

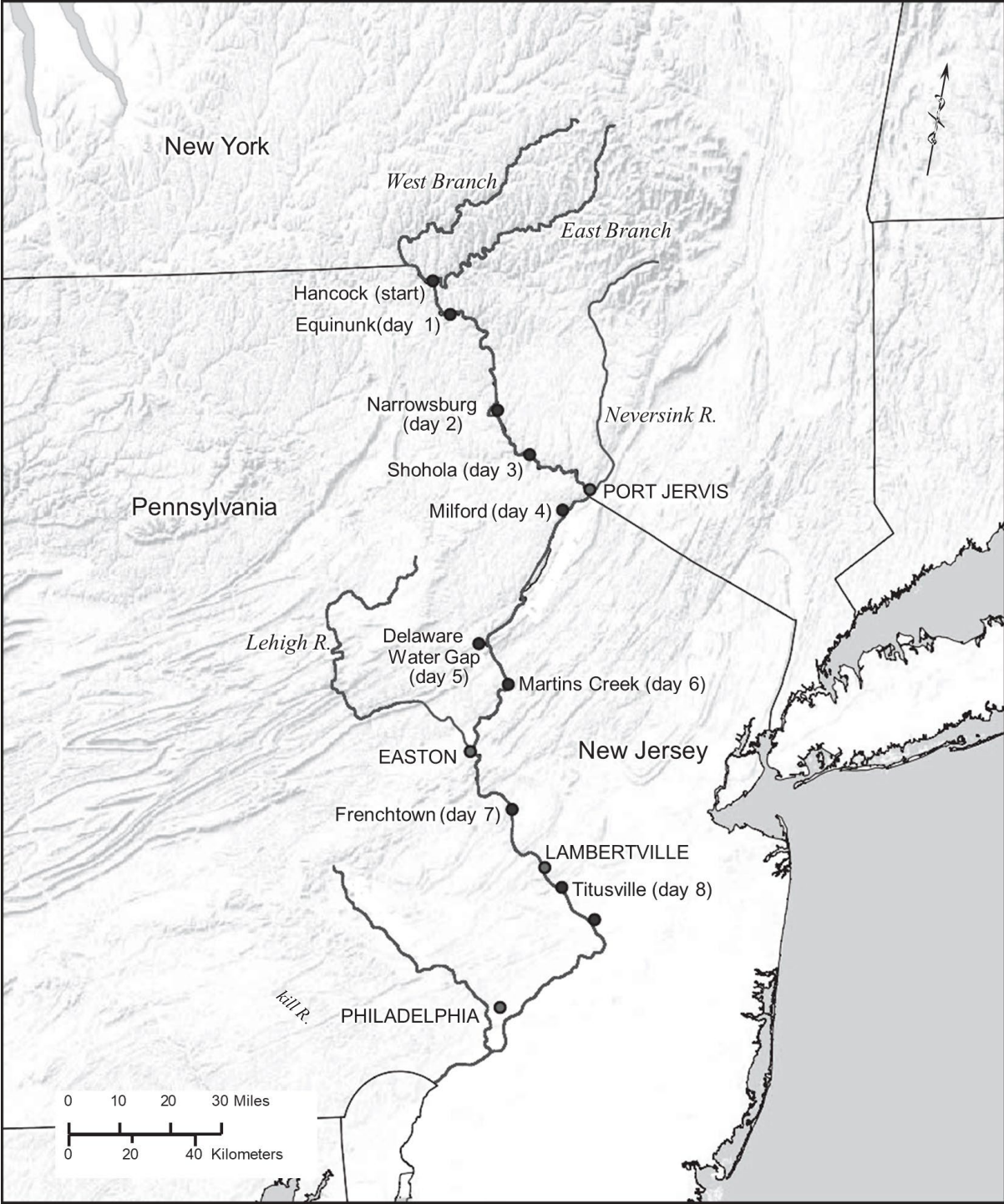
Borne by the River
Canoeing the Delaware from Headwaters to Home

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Map of the watershed and trip, Hancock to Trenton. Credit: Gordon Thompson.

The Delaware River provides drinking water for some fifteen million people, including the residents of New York City and Philadelphia, and is the longest undammed river in the East. One writer paddled it from the headwaters to his boyhood home. In the chapter “Drift” from *Borne by the River*, he tells the story of those who fought to save it.

Drift

Day 5—Milford (Minisink Island) to Tocks Island
245–217

Saturday morning, and the biting flies were bad. It was warm but I pulled on long pants, long sleeves, to cover my skin. The pesky insects still found the flesh between legging and sock by the ankles. Sully wanted back in the tent I was tearing down. She tried to find relief in the bushes and weeds, cover her hide from the menace. They looked like normal houseflies but seemed like some mutant strain: superflies.

