allied projects in the White and Arkansas River Basins. **Second.** For the Coordinated operation

<sup>569</sup> Cong. Rec., 78 Cong., 1st sess., 1943, vol. 89, pt. 7: 9322- 9323.

of all such projects and their efficient management. **Third.** That all such public improvements already authorized by Congress, and such as may hereafter be authorized, including general comprehensive plans for navigation and flood control, shall be initiated promptly, and in any event not later than immediately following the cessation of hostilities in the present war, and prosecuted to completion with the utmost dispatch. **Fourth.** That dams and other works included in the plans shall be constructed, maintained, and operated under the direction of the Secretary of War and the supervision of the Chief of Engineers; first for navigation and flood control, and second for the generation of hydroelectric power, irrigation, and reclamation. **Fifth.** It designates the Secretary of Interior as the agent to receive, transmit, and dispose of all electric power generated at such projects. **Sixth.** It authorizes and directs the Secretary of the Interior to construct, operate, and maintain all facilities necessary to transmit, sell, and dispose of all such electric energy at wholesale. First, to the United States for its own use; second, to public bodies or cooperatives operating primarily for service to the public rather than for profit; and, third to private corporations or persons, in that order of preference. **Seventh.** Authorizes necessary appropriations for carrying out the purposes of the act.

McClellan hoped that these seven points would guide Congress to quickly provide Arkansas with the assistance it needed to combat flooding through manipulation of the Arkansas River.

While McClellan was working on a federal solution to the problem of flooding, in March 1945, Arkansas Governor Ben Laney approved, and the 55<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of Arkansas adopted Resolution Number 18 (additionally, many civic organizations and city governments showed their support for the Corps by passing resolutions). The Resolution supported the Corp of Engineer's flood plan as authorized by Congress. Arkansas' legislature wanted flood control for her river valleys, and they wanted to block the formation of an Arkansas Valley Authority. The state legislature only wanted the Corp of Engineers to develop their river valleys. Arkansas "favor[ed] the democratic method of development, construction, and operation of the River Basins projects...by the Corps of Engineers...and we are opposed to the creation of a Valley

Authority.”<sup>570</sup> Citing the 1936 omnibus Flood Control Act, Arkansas contended that flood control on navigable waters and their

<b>Estimated Costs of Arkansas River Basin Projects, 1943 (authorized but not yet under construction)- levees and floodways in Arkansas and Oklahoma</b>	
<b>Location</b>	<b>Estimated Cost (in dollars)</b>
<b>Crawford County, Ark., levees</b>	284,000
<b>Cherokee, Okla., levee and floodway</b>	800,000
<b>Tulsa, Okla., levees and floodway</b>	513,000
<b>Kaw, Okla., levees</b>	32,500
<b>Fort Gibson, Okla., levee</b>	33,600
<b>Caney Creek, Okla., levee</b>	157,600
<b>Blackwell, Okla., Levee</b>	50,000
<b>Morrilton, Ark., levee</b>	603,000
<b>Clarksville, Ark. Levee</b>	70,000
<b>Little Rock, Ark., levee</b>	110,500
<b>Dardanelle, Ark., levee</b>	103,000
<b>Little Rock to Pine Bluff, Ark., levees</b>	641,000
<b>Total:</b>	<b>3,398,200</b>

Table 5.2 *Source:* Cong. Rec., 78 Cong., 1st sess., 1943, vol. 89, pt. 7: 9323.

tributaries was the “proper activity of the Federal government in cooperation with the States” and that “Federal investigations and improvements of rivers and other waterways for flood control and allied purposes shall be under the direction of the Secretary of War and supervision of the Chief of Engineers.”<sup>571</sup>

In January of 1945, *Collier’s Weekly* published an article that called for an “intelligent...nation-wide network of regional river-control agencies” similar to the Tennessee

<sup>570</sup> Resolution 18, Adopted by Fifty-Fifth General Assembly Arkansas, Approved by Governor Ben Laney, March 6, 1945, box 11 file 5B, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

<sup>571</sup> James N. Rutledge to Page Belcher, February 12, 1955, Page H. Belcher Collection, Box 183 Folder 1, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK; Resolution of the Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce, November 30, 1954, Page H. Belcher Collection, Box 183 Folder 1, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK; Resolution 18, Adopted by Fifty-Fifth General Assembly Arkansas, Approved by Governor Ben Laney, March 6, 1945, box 11 file 5B, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

Valley Authority following the end of World War II. Additionally, the article labeled river-control programs, such as the one on the Arkansas River, past and present, as unintelligent because of their political and “pork-barrel” nature.<sup>572</sup> In a scathing response N.R. Graham, Chairman of the Arkansas Basin Flood Control Association, denounced the article as a “smear” job.<sup>573</sup>

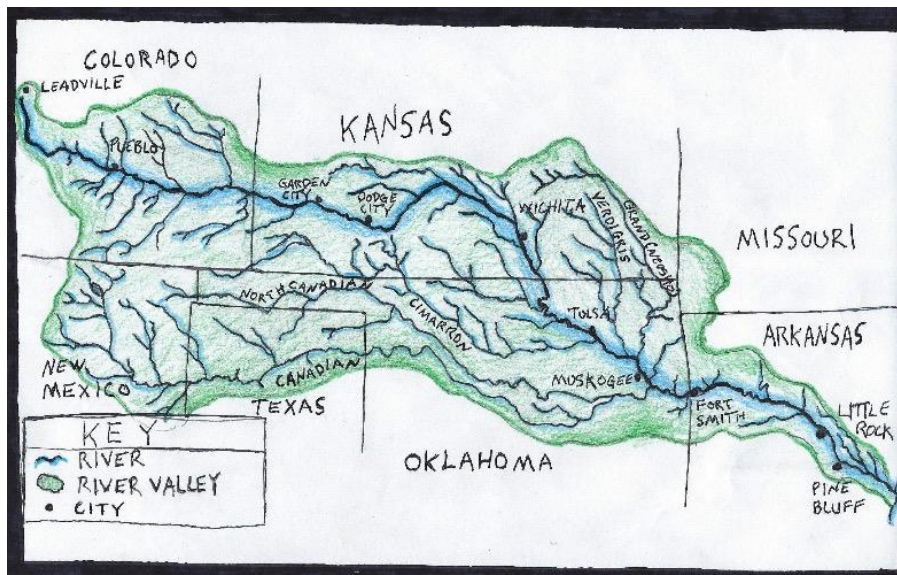


Figure 5.2 The Arkansas River Basin, Based on, World Maps, Thumbnail Us Political Maps, <https://pasarelapr.com/detail/maps-of-arkansas-river-27.html> (accessed May 5, 2019).

