Readings in the History of the Bureau of Reclamation

Gibson Dam in August 1929
Sun River Project, Montana

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
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Introduction to the Readings List

Readers in the history of Reclamation will quickly learn that writers differ markedly on how to interpret the bureau’s past. Historical accounts about the Bureau of Reclamation often, more so than for other Department of the Interior bureaus, have been colored sharply by their time and by the personal views of the author. Various, occasionally extreme, points of view are represented in this reading list, and, as is the case for many other subjects in an America driven by ideological interpretation, selective compilation of data from the history of Reclamation is often used simply to ride writers’ favorite hobby horses. As a result, writers over time have perceived Reclamation as both hero and villain.

Historical interpretation of Reclamation is a very complex task because constantly evolving and interacting technical knowledge, legislation, decisions, policies, politics, and public opinion have combined with the changing economic health of the nation to shape Reclamation for more than a century. This reading list is an attempt to provide a starting point for readers interested in the history of Reclamation or the evolution of western water policy and development. Before arriving at reasoned conclusions about the difficult public policy issues raised by Reclamation’s historic role in western water development and management, careful researchers will read fairly extensively.

Charles Wilkinson’s Crossing the Next Meridian contains a brief overview of Reclamation’s history and evolution that is generally good, and readers might find that a useful place to begin looking at Reclamation’s history. More recently Reclamation published William D. Rowley’s The Bureau of Reclamation: Origins and Growth to 1945, volume 1, which is a good starting point for that period of time. In 2012 Reclamation published volume 2 of this series, Andrew H. Gahan and William D. Rowley, The Bureau of Reclamation: From Developing to Managing Water, 1945-2000. For researchers interested in the engineering history of Reclamation, David P. Billington, Donald C. Jackson, and Martin V. Melosi’s The History of Large Federal Dams: Planning, Design, and Construction will prove useful. Reclamation has also published two volumes of essays prepared for presentation at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas: The Bureau of Reclamation: History Essays from the Centennial Symposium.

Primary and original records related to Bureau of Reclamation history. Unlike the situation with most other Federal agencies, researchers in the history of Reclamation will find the Bureau of Reclamation’s archived records concentrated mostly in one location—the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), National Archives at Denver, in
Broomfield, Colorado. Records held there include over 9,000 cubic feet of material which include correspondence, memoranda, project “histories,” construction notes, drawings, plans and maps, and extensive photographic collections. More recent Reclamation records and large photograph collections of interest to researchers are also held in Reclamation offices in Washington, D.C., Denver, regional offices, area offices, and field offices.

Reclamation’s website contains extensive information on Reclamation projects, and that project information also includes a brief narrative history essay on each project.

In addition, the records of the Secretary of the Interior and of other Federal agencies may be useful research sources. These records are located in NARA in College Park, Maryland, and in various Federal offices and NARA branches in the Reclamation West.

Reclamation’s history program has also conducted oral history interviews with over two hundred people on over nine hundred hours of tape. Finished interviews are deposited with a number of repositories where individuals interested in Reclamation’s history might do research. Among the repositories are: the Western History Collection at the Denver Public Library; the Colorado State University Library; the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming; the Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois; the Huntington Library in San Marino, California; the University of California-Berkeley’s Water Resources Center Archives; the Yale Collection of Western Americana in New Haven, Connecticut; the Library of Congress; the Department of the Interior Library in Washington, DC; the University of Nevada–Reno Library; the regional and Denver libraries of Reclamation; and the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland.

Readings List


Allen, Marion V., collection editor, Pacific Constructors, Inc., “The Headtower” a monthly newsletter aimed at safety of the workers of Pacific Constructors, Inc., published monthly at Shasta Dam, California from June 1941 to June 1944.

Allen, Marion V. *Shasta Dam and Its Builders*. Shingletown, California: Marion V. Allen, 1987 (second printing).


American Indian Lawyer Training Program. *Indian Tribes and Sovereign Governments*. Oakland, California: American Indian Resources Institute, 1988


University, 1999. (Includes chapter on Reclamation’s Grand Canyon dams proposal)


Bonner, Robert E. “Elwood Mead, Buffalo Bill Cody, and the Carey Act in Wyoming,”


Cannon, Brian Q. *Reopening the Frontier: Homesteading in the Modern West.* Lawrence:


Churchill, Beryl Gail. *Challenging the Canyon: A Family Man Builds a Dam* [Buffalo Bill...


Cone, Joseph. *A Common Fate: Endangered Salmon and the People of the Pacific*


Downey, Senator Sheridan. *They Would Rule the Valley*. San Francisco: Sheridan Downey,
1947. [Central Valley Project and acreage limitation to which Senator Downey was opposed.]


Harvey, Mark W. T. “Echo Park, Glen Canyon, and the Postwar Wilderness Movement,”


Kipp, Henry W. “A Short History of Irrigation of Indian Agricultural Lands of the United States,” Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1988?.


Murphy, Paul L. “Early Irrigation in the Boise Valley.” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* Volume 44 (October 1935): 177-84.


Pearson, Byron E. “‘You can’t study it, contemplate it or even dream about it’: Henry Jackson, the Columbia River Diversion, and NEPA’s EIS Requirement, 1963-1970.” *Journal of the West* Volume 50, No. 4 (Fall 2011): 60-73.


Pitts, Terence, editor for the Center for Creative Photography, *Central Arizona Project Photographic Survey*. Tucson: Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, 1986.


Pitzer, Paul C. Essays included in World Commission on Dams, *WCD Case Studies: Grand Coulee Dam and Columbia Basin Project, USA* circulation draft, December 1999. 11. “Negotiating the Columbia River Treaty,”
13. “Attempts at Comprehensive Planning for the Columbia River Basin,”
16. “Shift from Low Dam to High Dam at Grand Coulee,"
17. “Decision to Build the Third Powerplant”


Rodgers, Andrew Denny. “Federal Reclamation’s Pioneer Period: A Biographical Study of Its Origins, Organization, and Early Work of Its Engineer Corps,” Columbus, Ohio: The Author, 1966. Typescript in two volumes. The original, as well as the original research notes, are held in the manuscript collections of the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, Laramie.

Rodgers, Andrew Denny. “Indian Irrigation: Its Organization and Achievements,” n.d. Typescript of 276 pages. The original manuscript, as well as the original research notes, are held in the A. D. Rogers manuscript collection (#1935, Box 5) of the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, Laramie.


Sharpe, Emanuel M., Jr. “History of Architecture. ‘How the Engineering and Research Center, Denver Federal Center, Was Begotten.’” This is a photocopied compilation containing documents, photographs, and a small amount of narrative. The compilation was placed in Reclamation’s library in 1978. The only known copy is in Reclamation’s library on the Denver Federal Center in Lakewood, Colorado. The focus of the document is to show the need for a new office building (eventually Building 67 on the Denver Federal Center) and Reclamation’s work to make that happen.


Udall, Stewart L. Interviews by Joe B. Frantz, 1969, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.


United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, “Public Law 97-293, Title II. Reclamation Reform Act of 1982. October 12, 1982.” 10 volumes of loose leaf notebooks containing an extensive collection of materials related to the legislative history and passage of the act, including hearings, news stories, etc. Only known copy is in the library at the Bureau of Reclamation, Denver Federal Center, Lakewood, Colorado.


Worster, Donald. *An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West.*


Zuniga, Jennifer, “Clotilde Amador de Terraza’s Damage Claim Against the Bureau of Reclamation,” Edited papers from the Archives of the New Mexico State University collections held in the library of the Bureau of Reclamation, Denver.

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