



A Water's History of the United States

**Roosevelt Institute for American Studies
Middelburg, The Netherlands
May 21-23, 2025**

The Roosevelt Institute for American Studies (RIAS) and the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University invite submissions of paper proposals for a jointly organized conference on the role that water – in all its forms and manifestations – has played in the history of the United States. The conference will be held at the RIAS in Middelburg, the Netherlands, from May 21 to 23, 2025.

America's characterization as the land of the free, echoed by Theodore Roosevelt's famous definition as a nation "based on a mighty continent, of boundless possibilities," bolsters narratives of terrestrial growth and expansion that have been central to both the mythmaking and the historiography of the United States. However, this interpretation overlooks the significant role that the relationship with water and the management of water resources have played in shaping modern America. Both revealingly and paradoxically, Theodore Roosevelt's own political trajectory and presidential practices embodied the complex water-related nature of American power, which was built upon naval expansion, oceanic encounters, modern conservationist practices, and techno-political approaches to water bodies. Today, America's use and management of water represents one of the country's most impactful and significant legacies in the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, a comprehensive historical account of how water has influenced the nation's economic, social, cultural, political, and diplomatic developments is still lacking. What added value would focusing our historical lenses on water rather than land bring? Which dynamics and processes would this shift in perspective help to reveal?

This conference seeks proposals that contribute to further de-territorializing historical narratives of the US by shifting our focus from land-based processes to the roles and dynamics of water. Regional and local historiographical productions, such as those about the American West, have long-established traditions in water studies, drawing on the country's stark hydrogeographic disparities. Similarly, coastal and oceanic analyses have provided enlightening accounts of America's interactions with regional and global waterscapes. A growing body of scholarship has recently come to appreciate the extent to which water access

and water-related issues have propelled the nation's industrialization, enabled its international entanglements, and shaped its multifaceted identities. This novel interdisciplinary approach reveals how water, far from being a mere resource or backdrop, has actively sculpted the country's trajectory.

Following these themes, this conference aims to garner research into how the "vital frontier" of water, as Andrea Muehlebach has recently termed it, has shaped and tested the fabric of America's democracy and its planetary interactions. By placing water at the core of our analysis, we intend to offer a comprehensive reevaluation of American history that highlights the fluidity and interconnectedness of human and ecological narratives. This perspective is essential for a deeper and more critical understanding of America's rise to global power and its role in our current planetary water systems. Furthermore, considering water as a fundamental element in American history helps to shed light on enduring discourses of sustainability, resilience, and adaptation. This approach can not only enrich our grasp of the past but also provide valuable insights for addressing current and future climate crises.

This conference represents an ambitious effort to broaden the scope of historical inquiry and unravel the complex interplay between human systems and aquatic environments. Convening scholars from various cultural and disciplinary backgrounds and incorporating analyses across diverse themes, scales, and actors lays the groundwork for an extensive debate on how water has influenced America's policies, identities, and institutions. Therefore, we particularly encourage submissions that address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Indigenous Peoples and Water: Indigenous water management practices, cultural and spiritual attachments, and conflicts over water resources;
- Water and Colonialism: The role of waterways, water exclusion, exploitation, and degradation in colonial expansion and settlement patterns;
- Water and Economic Development: The impact of water on trade, agriculture, industry, and economic development, including water infrastructure and commodification of water resources;
- Environmental Histories of Water: Anthropogenic transformations of water bodies, conservation efforts, and the impact of climate change on water resources;
- Water and Public Health: The history of sanitation and water reforms aimed at improving public and environmental health;
- The Politics of Water: Domestic and international water politics, diplomacy, law, and governance;
- Water in US Culture: Representations of water in American identities, arts, and literature;
- Coastal Studies: US shores, delta, estuarine, and oceanic perspectives;
- US Waterscapes: The role of inland waters in molding socio-ecological relations across the United States;
- Glaciers and Frozen Watery Environments: The historical significance of frozen waters in America, from exploration to conquest and the challenges of climate change;

- Water Techno-politics: The development and impact of water technologies and infrastructure;
- Securitization of Water Resources: The securing of water resources and its implications for environmental sustainability and international relations;
- Water Rights and Justice: The struggles over water rights and access, including water sovereignty and activism;
- The US and Global Waters: American policies and practices impact global water bodies and resources.

We invite scholars interested in presenting their research at the conference to send a 300-word abstract to info@roosevelt.nl. The deadline for submitting a proposal is **October 31, 2024**. To support a culture of inclusion, we strongly encourage proposals that reflect the diversity of our field in terms of gender, ethnicity, and disability.

A selection of papers will be considered for publication after the conference. Speakers invited to the conference will be asked to submit their draft papers for pre-circulation by **April 30, 2025**.

The conference will be held in person at the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies in Middelburg, The Netherlands. Presenters will be provided with accommodation, and a limited travel grant program will be available to facilitate the participation of PhD researchers and early-career, nontenured scholars.

Keynotes speakers:

Sarah Elkind (San Diego State University)

Sarah Hamilton (University of Bergen)

Martin Melosi (University of Houston)

Conference organizers:

Michael Cullinane (Dickinson State University)

Gaetano Di Tommaso (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies)

Dario Fazzi (Leiden University / Roosevelt Institute for American Studies)