

OF MUDDY WATERS AND PRESIDENTIAL MEMORIALS: EROSION AND SEDIMENTATION IN THE POTOMAC RIVER WATERSHED

KELSCH, PAUL

Virginia Tech, Washington Alexandria Architecture Ctr, Alexandria VA pkelsch@vt.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper tells two paired stories of erosion and sedimentation in the Potomac River basin in the nineteenth century. It describes deforestation and erosion due to iron production in the Shenandoah Valley, the largest area of cleared land in the watershed, and it chronicles the resultant build-up of sediment downstream in Washington, impacting navigation and commerce in the capital. George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* identified these conditions as part of a long, historical pattern of human impact on the environment, and it galvanized the public, leading to significant conservation of forestlands. Less documented is the response to the sediment that built up in many cities and ports downstream. Tying the two stories together illuminates a larger story about human impact and agency in the environment, showing environmental impacts of human settlement but also showing positive consequences of focused stewardship and design.

Keywords

Forest history, erosion, sedimentation, Potomac River, Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, George Washington National Forest.