Graham’s strong response to the *Collier’s Weekly* article was less anti-TVA and more pro-Corps. On paper, the TVA looked like a program Arkansas could welcome. The goals of the TVA were to bring about :

1. The maximum amount of flood control.
2. The maximum development of said Tennessee River for navigation purposes.
3. The maximum generation of electric power consistent with flood control and navigation.

<sup>572</sup> Fifteen TVAs, *Collier’s Weekly*, January 6, 1945.

<sup>573</sup> N.R. Graham to The Collier’s Editor, December 30, 1944, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

4. The proper use of marginal lands.
5. The proper method of reforestation of all lands in said drainage basin suitable for reforestation.
6. The economic and social well-being of the people living in said river basin.<sup>574</sup>

Despite the potential outcome from instituting an authority in the Arkansas River Valley, there was plenty of sour opinions of the TVA in Arkansas, primarily because Arkansans did not want to wait for any kind of authority to be established. They wanted to focus on flood control immediately and not power generation, nor did they want “strangers” influencing their society.<sup>575</sup> Throughout the 1930s into the early 1940s, there were moments where it seemed an Arkansas Valley Authority would become a reality. Congressman Rankin of Mississippi introduced Bill, H.R. 1824 which called for the creation of an Arkansas Valley Authority, and Arkansas Congressmen Joseph Robinson, David Terry, and John Miller supported the creation of an AVA. Additionally, regular citizens throughout the state supported the idea. Marion Dickens, the president of the White and Black Rivers Flood Control Association, wrote President Roosevelt asking for a TVA in Arkansas.<sup>576</sup> Robert A. Brady, an economist in 1943, spoke at the Annual Meeting of the Western Farm Economics Association and declared his belief that

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<sup>574</sup> Roscoe C. Martin, “The Tennessee Valley Authority: A Study of Federal Control,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 22 no. 3 (Summer, 1957): :370.

<sup>575</sup> F.W. Reeves, “The Social Development Program of the Tennessee Valley Authority,” *Social Service Review* 8 no. 3 (September, 1934):447; J.L. Parker to John L. McClellan, February 21, 1945, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

<sup>576</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, “Roosevelt, Norris and the ‘Seven Little TVAs,’” *The Journal of Politics* 14 no.3 (August, 1952): 420; Mary C. Suter, “Damned Arkansas: Early Developments in How Arkansas Came to Be a Dammed State, 1836-1945” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, 2013), 56; United State Senate Memorandum, Elmer Thomas Collection, 1945, Box 59, File 37, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok.

following the war, the government would replicate the TVA across America. Brady reckoned that “The advantages of unified development are so huge and so obvious... that few will oppose them,” he continued, “and it is inconceivable that the peoples affected within any given area will consent to anything less than most rigorous and close government control, if not outright government ownership and operations, of at least the central and pivotal projects.”<sup>577</sup>

Unfortunately for Brady’s ego, his prognostication was wrong. He failed to account for the variations of environmental, social, and cultural characteristics of the particular river valleys of America. Most Arkansans in the River Valley did not want a TVA. Nor did they want a more active federal government influencing the state, but they did want some government involvement, especially with the river. Proponents and opponents of an AVA did not dispute the idea that the “Government should own” the facilities created to improve the Arkansas River.<sup>578</sup> Additionally, both sides of the argument believed as Senator Rankin, that “WHOEVER CONTROLS THE WATER POWER OF THE COUNTRY IN THE YEARS TO COME WILL CONTROL THE NATION.”<sup>579</sup> The amount of federal participation they wanted was directly proportional to the amount of power the state maintained. Arkansas could allow Uncle Sam to fund infrastructure construction projects all they wanted, but there was a very distinctive line in the sand, and if the federal government crossed it, the state would cry foul and lament government overreach and diminished states’ rights.

The majority of Arkansans concerned with the Arkansas River did not want an Arkansas Valley Authority; they wanted to continue their working relationship with the Corps of

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<sup>577</sup> Robert A. Brady, “Government Control After the War,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 25 no. 4 (November, 1943): 812.

<sup>578</sup> J.E. Rankin to Lyle Boren, January 11, 1937, Lyle H. Boren Collection, Box 12, File 30, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

Engineers. A handful of Arkansans, mostly those in rural areas, wanted a “little TVA,” to generate power.<sup>580</sup> Additionally, the president’s favorable opinion of the TVA and his lack of specifics regarding duplication of the program was worrisome for Arkansans. Roosevelt was a supporter of replicating the TVA formula around the county. Eventually, the president clarified that he did not want to create more TVAs but planning authorities.<sup>581</sup> Even the creation of planning authorities was too much for Arkansas to accept. Arkansas wanted to work with the Corps. “For the past ten years,” N.R. Graham explained, “the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation have cooperatively planned water resource development of the Arkansas Basin. The Army comprehensive flood control, hydropower, and navigation plan for the Arkansas Basin is now in Washington... These plans have been developed by engineers of unquestioned ability at a public cost of millions of dollars.”<sup>582</sup> Graham and others believed that the Corps and other government agencies along with Arkansas had a plan and they feared that the creation of an AVA would threaten their designs for the river.

Arkansas, particularly the Arkansas Basin Flood Control Committee, argued against creating an AVA. They believed that a valley authority would alter not only the state’s control over the river but also change the physical environment of the river valley and how local governments operate politically and administratively. If an Arkansas authority were passed along with the other two authorities most often mentioned in conjunction with the Arkansas project, the Missouri Valley and Columbia Valley, those three authorities alone would control 1/3 of the total

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<sup>580</sup> D. Clayton Brown, “Sam Rayburn and the Development of Public Power in the Southwest,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 78 no. 2 (October, 1974): 152.

<sup>581</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, “Roosevelt, Norris and the ‘Seven Little TVAs,’” *The Journal of Politics* 14 no.3 (August, 1952): 436.

