BOOK REVIEWS


In a nationwide project of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, each district of the corps has been publishing a history of its activities. The quality and scope of the volumes have varied widely, from simple chronological compilations of little more than pamphlet size to detailed studies by writers with professional qualifications in historical research, sometimes generously illustrated. The Pittsburgh District is fortunate to have in the present volume one of the better contributions to the series, complete with a more than ample allotment of illustrations both contemporary to the events described and specially prepared for the volume. The author previously wrote the histories of the Nashville, Louisville, and Huntington engineer districts, so The Headwaters District completes his survey of army engineering on the Ohio River from the sources of the river’s tributaries to its junction with the Mississippi.

The Pittsburgh Engineer District includes Western Pennsylvania, New York, and Maryland, and eastern Ohio and West Virginia, more specifically the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Beaver rivers and their tributaries and the upper Ohio. Johnson does not confine himself to engineering on these rivers only since the formal establishment of the district in 1866, but includes the work of military engineers in exploring and improving navigation from the first penetrations of the French and the British into the area. He also includes the work of private engineers who commenced projects eventually taken over or developed further by the Corps of Engineers, such as the Monongahela Navigation Company’s opening of the Monongahela to slackwater navigation beginning in 1838, making possible the Monongahela’s heyday as the busiest inland waterway in the United States.

The early chapters are colorful with incidents of the sort that the phrase “military history” most immediately suggests, reviewing much of the international contest for control of the Ohio in the eighteenth century, and following the story of settlement on the Ohio
and its tributaries through the days when Indian ambushes of river travelers were not uncommon. But this reviewer has often heard district engineers all over the country grumble that they feel more like lawyers than soldiers, and Johnson's book is rightly much taken up with legal and political controversy. Johnson notes a lawyer's remark about Major William L. Sibert, for example, Pittsburgh district engineer from 1901 to 1907, that "the major has mistaken his calling. In a year's time he ought to be able as a consulting attorney to earn five times that [his current] pay" (p. 150). Sibert spent, if anything, more than a district engineer's usual quota of time in court, because he was embroiled in controversy with the bridge owners along the Ohio to try to force them to raise their bridges higher to facilitate navigation of the river. This controversy, replete with threats to enlist congressmen as well as courts on one side or the other, and with direct interventions in contradictory directions by various secretaries of war, dragged on for decades until a vigorous chief of engineers, Major General Lansing H. Beach, with the backing of the secretary of war, hurled a virtual ultimatum at the bridge owners in 1923 to raise the spans forthwith or face legal proceedings involving fines of $20,000 a month.

The question of whether unraised bridges constituted unreasonable obstructions to navigation not only affords a realistic insight into the nature of the engineers' unromantic day-to-day preoccupations, it also touches on some of the ironies and mishaps that help make the internal improvements of the Corps of Engineers politically controversial. Removing bridge obstructions to Ohio River navigation was directly linked to the early twentieth-century effort to create slackwater navigation on the Ohio and its tributaries all the way from Oil City to Cairo. The hope was that such improvement in navigation would make the Ohio proportionately as busy with commerce as the Monongahela was when coal traffic was at its height. After Major Sibert and many other engineers and promoters fought hard to enlist the cities along the river to support "NINE FEET [depth of channel] FROM PITTSBURGH TO CAIRO" (p. 158), however, just as the project seemed assured the Monongahela River Consolidated Coal and Coke Company abruptly ended long-distance coal towing in 1916. The consequent dramatic decline of coal shipment made navigability of the Ohio seem commercially unimportant. At this juncture, nevertheless, Jones and Laughlin Steel stepped in to inaugurate use of the river for long-distance steel towing, and the other Pittsburgh area steel producers promptly followed suit. The project to improve
the Ohio took a new lease on life and was pushed to completion during the 1920s. Amidst gala ceremonies, Sibert, now a general, signalled the completion of the nine-foot channel by cutting a satin ribbon at Ohio River Lock 53 on October 29, 1929. Note the date: Sibert's dream had been fulfilled just in time for the Great Crash of 1929 to deal commerce on the inland rivers yet another almost fatal blow.

Chronicling these vicissitudes, Johnson maintains a detached, commonsensical attitude toward their implications for present-day policy on river "improvements." Writing under the auspices of the Corps of Engineers, he would scarcely enter the lists of controversy against the corps. Yet recent environmental debates involving the Headwaters District are all here in outline, with the rival positions summarized by and large with an admirably even hand. This is not a history that evades the recent past: the Kinzua Dam is here, complete with consideration of its impact on the floods following Hurricane Agnes in 1972; the Johnstown floods are here, including that of 1977. Johnson surveys a host of possible projects that environmental considerations have put in abeyance.

Underlying Johnson's approach to the currently debated issues is his thought-provoking observation that to Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and most conservationists of their generation, "water conservation commonly meant storing water behind dams for beneficial economic and social purposes, rather than letting it waste in annual floods." To today's environmentalists, however, as to John Muir of the earlier era, conservation has meant "preservation of an undisturbed environment" (pp. 299-300). Which approach better serves the future of the planet as well as of humankind is not so simple to answer. This book offers test cases to ponder along with hearty tales for the reader of regional history.

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In February 1861, Miss Emma Holmes, a twenty-one-year-old