I broke down camp and shoved off. At canoe-cruising speed they abated somewhat. But any buzz at all sent Sully below the canoe seat.

We were early and there was a fine fog on the water, a veil on the cliffs to river right. Gradually the fog dispersed, as flakes of sun beamed through the trees. Only a few puffs of smoky vapor hung on the water.

I wanted to get away from the flies, but I also wanted to slow down, enjoy the view. I was halfway by now or would be at some point in the day.

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The current and conditions were good that morning for river running. A little cloud cover meant it wasn't so hot. I hugged the shore so that when the sun rose overhead, the canopy provided some shade. I was conserving energy because I knew it would be a long day. There was an S-turn ahead, Walpack Bend, where the river makes a U-turn, heads north, and then another, back to the south. The curvy bends add about three miles to a straight-line distance. Sometimes, I have been warned, headwinds can be bad. Letcher warns that to attempt this whole section in a single day “requires considerable stamina of muscle and mind.”

I was joined on this stretch not by rafts but canoes, fleets of red ones. Canoes better fit this coming segment, as they are generally better for long, flat distances. But to novices, canoes can be tricky and tippy, and one group in front of me zigzagged like the river ahead, yet to figure out how to steer the boat straight. They chose a narrow channel through a small island. I heard scraping, and then what sounded like them running into tree branches. When I approached from upstream, I saw them trying to detach the boat, duck the tree.

Downstream from the island, I looked back up, and they were still figuring their way through the narrow stream and tangle of debris. I saw a woman on shore in a National Park Service uniform looking upstream with binoculars. It was Ranger Casey, patrolling by kayak, joined by a volunteer named Debbie. They helped stranded canoeists, made sure they had life jackets, and ensured that they didn't grill where they were not supposed to be grilling.

"Sometimes we just make them aware of the weather—a coming storm. Where are you headed?"

I told her and she said she was jealous. Not a wow, as in long journey, or where's that? But I'd like to do that myself.

"And that's all you have?"

She was used to seeing canoes with two or three coolers, gear piled on top. The reason canoeists like this section is because of good camping. And the reason there is good camping is because of the National Park Service. And the reason the NPS was here, in uniform, was because of a dam, or a proposed one.

In 1962 Congress authorized a dam at Tocks Island, six miles from the Delaware Water Gap. It would have contained a lake forty miles long, all the way to Port Jervis. Most of the land would be condemned or purchased from local landowners. By 1970 the National Environmental Policy Act required a comprehensive review of all federal projects and demanded more assessments and impact studies to be provided by the Army Corps of Engineers. That slowed down the process of the land acquisition and allowed for more public comment. Residents from Warren County, New Jersey, and Monroe County, Pennsylvania, opposed the dam. In 1975 the Delaware River Basin Commission, composed of the four basin-state governors and one federally appointed commissioner, voted to shelve the Tocks Island Dam project. President Carter (a canoeist) signed a law in 1978 adding the forty-mile river corridor to the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The land already acquired by the federal government was handed over to the National Park Service, and Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, originally intended as a narrow swath of land around a reservoir, became a seventy-thousand-acre park with forty miles of what is today a free-flowing Delaware River. The project was officially abandoned in the 1990s. Today the river runs free and the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area hosts over four million visitors every year.

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After I chatted with Ranger Casey, Sully and I had the river mostly to ourselves. We stopped to stretch our legs at Dingman's Ferry access, named for the Dutchman who operated the ferry beginning in 1735.

At the ramp I chatted with Sonia Szczesna, reading and waiting for her friends. Her hometown was my destination, Trenton, so we talked more. With partner Adam Nawrot she had just completed a documentary called *Godspeed Los Palacos*. The film tells the story of a group of Polish university students who set their sights on leaving behind the Iron Curtain to paddle whitewater in the early eighties. They skillfully navigate not only rapids but the Soviet system to journey to the Americas. With little to no whitewater skills, homemade kayaks, barely enough supplies, and hardly a clue, they descend the world's deepest canyon—Colca in Peru—yet run afoul of the Politburo when they leverage their newfound fame to support Solidarity and democracy.

Sonia was looking forward to something a little less adventurous. She later told me they had cake, watermelon, and multiple pineapples, “because canoe luxuries.”