<sup>582</sup> N.R. Graham to The Collier’s Editor, December 30, 1944, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.



land area of the United States.<sup>583</sup> Graham laid out three reasons to continue working with the Corps. The common denominator in all three points was control and power. Graham contended that Arkansas and the Arkansas River were better off without a river authority because:

1. We claim the waters of our rivers for consumptive use belong to the state. In the irrigation sections, this claim is of paramount importance for on it rests the whole base of community economy. Water rights have been granted by the states for years. We cannot trust this right to an authority.
2. We have come to know and respect the Army and the Bureau of Reclamation who have never tried to question our water rights. Our people now have a big voice in the type of development because the present system provides that each step must be authorized by Congress so we who live in the basin have a voice. That does not happen when Congress gives blanket authority and blanket funds to three men, none of whom need come from the basin. We want to vote for or against as we desire and we believe we know what we want far better than do bureaucrats. Certainly this is more democratic than under a paternal TVA plan. We are not peasants who must be lifted up by an overlordship.
3. We do not trust an authority group to give us flood control, our greatest need. Flood control cannot be put on the credit side of a ledger as can power sales. People either drown from floods or they don't, while power earnings are sold for dollars that show up as earnings to be pointed to with pride, so the temptation to reduce flood control space is ever present under that authority plan. 'It won't rain this year, the empty flood space can be filled and will earn dollars.' This is not mere idle talk or mere theory, it has actually happened in the Arkansas Basin under an 'authority' created by the State of Oklahoma. Authority people simply do not think in terms of flood protection and the Army does. In 1943, Oklahoma and Arkansas sustained more loss in twelve tragic days of flood than power on our rivers could earn above expenses in twelve years. But you cannot set down or prove the money value of saving twenty-two lives and millions in property, if you can actually save them. There is no direct profit or glamour about flood control, but with us it is our greatest civic waterway need.<sup>584</sup>

These were prevalent arguments among TVA detractors. Arkansas was well positioned to resist the creation of an Arkansas Valley Authority, in part, due to their strong representation in Congress. Arkansas and Oklahoma senators, house members, and lobbyists were able to

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<sup>583</sup> William Pincus, "Shall We Have More TVA's?," *Public Administration Review* 5 no. 2 (Spring, 1945):149; Joseph M. Ray, "American Government and Politics: The Influence of the Tennessee Valley Authority on Government in the South," *The American Political Science Review* 43 no. 5 (October, 1949): 925.

<sup>584</sup> N.R. Graham to The Collier's Editor, December 30, 1944, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

overcome House Resolution 1825, also known as the Conservation Authorities Act, which would have established a river authority in Arkansas and several other locations, and all the other attempts to create a TVA in Arkansas.<sup>585</sup>

Support for the Corps of Engineers existed in the lower Arkansas River Valley among all striations of society. Landowners, civic club members, and state and local government officials (sometimes an individual wore some or all of these hats) were particularly very active in shaping river management policy. Arkansas' Congressional delegation during the early 1940s included J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, John L. McClellan, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and Wilbur D. Mills, James W. Trimble, and Oren Harris in the House.<sup>586</sup>

Reverend Samuel F. Freeman Jr., of Little Rock, wrote to Senator McClellan urging him to fight against an Arkansas Valley Authority. Freeman, in his letter, quoted Senator Barkley who, in 1944, argued that "Our rivers were not made by us. They were not made by any corporation. They were not made by any private enterprise, free or otherwise. Those rivers constitute a part of the great body of natural resources which belong to the American people, and they ought to be developed for the benefit of the American people."<sup>587</sup> The Fort Smith Engineers Club supported the Corps because they, "demonstrated its fitness to carry out that program by its record of non-political, realistic, intelligent and ethical engineering service," and additionally "an authority would be concerned primarily with power production, necessarily at the expense of

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<sup>585</sup> Wesley C. Clark, "Proposed 'Valley Authority' Legislation," *The American Political Science Review* 40 no. 1 (February, 1946): 62-63.

<sup>586</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 61.

<sup>587</sup> Samuel F. Freeman, Jr. to John McClellan, December 7, 1944, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

flood control, navigation and other water uses so vital to our welfare, and logically would press for public distribution of power and final absorption or destruction of privately owned utilities.”<sup>588</sup> Harvey Couch, the founder of Arkansas Power and Light Company, scrambled to protect the growth of his company against a federally controlled program, specifically the Rural Electrification Administration (REA). He pushed for legislation that created a Public Utilities Department (PUD), later which became the Public Services Commission. Couch supported the creation of the PUD, which contained a clause that the REA needed permission from Arkansas’ regulatory agency before they could act. Fortunately for Couch, Arkansas Power and Light controlled the regulatory agency.<sup>589</sup>

Support for the Corps and an unwillingness to support an authority was present throughout the Arkansas River Valley. The town of Paris, Arkansas passed a resolution that stated their “full support for the comprehensive development of the Arkansas River System, with the Corps of Engineers, United States Army, in charge of design, construction and operation, and we declare our opposition to the creation of an Arkansas Valley Authority.”<sup>590</sup> The Arkansas Basin Flood Control Association clearly communicated to McClellan they “oppose any laws which will remove the Corps of Engineers of the U.S. Army...from this Basin” and that they “endors[ed] the flood control program planned by the U.S. Engineers and oppos[ed] the

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<sup>588</sup> Frank Beckman to John McClellan March 28, 1945, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

<sup>589</sup> E.F. (ED) Chesnutt, “Rural Electrification in Arkansas, 1935-1940: The Formative Years,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 46 no. 3 (Autumn, 1987): 224; Sherry Laymon “Arkansas’s Dark Ages: The Struggle to Electrify the State,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 71 no. 3 (Autumn, 2012): 287.

<sup>590</sup> City of Paris, Arkansas, *Resolution*, April 2, 1945, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

establishment of an Arkansas Valley Authority.”<sup>591</sup> The editor of the *Southwest American* (Fort Smith, Arkansas) explained that he could “see no evidence of sentiment for any ‘authority’ in the Arkansas Valley...Our folks generally are flood control-minded. Our people know and respect the Corps of Engineers.”<sup>592</sup> Additionally, the 55<sup>th</sup> general assembly of Arkansas passed a resolution supporting the Corps’ work in Arkansas and used the 1936 omnibus Flood Control Act to remind Congress that “improvements of rivers and other waterways for flood control and allied purposes shall be under the direction of the Secretary of War and supervision of the Chief of Engineers.”<sup>593</sup>

In 1945 McClellan saw his opportunity to have Arkansas acquire control of the Arkansas River without the establishing an AVA. McClellan was to do so by ascending to lead in two important river-related organizations. Congressionally, McClellan became part of the Senate Commerce Committee. Additionally, he became the president of the National Rivers and Harbors Congress, the largest lobbyist for the federal government to manipulate the river according to desires of Arkansas and Oklahoma. Although Congress did not pass McClellan’s Arkansas-White River Act (which stipulated the Corps would continue to oversee projects on these two rivers) at the end of 1943, Congress used parts of it in the Flood Control Act of

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<sup>591</sup> N.R. Graham to John McClellan January 29, 1945, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University; Reece Caudle to John McClellan March 19, 1945, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

<sup>592</sup> C.F. Byrns to John McClellan, March 17, 1945, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

<sup>593</sup> Resolution 18, Adopted by Fifty-Fifth General Assembly Arkansas, Approved by Governor Ben Laney, March 6, 1945, box 11 file 1A, John L. McClellan Collection, Special Collections, Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

December 1944. Now, according to the Act, the Department of the Interior could market electrical power generated by Corps facilities.<sup>594</sup>

Additionally, the Act of 1944 allowed the Corps to utilize their reservoir spaces for recreational purposes. Furthermore, the Act allowed Congress to assign non-war-related missions to the Corps, thus altering the types of projects they would undertake forever.<sup>595</sup> A

comprehensive Arkansas River plan was beginning to fall into place. As 1945 moved into spring and summer, the powerful men and business interests through the lower Arkansas River Valley were moving one step closer to developing the river for their designs and increasing their social and political power in the region.

