



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2023 Volume IV: Energy and Environmental History of New Haven and the American City

Introduction

by Paul Sabin, Randolph W. Townsend Jr Professor of History and American Studies

In this seminar exploring urban environmental history, we considered New Haven as a social and ecological site for complex energy, water, and transportation systems and as a changing habitat for humans, domesticated animals, and wildlife. We linked broad issues in U.S. urban history with specific instances from New Haven, such as oyster harvesting in its harbor, the erection of dams on the West and Mill Rivers, and the evolution of its canal, railroad, and highway infrastructure. Our readings also included shifts in land use, including residential segregation, urban renewal projects, and health issues tied to pollution of the air, water, and soil.

During the seminar, we met with New Haven civic leaders to learn about city plans to respond to climate change and about community-driven efforts to transform vacant lots into vibrant green spaces. We complemented this with visits to the Beinecke Library and the New Haven Museum to look at historical maps, photographs, and documents. Towards the seminar's conclusion, a bus tour introduced participants to key sites, such as the Eli Whitney Dam, English Station power plant, Farmington Canal recreational trail, and Winchester Factory. One highlight was a visit to a nature reserve where a small dam, hundreds of years old, had recently been dismantled to rejuvenate the river ecosystem. Our seminar culminated in a discussion of the idea of "restoration ecology," what a sustainable future might look like for New Haven, and how teachers might engage students in thinking about the city's present and future environmental challenges.

The volume presents individual units that take an interdisciplinary approach to New Haven's environmental history, seeking to integrate it into curricula for social studies, science, and English Language Arts. This strategy seeks to foster a connection between New Haven Public School students and the urban environment they inhabit. Peter Kazienko's unit, "**Mill River: Past, Present, and Future of New Haven,**" takes students on a journey through time down the Mill River, exploring the river's changing uses and comparing the current city to its earlier iterations. The unit connects students to local places and also propels them towards civic participation by encouraging them to envision a sustainable and equitable future for the watershed. Emily MacMelburn's unit, "**Water, Air, Trees: Building Interest in Earth Space Science through Local Environmental History,**" explores strategies for incorporating environmental history in an integrated science curriculum. Her unit invites students to study the history of the Mill River and later investigate its water quality and resident invertebrates. The unit further encompasses a study of environmental justice issues related to highways and air pollution and the interplay of urban forestry, heat islands, and the history of residential segregation and inequality. Nancy Bonilla's unit, "**Community Gardens: An Urbanite's Connection to Nature, Community, and Self,**" grounded in Paul Fleischman's book, "Seedfolks,"

introduces students to the concept of community gardens and New Haven’s gardening history. The unit engages students in a collaborative process that culminates in their creating a small garden of their own.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>