I recognized the book she was reading, *All We Can Save*, an anthology of feminine and feminist voices on the climate movement. Editors Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine Wilkinson were both frustrated with how often women's contributions to the climate movement were being overlooked. The book also highlights voices of a younger generation who, like Greta Thunberg, bring a moral urgency to the climate conversation. The persuasion is no longer an appeal to reason: the world is warming, we know why, and we know what we have to do. That approach increased some in pitch over the years, adding to it some very dramatic graphs and photographs. But the younger generation, including the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion, goes for a more moral and personal approach. You have betrayed us, spoiled our future and dreams. I am being harmed, and you have failed.

Life on the ground is also shifting, as temperature records are broken and storms are more severe. The impact is becoming clearer, accelerating not only the climate but the anger and frustration.

The editors write that initially the book's aim was to highlight women leading the climate effort, but the book also “became a balm and a guide for the immense emotional complexity of knowing and holding what has been done to the world,” while not giving up. All we can save tilts toward all we can salvage, including ourselves. While it is too late to save everything—some species and lives have already been lost—“it is far too soon to give up on the rest.”

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It was two women personally affected who led the resistance to the Tocks Island Dam. Both Nancy Shukaitis and Ruth Jones were among the six hundred already displaced by the early dam planning land acquisition. They and those landowners formed the Delaware Valley Conservation Association to sue the federal

government on behalf of those being displaced. Their suit was dismissed, but they kept working to save the river.

With other environmental groups (Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, American Canoe Club, Trout Unlimited, and the Lenni Lenape League) they then formed the Save the Delaware Coalition, creating more and more pressure on Congress to kill the dam. Maya K. van Rossum, the current Delaware riverkeeper, told the *Morning Call* that Shukaitis “felt this deep, emotional attachment to the river, as if it was her friend, a part of her life that she had been engaged with always.” And with that attachment, there is little option but to protect and defend.

Shukaitis did not evoke the typical image of resistance in the 1960s. When the government developed the Tocks proposal, Shukaitis was a housewife. Her dedication of time and effort sparked an activist’s spirit, despite it not being a traditional role for married women with young families at that time.

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Just before the S-turn, I overheard some canoeists talking. Many more were on the river now, and they were looking to nab primo camping. Each site is marked with a number and a brown NPS tent sign, firepit provided. I wondered about this rush to campsites, and Kathleen Sandt, public affairs specialist with the Park Service, said they are working on a camping fee and a reservation system, some site improvements, which would include better solutions for human waste, and the addition of new sites to replace those lost to flooding. New sites would be clustered so more easily maintained. They were piloting the reservation system with large groups. All of this is spelled out in their visitor use management plan, for the Water Gap and scenic river above it, released in 2020.

I passed a swim beach on river left, Turtle Beach, and then one on river right just downstream, Smithfield. Laughter and screams of delight emitted from both, a full house. Music projected over the water. Shukaitis would say that a silver lining of the dam proposal and subsequent turnover to state and federal agencies was access and a free-flowing river (and laughter) for all.

I took the right side of Tocks and drifted the length of the island. A monarch butterfly joined me for a stretch, on its own journey. Then a glamorous blue damselfly, sequined. I pulled into the downstream end of the island, with a little grassy knoll above to pitch my tent. The water was clear and gently flowing over freshwater mussels, a good sign for water clarity. They are not present if the area is buried under stagnant water.

Before setting up camp, I walked the island some. Somewhere here and in nearby Worthington State Forest are rock core samples that Shukaitis and the Save the Delaware Coalition studied. They examined cylindrical borings removed from the

ground and noticed how unstable the deeper parts looked. The dam would be built on unstable glacial material, and a collapse would mean disaster for densely populated areas downstream. Another reason why the decision not to build the dam was the right one. In the history of environmentalism, the Glen Canyon Dam built on the Colorado River in 1963 looms as one of the greatest losses. The Sierra Club's David Brower called the defeat at Glen Canyon "the darkest day of my life." He said it would come to be America's most regretted environmental mistake. But here on the Delaware was a victory. Here was something to celebrate. And even though we live in an increasingly wounded world, we should remember the successes. At the very least, we should keep alive the spirit of resiliency and pliancy that allows us to weather the coming weather.

The night was clear and cool. After a supper of soup, I paddled back upstream, drifting down, like those other drifters, Huck and Jim. "It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle."

The river sustained and soothed those two. Floating down the longest undammed river east of the Mississippi, I was glad the dam builders were long gone. By that time of night, the beachgoers had packed up too, but the sounds of their happiness still rang over the rippling current.



The Delaware Water Gap Toll Bridge (Interstate 80), built in 1953. Credit: author.