As the trees blossomed and flowers bloomed along the Arkansas River in the spring of 1945, Arkansas and Oklahoma joined forces to mold the river to serve their desires. The Arkansas Valley Flood Control Association joined with the Arkansas Basin Flood Control Association and 20 other organizations to pressure every member of Congress in support of the Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, Department of Agriculture, and Federal Power Commission to continue their work in the lower Arkansas River Valley. The financial, political, and social elite of Oklahoma and Arkansas held a series of meetings on May 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> in Tulsa and May 7<sup>th</sup> in Little Rock. This Arkansas-Oklahoma Committee consisted of members of Congress, governors, businesspeople, and other interested parties, who began creating a river development plan. Roughly three months later, President Truman was discussing plans for a comprehensive Arkansas River plan. On September 11, 1945, the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors agreed that a multi-purpose plan should be created to guide future river

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<sup>594</sup> Sherry Laymon, "John McClellan and the Arkansas River Navigation Project," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 69 no. 2 (Summer, 2010): 152; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 64.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

improvements. Lobbying Congress, working closely with the Corps and other government agencies required time, money, and ambition to create river development proposals and create a finished product. Newt Graham, who served as the chairman of the Arkansas Valley Flood Control Association, attended a dinner on February 13, 1946, with likeminded individuals who wanted to use the river to make their deep pockets even deeper. The fruit of that dinner was the birth of the Arkansas Basin Development Association (ABDA). The ABDA served as a bonding and synchronizing force to raise money and influence so that their agenda could be ushered through Congress by the now united and prominent Arkansas and Oklahoma delegation.<sup>596</sup>

Supporters of a comprehensive Arkansas River plan faced a series of political impediments in their legislative mission. In June of 1946, the Senate Committee on Commerce authorized a bill that included a comprehensive Arkansas River plan that set aside \$55 million. Opponents of the river development plan, particularly A.S. Mike Monroney an Oklahoma congressman, argued that the development of the Arkansas River would eventually cost Congress upwards of \$435 million. Thus began the slow and cruel dance that is federal politics. Often, the dance partners included various combinations of the Corps, special interest groups, Congressional representatives from Oklahoma and Arkansas, and, at times, various other federal organizations. The next several years witnessed supporters of the Arkansas River comprehensive plan beat back their opponents in fits and starts as appropriations and bills would be passed just to be nullified by newer bills and budgetary plans.<sup>597</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Dilsaver and Colten, eds., *The American Environment*, 185; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 52- 56.

<sup>597</sup> W. F. Norrell to Emmett Sanders, January 27, 1949, Emmitt Sanders Papers M95-5 Series 4 Box 1, File 1, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 57- 58, 85-86.

Despite the opposition of the project calling for new studies or for previous studies of the river to be redone to delay the project, support for the development of the Arkansas River was strong. The river delegation had several prominent supporters throughout the late 1940s and 1950s: the Corps of Engineers, the president (usually to a degree), an indefatigable Arkansas Basin Association with committed members such as Newt Graham and Clarence F. Byrns, and the congressional representation from Arkansas and Oklahoma. Furthermore, support in the Senate received a jolt in 1948 when Oklahoma elected Robert S. Kerr as a Senator.<sup>598</sup>

The first bill that Kerr authored as a senator attempted to create an interagency commission for the Arkansas-White-Red (AWR) River Basins to create a multi-purpose comprehensive development plan. The thirteen representatives of the commission were to come from the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, Army, and the Federal Power Commission, the eight states of the basins, and would be chaired by an individual unconnected to the federal government but appointed by the President. As Kerr's bill made the rounds through Congress, it changed as it bounced from committee to committee and from vote to vote. Additionally, McClellan added a clause that protected already approved river studies and projects from being changed. Opposition to funding for the Arkansas River made it essential to shore up the support of the president. Arkansans, especially Governor Ben Laney, were frustrated with the lack of progress the government displayed towards funding river improvements, some so much so that politically, they wanted to "send Harry back to the farm."<sup>599</sup> Eventually, Kerr talked directly to

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<sup>598</sup> News Letter of the Arkansas Basin Development Association, Inc., "Situation in the House," May 15, 1956, Page H. Belcher Collection, Box 183 Folder 1, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning a New Day for the Southwest*, 57- 58, 85-86.

<sup>599</sup> William Lowndes Daniel, Jr. and Bob Crawford, "Let's Send Harry Back to the Farm," 1948, Ben T. Laney Papers, M99-15 Series I, Box 6 File 23, University of Central Arkansas Library, Conway, AR.

President Truman and convinced him to sign H.R. 5472, although the president called upon Congress to make a few alterations to it. President Truman called upon the leaders of the Department of the Army, Agriculture, Interior, Federal Power Commission, Federal Security Agency, and Department of Commerce to work together as members of the Arkansas-White-Red Basins Interagency Committee (AWRBIAC). A resolution formed the AWRBIAC in June of 1950 and was embraced by the Federal Interagency River Basins Committee (FIARBC), which coordinated water resource activities at the Federal level. While the FIARBC supported the president's choice of agencies for participation, they also stipulated the Department of the Army, specifically the Corps of Engineers, should chair the committee. Later in 1953, the Department of Labor became a member of the commission.<sup>600</sup>

In 1954 the Corps listed the comprehensive Arkansas River plan as deferred. The House Public Works Committee had formed a special subcommittee in 1951 to study the plans and progress of federal water projects. A report from the Corps to the subcommittee stated that the Corps had over 900 authorized projects worth almost \$8 billion that they had yet to begin. Quickly, Graham pressured the AWRBIAC to conduct a study as the Corps was overburdened. While the study was being finished and submitted, supporters of Arkansas River development met with Corps officials and personally lobbied for the project to be reactivated. By April 1955, the Corps approved the continuation of a long-term Arkansas River Project, with some changes. Despite all the efforts of the AWRBIAC, if not for Kerr's involvement as the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Civil Functions, the AWRBIAC's study would not have been consulted by subcommittee when making decisions about the Arkansas River Project. Kerr was also influential as an ex-officio on the Appropriations Subcommittee on Public Works (which

