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. Reclamation published William D. Rowley’s The Bureau of Reclamation: Origins and Growth to 1945, volume 1, in 2006, which is a good starting point for that period of time. In 2012 Reclamation published Andrew H. Gahan and William D. Rowley, The Bureau of Reclamation: From Developing to Managing Water, 1945-2000, which completes the series covering Reclamation history during the 20th Century. 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 Bureau of Reclamation History Program.
National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) branch on the Denver Federal Center in Lakewood, 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


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Mawn, Geoffrey Padraic, “Phoenix, Arizona: Central City of the Southwest, 1870-1920,” a
two volume Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, August 1979. (This is not held by University Microfilms of Ann Arbor, Michigan.)


Morrison, Jason I. And Sandra L. Postel, and Peter H. Gleick. *The Sustainable Use of Water*


Murphy, Paul L. “Early Irrigation in the Boise Valley,” Pacific Northwest Quarterly 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*, vol. 50, no. 4 (Fall 2011), pp.60-73.


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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 [formerly found at [http://www.dams.org](http://www.dams.org) and in hard copy in the Bureau of Reclamation's library at the Denver Federal Center]:

11. “Negotiating the Columbia River Treaty,”
12. “Attempts at Comprehensive Planning for the Columbia River Basin,”
13. “Shift from Low Dam to High Dam at Grand Coulee,”
14. “Decision to Build the Third Powerplant”


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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. A xerox copy is held in the library of the Bureau of Reclamation on the Denver Federal Center.


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