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<sup>600</sup> Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 87-89



financed the civil projects of the Corps). Again, the Arkansas River Valley supporters used their power and influence to use the resources of the federal government to accomplish their goals. An excited Graham wrote to Kerr in late April to thank him for his help in “restoring the Arkansas to the living.”<sup>601</sup>

In 1955, the AWRBIAC released a multi-volume report that detailed a development plan for the land and water resources of the Arkansas, White, and Red Rivers. A year before the AWRBIAC finished its study and dissolved, a new interagency body was formed in 1944 that continued coordinating comprehensive river basin plans for the Arkansas, White, and Red River. The new agency, approved by President Eisenhower, was the Interagency Water Resources Committee (IAWRC). The IAWRC created a new AWRBIAC which closely resembled the original AWRBIAC in purpose and membership. While it may seem that Arkansas and Oklahoma’s influence over its region and river may have diminished with the inclusion of two other river basins worth of representation, it persisted. The representative for the governor of Oklahoma on the IAWRC was Newt Graham from 1951 to 1955. Graham consulted with former Corps engineers to create benefit/ cost ratio plans that illustrated the need to develop the Arkansas River. The early 1950s proved difficult for Graham to execute the development plans for the Arkansas River Valley, especially since the President’s administration was trying to balance the federal budget at the time.<sup>602</sup>

Senator Kerr was instrumental in reorganizing the physical environment of the lower Arkansas River. In 1955 Kerr was chairman of the Flood Control and Rivers and Harbors

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<sup>601</sup> Anne Hodges Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 157; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 92-95; Newt Graham to Robert S. Kerr, April 20, 1955, quoted in William A. Settle, Jr., *The Dawning a New Day for the Southwest*, 95.

<sup>602</sup> Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years*, 156; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 90-92.

Subcommittee of the Senate Public Works Committee and was on the Finance Committee. At other times he was a member of the Democratic Policy Committee, the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation, the Senate Office Building Commission, the Joint Committee on Reduction of Non-essential Federal Expenditures, the Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee, and chaired the Senate Select Committee on National Water Resources.

Additionally, Kerr had a lot of powerful friends and a useful ability to continue making more.

Kerr's prominence, combined with McClellan's influence on the Senate Appropriations Committee, allowed them to act as powerful shock troops in the struggle to control the Arkansas River through congressional legislation.<sup>603</sup>

The mid-1950s proved a difficult time for the Arkansas River Delegation. The railroad lobby eagerly worked to derail the Arkansas River project. They claimed that they did not "oppose" the project in terms of "water supply, flood control and power," but did argue there was not an "economic justification or need for development of the Arkansas River for navigation purposes."<sup>604</sup> The railroad companies argued that the money spent on transforming the Arkansas River into a dependable alternative to railroads was foolish because of the project's ratio of production to investment and that the changes made to the river would be irreversible. Further complicating matters, President Eisenhower implemented a strict budget and only provided funds for the Arkansas River in terms of bank stabilization. The Korean War and the Cold War also made it difficult to acquire funds to improve the Arkansas River.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>603</sup> Kerr Was One of Most Powerful Figures in Oklahoma History, *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 2, 1963; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 99-100.

<sup>604</sup> Association of American Railroads, "Synopsis of Attached Supplemental Statement Concerning the Arkansas River Navigation Project, September 27, 1957, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok, Box 26 File 40.

<sup>605</sup> John V. Krutilla and Anthony C. Fisher, *The Economics of Natural Environments: Studies in the Valuation of Commodity and Amenity Resources* (Baltimore: John Hopkins

The federal government did spend millions of dollars on the Pine Bluff Arsenal on the Arkansas River in the mid-1950s. After the government reactivated the arsenal, the Truman administration built a facility near the Pine Bluff Arsenal that produced biological agents. The facility's equipment needed a plentiful supply of water to be successful, precisely: a water treatment plant, a steam building, wash houses, and laundry buildings. Building the new chemical facility near the arsenal and an abundant water source was important; everything else about the site made it difficult to build. Nearly six feet of silty loam covered a harder layer of the earth, making building difficult. Additionally, the wet weather made construction a challenge. After a devastating flood in 1955, Senator Kerr alleged that the president was playing a dangerous political game by preferring northeastern states' water plans over Oklahoma and their flood prevention needs. The Arkansas River delegation in Congress continued their fight for government participation in altering the Arkansas River.<sup>606</sup>

The latter half of the 1950s was a mixed success for the Arkansas River Project. By late 1956, the Arkansas River delegation had secured the support of General Itschner, the chief engineer in the Corps, and the Bureau of Budget, but still needed to persuade the president. In 1956, the Eisenhower administration was seeking ways to help Republican Congressmen who faced fierce competition for reelection. Page Belcher, one of the rare southerners who was a Republican, expressed a need for help from the president. Belcher knew what his constituents wanted, and Arkansas River improvement was near the top of that list. Fred Seaton, future Secretary of the Interior, worked with Belcher to secure funds from the Bureau of the Budget for the Arkansas River. Although Belcher and Seaton failed to get any new money from the

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University Press, 1975), 40-41; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 70; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 100, 103-105.

<sup>606</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 70; Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 100, 103-105.

president that year, they did receive a promise for funding the following year. Nevertheless, the next year proved to be the same as the president vetoed the next bills that would further fund work in the Arkansas, White, and Red River Basins. Eventually, a bill was passed, after reducing the number of projects to be funded. Importantly, part of the bill allowed the Corps to include water supply benefits in their evaluations of reservoir projects.<sup>607</sup>

Undeterred, Senator Kerr formulated a plan to get the money the Arkansas River project needed. In 1956, Kerr began framing the Interstate Highway System as a public works project that would positively impact the nation at large which gained public support. Kerr did what Kerr did best and made deals in Congress. In exchange for pushing the highway system through Congress, Kerr wanted votes to support the river project. In 1956, Congress agreed to fund 90% of the estimated \$27.5 million to construct a 41,000-mile uninterrupted four-lane highway that linked 209 cities in 48 states.<sup>608</sup>

Additionally, Congress passed the 1957 Public Works Appropriation that funded dam and reservoir projects on the lower Arkansas River, specifically: \$650,000 for Dardanelle, \$1.25 million for Eufaula, and \$1.5 million for Keystone. Focusing on building river improvements, in strategic places was a brilliant move by Kerr to get production started on the larger project he wanted. Even though the congressional appropriation committee was not involved in Kerr's deal, and the Bureau of the Budget had not endorsed funding his projects, and the Corps still considered these projects as deferred, the Corps had to begin work. Congress funded the projects, and now the Corps had to do their bidding, even if the usual procedures for greenlighting a project were not followed.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> Settle, Jr., *The Dawning*, 100, 103-105.

<sup>608</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 85.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

The first issue the Corps tackled dealt with the Arkansas River's sediment load. Particularly tricky was the Arkansas portion of the Arkansas River. It would be easy to characterize the river as lazy, for the majority of the year, between Little Rock and the Mississippi. This portion of the river did not have any tributaries flowing into it, and the slope in the river bed here was miniscule, averaging eight-tenths of a foot per mile. It was easy for water to dump its sediment which changed the river bed and its course. The river, for example at Little Rock, carried a 24 hour average of 33,000 tons of sediment which is around one hundred and twenty tons a year. This stretch of river was alluvial and prone to flooding. The Corps' team studying the problem suggested using a system of slack-water pools, bank stabilization, and dikes to control the river. The goal was to keep the river in its banks while simultaneously helping free itself of sediment picked up along the way from several states.<sup>610</sup>

In 1960, Congress allowed the Corps to combine the General Comprehensive Arkansas River Basin Flood Control Plan of 1938 with the Arkansas River Multiple-Purpose Plan of 1946. The combination of these plans is what McClellan, Kerr, and a host of others had worked for over the last several years. The combination of these river development plans meant that now the Corps' projects on the Arkansas River included twelve locks and dams in Arkansas and five in Oklahoma, two upstream reservoirs in Arkansas, Nimrod and Blue Mountain, and seven upstream reservoirs in Oklahoma —Keystone, Oologah, Eufaula, Tenkiller Ferry, Pensacola, Markham Ferry, and Fort Gibson. Additionally, the plan included projects for flood control, power generation, water storage, recreation, and a year-round navigation channel. The engineered river channel would have a minimum depth of nine feet ranging 450 miles from the

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<sup>610</sup> Floyd M. Clay, *A History of the Little Rock District Corps of Engineers* (Little Rock?: Department of the Army, Little Rock District, Corps of Engineers, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1971), 69; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 85.

Tulsa area to the Mississippi River. The lock and dam system would rise the river 420 feet, the lifts at individual locks and dams would range from 14 feet to 54 feet. Corps engineers planned to complete the projects in segments and open the navigation system in 1970.<sup>611</sup>

The comprehensive plan would add new river improvements to the projects started in the late 1950s. In 1956, the Corps began the Eufaula and Keystone dams and reservoirs projects and designed them as silt traps that allowed them to decrease the river's sediment load by 80%. A year later, the Corps began planning for the Dardanelle Lock and Dam, which was the first work that addressed the navigation part of the comprehensive plan for the river. Construction at Dardanelle began in 1959. Although funding was always an issue, the Arkansas River delegation found ways to get the funding they needed. During the Kennedy administration, the river delegation took advantage of the New Frontier program. Kennedy's New Frontier program focused funds on economically challenged areas that needed help with civil works projects. Savvy congressional leadership combined with federal funding for comprehensive regional programs of public works resulted in Arkansas receiving the highest number of river jobs paid by Kennedy's administration.<sup>612</sup>

In 1963, supporters of the Arkansas River project, many of whom had waited decades, secured the funds needed to continue the comprehensive project. That year the Corps began work on the river locks and dams. Additionally, the Corps built dikes, revetments, and stabilized banks to keep the river from changing its course. Since 1950, the Corps, with a strained budget, worked

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<sup>611</sup> Jackson Graham to Carl Albert, May 24, 1966, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, Box 56, File 17, Defense (1966) Army: Corps of Engineers: Arkansas River/ Navigation; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 85-86; Jack E. McDonald to J. William Fulbright, December 2, 1964, J. William Fulbright Papers, 2<sup>nd</sup> Accession Series 68, box 1, File 2, University of Arkansas Library, Fayetteville, AR.

<sup>612</sup> Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 86.

to shape the river. They tried to make it as straight as possible, especially in areas sharp with bends. After the Corps manipulation of the river, it now follows a channel that contains some mild bends connected by straighter sections. At its mouth, the Arkansas River is very curvy and prone to changes. The Corps' solution was to bypass that area entirely by installing a 300 foot wide channel, with bends that offer a radius of 2,000 to 3,000 feet, that connects the Arkansas River to the White River which then dumps into the Mississippi River. Throughout the rest of the project, the Corps straightened the river enough to create bends with radii of 6,000 to 8,000 feet to support navigation by vessels that stretch 1,200 feet in length.<sup>613</sup>

The Corps began construction on the locks and dams that created the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System in the mid-1960s and completed it at the end of 1970.<sup>614</sup> The official dedication of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System was held in Catoosa, Oklahoma on June 5, 1971. President Nixon was the primary speaker for the ceremony. Nixon's speech discussed the newly finished project in a regional, and at times, a national context. He explained that this once "foolish dream" would create a "new era of growth and development" because "the progress and prosperity it will bring [Arkansas and Oklahoma means] added progress and prosperity to all of America."<sup>615</sup>

For hundreds of years, Arkansans have struggled with the duality of the Arkansas River. In one respect, the river gave humans an environment that offered opportunities to establish a

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<sup>613</sup> Offie Lites to Charles D. Maynard, April 25, 1963, Emmett Sanders Papers, M95-5 Series 4, Box 1, File 3, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 88.

<sup>614</sup> Settle, *The Dawning*, 143; Rathbun, *Castle on the Rock*, 88, 92

<sup>615</sup> Richard Nixon, "Remarks at the Dedication of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System," Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240215> (Accessed April 11, 2019).

quality life. Conversely, the river could quickly take everything away in a flash. As the nation was reeling from the Great Depression, the federal government attempted to solve the country's problems by taking on a larger role in Americans' lives. The federal government, in its newer active role, tried to solve issues like homelessness and unemployment. As the federal government worked to help the Arkansas River Valley they discovered that race, politics, and environmental factors made for a complex problem with no clear cut solution on how to help everyone. Planters used federal programs to line their pockets meanwhile sharecroppers were being fired from their jobs and evicted from their homes. As white elites in the river valley took advantage of the situation they were unknowingly killing sharecropping and changing the plantation system. Even though the New Deal and World War Two put the nail in sharecropping's coffin, river valley residents, urban and rural, continued to need the federal governments help to control flooding.

A handful of dedicated Congressmen from Oklahoma and Arkansas, who had witnessed the river's raw power first hand in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s used their positions in the federal government to unite the goals of river valley residents with the Corps' evolved mission. After years of heartbreak due to flooding, the post-war Corps, along with citizens and politicians, perceived the river's function as more than exclusively a navigation system (although that is exactly what they called it). The river was a source for irrigation, recreation, and transportation and as such, most people wanted to manipulate the river so that it could fulfill all these functions dependently and efficiently, without flooding. Nevertheless, the river is still a source of power. It has the power to give and take. Those who can control other people's access to river and use it to their advantage are able to draw upon its power. The McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System represents the closest anyone has gotten to taming the river. Although they have, to a



degree, successfully molded the river to serve their desires, the river is not a slave. Despite all the locks, dams, jetties, and reservoirs the river still floods and still punishes people's foolishness to spend billions of dollars on business and buildings in the river's flood plains.

The McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River System is the result of years of culture, society, and environment rubbing together. The river is not what it was, nor is it exactly what some people would like it to be, nor will it ever be so. The river cannot be everything everyone wants it to be simultaneously. At some point our interactions with the river will, perhaps, result in it not being a river anymore, or it may grow in strength and size. Either way, we need to look back at our relationship with the river and our struggles to overpower and use it and realize that it has undergone many changes since the first humans wandered into the river valley. Change in itself is not bad. Everything changes, at some point there will not be an Arkansas River, it will either dry up (looking at you Kansas) or the sea levels will rise and it will be swallowed up by the ocean. The important thing to take away from examining the history of human-river relations is that each impacts the other and that if we have had the power to change together this much over the last several hundred years, imagine what kinds of changes we can make in the next several hundred years, good or bad.

## Conclusion

### The Indefatigable River

The complete prevention of floods is a physical impossibility.

-Luna B. Leopold and Thomas Maddock, Jr., *The Flood Control Controversy*

In many ways, the Arkansas River was not merely a river anymore. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century bled into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, human perceptions of the river morphed. The river transformed, ideologically and physically, from a depression in the ground that carried water from a higher elevation to a lower one, to a tool. The Arkansas River became a system. A system of attempts to control and harness the river in ways that served the interests of the most influential humans along its banks. In December of 1969, Governor Bartlett of Oklahoma and Governor Rockefeller of Arkansas met to discuss the future of the Arkansas River in their states.<sup>616</sup> Perceptions of the river as a navigation system had begun to change before it was officially declared a navigation system. By the time the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System opened it had become more than a navigation system.

Oklahoma lawmakers summed up the river's complex identity in an Act that they submitted to their state legislature. Oklahoma and Arkansas believed that "The public interest of the State requires that the navigation project on the Arkansas and Verdigris Rivers and the resultant economic, industrial and residential development in the area primarily affected thereby should be accompanied by such properly planned and executed regulations respecting public

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<sup>616</sup> Patrick L. Abbott, *Natural Disasters*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 385; Frontiers of Science Foundation of Oklahoma, "Memorandum" John M. Peterson to Arkansas Waterway Study Committee, March 9, 1970, Appendix J, Minutes of Arkansas State Committee Meeting, in *Final Report, Project to Plan for Orderly Development of Arkansas-Verdigris Waterway Area, Volume II: Comprehensive Report, May 1971*.

services, land use, occupancy, structures, lot and plot sizes, density of population, and for the protection of the ecology and the environment from pollution, despoliation, destruction or waste of natural resources and all other factors adversely affecting the public health, safety and the general welfare as the proper development of the said affected area may require.”<sup>617</sup>

Although President Nixon (at the 1971 dedication of the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System), declared that the, so called by some, “impossible” and “worthless,” Arkansas River project was a “success.”<sup>618</sup> One that illustrated the “vitality of the American tradition of daring great things and achieving great things.”<sup>619</sup> Nevertheless, there was still a plenty of work to do on the river so that the river did not drown everything around it a couple of times a year, or run dry, thereby denying Arkansas and Oklahoma of their new status as “maritime States.”<sup>620</sup> Whether or not the McClellan-Kerr Project was a success remained to be seen.

By 1971 most of the Corps’ planned river improvement projects were completed, and in that year alone, the river carried 4.2 million tons of commercial traffic, a figure that rose to 5.7 million in 1972.<sup>621</sup> After decades of disasters and struggles, Arkansans got most of what they wanted from the Federal government concerning control of the Arkansas River. River Valley residents could sleep a little easier when the rains fell heavy, and water gushed throughout the river basin. The systems of dams and locks, river bank stabilizations, and jetties worked to

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<sup>617</sup> Frontiers of Science Foundation of Oklahoma, “Proposed Statutory Addition,” Appendix H, Oklahoma Legal Aspects Task Force Report in *Final Report, Project to Plan for Orderly Development of Arkansas-Verdigris Waterway Area, Volume II: Comprehensive Report, May 1971*.

<sup>618</sup> Richard Nixon, “Remarks at the Dedication of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System,” Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240215> (Accessed April 11, 2019).

<sup>619</sup> Ibid.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

<sup>621</sup> Miles H. Sonstegaard, “Arkansas River Commerce,” *Arkansas Business and Economic Review* 6 no. 1 (Spring, 1973): 1.

harness the river's wrath, most of the time. Not everyone was pleased with the Corps' work. Some of the reservoir systems did not work as advertised and in some areas people disagreed with how the Corps used the land, sometimes land they had been forced to sell. Disgruntled citizens best option in dealing with the Corps was to contact their Congressional representatives, which they did. At times, prominent local citizens used their influence to affect the landscape. In 1970, a lumber company attempted to construct a port in Dardanelle, Arkansas. Locals opposed the plan, and the lumber company abandoned it. Similarly, city officials from Dardanelle and Russellville planned another port that would be jointly operated by the cities as a public port. Citizens, once again, banded together to kill the project.<sup>622</sup>

Nevertheless, floods still happened, just not as often or severe (in 1973 Corps projects on the Arkansas River in Oklahoma alone, prevented more than \$83 million in damages).<sup>623</sup> It is impossible to prevent floods completely. Nevertheless, people continued to build structures and live right on the river's banks. An inability of humans to completely prevent flooding combined with risky construction practices in flood plains meant that there would continue to be human and fiscal casualties of the river. Knowing that the river will flood is not a secret. The Natives knew it, the early occupants at Arkansas Post did also, eventually, and the town of Napoleon learned the hard way when the river swept the town away. Despite understanding the threat that the river posed, people they continued to gamble on the river. Why?

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<sup>622</sup> G.W. Davidson to Dewey F. Bartlett, July 13, 1973, Dewey F. Bartlett Collection Box 61 File 4, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok; Conrad C. Mount to Dewey F. Bartlett, December 8, 1972, Dewey F. Bartlett Collection Box 61 File 4, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok; Jesse J. Dyas to Dewey F. Bartlett, April 30, 1973, Dewey F. Bartlett Collection Box 61 File 4, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok.; Annabelle Bender Motz, *A Research Strategy for Social Impact Assessment: A Tale of Three Cities* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 81.

<sup>623</sup> Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 174.

Although many variables factor into why the relationship between the river and humans unfolded the way it did, the combination of human culture and society with the physical environment addresses many of the reasons for the changes that occurred. The Arkansas River offered transportation, a fertile environment that attracted edible plants, plentiful game, and opportunity. Opportunity varied relative to time and space. Well into the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Native Americans established villages along the river. European explorers were also drawn to the river, partially because Natives were already there, but also because the river could be used to serve their culture's needs, conquests, and territorial acquisition. Although Europeans did not find gold in the river as they had hoped, there were many financial opportunities for Natives and non-Natives in the river valley, primarily in the hide and pelt market. Economic shifts in the fur market, combined with the environmental characteristics and social changes, resulted in the growth of agriculture in the Arkansas River Valley. Eventually, the fur market dried up, and whites discovered large quantities of rich alluvial soil in the Arkansas River Valley. Agriculture had a massive effect on the environment. Planters and farmers cut forests down, tilled the land, planted cotton, altered rivers for irrigation and steamboat travel, and they drained the swamps and lowlands. Slavery and the plantation system quickly spread throughout the river valley, especially between Little Rock and the Mississippi River.

Plantations never wholly left the river valley after the end of slavery, and neither did flooding. With an ever-increasing number of people striving to grasp the opportunities available in the river valley, the scale of destruction from flooding rose in proportion to population. With more people came more buildings, more crops, and more livestock, which led to more death, bad harvests, and lost property. Flooding was not a unique problem on the Arkansas River. People everywhere on American rivers faced the same risks. Eventually, and pretty quickly in the

nation's history, the Federal government began to pass legislation that addressed issues on the country's waterways. Although Arkansas had a checkered past with the government, and the people were mistrustful of politicians outside of the state and the South, people in the river valley and the state were able to manage a beneficial relationship with Washington D.C., a relationship that influenced the Arkansas River and the history of Arkansas.

Throughout Arkansas' territorial period and through statehood, the Arkansas River influenced the trajectory of Arkansas' future. The Arkansas River and its rich deposits it had made for millennia, created a space that, combined with the southern zeitgeist, allowed for plantation agriculture, along with slavery, to flourish. Agriculture and slavery in the river valley and the Delta set Arkansas on a course for disaster. Although Arkansas could have chosen not to secede, the political and economic power of the pro-secessionist planters and their supporters resulted in Arkansas joining the Confederacy. After the Civil War, Arkansas continued to engage in agriculture throughout the river valley, although cotton was never as successful as it was before the war. Arkansas' behavior during the war, the abolition of slavery, and the creation of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution created a new relationship between Arkansas and the Federal government. The U.S. Army rearranged relationships and power structures within the state during Reconstruction, and for a time it appeared that southern white supremacy was in danger of being replaced by a slightly, more egalitarian social system. After Arkansas transitioned from Reconstruction and into the New South period, Jim Crow appeared in the river valley and solidified white supremacy while procuring the labor force necessary for the plantation system.

Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Arkansas River periodically flooded, although when coupled with a depressed economy in the 1920s and 1930s, Arkansas needed help in the

recovery effort. With each flood between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1927, people with invested interests along the Arkansas River appealed for more and more help from the State and Federal governments. The government often responded in the form of work done by the Corps of Engineers. The Corps, slowly over time, expanded the types of work they did on the river from the primary duty of maintaining the river for navigation purposes. As more people moved into the Arkansas River's floodplains, the floods caused more and more damage. Each disastrous flood changed the relationship people in the river valley had with their local, state, and federal leaders. By the 1940s, people started electing politicians who lived through the environmental disasters of the 1920s and 1930s. These Congressmen, from Arkansas and Oklahoma, went on to hold power positions in Congress regarding Federal funds and river work. Arkansas and Oklahoma politicians, in league with local business, booster clubs, special interest groups, and state agencies altered the scope of the Corps' duties. The combination of all the parties mentioned following World War II resulted in a massive engineering project that radically altered the Arkansas River from the Port of Catoosa, Oklahoma through Arkansas to the Mississippi River. The Arkansas River, throughout Arkansas' history, meant different things to different people, but by 1971 public officials codified them, and the river was altered to consistently function in a manner that agreed people's desires and perceptions of what the river should be and what they wanted from it. The physical change of the river impacted Arkansas in several ways.

Following the completion and dedication of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System, the lower Arkansas River was now, in many ways, a new Federal ly operated and maintained national river system. A system of flood control, transportation, power generation, irrigation, and recreation that sought to maximize the river's economic earning

potential. The Arkansas River Basin's resources of water, timber, coal, limestone, sand, gas, and minerals were collected loaded onto barges and floated down the river to ports of call.

Throughout the first half of the 1970s, power project revenues averaged over 6 million dollars. By the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s visitors spent an estimated \$224 million and numbered about 35 million visitors annually at the six major lakes and 17 lock and dams of the lower Arkansas River Basin. In addition to the estimated \$224 million spent annually on recreation, the river generated an additional \$390 million from direct and indirect expenditures.<sup>624</sup>

In 1968 James F. Wright, Executive Director of the Delaware River Basin Commission summed up the new ideologies about rivers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, he said, "A great many things have been learned in the past few years. Paramount among them are two: one is that the administration of a river basin at this time has to be done as a constant development of a system. It is no longer efficient to deal with specific problems throughout the Basin," he continues, "The second lesson is that an interstate river not only has to be planned for operation as a system, but it must be managed on a day-to-day basis by an agency cognizant of the various requirements and representative of the many interests."<sup>625</sup> The lower Arkansas River became an

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<sup>624</sup> Poe & Associates, Inc., *Industrial Development Study of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System Through the State of Oklahoma, March 1975*, 4; U.S. Army Engineer Southwestern Division, *McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System, Hydroelectric Power Generation* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 73; Dean F. Schreiner, Dolores A. Willett, Daniel D. Badger, and L. George Antle, *Recreation Benefits Measured by Travel Cost Method for the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System and Application to Other Selected Corps Lakes* (Fort Belvoir, Virginia: Institute for Water Resources, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1985), viii; Daniel D. Badger, Dean F. Schreiner, and Ronald W. Presley, *Analysis of Expenditures for Outdoor Recreation at the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 71.

<sup>625</sup> Frontiers of Science Foundation of Oklahoma, "River Authority," Appendix J, Minutes of Arkansas State Committee Meeting, in *Final Report, Project to Plan for Orderly Development of Arkansas-Verdigris Waterway Area, Volume II: Comprehensive Report, May 1971*.



operational system, managed by an agency that did so in a way that pleased many interests. Although the Arkansas River has changed, conceptually and physically over the last couple hundred years, it continues to shape the course of Arkansas history.

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